

The Experience of No-Self

A CONTEMPLATIVE
JOURNEY

Bernadette Roberts

REVISED EDITION

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*To contemplatives East and West, especially those who dwell on the spiritual mountains of Carmel and
New Camaldoli*

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INTRODUCTION

This is the personal account of a two-year journey during which I experienced the falling away of everything I can call a self. It was a journey through an unknown passageway that led to a life so new and different that, despite forty years of varied contemplative experiences, I never suspected its existence. Because it was beyond my expectations, the experience of no-self remained incomprehensible in terms of any frame of reference known to me, and though I searched the libraries and bookstores I did not find there an explanation or an account of a similar journey which, at the time, would have been clarifying and most helpful. Owing then to the deficiency of recorded accounts I have written these pages trusting that they may be of use to those who share the destiny of making this journey beyond the self.

Though my contemplative experiences began at an early age, it was not until I was fifteen that I discovered how these experiences fit like the inset of a child's puzzle into the larger framework of the Christian contemplative tradition. This finding was followed by ten years of relative seclusion in order to pursue the Christian goal of union with God, and once I had the certitude of this goal's realization I entered the more ordinary stream of life where I remain to this day.

Within the traditional framework, the Christian notion of loss-of-self is generally regarded as the transformation or loss of the ego (lower self) as it attains to the higher or true self in its union with God. In this union, however, self retains its individual uniqueness and never loses its ontological sense of personal self-hood. Thus being lost to myself meant, at the same time, being found in God as the sharer of a divine life. From here on, the deepest sense of being and life is equally the sense of God being and life. Thus there is no longer any sense of "my" life, but rather "our" life, God and self. In this abiding state God, the "still-point" at the center of being, is ever accessible to the contemplative gaze, a point from which the life of self arises and into which it sometimes disappears. But this latter experience of loss-of-self is only transient, it does not constitute a permanent state, nor did it occur to me that it could ever do so in this life.

Prior to this present journey, I had given little thought to the self, its perimeters or definitions. I took for granted the self was the totality of being, body and soul, mind and feelings; a being centered in God, its power-axis and still-point. Thus, because self at its deepest center is a run-on with the divine, I never found any true self apart from God, for to find the One is to find the other.

Because this was the limit of my expectations, I was all the more surprised and bewildered when many years later I came upon a permanent state in which there was no self, no higher self, true self, anything that could be called a self. Clearly, I had fallen outside my own, as well as the traditional frame of reference, when I came upon a path that seemed to begin where the writers on the contemplative life had left off. But with the clear certitude of the self's disappearance, the question automatically arose of what had fallen away, what was the self? What, exactly, had been? Then too, there was the all-important question: what remained in its absence? This journey was the gradual revelation of the answers to these questions, answers that had to be derived solely from personal experience since no outside explanation was forthcoming.

With the exception of the little I could find by Meister Eckhart, I was left without a way to account for this experience, and even when I turned to books in the Eastern traditions, I encountered the same deficit of accounts, at least accounts that were available to me through the local channels. Though the Buddhist notion of no-self struck me as true, its failure to acknowledge, or first come upon the

wholeness of the self in its union with God, naturally left the Christian experience of no-self unaccounted for. Quite possibly, the extent to which the individual first discovers this union is the extent to which its falling away will appear all the more inexplicable and bewildering. It is only when this transition is over, or when we have become acclimated to a new life, that the relative difference between self and no-self recedes beyond reach; but by this time, we have already seen what is down the road and the need for clarification no longer exists.

Realizing then, that I was alone in this gap between the ultimate Christian notion of loss-of-self and its immediate experience, I came to a few conclusions of my own. In main, I am convinced that the contemplative life is composed of two distinct and separate movements well marked and defined by the nature of their experiences alone. The first movement is toward self's union with God which seems to run parallel with the psychological process of integration, wherein the emphasis is on interior trials and dark nights by which the self is established in a permanent union with God, the still-point and axis of its being. In this process we discover that self is not lost; rather, a new self is revealed through functions from the deepest, innermost divine center.

Following this first movement is an interval (twenty years in my case) during which this union is tested by a variety of exterior (not interior) trials whereby this oneness is revealed in all its enduring depths of stability and toughness against all forces that would move, fragment, or disturb its center. Thus it is a period of discovering the beauty and intense wonder of this gratuitous union and, above all, of discovering what this wholeness means and how it works in our daily lives in the marketplace. Initially it is a period of becoming acclimated to the relative difference between life with the old, easily fragmented self, and life with a new self that cannot be moved from its center in God. Finally, this is a stage in which, if exterior trials are not forthcoming, the contemplative may seek them because the energy created by this union must move outward (as a unit and not as a scattered force) to find expression, to accept challenge, even suffering, as a way to both reveal and affirm this enduring love.

I might add that these intervening years between movements are also largely ignored in contemplative literature; their importance is highly underestimated due to the failure to realize that this interval (the "marketplace stage") is actually the preparation for a great explosion, a quiet one however, that ushers in another major turning-point. It seems that at the end of the marketplace a point is reached where the self is so completely aligned with the still-point that it can no longer be moved even in its first movements, from this center. It can no longer be tested by any force or trial, nor moved by the winds of change, and at this point the self has obviously outworn its function; it is no longer needed or useful, and life can go on without it. We are ready to move on, to go beyond the self beyond even its most intimate union with God, and this is where we enter yet another new life, a life best categorized, perhaps, as a life without a self.

The onset of this second movement is characterized by the falling away of self and coming upon "that" which remains when it is gone. But this going-out is an upheaval, a complete turnabout of such proportions it cannot possibly be missed, under-emphasized, or sufficiently stressed as a major landmark in the contemplative life. It is far more than the discovery of life without a self. The immediate, inevitable result is an emergence into a new dimension of knowing and being that entails a difficult and prolonged readjustment. The reflexive mechanism of the mind, or whatever it is that allows us to be self-conscious, is cut off or permanently suspended so the mind is ever after held in a fixed now-moment out of which it cannot move in its uninterrupted gaze upon the Unknown.

This journey then, is nothing more, yet nothing less than a period of acclimating to a new way

seeing, a time of transition and revelation as it gradually comes upon "that" which remains when the self is no-self. ~~This is not a journey for those who expect love and bliss, rather, it is for the hardy who have~~ been tried in fire and have come to rest in a tough, immovable trust in "that" which lies beyond the known, beyond the self, beyond union, and even beyond love and trust itself.

