

Carolyn T. Brown

The background of the central panel is a photograph of water ripples. The ripples are captured in a way that creates a strong sense of depth and movement, with light reflecting off the crests and casting shadows in the troughs. The colors range from deep blues to lighter, almost white highlights, creating a textured, wavy pattern.

*Footprints  
of the Soul*

*Uniting Spirit  
with Action  
in the World*

*Essays on Deepening the American Dream*

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## FOOTPRINTS OF THE SOUL

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UNITING SPIRIT WITH ACTION IN THE WORLD

*Carolyn T. Brown*

MAY YOUR LOVE CONVERT LUCIFER

*Even the devil has some good in him.*

—*St. Anthony*

Abba Jacob said: I pray for Lucifer  
I rather like him, you know. My moral  
theology professor once said God hates Satan.  
I said I hope that's not true:  
If God hates Satan, God must hate me, too,  
because I am a sinner. But God loves me.  
If the devil has anything to do with half  
the hate and evil that goes on in the world,  
as it seems he does, then he is a terrifying being.  
On the other hand, his power was broken  
by Christ's great gifts of love and life,  
and he was created good and beautiful,  
and God still loves him.  
Why, then, should we hate him?

So I pray for him once in a while,  
when I think of it.  
I'll bet it makes him  
mad as hell.

—Marilyn Nelson<sup>1</sup>

## A Quest for the Authentic Life

THE CHALLENGE OF LIVING an authentic life in a dangerous, troubled time is hardly unique to our age. Reflective people through the centuries have struggled to construct a workable interface between the personal and the public and have sought to honor responsibility to family, community, nation, or group while also honoring the inner calling to know and be one's true self. Perhaps in all times, but certainly in our own, the pressure to respond "appropriately" to external imperatives directs us to explicit and clear ends: we know more or less what it means to be a good parent, a good worker, a good citizen, a good consumer, a good whatever. The roles answer and elaborate the physical requirements of sustaining life, creating new life, and organizing in groups to accomplish the first two imperatives. In general, the world cares little about our inner lives as long as we perform our assigned roles reasonably well. And it appears that in a good many cases, we ourselves pay scant attention to our truer selves until something goes visibly awry, until some dissonance of more than accustomed volume insists that we pay attention to an inner life that we scarcely knew we had. We may then go back to religious traditions that we had learned, even if only by rote, to see if some silent, resting wisdom that we had overlooked yet resides there. Or we seek in another's tradition a way of speaking that we can better hear because its language of words and concepts seems fresh to our weary understandings.

Mainstream American culture at the start of the twenty-first century has arrived at such a point of dissonance and unease. The good enemy, the Soviet Union, has been vanquished, and no satisfactory replacement has emerged, terrorism being a bit too shadowy and abstract to fill the void. The gap between rich and poor is growing, at home and abroad, and even the middle is feeling apprehensive about the downward pressure on personal wealth and material aspirations. We are beginning to notice that technology is making us its servants, not the other way around, as we worry about global warming, pollution, insufficient fresh water. The privileged among us contend with the expectations of living in a 24/7 communication nexus, where silence is anathema and doing nothing appears pathological.

There may be other reasons. There may be better reasons. But for whatever reasons, the assertiveness of religious conservatives and the resurgence of interest in ancient wisdom traditions evidence the felt need for new or refurbished road markers that are untainted by current understandings (or misunderstandings). Conservative or traditional versions of familiar religions are on the rise. Words that a few years back would have



been unfamiliar to most slip from the tongues of many Americans: mindfulness, Sufi dancing, the desert fathers, the Kabbalah, *vipassana*, sweat lodges, *lectio divina*, and on it goes. Something is afoot.

My own ventures into the terrain of spiritual questing began before it appeared, to me at least, that the country itself might be coming unhinged and instead have been precipitated by small personal disasters that demanded an end to comfortable complacency. Once I began to open my eyes and my spirit, my personal challenges painfully invited me to query the nature of the world I found myself in and my role in creating its realities. Without willing it, by an act of grace uncomfortably imposed, I became a pilgrim.

The surprises along this path have been considerable. Not least among them is that the distinction between inner and outer life now seems an illusion. The emerging view of the planet that we inhabit is that all systems, places, and people are deeply interconnected and that any change to one part reverberates throughout the whole. The earth, that blue marble floating in space, must finally be understood as a single, fragile entity, itself embedded in the system that we call the universe. For purposes of analysis and the power that it yields, it is useful conditionally to see parts as discrete. Nevertheless, the more embracing reality is that within the natural world and the human world all elements are organically related and integral to the whole.

This ecological worldview, as it is often called, is no less true on the smaller scale of our lives as human beings. For each of us, the inner life of the mind and spirit, whether acknowledged or not, is integrally related to our actions in the visible, outer world. There is no escape from this reality. For surely, to quote the title of a wise book by Jon Kabat-Zinn, “wherever you go, there you are,” and whoever you are is who you bring into each transaction in the world. Each of our actions bears the footprints of our soul. The two are inextricably fused. Yet clearly this is not self-evident and often does not feel so even to the most introspective of us. It requires examination.

Still, if we understand ourselves to be organic creatures, then no part can be fully disaggregated, for what we do is also who we are, and all elements of the self are interlocked. Perhaps the sense of dissonance and unease arises because we are displeased by the mind and spirit we see ourselves enacting in the world, and when we look at our nation at the start of this new millennium, we are not reassured. Something is amiss. I suspect that we are apprehending a better self waiting to be unburied, some truer, more authentic person than the one we meet in the mirror each morning or see reflected on the television each night. Or perhaps we

recognize that we are multiple selves some one or more of whom is crying for greater presence in the world. We are unsure whether that unheard voice is devil or angel and have not yet learned or have difficulty remembering that even the devil's message, rightly understood, can hold value and be transforming.

The seeming gap so many of us experience between who we are and what we do undoubtedly also testifies to conditions embedded broadly in the contemporary experience. Even as we struggle to be fully ourselves and most demandingly to discover who that or they may be, the *zeitgeist* establishes parameters and limitations. We have available to draw from, at least in theory, the entire world's intellectual heritage, resources of mind and spirit beyond what those of other ages could imagine. We would seem to have less excuse for failure. Still, we are yet creatures of our own time. Retaining a sense of history should keep us humble even as we recall that every age, every people, must find a fresh vocabulary for speaking to the age-old human dilemmas.

The implied "we" may also be a subset of American culture. As I recall, twenty years ago or so, when deconstruction was becoming the fashion among mainstream (read "white and male") American literary critics who were just noticing that cultural presumptions were embedded in the questions they were asking of literature, several African American critics were bemused and outraged because they had been making the same point, from the margins of the profession, for years. Only when deconstruction received a fancy name and became a statement by the mainstream instead of about the mainstream did it gain currency and, of course, fame and tenure for its authors. Similarly, then, it may be worth wondering whether those who speak of the dissonance are speaking for a broad cross section of Americans or whether "we" are speaking for the experiences of a more limited group. My guess is that the sense of things out of kilter is widely felt. I could be mistaken.

In the journey of my own life, the tension between the purported pole of mind and spirit in contrast to that of service and action, each immensely complex in its own right, has been and remains vexing. I am a contemplative and closet mystic passing fifty hours a week of my sacred time on this earth as a "faceless bureaucrat" in a federal agency. Certainly the Library of Congress, where I work, is blessed with a truly noble mission—to preserve the world's cultural heritage and make it available now and to future generations—but it is also a structured hierarchy premised on secular power, and the spiritual, unless well disguised and in masquerade, must be left at the door. I am hardly unique in struggling with the tension between the city of man and the city of God in my per-

son and in daily life. Every religious tradition has aimed to provide practical direction for living. Each certainly claims a higher truth, but most likely each arose because living unwisely in a troubled time is a foolishness to avoid at all cost. If you cannot avoid the trouble, you had better find the wisdom.

