

Life, as every alcoholic knows, is unfair. Sometimes it hurts, but it is often in the depth and agony of the hurt that we find our “way.” All spiritualities, but especially those that urge some kind of “perfection,” emphasize finding part of that “way” in God’s—reality’s—forgiveness of humans, of us. But a spirituality of imperfection raises the perhaps more difficult topic of another kind of forgiveness, the need we humans occasionally have to forgive God. A story told by a volunteer who works with terminally ill children connects many of these ideas.

My idea was pretty simple at the beginning. I started to volunteer in wards with terminally ill children or burn victims—just go in there to cheer them up a little, spread around some giggles. Gradually, it developed that I was going to come in as a clown.

First, somebody gave me a red rubber nose, and I put that to work. Then I started doing some elementary makeup. Then I got a yellow, red, and green clown suit. Finally, some nifty, tremendous wing-tip shoes, about two and a half feet long, with green tips and heels, white in the middle. They came from a clown who was retiring and wanted his feet to keep on walking.

It’s a little tricky coming in. Some kids, when they see a clown, they think they’re going to be eaten alive. And kids in hospitals and burn units, of course, are pretty shaky. . . .

Burnt skin or bald heads on little kids—what do you do? I guess you just face it. When the kids are really hurting so bad, and so afraid, and probably dying, and everybody’s heart is breaking. Face it and see what happens after that, see what to do next.

I got the idea of traveling with popcorn. When a kid is crying, I dab up the tears with the popcorn and pop it into my mouth or into his or hers. We sit around together and eat the tears.<sup>23</sup>

“. . . and eat the tears.” Sometimes, that is all that we can do. But somehow, when we do that “together,” healing and forgiveness—not only by “God” but even of “God”—can happen.

## Chapter 16

### BEING - AT - HOME



*The mistake we make is to turn upon our past with angry wholesale negation. . . . The way of wisdom is to treat it airily, lightly, wantonly, and in a spirit of poetry; and above all to use its symbols, which are its spiritual essence, giving them a new connotation, a fresh meaning.*

John Cowper Powys

*It is difficult to be a saint in the midst of one’s family.*

Anatole France<sup>1</sup>

A boy with a rare disease had to live his entire life in a sterile plastic bubble, for a single germ, an unsterilized touch, could be fatal. Anyone reaching to him through the hermetically sealed opening in the bubble had to wear sterilized gloves, and everything that came to him—books, food, utensils, gifts—had to be decontaminated before passing through that opening. He was sealed off, isolated, in permanent quarantine.

But even the airtight, sterile bubble couldn’t save him. When the boy understood that he was dying, he asked for only one thing—to reach outside the bubble and touch his father. Doomed, knowing that this encounter was death itself, the boy reached out and touched his father’s hand.<sup>2</sup>

The boy in the bubble can serve as a metaphor for us all. Suffering begins in the bubble that is our family, our first home. Touching each other brings pain and even involves danger—the risk of being

wounded by someone we love. But life is sterile, lonely, and not worth living in the kind of bubble that precludes touch. For that touching, even if it hurts, is life itself.

Our pain and sorrow begin at the very beginning, when we begin—within our family. Family contains its own paradox, serving on the one hand as shield and protection against newborn vulnerability and, on the other hand, as the setting within which we suffer our first wounds. As infants we are dependent upon our parents to defend and shelter us, and yet it is inevitably also our parents who first wound us. Given our prolonged physical immaturity and the complex dangers of our modern, technologized world, those who love us must forbid, “No,” as often as they affirm “Yes.”

Soon enough, we are also confronted with the sad but undeniable fact that our parents are imperfect beings who make mistakes—they are not God. We discover that we have been born into a kind of paradoxical “4-H Club.” If I get close enough to *hug* someone, then I am close enough also to *be hugged* by that person; but I am also close enough to *hit* or to *be hit*—even if, as often happens, the blow is accidental. In a less physical image of the same 4-H’s, if I let people close enough to *heal* me, then they are also close enough for me to heal them; but in coming that close, we can not only heal but we can also *hurt* each other—again, perhaps, unintentionally.

