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## A Review of Your Lived and Unlived Life

### PARABLE

#### *Fatima the Tentmaker: A Sufi Tale*

*Hoping to find a handsome, affluent husband, Fatima, a spinner by trade, joined her father on a trip to several islands in the Middle Sea. On the way to Crete, a violent storm destroyed her father's ship, killing everyone except her. Poor and alone, she befriended a family of weavers in Alexandria, and they taught her their craft.*

*Years later, in the marketplace, Fatima was captured by slave traders and sold to a man who made masts for ships, her world collapsed for a second time. But she adjusted to life with the mast builder.*

*When her life was disrupted once again, she cried out, "Whenever I try to do something, it comes to grief! Why? Why should so many unfortunate things happen to me?"*

*Yet she refused to lose hope. She traveled to China and learned that the emperor was looking for a female stranger who, according to legend, would be able to make him a tent. By this time, Fatima had worked as a spinner,*

*disruption in her life, each grief, had prepared her for her final roles—as the emperor's tent maker and eventually his wife.*

—Paraphrased from a story told by Idries Shah in  
*Fatima: The Spinner and the Tent*

Like Fatima in the parable, most of us live our lives in reaction to changing circumstances, in the details of the moment that require our energy and attention to meet our survival needs, our emotional needs, and the needs of those we love. We are lost in those moments as if they are disconnected from what came before and what comes after, as if they are single, separate entities, like the many-colored threads of a tapestry before we turn it over and stand back to view the finished pattern.

As the great existential philosopher Søren Kierkegaard said, "Life can only be understood backward, but it must be lived forward."

The effort to understand a life, repair it, and find meaning in it is a natural developmental task of late life. With the loss of the ego's agenda, we can suffer disorientation, and a life review can help us reorient to the soul's mission and give us a deeper purpose for late life.

But no one teaches us how to do this in a thoughtful, organized way. No one teaches us how to digest the life we've lived, distill the lessons from it, and turn them into wisdom. So, we watch older people trying urgently to tell their stories or reminiscing in a way that makes them appear to be lost in the past.

Fifty years ago, experts in the field of aging believed that this reminiscence was a sign of senility, which reinforced ageist stereotypes. But in the 1960s, renowned gerontologist Robert Butler discovered that many older people seem to be experiencing a profound internal effort to come to terms with everything that happened to them in the past. He coined this phenomenon "life review" and concluded that it is a normal, necessary task of late life, not a pathological one.

Butler suggested that the purpose of life review, whether spoken or written, is to recall unresolved conflicts and reconcile with them

to reconciliation with estranged loved ones, making amends and forgiving them, or forgiving ourselves. In the best case, it leads us to give up denial or blame and become accountable for the life we've lived.

The call to review our lives may come as a gentle nudge to see it from the long view, not through the eyes of youth or of middle age. We want to recognize what we have made with the life we were given, or what it could have been if it had unfolded differently. We want to detect the patterns in our choices, the results of our actions, the coincidences in seemingly chance encounters, and the residue of unfulfilled desires—the full weave of the tapestry and the images revealed there.

Sometimes, the shock of mortality awareness triggers the desire to review our life, evaluate our achievements, and possibly design a new direction. Or the reality of retirement may catalyze a process of self-reflection about the past and inquiry about the future. Sometimes the event of becoming a grandparent stirs a need to tell our stories, to record them in the memories of our family members or in an actual written or video document to create a legacy for future generations. In other cases, a nagging feeling of guilt or shame brings up a need for emotional repair, which requires us to look back and examine when we were harmed or harmed others.

In a less intentional way, people in late life may repeatedly tell the same stories from their past, in a dreamlike, nostalgic reverie, as if to digest something that's stuck somewhere or to complete something that's unfinished. They may fantasize about the life they did not live, which they could be living if only this had happened or not happened. Their minds may wander between reality and fantasy, between *what is* and what's out of reach, between choices made and not made, opportunities lived and missed, loves gained and lost. And they are haunted by internal shadow characters that grieve lost potential, regret abandoned gifts, long for ideal lovers, and mourn unfulfilled dreams.

In late life, these shadow characters inhabit us and inhibit us from redesigning our lives now. They form an inner obstacle: remaining stuck in denial about the past or stuck in fear about the future. The

result. We live in a narrow band of time, unable to make the shift from role to soul.

Instead, with a life review, we can gain the opportunity to see the full arc of a lifetime from a higher, broader vantage point. We can see how the key moments in our lives were interconnected and became sacred passages with a hidden purpose: the evolution of the soul.

My client, Alan, had been harboring resentment toward a woman who had rejected his marriage proposal decades earlier. He just got stuck there. But when he looked at his full life span in the way that we will explore here—backward and forward, above and beneath—he realized that the painful rejection by one person was not isolated from the rest of his life. That pain carried with it a pattern of feelings from his early childhood. This insight led him to seek therapy and to learn how to have a much more rewarding relationship. At last, Alan could reframe that apparent failure as a turning point that took him in a new direction, an ending that became a beginning, a loss that became a gain in awareness and maturity.

