

An Open Letter Written In Love, But With Nobody In Mind

“The prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel dined with me, and I asked them how they dared so roundly to assert that God spoke to them; and whether they did not think at the time that they would be misunderstood and so be the cause of imposition. Isaiah answered, I saw no God nor heard any in a finite organical perception; but my senses discovered the infinite in everything, and as I was then persuaded and remain confirmed; that the voice of honest indignation is the voice of God, I cared not for consequences but wrote.” -- William Blake

Like you, through forces, chances, and circumstances quite beyond intellectual understanding or planning I find myself in a certain time and place. The eternal now for one, at least when I let go of distraction, but also a time and place of particulars.

Particularly: a time and place of political, ethical, clinical, familial, communal, and global concerns; just to name a few.

I find myself in various roles, as you do, and because those roles have come to include being a psychologist in private practice and also a meditation teacher, I find myself often in dialogue with individuals or small groups of people who keep asking similar questions of themselves. Questions that often start off as particular to their life circumstances, but which may lead to more universal concerns.

I have put some essays on this website based on some of the main themes of these dialogues. Much of the writing is informational or psychoeducative, meant to offer a structure that has been helpful to past clients as they grapple with their questions, and then amongst the information comes these deeper themes. Or, to the extent my limited capacities as a writer allow, I try to illustrate themes that appear to me deeper, perhaps even universal. I sincerely hope they will be helpful to you if you choose to read them. I also hope to evoke, and sometimes provoke however, so be forewarned.

I choose a provocative tone at times because I sincerely believe there are some issues in the particular of today's here and now that require a community response. Also, at other times, to try to surprise you into noticing that your “self” is not what it appears to be to you. But raising an alarm can also seem alarmist, so I'm not sure this is the wisest course. However, I may never meet you, so I figure I'll swing for the fences.

Speaking of swinging for the fences, let's begin with free will and autonomy.

You don't have free will, but you do have autonomy. This seems to be a consensus among philosophers and neuroscientists at this point. Broken down into an admittedly oversimplified and probably still confusing nutshell, the idea is that the you you feel yourself to be is, in most instances, an implicitly self-constructed illusion that completely ignores or is completely unaware of various implicit and/or unconscious drives and forces that mostly cause you to do what you do. Your sense of yourself, in its profound ignorance, is also a you that automatically creates an explanation, usually a very self-serving one, for anything that seems out of place in its narrative about how life is going. "You" are inevitably the star of this narrative, even if you are an anti-hero who doesn't particularly like themselves.

There is some objective reality. "You" have a body based sense of self because you have a body that interacts with other bodies. "You" are also a social creature and have been taught social norms, laws, principles, etc., (and you are expected to follow those norms or have a good reason not to because the argument that you have no free will is not going to get you very far in a court of law). "You" have no doubt noticed that you appear to be able to affect the world around you and even in you. "You" also seem to affect the social worlds of others, through willed action, *and*, other selves who you notice are not under your control seem to often agree with you that a tree is a tree, a home run is a home run, or that this person or that person is this way or that. Or they disagree with you and that reinforces "you" too, just in a different way.

With all of this first hand experience, you feel quite certain you exist as an independent agent. However, you are wrong.

You are genetically, culturally, linguistically, socially and affectively programmed on so many levels it staggers the mind.

"You" are unique in the way you go about trying to will your life, *but*, unique within a highly constrained band of possibilities. "You" are not nearly as original as you think you are, in fact, "you" mostly run on automatic pilot, and your auto-pilot is mostly the same as mine. Your speech patterns, your thought patterns, your typical ways of going about life...very limited my friend. Me too, don't get offended.

Oh, and by the way, you are a member of a physically weak and limited species. You can't even see in ultraviolet like birds...but you think you know what's real and what's not. Please.

Jumping way ahead to try to plant a disturbing seed, the lack of free will but existence of autonomy means that the existentialists essentially have it right when they say that: meaning is self-constructed; and therefore we have full responsibility for the meaning that we make of our lives. Yikes. How do we do that?¹

At every decision point there is a wide variety of actions we could take, feelings we could experience, and opinions we could form, and yet we experience only a narrow range of those possibilities. We only know what we know and have the flexibility we happen to have at this particular moment that is happening right now because our knowledge, creativity, flexibility, etc. are all obviously constrained to a significant degree by our past. For example we obviously cannot know something we have never studied or experienced before. We may experience some brilliant insight from time to time (and yes some people even claim to have experienced direct knowing from alien or spiritual sources, though never reproducibly in a lab setting oddly enough) but even for the gifted knowledge and ability mostly come from consistent effort over time. Clearly.

Moving to a more subtle level of experience, things like moods and beliefs are not random. Our emotions have fluctuating patterns that we can get familiar with through introspective observation *and* feelings are influenced by that self observation. However, feelings are also influenced by factors situational, relational, hormonal, nutritional, psychological, genetic, epi-genetic and more. These factors are, on the whole, out of “your” control. A fact “you” likely finds anxiety provoking to some degree if “you” and “I” are being honest, and we, because we are all in this together, often do all sorts of unconscious things to manage anxiety don’t we? Like you could just stop reading this and not bother thinking about such rubbish couldn’t you?

To go to an extreme for purposes of illustration, let’s consider that those with traumatic pasts can experience high degrees of variability in mood, affect, or perception because of triggers conditioned by previous experiences that were completely unavoidable for them and for which they bear no responsibility. Until they have managed to heal their internal wounds they find themselves feeling at the mercy of triggering experiences that often cannot be foreseen, or if they are foreseeable, become sources of avoidant behavior that also do not usually help the person heal. Here we have an example where we are forced to admit that we are subject to circumstances completely beyond control of a personal will, and yet also influenceable to a degree by willful effort. If I am a survivor of trauma I probably very much want to change my experience of the world at times and I am essentially responsible for how I participate in trying to help myself, but there are also times when I am operating from hypervigilance, hypovigilance or dissociation and am not really “myself.”

