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# Conscious Living

**Gay Hendricks, Ph.D.**



## Finding Joy in the Real World

**Gay Hendricks, Ph.D.**

 HarperCollins e-books



# Dedication

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With deep gratitude, I dedicate this book to two people whose passion and commitment set the standard I aim for every day:

KATHLYN THATCHER HENDRICKS—  
*wife, creative partner, and boon companion*

and

DAVID HUBBARD—  
*consummate truthseeker and treasured friend of three decades.*



# Epigraph

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Both of you have shared, in person or in my mind, every crucial conversation that inspired the book. When I discovered the following poem of Rilke's, I thought of you both and translated it anew in your honor.

*The one who grasps the thousand contradictions of his life integrates them into a single whole,  
that man, joyous and grateful, drives the hooligans out of the mansion, celebrates in a different way  
and you are the guest he welcomes in the still of the evening.  
You are the second person in his quiet space, the still center of his conversations with himself; and  
every circle he draws around you raises him out of time on the legs of a compass.*

—RAINER MARIA RILKE





# Contents

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Dedication

Epigraph

Introduction: A Personal Journey to a Conscious Life

Part I. Finding Joy: Infinite Journey of the Questing Spirit

1. Conscious Living

2. A Reliable Path

3. Five Required Lessons of the Journey

4. The Inner Shifts and Outer Moves That Create a Conscious Life

Part 2. The Real World: Conscious Solutions to Timeless Problems of Living

5. The Foundation of Self-Esteem: Discovering Who You Are

6. Building on Self-Esteem: How to Find Peace of Mind, Body, and Heart

7. How to Attract Lasting Love

8. How to Create Thriving Relationships and Conscious Sex

9. How to Create a Life of Your Own Design

Closing: One Breath at a Time

Acknowledgments

About the Author

Other Books by Gay Hendricks

Copyright

About the Publisher



## A Personal Journey to a Conscious Life

**Eternity is a child at play with colored balls.**

**HERACLITUS, FRAGMENT 53**

In my early thirties I made a discovery about love that changed everything about my life. This discovery enabled me to attain my heart's deepest yearning: a lasting love relationship rich with happiness and creativity.

The realization was this: the only way to attract the love you want is to love and embrace your self. For years, through many unsatisfying relationships, I had been trapped inside the bubble of a delusion. I was trying to get other people to love me deeply and unconditionally, but without ever having loved my *self* unconditionally. In retrospect, it seems obvious, but at the time it was anything but. Right after having this realization, I put it into action. I let go of my defenses and relaxed into a few seconds of pure, loving acceptance for all of myself. I loved and accepted my anger, my fear, my loneliness, and all the other things I didn't like about myself. I even loved myself for not being able to love myself very well! I could do it only for an instant at first, but these few seconds of unconditional love for my self changed my whole approach to life. Ultimately I resigned from the exhausting task of seeking love outside myself to complete myself.

In time this realization led me to see that my job now was to be a producer and distributor of love, not a consumer! I dropped the restless, mindless search for love in all the wrong places. In fact, I dropped the search for love *anywhere* outside myself. Instead, I began to look for the places in me that needed loving.

This inner shift caused real magic to happen immediately in my outer life. Suddenly a woman appeared in my life—as if by magic—and she was exactly the kind of person I'd always dreamed of.

There was a very good reason I'd never found her before. Unconsciously I had been looking for a woman to complete me and make me whole through the power of her love. Suddenly I realized that it was my job to complete myself through *my* power of loving me. From this place of wholeness, I would naturally attract another whole person who loved herself to exactly the degree I did. Then our lives together could become a journey of two whole people celebrating each other and ourselves. When problems and barriers emerged in our relationship—as they surely would—we would work through those barriers as two allies committed to our mutual development.

And that's just what happened.

The past twenty years with Kathlyn have been exactly that kind of magical journey. Two kids, nine coauthored books, five hundred radio and television interviews, and thirty-some trips around the world later, I can report that the magic is real and sustainable. I never imagined how good it could get. I now know that it's possible to live and learn and even work together through twenty years of creative harmony.

The love we all seek is right here, right now. A simple shift of consciousness, and the floodgates are open. This book is about how to make the shift to a new kind of conscious living and loving. If you

read Kathlyn's and my earlier book, *Conscious Loving*, you will find that the book you're holding complements the previous work but goes into a new dimension: the transformation of your inner self. I've come to believe that the process of learning to live consciously begins in the depths of our inner selves. This book—particularly part 1—is directed at you and your relationship with yourself. In part 2 I will discuss relationships with others, but with particular focus on what I've learned in the decade after *Conscious Loving* was published.

This book takes a larger perspective than my previous work. The journey of conscious *loving* is part of a larger path of conscious *living*. In a very real sense, conscious loving is something you do every moment of living, whether it comes to life in the way you grip your steering wheel in heavy traffic or the way you embrace your beloved in breathless ecstasy. It's all the same thing! The very same discoveries that brought a rich love relationship into my life could also be applied to creating a life rich in creativity, good feeling, and even financial abundance.

## My Personal Journey of Conscious Living

“Where could you have possibly come from?”

As a child I heard this question often, and it was usually uttered in tones of exasperation. Now that the sting has worn off, I wonder about it myself. The differences between my family members and mine could go on for pages:

I like chocolate; everybody else in my family hated it.