Since the moment self-consciousness comes to a permanent end, and a new journey begins, is such a decisive stroke or milestone in the contemplative life, I can only speculate why so little has been said of this breakthrough; in fact, I may never get over the silence on the part of writers who say nothing about this second movement. Perhaps some contemplatives take in stride what to others is a monumental explosion; or possibly, writers down-play what they do not understand or deem unorthodox or rare; or perhaps, and this is my view, they have confused these two movements by failing to adequately distinguish between them: that is, to distinguish between a radical *change* of consciousness and the *cessation* of consciousness; between going beyond first, the lower (ego) self and later, the higher True Self; between union with God, and God beyond union. Since viewed as a whole, the contemplative life is on a single continuum, it is often difficult to draw a line and see clear distinctions until one has personally encountered these landmarks, at which time the difference between these movements becomes obvious and unmistakable.

My purpose then, in writing this account, is to help clarify the second movement, to make it more recognizable and to bring to light, if possible, the ultimate, final realization of the Christian notion of loss-of-self. In part, this attempt stems from the conviction that this movement is not unusual and that many individuals have come, or will come, to this stage wherein some clarification will be as relevant to them as it would have been to me. Though no two will have the same experiences, I feel sure that for those who had found their true self in God and then lost it, there will be certain consequences and findings in common.

While the journey was in progress, I tried to write of its events, but it was not until it was over, and until the relative difference between life with or without a self was no longer apparent, that I wrote this account in its present form and gave it to several friends for their comments and criticisms. Though much too generous to cite me for either its content or its homely narrative, they were nevertheless honest with their questions and objections. In response to these I wrote Part II, trying to find the answers that were not apparent during the transition.

In some respects, while writing these final chapters I learned more about the journey than I learned while it was in progress. It seems that the nature of this passage is a total state of unknowing which while it lent a certain beauty and air of mystery to its unfoldment, also lent a sense of bewilderment which was responsible, I believe, for certain hardships that might have been avoided if some explanation had been forthcoming. It was only when the journey was over and I could view it in retrospect that I came to a better understanding, and was able, therefore, to offer the explanation given in the final chapters.

Here too, I have made reference to my earlier background where it seemed necessary for understanding the present journey in its relationship to the past.

This background was not given at the outset because my present concern focuses solely on the relatively unexplored dimension of life, the movement beyond self. Also, I knew that if I did not record this transition as soon as possible it would soon be forgotten, because one of the first lessons learned on this journey is that the passing of each experience leaves nothing in its wake, hardly a footprint, and certainly not a vivid memory. In a word, one learns to live without a past.

For this reason I wrote quickly before the journey became lost forever and life without a self grew

as dim as the day of my birth. But at the same time, release from the past has made it possible to write on a personal level, something I would not have dared to undertake prior to this time, because this journey no longer belongs to "me." I look upon it as I do any other fact of life or event taking place around us. Thus it now stands unalterably by itself where it remains forever, but a thing of the past.

In conclusion, I must re-emphasize that the following experiences do not belong to the first contemplative movement or the soul's establishment in a state of union with God. I have written elsewhere of this first journey and feel that enough has been said of it already, since this movement is inevitably the exclusive concern of contemplative writers. Thus it is only where these writers leave off that I propose to begin. Here now, begins the journey beyond union, beyond self and God, a journey into the silent and still regions of the Unknown.

PART I THE JOURNEY

Chapter 1

Through past experience I had become familiar with many different types and levels of silence. There is a silence within, a silence that descends from without; a silence that stills existence and a silence that engulfs the entire universe. There is a silence of the self and its faculties of will, thought, memory, and emotions. There is a silence in which there is nothing, a silence in which there is something; and finally, there is the silence of no-self and the silence of God. If there was any path on which I could chart my contemplative experiences, it would be this ever-expanding and deepening path of silence.

On one occasion, however, this path seemed to come to an end when I entered a silence from which I would never totally emerge. But I must preface this account by saying that on previous occasions, I had come upon a pervasive silence of the faculties so total as to give rise to subtle apprehensions and fear. It was a fear of being engulfed forever, of being lost, annihilated, or blacking out and possibly never returning. In such moments, to ward off the fear, I would make some movement of abandoning my fate to God, a gesture of the will, a thought, some type of projection. And every time I did this the silence would be broken and I would gradually return to my usual self, and security. Then, one day this was not to be the case.

Down the road from where I lived there was a monastery by the sea, and on afternoons when I could get away I liked to spend some time alone in the silence of its chapel. This particular afternoon was different than others. Once again there was a pervasive silence and once again I waited for the onset of fear to break it up. But this time the fear never came. Whether by habit of expectation or the reality of a fear held in abeyance, I felt some moments of suspense or tension, as if waiting for fear to touch me. During these moments of waiting I felt as if I were poised on a precipice or balanced on a tightrope, with the known (myself) on one side and the unknown (God) on the other. A movement of fear would have been a movement toward the self and the known. Would I pass over this time, or would I fall back into my self, as usual? Since there was no power of my own to move or choose, I knew the decision was not mine; within, all was still, silent and motionless. In this stillness I was not aware of the moment when the fear and tension of waiting had left. Still, I continued to wait for movement not of myself and when no movement came, I simply remained in a great stillness.

Sister was rattling the keys of the chapel door. It was time to lock up, and time to go home and prepare dinner for my children. Always in the past, having to abruptly pull out of a deep silence was difficult, for my energies were then at a low ebb, and the effort of moving was like lifting a dead weight. This time, however, it suddenly occurred to me not to think about getting up, but to just *do it*. I think I learned a valuable lesson here, because I left the chapel as a feather floats in the wind. Once outside, I fully expected to return to my ordinary energies and thinking mind, but this day I had a difficult time because I was continually falling back into the great silence. The drive home was a constant battle against complete unconsciousness, and trying to get dinner was like trying to move a mountain.

For three exhausting days it was a battle to stay awake and ward off the silence that every second threatened to overpower me. The only way I could accomplish the minimum of chores was by

persistently reminding myself of what I was doing; now I'm peeling the carrots, now I'm cutting them, now I'm getting out a pan, now I'm putting water in the pan and on and on until, finally, I was so exhausted I would have to run for the couch. The moment I lay down I immediately blacked out. Sometimes it seemed I was out for hours, when it was only five minutes; at other times, it seemed like five minutes when it was hours. In this blackout there were no dreams, no awareness of my surroundings, no thoughts, no experiences, absolutely nothing.