More prosaically, we all have personality patterns that are disturbingly automatic (go ask your friend or partner if you don't believe me). Also, certain situations tend to call for certain responses. Examples: feelings of sadness at the loss of a loved one; feelings of anger at a perceived injustice; feelings of joy in a new relationship; feelings of fear as you peer from a great height. These are all human emotions and most humans would experience their idiosyncratic versions of them if placed in similar conditions.

By the way, the ability we all have to imagine being in someone else's situation and realizing we would probably have felt and acted very similarly is what we call empathy. Which is very closely related to what some people call common sense. Which is supposedly common. And is common, it seems to me, in the sense that it is innately there in most humans, waiting to be tapped to its full potential. However it is not common, it seems to me, in the sense of being abundantly evident in how we treat each other.

Anyway, basically, we can be more or less equanimous in our experience of our feelings and we can be more or less effortful and skillful in our attempts to interact with our feelings, but they seem to be hard wired to some degree, and they also seem to involve patterning that is malleable, but not necessarily erasable. As another aside, this would seem to imply that the idea of equanimity as a complete cessation of or imperviousness to unpleasant experience is an impossibility. Equanimity is perhaps better understood as being able to encompass whatever is happening, pleasant or unpleasant, just or unjust, but also to encompass the natural human reaction that perceiving something as unjust would entail if that is the perception, feelings in the sadness and anger categories presumably.

Coming back to the point, I don't really have free will in the sense that I can't really claim all that much freedom in my choices or even in my experiencing thoughts, feelings and sensations. From before our own birth into the world and then for months and years during the various psychological changes where we were almost completely dependent on others, we were subject to whatever we were subject to. Even in adulthood, where I do have comparably much more power and control than in childhood, I am still subject to the whims of fate and the larger world. Take the 2008 economic crash for example. Yet, I have responsibility for my decisions because I do have *some* choice, I have autonomy in other words, and also, pro-tip, because I can always be conscious of how things are going. I can notice that I am struggling with a problem because I do not have sufficient information to solve the problem, and then decide to learn what I need to learn or ask for help from those already learned. I can recognize that I am struggling in a relationship because I have a tendency to think or

feel certain ways, and I can try to communicate with the other(s) involved, or seek therapy or some other form of insight, or community support or what have you. I have autonomy, and the capacity for reflective meta-awareness, therefore responsibility. I can always try something, even if that something is to decide not to try, and I can and should then monitor how the decision goes and adjust accordingly.

There is an uncomfortable point here. We have little control over most of life, but we do always have some influence, at the very least over our own manner of showing up to meet our circumstances. You have responsibility for you. Society also has responsibility for society. We should help people who have accidents and get them back on their feet so that they can help us when we have an accident. This is obvious, commonsensical even, and yet it is often unclear to many individuals how they should best proceed to interact with the society around them and where lines of personal versus group responsibilities lie.

Let me bring you back to the existential concern.

Can you really fathom the implications of the possibility that you are completely responsible for your own life and yet simultaneously subject to the whims of fate²?

Maybe read that 6 or a thousand times until it really sinks in.

No really, you could stop here for the day or the week (or even several months, no seriously) and just practice holding this reality, and see how it affects you. That's a totally legitimate practice for a period of time. Also, check out footnote 2 if you haven't already.

Your decisions and reactions are yours. And your reality is, in large part, a product of where you decide and react from. Conscious, unconscious, semi-conscious or preconscious, it doesn't matter, your decisions are still your decisions and you have to own them to fully mature into your birthright of Awakening. I am not saying that you can one day know everything you need to know and then will always feel content, but rather that whether we are content or discontent, and many of us are understandably discontent in the face of some version of those aforementioned uncontrollable circumstances, the task is to try to show up completely.

If that seems like the work of a lifetime, then that is what I am saying.

Now, I am already in a morass of words and there is a major problem with what I am saying that I have already alluded to. Who or what is this "I" that is taking

responsibility? Many will skip over this point, and if the question of self does not particularly draw you in then I definitely advise you to stop reading here, but I don't want you to assume I am talking just to your conventional sense of I-ness. Over there in the left lateralized sections of your forebrain where you think you exist and make autonomous decisions, that is not the only you I am talking to. That you is included, don't get insulted, but it is not the full you. Over in your right-lateralized structures and throughout the limbic system and throughout the body are unconscious and implicit processes happening that are actually running the show far more than your executive functions can admit, and the kind of autonomy I am referring to has to include those places and possibly beyond. If you hear what I am saying only from your conventional sense of self then the pursuit of autonomy becomes either just another self-reinforcing goal of that conventional self, or much worse, a nihilistic weight of apparent arbitrariness³.

People who find meaningful autonomy find it from within their full selves, from a place of genuineness. They don't just will it into existence as though any arbitrary set of beliefs can be meaningful. They search in themselves for what feels most fundamentally important and then, usually, have to do a fair bit of thinking and adjusting to circumstances in order to balance their core values with whatever is happening. In my own experience, long term forms of depth psychotherapy and forms of meditation that emphasize resting as the underlying non-dual mystery are helpful in feeling the autonomy I am referring to, but those are also complex topics.

When explanation gets too weighty I often turn to poetry. Here's Dogen:

“When all dharmas are the buddha dharma there are delusion and enlightenment, practice, birth, death, buddhas and sentient beings. When the myriad dharmas are without self, there is no delusion, no realization, no buddhas, no sentient beings, no birth, and no death. Since originally the buddha way goes beyond abundance and scarcity, there are birth and death, delusion and realization, sentient beings and buddhas. Yet, though it is like this, simply, flowers fall amid our longing and weeds spring up amid our antipathy.”