I'm the lone mystic in a family of hardheaded skeptics.

I write books about relationship, psychology, and spirituality; no one in my family has ever read one of them or even acknowledged gift copies I sent.

My brother often goes to Scotland and France on one sort of spirit quest: he tours the great distilleries and vintners in search of the perfect sip. My spirit quest has taken me to monasteries in India, Tibet, and Nepal, to grand cathedrals, humble caves, and epic shamanic journeys in the outback of Mexico. Even thinking of whiskey gives me an inner cringe; I may be one of the few people on this side of Utah who's never been drunk or even managed to finish a whole beer.

You get the picture. Even after I had published a dozen books and was a tenured professor at a major university, my mother would still ask me occasionally if I ever planned to get a real job. Finally, an appearance on *Oprah* seemed to convince members of my family that I wasn't in a fly-by-night profession after all!

Many of us begin the journey so that we can find a way through the frequently awful life situations we find ourselves in. That was certainly true for me. Part of my quest was inspired by a search for survival tools to use on myself. As I looked around while I was growing up, almost no one seemed happy. Most everyone wore downward-pulling mouths and deep worry grooves on their foreheads. Addictions were rampant. Family photos reveal that I adopted these masks myself by the time I was in high school. Pictures in my late teens and early twenties show me with a much more wrinkled brow than I have now. The wrinkles disappeared after a great awakening in my early twenties that I will soon describe, and fortunately they haven't come back.

The pain on the faces of the married couples in my family troubled me deeply as a child. Even now as I pause to look at old family photos, I find it hard to look without flinching. In your imagination

look over my shoulder as I hold a family photo in my hand. It is a photograph of my grandparents ~~their fiftieth wedding anniversary. I was there and remember the day vividly. It took hours to get the~~ picture, because they were unwilling to sit on the same piece of furniture to have the picture snapped. Sitting on the couch together would indicate a degree of intimacy that they did not wish to communicate to posterity. A compromise was reached only after a lengthy and bitter negotiation. My grandfather agreed to occupy the seat of the couch, while my grandmother would only perch on the armrest at the other end. This solution allowed them both to be right. The portrait reveals my grandfather looking helpless and confused as he stares blankly at the camera with his mouth agape while my grandmother looks off in the other direction, her jaw set in silent rage.

They had a terribly strained relationship, and my inquiries have revealed that it was like that throughout most of the sixty years they were married. My brother once asked my grandmother what things were so difficult between her and my grandfather. She reflected a moment, then said, "I think it's because I hated him from the moment I met him." That explained it to my satisfaction.

My young mind was always wondering, how can they be so unhappy? These were wonderful people when they were out of each other's range. They fed and clothed me, showered me with love, and probably saved my life. I felt so sad that they could not be civil to each other even on special occasions. What had gone wrong between them? What would it take to bring serenity and happiness back into their pinched faces?

I felt a passionate sense of mission to figure out what had created that degree of pain. I wanted to avoid creating anything like it in my own relationships. But try as I might, my unconscious programming caught up with me, thrusting me first into a backlash. By my teen years, I was so bitter on the subject that I wrote an essay called "Marriage" in the ninth or tenth grade. I had completely forgotten it until my niece discovered it in an attic and sent it to me when I was about forty-five years old. The first line says it all: "There are very few things about which I am absolutely certain, but the one thing I am completely certain about is that I will never, ever get married." After taking that position, I swung to the opposite extreme in my early twenties. I not only got married, but my marriage unfolded as an uncanny replay of the worst of my family scripts. Fortunately, I got a second chance.

## **Questions Are Powerful Magic**

In nearly thirty years of teaching and therapy, I've made the following recommendation more than any other: figure out the questions that you, with all your heart and soul, most need to ask. Don't worry about the answers. Put your attention on the questions themselves, and keep going for deeper and deeper questions until you come to the one or two or three that your life purpose is centered around. As the poet Rilke put it, "Learn to love the questions themselves." The magic is this: if you ask your big questions with sincerity and all your heart, your life itself will become a living answer to them.

There is another reason that questions are powerful medicine. If your question is vast and deep, personal and you really don't know the answer to it, you set the stage for previously unthinkable leaps of consciousness. If you open up to genuine wonder, you step out of the zone of the known and into the infinite creative possibilities of the unknown.

## **An Early Leap and a Resounding Thud**

My childhood interests in matters of the heart and soul set the stage for a profound peak experience and an equally profound fall from grace. Both were essential to my growth, and both occurred around the time I entered elementary school.

I was playing in the side yard by myself one afternoon, probably a month or two before I would begin elementary school. I had been attending vacation Bible school at the church my family belonged to. There had been many stories about Jesus being the son of God, and I was trying to figure out what all this meant.

I remember that it was a hot and muggy day, even by Florida standards, and that I had just taken my shirt off. I suddenly felt a call to pause and rest for a moment. A question gripped my mind: was I, too, a son of God? It seemed possible, because I had no father in my life. Where had I come from? Was that invisible father in the sky my real father? I looked up through the oak branches to the shimmering sky beyond, and an awareness came over me.

“I am made of the same stuff as everything else in the world. I am the same as the oak leaf and the earthworm and the sky beyond. It is all one thing, and I am a part of it.”