The 4-H’s, understood either way—the more physical image of hugging and being hugged, hitting and being hit; or the more abstract conception of healing and hurting, being hurt and being healed—are present in *every* relationship, including (and perhaps, most important) family. It is, after all, within our families that we learn “relationship.” Perhaps that is why the ultimate act of maturity is presented in both literature and psychology as the forgiveness of one’s forebears.<sup>3</sup>

Yet if we are to believe the pop-therapy literature that has become epidemic in modern American culture, the issue is not *forgiveness* but the need to free ourselves from our familial past, to find release from our parents’ chains. “Growing up” is presented as a process of looking to the past in order to finger forebears who should have loved us more, protected us more, praised us more, given us more. We are encouraged to think of ourselves as victims—victims of our own families.

According to this literature (which “lines the shelves in bookstores

like different brands of aspirin in a drugstore,” as Wendy Kaminer put it in her *New York Times* analysis of the new “disease” of codependence), *all* our unhappiness begins at home, in the family. There, in our first “home,” we are inevitably subjected to a varying range of physical and emotional abuse, resulting in injury and insult to our “inner child,” that innocent and pure, even “divine” entity that exists within us all. The goal of adulthood and recovery, we are told, is to heal that inner child, to recover the innocence and purity of our original self—the identity that existed before our parents got their hands on it, molding, mangling, twisting, deforming. Because our families are (almost by definition) “dysfunctional,” we too become dysfunctional, adopting “types” and “roles” instead of forming our own unique, integrated identities. And so instead of truly “actualized” human beings, we become “women who love too much,” “enablers,” “heros,” “mascots,” “lost children” and a host of other such “survival roles.” Having been diagnosed as “improperly individuated,” we cling to these labels for dear life, for they seem the only source of identity available in the modern family.<sup>4</sup>

The literature of pop therapy and pop spirituality seems to make the assumption that along with the divine child within us there is a “divine” way of interacting with each other—a method free of mistakes, flaws, and imperfections. Parents can be taught how to raise their children without wounding the holy child within; adults whose inner child has been wounded can recover, in recovery, their primary, pure essence. But for anyone familiar with the long tradition of a spirituality of imperfection, this worldview is inherently flawed. As John Garvey noted in his study of *The Prematurely Saved*: “When Saint Anthony went into the desert to face himself and God, he did not find in himself a poor self-image. He found demons.”<sup>5</sup>

The presentation of good (health/recovery) and evil (sickness/addiction) as polar opposites, absolutely black and absolutely white, ignores the fundamental truth, the basic significant reality, of the human being: We are inherently and intrinsically imperfect and therefore any relationship we enter into—voluntarily or involuntarily, familial or otherwise—will necessarily be flawed.<sup>6</sup>

To be related to *any* other human being is to be *both* healed and hurt, *both* wounded and made whole. Our choice is not between whether we will be healed or hurt but, rather, to which of those

always-present realities we shall attend. The relative presence of healing and hurting varies over time; but if the balance within our parental families did not tip toward the side of hurt, would we ever set off to begin families of our own? As A.A. co-founder Bill W. reminded so often: "Pain is the touchstone of all growth." We may not like that, but the tradition of spiritual wisdom suggests that that is the way it is. "Reality," a popular sidewalk scrawl of recent decades reminds, "is for those who can't handle drugs."<sup>7</sup>



William James's gloriously vivid image of *Zerrissenheit* extends beyond the perception of a fractured, broken self. We can apply it also to the sense of broken links between self and others, between self and larger reality, between self and *family*, between self and the very concept of *home*. Modern humankind feels homeless in the deepest meaning of the word: not in the transient sense of having no place to sleep for the night, not even in the wider sense of poverty's homelessness, but in a monstrous, universal sense of having no place wherein we *fit*. James's *Zerrissenheit* thus comes full circle; those broken within, also cut off from what is without, find themselves fundamentally estranged—not at home with self, not at home with family, not at home with the world.

This is a terrible feeling, a terrible be-ing—this *dukkha* sense of a bone ripped out of its socket. The experience is of lost souls circling endlessly, seeking the place where they "fit." For only in finding that "fit" is the bone re-healed into its socket, and only thus does one find a place to rest, a place to hide, a place to *be* one's-self . . . a *home*.

