

Two Souls: A Correspondance

These are a set of twenty letters between two “souls”, one younger, one older, who are in touch about this soul process and journey and share some of its dynamics. The letters are obviously partial, but they do provide an experiential glimpse into how the soul process and crisis can work and how we can learn better to cooperate with it in our life. They are to be read with an eye to your own experience as well as witnessing the experience of these two fellow human beings.

These letters evoke the experience of soul loss, soul wound, soul hunger, and some of the complex process of soul restoration and realization. They are both particular and generic in their portrayal of the suffering of spiritual starvation and the process of restoration of the soul—a process that is itself never complete, for its very nature is a continuing openness and participation in the face of whatever life brings. I hope, however, that they can give the reader, from this epistolary angle, a vivid sense of the experience I am talking about.

I cannot stress enough that the essential aspect of healing the soul wound is to learn to trust your experience again, as we did before we were talked, seduced, or beaten out of it. The range of human experience is vast, so we also need to learn where different experiences are coming from and how to work with them skillfully, but, if we do not make a basic commitment to stay close to what is true for us, no matter how painful, or joyful, or unusual, or whatever, we will not be able to heal the soul wound and find our soul’s way home. There is no substitute for this, try as we might to find one, and, when we do finally accept this and begin to live our life as it comes to us, including all its suffering as well as its joy, we will never want to go back.

One way of thinking about the soul that may help here is that it is our capacity to hold and embrace the full range of our human experience. Maturity and wisdom rise from this capacity, and also true power and vision. Our capacity to love is rooted in this also, both the

giving and receiving, and the experience of being fully alive on earth as human beings. All this takes hard and sustained work, but the fruit of it is a life well lived that is truly our own. Our experience then becomes our teacher and we learn to live close to who we are as we grow and mature as human beings .

Here are the letters.

Dear R

I'm in a dark place, as dark as any I've been in my life. I'm reaching out to you who know and love me. I feel so lost, like, really lost, at the end of the road, and though life goes on, I don't. There's this emptiness, a hollow gnawing, a not knowing where to turn, like no where to turn, and all the confidence I had is gone, gone, not suddenly, but bit by bit disappearing and in its place this emptiness and terror. I'm afraid, I can't sleep, I no longer know who I am really. That's it. I've lost my bearings. The markers are gone, or fading, and confusion is taking over. It can happen in the middle of the day, in the midst of work, or walking home in the evening, suddenly I'm dizzy with fear, panic really, not about circumstances, but about me, about who I am. I can't feel me anymore, just emptiness. The nights are the worst. I wake up and the dark presses in on me and I reach out and I'm not there, not the way I used to be. Strange, because on the outside my life continues and is even successful, whatever that means. No one would ever know that inside I am falling apart, screaming, increasingly empty.

Into this emptiness come so many memories, so many sorrows and struggles of my childhood and that family-- the drinking and shouting and the five children cowering, beaten occasionally, and I the youngest hiding under the kitchen table watching it all and so scared I couldn't breathe. And then all that hard work of my young years trying to make it better! And then to get out of that house, and my brother's death when I was 13. So much chaos, I wondered often would I survive, yet I was fierce and did. I built an hardness in my body for protection and also to stand against the world. I felt so alone, but I was stubborn

and kept going. “Tough”, was what my friends called me, “thick skinned”.

Yet, you know, the trees in the backyard saved me from this craziness, from going completely crazy, and that hideout near the fence did too. I felt safe there. I could crawl in there and gather myself as a kid, feel something, feel that there was hope for me. And later my long hikes in the mountains did the same. These solitary places gave me strength. I could think and imagine what I could make with my life. The trees held me. No such luck from those people around me, but I was a determined kid, and I did make something of my life up until now. All this comes back to me in the darkness. I weep for that small and lonely boy and his struggle to find a way through that shit.

So hard to speak about this! When I do, people don't understand, and seem a little afraid. Maybe it stirs something in them they don't want to know. R, there is this aching, this something-missing feeling, like I had missed a turn, or left the road I was meant to be on. And somehow I never even noticed, I was so busy surviving. The gap has grown over the years without me knowing it. Something missing. What is it? I have most of what I wanted in life, and yet this emptiness is here gnawing. If I stop... if I let myself feel it, I go crazy, and lately it has been really pressing me, like a knife deep in my belly. The hurt is invisible to anyone else, and to me also, except I can feel the twist and the agony when I slow down.

I am lost in my life and despairing. I don't know where to turn, so I am turning to you.

Dear P,

Thank you for writing and reaching out to me who love you and have watched you growing from early in your life until now. I am well aware of the struggles you have faced and know them in my own life. I believe they are part of most lives and that none of us can avoid them, if we want to live a truly full life. But it takes courage to face into this pain and emptiness, as you are now, and to begin to explore it. Most people keep it all at arm's length in any number of ways, and do their utmost to

drive it away whenever it comes close. It is hard because there is little understanding of its nature and where it comes from, so that often, when people do seek help with it, it is misunderstood and reduced to something other than it is. This simply reinforces the isolation and feeling of not being understood, and it can, in fact, increase the suffering of the loneliness and being lost.

Yes, it is difficult; this is true. The emptiness is profound, and the loss of the meaning that you have built through such hard work over the years is overwhelming--the fading of the markers, as you say, and the experience of confusion and disorientation that sets in. I know this well in my own life, and can remember how troubled I was when this darkness came on me, in the very midst of a busy and, I thought, creative life. So I am with you in this.

There is much to say, and I am glad to correspond with you about it, but for the moment I would suggest that you find ways, in the midst of your busy life, to have more time like the moments you spent in the trees in the backyard as a child, or in the mountains later as a young person. It may not be possible to actually go to the mountains, but find a place near where you live that has the qualities of those settings and find a way to spend time there. This is not to figure this all out, but rather to find again that experience that you touched in your childhood and adolescence and practice being with it, resting in it, whatever the words, but mostly to remember it, and re-gather it--to remember that, in the midst of the chaos then and the lostness now, there was, and is, a place where you felt something of yourself that was true.

The trick is not to try to do this too deliberately, but to let yourself into this place and be there without doing anything. The darkness will come there and you can study it more easily, and also other memories may come, and experiences. Think of it as a place of rest from which you can explore what is happening to you without panic, so you invite your experience there and slow down enough to let it reveal itself in its truth and complexity. I think this will help. It will not drive the emptiness away, but it will help you learn more about it. And it will allow it to

change in time. See if you can befriend the darkness and see what it is bringing you.

And let me say again that this is hard, and many would not venture here. Many avoid it until at last it crashes in on them in some form of crisis. Many buffer the secret agony with staying busy, or addictions of various sorts. But it is better in the long run to face into this experience of loss of yourself and begin to explore it directly; then it can teach you what it has to give. Try what I suggest and let me know how it goes.

And if it is any solace to you, I can say that you are not alone, not only because I myself recognize, and have lived, this pain and emptiness, but because there have been many who have felt it and each in their own way have entered it to learn what its gift was. I will write you more about this later. For the moment practice trusting that this emptiness and despair has come to you for good reason and begin to see what it has to give, again, by simply sitting with it in that safe place within, or without-- the trees and the hideout-- that you have known from childhood and youth.

I send you my love and thanks for writing and for your courage to begin.

Dear R.

So grateful to you for writing and for what you say! I don't feel so alone with this terror now. My God, so many memories are coming up as I sit—not the ones I spoke of before of the family chaos and pain, but more hidden ones, like the hideout by the fence, and what it meant! I found a spot in a park near where I live and have been going there after work. I sit by myself, as you suggested. It is peaceful, a tiny corner where I feel more sane. But here come painful memories like me a small kid asking questions about how the stars and moon worked and my dad laughing, mocking me for such “big” questions. “Stick to the small ones, peewee, that you can handle”. Or beginning to draw little pictures of animals I saw around the house, or plants outdoors, and my mom shouting what a waste of time. She screamed I would never amount to

anything, and, dead drunk, would roar she wished I'd never been born. Such a deep feeling of not fitting in this family, no place as me! Whatever I tried to get in was rejected, scorned, ridiculed, ignored. I lived always in fear.