In that moment I knew that all humans are connected to one another and all are exactly the same, even though we come in different packages. I saw that I was made of the same stuff as my mother and my brother and my Uncle Marlow, even though we each had very different personalities.

Of course, I lacked the vocabulary to state the idea coherently, but I remember the feeling as if it happened ten minutes ago: There is a Oneness. We have it inside us, and it has us inside it.

The feeling soothed me deeply. I remember feeling a great sense of peace after it happened. I felt secure knowing that I was all of a piece and so was everything else. I had no idea the same idea had been occurring to people throughout history.

Nearly forty years later I opened a book written two thousand years ago by Marcus Aurelius, the emperor living in a military outpost while defending Rome against the barbarians. This wise and heartfelt man kept a journal that he called “To Himself” and that we now call *The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius*. It consists of twelve notebooks, and in the tenth one he writes,

Let us agree on this first: I am part of the whole, all of which is governed by nature. Next, let us agree on this: I am intimately related to the parts which are the same kind as myself. If I remember these two things, I cannot be discontented with anything that arises out of the whole, because I am connected to the whole. Nothing that comes out of the whole can injure a part, because nature cannot generate anything harmful to itself. In remembering, then, that I am a part of the whole, I shall be content with everything that happens.

It is basically the same idea that appeared spontaneously in the heart and mind of a youngster in the early 1950s, in the swamplands of Florida.

Where could this notion have sprung from? Is it part of our heritage, somehow encoded in our bodies and minds? Is it something we can feel again and again? It would take me a long time to find out, because I came down out of this exaltation with a thud: I entered the first grade.

At first I was very excited to be entering school. There would be other kids to play with and something new to learn every day! My brother, Mike, who was starting junior high school as I entered first grade, had told me there was a subject called social studies. I made up my own fantasies about the content. It would be a time every day when we would learn how to solve problems in our lives and our families. We would learn the skills of how to conduct a social life—how to talk to people without being afraid, how to ask adults things without getting them upset. Boy, was I wrong! Social studies

turned out to be learning things like the major exports of Bolivia. But the curriculum wasn't the one problem. I was a problem myself, and I remember the shock of finding it out.

When I entered school, I found out something I had not known before: I was a family problem. In my early years I was raised primarily by my grandparents. My grandparents doted on me; even though they didn't get along with each other, they were totally loving and endlessly patient with me. I had no way of knowing that I had something wrong with me, because I was always in the radiant field of my grandparents' caring. To explain why and how I was a problem, let me introduce my mother.

In 1933 my mother, Norma Canaday, married her dream man, Leonard Gay Hendricks. She was a great planner, and her plan was this: she would work at an office job until she had the one child she wanted, then she would quit the job and be a housewife and writer until she attained her dream of publishing the Great Southern Novel. My father would support the small family with his job as manager of a factory a few blocks from their house.

The desired son was born in 1937, and other elements of the plan were in place, when life intervened harshly and abruptly one day in 1944. The war had not disrupted her life very much, mainly because my father was 4-F for being obese and having flat feet (the same conditions that kept me from slogging around the jungles of Vietnam when I was drafted in 1967). It had, however, forced her to keep working part-time, so she had postponed her writing career until her son entered school. With this newfound freedom, she would launch her writing career.

Now for the hard part. One day my father, lunch box in hand, walked off to work and never came home. He became ill that day and had to be rushed to the hospital. No one knows exactly what the problem was, but something caused his kidneys to fail rapidly. Within a week he developed uremia, a poisoning, and he died at age thirty-two. My mother was grief-stricken, but she mobilized all her strength and pushed through the bereavement, the funeral, and the unpleasant surprise of discovering she had been left nearly penniless. My father, known for his new cars, his natty wardrobe, and his generosity to friends, had borrowed against his life insurance so much that after funeral expenses my mother was left with less than three hundred dollars to her name.

Now for the harder part. A few months after the funeral, the stress was still so great she was practically living on coffee and cigarettes. Always slender, she had lost thirty pounds and now carried less than one hundred pounds on her 5'10" frame. One day it occurred to her that she had not had a period since the funeral. At first she attributed it to stress, but a visit to the doctor proved otherwise. She had conceived a child, probably only a few weeks before the funeral. At this news, her steel composure broke, and she sank into despair.

Fortunately, she lived in the midst of an extended family, which, though poor and emotionally reserved, rallied around her until she got her feet back on the ground. Practically force-fed by my grandmother, my mother finally topped the hundred-pound mark and began to regain health. In the fall of 1944, she put her six-year-old son in school and sat back, not to pursue her writing career, but to await the birth of her second son.

That was me.

From the very beginning I was fat. Pictures show me with roll upon roll of fat on my arms and legs. By the end of six months I weighed more than most babies at one year. Various theories were advanced: Perhaps my mother's semistarvation had jiggered some inner thermostat so that now I stored fat more readily. Perhaps I had inherited my father's and grandmother's thyroid problem. Perhaps I would outgrow it.

But I knew nothing of this. My grandparents took over primary care for me, because my mother had her hands full looking for a job, raising Mike, and trying to stay above water. My grandmother was

sixty-five and my grandfather sixty-eight when I was born. I am deeply grateful that they were willing to take me in at a time when they would normally have been gardening, working crossword puzzles and doing other things they loved to do.