Seeing from this deep and wide vantage point, we can release the past and live more fully in the present moment, opening to love of family, creative impulses, and the beauty of the natural world. A life review can be a portal to presence. And it can help prepare us for death by lessening feelings of fear, guilt, anger, and regret as we move toward life completion.

On learning that he had terminal cancer, the late neurologist and prolific author Oliver Sacks wrote, six months before his death, "Over the last few days, I have been able to see my life as from a great altitude, as a sort of landscape, and with a deepening sense of the connection of all its parts. . . . I cannot pretend I am without fear. But my predominant feeling is one of gratitude. After all, I have been a sentient being, a thinking animal, on this beautiful planet, and that in itself has been an enormous privilege and adventure" ("My Own Life," *New York Times*, February 19, 2015).

As a scientist, Sacks viewed life through a material lens. Others,

with a more philosophical or spiritual lens, seek to address questions of existential or spiritual meaning in late life: Could we have made different choices, or was our life fated to unfold in this way? What is the meaning of coincidence or synchronicity? Of karma or fate? What is the larger tapestry that is hidden behind our own small story? And who is the weaver?

To see the shape of a life, we need to stand back from it and reflect, as if the tapestry is hanging on the wall. We need to soften our gaze, step out of the immediate moment, and let go of the apparent randomness of events to see the order and beauty of our one-of-a-kind story.

We may be asking: Can we accept ourselves more deeply now? Can we accept our losses and our limits? Should we let go of relationships that continue to disappoint us, or should we use the time remaining to try to repair them? Can we accept our unmet goals and unlived dreams? Or should we use this time to reclaim those dreams, such as write a memoir, learn to play guitar or paint, or travel to exotic lands, even as we move toward life completion?

Some of you will read this and feel immediate resistance: "I don't care about the past." "It's too painful to look back." "I can't do anything about that now." "I don't have enough time or energy for that."

This denial or resistance to inner work may be the voice of a shadow character that does not want to face our many disappointments and disillusionments. Perhaps our memories of a trauma or betrayal are too painful, and they have been stuffed away in the shadow for too long. Perhaps a Critic shadow judges us for "sinful" behavior, such as lying or cheating, and we don't want to face that rejected aspect of ourselves. Or the Critic compares us to an invisible standard of success that we did not attain, creating self-doubt and regret.

It's also possible that our "inner ageist" is part of the resistance to life review, whispering, "Oh, nostalgia and reminiscence, that's just for very old people. That's not me."

But our denial of this opportunity also denies us the chance to repair the past, forgive ourselves, and pass on what we've learned to

future generations. And this denial puts us at risk for depression about the past or unhealthy obsession with it. A lack of self-reflection leaves us with a lack of insight, which is needed to become an Elder. It's as if we've gathered a lifetime of bounty and just don't bother to harvest it.

When I was in my sixties, it never occurred to me to do a life review. For most of my life, I was future-oriented, never interested in looking back. But something began to call me to contemplate my life patterns and digest all that I had learned. For me, this call came through the music of the 1960s and '70s, listening to Dylan, the Dead, the Band, the Stones . . . and discovering that my brain lit up with joy and my body rose up to move. The rock sounds of my youth connected me to those times. The lyrics arose from my memory like buried sacred texts. And I became ready to look back.

If we do not consciously choose to undertake a life review, it may take place spontaneously, as has been reported by people who've had near-death experiences when their lives "flashed" before them. And it may take place unconsciously while we sleep. Jungian analyst James Hollis told me that his older clients, over the age of sixty-five, often dream about unassimilated material from the past, which they need to digest now. "It's not merely nostalgic," he said. "It's how the psyche is making meaning of the life story."

For instance, Hollis had several physicians as clients who were burning out from work and looking at their futures with dread. Their dreams led them to understand that they had become doctors for the wrong reasons—for their parents' dreams or cultural expectations. "They were in pain from doing the right thing, which turned into the wrong thing. But they didn't know it. If they didn't pay attention to their dreams, they wouldn't know what was really going on behind the ego's story."

Hollis suggested that this kind of connection with the unconscious, or shadow, equips us to deal with the many losses and diminishments of age, including mortality awareness. Through our dreams, we have a felt sense of an ongoing dialogue with something larger than the ego, something deeply meaningful.

In a conversation, Rick Moody reminded me that life review can occur spontaneously in dreams and that this was famously illustrated by Charles Dickens in *A Christmas Carol*. The novel's protagonist, Ebenezer Scrooge, now an older man who has been miserly and unkind all his life, hates Christmas and refuses to give donations to people in need of food. In three dream episodes, Scrooge sees the ghost of Christmas past, when he was an innocent, lonely child; the ghost of Christmas present, where some families celebrate in generosity and joy, while other children starve; and the ghost of Christmas future, which reveals Scrooge's own funeral that no one attends.