In my own life, I have found the myths and archetypes of my religious tradition instructive, but also I look to other traditions for sound guidance and insight. If an approach has been tested and found valuable for at least a thousand years—that's my benchmark—then I'm prepared to consider its wisdom. New Age is too new for me. So I measure wisdom against the slow time of the ages, against the myths and archetypes that have continued resonance, against teachings and illuminations that serve as signposts on the journey. Those that have touched me most deeply come out of Christian, early Taoist, and Buddhist conceptual frameworks; from reflections on the hero's journey, so concisely articulated by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero of a Thousand Faces*; from the insights of Carl Jung and the works of the Chinese writer Lu Xun. These have been my lodestones.

My life has been greatly privileged but not without its troubles. The impetus for much that I have learned in this world has come from pain, from my desire to understand its causes and mitigate its impact, from mentors and guides who have loved me with firmness and with gentleness, and from the act of grace that settled in me the desire to know the truth, in the multiple ways that it unfolds, and led me unknowing to the conviction that the truth will set us free—or rather that conditional truths will make us freer than we would have been. And while the particulars of each life are just that, particular to it, the larger meanings sketch a common tale. So what follows tracks this pilgrim's progress so far, the wisdom paid for with pain and reflection and nurtured by love, and some hopes for how greater wholeness might be entered into this conflicted world.

### The Hero's Journey: Riches of Mind and Spirit

The biblical story of the fall no doubt derives much of its power from its likeness to the personal loss of childhood experienced by all humans. Born creatures of instinct, as children we experience an undifferentiated world, whether good or bad, where we accept the givens as cosmic norms. Autobiographies in Western literature often depict childhood as a garden peopled by wondrous tokens of the natural world.<sup>2</sup> The most famous depiction of childhood in Chinese culture, the eighteenth-century novel *Dream of the Red Chamber*, similarly employs the garden as the site of

childhood. The sense of unchallenged oneness with the world and of time endlessly unfolding without change at some point, gradually or jarringly, becomes an experience of separateness. In contemporary American society, this typically occurs in adolescence with a growing perception that our life extends beyond the family sphere. Emerging sexuality is physical but also a metaphor for the excitement and fearsome nature of discovering our difference.

My own childhood had a garden in it, behind a white colonial house with a white picket fence. I remember billowing clouds in a blue sky, a garden gate that I rode in defiance of the rules, a rose arbor of beauty and scents, an assortment of ants over whom I wielded the power of life and death, and piles upon piles of books to read as I lay in the grass. It was not exactly idyllic, but I was well cared for, well loved, and well protected.

### *Crossing the Threshold*

I remember all too well my own fall. In junior high school I had been “queen” of the class: president of the student government, opening the school day over the public address system. With a buddy I had designed the first installation ceremony for the honor society, an event that we filled with high-minded phrases, candles to represent truth, and such. High school was another matter.

There was, I presume, the generic pain of the age, when one asks, “If I’m more than my parents’ child, then who am I?” Certainly for most young people it is a time of high anxiety, a crisis of identity at the moment when the fortunate ones fear that the choice of college will determine success or failure. My particular high school was governed with inexplicable meanness. A friend with a newly broken leg was summarily evicted from the elevator and forced to the steps because he had failed to secure the required elevator pass. The whole atmosphere bore the traces of Simon Legree.

This equal-opportunity persecution was made worse by the confluence of puberty and my discovery that I was black. Of course, I knew that I was black. It was the late 1950s, and I knew quite well that Bull Connor and his dogs and fire hoses represented a particular animosity lying in wait for me should I tread in that direction. But those events happened on television and in a faraway state. So while the disturbing images were engraved in my brain, it was all rather abstract and bore little relationship to my world.

My father had graduated from Cornell University in 1924 and had destined me by birth and his determination to be part of what W.E.B. Du Bois



called “the talented tenth,” the Negro intellectual elite. I had been the only black student in my junior high school, a high achiever with similarly ambitious friends, most of whom were Jewish. To compensate socially for living in a white neighborhood, my parents had enrolled me in a social club peopled by the children of the Negro elite. But I saw them infrequently and their values, or so it seemed at the time, tended toward the social, not the intellectual.

But my school friends were all comrades in arms; we shared high spirits and untested confidence about our glorious futures. However, when puberty struck, the taboos against interracial dating struck with it, and while my friends from the Jewish ’hood and other members of my peer group from other ethnic backgrounds began to date one another, silent rules forbade my stepping out with them. Unaware of the overwhelming power of cultural taboos, I felt that my friends had abandoned me, and my parents gave me no language with which to name my experience, or perhaps their language could not reach my experience. In any case, having no shield against this experience, I was devastated.

My racking pain, however, apparently was invisible to the naked eye. An old high school classmate astonished me recently with evidence engraved in the yearbook that I had been voted the friendliest girl in the class. “Oh, yes,” he assured me, “you always spoke warmly to everyone.” My memory was that in my hurt and confusion, I had hardly uttered a conversational word to anyone for nearly three years.

To this day I measure all the pain in my life against that time. I could even say in full truth of the searing pain that later marked a divorce that dashed so many dreams, “but it wasn’t as bad as high school.” Unredeemed suffering. I had experienced the fall, not into the world of adulthood but, it seemed, straight into hell. Having no larger framework in which to locate my experience, my tender teenage spirit was left vulnerable, unsheltered from the “normal” racial presuppositions of mainstream American culture. I had not yet learned that every misery wisely encountered becomes a source of great learning. Still, learn I did, though I could not have articulated this knowledge at the time. I learned the face and feel of suffering and that it can be survived, or at least that I could survive it. I learned that my color is often a problem to others, or at least a factor to be dealt with. “The Negro problem,” as it used to be called, did not belong to me, but others might give me problems because I was a problem to them. I can still be disconcerted when people, white and black, endow my blackness with meanings that it does not have for me and turn me into a walking metaphor for their needs and expectations. I learned the symbiotic nature of celebrity and its fragility. I had been part

of the inside circle in junior high school, and suddenly my right to belong there had been withdrawn. Part of surviving was not needing the approbation of untrustworthy colleagues. Those who require admiration will always be at risk. A leader must have followers, and agreeing to follow is a choice. I had come to enjoy respect and inclusion, yet I learned to live without it.

Most usefully, I learned to live on the margins, to be engaged in the world but also to view it simultaneously from a place of alienation, at once an insider and an outsider, the friendliest girl some part of whose real self is nowhere in sight. Marginality is like having second sight. Being African American can be a great advantage because it tends to deposit you neatly on the sidelines. But marginality is an equal-opportunity employer, widely available to anyone who cannot or will not fit. I am naturally a deconstructionist, and seeing from the fringes has served me well. With my tears and loneliness, I had earned the right to see newly, more clearly, to live on both sides of the divide, to understand the belly of the beast while, if necessary, patting his head. It would be many years before I would also understand and accept the moral imperative to love and feel compassion for the beast himself. Wisdom does not come easily to the young.

My suffering had set me on my way to freedom, but I certainly could not recognize it at that point. I did arrive at college, released as if from jail, and entered the halls of the talented tenth at my father's alma mater.

### *Adventures in Cultural Conflict*

My high school had also inadvertently launched me toward the study of Chinese literature. The school assigned its best teachers to its advanced-placement students. Among the best of these were several who were Jewish. With hindsight I suspect that they were survivors, if not literally then psychologically, of the Holocaust. For them European culture represented the high-water mark of civilization, mainstream American culture seemed second in line, and people like me were not within their purview. Scarred by their experiences, perhaps they were trying to find again solid ground after the horrors of World War II. In that environment, somehow I asked what was missing from their definition of what counted in the world. Of course, I discovered gaping lacunae—Latin America, Africa, and the East. My mother, having a strong interest in Asian art, had accented our house with chinoiserie wallpaper, Chinese rugs and vases, books of Asian poetry—a stash of images from the Far East. In response to my alienation and their intellectual neglect of so much of humanity, I “naturally” took up Asian culture, writing my high school senior thesis on “Shintoism and

the Emperor of Japan.” “My enemies” had ensured that I received an excellent education, a substantial mastery of the then-traditional narrative of Western history, and the tools of reading, writing, and rigorous analysis that made it possible to challenge their presuppositions with my sophomoric strategy. In retrospect I suspect that they were genuinely proud of my intellectual accomplishments and that their pride would not have diminished had they intuited the underside of my motivation for high-level accomplishment: survival and revenge.

