

ON THE NECESSITY FOR MORAL HONESTY

Stephen Harrod Buhner

*There must be those among whom we can sit down and weep and still be counted
as warriors.*

Adrienne Rich

I came across a remarkable Freddie deBoer article a few days ago (which I will talk about in a moment). It stimulated a great many thoughts about matters I have been thinking about for a very long time. It crucial to all areas of an honorable life, including herbal medicine and healing, those of us who speak for Earth, and, of course, for those of us who write. It all begins with a unique form of honesty, what I tend to think of as moral honesty. This is not the all-too-often simplistic phenomenon that many people make it out to be, it is rather, as Raymond Chandler once put it, “an art.” And like all art, it takes time to perfect it.

To have moral honesty, there is a quality of self that must be developed. And this is far more than the refusal to lie. It isn't easy. Honesty as Chandler is speaking of it in his iconic essay, “The Simple Art of Murder,” is a tangled quality composed of integrity, emotional intelligence, compassion (for self and others), a certain quality of heart, the absolute commitment to keeping one's word, the willingness to speak uncomfortable truths, the awareness that one's adversaries or enemies are not necessarily evil but are usually the same kind of flawed human being as one's self, an exquisite understanding of the lure of power and money and fame and their effects on people's behavior, and the willingness to encounter the evil that people do (and the evil that some people become) and not lose the self in that encounter. Further, within Chandler's world

(and that essay) is the inescapable responsibility of the honest person to speak for the voiceless and to defy the powerful. The characters that live within Chandler's books reflect the complexity that he called honesty, which he considered foundational to a lived life, and also crucial in any story a writer tells.

Those that mimicked his style rarely, if ever, understood it. As Chandler insisted, mimicry is always easier than the real thing, "Realism takes too much talent," he said, "too much knowledge, too much awareness."

The realistic style is easy to abuse: from haste, from lack of awareness, from inability to bridge the chasm that lies between what a writer would like to be able to say and what he actually knows how to say. It is easy to fake; brutality is not strength, flipness is not wit, edge-of-the-chair writing can be as boring as flat writing; dalliance with promiscuous blondes can be very dull stuff when described by goatly young men with no other purpose in mind than to describe dalliance with promiscuous blondes. There has been so much of this sort of thing that if a character in a detective story says 'Yeah,' the author is automatically a Hammett imitator. And there are still quite a few people around who say that Hammett did not write detective stories at all, merely hard boiled chronicles of mean streets with a perfunctory mystery element dropped in like the olive in a martini.

Chandler then describes the nature of the world in which the morally honest person lives (and in

which all of us live). It's full of what Robert Bly called "the harsh facts of life," something which the young in our time have great difficulty facing (or even hearing about without feeling "unsafe"). The muscles that grow from facing adversity and tests of character are often atrophied in consequence – as they are in all of us when we begin to develop the courage necessary to become morally honest.

Those of us who have grown up in certain parts of America have had a very hard time facing those facts (as I did myself), for we have been erroneously taught and come to believe we are entitled to a world and life in which we feel safe, where such things do not exist – or only exist among "deplorables." Groups or communities of people who are so devoid of value that they deserve no compassion, no attribution of a common humanity. Such default positions are possible because we live in a country that "has made denial its national obsession" (and as we grew, many of us absorbed this default position of denial and made it our own). That denial, as Robert Bly puts it so well, is a mark of "the naive person's inability to face the harsh facts of life."

As he says . . .

The health of any nation's soul depends on the capacity of adults to face the harsh facts of the time. But the covering up of painful emotions inside us and the blocking out of fearful images coming from outside have become in our country the national and private style. . . . denial begins with the refusal to admit that we all die. We don't want anyone to say that. Early on in the cradle, swans talk to us about immortality. Death is intolerable. To eat, shit, and rot is unthinkable for

those of us brought up with our own bedrooms. We want special treatment, eternal life on other planets, toilets that will take away our shit and its smell. We love the immortality of metal, chromium implants, the fact that there are no bodily fluids in the machine, the precise memory the computer has, the fact that mathematics never gets colon cancer, and we are deeply satisfied that Disneyland can give us Germany, Spain, and Morocco without their messy, murderous, shit-filled histories.

But as Chandler understood so well, there are certain harsh facts that can never be removed from our species' character and its behavior. Nevertheless, he insisted that the mature person, as well as the characters in his books, must face them.