Ultimately, as simplistic as it may seem to some, I really do just want and expect the world to come into some kind of Star Trek-like future shape. I don't expect it to happen anytime in the near future. 500 years? I'm not sure when, but I do expect that the obvious truth that we are deeply interconnected and therefore helping each other works a lot better than taking advantage of each other, will eventually lead to some

form of sensible world government that supports the unique diversity and potential of each individual. It really isn't that complicated. All we need are basic laws and structures that provide for the fundamental needs of each person, and all that really takes are some basic guidelines that all cultures can agree to. There will still be many complicated details of course, but it seems to be a solvably hard problem at our current level of scientific understanding. If you can create nuclear missiles, land people on the moon, work towards artificial intelligence, model complex economic systems and even chaotic systems like the weather on Jupiter, then you can certainly figure out how to give people the basics of health care, clean drinking water and food.

There would still be plenty of competition and challenge for even the most red-blooded capitalist among us, the challenge just might not be framed capitalistically any longer. As we are currently in an acquisition driven culture however, the kind of reform I am after just ain't happening anytime soon, but still Gene Roddenberry kind of nailed it.

Thanks Gene.

In the meantime, since I am not holding my breath for a perfected government, I try to focus on things that are fundamentally useful for health. I try to be professional, but also real, and especially since I work in rural northern Vermont and southern Quebec where a lot of people think clean Carharts are dressing up, it pays to be a bit salty at times. At least, that's what I tell myself to permit myself to keep having the cursing habit that I seem to have. I truly don't mean to offend anyone by the way, but letting a good mother f***** this or sh** that trip trippingly from the tongue from time to time delights says I.

It's at least as satisfying as alliteration and with generally less effort.

More seriously, gruff language seems to suit the current state of things sometimes. WTF?

Besides, I grew up in the South. We tell stories there and many of us also curse artfully, though mostly in private with trusted others. Stories are a really nice way to teach and learn deep truth and the cursing...well the cursing is just an attempt to stay close to the ground floor of people's lived experience. Take or leave the cursing depending on who you are speaking with, but definitely learn to listen to stories and poetry for deep truth if you haven't already. Poetry is the secret bastion of non-duality in Western European culture, but it generally requires some patience to interact with, whereas good stories just carry us right along and let us take what we can. Stories are

one of the few ways we have to adequately convey complex moral, social, and personal information without boring people to tears.

I wish I could come up with a story that conveys something about free will and autonomy. Jeez, thanks for sticking with me through all that.

Straightforward didactic or logical statements, while possible to construct with correctness, just don't seem to hold people's attention the same way.

I mean, if you are trying to talk about free will then yes, okay, some didacticism, but most of us just sort of tune out....carefully constructed statements of a didactic nature...what the hell is this guy saying? That's how some academics write. Hell, some academics are telling you the most obvious damn thing in a thousand extra bits of jargon. Academia appears to be another complex system out of whack these days. I should also state that the true spirit of the Academy lives on in many places and produces intellectual luminaries who help guide the rest of us, undoubtedly. Who else is going to do that complex mathematical modeling I mentioned earlier? On the whole though, academia seems to have become an enterprise of degree and certification creation, careerism, and mediocre biased research. At least in many of the social sciences. Just my impression of course.

But time will tell, both with research and stories. The tried and true are there to be found and as far as stories go there are some beautifully instructive stories out there. There is this fellow Jesus, and this other fellow known as the Buddha, and then there's even people still alive like Wendell Berry, and they all tell some very worthwhile stories. There is also Zen literature and Taoist literature replete with one story after another. Although in Zen many of the stories are unnecessarily obscured by changing language and culture, so I wouldn't recommend reading Cleary's translation of the Blue Cliff Record⁴ for example, but Aitken's translation of the Mumonkan⁵ is worth a read. Tibetan Buddhism has a tradition of story telling about past teachers that is very instructive if you're into the Dalai Lama as many are. I find even the Brothers Grimm and Aesop to generally have more wisdom and be more useful to most people than say, Saint Thomas Aquinas or some dry philosophical treatise on the Diamond Sutta or whatever. Sorry Tom. You were great, but not much of a story teller as far as I know.

I think it was the famous critic Harold Bloom who wrote something to the effect that there are only 7 stories in the world, they can just be told in infinite ways. Jung, as in Carl, is making a deeply related point with his ideas about the archetypal.

Stories. Gentle humor. Awakening. There is some kind of connection there it seems to me. See if I am right by finding it for yourself. Don't believe me otherwise. But when you do find it, because it is there, say thank you, I love hearing from people.

I want you to understand that this is all meant with love, and if any of the strong opinions seem to really piss you off, please let me know, I would genuinely be interested in dialoguing with you. Mostly I state things with passion just to get the conversation started. I don't really believe anything specifically, I would say I'm just convinced some things are a mystery and some things are complicated and I'd like people to think more carefully about the complicated things and be less attached to the mysterious things. Dialogue is a great way to bump into identifications we need to let go of, and also a great way to realize we have not thought something through as thoroughly as we had assumed. Dialoguing with a trusted other is one of those tried and true methods humanity keeps coming back to. It quickly gets us where we need to go, at least if all parties are on the same page about letting go of identifications and checking their reasoning. If not, it can be quite a mess in my experience (I wrote a little essay on relationality that talks about some of that complexity in communication, please check it out if you have any questions about communication in relationships. I'm sure you don't. I'm sure relationships never confuse you. But just in case you ever feel confused by relationships I wrote it for you...and me...we are all in this together).