At college I began to study East Asia: history, literature, philosophy, art, and the Chinese language. I could now populate my rebellion against European cultural superiority with a historical narrative from a different culture, real facts and dates, and the names and works of individual thinkers.

I was also fascinated by the spectacle of two old and arrogant civilizations, China and the Western powers, each encountering an alien and not fully explicable other with new intensity in the nineteenth century and each trying to shape that charged historical moment through the limitations of their own histories and cultures, through understandings and misperceptions, while locked in a high-stakes game of political power and economic spoils. In that struggle the earlier respect for one another’s culture, which had been formed during the centuries of the Jesuits’ presence in China prior to the Opium War, had been replaced by the exigencies of economic and military confrontation and activated identities of self firmly grounded in the mutual conviction of the superiority of their races and civilizations.

I can only reconstruct from forty years’ distance the fascination this international spectacle of cultural collision must have held for a bruised eighteen-year-old who had to have intuited that the dynamics of cultural encounter that she had experienced with such devastating immediacy in high school had been enacted on the world stage some hundred years before and ten thousand miles away on a grand international scale. The unknowingness on both sides, the weight of history in setting the parameters of the relationship, the consequential misunderstandings, faulty judgments, confusions, the pain and violence that ensued, the full spectacle of cultural conflict—all must have resonated with my still inarticulate understanding of that personal experience of cultural collision in high school. Why else would I, who had never even traveled to Asia and had no East Asian friends, have poured so many hours into the quest to understand this historical moment?

By the conclusion of my freshman year, if not sooner, most of the personal and intellectual themes of my life were evident: a fascination with cultural encounter in multiple arenas and the capacity to be literally or imaginatively in two worlds at once. I have only mentioned two here, the

personal world of black and white and the international world of China and the West, but there have been many, many more. In each case I have struggled to see them from a transcendent metalevel, to understand the aspirations and blindness on both sides, to strive for a more inclusive and compassionate understanding of the dynamics. In some sense, I am always striving to be a bridge, across chasms large and small. It is often no fun, but apparently it is the recurring theme of my life's work.

### *Guides and Mentors, Lu Xun and Carl Jung*

In this context of my collegiate studies of China, I met Lu Xun (1881–1936), modern China's greatest writer and intellectual. In his works I found echoes of my own perplexities. I can still recall the visceral impact of reading his short story "The New Year's Sacrifice," whose conclusion evoked in me the physical sensation caused by suddenly screeching chalk scratching across the blackboard, a sound that usually makes people grimace and recoil. As I struggled to embrace and transcend my own pain, he provided spiritual guidance to my own life. Only some twenty years later did I finally understand the basis for this unlikely affinity.

Lu Xun lived on the cusp of China's transformation from an imperial empire to a modern state. Born into an educated family, his early education prepared him to assume high status in the old culture. In his late teens he encountered the "new Western learning" flooding into China at the time and decided to study medicine in Japan. Less than two years into this pursuit, he left medical school following a moment of epiphany. What the Chinese most needed, he concluded, was not someone to cure their bodies but rather someone to heal their spirits. For that literature was the best strategy, he thought, and set out to foment a literary movement.

I must have been touched unaware by the ambition to use an intellectual project to heal wounded spirits, for surely my majoring in Asian studies was a way of addressing my adolescent hurts. Lu Xun's first stories failed, but a decade later he became a writer and within less than twenty years had become modern China's premier thinker, whose ideas dominated the Chinese intellectual scene during the first half of the twentieth century. Known for his uncompromising honesty and biting wit, he was a radical critic of traditional ways and the politics of Republican China. In the late 1920s he became a sympathizer of the emerging Communist movement. After his death Chairman Mao and company distorted the meaning of his life and work and appropriated his reputation. Had he lived into the Communist era, he would most certainly have been reviled and persecuted.

Lu Xun knew his culture well from the inside, having immersed himself in the Chinese classics and in traditional popular literature. Going to Japan gave him a view from the outside, made more dramatic by Japan's far earlier success in modernizing. Many of his cultural blinders, those unconscious presuppositions we all carry, fell away; he became, in modern parlance, a kind of deconstructionist. He was able to see Chinese civilization, in its moment of cataclysmic cultural chaos, simultaneously from the position of insider and outsider, participant and observer. Events in his biography make clear that he was a man who had experienced deep personal suffering and loneliness, about which he refused to speak. But only someone who had known great inner pain could have written as he did of the poor and downtrodden without a trace of condescension, but rather with unrelenting commitment to relieve the suffering.

Although he also studied Buddhism, he rejected the path of release through individual transformation and instead located the source of suffering primarily within the social system, without, however, ignoring the blindness of the human heart. In his fictional world one is either a persecutor or a victim. To be neither is not a possibility. The elite establish the rules and reap the benefits, and the masses have little power and fewer options. The powerful, terrified of losing their position, become callous and small-minded. The subjugated masses either struggle against hopeless odds or accept their fate, their misery, and frequently their death. This structure, based on coercion and driven by fear, is assumed to be inevitable, even moral. The strategy of Lu Xun's short stories was to "name the game." By making visible what had been hidden in plain view, he established the conditions for change.

In my academic work on Lu Xun, I read much by Carl Jung and found his conception of ego and shadow particularly illuminating. The ego, the parts of the self that are valued and acknowledged, happily imagines that it constitutes the whole self. The shadow constitutes that part of the human personality that is rejected, despised, or in some way difficult for the ego to acknowledge. The content of each function may change, but the function remains. Lu Xun's solution to the problem of China's spiritual illness was to give voice to the voiceless, to explore in fictional terms what would happen if one of the masses, or the women, or the otherwise silenced ones, attempted to speak. He worked that problem through in the fictional world to discouraging conclusions. Only within the self and perhaps the family could he imaginatively project spiritual healing. For the rest, he concluded, force would be necessary to change China. Thirteen years after his death, the Chinese Communist Party came to power.<sup>3</sup>



My more studied and mature exploration of Lu Xun's short stories coincided with the second time of great trouble in my life, that of the divorce that "was not as bad as high school." In addition to the pain and fury of this period, it was also a time for contemplation. I was graced with great washes of time during which I read Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell, and I entered psychotherapy in an attempt to understand the part I had played in the dissolution of the marriage. Jung's autobiography, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, opened my eyes to the richness of an extraordinary inner life deeply explored, and Campbell, his disciple, named the parts of the universal story of the hero's quest: departure from childlike innocence, which includes the call and crossing the threshold to a more spacious encounter with the world; initiation, the introduction to the ways of the world—the hero's adventures, his securing the boon, perhaps acquiring some ultimate understanding; and the return, when the hero brings the life-transforming wisdom back to renew the entire community.<sup>4</sup> I can remember the moment when it dawned on me with great suddenness that I was a hero in my own quest, that I was in the midst of my own terrifying adventure, and that like any true hero, I had no way of knowing if the demons of the dark would kill and consume me. The reader of heroic stories knows that the hero will survive, but the hero himself cannot share this insight. Even then I understood that despite having spiritual guides and companions who lend critical assistance, as I myself had, the only sure powers the hero can bring to the journey are his own, and the only figure I could hope to control was myself. Some of the monsters lived in the external world, but others lay within me, and figuring out what to do about them was my responsibility, as was my part in the breakup.

The tale is common enough, with its own variations, of course. I had based my life and marriage on a set of suppositions about who I was and the nature of my mate and of the external world. Some of the premises were wrong from the start; others I had outgrown. To maintain the fictional requirements of my worldview and self-identity, I had attempted to kill off portions of myself that were not only not dead but actually creating quite a ruckus. Jung was instructive here. I had a shadow problem whose resolution required, of course, embracing the shadow and incorporating the unloved, unwelcome parts into the whole. What was hidden had to be made known.