A spirituality of imperfection helps us find that experience, that *fit*. First, by accepting ourselves as imperfect and essentially *mixed*, we fit into our own being. And second, by applying the spirituality of imperfection to our relationships with others, and especially to *family*, we learn to "see" all relationships, and most important *family* in a different way, and so learn how to *fit* with others, how to find a real *home*.

Seeing family in a different way involves *gratitude*: being grateful for what we *do* have instead of moaning and groaning about what we *do not* have. A spirituality of imperfection helps us to see family itself as a gift, for it is in our families that we learn our first and most important lessons. We learn to value differences, to let go of resent-

ments, to forgive transgressions, to think of others before we think of ourselves. We learn that what we do affects others, that what others do affects us, and that we are related to each other through need and through love—through sweat and tears—as well as through blood.

Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sasov learned to love when he went to an inn and heard one drunken peasant ask another, "Do you love me?" "Certainly I love you," replied the second. "I love you like a brother." But the first shook his head and insisted, "You don't love me. You don't know what I lack. You don't know what I need." The second peasant fell into sullen silence, but Rabbi Moshe Leib understood: "To know the need of men and to bear the burden of their sorrow, that is the true love of men."<sup>8</sup>



Master Shaku Soen liked to take an evening stroll through a nearby village. One day he heard loud lamentations from a house and, on entering quietly, realized that the householder had died and the family and neighbors were crying. He sat down and cried with them. An old man noticed him and remarked, rather shaken on seeing the famous master crying with them: "I would have thought that you at least were beyond such things." "But it is this which puts me beyond it," replied the master with a sob.<sup>9</sup>

Life hurts—where is there growth without suffering? Pain is not without its reasons, for it serves the purpose of telling us that "something is wrong," something does not fit. Pain, with its intense message of "unfittingness," moves us to move on in our pilgrimage, to seek new ways of fitting into our own being and into the community of other (imperfect) beings.

Life hurts, but in the hurt there is the potential for healing. The healing of events, the release from victimhood and therefore from resentment, is attained by *gratitude*—gratitude understood not as some warm, transitory feeling but rather as the vision, the understanding, that allows one to see how truly gifted each of us has been

and continues to be, not least in our *family*. Gratitude, Milton Mayeroff suggests, is the "natural expression of being in place."<sup>10</sup>



Being-at-home involves, first, coming home to ourselves—being able to accept our own imperfect humanness. This is the first and, really, the only coherent meaning of another concept: *self-forgiveness*. Self-forgiveness, as a spiritual act, is quite simply the opening of one's self to "experiencing forgiveness," which begins with allowing another to forgive us. It is in letting some other that close—close enough that his or her forgiveness matters to us—that we find ourselves released from fundamental estrangement from self and the world. We discover that we can and do *fit*, that we can be-at-home with both self and the world. Self-forgiveness requires the kind of openness that is first of all *trust*. There is a letting go of the *fears* connected with one's old identity, expectations, and beliefs—and not least the belief that one can do this by oneself.

The total experience of forgiveness—being forgiven and forgiving—is a reclaiming of one's true self. In *own-ing* (making one's *own*) the part of self that had been split off—because it was seen as imperfect, flawed and therefore, in this perfectionist world, somehow shameful—that "dark side" becomes less threatening. There is less to fear in the vision of self as ordinary, imperfect, and limited—*neither* devil *nor* angel, but *both*. And this acceptance flows into and involves an awareness of connection with others who are also, inevitably, imperfect, and with the world, which, because it is made up of imperfect beings, does not demand perfection of us. In accepting this vision of self, others and the world, we let go of the feeling that we have to betray our true self in order to become a part of humanity.<sup>11</sup>

*Home* is, ultimately, that place where we find the peace and harmony that comes from learning to live with the knowledge of our own imperfections and from learning to accept the imperfections of others. Such a place, such a *home*, can exist in various settings, but its ultimate foundation rests jointly within self and within some group of trusted others. Some places are more conducive to this experience than others. But wherever and whenever we do attain that sense of "being-at-home," we experience a falling away of tensions, a degree of balance between the pushing and pulling forces of our lives. In such a

*place*, we can cease fighting—most important, we can cease fighting with ourselves. We find the *space* to be the imperfect beings that we are, and we discover that in such a space, we also become able to let others be who they are.