The realist in murder writes of a world in which gangsters can rule nations and almost rule cities, in which hotels and apartment houses and celebrated restaurants are owned by rich men who made their money out of brothels, in which a screen star can be the finger man for a mob, and the nice man down the hall is a boss of the numbers racket; a world where a judge with a cellar full of bootleg liquor can send a man to jail for having a pint in his pocket, where the mayor of your town may have condoned murder as an instrument of money making, where no man can walk down a dark street in safety because law and order are things we talk about but refrain from practising; a world where you may witness a hold-up in broad daylight and see who did it, but you will fade

quickly back into the crowd rather than tell anyone, because the hold-up men may have friends with long guns, or the police may not like your testimony, and in any case the shyster for the defence will be allowed to abuse and vilify you in open court, before a jury of selected morons, without any but the most perfunctory interference from a political judge. It is not a very fragrant world, but it is the world you live in.

Chandler ends his essay like this . . .

In everything that can be called art there is a quality of redemption. It may be pure tragedy, if it is high tragedy, and it may be pity and irony, and it may be the raucous laughter of the strong man. But down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid. . . . He must be, to use a rather weathered phrase, a man of honour, by instinct, by inevitability, without thought of it, and certainly without saying it. He must be the best man in his world and a good enough man for any world. I do not care much about his private life; he is neither a eunuch nor a satyr; I think he might seduce a duchess and I am quite sure he would not spoil a virgin; if he is a man of honour in one thing, he is that in all things. He is a relatively poor man, or he would not be a detective at all. He is a common man or he could not go among common people. He has a sense of character, or he would not do his job. . . . He talks as man of his age talks, that is, with rude wit, a lively sense of the grotesque, a disgust for

sham, and a contempt for pettiness. . . . He has a range of awareness that startles you, but it belongs to him by right, because it belongs to the world he lives in. If there were enough like him, I think the world would be a very safe place to live in, and yet not too dull worth living in.

Nick Cave was speaking of this same quality of self and way of life when he said that “goodness could not be trusted that has not breathed the same air as evil.” That is, the person who presents themselves as good must understand and have come to terms with the harsh facts of life – they must be able to walk down those mean streets and clearly see and understand their nature, must be able to breathe their air without losing what is most essential in the self.

For those who do not understand this, it is easy to mistake honesty (as Chandler understood it and as I describe it here) for its surface mannerisms. It’s an astonishingly common mistake. Another way of putting it is that it is easy to mistake many activists’ (, e.g., medical doctors’, herbalists’, scientists’, environmentalists’) behavior as action in defense of the good when in fact it is something else entirely. For they have not yet come to terms with the harsh facts of life nor do they possess these qualities of honesty as I am speaking of them here; they are in fact mere mimics – mimics who often seek public accolades for their apparent goodness. They do not produce art (in the expansive sense of that term) but something else entirely, something not so good as true art is for our world or the people in it. To see activism that is art (and which contains moral honesty) one only needs to look at Martin Luther King, Jr. and James Baldwin whose art lived not only in their writings but in the fabric of their lives and actions. Art that is genuine is always honest in this sense of that word. As Stephen King once put it, when you write

you must always tell the truth, even in fiction. For if you lie in your writing then you have no business writing at all.

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These are the thoughts that immediately arose as I read Freddie deBoer article on his substack site. It's title: "Imagine If Everyone Who Tried to Write Like Choire Sicha Had His Emotional Integrity." I don't know Choire Sicha's work but I do know Freddie's and this is one of the most beautiful essays he has ever produced.

From the way deBoer begins his essay you can perceive the commonality between his points and what I have included here about and by Raymond Chandler.

It's often been said that if there is anything like a default prose style for the internet, no one has influenced it more than Choire Sicha, the former Gawker editor and Awl founder and current New York editor. This may not sound like praise; the default style of the internet is pretty damn annoying. But the point is not that the average style really mimics that of Sicha but that it's a warmed over photocopy-of-a-photocopy of Sicha's voice.

As he goes on to say . . .