But whereas I was living the dynamic in an inauthentic personal life, Lu Xun had probed the shadow problem on behalf of the entire polity and traced its impact with respect to the nation, the community, the family, and the inner self. When he wrote most passionately and with con-

summate literary skill about what he knew most clearly from his own heart, he also wrote most perceptively about the China of his times.

I had looked in Lu Xun's mirror and seen my own face. Chalk on the blackboard.

### *Deepening*

I had also discovered a unique way of seeing the underlying dynamics of much that passes before my eyes and a mode of analysis that has served me well. Without his tutelage I might not have made the connection between the multiple realms and instead might have directed my eye inward solely to my own life, not outward toward the community and the world. My blackness and fortunate marginality, of course, had primed me to take the insight and run with it and to struggle with the sense of responsibility I might feel to the larger world around me.

My journey into the inner life had certainly deepened my spirit.

"Deepening" as a project, whether applied to the American dream or to something else, requires first having the courage to look hard at reality, to try to step from the center, where the world feels solid and final, to the margins, where the ground shakes a bit and where both trouble and creativity seem to find their home. "Deepening" means expending the effort to be critical and see the world anew and risk whatever may follow—the discomfort, disorientation, and anger or fear that might greet us if we venture into the unfamiliar. We need to see the world with eyes unspoiled by habit, to hurl ourselves outside our unthinking frames of reference. In the evening when I leave my office, I bid good night to the building janitors who are just coming on duty. Every few years when the contract for who cleans the library buildings is changed, a new crew comes on, and I see new faces, new people to greet, and feel a brief concern for old friends who have vanished. In my part of the world, the day crew seems always to be Hispanic; the night crew is black. I do not know the reason for either. But if I ever left the office and encountered an all-white crew, I would be surprised by this strange turn of events. Even I, who should long ago have moved beyond race, have grown accustomed to seeing minorities working at lower-level jobs. Trying to see with eyes unspoiled by habit is no mean feat.

"Deepening," then, is a wonderful metaphor resonant with archetypal imagery, for it draws its power from the implied contrasts to what is shallow. It conveys a sense of danger, as if even in a world of electrical lights and other technological wonders, the old myths of going into the

underworld, into the dark, into the unknown and unseen, still hold sway over the human imagination. The underground, in fact, deep-down places in general, are not only fearsome places but also the sites of adventure and mystery, where the unfamiliar or unknown can be encountered, not always to ill effect. Why, after all, have so many heroes of world imagination left the safety of the light for the dangers of the deep or the dark? “Deepening” follows the direction of the Christian myth, which is vertical: the fall. Its analogue in the myth of the hero, enacted on the horizontal plane as a journey across the face of the earth, is darkness, as when in the opening line of Dante’s *Inferno*, the hero strays from the path and enters a dark wood. So “deepening” calls forth a full spectrum of Western and other iconographies of light and dark, known and unknown, welcomed and unwelcomed, even good and evil, God and the devil. Jung drew on and reconceived the ancient archetype when he labeled the hidden unknown parts of the self “the shadow.”

The key requirement for “deepening” seems to be a willingness to risk death of the self or some precious part of the self in order to secure something of greater value. The hero myth makes literal what is experienced psychologically as metaphor. The hero quakes before slaying the dragon. Our terror in facing inner demons may be no less powerful.

Why would we risk such a journey? According to Jung, few of us do. I have no idea why I chose healing and understanding over anger and bitterness, or love over hatred. Cowardice, perhaps. I dislike anger and fighting. If it was wisdom, then I arrived there through grace, not considered judgment. At the heart of risking must lie, I think, a love that gives us courage to proceed in the face of fear, love placed in us by family, by friends, or through the divine spirit who gives us confidence that surely she will shelter us in her bosom and that at some level quite difficult to articulate, the “I” is safe.

### The Hero’s Return: A Life of Service and Action

The good news and bad news about myths and archetypes is that the capacity to receive their truths rests, at least in part, on their simplicity and sparseness. Real life is messier. In the hero story, the hero usually sets out to secure some object and returns to the community with or without the boon but always with some knowledge or good that has great value for the polity. But typically the stories are more concerned with the journey into darkness and adventure than in how the hero brings the value to the community.

The myths help us distinguish the processes by conceptually separating the deepening of mind and spirit, the acquisition of wisdom, from the act

of bringing that wisdom into the world so that society may be deepened as well. But of course the processes more typically happen simultaneously or in rhythmic alternation. The world of action makes one thirsty for water from the well of spirit. But wherever you go, there you are, and the footprints of your soul mark your every action in the world. If your insides are at war, you bring war into the world. If you are at peace, you bring peace. So unless you have met your shadow, invited her in for coffee, listened and absorbed though not necessarily agreed to her message, then when you act in the world, she will be executing her own play in the theater just behind your back. And when the curtain goes down, you may find that your audience has seen a play different from the one you thought you were performing.

If we understand the heroic quest as primarily about the hero's psychological deepening represented as a physical journey, we also observe that the hero's return is a prelude to action and creates good for the entire community. The heroic struggles and triumphs redound to the good of the polity. Embedded in our very concept of "hero" is this public role. The inward journey is the prelude to external action. One of the most ancient of questors, the Babylonian king Gilgamesh, returns after having lost his prize during the journey but nevertheless resumes his royal duties. Other returned heroes contribute other kinds of good. The bodhisattva, among the most pure of returned heroes, rejects nirvana in order to remain in the world to save other souls. After his baptism, which can be viewed as a kind of departure from his previous life, Christ spent forty days in the desert, where he was tempted by the devil in what could be viewed as preparation for taking up the mission of salvation of others to which God had appointed him.

In the case of my "hero," Lu Xun, the phases of deepening are largely invisible. He "did" very little of public note immediately following his nine years abroad. Only after a quiescent decade back in China did he emerge on the public scene as the seminal writer and thinker of modern China. Accounts of his life typically trip lightly over these years. As I came to understand his decade of silence, I also unraveled one of the perplexities of my undergraduate study of Taoism.

### *Taoism Revisited: Yin and Yang*

I encountered the Tao Te Ching in my introductory course in Chinese philosophy. At the time I could make little sense of several of its fundamental concepts. But with full undergraduate naïveté, I believed that if my professors deemed a work a classic, it must be wise. So I tucked these away in

my mind as puzzles to be solved in the by-and-by. Thus I encountered the odd notion of *yin* and *yang*, alternating modes of action and inaction that are mutually generating. At the furthest extreme of action, inaction arises; at the furthest extreme of inaction, action arises. Although Taoism falls far from my area of intellectual expertise, this notion articulates much of my lived experience. Out of my periods of greatest inaction, that is, invisible spiritual activity, has emerged highly energetic action in the exterior world. My *yin* decade, lived intensely with Lu Xun, Carl Jung, and other explorers of the inner life, ended with my moving to the Library of Congress to manage, administer, and lead, in very public and visible environments, long days and short vacations. My *yang* decade of public service has placed great pressure on the imperative to remain connected to the contemplative streams. The attempt to do so has required my bridging yet another divide with, as usual, considerable discomfort.

Supporting, even tolerating, stretches of spiritual nondoing seems practically un-American. The blue laws that enforced a noncommercial Christian sabbath have gone the way of the typewriter. We are a culture that values the *yang* spirit. Settling the wilderness, opening frontiers, conquering diseases, warring against poverty, getting ahead, progress and development: these metaphors of our national culture all resound with “doing.” One of the most striking and attractive features of the United States is the dynamism of the place. In the digital era, the expression “24/7” is the perfect metaphor for the frenetic pace at which we run and which we are encouraged to embrace as the ideal. Instant news, information, messaging, e-mail, pagers, cell phones—all ensure that any solitude can be broken at any time. I am sometimes nostalgic for the old computer software of WordPerfect 3.0, which from time to time after one had input data too rapidly would flash a white sign on the rich royal blue field that said “Please wait.” This gentle request, necessitated by slow computer processors, has been replaced by the advent of multiple windows and simultaneous multitasking. Never a need to pause!