In the meantime, also please keep in mind that your reaction might be about something worth exploring in you. I'm just trying to speak from a certain perspective that landed on me some years ago after about 15 years of meditation and 5 years of psychotherapy. That perspective has become mixed in with 13 years of being a professional psychotherapist where, until recently, I saw 35 to 40 people a week. Now, in "semi-retirement" (meaning I spend more time building, raising vegetables and processing chickens and less time "working"), living in Quebec but working just across the border in the beautiful but wild and traumatized Northeast Kingdom of Vermont, I see 20 to 25 a week generally speaking. Twenty to twenty-five people a week, about half of them drawn from a population of maybe 50,000 or so, spread out rurally through small hamlets that used to have paper mills and now have dollar stores. People who are mostly either severely and complexly traumatized, impoverished, or both. At least if they come from this area with its burden of transgenerational traumas of various sorts. The other half work with me online and come from all over the state and sometimes further afield. The folks living in northern Vermont tend towards the politically and religiously conservative. The other group tends to lean politically liberal and tends to eschew religion but be spiritually hungry.

I write this letter because after 13 years of daily, sometimes intense, conversations with hundreds and hundreds of people, it has come to seem to me that everyone is essentially seeking autonomy; and that autonomy implies community; and that we are a global community at the very least; but that even though, or rather especially because my clients come from various perspectives, it is not always clear how to access the cooperative much less the universal.

Okay, let's pause and assess.

We've established that you and I have no choice but to take responsibility for you and I, that I'm writing for my clients (mostly), and that I'm trying to be useful but also provocative at times. Everybody with me so far? Great. When I write something for this website I am writing to my clients past present and future in a continuation of ongoing dialogues as stated above. These dialogues generally start with personal concerns, and often go no further, but sometimes seem to blossom into deep inquiries into what it means to lead a meaningful life. I can say, in a somewhat off the cuff dichotomy, that I have two types of clients. The spiritual aspirant type, and the non-aspirant type. I can say that it is the first sort who is usually consciously seeking meaning, but I can't say they are more likely to find it.

By this somewhat silly dichotomy I mean to say that there is a significant percentage of my clientele who contact me specifically because they are, let us say, non-dualists or at least spiritually hungry, while the other clients have never heard the word non-duality in their lives (all terms are problematic, please cut me some slack). The spiritual aspirant types say they want to awaken, whatever exactly they think that means varies, but they say they want to awaken, and they hope that someone like me, someone who has a foot in the non-dual but who is also a trained professional and licensed psychologist, might be of assistance to them in awakening. They have come to think or feel, and they are right, that there is a great deal of overlap in the sort of work that can be done in psychotherapy, and the sort of work that can be done with meditation. They have come to think or feel that maybe, and again they are correct although the doing of it is often more complicated than the thinking of it, that in some ways and for some problems psychotherapy is actually better than meditation (complex trauma is a clear example). Meanwhile, half of my clients are people who just walked in the door. They just need someone to help them with something that's happening that doesn't feel very good. They don't actually know much about me, and often don't really care, they just need some licensed person who can charge their insurance company to help them sort out whatever it is that's bothering them. This can range from anything as pedestrian as marital or familial stress, or stress from overwork, to things as serious as psychosis.

I'm sorry did I just hear myself say psychosis? Let me go off on a little riff here:

I do not have many psychotic clients because most such clients are routed towards hospitalization in our society, but I do take the clients who wish to avoid hospitalization. This is a fairly rare client, at least for me, and such clients are quite challenging for all of the obvious reasons, but I and a few other people who know each other are willing to try. Meanwhile, I'm happy to report that work with folks labeled as Schizophrenic or Bipolar is often met with great success. At least in my limited clinical experience (and that of Bertram Karon's extensive experience. He published peer reviewed studies strongly supporting the superiority of psychodynamic therapy over medication for Schizophrenia as defined by DSM IV-TR criteria back in the 70s; go, read the damn reference before you disagree with me⁶). But again this sort of severe presentation is relatively rare in the small town Vermont outpatient psychotherapy world because again, most people with the severest forms of mental health problems are steered more towards medical intervention. I think that this is a great shame and that anyone who wants to look carefully at the research on the genetic links in conditions like schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, but also look at the research showing correlations between early trauma and later severe psychopathology, and then the research on epigenetics, will come to the same conclusion that I have. Which is that our current DSM nosology is too loose to accurately sort patients into useful categories, and that most of the medications used for psychosis are basically major tranquilisers...which doesn't mean they have no use, by the way, it just means calling them an "anti-psychotics" seems dubious.

As the authors of DSM IV wrote, and then wrote again when DSM-5 was published, the DSM nosology was never meant to remain as created. It was always assumed that science would move forward and give us a much more useful way of categorizing mental illness. Most folks who have given thought to this matter agree that a categorical nosology is neither reasonable nor possible at this stage of our ability to measure mental health. Unlike other forms of medicine, mental health does not have signs, we only have symptoms (a fever is an example of a symptom rather than a sign. A fever can occur for many possible reasons, it is not sufficient for diagnosis. Instead we need some kind of image, or chemical assay, or biological assay, which tells us that there is a substance or a virus or a bacteria or an injury present. Those would be considered signs, and those would then explain the presence of the symptoms. Sometimes we can deduce illness based solely on symptoms, but usually we would want there to be signs as objective criteria to refer to in case of doubt or misdiagnosis).

We need to understand underlying causal mechanisms in order to create best treatments. Obviously. That we do not understand causal mechanisms but act and talk like we do should concern you. If you are not concerned please re-read the essay from the beginning, you have not been paying enough attention.

Right, okay, thanks for sticking with me. Let's gather back around, take a knee, take some water, face out if we need to. Where are we at? I think we've established that I'm a rural psychologist who happens to also claim some knowledge of Awakening and spiritual practices, who is trying to be helpful to whoever happens to walk through his door, but that being helpful often involves helping people find their autonomy. Finding autonomy for some can be a somewhat confrontational seeming push towards taking responsibility for cleaning up and getting on with the serious work of making things a bit better than we found them, and for others can be a frightening journey through trauma.