My God, I lived in such fear for my physical safety, as I saw my older brothers and sisters beaten, and for the safety of my own self, like I might be destroyed and never get out-- to live, to be who I wanted to be, or felt that I was. Memories of endless hours alone in my room, sent there for some fuckup, and sitting there in despair. Would I ever find a life that was mine? There were survival routes—I could see that—even ones that would make my goddamn parents proud of me--I could see that. And I did take one of these until now, but the cost was giving up what I sensed was deep and true in me. Again and again this place was thwarted, and I am seeing now it was only in my flights to the fence and later to the mountains that this other truer life reasserted itself and I would dream of living it. There was a story I remember of the duck that did not fit in with the other ducks because he was a swan. It was only when the flock of swans appeared that he found his flock. Can't remember the name of the story, but as a kid I read it again and again and wondered where the swans were and when they'd come.

So strange that these thoughts and feelings are coming to me! I'm bearing the emptiness and this happens! There's a deeper sorrow and despair than any I have felt before, deeper even than the pain about my crazy family. Some hidden level of pain, primal really, eats at me, as if my very soul had been stabbed. A disconnection here I had no idea I was feeling, and such sorrow! I have been in so many ways effective and productive, but, My God, I see now this hurt was always festering secretly, way below the surface. As I have become quieter, I can better see it and feel it. And this is really hard! Some days sitting there in the park I can barely breathe.

You know, I feel such compassion for this scrappy kid I was and his struggles! And there's the sadness of being thwarted and making do with less, with what fit. No satisfaction in all this, but other things like money and recognition and a routine. It's so painful to feel how

unwelcome I was in my family as me. This was true later also. Something deep in me not seen and supported by those around me! Well, I gave in, lost confidence in it and went off in other directions. I persuaded myself I could do without, that it wasn't that important, and life didn't really work that way anyway. How I regret this now!

But I'm back--at least that—I'm back with the pain and the sorrow and the emptiness. I won't leave again. I value what you said in your letter about staying with the pain and seeing what it brings. No idea what lies ahead, but I'm committed at least to this. No choice here, really. Oh, I guess I could choose to get busy again, or drink, or whatever, but, no, I'm staying right here with this agony I didn't know existed. I feel good about that, even if I feel like shit. And the place in the park is really helping me have courage to hang in there.

I wonder if others feel the way I do in secret. I look at the people I pass in the street and wonder is that sorrow there too? Are they unaware, or are they hiding it like I did. I don't know. Very strange to do this facing into the pain, and yet a relief too. This agony is real in me and perhaps it's real in others. Maybe I'm not so alone as I feel...I've never felt such deep pain, and I can see why people avoid it. I'm grateful to be able to write about it. It makes bearing it easier.

Dear P.

Yes, this is a pain few bear directly, a wound buried deeply in our person, far below the usual ups and downs of daily life, even difficult daily life. And it affects so much of how we see life and what we do. I think many, many people are suffering in this way, and that much of the compulsion, consumption, and violence of our collective life rises from this unacknowledged source and serves as a way to keep it at bay and hidden. There is no deeper pain than this loss of soul, as I call it, and it takes courage to face into it and to begin to restore and live one's true life.

Of course, this is a half-truth, because I have also seen how resilient people are and how they will try to hold to the course that is right for their life at all costs, and stick to it, even if it means isolation

and opprobrium from others. The soul, in this sense, is invincible, and will out in the end. But still, this pain of the loss is real and it destroys the joy of living and an ease that can be there, once the deeper true nature is revealed and released. The pain is like a cancer, hidden and deadly, growing slowly in the depths of the being and eating at our flesh and spirit without our knowing it.

You are brave to open this up and to begin to examine the wound. It is a wound, not to the soul itself, but to the connection to your soul and to your trust in this connection and capacity to express it. The soul is there still in those quiet moments you are seeking now, and in many places that surprise us--- chance meetings, a beautiful sunset, a snatch of music, a moment of solitude, or a conversation with a good friend, and in that sense nothing is lost, but you are, for you have lost faith in this connection. This loss is real, and you are beginning to find your way back through the very darkness and emptiness you are willing to let yourself feel. “Brave” is the word here. Let me encourage you with my words, to whatever degree that helps, and say how brave you are to be doing this.

I know this pain from my own life and could tell you stories of how the loss became visible to me. It stems from experiences similar to those you describe, and I sometimes call it “the wound of non-welcome”. It is hard to see because we are so busy just trying to survive and we develop all sorts of ways to do this, and lose touch with that inner sense of where we most want to go. Often there are obvious traumatic experiences that inflict this wound, ones that are violent and abusive, but many times the wounding is very gradual and a result of many small incidents of rejection and non-acceptance of who we are in our core. As a result we begin to feel that it is impossible to be ourselves, or, if we persist, we will lose everything we need in order to survive, and that can seem to be true. This is overwhelming for a child, or young person, and so we settle for less than who we are, and follow a safer path that leads in time to where you are now—to a dark emptiness and loss of meaning and direction, and to a profound aching and yearning for something that we cannot name, but which is more precious to us than anything else on

earth. It is striking how much suffering a person will bear to avoid this deeper sorrow and missing, and I believe, by the way, that addictions and compulsions of many sorts spring up as a means to buffer this, essentially, spiritual pain. I think we live in a culture that is suffering deeply from this wound and loss of soul, but there is little recognition of this. Rather, there are all the ways in which we can keep ourselves from it and keep going.

On a larger level, shifting there for a minute, the political and religious fundamentalism and fanaticism that we see all around the world, I sense, are a collective means for buffering this primal pain, for they spring from a loss of faith and true connection and are rooted rather in fear, violence, and domination. This world condition can change, and it will change through people like yourself--many, many people-- choosing to stop and feel and explore this loss of soul. So, more than anything else I want to say, "keep going". Keep looking, and trust that a path will open for you and that the despair you feel now will in time pass and be replaced by the faith and joy which is yours by birth.

I send you my love and support for this journey.

Dear R.

Haven't written in a number of weeks, but your words have been so good and I've read your last letter again and again. I'm letting myself be with the darkness and emptiness and am trying not to drive it away. Seeing also more how the loss happened and how I arranged my life not to feel it. Been trusting the glimmers more too-- those times when I sense the presence of my soul in my experience-- and have been trying to listen to them also, make room for them.

And I'm seeing those young person years from a very different angle-- so aware now of the struggle to fit in and belong, trying to find ways to make it with my peers and in the culture of that time. Such a pervasive sense of being odd, of not fitting no matter how hard I tried! Yet at the same time I was finding my way through studies and work and friendships, so this is subtle and complex. It's not as if I was a total loner and misfit: in fact, I can see I took on many responsibilities to have

a place. I was admired by many for who I was and what I did. And yet with all this I still became increasingly estranged from myself. I lost touch with the dreams I had for how my life might go. Not that they went away, but I abandoned them, and began to say, “No, that’s not possible”, “I need to do this first”. Came up with all sorts of reasons why I couldn’t pursue what was in my heart and soul. So subtle! Can see so clearly how my drinking contributed to this detour and the frenzy of constant activity, never slowing down, always on the move and driven. Only occasionally when I found myself alone, would this pain stir, but then I’d create some new diversion and push it away with that.

The times in the mountains were different. The physical challenge gave me something to do and I could safely touch these dreams. I’d open in the wilderness, either alone, or with friends, and my body would relax. Climbing brought both focus and euphoria. There was a stillness in its midst where ideas and intentions for some other life would appear. But I couldn’t hold it. The old ways swept over me when I returned home, But I see those times were keeping something alive. Music did this too. I’d listen and the same thing would happen in my body—a focus and relaxation, and this quiet euphoria. But, mostly, I see I got way off the mark, was constantly struggling to survive in what felt like an alien and sometimes hostile world. I did create a life that worked well enough, but what you call the soul loss worked in me always. There was an underlying sadness in me that I never understood until now, a yearning for something different. And no name for that, no clue that it existed!