This dark review of his life and his mortality prompts a painful question: "Is it too late for me?" Scrooge wakes up a changed man. He spends time with a family, gives his worker a raise, and sends a turkey to a needy family, finding generosity and renewal in his own heart.

Like Scrooge, many of us meet a shadow part of ourselves in late life and vow to take a different direction. It may not be such an extreme turning as Dickens's character. But with a life review, we can turn away from harmful or limiting habits and turn toward a larger embrace of life.

### Physician Rachel Naomi Remen on Seeing Her Life with New Eyes

Rachel Naomi Remen is cofounder of Commonweal Cancer Help Program and author of the bestsellers *Kitchen Table Wisdom* and *My Grandfather's Blessings*. In an article for the *Institute of Noetic Sciences Review*, titled "Seeing with New Eyes," Rachel wrote about the turning points in her life that led her to "see with new eyes." She called these moments "initiations" because they resulted in a new stage of awareness.

Rachel was born into a family of doctors, and her life goal was to be the first woman to head a department of pediatrics. Then the human potential movement and the field of holistic health emerged, and she was invited to join a research team at Esalen Institute in Big Sur,

California. She agreed. Her discoveries about the mind/body connection and the field of complementary medicine took her by surprise and forced her to question her lifelong ambitions. "If I had known what I was going to have to surrender, I wouldn't have gone."

Months later, confused and disoriented about her purpose as a doctor, Rachel suffered a series of panic attacks and wanted to leave Esalen to return to the safe, familiar world of science. A colleague encouraged her to do an imagery exercise that slowly revealed a mystery: an image of a marshmallow squashed under pressure, flattened out of its natural shape. "The shape most familiar to the marshmallow was not its true shape," she wrote. "But something in it remembered its own shape and was puffing up and reclaiming it now."

Rachel cried as she realized that this was her life story. Her family of scientists worshipped logic and facts and scorned other styles of learning. Her colleagues reinforced this view. She had been under a lifelong pressure to flatten herself and conform. But by nature, she was an intuitive, even a mystic. And at Esalen she had, for the first time, found like-minded souls.

"Before that, I felt like I was dying," she said. "But I was going toward a way of being I had never been able to live, a way that would fit me perfectly when I got there. I was going home."

Having left Esalen and taken a teaching position at Stanford University, she received a faculty promotion and achieved her conventional career goal. But instead of celebrating, she felt trapped and suffocated. Then a synchronicity triggered a memory: "I stepped through a doorway into another reality in which all the odd parts and pieces of myself turned toward each other, and for the first time they fit together seamlessly. I who had always felt an outsider, always felt like the wrong person, I remembered—and knew I belonged."

She quit her job and, as she put it, went from being a person who was always fixing a broken world to a person who felt privileged to serve a holy world.

"But this hadn't happened as a single event," Rachel said. "It

happened slowly over time through a series of events. And I could see it only by looking back.”

Rachel pointed out that these moments of initiation happen as a natural part of living, a return to what is most genuine and unique in each of us. “They seem to be moments when the personality recognizes what the soul has always known,” she said. “At such times something familiar is lost, but something of great value is found. Our true life is offered to us—a life more transparent to our deeper values.”

In the trajectory of a lifetime, this turning toward soul happens not once but many times. “With each initiation we come closer, we turn more easily,” she said, “until that final initiation, death, when we turn away from the personality and become the soul.”

Rachel had the intelligence and discipline to become a doctor, but to do so, her intuitive, mystical nature had to be buried in the shadow. Like many people in family professions, she could have pushed herself to become a gifted physician. But she realized, in the early years of the holistic health movement, that the sacrifice of her innate, constitutional design (or typology or calling) had too great a cost.

It was only later that she could see the ebbs and flows of her life with new eyes, the eyes of a sage.

## The Ego's Life Review

### *What Was Expressed*

To find the threads of the tapestry of your lived life, I suggest you prepare by sitting still, taking a few deep breaths, and sinking into presence. With your mind quiet and alert, write down a horizontal time line from birth to one hundred years old across a long, horizontal sheet of paper. Then divide the time line vertically into decades. For each decade, recall the key events and key people of those years. Write them down above the horizontal line, that is, in the realm of conscious awareness. It may help to note the numbered years, beginning with your birth year, to jog your memory.

For instance, for your first decade, from birth to age ten, what do you know of the key events, transitions, gains, and losses? Who were the central people in your story, families, romances, and mentors? How did they influence you?

Taking your time, continue through each decade, remembering as much as you can about the forces that shaped you. What were your major transitions in each decade? What insights did you gain coming out of the transitions? How did you grow, open your heart, and develop new awareness?

A key event may be a beginning or end, a gain or loss, a success or failure, a birth or death, a rite of passage, a gift or trauma, or a meeting with a remarkable person. Given the rich and unique life that my husband has lived, I was surprised to hear him say that his key event was immigration—leaving his country of origin, family, friends, and financial support to come to the United States. He believes that the trauma of immigration shaped his traits of resilience and determination, as well as his capacity for letting go, leaving behind the road not taken, and embracing change to build a solid foundation for his children.