On the fourth day I noticed the silence easing up so I could stay awake with less effort and therefore, trusted myself to go shopping for groceries. I do not know what happened, but suddenly a lady was shaking me and asking, "Are you asleep?" I smiled at her while trying to get my bearings because, for the moment, I had not the slightest idea how I got in the store or what I should be doing. So I had to start all over again: now I am pushing the basket, now I must get some oranges, and so on. The morning of the fifth day, I could not find my slippers anywhere, but when getting breakfast for the children I opened the refrigerator and what I found there was unbelievable, positively ludicrous.

By the ninth day, the silence had so eased up I felt assured that a little while longer and all would be normal again. But as the days went by and I was once more able to function as usual I noticed something was missing, but I couldn't put my finger on it. Something, or some part of me had not returned. Some part of me was still in silence. It was as if some part of my mind had closed down. I blamed it on the memory because it was the last to return, and when it finally did, I noticed how flat and lifeless it was, like colorless slides on an antique film. It was dead. Not only was the distant past empty, but also the past of the previous minutes.

Now when something is dead you soon lose the habit of trying to resurrect it; thus when the memory is lifeless you learn to live as one who has no past, you learn to live in the present moment. That this could now be done effortlessly, and out of sheer necessity, was one good outcome of an otherwise exhausting experience. And even when I regained my practical memory, the effortless living in the present never left. But with the return of a practical memory I discounted my earlier notion of what was missing and decided that the silent aspect of my mind was actually a kind of "absorption," an absorption in the unknown, which for me, of course, was God. It was like a continuous gaze at the great, silent Unknowable which no activity could interrupt. This was another welcomed outcome of the initial experience.

This interpretation of the silent aspect of my mind (absorption) seemed sufficiently explanatory for about a month when I again changed my mind and decided that this absorption was actually a new awareness, a special kind of "seeing" so that what had really happened was not a close-down of any kind, but actually an opening-up; nothing was missing, "something" had been added. After a while, however, this notion also did not seem to fit, it was somehow dissatisfying, something else had happened. So I decided to go to the library to see if I could solve this mystery through someone else's experience.

What I found out is that, if it cannot be found in the works of John of the Cross, it will probably not be found at all. While the writings of the Saint were well known to me, I could not find there an explanation of my specific experience; nor was I able to find it anywhere in the library. But coming home that day, walking downhill with a panorama of valley and hills before me, I turned my gaze inward, and what I saw, stopped me in my tracks. Instead of the usual unlocalized center of myself there was nothing there, it was empty; and at the moment of seeing this there was a flood of quiet joy and I knew, finally I knew what was missing, it was my "self."

Physically I felt as if a great burden had been lifted from me, I felt so light I looked down at my

feet to be sure they were on the ground. Later I thought of St. Paul's experience, "Now, not I, but Christ lives in me," and realized that despite my emptiness no one else had moved in to take my place. So I decided that Christ WAS the joy, the emptiness itself; He was all that was left of this human experience. For days I walked with this joy that, at times, was so great, I marveled at the flood gates and wondered how long they would hold.

This experience was the height of my contemplative vocation. It was the ending of a question that had plagued me for years: where do "I" leave off and God begin? Over the years the line that separated us had grown so thin and faded that most of the time I couldn't see it at all, but always my mind had wanted desperately to know: what was His and what was mine? Now my quandary was over. There was no "mine" anymore, there was only His. I could have lived in this joyous state the rest of my life but such was not in the Great Plan. It was just a matter of days, a week perhaps, when my entire spiritual life, the work, the suffering, the experiences and the goals of a lifetime, suddenly exploded into a million irretrievable pieces and there was nothing, absolutely nothing left.

Chapter 2

When the joy of my own emptiness began to wane I decided to rejuvenate it by spending some solitary time gazing into my empty self. Though the center of self was gone, I was sure the remaining emptiness, the silence and joy, was God Himself. Thus on one occasion, with full hedonistic deliberation, I settled myself down and turned my gaze inward. Almost immediately the empty space began to expand, and expanded so rapidly it seemed to explode; then, in the pit of my stomach I had the feeling of falling a hundred floors in a nonstop elevator, and in this fall every sense of life was drained from me. The moment of landing I knew: *When there is no personal self, there is also no personal God.* I saw clearly how the two go together, and where they went, I have never found out.

For a while I sat there mentally and emotionally stunned. I couldn't think about what had happened nor was there any response in me at all. Around me there was only stillness, and in this complete stillness I waited and waited for some kind of reaction to set in or something to happen next, but nothing ever did. In me there was no sense of life, no movement and no feeling; finally I realized I no longer had a "within" at all.

The moment of falling had been such a complete wipe-out that never again would I have any sense of possessing a life I could call my own, or any other type of life. My interior or spiritual life was finished. There was no more gazing within; from now on my eyes could only look outward. At that time, I had no way of knowing the tremendous repercussions that would follow this sudden event. I had to learn bit by bit on a totally experiential level. My mind could not comprehend what had happened; this event and everything that followed fell outside any frame of reference known to me. From here on, I literally had to grope my way along an unknown path.

My first thought was: oh, no, not another Dark Night! I was accustomed to those experiential disappearances of God and was rather disappointed to think there were any of them left. But when none of the usual reactions set in (anything from anxiety to agony, you name it), I felt this experience fell outside anything John of the Cross had described and put the notion out of my mind. Besides, it didn't make any difference, I simply had to cope with the reality of the here and now, a reality in which there was no sense of life in me.

So I sat there fully awake, healthy, faculties unimpaired, obviously alive; in a word, all systems

were functioning as usual, but I felt no life. What do you do now? I decided I might as well get an early start preparing dinner, but as I did so, all the usual movements now seemed so mechanical I felt I had suddenly become a robot, for I could no longer endow my work with any personal energies. I did my chores with no life to back them up and they were all totally mechanical, a mere conditioned habit of movement.

After a while this "gets" to you and you gradually have a pressing need to find some life somewhere. Hoping to find it I went into the garden and stood there looking around. I knew there was life there, but I couldn't "feel" it; so I went around like a blind man, touching everything: the leaves and flowers; reaching up I grabbed the pine branches and let them slide through my hands; stooping down, I ran my hands through the soil. Then I lay down on the grass, palms downward, looking up through the branches of the pine tree and felt the moving air flow over me. It was good to be there, everything was okay. Somewhere there was life all around me, even if there was no life in me.