Chaos and darkness still here, the only difference being I’m dwelling in it now and beginning to learn what it has to teach. Everything from my life is coming into this space—the deep pain and loneliness, the times when I felt very alive and true. So complex! But I’m staying with it, and can begin to sense, in the midst of the desolation, a path under my feet. Acceptance and living each step--I can’t do more than that. I can’t make this go away, I can’t figure it out, I can’t make it better, but I can live it. How strangely good! Falling deeper and deeper into darkness, yet supported now, not only by you, but by Life, by a

presence of Life that holds me, or the Universe, or God, whatever-- something much bigger and that knows the way through. Unbelievable! Learning to take whatever comes in this spirit, and to “keep going”, as you said in your letter. Just that—“Keep Going”. I wouldn’t wish this experience on anyone and at the same time-- can I say it? --I am beginning to be grateful for it—how weird!

I send you my love and thanks for listening.

Dear P.

There is so much in your letter, so much living, and this is the most important thing--to live everything. What is falling away is what kept you from living fully, and, in order to restore this, we have to uncover and bear the suffering that generated the pretenses, what we pretended to be. This is a very painful process, as you well know now, for we are attached to these ways of being and they have created a kind of safety for us and a security of identity. They are a way of coping and, of course, some portion of who we are does get through. But, sooner or later, we run up against the limitations they set for our true life, and then we need to unearth the sorrows that put them in place and let the structures we have created go. There is, of course, great fear to do this, because we think that there is nothing there, that we will be nothing, or won’t survive. Ultimately, this is the fear of death we are feeling, but it is played out in small doses in letting go of familiar ways of being and doing and beginning to face the unknown behind them. You are doing this now, and bravely.

And what is marvelous is that already you are experiencing that there is something there, something holding you in the darkness and despair, and it is something you can call on and count on. This is good news! I remember when this first happened to me, I was in my thirties and very unsure I could cope with the responsibilities I had, and quite despairing of life. I was in my home alone in the evening, sitting in a chair, despondent, and suddenly I had the sense of a presence standing there with me, and a quiet radiance coming toward me. I looked up, but could see no one, and yet my heart began to relax, my breathing deepen,

and a thought came into my mind “You are fine as you are, now and forever”. I felt myself melting in some way and yet I was very alive at that moment, very awake, and I just sat there in the darkness, listening to my breathing. I still had all the things to cope with, but something had changed and I approached them with more faith and serenity after that evening. And there have been other experiences like that since.

Strangely, this sense of being held allows us to go deeper into the darkness, or into whatever is asked of us. There is a place of rest in the midst of the chaos, which nonetheless continues, both inside and out. Trust this, my young friend, and cultivate it as much as you can. Perhaps this place will come also with the soul glimmers you speak of, but it is also there in the midst of the loneliness and despair. Both.

In all this the wound you have carried since childhood is beginning to heal. I know that it does not feel this way, but this is the beginning. There is much work to be done still, and layers of experience to be explored so that your life can become true and you be able to be and express who you truly are, a unique and gifted being, as we all are, each in a particular way. There is a process by which this happens, and it is possible to cooperate with that process, much as a mother cooperates with the process of childbirth. Perhaps we can call this the process of “soul-birth”. I will write you more about this soon, but for now I urge you to be patient with all this, to let it work in you in its own mysterious ways, and to have faith that you are held, and that in time you will come through. Don’t try to rush it, but rather receive what is given and work with it as it comes. Something in you knows exactly what to do, and, if you will listen, you will be fine.

And, if it is any consolation, I believe there are many people who suffer in this hidden way, and are quite unaware of it. It is an epidemic of spiritual starvation that, for the most part, has gone undiagnosed and which eats at our happiness and robs us of joy. There are many reasons for this, many causes, but the main thing is to recognize it, as you are doing, for what it is, and begin to do the work of healing and restoration so your soul can take its rightful place in your life. I admire your

courage and send you my support for this journey that is now beginning.

Dear R,

Wish that I could report that things are better, but the last weeks have been very hard and lonely. Looks like there are deeper and deeper layers of this agony, or perhaps it's surfacing more and I'm feeling it rather than fleeing it. You know, a few days ago I saw I'd made a secret vow, or pact, with myself to deal with this pain. It was to not trust anyone, or rely on anyone, just deal with all my difficulties myself, isolate myself into extreme self-sufficiency. Then no disappointment with others, no betrayal ever again. So surprised to discover this! I am involved with many people in my life and work. But, amazing! there it was, a refusal to open, trust, depend on others, even the ones I loved and who loved me. So deep in me, so hidden, and yet I can see how pervasive, and where it has led me, how it affects my choices. A "never again" vow, an attempt to close the door on what you are calling the wound to the soul. I simply said to myself, "I can live without reliance on others. I can survive without any real connection to other people." Perhaps those times in the garden, or in the mountains were so important because they did provide a connection to Life. But I was always alone, even when friends were with me. I feel such compassion, right now as I write, for the kid who made this choice, this vow. I can see why he did, but that choice has brought me here to this dark place, and to everything collapsing around me. The sorrow and sense of waste is overwhelming!

So many fabrications, attempts to be someone, to be included, or admired, whatever. The deceit and indirection in how I conducted my life, all in desperation to fit and succeed. And the vow was keeping me from any true satisfaction and joy. No one knew— myself included— and yet now it's so clear to me, so painful to see. This hunger, I'm in touch with it right now, hunger for the deep connection that I lost, that I sacrificed to survive. The vow was simply the last nail in the coffin.

I want to write about this hunger and get it out in the air. It is bone deep, so close in it's hard to express. A profound missing, that something is missing, or I'm missing something that I need more than anything else. This something is capable of nourishing my life, of fulfilling it, bringing joy to it, but it feels so far away, that there is no way to it, Lost it, Lost it, I have lost it. I feel bereft, lonely, abandoned, but by whom? Myself, myself! Somehow I betrayed myself without knowing it, and kept going in a direction that led into an arid desert where I am searching for water, but no luck, there's none. Thirsty, hungry, starving, these words come, and empty, or hollow, I feel hollow way below the surface, a deep emptiness and sense of loss. It is dark, yes, but not dramatic dark, not like trauma and suffering, which I know also. It's the dark of absence, pervasive, the thought that I will never find what would feed me at this level. Despair also, and extreme isolation. I can see the bright world around me, but cannot feel it, or connect. It's alien to me, and I to it. All this so far below the surface of my life, which is busy and full of people. How strange!

Now I see how the drinking worked-- to buffer this emptiness, to ride over it. I used a whole stable of addictions—over busyness, material consumption, heartless sexuality, opportunistic relationships I called friendships, alcohol, a certain posturing and pretence in my identity, and a need to be the center of attention. Some of these are obvious, but the others are subtle killers, and they all were used to compensate and buffer this primal pain I am in touch with now! At least I'm not shying away any more. But this is so overwhelming to see how I have fed myself false and fast food in a vain attempt to feed my soul and quell this hunger, quench this thirst. No luck. Nothing has worked and here I am really up against it, not at all sure I will survive. The pain is way deeper than anything I have experienced.

R., so good to write this to you, better than keeping it to myself. But, shit, I wonder will I find my way through? I have no idea. I did have a dream two nights ago where I was in a completely dark room and suddenly saw the only way out was down through a trapdoor. I opened it and saw infinite space and the stars below. I woke freaked out, but right

now, I feel reassured, or calmer. All this! Clearly I need to stay with the dark of this wound and its pain. Help me! Write me! I am at my edge.

Dear P.

Yes, stay with it. It has always been there and you are only bringing it to light so you can realize this. As much as you can, let this work in you and don't move away from it in the usual ways you describe. Live it and find those allies who can stand with you in it. I am one, but there may be others, and Nature herself is always an ally in this. The wound is deep and real and unrecognized. Few, if any of us, have really been welcomed and received as souls on earth, Personalities, yes, though not in all cases, but it is rare that a person experiences that they are fully seen and encouraged as the being they are in their depths. It is not anyone's fault, really—parents are imperfect, peers can be cruel, and the culture is limited always, and seeks to shape us in certain ways that may not fit at all with who we are truly. You are not alone, therefore, in suffering this emptiness and hunger; as I said in my previous letter; this epidemic is rampant around the world, and, paradoxically often in those people and places you would least expect. And it generates such suffering! Suffering and all those useless compensations that take us further and further away from our true self! Such a waste, really, and yet, in recognizing and facing this, you are turning back toward yourself, even if it feels so hard. You are gaining the capacity not to flee, but to confront and study this wound, to see how it came, and learn what you need to do in order to heal it gradually and begin to feed your soul food that will nourish and sustain you truly.