There is nothing wrong with speed and action per se. That is part of the American spirit that has helped make us the prosperous nation that we are. The issue is balance. Where are the regenerative *yin* rhythms, the time to sit in contemplative space, listen to the inner motions of our hearts, and hear the quiet pleadings of the world? When Wayne Muller’s book *Sabbath: Restoring the Sacred Rhythm of Rest* was published, I was much taken with the title because I believe each of us needs separation from the din of modern life to reconnect periodically with the dark and hidden *yin* elements in our lives. The meaning of the sabbath extends well beyond the psychological space that I have considered here into the realms



of the holy and the sacred. I have glimpsed those dimensions, an entirely different order of existence, but being not yet even a novice in that realm, I will refrain from speaking about what I scarcely know.

Suffice it to say that at this point, American culture is out of balance in its persistent inattention to the complementary demands of spiritual inaction. This appears to be true even in our churches. Friends who are ministers and deeply contemplative themselves have told me that the average American congregation has difficulty tolerating more than three or four minutes of silence. I cannot speak for the multiple practices of multiple traditions. But in my own life I have frequently experienced comfort, sometimes joy, sitting in an empty chapel, only to find that upon returning for a service, I literally felt compelled to flee the commotion being generated in the very space that had previously so nourished my spirit. I am naturally more at home among Quakers than Episcopalians. Yet despite my personal proclivities, I think it is fair to say that as a people, Americans tend to find silence and “doing nothing” unwelcome and uncomfortable. The *yin-yang* concept probably could not have originated on American soil.

### *Self-Help and the Common Good*

Still, religions have often called people to inner reflection. And in their personal spiritual journeys, seekers through the ages have turned to their religious traditions, whose function, at the least, is to educate the soul in how to make life's journey. When culture changes, that part of religious instruction that is wedded to and embedded in a previous iteration of the culture loses some of its efficacy because the context has faded, and so the language of religion must be rethought and reinvented for a new age. Either one explains anew in contemporary idiom what the old language means—Kathleen Norris takes this tack in *Amazing Grace*—or one finds an altogether new language. The impact of Buddhist psychology on the American public—in fact, the intrusion of so many wisdom traditions—is part of this reaching for a new language. Psychotherapy has provided yet a different articulation.

But whatever the path of the inner journey, always a new challenge arises when we step again outside the door: to act from the insight and wisdom as we move through the world. The Christ and the Buddha, Carl Jung and Lu Xun, and all the heroes, mentors, teachers, and spiritual guides could only point the direction because they had taken their own journeys. But they did not rest content in suburban enclaves hoarding their insights, doing yoga, reciting mantras, saying the rosary, sitting

peacefully on their cushions or snug in their pews. They intentionally entered their sacred learning into the world. And the depth and suffering of their journeys that had radically transformed their inner beings of necessity informed the nature and quality of their actions. To rest complacent with one's own inner peace is to cut the journey short.

The current plethora of spiritual self-help books poses a dilemma for me for two reasons. Every person who grows clearer about the shadow side, who becomes wiser in owning up to overlooked currents or the demons within, inevitably slips a bit of much needed peace into the world. Yet in my unscientific survey of these shelves of books, I have noticed that only some counsel investigation into the maiming sufferings of one's life and even fewer reach beyond the healing of the individual self to consider the impact of that healing on the community in which the self resides. In fact, many pitch their wisdom as utilitarian tools for addressing the material world as it is, with nary a hint of any moral imperative to transform it for the better. Perhaps it was the publisher who insisted on naming a Deepak Chopra book on the spiritual life *The Seven Secrets of Success*. The title implies "success" in its usual American, material context, and the book, which does not speak to community transformation, conveys relative indifference to the struggles of other pilgrims in this life.

I find myself missing a commitment of service to the group. There also seems to be no apperception of the larger premise, embedded in the Confucian tradition and implied in Lu Xun's inquiry into the Chinese shadow, that heaven, earth, and humans are ideally in alignment and that there is a continuum of the moral issues from the individual through the family and community to the nation and the globe. The wisdom traditions, on which the self-help genre frequently draws, embed their insights into the lives of communities. Through institutions or rituals or teachings, these traditions in their lived environments construct social contexts in which the spiritually rich are invited to share the wealth with those less advanced on the journey. The current American tendency to focus on the independent individual in isolation has, perhaps, abrogated the fullness of these insights and left the new literature of spiritual transformation the poorer for it.

The embrace of "individualism" helps make "freedom" and "choice" superficial watchwords, perhaps appropriately praised in the context of quotidian realities but misleading in the context of psychological truths. Without the deepening journey, we have compulsions, not choices, constraints, not freedom. Even in a comfortable middle-class life, how persistently we are not free, prey to our addictions, our angers, and our fears and unconsciously responsive to societal manipulators. Deep listening is

the necessary though not sufficient condition to gain freedom from inner compulsions and external manipulators, those advertisers of goods, ideas, celebrities. Most people also need guides to help distinguish authentic voices of the soul from fraudulent expressions of a damaged spirit. For the great heroic spirits, their inner journeys prepared them for action on the world stage. Having vanquished their inner demons by making allies of their shadows and incorporating these dark figures into their own armies, these heroes of spirit became exemplars and champions of freedom for their communities. Then history offered up an opportunity for them to paint freedom on a large canvas, and they chose to change the world.

Elie Wiesel and others have testified to the capacity of the human being to retain internal freedom even in the face of unremitting, catastrophic extremity. Some rare spirits have made of prison an extended sabbath: Wiesel himself, Mahatma Gandhi, to a degree Malcolm X (whom I think has been much misunderstood), Nelson Mandela, and legions of others through the ages. Today's young people may not recall that until 1990 when Nelson Mandela and F. W. De Klerk stepped across the divide, most observers anticipated that the abolition of apartheid would require a racial bloodbath. That apartheid would be broken by the spiritual power of Mandela and his companions was beyond imagination.

As I noted earlier, one of the lessons from high school, delivered of course on a very minor scale, was that my emotional participation in the events around me was my choice, and I could claim a small space of freedom. There I experienced the first inklings that no one could coerce me into behaving in certain ways if I did not permit it; no one could know my experience if I chose to withhold that knowledge. My capacity to discipline my feelings so that people "could not make me feel a certain way" came much later. To observe the inner sabbath even in secular terms is to push back the unbalanced insistences of a 24/7 culture and reclaim the sources from which freedom, clarity, calmness, and compassion may arise. We can adopt this as a posture of resistance, a kind of "just say no" or, as an affirmation, "just say yes" to the needs of the soul, *yin* as well as *yang*, however loud the worldly clamor.

### *Taoism Revisited: Wuwei*

As returned heroes, we have an ethical obligation to find the love, compassion, and courage to support the journey of others who are wandering as we once did. How, then, might we proceed?

The first imperative is always to tend one's own garden, against the odds given by modern life to nurture a personal contemplative life, always

recalling that every action in the world bears the footprints of your soul. The constant renewal of spirit through a personal contemplative or religious practice, ideally one also nurtured in a spiritual community, is a necessity.

In a 24/7 world, we are led to believe the mantra of common sense: the faster we run, the sooner we get there. This disregards whether “there” is where we really want to get, and it defies the wisdom of the Tao Te Ching that doing less may result in accomplishing more and that doing nothing except being rightly aligned may in fact accomplish the most. This concept, *wuwei*, which is typically translated as “doing nothing and everything is accomplished,” was indecipherable to my undergraduate mind and lay dormant until experience caught up with education. Two decades later it began to make exquisite, mysterious sense. In this madly dashing world, I must frequently remind myself that the Tao Te Ching has sometimes won hands down over the linear plotting of outcomes.