It's a shame, given [Sacha's] influence, that the droll, world-weary, and subtly

lacerating elements of Sicha's style are what has been so endlessly aped, and not the deeper commitments that underwrote them. For one thing, it's simply much harder than people seem to think to be dry and cutting, and anyway we are now drowning in such attitude and so it can't possibly seem anything else than tired. A 2008 n+1 piece contrasted Sicha's style with "vacuous sarcasm," and that's as good a term as any for the default affect of the internet, I suppose. But there's a deeper failure to understand that the only route to authentic irony, rather than its aforementioned unwelcome cousin, is through the heart. Sicha is living proof that every true ironist is a failed romantic. I think Sicha has maintained an incorrigible desire to see the world in a better light than he currently does. What I think his imitators fail to understand - or, more like, the generations who now imitate the imitators, unaware of the original - is that his best work has always been ringed with kindness.

Again, what is being articulated here as most crucial is not the form of writing or behavior but what is inside the form. And one of the terrible things in our culture now, part of what is leading to its collapse, is that nearly all Americans are trained to focus on form not what is inside it. A sense of the aesthetic dimensions of life has atrophied to the extent that the faculty itself is nearly extinct in far too many people.

Oops, A Rant

This is, regrettably and tragically, a side effect of rationalist materialism and the insistent

monotheism that have been forced upon us since birth. (Bear with me here.) Rationalists (and their priests, scientists) focus on the exterior of matter (dissected interiors themselves become exteriors), can describe the attributes of matter (the exterior world) with extreme exactness but when it comes to the interiority of anything, including themselves, their vocabulary is stunted, childish, terribly limited. (Far too many continue to insist that all human qualities are merely the result of chemical interactions, that there is no such thing as consciousness, or any interior self at all.) In truth, very few rational materialists will extend interiority to any living thing other than people.

Few people understand (because of its insistent, oppositional positioning) that rationalist science is the most powerful of christianity's protestant sects. It *is* christianity in a slightly different form. Its cosmology is nearly identical and if you take the time to unpick its underlying belief structure it is not so hard to see the resemblance. (See Mary Midgley, for example, on science as religion.) Within christianity, as in rationalist assumptions, an essential aspect has always been its unwillingness to extend soul (intelligence) to anything other than human beings. That is, the material world is merely matter, and unimportant matter at that; it has no interiority or soul or intelligence. (And please do not bring up st. francis, the exception that proves the rule, or the kindly botanist who loves plants, *ibid.*)

This orientation is foundational to the offspring of judaism, that is, christianity and islam. It is not so difficult an undertaking to understand that christianity's form and many insistences are in direct opposition to that of roman paganism, specifically, the roman belief that the world is alive and aware and filled with sacred intelligences that are interactive with human lives, that we live in an animist universe on an animist planet. (Things that are integral to my spiritual beliefs

and practice – I am an ecstatic animist.) The religious form we call christianity emerged in direct opposition to those beliefs. And its adherents have spent centuries killing or forcibly converting anyone who believed the old religion . . . even those who were merely accused of being its adherents. Even today, they still kill heretics in some places while in others, such as these United States, they actively attack those who see Earth as more than mere matter. They wish to prohibit all other religious forms, force a theocratic government with their own version of sharia law upon us all. And there are over 70 million of them insisting on it. (The emergence of rationalism during the Enlightenment took place in a powerfully christianized world; it *had* to use christian orientations to present its case so as to avoid attacks from the church.)

This is not a bug in the religion but a feature. It cannot be eradicated without altering the essential fabric of what christians believe their religion to be. (And yes, there are a scattered handful of true christians that have taken jesus’s teachings to heart and do their best to emulate him. They are irrelevant to this point. At best they are used as an excuse for the barbarism of the rest.) This is one of the harsh facts of life that far too many of us keep secret, even from ourselves.

This same orientation is true of rationalist materialism and its science. It, too, actively attacks anyone who insists we live in an animist world (such as proponents of Gaia Theory), more than this, its science actively kills Earth itself in its quest for knowledge. As James Hillman so poignantly put it, “It was only when science convinced us the world was dead that it could begin its autopsy in earnest.” The belief that Earth is “mere matter” underlies rationalist materialism’s every belief, assumption, and action. (And yes, there are other kinds of scientists and rationalists, they, too, are far too often used to excuse the evil of the rest.)

No one has to look very far to see the ruins that this way of thinking has made of our world. There is a reason we live in a time of ecosystem collapse and it is *very definitely not* because you use single-use plastic bags or drive a car. As Hannah Arendt once put it, universalizing blame enables the true culprits to escape responsibility. Every article that uses the word “we” when discussing climate change colludes in that process.