Later that evening before the sun went down I took myself to a place I always went in time of crisis, the local bird refuge. It was only a few blocks from home and the route there passed by beautiful vistas of the sea, with its miles of shoreline and hills rising up behind the refuge. Usually I only climbed in a little way, for beyond the stump where I would sit was a marsh that grew deeper with mud and water as it approached one of the ponds formed by the river which here, emptied into the sea. But this day I took off my shoes and socks and climbed into the middle of the refuge until I found a small rock barely visible above the mud. Here, among the tall reeds and wild grasses I sat down and disappeared, literally sank into the life that was around me, and soon, on me as well.

Always I had felt at home here. It was a place of great peace and a mysterious stillness. By experience I knew that thinking would never solve the problems of life, it was just being here, out-of-doors, in the midst of real life, that automatically separated the relevant from the irrelevant, so that upon returning home all the irrelevancies had been swept away and I could see clearly the path I must go. So too, on this particular day I knew I was home, more at home perhaps than ever before. Around the little rock life was teeming and overflowing; it was everywhere, and so compensated for my own lack of life that the earlier events of the day seemed not to have happened. For sure, this was where I belonged, surrounded and locked securely into this elusive unlocalized thing called "life." After all, I thought, perhaps no man is better than the elements of which he is composed, for these elements are his very life, but how this could be so, I did not know. Just to be there was all that mattered.

The next weeks were spent mainly out-of-doors. Life indoors had become almost intolerable because it was now so routine, lifeless, and devoid of personal energies that it was all I could do to accomplish the minimum of chores. But out-of-doors somewhere life was flowing, peaceful, forgetful, unknowable, and this was where I had to be. So I roamed the hills, the river-banks and the seashore just looking, watching, and being there.

Though I had looked and watched all my life, this time was different because I could, no more find life in the trees, the wild flowers or the waters than I could find it in myself; and yet, there was life all around. It's strange how the mind wants to localize and pinpoint this unknowable thing called life, and when its demands are met, it goes blind with this knowledge and is forever locked out of the only true security man has, or so I would soon learn. For now, however, I was looking for this security and could not find it. Though everything seemed as empty as myself I knew there was life somewhere in nature, and for now, I wanted only to be there and be a part of it.

On a bluff above the sea, overlooking a cove of rocks on which the seals would doze, there stood a gnarled, wind-blown cypress tree, a favorite spot of mine, until a Forest Ranger one day told me

leave, lest I add to the soil erosion. Between the tortured roots, which allowed for no other growth there was a place to sit down without mashing a single dandelion or disturbing the varied flora that made this bluff so beautiful.

It was here that nature finally yielded its secret to me in a simple, still moment in which I saw how it all worked. God or life was not *in* anything, it was just the reverse: everything was *in* God. And we were not *in* God like drops of water that could be separated from the sea, but more like ... well, the only thing I could think of was the notion of trying to pinch out a spot on an inflated balloon; if you pinch out a spot and try to cut it off the whole thing will pop because it can't be done. You cannot separate anything from God, for as soon as you let go of the notion of separateness, everything falls back into the wholeness of God and life.

But to see how this works and to explain it are two different matters. One thing is for sure: as long as we are caught up in words, definitions, and all that the mind wants to cling to, we can never see how it works. And until we can go beyond our notions regarding the true nature of life we will never realize how totally secure we really are, and how all the fighting for individual survival and self-security is a waste of energy. This insight then, opened a new door for me. I began to see things differently and above all, I quit wandering around looking for life, obviously it's everywhere, we're in it; it's all there is.

Solely in retrospect I would like to mention a certain lesson learned on this journey. I learned that a single insight is not sufficient to bring about any real change. In time, every insight has a way of filtering down to our usual frame of reference, and once we make it fit, it gets lost in the milieu of the mind, the mind, which has a tendency to pollute every insight. The secret of allowing an insight to become a permanent way of knowing and seeing is not to touch it, cling to it, dogmatize it, or even think about it. Insights come and go, but to have them stay we have to flow with them, otherwise no change is possible. It is a mistake to think that because we have been thrown the ball, we know which direction to run. Perhaps our greatest insights are lost this way: we plunk them down in our usual frame of reference and go nowhere. But if we are really ready when the ball comes, the sheer momentum will carry us and place us in the flow, wherever it is going. Now I pass this along only because I had to learn it the hard way. When the pieces didn't fit or when an insight fell outside my frame of reference I felt more lost than was really necessary. Thus I could have saved myself a lot of trouble looking and searching for my own unanswerable questions.

An example of learning the hard way occurred here, with the falling away of all feeling of possessing individual life, which forced me to look for life outside myself. Since I had already lived some forty years experiencing life within, this was a very difficult time, a time of transition and acclimation without being able to see ahead or understanding what had happened. Nevertheless, I did the best I could to help myself, and since I was a daily communicant, it occurred to me it might be of some avail to carry the Eucharist with me at all times, in a pix around my neck. With the falling away of life within, the reception of the Eucharist no longer had any effect on me. Where before it had always drawn me into its mysterious silence, now, no such change occurred. If anything, there was too much silence. Thus, with the failure of the Eucharist to restore a sense of life within, I felt doubly lost and decided I might at least carry it with me in my search to find God without.

After a few weeks, however, I saw this ruse was not working when it brought no sense of life or security, nor brought about any change in the situation. Then, under the cypress tree on the day already mentioned, I consumed the host and saw all things were in God, that he was closer and more personal than I ever dared to expect. To suddenly realize you live and walk in God is a unique discovery that

forever dispels the sense of loss that ensues when the feeling of a personal life falls away.

If nothing else, this incident (and many that remain untold) attests to my continual effort to cling to the usual frame of reference, a clinging that revealed nothing until the hold was released. I might as well say that among the many notions that had to be abandoned was my notion of abandonment itself. It was not I, who had abandoned the self to God, rather it was God who had abandoned the self completely and once beyond the self, everything goes, even "that" which I had expected would remain.

A week or two after the above insight, I was making a retreat with the Hermit Monks on the Basilica of San Juan Sur. About the second day, toward late afternoon, I was standing on their windy hillside looking down over the ocean when a sea gull came into view, gliding, dipping, playing with the wind. I watched it as I had never watched anything before in my life. I almost seemed to be mesmerized; it was as if I was watching myself flying, for there was not the usual division between us. Yet something more was there than just a lack of separateness, "something" truly beautiful and unknowable. Finally I turned my eyes to the pine-covered hills behind the monastery and still, there was no division, only something "there" that was flowing with and through every vista and particular object of vision. To see the Oneness of everything is like having special 3D glasses put before your eyes; I thought to myself: for sure, this is what they mean when they say "God IS Everywhere." I could have stood there looking for the rest of my life, but after a while I thought it was all too good to be true; it was some hoax of the mind and when the bell rang, it would all disappear. Well, the bell finally rang, and it rang the next day and for the rest of the week, but the 3D glasses were still intact. What I had taken as a trick of the mind was to become a permanent way of seeing and knowing which I will do my best to describe. My whole world turned slowly inside-out. I was never to revert back to the usual relative way of seeing separateness or individuality; but make no mistake, the obliteration of separateness is meaningless in itself. What is important about this way of seeing is THAT into which all separateness dissolves.