In some respects the Chinese concept of *wuwei* may perhaps be another way of thinking about Christian grace. It may be that as we clarify our spirits and align ourselves with divine purpose, we draw to us what we need. This process is not entirely mysterious, at least in the fully human realm. We have “merely” to remove all of those impediments that block the action of grace in our personal and communal lives. We have “merely” to acknowledge and so remove the power of our anger, fear, doubt, vengeance, greed, grasping, and so on—those elements that Buddhism calls demons and the Christian church dubbed the deadly sins. Easy to say, impossible to perfect, but quite “doable” in a modest way. With sufficient attention to the inner dimensions of soul, it is quite possible to loosen if not remove the stranglehold that these negatives can have on our spirits. Or in the language of the heroic quest, we have to defeat the monsters and dragons in order to secure the boon. If we manage this somewhat in our personal lives, we may yet fall prey to the powers of sin in the world we inhabit. There are no guarantees. But through inner purification we can at least avoid contributing to the turmoil around us. If you are not part of the problem, you can allow the solution to emerge. Whether it does or not may lie beyond our control.

In any case, I have been the recipient of enormous amounts of personal good fortune that seem to go beyond mere chance. Although I would not make too great a claim to clarity of spirit, I have succeeded to a large extent (and I say this conditionally, since I have no idea what challenges will arise tomorrow) in eliminating inner turmoil from my life. I have repeatedly had only to stretch out my hand in need, even sometimes in frivolous desire, and what I wished arrived at my door without any overt

action on my part. Or my need is met through such an improbable chain of events that I could not possibly have plotted the path to the outcome. In this way I have summoned up objects and people. Some have been so minor that I suspect that the spirit of the universe designed their delivery to make a larger theological point. Others have been grand: I dreamed my current house ten years before I saw it. More recently, needing a caregiver for my ninety-plus-year-old mother, I planned to advertise. But something did not feel right, so I procrastinated. Without my spreading the word, an excellent person came walking in my door seeking employment. I met my second husband scant weeks after I decided it was again time to have a mate. Many would call this chance, but it has occurred so consistently in my life that others around me, friends and family, have taken note and asked, "How do you do that?" Some while back I fussed to my oldest son about needing something I did not have. I no longer recall what it was. He advised, "Why don't you do what you usually do?" "What's that?" I said forgetfully. "Summon it up."

### *The Contemplative Mind in Society*

As I was exiting my decade of intense exploration of my inner life, I was also feeling very lonely in that enterprise and inarticulately wishing for a community of companions on the path. A most improbable chain of events, more *wuwei* it would seem, led me into a circle of people who share the common dedication to "integrate contemplative awareness into contemporary life in order to help create a more just, compassionate, and reflective society."<sup>5</sup> In my inner journeying I had finally met an opportunity for action and service that would foster the very knowledge I had so recently acquired. Through a working group that then evolved into the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, I joined a community of like-minded people who are reclaiming and reframing the essential insights of the world's wisdom traditions and nudging these into the present world using a new language for this time, one that is not local to any particular wisdom tradition, whose vocabulary reaches past the rituals and theologies of specific religions. Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and other major world religions nearly all contain strains that promote contemplative practices, that may even invite mystical experiences, and provide a means for quieting the spirit, increasing concentration, and moving the soul closer to God. In secular American society, where many people feel alienated from their religious roots, meditative practices arising from certain strains of Buddhism provide, it seems, a neutral entry point to inner exploration without commitment to a particular theology. The presence of Buddhist



influence in our society is doing more than causing a few mainstream Americans to consider embracing Buddhist contemplative practices. It is also prompting mainstream religions to revisit contemplative strains within their own traditions. So the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society is encouraging a version of “just say no” to the excesses of 24/7 and building an awareness that changing our insides is the essential step to ameliorating the violence and harm that are running amok in ourselves and in our world.

Out of our own experience in joining the contemplative dimension of our spirits to our activist propensities, we hope to offer something of value to the world. In several sectors of society we have broached the possibility that the contemplative practices that we had used to reshape our own lives would be similarly transformative for others. Among our most immediate and interesting challenges as an organization has been to tend our own gardens, to create a new genre of group meeting that embodies the spirit that we hope to foster in the world, and to balance the need to get things done against the requirement that the means we employ in our lived interactions with one another embody the ends that we seek to nurture in the world. By devoting considerable time to meditation and other contemplative practices during our meetings, we have usually avoided the intrusion of ego needs, insecurities, and the full varieties of irritating behaviors that so typically undermine the noble missions of all too many human enterprises. When we have faltered in the execution of “skillful means,” it has often been because we momentarily lost the gentle self-discipline of the contemplative container. Shadow forces crept in. At each turn we have lived collectively with the knowledge that one cannot bring forth into the world what one does not possess, and so we return to the spiritual well repeatedly throughout our working times together.

When we began in the early 1990s, we sensed that there were rumblings of spiritual longing in the society that were largely unnamed, except perhaps in the field of mind-body medicine, through the work of Jon Kabat-Zinn, Herbert Benson, and others that was just beginning to receive broad notice. So we took as our challenge bringing forward into other arenas the means for people to experience and practice their professions from a contemplative foundation, or at least to open the discussion of what that might mean. By reason of deliberate choice and opportunity, we began working in academia, law, business, the environment, and philanthropy. My deepest engagement has been with the academic side, and so I will speak to that.

Our perception was that the university had lost the understanding of earlier centuries that educating the young means training both the mind

and the spirit, or in our age of rapid obsolescence we might better say opening the way for the whole person to enter into life readied for whatever might arise. Academic institutions have concentrated on developing students' intellect—skills of analysis and synthesis that most certainly are required in the modern world—but they have lost touch with the earlier insight that contemplation is a way of knowing and that knowledge of the spirit is precious and necessary to a balanced life and a balanced world. The contemplative dimensions in education have been neglected even when the content is rich in that knowledge. This can be seen most dramatically, but by no means exclusively, in departments of religion, which will teach theology and the history of religion but address neither the contemplative strains within religious traditions nor help students understand experientially these dimensions of religious life.

Generously funded in its early years by the Fetzer Institute and the Nathan Cummings Foundation, the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society established a fellowship program for faculty members at colleges, universities, and professional schools to develop courses and conduct research that would teach contemplative practices as objects of inquiry as well as make available the subjective experience of contemplation as another kind of knowing. Over the life of the program, both have happened, usually in the same course. To date we have given one hundred fellowships to faculty working in a wide range of institutions, large and small, public and private, in liberal arts colleges and professional schools, all over the country. I could summarize the official evaluations, but in this context I find the anecdotal evidence more persuasive. One fellow, who is a deeply religious Christian and a nun, used contemplative practices in the secular classroom as a tool in teaching the literature of horrific events—slavery, the Holocaust, and apartheid. The contemplative container made it possible for students to absorb the knowledge of these atrocities without becoming self-protective and disengaging emotionally. The quality of the classroom encounter was deepened and transformed.

Another fellow, Marilyn Nelson, whose poem I cited at the beginning of this essay, used various contemplative practices at the opening of each class in poetry that she was teaching to plebes at West Point Military Academy. In an environment where discretionary time was severely limited by a tightly regimented schedule, students were required to meditate fifteen minutes a day, and each class began with five minutes of silence. Repeatedly students testified to the preciousness of this empty time. On the last day of class, because there were so many concluding tasks to accomplish, Marilyn announced that they would not meditate. The students protested respectfully, but she insisted that there was no time in the

schedule. Later in the class period, she noticed that one student was inexplicably missing. She found him seated under the table in meditation.<sup>6</sup>

### *Disengaging the Ego*

Not only do I struggle daily to retain some semblance of a contemplative life so as to keep at least one eye on my inner demons and sustain a peaceful spirit, but I have also noticed increasingly that knowledge of my shadow influences my professional work in the world through how I behave, with greater challenge through how I manage my emotions, and finally through the professional work I choose to do.

Although my own spiritual practice is scarcely exemplary, it has enabled me to retain my psychological equanimity, if not always my political position, in the power plays and skirmishes of institutional work life. Exercising spiritual awareness in the world of daily business provides ongoing tests, for some kinds of behavior and patterns of thought must be resisted, and refusing to indulge them often excludes one from the camaraderie of influential groups who wield considerable power. One example: there is a powerful tendency in institutional life to engage in rivalries that pit “us against them,” an option that is simply not available to me as long as I stay mindful of my all too human tendency to take that path. I know that the ugliness I see in others at best lies dormant in me in all its destructive potential. The lessons of high school have stood me in good stead: being both insider and outsider is a familiar, powerful, albeit often painful position. So the daily return to the self-reflective honesty of the spiritual well is necessary to the exercise of the Hippocratic oath, which is popularly quoted, perhaps not accurately, as “first, do no harm”—or at least refuse to participate in gratuitously harmful thoughts and actions.

