

P A R T 1

Stepping Out of the Shadows



I prepared excitedly for my departure, as if this journey had a mysterious significance. I had decided to change my mode of life. "Till now," I told myself, "you have only seen the shadow and been well content with it; now, I am going to lead you to the substance.

-Nikos Kazantzakis,
from *Zorba the Greek*

The First Step of the Longest March



*Do not look back in anger, or forward in fear,
but around in awareness.*

-James Thurber

We had been working together long enough for me to know exactly how she would react to what I had to say to her. That's what was so intriguing about the therapist-client relationship we had developed. No matter what pearls of wisdom I tried to offer her, she would always just roll her eyes as she looked at me and say, "Whatever!"

Well, she was having a particularly difficult week in what had been a particularly difficult six months. Through all the ups and downs that we had gone through together, I don't think that I had ever seen her quite as agitated as she was on this particular day.

Her face had turned crimson red from the anger and futility consuming her. She couldn't spit her words out fast enough, seemingly trying to exorcise the pain that had enveloped her life.

She was feeling like her life had hit a dead end from which she would never recover as she looked at me and howled, "When is this all going to end for me?!"

I considered her question carefully, knowing full well what the answer was, knowing all too well what her response to my answer would be.

I was carefully measuring what my response should be when I decided to just go for broke and lay on her what I considered to be the solution that each and everyone of us must discover for ourselves.

So, I steeled myself for her reaction as I said, "All of this will change when you make certain shifts in the relationship you have with yourself, the relationship you have

with the people in your life, and the relationship you have with your spiritual power."

I held my breath waiting for the inevitable rolling of her eyes, the utterance of her dismissive, "Whatever!"

She thought about what I had to say for a moment, all the while looking at me as if I were crazy. Finally she snarled at me, "Oh, that's just great! That should only take me about forty years!"

I looked right back at her and responded, "You may be right. When are you going to get started?"

With that said, her face kind of softened as the faintest of smiles began to form in each corner of her mouth. She thought about my challenge for a moment, finally saying, "All right, Steve, let's rock and roll. My way sure as hell ain't working, let's give something else a shot."

As a clinical psychologist, I work with people everyday who are searching for the means to create those very shifts in their lives, shifts in their relationships with themselves and the people who matter most, shifts that enable them to step out of the shadows and [re]connect with their life's journey.

You may recognize the feelings we experience when we become disconnected from our path. Confusion, chronic anger, hopelessness, emptiness, despair, boredom, alienation from ourselves and others. But no matter how we ultimately go about the search, we all are searching for one thing and one thing only—the path that will lead us out of the shadows, the path by which we can become whole and integrated.

The aim of that search is simply to reveal to ourselves two things: the essence of who we are and what path to follow in order to express that essence in our day-to-day

life. This search arises out of the different choices we make as we chart a direction, a direction that fills our lives with either purpose or emptiness.

We all recognize the emptiness that paralyzes us as we make those choices that disconnect us from the path of our life's journey. You recognize the ways your being lost and disconnected appears in your life, don't you?

We may feel stuck in our professional lives. Perhaps our jobs have become merely a means to an end. An end that provides us with economic survival, but not an end that honors the essence of what our abilities and interests are.

We may feel no sense of involvement, no sense of being connected to our community. Perhaps we feel isolated and alienated from the world in which we live.

We may feel stuck in our relationships with our family and friends. Perhaps we become lost in our relationships, overwhelmed by what our relationships take from us but don't return in kind.

Or it may be that we've never become grounded with a long-lasting relationship with our spiritual power. A relationship that provides us with guidance and direction for the purpose from which we live our lives.

Finally, it may be that we've become estranged from ourselves. Perhaps the relationship we have with ourselves limits our ability to live in the world in a way that nurtures our growth and leaves us feeling safe with other people.

Whatever the reasons for being disconnected from our life's journey, we all have within ourselves the means to discover the path that will lead us out of the darkness to a place of light.

You see, we all hold the answers within ourselves to the questions that we confront on a daily basis. We

possess the wisdom to guide ourselves, in however an imperfect way we create, to the destiny we all are seeking to connect with. Each and everyone of us possess the courage necessary to heal our wounds and grow from the pain that any process of healing involves.

Make no mistake about this. The path that leads us out of the shadows is a richly rewarding experience.

Creating a life that is rich with the love and support of those who matter the most to us is a reward like no other you can imagine.

Creating a life that is an expression of who you genuinely are is the most uplifting gift you can give to yourself.

Creating a life that is closely connected to a spiritual power provides a sense of stability and strength that will guide you through the roughest storms you can imagine.

Creating a life that is built upon the bedrock of a loving nurturing relationship with yourself will enable you to attract the kind of people in your life that will mirror your own self-acceptance rather than tear you down.

No matter how much training we've received to believe differently, I know that it can happen for us all. Yet, we will all experience much pain and discomfort as we wrestle with letting go of our old ways. We will experience much fear as we search for new ways of acting and thinking that will keep us connected to our new path.