Scholars have found in this experience of *home*—the longing and the searching for it—a sensitivity exquisitely developed in most alcoholics. The anthropologist Gregory Bateson, in his essay on Alcoholics Anonymous, "The Cybernetics of 'Self,'" pointed out how the lonely drinker at the bar, as he gets more and more lubricated, becomes either maudlin or pugnacious. It makes little difference, Bateson observed: whether weeping or fighting, he has at least become *engaged with* someone else. Psychiatrist Edward Khantzian, following a lead suggested by analyst Michael Balint in his study of *The Basic Fault*, notes how "alcoholics seek the effects of alcohol to establish a feeling of 'harmony'—a feeling that everything is now well between them and their environment." The alcoholic's "sense of incompleteness" combines with "the yearning for this feeling of harmony" to become "the most important cause of alcoholism or, for that matter, any form of addiction."<sup>12</sup>



But what kind of place is this *home*—this space of harmony and balance that not only alcoholics but all of us seek? And *how* is it created? Home is, first, the "kind of place" where we "fit in" *because of*—indeed *by*—our limitations. It is that setting where our inabilities and incongruities fit and therefore belong. And thus it is a place where "feeling bad" can be turned into "*being good*."

Visiting a strange city, a newly sober A.A. member sets out to find an A.A. meeting. Following directions received on the telephone, he walks into a hall that is part of a large church-complex and begins to search for the room where the meeting is being held. The first door he opens reveals a group of children in choir robes, getting ready to sing. He closes the door rather quickly . . . no, that's not it. He looks in another door . . . no, half a dozen women are sewing and talking. That's not it.

Approaching panic, for he has never felt comfortable in a

church, he walks quickly down the hallway, feeling a little lost, thinking that if he sees an exit he will take it, but still hoping to find what he came for. Suddenly a cloud of cigarette smoke wafts down the hallway, and he smells the bitter, burnt aroma of strong coffee. He hears voices, and the welcoming sound of people laughing. Walking faster, he finds a room with the familiar blue-jacketed books on the table and the oh-so-trite but now-so-welcome framed mottoes on the wall. Entering the room, greeted by a dozen smiles, he sighs deeply and smiles back. He's found *home*.

Home is the place where we fit in precisely because of our limitations, where we fit in not because of what we have but because of what we lack.

A man was looking for a good church to attend and he happened to enter one in which the congregation and the preacher were reading from their prayer book. They were saying, "We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done."

The man dropped into a seat and sighed with relief as he said to himself, "Thank goodness, I've found my crowd at last."<sup>13</sup>

Our first "home" is our parents' home, and our first stories begin there. Sigmund Freud once observed his grandson playing a game—the lost/found game of "*fort-da*." The toddler, sitting in his playpen, developed a way of demonstrating a kind of mastery. When someone entered the room, he would pick up a ball or other toy and, throwing it away from himself, look at the visitor and exclaim "*Fort!*"—"Gone!" As soon as the visitor acknowledged "gone" and showed the requisite sadness and anxiety, the child would triumphantly produce the "lost" object, exclaiming "*da!*"—"Here it is!"

This is perhaps the shortest story we can imagine: An object is lost and then regained. A child's story, enacted by himself, told in just two words and yet containing the requisite beginning (an object exists), middle (it is lost), and end (it is found). In this child's story, as in all

stories, something must be lost or absent for the narrative to unfold—after all, if everything stayed in place, there would be no story to tell! If we were only evil, or only good, there could be no stories. "Lost has meaning only in relation to found," literary critic Terry Eagleton commented in his discussion of the *fort-da* game. "But, of course, found has meaning only when the thing is first lost." Once we become aware of the essential limitation of our own humanity, we cannot think of any reality without thinking also of its possible absence, without knowing that its presence is in some way arbitrary and provisional.<sup>14</sup>

Yet if *we ourselves* are to be found, another familiar truth comes into play: We are all looking for, but we find what we are looking for only by *being* looked for.

Some years ago on a sunny Sunday afternoon in Seattle, a young priest stopped to talk to a parishioner and her five-year-old daughter, Carmine. The little girl had a new jump rope, and the priest began to demonstrate the intricacies of jumping rope to her.