Before going further and attempting to describe this new way of seeing, I would like to say that after discovering God Everywhere, or His Oneness, as I called it I was compensated a thousand, for the bewildering loss of a personal God within. It seems I had first to move through the personal and then the impersonal before I realized God was closer than either and beyond them both.

The notions and the experiences of God as being personally within or impersonally without are purely relative experiences, pertaining to the self and its particular type of consciousness. God, however, is beyond the relativity of our minds and experiences; indeed, he is so close he can never be localized. But to realize this closeness, to see it, is to discover that the very definition of God is "Everywhere." Thus God IS Everywhere and all that truly exists, because wherever we look there is nothing else to see. In truth then, God is neither personal nor impersonal, neither within nor without, but everywhere in general and nowhere in particular. Simply put: God is all that truly exists, all, of course, but the self.

Chapter 3

Eventually it became imperative to make some changes in my life-style. For the time being at least, it had become impossible to feel at one with the constant flow of irrelevancies and noise that made up my usual environment. Having been robbed of the energies necessary to dominate, control, and stay on top of the frequent chaotic conditions in the home, my effectiveness as a mother to four teenage

dropped sharply to zero. When self is no longer running the show, the usual defense-mechanisms can no longer be activated and the burden of coping falls squarely upon the energies of the physical body alone. While I never had the feeling of being nervous, upset, anxious and all that, I nevertheless had the impression that if I were to continue the same pattern of living I would be expected, from now on to lift dead weights, and I couldn't do it.

Until the rug (my "self") had been pulled out from under me, I never realized how utterly dependent I was upon getting around under my own steams, team of the mind and emotions, that is, not physical steam. It seems we possess an endless array of subtle energies we don't know we have until they are gone, although later I was to see clearly how these energies are, in fact, the self's defenses against its own annihilation. For right now, however, it was taking a long time to learn how to survive without the experience of any energy. Learning to live this way was like learning to live all over again, and although I now understand it in retrospect, at the time I was as bewildered and groping as a man who has suddenly lost the power of his limbs.

What I seemed to need were great blocks of time for uninterrupted silence and contact with nature because it was only in such a milieu that I felt at home and at one with the flow of life. What I eventually did was pack up the camping gear and head for the forests of the high Sierras where I camped for five months, or until the snows came and I had to come down.

I went to the mountains to learn how to live a new type of existence, an existence without time without thought, without the emotions, feelings, and energies of self. I hadn't the slightest idea how things would go; all I knew was that I had to go and find out. While the discoveries were numerous and I have much to say about this adventure, I think I can sum it up in one phrase by saying: until I went to the mountains I had never truly lived. Not for a single day in my life had I ever lived before. Without a doubt I was in the Great Flow, so totally at one with it that every notion of ecstasy, bliss, love and joy, pale by comparison to the extraordinary simplicity, clarity, and oneness of such an existence.

There is nothing haphazard, idle, or easy-going about forest life. On the contrary, everything there is vital, fully awake, dynamic, and intelligent. It is not a free life. The Great Flow takes its own direction, sweeping everything along, and whether it would go or not, is of no consequence. There is no time to step out of the flow or to take a break; in a word, it is a life completely devoid of a single irrelevancy.

One of the great mysteries I hoped to solve in this mountain solitude was the answer to my question: what is it that sees this Oneness everywhere? And to make the question more understandable, I am going to back up a bit to the weeks following the initial seeing on the mountain hillside.

Gradually I began to notice a shift in this seeing. Where at first it had been nebulous and general, I soon noticed that when I visually focused in on a flower, an animal, another person, or any particular object, slowly the particularity would recede into a nebulous Oneness, so that the object's distinctness was lost to my mind. Visually of course, nothing changed, the change was merely in the type of perception itself. Until this happened, it never occurred to me how I had always taken for granted the individuality of all objects of visual perception. But now, with the imposition of the 3D glasses, it became impossible for the mind to perceive or retain any individuality when all visual objects either faded from the mind, gave way to something else, or were "seen through" I do not know which is the best description to use. I might also add, I do not understand the mechanism of this change in perception, yet I regard this change as one of the most significant events in the entire journey. It is

only remained as a permanent irreversible fixture of perception, but it seemed to be the necessary vehicle by which I eventually came to the final "seeing."

It is truly marvelous how this works, it is a unique type of experience; but I repeat, the marvel of it isn't the loss of individuality of the object observed; rather, the marvel is *that* into which it blends and ultimately disappears. For now I called *that* "Oneness" and of course, "God." I am always reluctant to use the word "God," because everybody seems to carry around their own stagnant images and definitions that totally cloud the ability to step outside a narrow, individual frame of reference. If we have any conception of what God is, certainly it should be changing and expanding as we ourselves grow and change. This is the very nature of our life's movement: to expand, to open up and blossom. Like flowers that will turn completely backward to face the light, sometimes we too must do an about-face if we would see what IS. Since we do not know in which direction to turn, we must wait like the flower for the morning sun, and with no effort or resistance, be pulled in the direction of the light. Whatever we care to call the ultimate reality, we cannot define or qualify it because the brain is incapable of processing this kind of data. Thus we must ever look upon words as mere descriptions of man's experiences, the nature of which we do not really know. For myself, the opening up of everything upon which I gazed revealed a reality that was the same throughout, be the object animate or inanimate. For this reason I called it, Oneness. That someone else would prefer a different name is all right with me. Just the seeing of IT is all that matters.

The mysterious aspect of this type of seeing was that while I could focus on the objects around me I could never focus on myself. To do so would have been as impossible as looking into my eyes without a mirror. For this reason I felt like an outside observer looking upon a Oneness that included everything but myself. It was as if I was not a part of this Oneness, not even a part of the universe; in fact, I couldn't see where I had any existence at all. Besides the body, all that was left was just the seeing and yet, even this did not really belong to me for it was not localized anywhere in my mental or physical make-up, but instead, seemed to be on top or a little above my head, toward the front and over the forehead. Although I continued to refer to this seeing as my wonderful glasses, because of the extra dimensional aspect, I was sure this seeing was actually outside the ordinary mind and physical body as well.