There are many possible dimensions to a traditional life review. For example, you can go through each decade from the point of view of your body, which has its own life story—its seasons of youthful vitality and beauty, midlife potency and responses to stress, and late-life slowing, resilience, limitations, and perhaps illness.

Sara, a client, told me about the difficulties of her own birth, as told to her by her mother, and an early childhood illness that affected her gait. Although she grew stronger and healthier, she carried a self-consciousness about her body into adolescence, which affected her early romances. She described the pain of her first menstruation, the awkwardness of her first sexual experience, her failed efforts to dance well, and a surgery that left scarring on the neck, which she wore as a badge of courage. At sixty-five, Sara survived breast cancer, which triggered her desire to do a life review. She told me that her body's story left her in awe of its beauty and strength, even though it's now scarred and sagging.

"I never felt such appreciation and gratitude for my body before looking back over its journey," she said.

Or you can go through each decade from the point of view of your heart, which has its own narrative—its seasons of hope and disappointment, of widening compassion and heartbreak, of empathy and generosity.

When she was in elementary school, my friend Jeanne watched her aunt enter a convent to follow the religious life. Jeanne followed at the age of nineteen; she opened her heart to God with all the love and longing of a young woman and took her vows. She left eleven years later with no knowledge of how to live in the world. Eventually she married, and she worked for Bank of America for twenty-seven years.

During that time, Jeanne discovered the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, a personality test that is built upon Jung's work with personality typology. To her shock, she discovered that she was an intuitive feeler, but she had been raised at home and in the convent to be a sensate thinker. That is, her feelings had been banished into the shadow long ago, and she had been living a false self.

During one brief period, Jeanne's husband left the marriage, her parents moved to assisted living, and her job disappeared. "Then the real shadow-work began," she told me. Her perfectionism, reinforced in the convent, hid secret feelings of fear and anxiety. Her "good girl" persona hid secret longings for freedom and self-expression.

A former priest told her that the only difference between her and Jesus was that Jesus realized that he was God. In that moment, Jeanne woke up to the myths that she had been living, read widely in mysticism, and completed her master's degree in transpersonal psychology. She also rekindled an intimate relationship, which led to a conscious partnership for the first time. "Now, when I react, I know it's me, and that changes everything."

Her partner also had stuffed his feelings into the shadow. "So now we're learning feelings together," she said. In other words, Jeanne was reclaiming long-lost feelings from the shadow in late life.

The ego/mind has a narrative, too—its seasons of fluid curiosity and love of learning, then attachment to beliefs in black-and-white thinking, then receptivity, and then close-mindedness.

Bob, a colleague and former minister, was unconsciously identified with his religious beliefs, holding himself and others to a moralistic, right/wrong way of life. One day, his spiritual director pointed out that God is not the same as the dogma of the church. Shocked, Bob began slowly to see through the thoughts and beliefs that he had internalized and taken for granted and to explore what he really believed, gradually recovering his independent thinking and discovering a more direct connection to his God.

"I became disillusioned for a while," he told me. "Although I was no longer a true believer, I became more interested in other traditions and open to interfaith dialogue." Eventually, he became a spiritual director to nurture people's religious curiosity, rather than their dogmatic beliefs. In other words, Bob broke his identification with unconscious thinking patterns that created egoic arrogance and self-righteousness, reclaimed his critical thinking, and opened his mind to other paths. At the same time, his moral development advanced as he let go of rigid rules and came to follow his inner, intuitive guidance.

Your work life has a narrative. So does your creative life. How have they intersected in your story? How has one disrupted the other or supported the other?

You also might review your life through the lens of romantic relationships. What do the patterns tell you? How have your partners resembled your parents? How have they been reactions to your parents? Have you chosen the same partner over and over, or have you chosen very different people?

While undergoing a divorce, Sue, a client, reviewed her relationships. She had married her first husband, John, at a young age and had several children, who now had children of their own. John had been an addict and, eventually, they divorced. Judging herself through a conventional lens, she felt regret that she had not stayed with John and

tried to tolerate his addictions. But after the divorce she met and married another man, who brought emotional and financial stability to her family.

Over the ensuing years, Sue felt stifled at home and returned to school, where she was shocked to be drawn to another man and pulled into an affair of the heart. Wracked by guilt, she cut off the connection. But her romantic yearning awakened her holy longing and carried her onto a spiritual path. Eventually, when her second husband wanted to end the marriage, she agreed. Several years later, she met a man who also was a seeker, a practitioner of centering prayer, and they formed a more conscious bond than she had ever experienced.

"I feel some regret for the divorces and the emotional affair," she told me. "From the life review, I can see who I was then and feel compassion for my younger self. But now I'm living real love. And any earlier choices that had been different would have had different results. My ego feels guilty, but my soul knows that something bigger happened."

Another client, who had never married or had children, told me that it was only after she reached her sixties that she could see this truth: Her father had tied her to him for his own needs. It was only then, years after his death, that she could see how he had prevented her from bonding with other men.