I would say have patience and take your time, and try to eliminate, or minimize, as many of the outer distractions as you can, so you can feel more clearly what is there. And also begin to ask yourself what does truly nourish? What am I drawn to, and what has meaning for me? You have the hints from the garden and the mountains, but what comes now to you in the daily round that you resonate secretly to? The strange thing about this is that your soul has not left, you have left it, and it is always trying to find you, if you will pay attention. So, as you slow down

and restrain the speed of the self-preoccupations, you will begin to notice moments that speak to you in the world in this way. “Soul moments”, I call them—moments when you least expect it something touches you, reaches you, and you come alive, quiver, sense, in the very midst of the darkness that something is there for you, or that everything is all right at some level way beyond your comprehension. Trust these glimmers; they are your soul at work.

The trick is not to move away from the hunger, but to bear it. It will then begin to draw to it what it needs to be sated, and you can recognize what this is. It is almost as if the soul hunger is now the touchstone for your healing, for finding your way. Let it work in you and have faith that in time it will work well, even if now it is overwhelming. Your dream is beautiful and points the way. There is no way out but down now, and the stars are waiting for you. Take your time, dear P, and there is time—believe me! And there is a way that this all will happen if you are true to each experience. Leave out nothing and in time, all will come to you. It is our inability to bear our true experience that gets us disconnected in the first place, and so it is important to welcome and bear whatever is given, to study it, and to learn that it too has a place in your life. Some of this experience is very painful, as you now know, and some of it is uplifting and joyous, but in the end, it does not make any difference what kind of experience it is, only that it is yours and you are capable of living it fully.

I am with you, and so are countless beings that have gone before, who have crossed this territory, and are sending you faith and love for the journey.

Dear R.

I have come full stop. Stopped trying to understand and shape my life. Given up, the way you might when you are drowning, or freezing to death. Let go, stop struggling, allowing whatever it is to sweep over you. The other night I came home from work late, ate some dinner, then sat near the window and watched night come on. So acutely aware of how lonely I felt, how empty my life seemed, but didn't struggle against

this, even with the good suggestions you have made and my best intentions to follow them. Just sat and let the dark come over me, inside and out. My breath moving in my body, hearing the noises from the street, both so far away, and I felt myself tumbling down, down, down. As if I'd fallen through that trap door in the dream, into utter dark. I have never had such an experience. Could feel the hunger and yearning, but couldn't care less. Could sense the chaos of life around me, the suffering of others in all directions, north, south, east, west, and I wept quietly-- for me, for all of us, for the sorrow on the face of the earth, of which mine was such a tiny part. I gave "in", that is more it than "up". I surrendered my struggles and my yearning and my sorrow and was simply there breathing and listening in the growing dark. Gave in.

No idea how long this lasted. At one point I became aware that it was full night and the stars were out. Came to, so to speak, and stirred a bit, looked around the room. It was the same, but I saw it in a new way, simply as it was, simply as it was, yes, no embellishment, or wishing it were different, just it, this room where I live, as it was. How can I say this? I had come to ground somehow, felt so here, nothing different save me, and this sense of being at the bottom of everything. Nowhere to go, lost, and, at the same time, here, just here, and that was ok. Stood up slowly and walked across the room. Turned on a light and looked around again. It was all still there, and I felt the whole world was still there, and yet different too, more itself, more real, more alive. Eventually I went to bed and slept, but this experience stayed with me deep and is with me now as I write a few days later. Of course, this has not made all the difference--wouldn't I wish! But it has made a difference, and I'm grateful, small blessing as it seems. Closest I can get is that MY FEET ARE FINALLY ON THE GROUND. The world is whirling, chaotic, challenging, frightening, just as it was before, but I'm here, just here, and this is different.

Where from here I have no idea, but this doesn't worry me any more. I'm here, so strange to say, but true, I'm simply here, and the rest will follow from that. Am I crazy, or is this sanity at last?

Dear P.

Bravo! You have landed. This does not mean that the journey is over—far from it—but it means that you can begin a new phase of it, can begin to build slowly and surely a new way to be in the world, one that is far closer to who you are, and have always wanted to be. The image of a house full of broken furniture is useful here—it all has to be cleared out so the house is completely empty. Then new furniture can be brought in and a new way of living begin. This all takes time, let me say this again, but you have come to the place where you can begin. Rest now there, and let it all sink in.

Savor what you have experienced in the last months, and see what happens. Be careful not to resume the struggle, but keep this attitude of openness and surrender, even as you go ahead with whatever emerges. Watch for the glimmers I wrote you about earlier, they may come more strongly now, and keep this question in your mind of what brings you joy and true satisfaction. But don't try to answer it: just hold it and see what happens. "Just here" is the key. All of this is an act of faith, and the gradual restoration of trust in your own experience—the thing you lost so long ago as a child, or that was beaten out of you. This is the practice now—to stay rooted in just being here, as you say, and see what comes. Everything will come in time, but how it will come you cannot know except by staying true to the moment and your experience, studying it, and letting it work in you in its ways. There are things that you can "do" and I will write you about them in time, but this is the most important, that you practice trusting and receiving what life brings to you and responding to it from this place of "here".

So much to say, really, but I will wait for now. Only to say that you are not alone in this, just as you were not alone in that empty darkness. This place of "just here" is ancient and many have touched it and then built their lives around it--many in all cultures and in all parts of the planet. It is the root of human maturity and the capacity to love truly oneself and the world. You have been given a gift of immense value, one that will grow now as you nourish it by staying true to it, though it seems small to you at first, and simple. It is simple in essence, but to

cultivate and strengthen it is a complex process and takes work that I will describe later and you will find on your own. But for now--“JUST HERE”-- let this be your foundation, your breathing, your body, your ground, your true being.

I am sending you my love and again my bravo!

(There is now some time before the letters resume again, and P. has begun to explore ways to support this process of healing. These ways have come partly by listening to his own inner sense and voice, and partly from efforts made in the outside world to find help and support beyond this older friend, R. We can imagine that this passage of time is a period of months, or years, and that much has happened that is not recorded in this next set of letters. Still, they point to some aspects of the territory crossed and the continuing journey.)

Dear R.

Quite a while since I have written you. Not that I haven't thought of you often, and spoken to you inwardly, but I've been focused on finding ways to support this process. It has taken me so beyond who I thought I was! A strange time, really. The loneliness and emptiness did not disappear. But I found how to contain them, if that is the word, so they do not take over. They are part of me and I have a better sense of where they come from and how they feel. Some days I can let them be, and they pass; other days they're as strong as before and I have to tough it out. Fundamentally different now though, because I know I'm not them. Funny to say, but so true! Realizing, in fact, that I'm not so many things I thought I was--not just these feelings from the soul wound, but all the ways I buffered this pain and compensated for it, all those “me's”—I'm not these either. You know, I can begin to see my personality without being so caught up in it. Of course, I'm still using my various skills and ways of coping, but there's more space, even in just normal life—I am not so stuck in myself, there's more room to move and breathe. I feel lighter. The “just here” has really been so important. I'm learning to go there and rest, to just sit as I did that day, and this

amazing space opens up. Even if I am very upset about something! Perspective, I guess, would be a way to say it. Not taking it all so seriously.

Yet you better believe I'm struggling still with the question of who am I now, and what's for me in the world! Here help is coming from my dreams. Never much of a dreamer, really, and didn't think they amounted to much, but in the last period dream after dream has woken me up and seemed to be teaching me, telling me about buried aspects of my life. I'm beginning to listen to this channel, so to speak. Some dreams are clearly the detritus of my daily life and my anxieties about little things. But, My God, there are others that seem really to come from another place, sometimes very dark, sometimes light. "Expanded" is the word, by these dreams, woken up and expanded! Last week I dreamt I was walking on a beach at the end of day, at sunset, and suddenly a wave, a really big one, rolled in from the ocean and swept over me. In the nick of time I dove under it, but its force was something else as it broke on the beach and rushed into the dunes behind. Another night I dreamed I was with some friends, laughing and talking in a room I guess we were sharing. Quite unexpectedly a new person appeared at the door dressed in work clothes, a farmer perhaps, and nodded to me to come with him. I didn't want to leave, but he beckoned again and finally I did go. Found myself in a new place, again, near the sea. There were horses grazing and a warm wind blowing, the smells of sea and land strong. So beautiful! I'm letting these dreams work me, trusting they are helping. I haven't yet found someone to help me understand them—I may do that at some point—but for now I'm simply letting them work as they will.