Perhaps the greatest challenge in the workplace is disengaging the ego and cultivating sufficient inner freedom and equanimity that no one, not even one’s superiors, can make one feel bad. When I disappoint myself, I can have a bad day. But I have learned, more through failure than success, that I have no obligation to let anyone make me feel bad or good. No one can have that power unless I yield it. This posture is easier to maintain in the federal government than in private enterprise because less is at risk. Unless one behaves egregiously or is grossly incompetent, job loss is unlikely. Marginalization is quite possible, but the paycheck will still arrive. So I work hard because my work is good, noble work and is worth doing well, but I strive unceasingly, and with increasing success, not to

permit my standing in the institution's pecking order, which rises and falls with the political winds, to affect what I do or how I feel.

I am reminded of a story that Jack Kornfield tells of a confrontation between a brutal general and a Buddhist master. Having terrorized province after province and caused all to flee before him, the general encounters the lone remaining inhabitant of a village, a Zen priest going about his business. "Don't you know who I am? I can run you through with my sword without batting an eye," howls the military man. "And I, sir, am one who can be run through with the blade without batting an eye," replies the master. The general, of course, is overcome by such spiritual power and bows down in respect and awe.<sup>7</sup> The same principles apply to institutional life. I have scarcely approached the master's equanimity, nor does a bureaucrat need to, but I know in which direction it lies. It is an equal challenge, when things are going well and ego gratifications abound, to refuse to be seduced by appreciation and awards. The workplace can be a fickle lover. So I give my love to the mission but withhold my soul and retain my inner freedom. I hope my equanimity makes me a better colleague.

In our interior lives, we recognize that what the shadow most often requires of us is acknowledgment and incorporation. In the international world, the exemplary model for incorporation is the post-apartheid government of Nelson Mandela, and most symbolically the Truth and Reconciliation Commission established by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, as the inspired strategy for coming to terms with the past and preventing violence. Each time we encounter some deeply disturbing force in our communities and nation, we have the choice between a mode of response that Lani Guinier characterized so trenchantly as "control and punish, control and punish,"<sup>8</sup> or we can choose to listen and learn. That is, there is a choice to silence and expel or to listen and try to incorporate the knowledge or grievance into our understanding. This decidedly does not mean allowing the perpetrators of vicious deeds to go unpunished and unrestrained. Justice does need to be served. But we also need to inquire deeply not only of the perpetrator but also about the forces that fostered his or her emergence. In short, we also need an inquisitive, compassionate approach to the generating sources of the violence.

No Solomon is required to anticipate some of the places in contemporary America from which the shadow forces are likely to emerge. Each of us could scout the landscape and probably identify a few potentials. At the top of my list are the white supremacists, the aggrieved, white, lower-class, mostly males who seem to believe that the one source of respect

guaranteed them is their whiteness, which is now slowly eroding as a sure-fire symbol of status. Ironically, they are joined in the dissidence, obviously around a different set of issues, by a large, disproportionately black male prison population, a shadow archetype of mythic proportions if ever there was one. Both groups have been created in part by unacknowledged American violence, institutional racism, and faulty gender definitions.

The approach through compassionate understanding is hardly a new thought; the strengths and pitfalls of loving responses to antisocial or violent behavior are well known. "Turn the other cheek" may be a profound strategy in the spiritual realm, but it requires considerable wisdom to exercise it in daily life. What is useful, perhaps, is to look at the implications of the shadow as they play out in unsuspected places.

### *Islam, the New Shadow*

In late 1999 I found myself increasingly irritated by the news media's repeated use of the phrase "Islamic terrorists," as if it were one word. Even on relatively highbrow nightly news programs, I rarely heard the adjective "Islamic" applied to any other human activities. My responsibilities for the foreign-language collections of the Library of Congress, materials written in some 460 languages from all over the globe, made me exquisitely aware that Muslim societies are highly varied and geographically diverse. They stretch from Africa through pockets in Europe to Central Asia, the Middle East, South Asia, and Indonesia. And Muslims have been in the Americas since the Atlantic slave trade brought literate, Koran-reading cargo to the new world.<sup>9</sup> As human beings, can Muslims really be so very different from others in their fundamental needs and aspirations? Yet all of these millions of people were being tarred with the same ugly brush. This gross distortion was being drummed daily into the minds of the American public. Given the murmurs of unspecified ferment in the Middle East, it surely spelled trouble. Although history never really repeats itself, thoughts about the conflicts between China and the West a century ago still echoed in my memory: the unknowingness on both sides, the parameters set by history, misunderstandings, faulty judgments, confusion, pain, violence, cultural conflict.

In essence my apprehension was not so very different from my experience of my own shadow, which sometimes speaks to me through some unspecified, inner restlessness that disturbs my mental peace. I have a range of preferred strategies that I employ in such situations, all tools for helping the shadow find her voice. Hearing murmurs of my teenage method of addressing pain through academic inquiry and of Lu Xun's



intellectual project of spiritual cure, I constructed a new intellectual project as a tiny step toward healing a gaping cultural wound.

In early 2000 I secured modest funding from the Rockefeller Foundation to develop a series of symposia on the human impact of globalization on Muslim societies around the world. It was my attempt to complicate Americans' understanding of this grand variety of peoples. Most of the symposia were "webcast" over the Internet via the Library of Congress's homepage and are still available for worldwide viewing. Even the fact of offering the symposia immediately garnered gratitude from the Washington, D.C., Arab American and Muslim intellectual communities, including notice from the embassies. From the perspective of anyone who has reflected on what it means to be the shadow in society or who had found oneself the shadow for others, a position that I as a black person have occupied, this appreciation was perfectly predictable. Subsequently, the Rockefeller Foundation provided a large additional grant to fund fellowships on the same subject. The first installment arrived in June 2001. It was the right impulse but too little too late. Along came 9/11.

But Lu Xun had also taught me that we have no right to despair because "hope lies in the future," and the future is unknown, or as my brokerage firm never tires of telling me on its statements, "past performance is no guarantee of future results." We do what we can with as much wisdom as we can bring to the moment. The consequences are not ours to know. So at the Library of Congress, we have continued to develop a project in Islamic studies that serves an American audience and also says indirectly to the Muslim, Christian, and other worlds that we are genuinely interested in bringing forward greater understanding of the deep cultural and historical roots of this unhappy moment in world history. We want all to know that the Library of Congress has the intellectual resources, with its collections encompassing the intellectual heritage of the world's peoples, to support that inquiry. As we have talked with our colleagues in other federal government agencies, we have too often found an interest only in getting the American message out and minimal awareness that the American message also communicates the American shadow. For example, freedom can appear to be license when its responsibilities are neglected. And part of the anger at us is the message our shadow is performing on the stage behind our backs.

We also find that one message of the Islamic studies program—that we should be practicing deep listening—is sometimes met with blank stares. If we as a people had learned to listen to our own deepest aspirations and to the voices of the shadows within our own nation, had we listened to the struggles of the poor, the angers of minorities, the rages of white

nationalists and brought these people into the daylight and incorporated their grievances into our understanding, would we have found it so hard to listen to those from beyond our own borders? Would we not have known that as a nation, we needed to know the languages Muslims speak, their cultures, their histories, long before a crisis arrived at our doorstep? As the world's most powerful nation, we have an imperative to ensure that what is hidden from our view is made known to our people.

Acknowledging our own limitations in no way removes the onus from "the other" to similarly engage in deep inner exploration. But each side can only exercise inquiry and action in the arenas of its own purview. It is too easy to point the finger only outward and never inward. In my own life, the end result of identifying my own culpabilities has been personally very freeing. The arenas of my responsibility are where I can most assuredly effect change.