Yet, the outcome of our struggle and triumphs, the outcome of our pain and healing, the outcome of our letting go will be our emergence from the shadows as we begin to [re]connect with our life's journey. A journey that will fill our lives with abundance, the abundance of self-love, receiving love and caring from others, and the freedom to express ourselves in ways that honor who we are.

The Heart of the Matter



With all the miseries surrounding us, threatening our destruction, we still have an instinct that we cannot repress, which elevates us above our sorrows.

-Pascal

We were finishing up our last session. This was a time for reflection. Looking back upon where we started, understanding where we were today.

“I can see so much more clearly today how lost I was back then. I remember thinking then that I wasn’t the one with the problem, everyone else had a problem.”

As my client was speaking, I was reminiscing in my own mind about our first session together, what brought him to my office, what it was that he said he needed to work out. I especially remembered how angry he had become with me in that first session, so I casually brought that up to him.

“That’s right, I remember now. My fiancée had given me a pamphlet you had written, I don’t remember what it was about.”

“*Seven Steps to Emotional and Spiritual Well-Being*,” I reminded him.

“Oh yea, something like that. But I do remember telling you that I understood what you had explained in the pamphlet, I just didn’t understand how to go about doing it.

“So I thought I would ask you to explain, little did I know then what I know only too well about you now, you refused to explain.”

“I refused to explain?” I responded, not quite remembering things the way he had remembered them.

“Well, you gave me what I thought was a bunch of double-talk. Something like, ‘Those steps are not something that can be *taught* to you, they are something for

you to *discover*. Ultimately, you must discover your own solutions to the challenges in your life, rather than live out somebody else’s solutions.’”

I laughed at his sarcasm as he tried to mimic me. “Well, we got through that first obstacle. Do you remember what those seven steps were?”

“Let’s see. Yea, I remember a few of them. Uh, the first few are easy. Awakening the soul. Liberating the spirit. Illuminating the path and um, let’s see, oh yea, transforming the mindset.”

“So far so good,” I encouraged him. “What about healing your wounds, and strengthening the bonds of fellowship?” I asked.

“Right, right. I wonder how it is that I could have forgotten my *two favorites*,” he smirked as he shot me one of his looks. “Let’s see, the last one was, um, the rhythm of life, at least I think that was the last one.”

“Well, that’s not too bad. But knowing what they are is one thing. Making them a part of your life is something else. Where have you gotten with that?”

He was silent for a few minutes as he gathered his thoughts. “Well, overall, I feel pretty good about where I’m at. Although I’m finishing up with seeing you, I know that I have a long way to go with each of those steps. But I can see in more global terms how far I have come.”

“What do you mean by global terms?” I wondered out loud.

“For example, I remember only too well what you told me when we started. It really pissed me off at the time, mostly because you were right about me, even more because you were right about the way this would all unfold.”

“What do you mean?” I asked somewhat puzzled.

“You know that stuff about making this my work, not doing this to get somebody else off my back. In fact, I think your exact words were, ‘When are you going to stop making this your fiancée’s therapy and start making it your own work?’

“I didn’t like what you had to say, but I got your point. Unless I was willing to go through this for myself, I would never get anything out of it. Believe me, that was a big shift for me, to make this my own journey rather than trying to make other people happy.

“But something else you said had a lasting impact on me as well. Remember how you told me what I could expect out of the first few weeks? I was so insistent on wanting to know how long all of this was going to take.”

“I remember that you wanted this over with before you even got started.”

“Yea, yea, you kept telling me you understood how frightened I was, but all I could do is look at you like you were crazy. But the point I wanted to make was when you told me about the first twelve weeks.

“You told me that I would start feeling better after two weeks. I think the term you used was, um, *subjective distress*? You said that the fear, anxiety, the loneliness, and the hopelessness would lessen after the first two weeks. By week eight, the circumstances that brought me here would settle down and I would begin to feel even better by then. That by week 12, I would start asking myself why the hell am I coming to see this guy in the first place.

“I don’t know what your point was, but what I took from that was that this work is easy to do when someone is hurting, but there is more to this work than merely

alleviating the symptoms. If I wanted to go beyond merely seeking relief from my symptoms, if I wanted to change more than the circumstances through which my pain was being expressed, I would have to find something other than the immediate pain in my life to keep me going. I would have to find something deep within me to motivate myself to grow and change.

“What occurred to me, whether you intended this or not, was that I was going to have to make a commitment to myself for myself. And you know what I realized? I had never done that before and more importantly, if I were brutally honest about it, that thought scared the living daylights out of me.

“To make such a commitment to myself would mean that I would have to believe that I was worth such a commitment, that I deserved such a commitment. Believe me, it took more than twelve weeks to get to a place of feeling like I deserved anything.”

“You’re right!” I exclaimed, “those are pretty big global shifts.”

“Yea, I think what you would say is that I learned how to *take ownership* of my journey. I learned to not hold everyone but myself responsible for my well-being.

“The way I see it, I had to start seeing who I was and how I affected the people in my life rather than stay so focused on what the world was doing to me. I had to start seeing how the things that I was doing, the ways I protected myself just didn’t work for me any more.

“When I started here, I was angry at everybody for not understanding me, not caring about me. I can see now that I wouldn’t let anybody care about me. I had made my work the center of my universe and pushed everyone else away.