"He put me in a trance. I believed only he could be relied upon. No other men. Only he would provide for me always. Only he really knew me and loved me." Now, she was free at last to choose whether to begin seeking out a relationship or come to terms with the reality of her life and the life that will never be.

All our personal stories are parts of the larger story of us, invisibly woven together as the tale of our lives. You might look at how the key events of your life story intersect with the key events of your generation—wars, scientific breakthroughs, political clashes, legal victories, environmental crises, heroic leaders, even musical hits. These and other cultural highlights are the context in which your personal key events took place in that decade.

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### A National Life Review

Many voices now are calling for a collective life review, a social and political accounting of the history of the United States. We can explore our ancestral histories and all the many ways in which we came to be here, together, on this land. We can explore our cultural histories and our family roles in the blessings and the sins that shaped this nation. We can explore our national collective shadows, speaking the truth about genocide, slavery, internment, torture, and immigrant policies that have been committed in our name. Without this kind of rite of passage, profound shame and grief lie buried in our collective shadow. Without it, we cannot understand the underlying roots of privilege and injustice.

If we looked back together with honesty, perhaps in time the grieving would ripen us. And we could witness the evolution of the soul of our nation. In that way, we could decide how to move forward together. Some politicians are calling for reparations to the descendants of African slaves. Some White people are exploring the impact of privilege on their lives. One woman I know, whose early ancestors stole land from Native Americans, is meeting with tribes today to grieve the past and make amends. She told me that she bought land in the Southwest and is leaving it as her legacy to the local tribe.

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On a different level, when we stand back to look at our stories and reflect, we may be able to uncover a mythic tale: the archetypal hero's journey. This narrative was popularized by mythologist Joseph Campbell, who found it to be a universal tale in which we as heroes venture forth from the ordinary world into an unknown, wondrous, perhaps frightening territory. We meet mentors, allies, and enemies; we undergo ordeals, victories, and defeats. And we return from the great adventure, as if reborn, with gifts to offer our fellow human beings. Many screenplays and novels are based on this tale; perhaps your life story is too.

Take some time to examine your life review in this framework:

- The hero hears the call to adventure;
- first refuses the call,
- then heeds the call and leaves the ordinary world,
- meets a mentor,
- crosses a threshold,
- undergoes a test (such as meeting the shadow),
- finds allies and enemies,
- stops to face inner doubts and fears (shadow characters),
- undergoes an ordeal (physical death or symbolic/ego death),
- receives a reward (object, secret, insight),
- follows the road back,
- has a final resurrection (following an encounter with death),
- and returns with a boon (a solution, a new awareness, a new beginning).

Here's an example from my own life review: A childhood infatuation with a blue-eyed boy stirred my holy longing and led me to yearn for the divine. A seemingly chance comment by my father about UC Berkeley led me to choose that school and wake up to my own racism, and I lost my suburban, White naivete in the heat of the Black Power movement, and Eldridge Cleaver became my hero. I became radicalized, rejected my father's money for college, and volunteered in West Oakland schools.

A year later, a seemingly chance meeting with a pony-tailed hippie, who told me that he wouldn't date me unless I began practicing transcendental meditation, led me on a spiritual journey. Books by Ram Dass and Paramahansa Yogananda opened wide the windows onto the spiritual realm. And my priorities shifted from activism to inner work. After meeting Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and listening to his vast integration of science and consciousness, spiritual awakening became the purpose of my life.

A decade later, after practicing and teaching transcendental meditation, I faced a painful encounter with spiritual shadow and left the community, disillusioned and alone. But I read *The Aquarian Conspiracy*, the first comprehensive vision of the "new age," and made a seemingly chance phone call to the author, Marilyn Ferguson. She told me that the editor of her newsletter had just quit and it must be synchronicity—I should come in. I had never called an author; I had not been seeking a job. But when we met, we felt a deep recognition. And Marilyn offered me the position of writing *Brain/Mind Bulletin*. She became a life-changing mentor and writing teacher, opening yet another door.

The first call I received on that job was from Steve Wolf, who was seeking publicity for a project. Fifteen years of friendship later, we became coauthors of *Romancing the Shadow* and remain close friends today, forty years later.

During those heady years with Marilyn, I was privileged to meet many of the leaders of the human potential movement and the pioneers of consciousness exploration—neuroscientists, psychologists, shamans, psychedelic researchers. But this cycle of my life would end in heartbreak when Marilyn fell into a spiral of addiction, which became an ordeal for all who loved her.

During that time, I met her publisher, Jeremy Tarcher, whose publishing house was the first, in the 1980s, to popularize books about alternative health and conscious business practices. We became friends, and eventually he became my mentor in the publishing world, where I spent a decade as an editor developing a hundred books, including my first two anthologies.

I had begun to study Jung seriously and to work with an analyst, who introduced me to my shadow in dreams. With my analyst as my guide to the underworld, I decided to return to graduate school in depth psychology and learn to teach others to work with their shadows.