I'm very much in the dark still. Not suffering as I did, but there's much I do not know, so much, both about myself and about where I'm going. Part of the process, I guess, to stick with the unknown and not panic. Always before I'd try to pin everything down, neat, in order. I can't do this now. This freaks me out at times, but mostly I go about my business with a greater sense that I'm not in control and this is ok. I'm so new at this. Sometimes I get very scared and wish for the old days. Then this passes, and I keep going. Much more energy for my work

these days and this I like. Not sure the job is my destiny, but for the time being I'm doing it with less struggle, just doing it. Could be change will come--a new direction for me to take. Not pushing. Enough to be where I am now, getting this new bead on life, welcoming the dreams, and living the mystery of it all. I like that phrase "Live the Mystery". It's a relief. Loosens me. Brings me to "just here".

My God, do I have sympathy for the kid I was and what he went through! See how it led me to the dead end and despair I felt when I first wrote you. This has changed now! More like I'm growing in the dark, beginning to find my way into a new life that is more my own.

Please write when you can.

Dear P.

I am glad to hear from you and have thought often of our exchange of letters around that dark time. It is good that you are going slowly and letting this process work in you without forcing it. This is the wisest way. You have experienced an opening, or awakening to your soul, a breakdown that is also a breakthrough, and everything is being rearranged to hold and express more of who you are. The expansion is in all directions, just as you said, so that you are getting a fuller sense of who you are and the range of experience that is available to you, both from the past and in the future. We so easily get locked into one, or two, ways of being, and the rest is put away from our awareness, supposedly for safe keeping, but, as you have discovered, it returns and explodes at some point. Keep working with that perspective on the various parts of your personality. We have many parts, and they are all useful in some way, but usually they need to be sorted out and rearranged so they do not get in the way of the soul, but rather serve it. This is a long, long process, and one that takes years of work, but it has begun in you.

The dreams also speak to this loosening of the boundaries of identity and letting more in—more of everything and usually all quite mixed. In order to survive we have rejected a lot of who we are, stuffed it away, and all this has to come back to us. This speaks to the complexity of this process—it has many different dimensions, each of

which needs to be attended to. They do all come together into a dynamic whole in time, but not according to our plans and timetable. Wholeness takes time, and is simply a matter of gradually coming to know all the aspects of who we are and accepting them. They are all needed and in time they each find their right place. Such a richness, really, once we get used to it! A lot goes into this process, as you are learning—more than I can write here—but the bottom line is learning to trust life again and letting it work in you in its particular ways.

And, yes, the unknown! Leave room for it, lots of room. The deeper we go into life, the less we know for sure. It is not that we do not know, but that knowing is limited and we discover increasingly that we are surrounded in mystery. Strangely, once we accept this, it is quite marvelous, as you say, and we can let ourselves live as we are more fully, not constantly trying to make ourselves into someone we are not. Here the principle is acceptance, and I would urge you to practice this along with patience as you continue along this path. There is all the time in the world, for the soul dwells in timelessness while it seeks to manifest in time and space. We get closer to it by entering timelessness, or at least slowing down, as you say, and it gets closer to us as we sense and act on who we most are. An older friend of mine once said to me, when I was young, “Work and live under the aspect of eternity”. This brings you, as you say, to “just here” and I would add “just now”.

Please write when you feel the need, and know that I am here thinking of you with great respect and joy. If there is anything I can do from afar, call on me. I send you blessings for the journey.

Dear R.

Thought this journey would be a straight line, once I got oriented, but no luck! It's constantly up and down and, if anything, more a spiral, circling back on itself. New vistas each time, but, My God, the roller coaster! Remember I wrote last time about expanding in all directions? Man, this is the truth! Can gradually see a rhythm to it, Like I'm going along fine and then some feeling begins to build up, or I react to an event, or person, and there goes the balance. Tips me down to

something buried, or, if I'm smart, I go down to meet it. Of course, I resist this shake up, and try to keep my balance just as it is. But no go. Down I fall into this anger, sadness, fear, despair, emptiness, whatever, and at my best, live it. And what happens? The experience moves and changes, turns into something else, often the opposite of the first. Can you believe it! Fear goes to courage, despair to hope, sadness to joy. And out of this arises a new balance-- more inclusive and human, I might add. Sometimes I feel I'm in the middle of a giant invisible kaleidoscope. It is rearranging patterns in a rhythmic and even orderly way, though the order is way beyond me. When I can bear this, a new experience of who I am comes through, like what I include in my human life.

See this also happening in dreams where a figure will transform surprisingly before my eyes, but this transform is when I'm awake and can happen anywhere. Makes me think of birth contractions and labor, which helps. Feels very natural, even if it's intense, and scary, and never stops, really, except for those moments of rest and balance that soon are broken open again. What helps is to witness the rhythm of this movement, and realize what I learn helps for the next tip. When despair comes around again, I know more about it. So can bear and work with it, maybe more wisely. Slow progress here, amidst the chaos.

Another thing that's helping is I have begun to practice a simple meditation that a neighbor taught me. Said it calmed him, and might help me. Seems to be universal— following of breath in and out of the body—and I do this every day as a “second awakening”—that's what he called it-- in the morning before eating. Steadies me, both in the moment and during the day. When I don't do it, I sure notice the difference. Feels like it's strengthening a central point in my mind, where I can see in all directions, so to speak. Don't get caught up in the details. I suppose it's like being at the top of a mountain, looking out in all directions. But this is right here in the middle of things. It shifts how I see and how I chose to respond. Again, slow going, but I can feel this still point growing in me—a balance point that has no substance attached to it, no clothing, so to speak. Naked awareness, naked being.

It's affecting how I am with other people. I'm both more here and more detached, closer and farther away at the same time. Strange! But I like it. And when I am there, amazing to say, often there's a flow of warmth in my heart for the world—for the particular person, or place, but you know, also for the wider world, for all creation. Wow! Remember feeling this in the mountains, for sure, but this is right here in the world, in ye olde marketplace! Gives me strength in a quiet way. Can bear the ups and down as they come and go better. Friends have noticed this difference in me. Find they're speaking more fully to me about their lives. I feel more trusted by them. How different from the kid who vowed to go it alone. I am alone-- I know this now. But this flow of love is real. So new!

On top of this, or maybe because of this-- and my neighbor did not tell me this-- when I'm here in this way I feel closer to my own soul, like that point is a doorway to myself. Yet I don't go anywhere. Something comes to me, something gentle and forceful at the same time, flowing into my mind and feelings and body--everywhere. I don't have to do anything except be open. Very quiet and very powerful and mysterious to me still. Can't quite believe it. So used to the struggle of life, and being thwarted. This is very different—a gift, a grace. Nothing to do but be. Who would have thought?

You know, I am busy with my work and life. It is not like I had gone away to some holy place. I'm in the very midst and have my responsibilities, even more now. But it's so much easier from this perspective, more flexible, not so tied up in them, even as I carry them out. I always thought holiness was elsewhere, in some beautiful place far away, and I imagine it is still. But, listen, I am learning that it is also right here, "just here", My God, "just here". Right under my nose. Still have real questions about the work I'm doing and whether this fits me now. But, even with that, I'm doing it more easily, with less strain. Want to explore the question of vocation at some point. But for now I have my hands full with the ups and downs and this growing center of balance.

R, does this make sense to you? Have you had such experiences? I look forward to hearing from you about all this and send my love and thanks. You have given me so much!

Dear P.

Yes, your experiences make sense and I am impressed with how you are learning from them. Not all people are able to do this at first, for they continue to yearn for the old ways and try to get back to them. Or they are afraid to let go into the unknown and trust that what is coming will be good for them. Rather they see disaster at every turn and so resist the inevitable, which is that Life moves on, and that there is always more for us to experience and express. I have seen many cases like yours where people reach a low point and uncover the soul wound and all the sorrow around that, but it can also happen that people are going along quite well and, without a crisis, the meaning in that life just begins to drain away. There is no crisis, as there was with you, but simply a gradual loss of meaning and direction, often in the midst of a very happy existence. Of course, this all is very upsetting, however the change comes, but it only means that the soul, by which I mean the true person, is ready for more, wants to go deeper into Life. A crisis, or this gradual loss of meaning, is the way the soul gets our attention, and we are broken open in these ways to its influence. This can be very dramatic, or not, but, when we are wiser, we come to always be listening for the new, for the next step, on the journey.