In their presence there was never a harsh word about me or to me, in sharp contrast to the volatile hours I spent at my mother's house. At my grandparents' my days were occupied with playing ball with myself, having stories read to me, learning card games from my grandfather, and accompanying him to the baseball park where he was the groundskeeper. I spent a lot of time alone and even taught myself to read so I could amuse myself better. According to my aunt, an elementary teacher, I could already read at the third-grade level when I entered school. Pictures from that time show me radiantly happy (and very fat).

Then I went to school.

Unknown to me, my weight problems had been an ongoing focus of concern, the Family Problem. My mother had no idea of this and did not even know I was fat. I had no external reference to compare myself to, I was just who I was. When I entered elementary school, I suddenly became aware of my different status. I was taunted with names like "Fatty" and "Pork Chop." Kids had a field day punching me and running away, because they knew I couldn't catch them. On one of my first school days I tried unsuccessfully to climb a jungle gym, slipped, and broke my nose. I came home and demanded, "Am I fat? Is there something wrong with me?"

I felt bewildered and hurt, betrayed and doomed. It had never occurred to me that there was anything wrong with me. Now, not only did I know it, but I knew everyone else had known it all along. They just hadn't told me. I felt heartsick, but I took a secret vow never to tell anyone how I felt.

I built a workable persona on top of all this pain. Nowadays I call this persona the Little Professor. Back then I just focused all my energy on knowing everything there was to know and proving to my teachers I knew it. By the time I finished first grade I had already done all the second grade work and then some. I leapfrogged directly into third grade, and there I hit another wall.

I had never realized it, and certainly didn't understand it, but I used my eyes for another purpose besides seeing the usual visual spectrum. I could see streams of energy around me and other people, and I used seeing the energy streams for my survival. The skill became crucial to my well-being because by then I had left the safety zone of my grandparents' house and was living with my mother. I could see when my mother was about to blow up by watching the intensity of the vibrations. By doing this, I could disappear from the scene before the storm hit. My brother was not skilled at this, and often he bore the brunt of the tirade by simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Everything changed one day when an optometrist came to my classroom. An eye test revealed that one of my eyes didn't work very well, while the other eye saw perfectly. I was outfitted with a clunky black pair of glasses, the type worn by a popular jazz musician of the era, Dave Brubeck. I looked ridiculous, but worse, my ability to see energy streams disappeared. Now, not only was I fat, but I had lost my secret vision. From then on, I slid further into despair. By the time I was in junior high school I was a hundred pounds overweight and was making C's and D's.

Imagine a river that disappears under desert sands, only to reemerge on the other side. That's how my adolescence seems to me now. There must have been a river flowing down underneath somewhere, but I was not in touch with it. I don't remember having any further insights or spiritual experiences until the stream broke through in a most unusual way in my early twenties. Looking back, I think I was simply on autopilot.

I got a reprieve from the prison of obesity when I was in the ninth grade. I was sent to a weight specialist in Valdosta, Georgia, a doctor named E. C. Jungck (I remember the name because it was



written on many pill bottles in the medicine cabinet). He put me on a severe diet and an array of diet pills. I lost a lot of weight and jumped to straight A's in school, boosted by the heart-pounding and mind-perking properties of the amphetamines that were the core of Dr. Jungck's program. Through exercise, I kept the weight off until college, but it eventually returned. By my early twenties I had regained the hundred pounds. Fortunately, I stumbled upon a permanent solution—emphasis on stumble—of which you will hear more shortly. (This morning I weighed 179—still no Mick Jagger or Baryshnikov—but with my 6'1" frame I now resemble a fullback more than a sumo wrestler.)

The saving grace of my adolescence was a profound relationship with a wonderful young woman named Alice, whom I met when I was sixteen. My love for her felt like a once-in-a-lifetime thing, and I assumed we would always be together. The thought that I might love any other person, or that she might, never crossed my mind. This was it. We were together for the last part of high school and the first two years of college. But one day, late in my sophomore year, Alice asked me to meet her for a talk. She said there was too huge a gap between the "real me" and the outer self I presented to the world. She said she loved the inner me but had stopped liking my outer persona. I pressed her for more, and she admitted that she had fallen in love with another man. Later I met him, and I could see why. He looked like a Greek god, with flowing blond hair and an athletic body. He was carrying a book of T. S. Eliot poems and a volume by someone named Jung. I was heartbroken and angry, but after the anger began to dissipate, I compared myself to him and came up with a sobering realization: what woman in her right mind would choose me over someone like him? I was fat, could never figure out what Eliot's poems meant, and had never heard of Jung.

This loss hit me hard, but a far worse one followed soon. My grandmother had a stroke, and my memory of the next year becomes a blur. One moment I was at her hospital bedside, watching her labored breathing assisted by life support. The next moment I can recall, my family was conferring about whether to turn off the machinery. She was in a coma, and there was no electrical activity in her brain. I must have sounded like a little boy instead of a bulky adult, because I remember stammering something like, "Hold on, this can't be happening. You mean she's not going to be all right?" I had grown up with the secure knowledge of her invincibility, and I don't think it had ever occurred to me she might die. My aunt Audrey and my mother looked at me like I was crazy. No, they said. This is it. She's not coming back.