I also had been grieving a broken marriage engagement for several years. On a seemingly chance evening, I received a dinner invitation from an acquaintance. A dark-haired man entered the room in a white



T-shirt, and my life turned again—upside down. Five years later, I married Neil, becoming a stepmother and, now, a grandmother. This rite truly initiated me into a new life of conscious relationship. If I had gone through with the earlier marriage, I never would have been emotionally prepared for this journey with Neil.

As Neil and I studied Hindu, Buddhist, and Sufi mystical practices, guides have continued to appear in person, in dreams, and through books. In each case, we met remarkable, highly evolved people. In each case, their shadows appeared. One man, in an extremely high stage of awareness, acted out a money shadow. Another Indian swami had unique attainment but was sexist and narrow-minded.

More recently, as I approached seventy, I wondered about the possibility of an initiation to become an Elder. I wondered what might need to be learned and what might need to be sacrificed to cross this threshold. I certainly no longer wanted a teacher or spiritual guide. I was becoming the Elder I had been seeking.

Today, after completing my life review, I can see that my life's initiatory moments happened through a series of meetings with remarkable men and women (or their books). I feel incredibly blessed for the appearances of my guides along the way, for their loving support and their generous transmissions to me. But in each case, I had to heed the call, undergo the tests, and earn the gifts. And I had to return the boon to the larger world.

I feel grateful for those people whom Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi called the "severe teachers," those who betray our trust by acting out their shadows, creating terrible suffering. I can see now how these "negative" experiences were "teaching experiences" that initiated me into the shadow, ending the innocence of childhood, humbling my ego, and moving me toward maturity. During this period of facing spiritual shadow, I had the following dream: *I dreamed of a man on a mountain who throws a boomerang out to the sky—and watches as it always come back to him.* I can see that each betrayal or disappointment boomeranged back to me, to my own responsibility for giving away

some power or some gift. Each time I painfully reclaimed a projection, I regained a part of myself, again and again, in an alchemical process. Each loss, in this way, became a gain. Each failure, a victory. Without the severe teachers, I would not have become a gifted therapist. I would not have become an expert in shadow-work.

With my life review, I now understand the difference between the ego's purpose and the soul's purpose in my own life. When I look back on my four distinct careers—meditation teacher, journalist, editor/author, and therapist—there are no obvious external commonalities. But, at the level of soul, they share the same mission: to transmit information about consciousness. It's been deeply satisfying to uncover this motif in the warp and woof of my life.

I had been living this mission like a vow, which oriented me to something larger than myself, to the whole of humanity. And today, with this book, my legacy is extended into transmitting information about consciousness in late life.

Stepping back, I also see that my life was not a string of unrelated events, a series of random changes or unnecessary sufferings that left me empty-handed. Rather, something larger was at work in me and beyond me—this thread, purpose, mission, dharma, Tao, whatever we call it—and I was following it, unknowingly, all along. If I listened and obeyed, it held me and carried me across threshold after threshold.

To put it differently, as Mick Jagger crooned, "You can't always get what you want. But if you try sometimes, well, you just might find you get what you need."

## The Shadow's Life Review

### *What Was Repressed*

The ego's story, the hero's journey, is the conscious tale we tell ourselves. But as we know from Freud and Jung, as the ego develops, a lot of material gets buried in the shadow. In fact, what is not expressed gets repressed. So, as we live out our life, another story is running beneath

the threshold of awareness, which Jung called the unlived life. And because the task of late life is not to reinforce the ego with our accomplishments but to connect with something larger, our life review needs to uncover those unlived shadow figures that have been secretly writing our stories and blocking the transition of role to soul.

A broader, deeper life review links the story of our conscious life with the story that's been running beneath conscious awareness—our unexpressed feelings, unexplored gifts, and unlived shadow figures, including their archetypal forms. It adds a whole new dimension to the traditional life review: We look not only backward and forward but above and beneath the boundary of ego awareness, creating a panoramic 360-degree view of our lives.

This 360-degree view may uncover those places where we got stuck, where our development stalled, and a rite of passage failed. It may reveal unconscious identifications that kept us stuck in past, limiting roles. And it may show us those sacrifices in which we lost essential parts of ourselves to the shadow. This kind of life review can be a portal to depth and presence.

Then, if we choose to, we can reclaim from the shadow specific material that we want to express now—new identities, mythic patterns, creative gifts—to enrich this stage. Or we can work to make peace with ourselves and with *what is*.

So, I ask you to return to your horizontal sheet of paper with your decade-by-decade time line. Begin with the first decade, looking at an event you've listed above the line—the level of conscious awareness. Ask yourself: For that to be expressed, what had to be repressed? Then write down that repressed trait, feeling, or action below the line—in the shadow. And pose this question with each key event.

Here's a simplification: The ego and shadow typically develop opposite qualities, so if one trait or tendency is cultivated, such as academic performance and identification with being smart, the opposite will be banished into the shadow, such as fear of not knowing and looking stupid. If independence is praised in the family, dependency may be for-

bidden. If kindness or politeness is demanded, anger may be punished and vanquished into the dark. If happiness is praised, sadness becomes taboo. If artistic talent is accepted but athletic talent is not, then it goes into the shadow.