While trying to figure out the nature of this seeing, I came upon the notion of man's original consciousness, or the type of consciousness we all have from the beginning. As a one-time student of child development, I knew that the infant possesses a non-relative consciousness in which there is no distinguishing between subject (himself) and object; consequently, he has no notion of a self. Furthermore, as we all know, the infant doesn't think, for as yet there is no content in his consciousness, nor does he have anything to remember. All of us then, were born without a reflective self-conscious type of mind which, to me, is an apt definition of "seeing." Thus for the adult, seeing may be a kind of return to this original form of consciousness, a form that surprisingly does not seem to hamper the ordinary activities of practical living. Therefore, in the process of reverting back to our original consciousness we have to learn how to live without any self-consciousness, the build-up of a lifetime perhaps, which is not an easy adjustment to make. But it's exciting to think we can make it all, and even more exciting to think of what would happen if every man could live as he was originally intended to live.

For a while then, this idea of man's original consciousness seemed to clarify the nature of the seeing, but one day I discovered a hole in this conclusion. While there may be no self-consciousness in this seeing, the seeing alone constitutes some form of subject, just as the Oneness it sees.

constitutes an object, for the distinction between the seeing and the Oneness was clear to me and never lent itself to any form of identity. In this case, then, seeing (observing) is not identical with the seen (observed), which put me right back on a purely relative plane of existence, even though there is no self that does the seeing. What this means is that the infant's consciousness may actually be relative even though it is not self-reflecting. But however this works, I could never find any relationship between this seeing and Oneness because, as I have said, at all times they were totally distinct and separate.

Months later, this same question of relationship came up in a conversation, and while trying to think of an answer, the notions of original consciousness, seeing, and Oneness, seemed to float out the window and over the hillside until they finally disappeared from sight somewhere over the ocean. Thus the question of relationship of seer and seen had no answer. But at the time of which I speak, I was still thinking up the questions because I lived a full nine months with the wonderful glasses even though focused on the Oneness they saw everywhere, and as far as I was concerned, this was the end of the road.

Nevertheless, it is still interesting to speculate about what the infant may actually see and know before his mind has become conditioned. At the same time we may ponder the animal's type of knowing and the possibility that it may know and see something that man has lost in his endless battle for survival of his self. Then too, who knows what great intelligence may be locked into the very elements that compose man and the universe, an intelligence without any consciousness at all? One thing is certain: with our thinking, rational mind, we'll never come upon these answers because our mind, limited tool that it is, is so continually taken up in the service of self that it cannot come upon that which lies beyond all such concerns.

Apart from trying to identify what it was that saw this Oneness, there was still the unresolved question of what remained in the absence of self. What is this that walks and talks and is aware of the eye upon Oneness? As obvious as it was, I had no mind for such a mystery and could not come upon any satisfying explanation. Though the identity of the Oneness was known, the identity of the eye that saw it, as well as what remained in the absence of self, could not be identified. Thus between the Oneness, the eye, and no-self, there seemed to be no true relationship.

Ultimately I discovered that the only resolution to the many questions that arose, is time. Time means change, and in the process of change my initial questions either changed, dissolved, or were resolved in the process. I had already learned that thinking never brought about change; consequently thinking netted me nothing when it came to resolving these questions. Though questions inevitably arose, I soon learned it was important not to give them a premature answer.

In similar fashion, I learned this was also true of my experiences. I discovered that as soon as I invested any value, meaning, or purpose in them, I was losing the pearl of great price by giving them premature closure. It was only by investing no value in an experience that I was able to find out its truth or falsity. What is false never lasts, it falls away of its own accord; while what is true, remains because truth does not come and go, it is always there. So as long as our experiences come and go and we are investing in them our own values, thoughts, and emotions, we'll never find out if there is any truth in them, for truth is what remains when there are no experiences left.

I only mention this because it was one of the lessons I learned in the mountains. I learned that without any movement, reaction, or response from within (or from self) all experiences were becoming like water on a duck's back. It was as if I had become an outside observer on the relative aspects of life, aspects in which I participated through conditioned habit, while at the same time

participating in the inexplicable reality of the flow of life, true life. It seems that beyond self the relativity of our experiences fall away because there is nothing within that can respond, nothing hold onto an experience in order to give it value, meaning, and so on. In this way, experiences lose their relative aspects when there is nothing to which they can be relative. This is why, when there is no self, there also seem to be no experiences, no movement, feelings, excitement, or the thousand responses of which the self is capable. From here on, all experiences are of a non-relative character. Without meaning, the experience is *it*, and there is nothing outside itself.

Since this is difficult to explain, I will give an example of how I came by this understanding. In the following experience I realized the great importance of having no self and of giving no heed to even the most marvelous of events.

The northeast portion of my camp sloped to a small meadow. Directly across, the meadow gave way to a steep descent that led to a lower valley. From the top of the descent a stream gushed from the side of the mountain having made its way underground from a lake a half mile away. Near the outlet of the stream, one could get a view of the valley and surrounding hills laden with boulders, trees, and patches of wild grass. The east wall of this valley was a tall imposing mountain of solid rock that turned red in the sunset. The locals called it "Thunder Mountain." I often went to this spot, not only to take in the view but to watch for the animals that came to drink. This day, however, I had been collecting firewood and only stopped to rest. Since there was nothing unusual going on at the stream, I stood looking out over the valley, gazing at nothing in particular, when I noticed a peculiar gathering of intensity in the air somewhere over the valley. Whatever it was, it was gathering itself together from all parts and in doing so, was expanding outwards, obliterating everything in its path. At the same time, it grew to such a pitch of vibratory, almost electrical, intensity that it exerted a magnetic pull on my body. At first glimpse it appeared to be the familiar Oneness, but as it grew in intensity I realized it was something else, something I did not recognize at all. The Oneness had always revealed itself through the medium of form, but if this was the Oneness, it now had no medium and was magnified a thousand times over, a magnification that could not be endured. But whatever its reality, I knew that to be caught in the path of its expansion was to be drawn into it like a speck of dust. I thought my time had come and that despite the mystery of what remained, it would remain no longer. Another second and the light would go out forever, the light of the eye that beheld this wonder. Somehow I knew this should not be, yet there was nothing that could be done. I could not look away for there was nowhere else to look, there was no energy to move, within, all was still and motionless, no response, no thoughts, no feelings. What would be, would be.