So you are doing well. The ups and downs are just what you say-- the opening to more of who you are in your depths and heights, and I would say expect more rather than at some point they will cease. This is another way the soul works to transform us and reorganize our inner and outer life to fit better its/our purposes, strengths and beauties. The metaphor of birth labor is apt. Yet, as you say, you are learning to keep your balance better as time goes on and you are cultivating that still point in your breathing and being. There is no substitute for this, and the ways of cultivating it are many. Meditation is certainly one, and prayer, but it can be equally strengthened through gardening, or

walking, or playing music, or any activity that is done with poise and awareness. You can even wash dishes and build this center at the same time!

So just keep going, and pay close attention to the experiences that come to you and seek to learn from them. We can learn from anything. For me the soul is our capacity to embrace all of our human experience in a coherent and creative way that allows us to make use of it all to fulfill our lives. We are born with this intention and with a mission, you could say, something to do and express on earth, and this gets all tangled up in what we meet as we arrive. We suffer the soul wound that I have written you about earlier. We lose our way, or we lose confidence that we can live in this way we most want to, and which is ours to live. We settle for less and make the best of it in order to survive. You know this. And the pain eats at us secretly, and the yearning never stops, though we can try to kill it in a vast range of ways. In this sense the soul never gives up, even if it is sidelined and suppressed. Its intent is to be here fully, to be fully alive on earth in its truth and beauty and power, and nothing can stop it forever, though it can be slowed.

We can work against ourselves, surely, and the culture we are born into can also work against us. There definitely is resistance to taking this journey that you are now on, and it takes a brave person to set out. There are many obstacles, inner and outer, to our soul life. And yet, I have seen again and again, against enormous obstacles, a person bear and do what is needed for the soul to be fully born and realized in daily life. This is what I mean when I say it is “inevitable”. Life tends toward this birth and the richness and beauty of a human life. It is only we, in our ignorance and fear, who stand against this, and sooner or later, we wake up and realize who we are and what we are here to be and do.

You are well ahead of the game on this, but I want to write you about the larger context for this journey and the pitfalls that can occur. Again, we can learn from everything, so that even the greatest mistakes can be redeemed in time through learning. Time can be lost, pain inflicted and endured, but in the end it all falls in place if you are willing

to wake up, keep going, and come alive. I remember at a very dark and difficult point in my life, where I had made some very foolish choices and was trapped in their results, this voice came to me again and again, "Just keep going", keep being willing to learn and all will be well in the end. I can vouch for the truth of this, and at the same time I would not wish where I was on anyone. We are fools on the way to becoming wise.

I think of you fondly and with admiration. Remember you have time and space, and that the deepest movement in your life is toward the beautiful, not at the expense of darkness, but in the synthesis of dark and light within you and the world. I wish you most well and please keep me posted on how it goes.

Dear R.

Struck by what you say at the end of your last letter about dark and light. Think I was under the impression until recently that spiritual life was all light and the thing to do was to get rid of the darkness as much as possible and bathe in the light. Dark was equated with evil. Certainly with suffering. The thing was somehow to transcend it, get beyond it, and then everything would be all right. Church as a kid was full of this message--good and bad being opposite, so you tried so hard to be good and to avoid being bad. Impossible! Like cutting yourself off from a rich source of Life! Such a very different experience of darkness now, coming to understand that this is the soil of the soul to root in. Accept it, embrace it, and it transforms into an aspect, or quality, of me, a very essential one. The darkness I have experienced in the last period has brought me to life, not evil. Can see, of course, that a person could get stuck in the darkness of a feeling, or viewpoint, but also see how people can get stuck the same way in a light feeling, or viewpoint. Both ways there is rigidity and repression of the other side, and the person less for it, stuck either way. Slowly, Oh so slowly, learning to stand in a place in myself that can welcome dark and light equally and let them mix, let them infuse each other. And, you know, when I can do this, I have the experience of beauty, strange to say, the beauty of creation, mine and everyone else's. This beauty is deep and very alive, not like

“pretty”, but so real, so who we are in essence and in truth. Blows my mind!

I have a new practice—whatever I am experiencing I imagine the opposite and then hold both in my awareness. This brings perspective, loosens me around whatever is happening. And it strengthens this center, the still point, so I get steady in my body and mind. Can even laugh a bit at myself. The center gets stronger from holding polarities and not choosing between them! How different from the good and bad school! More complex, for sure! And you need to be free of getting stuck to do this. But the freedom and power in it, and dare I say, peace! Unbelievable!

The other thing I’m learning is when I can find this place in me, as well as there being peace, I can also see and make the right choice, including doing nothing. It’s like I tap some source of wisdom within me that knows. Remember hearing about “the still small voice of God” in church, but this is my voice, this is something in me that knows, that is wiser than me, and yet still me. You’d say this is my soul. And this me can guide and direct me. This me knows where I am going and what is best for my life. Such steadiness and growing confidence that I can live the life that is my own! This is the voice I lost. So I began to listen to others and think they knew better than me, or they told me they did and I believed them! Coming to trust my own experience and live it no matter what. My own wisdom returning and confidence in it slowly, slowly. What a gift! What a difference!

Not that things are easier all the time. There are days when I am in despair about going on, or very afraid, or confused, and yet when I hang in there, it works in me and moves. So amazing the mood and perspective shifts and broadens, so I end up being grateful—can you believe it?-- for the experience. Poles swinging and I’m following as best I can, seeking to rest at that still point as much as possible and see what life brings. Other day a huge fight with a close friend and instead of backing away I stayed with my anger and expressed it. He was able to hear how upset I was, how hurt, and shift his stance so we both moved closer. In the old days I’d be gone and grudgeful!

Other thing that's happening is I'm feeling my life as a whole, not whole like "integrated" – I am far from that—but whole in the sense of the whole long stretch of it-- childhood to youth to now--, like there was a thread running through it, a purpose I cannot yet recognize, a backbone. Can see a little bit how the pieces fit, how the suffering has also made me who I am today. Can see there's a vision I am pursuing, even if I lost track of it for a long time, like, it was still always there in my sorrow of loss and wound. You said the soul is always there seeking to get in, and perhaps this is it—this line stretching through my life-- I sometimes touching it, many times not, and always yearning for it. Perhaps I am more on this line more of the time, or perhaps I know sooner when I lose it and am not. Progress?

Main thing I feel I am living more my own life, not someone else's. Can feel the strengths and limits of it, the way I lose myself, the ways I really enjoy being alive. Can sense myself different from others, alone, deeply alone, like with the stars, and yet this does not separate me from people, but joins me in some weaving that yields love. I don't know where I'm going, but in this basic way I am better, more alive, more living out who I am. More to go, but I am grateful for this, believe me. What a journey!

I send you my thanks and love for your listening.

Dear P.

There is so much in your last letter that brings me happiness. This is very basic learning that are coming to you from your experience, from paying very close attention to it, and trusting it. This is the basic practice—presence to your life. So much comes out of this, and yet so few people learn to do this, to their, and our loss. Your work with the polarities reminds me of an older friend who used to say to me "Never either/or: Always both/and". I was used, as you were, to conceiving in polarities and trying to figure out which was the good and which the bad, and this idea really helped me stand, just as you say, at that third point and take a much wider and more inclusive view of the situation. Then I could chose in ways that included aspects of both, and this was

always the wiser choice. It is interesting to think of the soul as your capacity to hold any polarity and without being drawn into either side. Our personalities are always polarized in some way, and grow and differentiate though polarity, but the soul is that principle of integrity that embraces all sides and sees how they each can contribute. I think the wisdom that you are experiencing comes from your soul doing this, and its/your knowing becoming more and more available to you as you practice this. The pole of darkness has been maligned particularly, and been equated with bad and evil, but I think there is such a thing as holy, or sacred, darkness, the dark side of the soul which is central to the experience of beauty, natural and human. As we practice, we get better at holding both and the spectrum of the poles expands, so we start with two feelings, or two conflicting thoughts and we expand through world-views and ideologies to birth and death. The wisest people are able to do this and then to act in ways that are consonant with who they are at the deepest level of their being. There is such a thing as “unholy darkness” what has been called evil, but this too is simply as aspect of a polarity, and when both are held here, then it can make its contribution in how we choose in relationship to it. I will write you more about this next time, for it is an important aspect of the soul’s life on earth, but for now, yes to holding both and the strength and wisdom that comes from this.