Because I was so out of touch with my feelings, I did not know how to grieve. I lived in denial of the loss of my grandmother and Alice. I tried not to think about them and never spoke a word about my feelings to anyone. Predictably, my life became a 3-D movie of the unclaimed feelings and issues in my unconscious.

I made a desperate and unconscious search for a security blanket, and within months of my grandmother's death, I became attached to a woman who was exactly like me. She was deeply wounded by early losses, and she had built a thick wall around them. She had a charming outer act, totally false, like mine, and inside she smoldered, like me, with awesome rage and grief. She, too, had lost her father, her grandmother, and her first love but had covered all of it over with a peppy cheerleader persona. She also had a substance addiction I did not discover until after we were married.

I'm not sure if we were a match made in heaven or hell, but we spent most of our time in the latter. Our wedding was the union of two false fronts. We had little idea who we were as individuals, and we had less insight into who the other person was. Within days of the wedding our outer masks cracked and torrents of ancient pain poured out—misdirected at each other. Now, looking back from the safe perspective of thirty years' distance and insight, I can think of only one other relationship to compare it to—my grandparents'. It was the only marriage I witnessed close-up in my early years, and I believe

that I made an inner movie of it in my unconscious. Later I would base my first marriage on the script. ~~As I write this I feel myself shuddering as I recall how deeply asleep I was throughout the period of my life. But then, through luck or grace or the sheer force of a lifestream flowing beneath the desert of my life, I received a second chance.~~

## **A Moment That Changed My World**

Hands thrust deep in the pockets of my heavy parka, I trudged along on a deserted country road in the bleak depths of a New Hampshire winter. It was January 1969, and I was about to turn twenty-four. I smoked my way through my second pack of Marlboros of the day, lost in thought as I contemplated how awful my life had become. I weighed three hundred pounds, I was in a marriage that had been pitched battle for nearly three years, and I hated my job. I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life or whether I wanted to keep living at all. As my boots crunched along the hard-packed snow, my mind chewed on question after question: What am I going to do? How do I get out? How can I find my life?

The questions came at a feverish pace, stoked by a confrontation that had shaken me. It had occurred in the first session of a counseling class at the University of New Hampshire. I had gone to the university the first day of classes to begin a literature class, but I had found it so boring I left early and went looking for the friend, Neil, I had carpooled with. I knew he was a counseling student, and I wanted to tell him where to find me after his class was over. At the time, my knowledge of counseling was primitive at best: I thought they were mostly former teachers who helped kids fill out college applications.

I caught his eye through the open door of the classroom, and he waved me in to join the class. I thought this was odd, but I went in. Even odder was the fact that the students were all sitting on the floor in seven or eight small circles of half a dozen people. Neil asked me to join his group, and the others welcomed me with smiles and nods. Then they continued what they were doing, and what they were doing absolutely mystified me. They were talking about their own personal feelings and life issues! This seemed outrageous to me. One person talked about strains in her marriage, another talked about fears of making a key life decision. Another broke down and sobbed, and no one tried to stop her or comfort her. In fact, they seemed to encourage her to cry! I could not imagine myself talking about these sorts of things with anyone, but to talk about them in public was unthinkable. I didn't stay outraged for long, though. What happened next pushed me past my anger.

Suddenly one of the men in the group, a tall and bespectacled fellow with a bushy mustache, turned to me and asked, "Why are you so fat? Why are you trying to kill yourself at such a young age?"

My world stopped. I simply couldn't compute an answer. Finally I stammered out a semicoherent stream of babble about glandular problems and how there was nothing I could do about it and how I would come to terms with it and everything was just fine. I flashed a cheery smile and shrugged my shoulders. The man studied me with an expression that looked an awful lot like disgust. "That's it?" he asked. "That's all you've got to say on the subject?"

I felt a welling up of fury at him, but I capped it and kept it contained. I just shook my head. The group looked at me with what I hoped was compassion but what I secretly feared was actually pity. It was a truly life-changing moment, but, perhaps as you have done in such moments, I resisted the opportunity mightily.

On that lonely stretch of road, on that bitter winter afternoon, I had become obsessed with h

questions. I stayed mad at him for well over a week, during which all my defenses flared up as I tried to execute the messenger who had brought me this unwelcome news. Who the hell was he to hassle me like that? Was his life going so well that he could go around needling other people? Damn, impertinence!

After a virtually sleepless week, it slowly occurred to me that being mad at him wasn't helping me feel any better. I began to wonder about his questions rather than blame him for asking them. That changed my life but in a way that was most unexpected.

Back to that moment of truth. As I turned toward home in the darkening afternoon, I stepped on a patch of bare ice covered over with snow. My feet shot out from under me, and I crashed flat on my back on the hard road. The back of my head smacked the ice, stars exploded in my field of vision, and I felt a blast of pain flash through my body. Suddenly I was in another world—not quite unconscious but a long way from my normal self. I was aware that my body was lying on the road, but I had no desire to move and couldn't have if I'd wanted to.

Next, I closed my eyes and saw with absolute clarity an inner vision I had never witnessed before. I could see down through all the layers of my body, mind, and soul.

First, the mind level: I saw that my mind had constructed elaborate defenses to keep my body from feeling the pain of my grief and anger and fear. I used my intellect to keep my emotions under control. Most of my thoughts justified my positions and made others wrong. I realized that I saw the world purely through my own projections. Because I was so out of touch with myself, I saw everybody else that way, too. I realize I had no idea who I was or what the world could actually be like: I'd made it all up and mistaken it for real.