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The importance of deBoer’s and Chandler’s essays are that they point us in the direction of our interior self and its nature, toward essence instead of form. And they insist, as they should, that anything that is created and which possesses genuine value must come from certain attributes of self. The attributes infuse the words – the art itself, they bring something good, essential – and most importantly, redemptive – into the world. To use a different terminology, they are speaking of the *climate of mind* of the writer. (This is a term from the Canadian scholar Tim Leduc.) The important point is that it is the climate of mind *in here* that has led to the climate *out there*. More specifically, it is the climate of mind (and its underlying beliefs) inside unrestrained corporate capitalism, neoliberalism, rationalist science, materialism, and reductive, surface-oriented thinking that has created the climate problems we face. Crucially, the climate of mind I speak of here is pervasive in our world, in every form of work and art, even inside each and every one of us. It is embedded in our assumptions, the structures of our societies, and in our language, which is why one of the tasks that faces each of us is to retrieve and repair our wounded words and ways of thought. We need to reclaim unwounded language in order to speak of these faculties of

self and their importance to our sustainable habitation of Earth. And it is crucial if we wish to decolonize ourselves.

Even more crucial than unwounded language is an unwounded climate of mind from which *to* write. Freddie deBoer captures some of the essence of this at numerous places in his essay. Here is one of them:

This passage [by Sacha] is critical but free from any kind of clumsy disdain or righteous derision, with nothing meaner than the swipe at the inconvenient hours of the banks of ages past. . . . The fashion of hip progressive writer types (practically the mandate, honestly) is to mock tech bros ceaselessly and crassly, to assert their moral poverty as well as their failures of style and cool. It's an absolutely exhausted genre, whether in essay, post, or tweet, yet tuned-in young writers oblige the communal dictate and still take sad waves at deriding NFTs or whatever, perhaps despite and perhaps because of the fact that the war of New York media vs. Silicon Valley tech can only end in one way. Well, observe [Sacha's] paragraph above: it's remarkably disciplined in its restraint, and for that very reason far more effective than yet another withering putdown about tech bros. It's easy to counsel subtlety. It's much harder to pull it off. And perhaps empathy is a register that's accessed so rarely, outside of greeting cards, because it's so often packaged with self-seriousness and cloying sentimentality. But if we're good enough and we care enough, there are other ways.

As deBoer comments, “Derision is easy, compassion harder, and compassion that casually evokes the absurdism of late capitalism very hard indeed. I would not trust one writer in ten to do it so well.”

He ends on this note . . .

Everyone knows that the internet is a colossal drag that they can't quit. You unlock your phone and cruelty falls right out and into your heart. So perhaps there was no version of online life that did not devolve into a firing line of bitter, overeducated people who think they've been wronged because they never got the accolades that were coming to them, launching one liner after one liner out into the atmosphere, seemingly in an effort to so saturate our environment with blank and witless sarcasm that it corrodes the buildings and poisons the wells, for what purpose I can't imagine. Every day a new asshole decides that they're going to be the one to settle all the world's scores with their Twitter feed or their podcast, spraying little insults feebly around them and hoping that no one notices that behind the arch delivery and the condescending tone there's a sad sad person who's too old to be spending their time that way, the only light in their life the sickly glow of a laptop screen that they should have closed hours ago. It probably had to be this way. But I can imagine a different culture, what could have been. I would say it could still be, but we're too afraid, too scared to try vulnerability, subtlety, reserve, gentleness, a lack of judgment. Which of course is also to say that I can imagine another me, were I not afraid.

And so can we all imagine, if we take the time to do so, another us . . . were we not so afraid.

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My primary writing mentor and teacher, Robert Bly, was someone who could walk down those mean streets, someone who could write honestly, someone who spent a lifetime urging the best in himself forward. He was also someone who understood the terrible dangers in a culture that focused so insistently on surfaces. The medium that called him was poetry and because he believed in this kind of honesty he attacked the powerful poets and staid literary world of his generation, of all generations really. He attacked them for their insipid poetry, poetry without an interior, without soul or luminosity, and without the kind of honesty I speak of here.