All this, including what you say at the end of your letter about your life as a whole comes, I believe, from a basic shift that is occurring in you slowly and surely, almost a shift in center of gravity, or point of deepest identity. For so much of our lives we live as personalities, with the soul off somewhere else, either split off, or merely neglected because there are so many things to do in order to survive. This leads, sooner or later, to a dead end, as you experienced, and we are cut off spiritually and so deadened in our lives, no matter how successful, or powerful, or beautiful, or whatever we are. This is a living death, one that can go undetected for a long time-- by us and those around us--, but eventually, this life breaks down, and the process of soul recovery begins, as you well know now. Each person finds their unique way,

given the conditions they find themselves in and the direction their souls want to go, but there are general patterns and principles that are useful in supporting this process, this journey, and so we can also be of help to each other, even in our differences. The process is very complex and takes its own good time, but gradually this shift happens and we experience ourselves as souls on earth with personalities through which we can express. But we are no longer rooted in the personality as we once were, but rather in the soul who we most are. A life's work, for sure, but you are beginning to experience the fruit of this shift of identity, the reclaiming of your soul, and the work of finding your way to a truer life.

There is more, there is always more, but this is important and you are discovering it through your own experience, which is best, and indeed the only way, ultimately. I am glad for you and remain at your side.

I send you best wishes.

Dear R.

Some time has passed since we last exchanged letters. There've been several turning points in that time. Seems I have to true my course again and again, and let go into more unknown. This process is never over, but, as you said, it spirals around again and again. You know, each time I feel I'm going deeper, getting closer to real, but what a trip! Relationships have changed—old ones fallen away, new one discovered—and my work too, not in the way I expected, but still asking new things of me. Thought I needed to leave my work, but instead it's changing as I change. Incredible, in fact, the various skills I gained over the years are being recombined in ways I never could've guessed. So I get continuity, and also the new. Doing ok with this, and have found other people for mutual support. Not so alone, really, and a growing community, both personal and at work. Steady as she goes. I am so grateful. Hard moments, for sure, but I weather them, and learn what they have to give. You know, some days I even feel love for the world. Can't quite believe it. Given the vow I made early on, this is downright

amazing. Gratitude is becoming my companion. Could this soul hurt be healing?

Two other things happening. The first is about what you called “unholy darkness”. The second is about the reason I am here in this life. Both are big questions. But here goes.

There’s a voice in my head I hear more, ironically, as I become more in balance. It’s very particular in its attacks. I say very particular because it aims at steps I’m taking to go deeper as a soul, to use your words, to proceed further on that line we talked about before. It’s not critical of everyday things. Not abusive in a personal way. It saves its venom for special moments. At those moments this voice very actively attacks, or mocks, or belittles who I am, what I am about to do. Tells me all the ways this is wrong, will get me in trouble, even lead to my death. People will abandon me, whatever. There’re only so many things it says, but, My God, are they mean and cruel! It’s chilling. Strange, this voice has become stronger as I’ve gained strength. Maybe I’m just more aware of it behind the scenes with the chaos gone. I’d say it wants me dead, not physically, but spiritually, like, as a soul, to be a zombie. It’s trying to distract me from the steps I most want to take. Uses fear, temptation, intimidation, rationalization, whatever, to try to get me off center, And it’s powerful. Learning to track it when it speaks. Find rather than fight the best thing is to give it an ear and then pay it no mind, or do just opposite. This voice is in me, it’s not outside. Can see it in other people from time to time. Scary! But what’s amazing is this is part of me, just opposite to my soul. Another big polarity to hold—my soul’s intention and this opponent. Some would call this the devil, and perhaps it is, but it seems closer, more particular than that, pitted against me, yet keeping me awake, in line, so it serves a purpose, strangely enough. But, Man, can it bite! Do you hear this voice? What do you do with it?

The second is a growing sense of destiny, not like determined, but in the sense of potential, like I’m here really to express something quite particular, and it’s me alone can do it. Mission. I have a mission. With all that chaos and pain, this was an idea, but very far off and impossible. Now it’s in my experience like a gyroscope, compass, a needle turning to

true north. It helps me decide what steps to take. What is this? The shift you wrote about-- More soul now than personality, so the soul's will can be felt directly? I'm afraid this might sound prideful, but I sense I'm called in some way, that my life is a response to that call. Wow! As I write this right now the voice I spoke of above is howling. It hates that idea. The two are related, yes? And each is stronger now than when I was so lost, so confused and down.

Now, I don't get the whole picture. I don't get a voice that says "You are on this earth to do such and such". No, not at all. It is much more "now here, now here, now here". Stay very much in the present situation and respond, but in line with the sense of destiny. Seems all I need to do is stay in the present and listen, deal with the obstacles, wherever they come from, and take the next step. Always the unknown still here, and the new. Cannot rest on what I know completely and so always learning. Is that it? Can rest—this I know-- in the journey I've made and what it's brought me. I'm not the same person I was when we first starting writing these letters. I'm not finished either, not at all. In fact, I'm just beginning to live the life I was meant to live. For sure this includes everything from before, all the suffering, all the mistakes I made. How strange and wonderful! Was it like this for you?

And another thing—my body. I'm in my body, if I can say this, like more than ever before. Of course, I've always had a body and lived a physical life, that's for sure. But I was not fully there, really in the earlier part of my life, like distant from the fullness I feel now, protecting myself, pulled back. Perhaps this was from the wound, not feeling fully welcomed. So I didn't fully "come in" like inhabit my body, enjoy it. Is this crazy? You know, I experience I am so alive in the flesh, very present to inside and outside, and this flow of life everywhere! Strange, me only one human being out of seven billion alive now and many more before, and yet my life, this one life, has dignity and realness. I am real, realer than I was, becoming real, becoming fully me, whatever. And not just my mind and feelings, this is me as soul embodied in the bone, blood, and breath of my body—vulnerable and sensitive, that can become ill and will die. For Sure! Yet this body can relish and enjoy the

great beauty of life now and can love, is learning to love, for God's sake, who would have believed? I am way out here. But this is really happening. I can vouch for it. Miracle! What do you think?

So I'm well, or, as I like to say, well enough. Grateful for everything, even the most painful moments. Beginning to see how they fit together in a pattern that long escaped me. Yet it's so central to the spirit and vitality I longed to have. Nothing is over, nothing complete, I know this. But I'm moving with greater grace and joy in the world now, constantly amazed. Never would have guessed it could be so hard and so easy at the same time.

Dear P.

You bring up here in your letter the very important experience of spiritual testing and I am so glad that you are aware of that voice within you, for to not be is dangerous and gets more so the more you advance on the spiritual path. Behind it is a vast polarity between the forces that tend toward connection and union and those that tend toward disconnection and disunion--universal forces, far beyond any of us, and yet they affect us and we need to pay attention. As you have become more connected to yourself, to put it that way, you have brought to consciousness that force in you that tends in the opposite direction, and it take the form of trying to undermine your progress and growth as a soul. It tests you and tries to draw you away from this path, and you have to choose again and again whatever it takes to stay on the path. Usually it is letting go of something, even something quite precious and important to you, or it means bearing emptiness, or suffering of some sort, or it means seeing clearly the nature of the distraction and "calling" it for what it is—a distraction. What is important here, and you see it, is that this force is aimed at your spiritual will, your soul's intention to incarnate fully and express its qualities and gifts. It is seeking to undermine though testing your integrity and power and generosity as a soul, your self-forgetfulness, even unto death, and your mission, as you put it, on earth. And when you choose rightly, you pass the test, so to speak, and are stronger as a soul for it. If you are distracted, then at

some point you realize this, and look to learn what happened, and then do what it takes to restore the connection.