At the threshold of disintegration something happened. With nothing more to guide it than itself, the body turned away, made an about-face that once more confronted it with the forest and the wood to be gathered. So I went on my way, but did not get far before I had to sit down. The body was so weak and shaken I thought it might yet fall apart, disintegrate.

This experience occurred a number of times while I was in the mountains and each time I could not get over the mechanism of "turning away." Though I was being pulled in the direction of this intensity of myself I could not have pulled away or turned away. Yet of its own accord, the body turned, and always at the last moment. That the body had a power and wisdom of its own, struck me as a great mystery, a miracle in experience.

I never knew how to evaluate this experience, but each time it occurred I thought the end had come and that the fight would go out forever. This would have meant a total blackout such as I had experienced before, a blackout in which there is absolutely nothing, an annihilation more complete

than just the loss of self, and what this meant, I had no idea.

I felt the need of great strength to enter the intensity without the light going out, but what kind of strength is this and how could it be acquired? Perhaps it was the strength needed to bear the vision, to enter into God, but I did not know for sure, nor could I imagine how one could see God face to face and live. To come upon such a requirement could make a man despair and turn away. Nevertheless, I felt sure that whatever had brought me this far would give me the strength to go all the way. In my journal I called this experience a "crack in the door."

Chapter 4

The snows came early that year. After two stormy days, I awoke in the night to hear a great silence, a silence only snow can bring. The storm left a foot of snow that so transformed the woods and the surrounding mountains it was like a totally new terrain, a place I had never been before. For several days the roads were snowbound, but by the time the snow had partially melted, black heavy clouds hung low above the trees, and when the Ranger's car drove up, I knew what he was going to say.

From time to time the Ranger stopped by to swap animal stories, and each time he never failed to tell a story of someone he'd had to "dig out" because he stayed too long. Since another snowfall was imminent, it was necessary to leave before the roads iced up and I would be snowbound, for how long this time, he did not know.

So after packing my gear and stuffing the remaining nuts into the hollows and holes of my friends, I stood there taking a last look around, knowing the best months of my life had come to an end, an end that had been inevitable from the beginning. I knew that although I should return many times to this spot, it would never be the same. I had learned long ago that the essence of life is movement; it was not contentment or security; rather, it was growth, change, and challenge, wherein the external circumstances of life merely reflected the needs of each moment in the thrust of life's flow. What I would find down the mountain I did not know, but I was sure nothing could ever again alter the flow I had discovered in the mountains, a flow that would continue to take me "whithersoever I goeth."

My first destination was a campground overlooking the sea. As beautiful a site as it was, I seemed unable to appreciate the surroundings because I noticed a subtle change in the object now being picked up by the 3D glasses. Instead of seeing the Oneness into which all separateness dissolved, everything now dissolved into an inexplicable emptiness. Where, for so many months there had been "something," now there was nothing. In time, this emptiness became increasingly pronounced and difficult to live with. Without an "inner" life or the slightest movement within, "seeing" had become my life; I was totally dependent upon it, and without it, I had not a thing to fall back on.

But if the constant sight of emptiness was tedious and difficult to live with, it was as nothing compared to what I came upon one morning as I walked along the beach. Suddenly I was aware that a life around me had come to a complete standstill. Everywhere I looked, instead of life, I saw a hideous nothingness invading and strangling the life out of every object and vista in sight. It was a world being choked to death by an insidious void whereby every remaining movement was but the final throes of death. The sudden withdrawal of life, left in its wake a scene of death, dying and decay so monstrous and terrible to look upon, I thought to myself: no man can see this and live! My body froze to the spot.

The immediate reaction was to ward off the view, to make the vision go away by finding some

explanation or meaning for it; in a word, to rationalize it away. But as I reached for each defense, the knowledge that I had not a single weapon dawned on me like a sudden blow to the head, and in the same instant I understood this thing called self: it is man's defense against seeing absolute nothingness, against seeing a world devoid of life, a life devoid of God. Without a self, man is defenseless against such a vision, a vision he cannot possibly live with.

Realizing I could no longer project a single defense, I waited for some reaction, especially an inward movement of fear. Somehow I knew that with the birth of fear, self would spring alive with all its weaponry, for it was now obvious that fear, the mother of all inventions, was the core around which the self was built and upon which its life so depended, that self and fear were here, all but indistinguishable. But when no reaction came, when there was no movement of fear, I concluded that self had been frozen and entombed within me in full consciousness of its state of immobility, death, and total helplessness. Unwittingly I had been lured and entrapped in this monstrous state of no-self, an irreversible state because, once gone, the self can never return. Thus in these moments, surrounded by a terror I could not feel, and from which I could not escape, I seemed doomed to remain in this unlivable condition of having to stare out at a horrible nothingness without a single weapon or defense.

Until this moment I had given no thought to the self, or where it had gone the year before; rather my concern was what remained in its absence. From the time of its disappearance I had known a great freedom, the freedom to come upon the Oneness which lies beyond self. But right now, the silence within was not seen as freedom from self, rather, it was seen as an imprisoned self, a frozen, immovable self that was all part of the scene, part of the insidious nothingness choking the life out of everything. Even now it had frozen my body to the spot. How could I survive another moment?

It seems the one remaining resource was my two legs, two legs that could still run even though they felt frozen and immobile. I had learned before how to move without any need for personal volition, which is to act instantly, without thinking, without any need for self-consciousness or will-power. Once again it worked, and I found myself running down the beach, but as I did so, it was as if something else was running with me, urging, forcing me beyond all physical endurance to "Run! Run as you've never run before! You are running for your life!" And I believed it.

Now I wasn't even a jogger, and there was two miles to go, some of it up a steep cliff; but when I reached my car I seemed mindless of any exhaustion. Jumping in, I drove downtown and parked near the main intersection. I had decided to spend the rest of the day walking and being among my own kind, and it was good to be there.

Since this was a university town, the downtown section was full of young people. On the sidewalk of one corner a jazz-band was playing with full amplifiers; further on was a more subdued trio; and further yet, a solitary fiddler was playing lively Irish tunes. The shop windows were dressed with outlandish, unique Halloween costumes, and the cafes were crowded. The bookstores, however, were as quiet as a library and in these places I didn't spend much time, but squeezed myself into one of the noisy cafes and ordered a beer. While sitting there watching the people around me, I decided that having no-self was as bad, if not worse, than having a self; because once beyond the self, man was just as likely to come across an unlivable nothingness as he was a marvelous, unnameable "something" as it first seemed to do. To put aside the self is a premature laying down of our weapons before we know for sure what lies ahead. It's all an insane risk. Without a self, man is totally vulnerable to the winds of chance, bode they good or ill. Looking at the young people around me, I was glad they had a self; in fact, the greatest blessing I could wish upon all the peoples of the earth was to have a self. That was

they would never be able to see what I had just seen and what no man could see and live with.