After a while Carmine began to jump, first once, then twice. Mother and priest clapped loudly for her skill. Eventually, the little girl was able to jump quite well on her own and wandered off with her new-found skill. Priest and mother chatted a few moments until Carmine, with the saddest, wisest eyes imaginable, returned dragging her rope. "Mommy," she lamented, "I can do it, but I need lots of clapping."<sup>15</sup>

As children learn (and not least from stories), reality comes with suffering; everything contains within itself its own paradox. Those who applaud can also ignore, what is found can be lost, what hurts can also heal, what is loved can inflict pain. For the essence of *suffering*, as the very word signifies, is *to be done to*. Thus it is that, in a very literal sense, suffering makes us *real*, for it defines our boundaries.<sup>16</sup>

Most of the time, we tend to think of *boundaries* as only negative—that which *keeps* us "out" or "in." But boundaries are important for their positive function: They *define* us. By setting limits in a way that gives *identity*, telling us who we are and are not, they make it possible to *fit*, to *belong*, and so to feel—and be—*good*. Without

boundaries we would not exist, any more than we can be present in any place other than in the skin that is in a way our "home."

For this is the main meaning of *home*: It is the place where we fit, where we belong, and where we can *hide*. The word *hide* has a poor reputation among modern men and women, for it suggests concealment and dishonesty, even shame. Yet the words *hide* and *home* have the same root—the Indo-European source-word, *KEI*, which signifies a bounded space. For *hide* is not only a verb meaning "conceal," it is also a noun signifying "skin" or "pelt." A football is a "pigskin"; a baseball is "the horsehide."

In one extended meaning, the word *hide* served as a synonym for "home," signifying "land enough for one free family and dependents." That early English usage was based on an interesting story.

When Queen Dido and her people, fleeing the city of Tyre and the treacherous wrath of her greedy brother Pygmalion, came to what the Romans knew as Carthage in northern Africa, they were greeted by warlike native-traders eager for the riches that the emigres had brought with them. Knowing that her people were too exhausted to fight, that they needed time and a place to recoup their strengths, the queen set out to bargain with the canny inhabitants, who could hardly conceal their scorn for a nation led by a woman.

After a short period of sharp haggling, Dido contracted to exchange the wealth they had brought with them for "enough land to be encompassed by a bull's hide." The sellers, thinking they had struck a very good deal, encouraged the queen to find the largest bull she could, even assisting her in that search.

Having found the bull and had it slain, Dido proceeded to cut its hide into very thin strips. Those strips, laid end to end, encompassed almost 120 acres—enough land to hold a citadel, which she called *Byrsa* (Greek for: "the skin stripped off, hide"); it grew to be the city of Carthage.<sup>17</sup>

*Home* and *hide* both have to do with boundaries, with limits. Boundaries establish *space*, that internal quality that is the capacity of letting some reality be present to us and for us. By defining who we

*are* and *are not*, our boundaries establish our *identity*. The space within the boundary is cleared out, made free. In this ancient understanding, the boundary is not that through which something ceases to be, but rather that from which something *begins to be what it is*, is free to be what it is. *Home*, then, is the place that is like our pelt, our skin, our *hide*, in that it is that which covers us less in a concealing than in a protective way.<sup>18</sup>

Where would we be—*what* would we be—without our skin, our hide? My *hide* defines me; it establishes the limits, the boundaries, between the "me" and the not-me. *Home* is the place where one's very "hide"—limited and bounded almost by definition—*fits*. It is the place where I can be naked, which is to say *vulnerable*—undefended against being wounded because of confidence that there I will not be wounded. Or if I am wounded, that I will also be healed. In every sense of both terms, *home* is the place where I can *hide*.

*Home* is always there, in a sense, but it needs to be discovered, somehow brought into our experience. How do we do this—how do we find *home*? The tradition of a spirituality of imperfection teaches that of all the tools at our command, the surest way to touch the human spirit—to find home, to find the place where we fit—is in and by and through the practice of telling and listening to stories. This is why the great spiritual teachers have always been storytellers, and why we retell, over and over and over again, the stories of those teachers. All stories convey how human beings like us sought and found or failed to find "home," the experience of "fitting in" to some reality. Stories thus bring us both home to ourselves and into fellowship with others.