“As I drifted further and further away from the people that mattered most to me, from the things that brought me fun and pleasure, I didn’t realize it at the time, but I *lost myself*.”

“I guess that’s the biggest thing that I will leave here with, knowing all the ways I lose myself and how destructive that is for me. I have to remember how to hold onto myself if I am going to make my life work for me the way I want it to.”

“Hold onto yourself?” I liked the sound of it but I didn’t know exactly what he meant.

“Yea, that’s become almost a mantra for me. *Hold onto myself*. What I’ve learned is how easily I lose myself. In my relationships. In my ambition. In my value system. In the choices I make. In the issues I leave unresolved with my fiancée. Every area of my life is full of potholes for me to fall into. Hell, forget fall into, sometimes I willingly dive headfirst into them, but the end result is, I become totally disconnected from myself.”

I was genuinely impressed by the depth of understanding that my client was taking from our experience together. “Well that does sound important. So how do you *hold onto yourself* these days?”

“I work at it. I don’t think I’m there yet. But I keep working at it. In fact, I can honestly say I still lose myself in a lot of crap more times than not.

“But, I know now how important my friends are to me. They keep me grounded, so I work at these relationships, even when the work is tedious or overwhelming or both.

“Secondly, I’ve only uncovered the tip of the iceberg about myself. But I have to keep peeling back the layers

that hide me from myself and the world. I never realized how *not-present* I was in my life. I’ve made it a point of absolute commitment to keep doing the work that will enable more and more of myself to show up in my day-to-day life.

“Lastly, and don’t ask me to explain this one because I don’t have a handle on any of it yet. But spirituality, spirituality is a big part of me *holding onto myself*. I divorced myself from that part of me my whole life because religion turned me off.

“I’ve learned from you that this isn’t about religion, it’s about a relationship I have with a higher part of myself and some kind of higher power in the world. I get it in my head, I just don’t know what that looks like in my life just yet.

“But I also know, that all of this doesn’t have to make sense to me just yet, in fact it’s likely that it never will make complete sense to me. It’s only important that I’m moving in the direction that will enable me to make sense out of all of this little by little. For I’ve come to accept that I’m a work in progress rather than a project waiting to be completed.”

I looked at him with a big smile on my face and said, “You take my breath away. It’s easy to see that you’ve made this journey your own voyage, where you’re *discovering* your way rather than expecting somebody to *teach* you their way.”

That’s the secret to all of this, *discovering* your way. *Discovering* your path. Forsaking the safety and security of somebody else’s expectations, somebody else’s methods. Your life can only be genuinely lived by you with the courage you have to forge your own path. Anything

looked like when we were totally disconnected from our paths. She was in town on business a while ago. We talked to each other into the wee hours of the morning taking an inventory of what life has taught us. She shared with me the most important lesson that she has learned.

“The times I have abandoned my path, those were the times I became confused and disoriented. I can see how certain choices I had made were more about stopping my pain and silencing my fear rather than honoring my life’s journey.”

I thought about what she said for a moment. I was staring off into the distance, listening to the piano player playing *Killing Me Softly With His Song*. Finally I said, “It sounds like you’re saying that there were times you chose the path of least resistance, whatever was expedient, but a path that inevitably caused you more suffering than the pain and fear you were trying to escape.”

“Steve, that’s exactly right! At the time I believed I was choosing the only means available for me to survive. When I chose mere survival, my life became frozen. Every step I took was encased with rigidity, caution, self-protection, and inevitably self-sabotage. Those were the times that fear and hopelessness permeated my emotional world. Confusion, bewilderment, they both coated my mind with a clouded sense of who I was, where I was headed.

“As the feeling of being trapped with nowhere to go overtook my whole being, I sank deeper and deeper into a routine that ensured my safety but stifled my growth.”

Mary Jo paused for a moment to collect her thoughts. She was being careful not to misspeak. She sipped her coffee as she continued, “Think about it this way. I developed a routine that gave me one thing: safety. But the net

result? The net result was that I abandoned my sense of adventure, my willingness to take risks. My life became sterile. It was stripped of the natural emotional ups-and-downs. As a result, I lost myself.”

“You lost yourself?” My eyes were squinting, almost as if I was searching for something in the air that would help me understand what she was saying.

“I lost my connection, my connection with, with my humanness.”

“Your humanness?”

“Yea, let’s see. How can I...?” she stared at the ceiling searching for a way to explain herself. “My humanness, my humanness, well my emotional experiences, I guess is what I mean. Those things that make us all human. My hopes, my sorrow, my joy, my wounds, my pain. All of that, I was totally disconnected from.

“My world was black and white. There was no pain, but there was no joy. There was just a growing sense of apathy, an increasing sense of powerlessness.

“By dedicating my life to the avoidance of pain, I became numb to all of my life experiences. You see, it was this very process of avoidance, routine, and emotional numbness to my life experiences that deadened my soul.

“Ultimately, what I discovered is a very simple truism, we all need to get [re]connected with the path that leads us out of the shadows, and to turn away from the means we use to drown out our pain and fear.”