I'll continue with an example from my life. During my twenties, when I primarily practiced and taught meditation, two major kinds of development went into the shadow. First, I didn't focus on building a career, so I wasn't building skills to find a place in the world. And I was banishing money into the shadow. The desires and abilities that go with career building—the desire for power, status, money, impact—were not expressed, so they were repressed.

Second, I wasn't focused on building relationship skills. Without a relational focus, I wasn't engaging emotional development, learning how to explore my feelings or share them with a partner. Of course, I had friendships. But I wasn't learning the tools needed to build a safe, trusting, intimate, lasting relationship—how to express needs, how to listen deeply, how to be vulnerable, how to be emotionally accountable. Those abilities were repressed.

Anyone who, like me, did spirituality first, then career and family later, may have similar shadow issues. Ken Wilber called this a "spiritual bypass": We skipped stages of growth, believing we could get beyond them by "transcending" them. But in that way, we derailed our development.

Now, focusing on one decade, see if you can link your ego's story in that decade to your shadow's story during that time. What was expressed? What was repressed?

If you identify that connection, can you see it as a shadow character, with a name and image? For example, I lived out the spiritual Seeker with such singular-minded commitment that I rejected the archetype of the feminine, and the Girlfriend/Wife/Mother was banished into my shadow. I lived the myth of enlightenment; I longed for spiritual awakening only.

Today, as a wife, stepmother, and grandmother, I can open the

invitation to what was unlived and reclaim and redesign those roles and qualities for myself.

If you had a family early, how did that determine what was expressed and what was repressed? If you had a high-powered career, how did that determine what was expressed and what was repressed? Can you now say yes to something that you said no to before and, in that way, alter your late life from the inside out?

If you resonate with archetypes, see if you can detect the mythic level of the story that's playing out. Because of my early years, I didn't identify with my apparently powerless mother but became a father's daughter and eventually lived out the story of the Greek goddess Athena—a fierce, independent warrior born from her father's head.

If you're not familiar with the Greek archetypes, use other terms that speak to you, such as Hero, Caregiver, Victim, Lover, Mother, Tyrant, Inner Child. If you spent decades as the Caregiver, what was repressed? If you lived the myth of the Victim, what was repressed?

Take the time to slowly and gently recall each decade. Then look to see how each contributes to your whole life story, lived and unlived. It's as if you're standing in the twilight, gathering the fruit of your life.

When you've had time to fully review your lived and unlived lives, see if you can detect an overall thread—your soul's mission in this life, your higher purpose or *dharmā*. This can help you reorient from the ego's midlife agenda to a deeper purpose in late life. It can help you witness your story from on high, rather than get lost in identification with it.

When the threads of the story are connected and the tapestry revealed, we can see our lives with a 360-degree view—backward and forward, above and beneath. Some people feel a certain sense of inevitability about how their journey unfolded, a sense that it couldn't have happened any other way. If we completed the developmental tasks, our key transitions became sacred passages, key people left their gifts with us and we digested them, and our heartbreaking encounters with the shadow became initiations into soul, then we became who we were meant to be.

Ultimately, at the level of soul, we are not our stories. The narrative self, which constantly tells these stories and unconsciously identifies with them, is not the spiritual essence of who we are. When we meditate and listen to our mental chatter—stories about the past or the future, stories about who we are or who we are not—we can begin to detect shadow characters and their agendas. We can learn to listen from a more spacious silence, from pure awareness.

When we witness the noise for long enough, we can begin to break our identification with the stories of the narrative self or shadow characters that have lived the hero's myth, the romantic myth, the victim myth, or the caregiver myth. And we can begin to identify with pure awareness, moving beyond ego to a more spiritual identity. In this way, a life review can help us complete the ego's story and go beyond it. To include and transcend it. A life review can be a portal to soul.



### **An Interview with Father Thomas Keating, Founder of Centering Prayer**

When I interviewed the late Father Thomas Keating at the age of ninety-five, from St. Benedict's monastery in Snowmass, Colorado, he looked back on his life in the context of his changing relationship with the divine and "a growing consciousness of relationship with the mystery," as he put it. The conversation was a spiritual life review, although we didn't call it that, because for him that was the primary thread in the tapestry.

At the age of five, Thomas had had a life-threatening illness and heard the doctor say that he might die. So, he made a bargain with God: "Let me live to twenty-one, and I'll become a priest."

As he recovered, he would sneak out of the house in the early mornings, before his parents awoke, to go to mass. He loved these secret visits and joyfully watched the monks "talking to God." Gradually, he disconnected from worldly concerns and knew that he, too, wanted to be a monk. He wanted to keep his promise to God.

His parents were dismayed, hoping he would become a lawyer and create financial security for a family. This created a rift for many years, as Thomas felt unsupported in his vocation.