Uh-oh, trauma, here comes another riff:

I have a deep interest in some psychoanalytic writings. Thomas H. Ogden for example is, in my personal experience, one of the most evocative writers of any discipline and any genre that I have ever encountered. He is a writer's writer, a thinker's thinker, a psychoanalyst's psychoanalyst, and much more. The dude f***** rocks okay? But I still have deep ambivalence about seeking analytic training. It just seems too...I'm not sure what word to use... there is a strong whiff of classism, at least in American Psychoanalysis where only the wealthy can afford the kind of insurance plan that would cover analysis, much less the wealth required to pay out of pocket... and then strangely enough there is this weird Oedipal thing you bump into sometimes...what word to use? What do you call it when there is a group of people who have luminary members like Ogden (and Faibairn, and Ferenczi, and Sullivan, and Kohut, and Bromberg, and just so many great and refined minds who have turned their attention to the analytic frame and to the understanding of the human experience through that frame) and yet also full of people who make it strangely plain that they still owe allegiance to Sigmund Freud, like sort of Oedipally strangely plain how clearly they state that Freud is a genius of geniuses kind of strange? Oh yes, ambivalent. That's the word.

You know, here's a true story. I was participating in a study group run by a group of analysts once and they were talking about Freud in this weird way that I'm trying to find words for. And I chimed in, my usual charming self, and I said, "you know, physicists don't talk about Newton this way, and he was a genius. Don't you find it a little bit strange or even, Oedipal, that a bunch of adults sit around talking about a

man as though he were a genius among geniuses, a virtual God among men, while people of equal genius, like Sir Isaac Newton, are simply acknowledged as having moved the ball forward?" Dear reader, this comment went over like a lead balloon. So much so that I found myself wondering if I was somehow amiss in my perspective. Some years later I stumbled upon an essay by Harry Guntrip, an analyst who is generally highly regarded by other analysts to the best of my knowledge, and he used literally the same analogy about Newton with the same intent. So that was a relief. Thank you Harry⁷.

Freud wrote in several places persuasive arguments for the extension of psychoanalysis to the poor via the creation of clinics in which psychoanalysts in private practice would be expected to volunteer their time so as to help society begin to heal individual by individual, and not just help heal the wealthy. He was also very keen on child education reform. To the best of my knowledge, this part of the Freudian legacy has not been taken seriously in American Psychoanalysis. Am I wrong? If I am not wrong, might that be worth pondering?

Here's another historical tidbit about Freud that seems eerily resonant with today's mess. He trained in Paris with Janet. Janet was pioneering attempts to use hypnosis for severe cases (that means people severely traumatized). More important than the clinical technique, Janet was pioneering a theory of dissociation, the sort of theory we need to treat trauma. Freud came back to Vienna from his training, and his writings show him to be filled with Janet's ideals and filled with hope for treating the most severe problems in his community, what was then called hysteria. He did drop Janet's technique, finding that hypnosis is not a long term solution for complex problems (though it can be useful for things like smoking cessation, or used as part of a more complex therapeutic process, for example as a method of self soothing), and had "discovered"/co-created with his clients the technique of free association. This new technique, combined with the underlying perspective Freud had learned from Janet, was producing excellent results. But then, mysteriously, we see Freud move away from a dissociation model of the mind to a repression model of the mind, all in the course of a single case study he publishes regarding treating a young woman from a well connected family. The young woman was having...fantasies or memories?...memories or body impressions?...body impressions or hysterical fantasies and symptoms?...of being sexually molested as a child. Certainly such things could not be really happening in the good families of Vienna? Perhaps in those poor communities over there, but certainly not among the genteel well-to-do...I hope you notice how familiar this all is...

Here's what it's really all about, at least for me. Please believe me when I say that I speak only for myself, and in no way do I judge anyone who feels differently as these are such complex topics that there must be many possible points of view, but I will certainly judge you if you oppose me with ignorance and denial instead of brave and rational thought. There are many valid perspectives in the world, and there are also facts, and there are also gradations of evidence. This is obvious, so if I just lost anyone with these apparently simple words, let me repeat, there are many valid perspectives, but not perspectives that contravene facts or perspectives which ignore gradations of evidence. The age of the earth, whether consciousness is epiphenomenal, whether and to what extent climate change is occurring due to human agency, these are questions that can be empirically investigated. This does not necessarily mean that there will be empirically derived answers, we often also need a good dose of common sense, humor and storytelling for most complex human problems, but sometimes facts are facts, and those facts must be known and regarded if they are in fact, factual. That again boils down to autonomy and responsibility. Get it? Then think through it. If I do all the work for you you don't get as much benefit. Go back and re-read the beginning and the first two footnotes if you still don't get it.

Here are some facts about trauma. We are talking about, conservatively, 25% of the population in the United States of America. I've looked at some of the data for Canada, and it looks as bad or worse. Twenty-five percent! Conservatively! This is severe or complex trauma I'm talking about. If you include gradations of relational trauma then the percentages start approaching 90.

I'm standing here, and I don't know who I'm supposed to turn to. Because when I turn towards the psychologists, I mostly see people who want to be doctors. They're trying to out doctor the MD's, seeking prescription privileges and offering mental techniques in much the same spirit as offering a pill...here just do this and it will help. And yet, the biological sciences just don't seem adequate to help heal those who most need healing. Or rather, the very relevant biology of trauma still gets short shrift overall. Insofar as I am accurately understanding the literature that I am reading on the biology and neurophysiology of trauma, we can understand a great deal that is useful, but what we seem to understand does not seem to suggest that we should spend more money developing more cognitive interventions or pharmaceutical treatments. This is not to say these treatments have no use, but just to point out that we seem to be in a short term profit corporate driven culture of late. These observations, if correct, have very significant implications. You should think carefully about this. I am alarmed, I believe for good reason, and yet when I raise the alarm at conferences I don't get much traction. No doubt it is me or my style, I am also autonomous and therefore responsible, but I can't help but wonder about denial. In recent history we have

discovered and lost the knowledge of trauma at least several times. Freud had it and turned away. WWI and WWII, and then Korea and VietNam, and then most recently Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Afghanistan, have taught and then re-taught us that trauma is real. We have data from every state that shows that little girls and boys are being raped, tortured, neglected, abused, etc., and that data is only the *reported* cases, that were then *investigated*, and then *substantiated*. What about the unknowable number of unreported cases? What about the cases that were really bad, but the social worker had worse ones to deal with and had to put the water on the biggest fire while other fires burned? What about the cases that were bad but the state's attorney made a judgment call that a case wasn't feasible?