For myself, of course, it was too late. I had survived this time, but who knows what tomorrow may bring? Fortunately I could not think a moment ahead or imagine how anything more could go wrong; instead, I tried to figure out where, in the past, I had somehow made a wrong turn that had brought me to such an impasse and landed me in this terrible predicament. All I could think of was that I had trusted God too much ... but is that really possible? I used to wonder if we could ever abandon too much of our self to God, or if there was a limit beyond which a man should not go. Should we abandon our mind, our memory, our whole existence, forfeit all we know in order to come upon Him, the Unknown? It is one thing to abandon our will in the form of accepting trials and tribulations, but it is quite another to be without a will or any energy to call our own. To give one's self to God is one thing, but to have him accept it, is a terrible thing, or so I now understood. The whole problem is that I had given myself to "something" I didn't really know, and why I did not anticipate the present outcome of something else I didn't know. Thus, there was only one way to account for this predicament: in thinking I had abandoned myself to God, I had, in reality, abandoned myself to nothing. So, yes, indeed, it is possible to trust God too much, but only if there is no God, only if there is nothing beyond the self.

But if there is no God, then all along I had only been trusting myself, so which was worse? Somehow they both had a way of leading to similar dead ends. But if you can't trust either of these, what's left? That was the real question: if there is no self and no God, what then? I had just seen "what then" and couldn't live with that either. There's nothing blissful about sheer nothingness, even Sartre declared it nauseous, so what it all boils down to is the fact that the only thing we can trust in life is well, money.

With a self or without a self, with a belief or without a belief, to survive, man needs money and material goods; it's the ultimate compensation, perhaps, for having no self and no God. We blame greed on the self, but it may not work that way at all; materialism may not stem from the self but from the nothingness that lies beyond the self. So when there is no self and no God what else can we do with our lives but make them economically feasible? And for myself, I thought the sooner I got into the financial game the better off I'd be, after all, life must go on despite our worst experiences of it.

Back at camp, however, I was not so optimistic. I had a messed-up life on my hands and coping with the here-and-now made for some very bad days. I tried to keep busy so as not to remember what had happened and, above all, I stayed away from the beaches because there was no life there anymore. What I had to deal with now, was this frozen self, the very idea of which could be personified as "icy fingers" of an unknown terror and dread that had a way of appearing when my mind was unoccupied. Though seemingly held in abeyance and never approaching too close, I knew they were lurking in the background of my mind and were liable to appear at any time. Right here, I realized how totally my life depended upon the toughness of the immovable stillness within; I knew that the slightest feeling of fear or panic and these icy fingers, which were like sudden flashes of light in my head, would invade my entire being, resulting in madness. But I had no control over this silence, it wasn't even mine; rather, it was all that remained of a self-that-was. Thus my fate now lay in the precarious balance between the stillness within and an unknowable terror that could suddenly appear in my mind.

To avoid any possible confrontation I tried, as I have said, to keep very busy, and with four children this was not hard to do. More than once they had been my lifesavers, for despite all the quarreling, dirty rooms, and loud music, they always kept my feet on the ground and my nose to the grindstone. Right now, just being around them was all that mattered. Consequently, an upcoming date to make

retreat with the Hermit Monks on the Big Sur had to be canceled; the last thing I needed was solitude and silence. So I got on the phone and told Brother there was no possible way my present car could make it up their steep hill. He laughed and said, "If you could see some of the 'things' that make it up this hill you'd have to believe in miracles; besides, if you can't make it up, leave the car down and we'll send Brother E to pick you up." So that was that. How could I possibly tell him about these "icy fingers" following me around? For sure he would have told me to go to the hospital instead.

The day I drove down the coast, a big storm hit the Big Sur. Twice I had to pull over and wait for a lull in order to see beyond the windshield. After the second pull-over, I decided to stop at the next phone and tell them I couldn't make it; if it was this bad down the hill, imagine what it must be like going up the hill! Unfortunately, the storm suddenly abated, and by the time I arrived at the foot of the monks' grade it had become a clear and beautiful day.

I decided to wait for Brother E who came down every day at noon to meet the mailman; I thought he could follow me up and be of help should I have any trouble. After helping him unload the pig slop which the monks donate to their neighboring farmer, Brother got in his car and told me to follow, "In case," he said, "you have any trouble, at least I can keep going!"

At first everything went okay, but when we got to the worst vertical upgrade, Brother suddenly slammed his brakes, got out of the car, came back and told me to do the same, because he had to put a new blade on his tractor, which was to the right of us, half over the cliff already. Now I did not know if my hand brake would hold, in fact I was not sure how long the foot-brake would hold, so I shouted at him, "Move it over because I'm going through!" But how could he move over? To the immediate left was a steep embankment, and to the right, a sheer drop; it was obvious that somebody had to give. What happened next could be called the "big squeeze," but once beyond this delay, the rest of the way up was a breeze.

Arriving on top, instead of being relieved, however, I saw the whole situation as positively ludicrous; after all, my car was probably in better shape than some of the clunkers the monks were driving. Then too, since my last trip, the road had been newly paved. So there I stood, possibly the most reluctant retreat, and ever to come up the hill, and had I known what lay ahead I would have gone back down. We never know the time or place where our destiny will catch up with us, nor could I have imagined why, for me, it would be here on the monks' hillside.

The first two or three days went by so well, I thought I had finally won out; but on the afternoon of the third or fourth day the icy fingers came back, and in a moment of bravado I decided it was time to have it out with whatever it was. I could not keep running from this thing all my life, I had to get it out in the open, face it head-on and deal with it, because I could no longer stand its continual lurking around every corner of my day. I decided to go outside, sit on the hillside, and stare it in the face until one of us gave way, or went away.

Now I cannot convey what it is like to stare at some invisible horror when you don't know what it is.

Just knowing what it is may be all the defense you need; but when you've gone through your list of name-calling and it does no good, you just have to resign yourself to not knowing and face it anyway. This thing I had to stare down was simply a composite of every connotation we have of "terror," "dread," "fear," "insanity," and things of this order. In a word, it was a mental, psychological killer. Although I knew this whole drama was only in my head, my thinking mind was all but numb in its presence; but for this reason, the thing seemed wholly on the outside so I could personify it as icy fingers, which were like darting tentacles of light. Though it was unlocalized, it was easy to stare

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