Now I shifted to the body level: I felt how tight my muscles were, from the clenched fist of my stomach to the heavy armor of my shoulders. I realized I kept my muscles tight to deaden the pain of all my feelings. I held them in a locked position to control myself and keep from exploding.

I noticed all these things dispassionately, just as I might notice what time it is. There was no despair or "Wow!" to any of this incredible vision; it's just the way things were.

I shifted to the feeling level: I discovered I was awash in feeling and always had been. I had always prided myself on having no feelings, but now I saw the truth. Just because I wasn't letting myself consciously experience my feelings didn't mean they weren't there. There were so many that I didn't have names for them. It was like looking through a bowl of minestrone and trying to name the ingredients. I saw, though, that each feeling, no matter what it was called, had its own energy configuration. Fear was a certain pattern of waves of energy flowing from my belly, while anger was a very different energy shape. Anger had a jagged edge to it and a hot, raw sensation. It was dancing under the tight muscles in my neck and shoulders. Sadness was a dull throb of pressure in my upper chest and throat.

As I looked down through the levels of myself, I came at last to a clear space. Now I would call it my soul or my essence, but at the time what I saw was a vast open space that was at the center of me. The center was everywhere else, too; the space extended outside myself. In other words, it permeated the world as well as me and everybody else. Compared to everything else in me and the world—feelings, muscles, ideas, trees—the space was infinitely larger. It was most of what everything was made of.

As I lay on the frozen ground, I settled into that vast, clear space. I discovered that all the pain disappeared from my body if I relaxed into the immensity of the space. The vision deepened: I now realized that every single problem I'd ever had came from resisting the power and glory of this space inside me. Because I did not know how to live immersed in its vastness, I had assembled a set of ac-

that worked in the world to allow me to get along. When those didn't work, I had a more insidious set of acts to fall back on.

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I got a clear answer to my fellow student's question, "Why are you so fat?" The reason: I was trying to kill myself to replay my father's life. He died at thirty-two, a grossly obese heavy smoker in a strained marriage. I was copying his life in uncanny detail. In the absence of any conscious purpose in my own life, I was doing his all over again.

As I relaxed more into the infinite space inside me and all around me, I could feel that the space itself was alive and yet vastly still at the same time. Between the clear space and the elements that it contained—feelings, body mass, thoughts—was a zone of subtle activity that was not quite pure space and not quite actual stuff. As I shifted my inner vision to see it, I realized that it was actually three things happening at once. I saw them as vibrations or shimmering waves, each with its own purpose and its own signature. As I searched to appreciate them, I saw that they were love, creativity, and intention.

Just next to clear space was the subtlest vibration, which I recognized as love. It was almost pure space, with just the lightest of vibrations. I could feel how love was the first thing that manifested out of the immensity of pure space. It was also the entry point to my soul: by loving we could open ourselves effortlessly to pure space.

Creativity was next to love. It was simply endless experimentation without judgment or criticism. In a word: play. I understood that we are at play all the time, and so is everything in the universe. I didn't enjoy it or realize it or let it work for me very much, but I saw that it was always going on anyway.

Love and play were flowing spontaneously from the center of pure consciousness. Then, just before things came into form, was the third zone of vibration: intention. The zone of intention was flavored with my particular history. I could see how I corrupted pure intentions with my own unconscious intentions. I could see how my intention to express my love had been thwarted by my life wounds and the wall I'd built around them. Because of this, when I tried to express love, it had a flavor of anger and fear to it. I realized also that my creativity was not being expressed clearly; it was often flavored with bitterness and cynicism based on my history.

In this moment I knew who I really was. Of course, part of me was the acts and the tight muscles and the unexplored feelings. But none of those were the essential me, because each of those acts and each of those feelings could have been different, and I would still be who I really was. This idea was deeply soothing to me, and I believe it changed my life direction permanently.

But then, with a groan of returning pain, I began to leave the space and come to. I saw clearly the levels of my self assembling again. I felt my tight muscles and my stuffed-in feelings and the thoughts begin to seethe in my head again. I felt deep despair that I had to leave this place and stand up in the three-hundred-pound body of one who smoked cigarettes and hated his life.

I stood up and got myself reoriented in the world. The back of my head throbbed, and a knot was forming. I glanced at my watch and saw that the whole experience could not have taken more than a few minutes. The knot is still on the back of my head. Doctors tell me I suffered a subcutaneous hematoma and have pronounced it harmless.

Although I felt a sense of sadness that I was leaving the magic inner world behind, I knew another sense that I would always carry it with me. Now there was the promise that my life could take on a direction and purpose. I wanted to know myself to the soul-core so that I could live in that magic world all the time while functioning happily in the outer world.

I took a deep breath and headed toward home.

# Bringing the Awareness into Reality

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The project of reinventing myself with the soul side out would take some doing, but fortunately I only had to do it one step at a time. I dedicated my life to uncovering who I really was so that I could express my creativity and love in the world in their purest forms.