As a young man at Yale, he read Tolstoy's controversial views of the Catholic Church and became disillusioned, realizing that it was not teaching the real Gospels. He delved into the mystics, St. Teresa, St. John of the Cross, and the Desert Fathers, and he discovered ancient Christian contemplative practices, which seemed to have been lost since the Reformation. This discovery would open a way for him.

In his first spontaneous spiritual experience, Thomas felt "surrounded and penetrated by a powerful love." He saw that on his land the hay, the trees, the heat were emerging out of this reality. And it was all that mattered. The perception of That was all that mattered. Everything else lost meaning for him.

Thomas learned transcendental meditation and discovered pure awareness, a taste of silence. "Silence is God's first language," he told me. "Just keep quiet and find this out."

Slowly, he became more austere and eventually chose to become a Trappist, giving up contact with his parents and the outside world. Thomas felt their anguish, he told me, but needed to follow his calling.

At St. Joseph's Abbey, where he served as abbot, Thomas found that many people failed to mature emotionally and intellectually because they had missed developmental steps and couldn't integrate the spiritual energies that arose. He explained to me, "We can have a mystical experience at any stage of development. But if we have no guidance and no practice to heal our early emotional wounds, that energy is not digested. If you have high graces and mystical unions, but other lines of development are incomplete, then the shadow will appear even as you move forward spiritually."

Thomas told me, "God calls us to interiority through the purification of unconscious traumatic wounds." From my point of view, he was affirming that our emotional suffering can lead us to therapy and self-reflection, as well as to spiritual practice.

For him, this understanding meant that he needed to reconcile with his father. Eventually his father came to accept his son's life choice and offered

financial support for the monastery. "I saw new parts of him then. And I saw my own failure to forgive him, even feel concern for him. I had wanted him to change the script. But through this reconciliation with my father, I realized why forgiveness is at the center of Christianity."

When I asked Thomas about the purpose of long life, he said, "It gives us the opportunity to see ourselves with deeper honesty and transparency, to see through the false self. It's different from St. Benedict's time in the sixth century, when the elders were forty. With ninety years, we can do purification and uncover unitive states. We can use old age for contemplative prayer, to surrender the ego, and abandon ourselves to God's will.

"Spirit works in us when we let go of the obstacles to it," he continued. "It's not about earning God's love. It's about looking inwardly for divine presence and allowing God's love to flow into us. It's always present, just hidden under debris. It's not an image or a concept. It's being free of thought, becoming everything. It's the reverse of a hero's success story."

In this context, the things we give up or the things we might do are unimportant, I thought. Our personal history is unimportant. He continued: "The experience of God absorbs your faculties. Awareness without content is home. And the construction of a separate self is the radical problem of humanity."

In 1984, drawing on ancient Christian practices with two other Trappist monks, Father Thomas founded Contemplative Outreach, an interdenominational community of people practicing centering prayer, in which a person chooses a word or symbol "to turn our will toward God and rest in the presence of that which is."

Thomas urges us to move beyond method to a relationship with the divine. "It begins in prayer and meditation, it weaves itself into activity, and eventually we see it in everything. Then we feel awake in aliveness, as if we're embraced and held by God."

He also "transcended the bounds of the Church" by entering world religious dialogue. "I wanted to use Catholic doctrine to speak universally. I saw Nature as the Book of Revelation—infinitesimal and immense. The spiritual journey does not require going anywhere because God is already with us and in us."

Years later, no longer abbot, Thomas was free to meditate, write, and

teach, becoming a Spiritual Elder and modeling an inclusive, nondogmatic, mystical Christian way. “The gift of living long enough is to pass through the phases of human development to higher levels of unitive consciousness. This gift has been given to us,” he told me. “It just is. We can bring ourselves into relationship with this reality. The only condition is consent—say yes.”

Father Thomas lived his vow: to move into intimate relationship with the reality of the divine. He passed away while I was writing this piece. Many teachers and practitioners now carry on his work of teaching centering prayer.



We have moved far beyond the traditional life review. We have moved from telling our conscious tales to reframing them with new eyes. We have moved from detecting our unconscious tales to reclaiming them in late life. And we have moved from identification with past stories and their wounds, past roles and their limits, toward identifying with soul.

At the deepest level, we are not our stories. We are not what we do—or what is done to us. But the shift in identity from story to soul is a radical one. Letting go of our stories runs against the cultural grain. Elders everywhere today are writing memoirs and recording videos. And when they say “I’ll live on in people’s memories,” they mean their stories will live on.

So, this shift may be aspirational. But in the next chapter, we’ll explore how we might make it manifest.

Of course, in pursuing a life review, some of us may not find the thread hiding beneath the stories of victory and defeat, gain and loss, suffering and well-being, meaning and meaninglessness. We may continue to feel sorrow or regret about how our lives turned out. We may grieve that we have not fully lived.

So, let’s continue with life repair to reclaim what was banished into the shadow, take responsibility for our choices, speak our truths, forgive ourselves and others, realign our values, and make meaning for this time of life, here and now.