Trauma is correlated with medical, psychological and social ills of an astounding array and of astounding cost to society. Unless I am totally missing something, you should be extremely upset right now, and you should be motivated to learn more about what I am saying and do something in your community. This is literally an epidemic that has vast social and economic ripple effects, and yet we spend hardly any money on the problem in either research or intervention⁸.

When I turn my attention towards the spiritual crowd, and I want to make it clear that I am not deeply embedded in the American spiritual scene and therefore I'm not speaking about anyone in particular in any way, nevertheless when I survey the American spiritual scene via available books and interviews and YouTube videos and the like, I see and hear a great deal of idiocy. People are blabbing about stuff they don't understand, or seem to have made up, or because it just *feels* true to them. I assume they are just trying to fit in and talk the talk they think/feel/assume they are supposed to talk, or are trying to get more adherents in some cases (the spiritual marketplace is a marketplace indeed!), or are genuine but not particularly thoughtful, but jeez. On any given interview program or book in the "spiritual" isle, I find utter inanity and often downright insanity about stuff that is unprovable or unknowable, or about stuff that actually we do know a lot about, like consciousness, but you would have to read complicated books and papers to understand. The author or presenter often does not seem to have done the relevant homework, but the average spiritual seeker also hasn't done the homework and gets buffaloed. Look, you are free to believe whatever you believe. Stop reading this if I offend. Just turn it off and go back to your happy delusion. Remember, you have autonomy. But this is bullshit. If you really want to wake up, it doesn't matter whether or not there are Devas or whether the Planck constant has something to do with enlightenment. Pray or study if you feel an affinity for that kind of practice, it's fine, just don't hold so tightly to your belief system, because underneath that belief system is something you are defending against, and you have to let go of whatever that is.

Look, little girls and boys folks. I don't want to scar you for life, but little girls and boys. Suffering. Suffering and transgenerational suffering, and telescoping trauma, and correlations with loss of opportunity and socioeconomic status, and no well funded school system to step in, and overwhelmed teachers and overwhelmed social workers, a broken and overwhelmed justice system...a traumatized system promoting further traumatization like trauma bound systems do in other words...this is what I see in pockets all over the world...what do you see?

I am not counseling despair, I am counseling autonomy. In autonomy there is something deeper than hope, but we have to get together and show up.

If you're a medical professional, why do you know, know for a fact, that antidepressants are the best way to treat depression? This is not a fact. In fact, the data would indicate that, on the whole, antidepressants are weakly to modestly efficacious. They are clearly less effective, on the whole, than psychotherapy generally is and psychotherapy is only moderately helpful on the whole. I'm lumping together metadata to say what I'm saying. I know that there are many methodological complications with measuring efficacy, but on the whole the data is pretty damn clear⁹. Look at the data if you don't agree with me and then tell me why I'm wrong. *After* you've read the actual studies though, not just the abstracts or whatever summary you just read in your favorite journal because, newsflash, big pharma got some big hooks. Go and prove me wrong, I want to be wrong on this one, but I believe you'll find I am right. Also, just because I can hear some of the complaints in my mind, *no*, I am not saying drugs are bad. Many people feel they derive great benefits from SSRIs especially when used over shorter terms. That is wonderful. What I am saying is that the average experience appears to be lackluster and to often come with some degree of side effect and withdrawal effect complications. This is the data I can find. You send me what you found if you see it differently.

To the spiritual types I am also taking up a few issues that I feel need to be presented to their attention. And again, truly, just an attempt to help, if what I'm saying doesn't resonate for you just stop reading, please, just stop. But if you're still reading then let me say this, what the hell is wrong with you? And by you of course I mean all of us. But honestly what the hell is wrong with you? You say that you want to wake up but you don't practice for example? Or you say that you want to follow the Buddha path, or the Ramana path or whoever, and yet you don't address the obvious hypocrisy in your life? Let's talk about the Dalai Lama for a second. Everybody loves the Dalai Lama right? I mean, I don't know the man personally but he seems like a darn wonderful fellow. So nothing against the Dalai Lama, in fact I attend to his words with great care and often

reverence for the wisdom I hear, but I can't help but notice that he's male. Anyone else noticed that he's male? Also everyone around him appears to be male. Anyone else noticed that everyone around the Dalai Lama is also male? Now I'm a little confused here. I'm not a deeply scholarly man when it comes to Tibetan Buddhism, but I'm pretty sure that enlightenment is non-gendered. Why aren't there female Lamas attending to the Dalai Lama? Why are Tibetan nuns getting distinctly less support than their male counterparts? If even the Dalai Lama isn't quite knocking it out of the park, what are the rest of us to do? How do we manage to tap into the infinite and not bypass the everyday? How do we appreciate the everyday without becoming distracted and missing the infinite?

Look, I'm like you, imperfect. On the path. Working hard to be where I am and not be satisfied with attainments but to keep growing and growing. And boy do I have a lot of growing to do. I'm not criticizing you. I'm not talking to you like your teacher or your disappointed parent, I'm trying to talk to you like a fellow human being in a bewildering time, and I'm trying to encourage finding a way together.