First of all, the weight had to go. For a month I ate only things that I intuitively felt would feed my true self. It turned out to be two things that I almost never ate—fruits and vegetables. When I would think about eating, I would tune in and find out what food would “sing to my soul.” My soul foods were blueberries, carrots, greens galore, string beans, and apples. I shed thirty pounds in a month. I started feeling a little shaky from so little protein, so I switched for a couple of months to light proteins such as white fish and omelets made mostly of egg whites. I continued losing a pound every day or so. Then I alternated between the protein and the fruit-and-vegetable diet for a while. Within six months I had lost seventy-five pounds, bringing me down to 225. Maybe I wasn't a fashion model yet, but I was on my way. The last twenty-five came off much more slowly, but within a year I was down to around 200, eventually getting down to 180 or so.

At the same time, I lost a ton of psychic baggage by immersing myself in the University of New Hampshire counseling program. The classes were mostly experiential (we were still in the halcyon glow of the sixties, and education had not yet rigidified again). Consequently, it was like being in intense therapy for two years. I got in touch with my feelings again and learned how to give other people room to feel theirs. An unexpected surprise happened, partly due to opening up to my feelings again. My eyesight started changing for the better, and I soon was able to let go of my glasses and pass my driving test without them for the first time. My ability to see energy fields began to return, and I discovered how to put the skill to work in my counseling practice.

Dissolving the marriage was the most painful part of those years. My wife did not rise willingly to the creative possibilities of being single. In fact, our parting was the most bitter, awful experience I have ever had in my life. Even though the actual divorce happened fairly quickly, the fallout from it took longer than our relatively brief marriage. I wanted to move on so badly that I agreed to practically all her demands. She was from a moneyed family and had considerably more access to quality legal help than I did. Even though the divorce was financially devastating to me for many years, I eventually recovered. Emotionally, however, it took longer to build my reserves. It was a long time before I risked any kind of significant relationship again.

What got me through the pain was a deep inner knowledge of where I was going. I wasn't getting away from being a fat tobacco addict in a horrible marriage; I was going toward a life of self-awareness and creative fulfillment. Creativity also rescued me. One day I was talking to an inspiring professor named Dwight Webb about my writing aspirations. I was telling him that I was having a hard time letting go of my desire to be a writer. I loved counseling psychology, but I'd always known somehow I'd be a writer. He made a simple suggestion. Why not write about counseling? Why not put all my feelings and inner experiences in the form of poems and articles for the profession?

It was an obviously great idea, but for some reason I'd never considered it. I was so inspired by that I wrote a sheaf of poems about the counseling process. Many of these were published in counseling journals (and became my first publications in my new profession). The poems caught the eye of a professor at Stanford, helping me get a fellowship to that fine institution for my doctorate. I am eternally grateful to Dwight for his suggestion and have had the opportunity to thank him privately and publicly on many occasions.

I was on my way, with a literal smack on the head as my inspiration and guiding vision.

I told you about my first contacts with the living wisdom of conscious living—an easy one as a child and a second one the hard way on the icy road. Now I want to roll the clock forward to 1974, five years after my world-changing smack on the head in New England. This next episode will demonstrate how to get a lesson by feather rather than hammer.

In autumn of that year, with my new Ph.D. hanging on the wall, I was just days away from teaching my first classes as a graduate school professor at the University of Colorado. There was just one problem, though: I was convinced I didn't really know anything of ultimate value.

As I walked alone one pristine morning near my cabin in Green Mountain Falls, I was mulling over this deeply troubling issue. In spite of being trained at a prestigious institution famous in my field, even though I knew the research literature backward and forward, I felt utterly unequal to the task that lay ahead of me. The intensive years of work at Stanford had given me excellent clinical skills and had made a rigorous researcher out of me. But they had also separated me from my essence. Data-oriented research was the most highly valued endeavor. Personal experience was considered a source of distortion, not something to draw on for wisdom. Even though I was a master of a dozen powerful techniques, from biofeedback to hypnosis to empathic listening, I did not feel able to teach a single thing that resonated in my own soul. By spending those years in the research culture, I had wandered away from the contact with the living source of wisdom that had brought me there in the first place.

As I walked in the woods that morning, I felt a sense of panic building: Where should I go for the answers now? After all, I had studied with the best and wisest. I had read most of the key books in the field. Still, I did not have the thread that held it all together. What to do?

Suddenly an amazing idea leaped into my mind. Instead of reaching for answers, I could simply pose the questions—to the universe and to myself—and listen for an answer. Rather than straining the leash of my consciousness, looking outside for the answer, I could stand still and listen. So that's what I did.

I asked these questions: Are we doing some single thing wrong that creates all our troubles? What can we do instead to create a life of happiness and productive service?

I stood beneath a tree and awaited an answer.

I didn't have long to wait. Seconds later, a cascading rush of energy streamed through my body, as if a torrent of passion had been released in me. The feeling was intense and electric yet completely benign. It was at the opposite end of the spectrum from scary; to surrender to it felt like the ultimate safety. I let go into it and reveled in it for minutes on end. I lost track of time during the experience, so I can only guess that it lasted a half hour or more. When the peak of the energy had subsided, I knew the answers to my questions. More important, I had reconnected with my inner source again. Possibly because I had asked specific questions, I received very specific answers. A life path began to open up for me.