They hated him for it – as did much of America. You have heard the words his critics used to castigate him and his work; they are commonly thrown at anyone who still insists on the importance of an animist world, of interiors, of soul, of empathy, compassion, integrity, and honesty (that is, anyone who talks of these secrets out loud). Descriptives such as woo-woo, New Age quackery, half-naked men running in the woods and seeking meaning in drumming, anthropomorphism, projection, irrational assertions, inappropriate to science, emotionalism, childish.

In one article I read recently, the author talked of regular hugs improving health then was quick to exclaim “this is not woo-woo stuff but an outcome verified by science.” (How is it that such a simple and natural human sharing such as hugs have come to be described as “woo-woo stuff?”) If a writer says that a walk in the woods heals the wounded soul, that they feel the

companionship of trees and stones and landscape itself, it will be derided as projection. If someone says that animals possess the same attributes as people, language, culture, memory, future planning, tool making, they will be accused of anthropomorphism. (As Jane Goodall once commented about this, “When I was six my dog taught me that such an assertion [from rationalists and their scientists] was rubbish.”) And in truth that same climate of mind is pervasive in journal articles, in the New York literary world, in most nonfiction, and distressingly, in contemporary fiction itself. The wounded climate of mind which surrounds us is pervasive; it affects everything we think and do – as individuals, as cultures.

It has become so bad in fact that the internet is filled with people who cannot see an expression of empathy without attacking it, see redemption without undermining it, see human failings without destroying the person who has them, see love and caring and honesty and simple goodness without responding to them with a tired cynicism embedded within a mask of elite sophistication. This describes most of the literary output of the east coast publishing world and every MFA graduate of the past thirty years. They just cannot allow themselves to speak of and overtly believe in goodness or the simple childlike enjoyment of story without fearing censure or being called naive, unrealistic, sentimental. (Just see the current denigrating reviews of *Ghostbusters: Resurrection* for examples of this.)

As the screenwriter Richard Curtis (Notting Hill) once put it . . .

If you write a story about a soldier going AWOL and kidnapping a pregnant woman and finally shooting her in the head, it's called searingly realistic, even though it's never happened in the history of mankind. Whereas if you write about

two people falling in love, which happens about a million times a day all over the world, for some reason or another, you're accused of writing something unrealistic and sentimental.

Ultimately, we have a responsibility to ourselves, to our children, to the coming generations, to life itself, to repair that dysfunctional (even psychotic) climate of mind in ourselves. In no other way will be able to repair the terrible wounding in our cultures or in our world. It is time, past time, to reclaim these most essential of our human attributes and make sure they are present in every facet of life, including rationalism and science.

Thus we must learn to discriminate, to make value judgements, to refine our aesthetic sense so that we can determine the difference between false and real art, between the genuine and the fake, between unwounded and wounded words, between these opposing climates of mind. This of necessity mandates the willingness to *feel* – for it is the response of our hearts to the touch of the world upon us that gives us access to the meanings in which we are embedded and which we encounter every minute of our daily lives.

We have all had the experience of going to a new restaurant with a friend, turning to them and saying, “This place feels weird, let’s leave.” This is the kind of feeling/sensing I am speaking of. What you are sensing in that moment is the place’s climate of mind – its essential meaning, the touch of its true nature upon you.

Mind, in the way I use it here, is not brain but a state of beingness generated in large part by ingrained assumptions/beliefs about self and the exterior world. It’s a personal, cultural, or professions orientation toward reality, often believed to be reality itself. When taken on as one’s

own, it gives rise to thoughts specific to that climate itself. For instance, if you were raised from your earliest days with the belief that women do not think as well as men (as so many men were Once Upon A Time) it becomes a default orientation of self, the belief so deeply embedded it just seems to be a facet of the world itself. Any woman (or sensitive male) who encountered such a person would *feel* that climate of mind during any interaction with them. And that climate of mind would naturally generate certain behaviors on the part of the person who believed that underlying predicate. In many ways we are trained to perceive what we have been taught and unable to perceive what is outside that teaching. Undoing that colonization, allowing the exterior world to tell us of itself without assumption on our part, is the work of a lifetime. There is always some new, unnoticed ingrained belief lurking about in the deeper recesses of the human heart.