...

And so I wrote you this letter.

I'm just trying to let you know that there are some things you can do with your autonomy that might be tremendously useful to both you and the people around you. But I'm not saying it's simple, it's complicated. I'm not trying to sell you an easy fix or a new belief system, I'm trying to sell you lifelong deconstructionism. I'm not really doing anyone any favors except the ones who think they want to awaken, but they don't have any way to know what awakening really is, and thus can't really know whether they want it. It's okay though, because they do want it. We all do. In fact, even if you've never heard of it you want it, simply because it clearly surpasses the alternative, but it's totally okay if you don't ever hear of it and never get it...truly, I'm certain...but that won't necessarily be true from your perspective...clear?

To quote Mumon from Robert Aitken's translation of the 6th case of the Mumonkan:

Once, in ancient times when the world honored one was at Mount Grdhrakuuta, he twirled a flower before his assembled disciples. All were silent. Only Mahakyasapa broke into a smile.

The world honored one said, "ladies and gentleman I'm super enlightened" [just joking, that's me paraphrasing]. The world honored

one said [something much more flowery], “I have the eye treasury of right Dharma, the subtle mind of nirvana, the true form of no-form, and the flawless gate of the teaching.” [so, like I said, super enlightened] “It is not established upon words and phrases. It is a special transmission outside tradition. I now entrust it to Mahakasyapa.”

Mumon’s Comment

Gold-faced Guatama [another name for the Buddha] insolently degrades noble people to commoners. He sells dog flesh under the sign of mutton and finds it quite commendable. Suppose all the monks had smiled, or that Mahakasyapa had not -- what then?

If you say the true Dharma eye can be transmitted, then that is as if the old fellow were swindling people in a loud voice at the town gate. If you say the eye treasury cannot be transmitted, then why did he say he entrusts it to Mahakasyapa?

See? Totally clear and really complicated. Like most koans in the Zen tradition, if we can get through the obscurations of translation from another time, place, language and culture, then we read a creative description of one or several aspects of the awakened perspective. Then we can practice inhabiting that perspective.

Anyway, Reality is complicated and also not complicated. Kind of obvious. We really can only learn and internalize models and ways of being in the world that feel like balance or lack thereof, but we can *always* be unbalanced and yet feel we are. This is the nature of human subjectivity, or at least it is one of the aspects that appears baked in at any level of awakening. The truly awakened ones that are far along and mature in their awakening definitely have a different vibe and energy field compared to most of us, but they can still have regressed parts that haven’t yet entered into wholeness.

Here’s a sad story.

Up here in the little Northeast Kingdom of Vermont, a place I certainly would never even have heard of until I happened to move to Vermont, is a place that turns out to have an interesting history for free thinkers of various sorts. Among other hidden attractions, we have the very first retreat center of the Shambhala organization (not far away are the Bread and Puppet people who are also very interesting to look into. They have nothing to do with non-duality so far as I know, but they appear to be very

interesting people to hang out with, and, as one of the best examples of truth in advertising I can think of, they make great bread and really cool puppets). Shambhala is the organization that was founded by Trungpa Rinpoche, a man famously enlightened, and notoriously drunk. Just a few years ago we heard that Trungpa's son and successor, not that one would ever think that combining the words son and successor could possibly be a bad idea, was accused of various sexual and social indiscretions. The accusations ranged all the way from public drunkenness, which frankly seemed pretty easy to believe, to statutory rape, which I didn't want to believe at all. There was an internal investigation by a law firm and that investigation did not support statutory rape as a legitimate allegation, but it did support at least two cases of severe sexual harassment, and also seemed to strongly indicate that Trungpa was having sex with students. Sex between adults can be quite a complicated affair, all puns intended, and then there's that pesky autonomy issue, so I don't rush to judgment about those things necessarily, but I can't help but question the obvious power dynamics in such a situation as appears to have played out in the Shambalah organization.

We all have our personal proclivities and areas of struggle or trauma, so there are always complex interpersonal and intrapersonal dynamics happening in groups of humans. It seems to me that the basic motivation for most of us to take up therapy or to take up practices like meditation (or an exercise program or what have you) is generally a simple wish to feel better. Then, we naturally want to share what has helped us, have affiliations with like minded others, etc. No problem. Where the "spiritual" crowd seems to often falter is in a lack of thoughtful, culturally appropriate to our time and place, structures that would provide scaffolding for continued growth past the initial relief offered by a practice, a community, or a charismatic teacher. Especially if the teacher is considered somehow infallible, and especially if there are no structures that create open dialogue amongst and between members of a group, you've basically got a time bomb.

So, here is this letter and some essays meant to generate dialogue. Look me up if you would like to dialogue and maybe we can get closer to truth together.

In a way that is hard to explain, I'm vigorously trying to make myself clear and also okay with whatever...I wish more people would join me here and we could play Star Trek together...but you can't really rush things it seems...

Ezra Maurer

February/March of a warm winter, 2020, NEK VT and Eastern Townships, Quebec, respectively.

Notes:

1. I am basically summarizing the most salient aspects of existentialism to the best of my understanding. I cannot claim to be formally trained in philosophy, but I have read Camus, Sartre, Yalom, Rollo May, Frankl...some others who aren't coming to mind as I write...so, I'm not sure how that would compare to a philosophy course, but that's who I've read in the existentialist genre of philosophy.

Also, I have in mind here a plethora of neurophysiological research, particularly neuroaffective research on consciousness, and also a fair bit of reading in my past on western philosophical attempts to grapple with the so-called hard and soft problems of consciousness, as well as what philosophers mean by free will and responsibility.

There is too much to go into in a footnote, but for the moment just know and ponder that some great minds have come to some general consensus about human subjectivity and the possibility of growth beyond our current felt sense of selfhood. I would say the implication is we each have some personal responsibility for attempting to promote that growth.