Here is the awareness the torrent of energy left behind in its wake: we are doing one thing wrong that is at the root of our problems. We are failing to honor and love our authentic experience and failing to notice the authentic experience of others. When we are scared or sad, we try to distance ourselves from the experience rather than feel it, resonate with it, love it. We do not feel what we feel and we do not tell the truth of our feelings to others. We live in a trance of denial in which we put our personality agendas ahead of connection with ourselves or union with others. These agendas of our personas—adopted in childhood for survival and recognition—are preventing us from resting at home in the vast space of our essence, which is something we could feel in our bodies and see in our minds.

I felt my essence again—who I truly was—as I stood there under the trees. Beneath all my feelings was the vast space of my pure consciousness. Beyond all my thoughts was the backdrop

consciousness—steady, clear, and radiant with serenity—and all of it was mine for the seeing. ~~By resisting my experience all my life, I had trained myself to focus on illusion instead of reality. In that~~ moment I let go of illusion and slipped into harmony with what is.

In that moment I woke up from the trance I'd slipped into in graduate school. Twice before—as a little boy and at twenty-four—I had experienced a deep contact with the source, and each time I had gone back to sleep again. This third time must have been the charm, because I have never since lost touch with it. As I write now I can feel the imprint of that moment in my body.

That experience changed everything about my life. I realized that there was nothing to fear or hide inside myself. I began feeling the truth of my feelings and speaking the truth of them. The week before my experience, my girlfriend had asked me to say how I felt about her going to visit a former boyfriend on an upcoming trip. I told her it didn't matter, that it was "fine." Now I realized that I was covering my true feelings with my "cool California guy" persona. The old therapy saying was true: *fine* was a four-letter word for denial. In reality, I felt scared that she wouldn't like me as much as she had, and mad that she still wanted to see him. I felt hurt and confused; we'd been having a wonderful time, and now she was going away. After my experience under the trees, I told her all these feelings, and to my great surprise she seemed appreciative and relieved to hear them. She returned from the trip having completed things she needed to complete with the other man. She became much more present in our relationship.

The experience under the trees profoundly changed my therapy practice, too. Up until that day I would listen to a client's issue, then devise some solution that he or she would try out with more or less success. The solutions were all based on techniques that had been proven to work by the scientific literature. Suddenly now I could see the feelings that were running beneath the surface of the client's communication. I delved into those feelings directly, acknowledging them rather than looking the other way, and as my clients confronted the emotional depths of themselves unflinchingly, they moved very quickly toward resolving their problems. I found that people could devise much more ingenious solutions to their problems than I could, if they were given the room to go down through all their feelings to make contact with their essence.

## **Bringing My Life Path into the World**

After that moment under the trees in Colorado, I felt secure entering the academic world. As my early books were published and my career took off, I felt that I had reached professional nirvana. I had everything I'd ever wanted.

In addition to teaching my graduate classes, I saw half a dozen therapy patients a week. I did this to keep from getting rusty, to have fresh data for theory building, and (truth be told) to supplement my modest salary. And for a while, all was well.

As I grew more experienced, I began to lose enchantment with the therapy model. It was dreadfully inefficient. It seemed to me we were going about things backward. Rather than putting signs on the road that said Slow Down, Bump Ahead, we were training thousands of people to repair broken axles. Leaving behind a therapy model, I began to embrace a learning model, one that emphasized conscious living instead of remediation.

In the therapy model, you focus on the past, hoping that by shifting your perceptions it will lose its grip on you and free up more creative energy in the present. Sometimes it works this way; often it doesn't. The downside of therapy is that people often remain not only focused on the past but

enthralled by it. Dependency on the therapist also becomes a problem.

In the learning model, you put yourself in the future and design conscious goals for your life. The goals, if you are committed to them, begin to pull you toward them. Along the way, old patterns may emerge similar to those addressed in the therapy model. The context is different, though; now you are engaged in a forward-looking journey of conscious living rather than a past-focused process of remediation. I found the learning model much more powerful. After all, have you ever seen a horse pushing a wagon along a country road?

I began to teach the learning model in addition to the therapy model, and the students loved it. They were delighted to learn the basic principles of conscious living that, when practiced, make much of therapy unnecessary. I would compare it to a medical school curriculum that introduced preventive medicine as well as remedial procedures.

I taught them the basic skills of living and loving:

- How to locate their feelings and name them correctly
- How to communicate clearly about their inner experiences
- How to make and keep agreements
- How to discover a life purpose and choose conscious goals
- How to love and accept ourselves as the foundation for learning to love others

In the seventies, I developed my career goal: to distill the essence of what people really needed to know about the art of living and bring it out in the form of books and seminars. It wasn't important whether the skills came from psychology, spirituality, or just common sense. The only thing that mattered was that they worked in the real world—in places like relationships, jobs, and health. The first seminar I conceived was called "The Art of Living," in homage to the ancient Greek philosopher of common sense, Epictetus. Six people showed up for the first session. Word spread, however, and thirty people enrolled next time, with nearly three hundred signing up on the third time around. The trend looked good.

After a while I started offering the course in a different format on the cable television network operated by the university. The first time the course ran on cable, one fan letter arrived. The message, though cryptic and scrawled in pencil, gave me heart. It said, "I'm not enrolled in your class, but I saw it flipping past the channels. What is this? It looks like you are talking about what it takes to have a happy life. Why isn't there more shows like this on TV? Thank you."

My sentiments exactly. When I replied to the letter, I thanked the author on behalf of Epictetus and Heraclitus as well as myself.



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