To take this a bit further, if you find yourself standing in a shattered, clear cut forest a certain feeling will arise, just as a different yet specific one arose in that restaurant. If you *remain* in that shattered landscape certain kinds of thoughts will begin to arise, generated of their own accord from the meanings inherent in the land itself and which you feel as you stand there. Associative transfers occur, one thing leads to another. If you remain within that climate of mind long enough, you will take it on as your own. (This is what happens to those immersed for years in rationalism or reductive, mechanicalistic science.) If you encounter a damaged or wounded climate of mind without an awareness of what is happening to you, begin to spend your days, your life, within it, it can easily become a habit of mind instead of a guest you have allowed to visit and access your interior.

Taking on the state of mind in a clear cut forest *is* breathing the same air as evil. With awareness, instead of just stumbling along, you can travel deeply into the meanings that reside in

such a landscape, take on its climate of mind, analyze its nature, and determine its differences from the good (which is far more than “This sucks!”). If you immediately then place yourself within a healthy, old growth forest you will then take on its climate of mind and will be able to, because of the experiential comparison, more clearly understand far deeper levels of what has occurred in the clear cut forest. This allows depth knowledge of the impact that rationalist materialism and its unrestrained corporate expressions to arise – of the climate of mind driving them, and of the people who clear cut. That deeper knowledge enables a far different kind of Earth activism than has been practiced the past half century.

You can then confirm in yourself your allegiance to the good for you know the bad by its acts – by how it feels you know it. What you don’t do is excuse the evil. Say, “Well, progress,” or some such thing. You take a stand, become the kind of person that Chandler and Cave are speaking of.

What most of us learn as we travel is to avoid becoming shrill (as hard as that sometimes is). As the Indigo Girls once said, “shrill is never very attractive and it certainly does not make good music.” It doesn’t produce effective activism either. “Shrill” is pain encoded in words, an attempt to stop the agony that behaviors by others cause in the feeling heart. There are other ways to speak of these harsh facts of life, other ways to disavow them, other ways to walk through the world and down those mean streets.

It matters, deeply, the quality of the thoughts (and style of thinking) we take as our own. Some deepen our sense of self, strengthen the best in us, connect us more deeply to truth, to Earth, to our humanness and moral center. Others do quite the opposite. And it is how we feel as we let those thoughts become our own that tells us which is which – specifically, the response of

the heart to the touch of those linguistic meanings upon us. And that feeling response leads always to what is behind or underneath those meanings – the psychological and epistemological orientation of the one or ones who composed them. Thus, to allow the thoughts of others to take up residence inside us without a simultaneous discernment of their character or analysis of their nature is often unwise.

As the great writer William Gass once put it . . .

For what is it to take a guest of this kind into the interior of the soul, from whence words rise like a sudden spring; what is it to offer your hospitality to the opinions and passions, the rhythms and rhetoric, of another, perhaps far from perfect, character and mind? . . . In societies which depend principally upon the spoken word to establish and maintain community, the real origin of one's words is a serious, even critical matter. . . . Rhetoric in the abstract [is composed of] words quite free of responsibility to anyone. It is no wonder that Socrates feels uneasy in their presence.

It is our feeling response, that is, *the mood or atmosphere or climate of mind* that arises in us as we read, that tells us the true nature, and epistemological value, of the thoughts of others as they enter inside us.

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This is a subject that has concerned me for a lifetime. It has not been easy for me to live the kind of life I am describing here; I don't think it's easy for anyone. None of us are born possessing these qualities; we only possess them at birth in their nascent form. They have to be developed and that takes time, a lot of time. For our life to become art (in this sense of it) we inevitably make errors, sometimes terrible ones. We fail and then we begin again. This is the nature of art of any sort.

Developing this form of honesty is so difficult because it goes against the grain of a great many embedded drives with which all of us are born. The overwhelming desire to run from trouble or danger. The terror of behaving differently than the people around us, of being cast out for our difference. The fear of taking the lonely path. The desire to not see the worst of ourselves, our fear of shame, of worthlessness. And there is, too, the common fear of darkness, of facing the harsh facts of life, of encountering evil.

There is the weeping of centuries in many of those harsh facts. For an ancient grief resides within the cruelty that human beings do to each other, that we ourselves have done on our long, difficult journey into becoming ourselves. As Robert Bly once said, "wherever there is water there is someone drowning." Everything has its shadow side, even dihydrous monoxide. Everything possesses its own harsh facts – including our own desire to do good.

Rigorous self-examination has fallen into disrepute. But if we engage in it we will find in ourselves qualities and memories, ignorances and facets of self that are hard to endure or to live with. We can choose to look in the mirror, see what and who we are and sometimes have been, and change. Or . . . we can avoid mirrors for the rest of our lives.