Core to the failure of "home"—the feeling of *Zerissenheit*, of not fitting in, even to our own being—is the sense of not even knowing our own story. We do not know our story when we cannot *own* our own story because we have internalized others' versions of who we are and who we "should" be. Each of us carries around within ourselves not only a storyteller but also a *critic*, an inner tyrant and constant commentator who judges and scolds, reprimands and censures. This critical tyrant is not *conscience*, which in true inventory-mode praises as well as chides, but rather represents both "superego" and "ego-ideal," for neither of whom we can ever do—or be—"good enough."<sup>19</sup>

Some try to silence that commentator, that critic, even to get rid of it, through the use of alcohol or drugs, or through immersion in sexuality, food, gambling or the amassing of material possessions; but always, inevitably, these are doomed efforts, for we destroy ourselves rather than destroying the critical voice, which is, indeed, an essential part of us. But if we cannot rid ourselves of that voice, we can, at least, *balance* its effects, purge its power and its sting. We disarm the inner critic by enlarging our frame of reference so that the critical voice no longer takes up *all* of our inner space. That enlargement takes place most tellingly, most fittingly, by immersion in story—by the telling and hearing of the experience, strength, and hope of others who describe “what we used to be like, what happened, and what we are like now.”

In such a setting “a new presence” is discovered, one that is more *witness* than judge. And as more and more is told and heard, a new kind of *community* is born and grows. When we enter a new place together, when we show each other the things we usually hide, a special kind of connecting occurs: Telling our story to someone, we enter into trust.<sup>20</sup>

Whenever the rabbi of Sasov saw anyone’s suffering, either of spirit or of body, he shared it so earnestly that the other’s suffering became his own. Once someone expressed his astonishment at this capacity to share in another’s troubles.

“What do you mean ‘share?’” said the rabbi. “It is my own sorrow; how can I help but suffer it?”<sup>21</sup>



A Beduin set out one day with his son to graze his camel and look for wild herbs to bring back for his wife to cook. On their way home, a herd of gazelles appeared in their path. Quickly the father stopped the camel and slid from her back. Warning the boy not to stray, he moved toward the gazelles, which streaked off as soon as he stepped toward them. But the Beduin was a keen hunter, and he eagerly followed on their trail.

As the child waited alone, a She-Ghoul, that monster of

the wilderness who feeds on human flesh, spied him and with one leap sprang upon and greedily devoured him.

The father hunted long but could not catch a single deer. Resigning himself, he returned to his camel to find that his son was gone. On the ground he found dark drops of blood. “My son! My son is killed!” he shrieked. And in sadness he led his camel home.

On the way he passed a cave, where he saw the She-Ghoul dancing, fresh from her feast. Taking careful aim, the Beduin shot the She-Ghoul dead. He slashed open her belly, and in it he found his dead son. He laid the boy upon his cloak, pulled the woolen cloth around him tight, and so carried him home.

When he reached his tent the Beduin said to his wife, “I have brought you back a gazelle, dear wife, but as God is my witness, it can be cooked only in a cauldron that has never been used for a meal of sorrow.”

The woman went from tent to tent for the loan of such a pot. But one neighbor said, “Sister, we used the large cauldron to cook the rice for the people who came to weep with us when my husband died.” And another told her, “We last heated our big cooking pot on the day of my son’s funeral.” She knocked at every door but did not find what she sought. So she returned to her husband empty-handed.