2. In his little gem of a book, "Buddhism Without Beliefs," Stephen Batchelor states that there is an exercise he learned during his training as an ordained monk in a lineage of Tibetan Buddhism. The exercise goes like this:

Imagine you are in a row boat (facing backwards relative to your direction of travel in other words) and you are on a vast river with many other people in many other boats of similar design, but you cannot turn the boat around to see where you are going, nor can you turn your head, etc. In other words this is a metaphor for life and death. You can't see what is in front of you in time, you can only see where you are, and have some hazy and limited version of where you have been. You are on the river (of life) with others that you can get close to, but only so close. Play with the metaphor any way you can, that's part of the practice. Anyway, you hear and feel the subtle vibrations of a huge waterfall. A

waterfall so immense it will be unthinkableably devastating to slide over. You can't help but wonder with fear and awe what the drop will be like.

Now, when you feel you are as fully immersed as you can be during this meditation session, ask yourself: What should I do? (i.e. with this limited life and time of life?)

Sartre, also well worth reading and generally considered a literary genius, could do no better. He talks about imagining you are on a trap door that could spring open at any moment...or was that Camus?...I think it was Sartre...doesn't really matter. Look it up if you really care so much...

The exercise asks you to fully embrace this metaphor of human life as an imaginative reality. This is one example of a major type of meditation exercise found cross-culturally, exercises in which you engross yourself to the utmost of your concentration powers in some imagined reality. I believe the point of this kind of practice is that by developing your concentration power and then experiencing the concomitant increase in the felt reality of the imagined object (which then supports further development of concentration power, leading to further immersion, ad infinitum? or ad awakenum?) you eventually internalize the perspective the exercise is meant to evoke. In this way it is very akin to the Zen koan in which the student immerses herself in the koan's story in such a way as to resonate with the mind of the master in the story. After he resonates with the master's mind enough times, the student's mind will reshape itself to some degree in the image of the master's.

Anyway, there are lots of ways to practice.

3. Stephen Porges. Allan Schore. These are must reads. Then hundreds of others.
4. Thomas Cleary. Look him up if you like. My understanding is that he was a professional academic. His own insight into what he was translating doesn't seem very non-dual to me though, so I don't really recommend him so much as acknowledge gratitude for the great translations he provided.
5. Robert Aitken. Worth looking up for any serious non-dualist of any sort. American born, trapped in Japan during WWII, he wound up becoming quite fluent in Japanese and scholarly about Sino-Japanese and Chinese language groups generally. Excellent writer. Deeply enlightened personage. Along with Phillip Kapleau, Aitken Roshii was the first American born Zen master to carry

Zen to America. Aitken established a zendo in Hawaii while Kapleau established one in Rochester, New York. All works highly recommended but especially his artful, poetic and whimsical “Zen Master Raven.”

6. Bertram Karon. Hundreds of high quality peer reviewed journal articles. Look him up. I direct your attention most specifically to his magnum opus, *Psychotherapy of Schizophrenia: The Treatment of Choice*. 1977. Pretty damn provocative for 1977. Pretty damn provocative today. Still buried and ignored. Hmmmm....wonder why....follow the money...? Anyway, the book has the Michigan State Hospital Project Data at the end. You can also look that up as a paper but you might as well read Karon’s thoughts on technique if you are going to read the data showing his technique definitively beating the pants off medications.
7. Guntrip, Harry. 1971. *Psychoanalytic Theory, Therapy, and the Self: A basic guide to the human personality in Freud, Erikson, Klein, Sullivan, Fairbairn, Hartman, Jacobson, and Winnicott*. Basic Books.
8. For one of the clearest and most accessible examples of how trauma is both clearly relevant and also clearly underfunded and ignored, google “ACE”. This stands for Adverse Childhood Experiences. The research, which interestingly began with a bariatric clinic run by Kaiser-Permanente in California, was then taken over by the CDC (Center for Disease Control) and then, mysteriously to me, dropped. All of the data collected by the CDC, as a government entity, is free and open to the public (go to CDC.gov and search). Most of the Kaiser-Permanente data is pretty easily accessible as well as it was eventually published in peer reviewed journals. Along with studies by the WHO that show the ineffectiveness of anti-psychotics for Schizophrenia, the lack of empirical support, at least that I have been able to find, for the classes of drugs used to “treat” Bipolar Disorder, the very clear lack of efficacy of SSRIs and related “newer generation” (that’s marketing language for “better but not really”) “anti-depressants”, I’m looking at trauma data and thinking, “Well, jeez, it’s all trauma.”
9. Look, it’s pretty complicated, but this all started with a fellow named Rosenweig who was arguing for a common factors model to explain therapeutic efficacy. There is a very complex debate here that involves technical statistical, methodological, theoretical and ethical questions that are not easy to grapple with, and many thousands of articles have been written on efficacy and the various implications of there being support for both a common factors

understanding and a specific factors understanding, but frankly, overall the research is a mess. There is, at least in my opinion, too much noise in the system to say much. There are, for example, an overabundance...a vast overabundance...of studies showing the efficacy of CBT for anxiety disorders, but almost all of them only run for 6 months. If any professional reads this, please, please, please send me some good references that prove me wrong, but I can't find studies that go past 6 months. But that's pretty obviously stupid. How the hell is that supposed to be applicable to a real life situation?

As an example, here's a reference I just pulled off of google scholar in about five minutes:

Spielmanns, Glen I. PhD*; Berman, Margit I. PhD†; Usitalo, Ashley N. BA.
Psychotherapy Versus Second-Generation Antidepressants in the Treatment of Depression: A Meta-Analysis
The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease: *March 2011 - Volume 199 - Issue 3*
- p 142-149
doi: 10.1097/NMD.0b013e31820caefb