Of course, if people continue to be distracted and make choices that take them away from this connection, if they are drawn away by this voice, then they become increasingly isolated, disconnected, and destructive, both of themselves and of life around them. But there is always the chance to turn this around, and you see people doing this in most amazing ways. I like to think of this voice as a whetstone to the blade of my soul. It is the fear and ignorance we all have in us on which we sharpen our spiritual awareness and will. And in time we move to a place that you also know in a lesser way of holding both these forces within us and in the world and seeing how all of us are making these choices again and again as to which we give our energy and attention, in other words, our life. This challenge does not come to all people—it depends on where they are on their path—but when it comes it is as you describe. What is so beautiful about human being is that we are completely free to choose, and are blessed with that freedom to do as we sense is best. No one coerces us—we advance as we can by choosing again and again how we respond to what comes—just what you have been doing. This freedom of will is a precious human attribute, which can be abused, but which is innate to our nature, and very powerful once we learn how to use it.

It is no accident that this is coming up at a time when you are clarifying your calling and mission, the purposes for which you are here as a soul on earth. Perfect timing! The trick is to keep an eye on how that voice is working, so you know where it is, so to speak, within you, and at the same time, just keep going, choosing to follow your path, experience whatever comes, and look for ways in which you can express yourself more and more fully, ways in which you can realize your soul's qualities in the world. I often say to the voice “Thank you for sharing”, or “Thanks, but no thanks” and then go right on with what is in my mind and heart. Ultimately, this is where the power and vitality lie.

As for a mission, the way I think about it is that each of us has within us, like a spiritual DNA, a pattern of potential, much as an acorn would carry within it the image of its maturity as an oak. There is no guarantee that this will be realized, but it has intent and force in it, and is always seeking to grow and mature. I sometimes refer to this as the “pattern of spiritual maturity” that each of us carries in our genes. Humanity carries this also, but that is another topic, and here what is important is that you know that that is there in you and is seeking expression and realization in the world. The experience of calling is sensing the intent of this soul pattern and wanting to fulfill it. As the healing of the personal life proceeds, this can be felt more strongly, though it is also true that it is often there in the midst of profound personal suffering and is the lifeline that helps us through. People stay alive, even if very ill, to fulfill this destiny. People risk death to do this. People will take on voluntary suffering and hardship to do this. It is a deep drive in all humans, given half a chance. It can be attenuated, as the soul wound does, and it can be opposed by many forces, personal and cultural, but at root the desire, if I can say it that way, of the soul is unstoppable, the desire and intent to be here fully on earth as human being, to love and be loved, and to contribute a gift which we carry from afar and yearn to give here and now.

And, of course, this can only be given through the body, through our being here in flesh and blood. The body has been so abused and dismissed in many spiritual circles, but it is, in fact, sacred and completely necessary to our realization as souls on this earth. Finally, people are beginning to see this and speak of the spiritual path in ways that include the body as ground for the soul. There is such beauty in this, for it is not only about the body, it is about the earth herself, and how we have abused and degraded her, our collective body, as a species. Again, this is a topic for another time, but you, in discovering the vitality of your own body are finding your way home here on earth as a soul, incarnating who you most are, and this brings joy and might I say ripeness, maturity, and the experience of fulfillment of a destiny that has been there from the beginning. Let your body teach you and carry you

and let the energies of your soul infuse and enliven it. This is an important aspect of what you are doing now, and your body will guide you deftly in concert with your mind and feelings to help you stay on your path.

People often say that this is a journey "home", but what does this mean? For me it is simply the experience of we, as souls, being at home on earth, being fully here as ourselves, embodied, vital, creative, loving, powerful, whatever is called for, and moving always with the great forces of the universe which animate all Life. It is not a place that we get to strictly; more it is a place we find and live from, as everything keeps moving, changing, growing, transforming. Home is here where we are. Thus there is both rest and no rest in this life of the soul, there is a deep sense of identity and emptiness at the same time. There is great darkness and great light, of all sorts, and there is simply being here," just here" as you said, which is neither light nor dark. Mostly, home is no where but now here. Each person needs to find it for him or herself. It is our legacy and our destiny, both.

I have a sense of increasing blessing in your life, and gratitude. An older friend once said to me "gratitude is the deepest human feeling" and I can certainly understand that. And I would add that with this gratitude comes a joy that depends on no conditions, but is an experience of simply being alive on earth as a soul, immersed in the great beauty and trouble of this planet, feeling our place and playing our part in the broken and beautiful world.

I send you my love.

Dear R.

So helpful your last letter! Got me to trust what was happening, to go with it without knowing for sure yet sensing I was going in the right direction. The tests continue, as you predicted. Becoming more skillful in detecting that voice. Finding my way. Can see what you mean about the whetstone. It is a bit of a dance, really. Getting how important awareness is of this voice in the whole of life, to really track it and outsmart it.

My work is expanding into new arenas and another kind of challenge is up, the challenge of taking more responsibility and being more visible with what I have to offer. As long as I was wounded, or separated, in the world, there were limits to what I could do, and I had all the reasons why. But now, with more force and flow, doors are opening, opportunities to work, yes, and to be me, to give what I have to give and most want to. Funny, but I used to think of mission as something that would come all at once, preferably from the sky, and I'd know what to do. Instead, see now it's a step-by-step process of recognizing what's to be done in the moment and doing it not knowing the whole shebang. But, you know, when I look back, I can see how all the steps connect. This is so great for my faith that the future ones will too. Confidence in the soul, yes!! Mission, vocation, destiny, whatever, but not how I thought. What a relief, really! Gives me more attention for what's immediately at hand. I have this larger intent, but how it'll be carried out remains unknown until the moment it is. Amazing!

This draws me deeply into daily life, into the needs and possibilities of my immediate surroundings. No more "Big Vision" and "Instant Change", but the way it works is each step at a time and many, many small changes, leading to bigger ones. I think you meant this when you said that by myriad small choices we make we move along the path of soul. Yes, there're big turning points, and I know these, but the real work I see now is in the daily details. You know, I am involved with more people than I know what to do with and I'm really enjoying this. At the same time solitude is my friend. I can spend the time I have alone quite well. These times are like the times by the fence, or in the mountains, but now the situation is completely different. Those were withdrawal out of wounding to try to restore my soul; these are withdrawal for nourishment with which to reenter the world where my soul is also. Wow, big sentence! Sounds like you. I am steadier in all this. But I want to say there's a real intensity to this way of living. The process keeps moving. No stasis here. I need to stay awake.

You know, the other thing is I'm much more aware of suffering in the world. Before it was my own suffering that got my attention and my

attempts to buffer and assuage this pain. Now there's still occasional pain and hard times, but my attention is not on these so much as on the very great sorrow we share as human beings. It draws me to respond through my work. Am looking at ways to do this. But the root of it is I feel this collective life more acutely, even if I could do nothing. Like I live there more, feel joined to all the souls both suffering and responding. No way have I lost my sense of myself-- this is stronger-- as I have said, but, strange. I feel more part of Humanity and Nature, in capitals, more a participant in the life of the planet. Paradox again, "holding both" here—that I'm by deep nature both completely particular and unique AND common and universal—both at the same time. Read about this experience, but here it is, as I live and breathe.

The other thing is that I'm seeing the beauty around me so much more. Sometimes it catches me by surprise and I gasp— the little common daily glimpses of people, animals, plants, weather, whatever. Surrounded by beauty. Yet I know that for years I couldn't see it. It did not really exist for me, except at rare moments. The world is so beautiful! Troubled, yes, as you say, and broken, but somehow there is such beauty as well, beauty in the making perhaps, beauty being born. Hard to put into words, but here I am—just here, as I have said before. Now, now, now, now, now.

And it all keeps coming and going, perfectly imperfect, completely incomplete, and always ever new.

Dear P.

Your last letter says so much of what I have hoped you would come to and what I have held for my own ripening life. It is what I would most wish for those I love, and for all beings, really, and it brings me such joy to know how you are in these days. Of course, the journey is not over, and never will be, but the soul is at hand, and this is cause for celebration and thanksgiving. There is much that I could say, but for now it is in my brevity and silence that the depth and breadth of my rejoicing will be heard. You have worked hard and well on this journey and are finding your way. May the doors of your soul and the world

continue to open and welcome you, and may you travel well and in good company!