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11 many African Americans held odd and unusual feelings as we watched Arab American neighbors in our national community demonized and cast as alien to the American polity. We who had been "the other," perpetually seeking and usually failing to become fully acknowledged as Americans, not hyphenated Americans but just Americans, suddenly felt ourselves to be unproblematically part of "we the people." It was a very nice feeling. White America might not have liked us any better or worse, but even those of us with dreadlocks and baggy ghetto styles were at least familiar and less fearsome than the suddenly emerged Muslim "other." I checked my perception of "something fishy" with other black people and found it confirmed. For that moment in time, we were no longer part of the shadow. My sister, with insight honed from decades living not just as a woman but as an African American woman and schooled in the nuances of performing the unsought role of shadow, put it all neatly in ironic perspective: "Don't worry," she reassured me. "It won't be long before we blacks resume our rightful place at the bottom!"

If being marginal increased the likelihood of my empathy for the pain and anger of another widely and unconsciously disparaged group, I felt empowered to move understanding into action because my project fit so well within the direction set by the librarian of Congress, James H. Billington, who is a great visionary and a wise intellectual. On February 3, 2000, he gave a speech that articulated particularly well his own concern about incorporating the shadow. (I doubt that he would characterize it that way because I do not think he endows the unknown with "otherness." It is merely unknown.) He had made these points earlier, but this is a particularly eloquent expression of them:

We [Americans] have . . . a profound special need to understand better the three great cultural belts of Asia—each of which is now aggressively asserting itself on the world scene: the Confucian- and Buddhist-based cultures of East Asia, the Hindu-based cultures of South Asia, and the long corridor of Islamic nations stretching from Indonesia through Central and West Asia to North Africa. Each of these worlds contains more than one billion people who speak languages and profess beliefs that few of us have even begun to understand. But if you do not learn to listen to people when they are whispering their prayers, you increase the risk of meeting them later when they are howling their war cries.

How unfortunately prophetic his words turned out to be.

### *Returning to the Well of Spirit*

When in my mind's eye I replay images of the World Trade Center after the second plane struck, in addition to all of the other layers of meaning that we have considered over the months, including those that demand accountability from the warped spirits who caused such horrendous suffering, I also see this symbolically as the eruption of shadow forces into the awareness of the ego. Americans have been complacent, imagining that we could withdraw into the gated compound of our vast continent, ignore the distress of others, and escape the consequences. Neither domestically nor internationally is this a viable option in the long term. Labeling “the enemy” as “the axis of evil” and seeking its destruction models the pattern “control and punish, control and punish,” and announces a Manichaeian notion of a world divided between good and evil, us and them. But the evil is also in us, and there is good somewhere there inside the enemy, however difficult it may be to detect. I worry as I write this that the president and other American leaders are out of touch with their own shadows, believe that the United States is only pure and good, and that anyone who challenges this “truth” is surely bad. It is not merely a matter of seeing shades of gray, although pragmatically that is essential to policy and negotiation, but of retaining the capacity simultaneously to see both white and black at once, to see ego and shadow, one eye on God and one on the devil.

If I had been President George W. Bush on September 11, 2001—and how grateful I am that I was not—after I had conferred with all of the appropriate military and foreign policy officials and consulted various heads of state, I would have also placed phone calls to Vaclav Havel,

Nelson Mandela, the Dalai Lama, and perhaps several other great heroic spirits. In times of peace but especially in times of crisis, the world needs people who are fully grounded in their own inner worlds of spirit, aware of their inner demons; who have known fear and grown wise enough not to act from it; who know that they too are sinners and therefore are slow to consign to oblivion those still in sin's grip; people who also know the world and its political realities and so can bring deep spiritual wisdom to the dangerous, consequential world of political leadership.

The United States is a great nation. There are good and just reasons why people from all the cultures and civilizations of the world want to come here, why we promise to welcome "your tired, your poor, / Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, / The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,"<sup>10</sup> and why they risk their lives and their fortunes to accept that offer. I believe that the analogy with the personal does hold. If we want to deepen the American dream for our citizens and extend it to others, if we want to stand as an inspiring vision in a tumultuous world, we must be prepared to listen to the voices from the shadows, whoever they are, whatever they speak. We must summon the courage to acknowledge what is unwelcome and incorporate it into our understanding. If the United States is to move toward being its best self and remain a beacon of hope for others throughout the world, it must embody its deepest spiritual values, not solely its values of self-defense, as it acts in the world community. It must live the ideals that it seeks to promote.

Time and again we see that the initial response to the shadow, whether in the arena of nations, of communities, or of our own hearts, is fear, denial, and suppression. Certainly such impulses arise for credible reasons. Without them those parts of the human psyche and the human family would never in the first place have been consigned to a sphere beyond our awareness and concern. If we have taken our own, deep hero's journey, we know that fear and rejection, "control and punish," are only a shallow, temporary solution to our troubles. If we have taken our own, deep hero's journey, we know that responding out of compassion for our own frailties and for those of others is the harder but surer path to peace. Struggling for a more comprehensive view, trying to bridge the divide between "us" and "them," seeing in a way that affirms the hopes and aspirations of others, even when their methods for achieving these are faulty or even appalling—these modes of addressing the human condition require great self-knowledge and discipline of spirit.

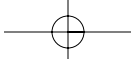
Although few of us are called to statecraft, in our own smaller arenas each of us has no less a moral imperative: to integrate into our frantic 24/7 life a private sabbath of *yin* "nondoing" so that we may be purer of

heart; to keep a watchful eye “in” as well as “out” for the shadow figures, which, left unrecognized and in exile, may be up to no good; in short, to water our souls afresh each day from the well of spirit so that what we bring into the world is untainted by unsuspected darkness. We do this for our own sake, because it feels better to be at peace than to allow interior wars to rage. And we do it in preparation for stepping outside of our own doors and taking right action in the world, because the world’s wisdom traditions tell us that the journey is cut short until we share the boon.

Ultimately, however much we may try to hide our nature, who we are will manifest in what we do, and any good works we execute will be colored by the spirit we bring to them. When we go into the world of action and when we leave it through death, whatever remains after we pass by will be the footprints of our souls. This has been true since the dawn of humanity and is not likely to change in our time.

#### NOTES

- 1 Marilyn Nelson, “May Your Love Convert Lucifer,” in *The Fields of Praise* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1997), p. 151.
- 2 Martha Ronk Lifson, “The Myth of the Fall: A Description of Autobiography,” *Genre*, Spring 1979, pp. 45–67.
- 3 This nonstandard analysis of Lu Xun’s short stories forms the core of the research I am preparing for future publication.
- 4 Joseph Campbell, *The Hero of a Thousand Faces*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1968).
- 5 This is the mission statement of the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society.
- 6 Marilyn Nelson, “Aborigine in the Citadel,” *Hudson Review*, Winter 2001, pp. 543–553.
- 7 Jack Kornfield, *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom: The Path of Insight Meditation* (Boston: Shambhala, 1987), pp. 75–76. I have taken minor liberties in the retelling.
- 8 Lani Guinier, “Where Do We Go from Here? Chaos or Community? Black America’s Vision for Healing, Harmony, and Higher Ground.” Smiley Group Forum, Panel 2, Feb. 23, 2002. [[http://video.c-span.org:8080/ramgen/kdrive/mis022302\\_smiley2.rm](http://video.c-span.org:8080/ramgen/kdrive/mis022302_smiley2.rm)].
- 9 Scholars are beginning to study slaves brought to the Americas whose religion was Islam. Many might well have been literate as a consequence



of the imperative to read the Koran in Arabic. One of the most unique manuscripts to have surfaced in recent years is the autobiography of Omar ibn Said from Senegal. Writing in Arabic, he complained of being enslaved to an illiterate master. His manuscript was displayed at a symposium at the Library of Congress on January 29, 2002.

- 10 Emma Lazarus (1849–1887), from “The New Colossus” (1883), which is inscribed on the Statue of Liberty in New York harbor.