In the end we are faced with developing the hardest of all virtues: self-compassion.

Something far more important and necessary than self-esteem.

The drive for self-esteem, as I have learned over long, painful decades of labor, is *always* accompanied by a sense of worthlessness. The greater the drive for the former, the greater the sense of the latter. The more insistent one becomes on building self-esteem, the more confirmed the worthlessness of the self is. (All affirmations inevitably affirm their opposite.) The focus on self-esteem is, in the end, a denial of the harsh facts of life that reside in ourselves. Truly facing what we are means that we see the worst of us, yes, but also: *it means that we must come to terms with the best of us*. And I do not know why but from all my decades of observation I have noticed that people are quite often more afraid of perceiving and accepting the best in themselves than the worst. It is an inheritance of our puritan history, and I suspect, of monotheism itself.

It took me decades to come to terms with these things, to decide to open myself to the gaze of others, to undefend myself, to let myself be seen (by myself *and* others), to become genuine. Eventually, I learned how to remove the watcher from the gates, made the decision to intentionally become naive, unsophisticated, simple, and open – just as I had been in childhood (though of course the “child” of me is now 70 years old; it’s far more mature in its understanding of life and the world, and in its capacity to recover from the hurts that come to all of us).

One day, some years after that decision, I was able to write this . . .

I’d Like

to meet someone who

hasn’t let the world

rub the wonder off them,

a person whose mind is
neighborly with my own,
someone who knows how
to drink up sound, a
woman who's eyes are
filled with the depths
of her, someone whose
life's sunlight touching
crystal prism, thousands
of images flying wild
into the world, a writer
who's become the stories
he's told, an archeologist of
mourning, a digger of first things,
a man who carries inside himself
the silences of his father
and doesn't mind,
a storyteller whose words
throw sparks from every
thing they touch, who's able
to cry all the tears I can't,
a person whose thoughts don't

smell musty, someone who's
heard the land sing to itself
late in the night
when the Pleiades rise
above dark mountains, a
person whose feelings
bear witness to what the
world's telling them, some
one who's willing to be
innocent over and
over again, and thinks it
would be a good thing
to love me.

The road is long and often difficult. To become who we are is the work of decades. Deciding to undefend the self, to open fully to intimacy, is one of the hardest things I know. But even harder is understanding trust and becoming trustworthy to the self – something that has to happen before it is possible to truly become trustworthy to others (including the plants of the field and Earth itself). Only in so doing can any of us engage in the sacred act of breaking bread with ourselves. And that is a crucial step on wholeness for each of us.

The only way to achieve with another person the kind of love so many of us want, but do not have, is to learn to do these things. And trust is the core of it. As Julie McIntyre once put it,

trust is the food that feeds the soul of love. Love without trust, as common as that is, is poor food for the soul or a lived life. Without trust the kind of intimacy I speak of here is impossible.

This sort of trust means revealing the whole, undefended opened self to another human being and their gaze. And that is indeed a frightening thing. Perhaps it's the hardest choice of all for any of us to make. For all of us have been hurt when we gave our self in this way – opened ourselves and then found out it was a one-sided thing. For true intimacy, both people must do and be these things *at the same time*. It is a dance, a non-physical form of love making, in which the undefended self and heart interblends itself with another undefended self and heart. It is the most potent erogenous zone of all and the most intense form of lovemaking, especially when combined with the physical, that exists.

There must be a commitment to moral honesty by the both of them. Most especially they must know that a major purpose for each and every one of us in our time here is to companion each other on the journey. And not just the surface self but the self each of us has in the core of us, the place no one has ever been allowed to visit. I believe that to do this we must become honorable people – irrespective of the harsh facts of life and despite that when we do so we go against the grain and motive force of our times.

We create a very different climate of mind when we take on this kind of life, when we decide to make our lives art. And looking around myself, I can't help but think, that it's about time we did – as individuals and as a people. It's time for our science and our spirituality – and our government, too – to take on this kind of life. For we are in difficult times and surely a different, more honorable approach is needed.

No one can make the world or other people be honorable. But I can start here, with me, in

the secret chambers of my own heart, in the fabric of my life, in the kinds of words I choose to speak and write. One word and step at a time.

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