“Haven’t you found the right kind of cauldron?” asked the Beduin. “There is no household but has seen misfortune,” she answered. “There is no cauldron but has cooked a meal of mourning.” Only then did the Beduin fold back his woolen cloak and say to her, “They have all tasted their share of sorrow. Today the turn is ours. This is my gazelle.”<sup>22</sup>



The word *witness* means “one who knows the truth.” In an environment of storytelling and storylistening, where each person is at different times both teller and listener, the hearers do know “the truth”—about the tellers—in a special way. For unlike seeing, where one can look away, listeners cannot “hear away” but must listen. As the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer pointed out: “Hearing implies *already*

*belonging together* in such a manner that one is claimed by what is being said."<sup>23</sup>

The *hearing* that happens when people "belong together" fashions a narrative *home*—a place where our anomalies of behavior, our ambivalences of thought and feeling, the ambiguities of our human being all *fit in*. In such a place we look not for explanations or causes of our behavior: We discover, instead, forgiveness. Here again is *mutuality*—storytelling calls into being the place, the setting, where one can "Be at Home"—and "Home" is that place or setting where one can tell one's story.<sup>24</sup>

Such a place, the kind of community we call *home*, is discovered rather than created, found rather than made. Too many speak too glibly about creating a community by "sharing" thoughts, feelings, stories. But *community* requires more than the sharing of stories—true community requires the *discovery of a story that is shared*. People "sharing" their separate stories, no matter how similar those stories may be, is not the same as *shared story*. In this context, "sharing" is not something that we can create and control—it is something that *happens*, an experience serendipitous and unbidden; and when it happens, we experience gratitude for the dis-covering of a shared story. In the words of theologian Mary Daly: "The deepest possible community [is] the community that is discovered rather than 'formed,' when we meet others who are on the same voyage."<sup>25</sup>

That, after all, is what happens at meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous—the discovery of a shared story. Such meetings bear out the theological truism, "There is no *koinonia* without *kenosis*": there can be no "community" without the "emptying out" that springs from the *gratitude*, the generosity, that undergirds all "humility." A story may help us "see" both points.

About noon one working day, an itinerant clown stood at the edge of New York City's Central Park, juggling and engaging the passersby by calling out questions, inviting them to sit down, making them laugh. Little by little a crowd gathered. After a while, a man in a three-piece suit looked at his watch and realized that he had to return to work. Moved by the performance, he went to drop a twenty-dollar bill into the hat at the clown's feet.

"Don't give me twenty dollars!" the clown called out. "Buy us all some apples instead!"

The man in the three-piece suit was startled but receptive; within ten minutes he returned with a bag of apples for the group.

And with those apples a little community was created in Central Park—twenty people surrounding a juggler, eating apples. When others came by to watch, the only way the newcomers could be transformed from confused outsiders to members of the group would be if somebody told them "the story of the apples."<sup>26</sup>



In *The Power of Myth*, Joseph Campbell tells of an event that happened in Hawaii in a place called the Pali, where the winds come rushing through a great ridge of mountains.

One day, two policemen were driving up the Pali road when they saw, just beyond the railing that keeps the cars from rolling over, a young man preparing to jump. The police car stopped, and the policeman on the right jumped out to grab the man but caught him just as he jumped, and he was himself being pulled over when the second officer arrived just in time to pull the two of them back.

Do you realize what had suddenly happened to that policeman who had given himself to death with that unknown youth? Everything else in his life had dropped off—his duty to his family, his duty to his job, his duty to his own life—all of his wishes and hopes for his lifetime had just disappeared. He was about to die.

Later, a newspaper reporter asked him, "Why didn't you let go? You would have been killed." And his reported answer was, "I couldn't let go. If I had let that young man go, I couldn't have lived another day of my life."<sup>27</sup>

The message of all spirituality is that, in some mysterious way, we are all one—that therefore the joy and the sorrow of any one of us is the joy and the sorrow of all of us. Recognizing and living that reality

is not "codependence": it is *love*. "It is not judgment or discussion of sins, excuses or understanding of alleviating circumstances that break the heart, but mercy and love," wrote desert spirituality scholar Benedicta Ward. An oft-quoted saying of Hillel reminds: "If I am not for myself, who will be? And if I am only for myself, what am I?"<sup>28</sup>

A final favorite story may perhaps suggest new insight into the nature of that careworn word, *love*.

An old Jewish woman was dying of rectal cancer. Her husband sat at her bedside, holding her hand, talking to her, crying with her.

A nurse came into the room. "Excuse me, sir," she said, gently touching his shoulder. "It's time to change the bandages. If you'd leave the room, I'll be done in just a few minutes."

"Excuse *me*," the man replied with a gentle but determined smile, "but I'll stay right here. This *tush* and I have had a lot of good times together. I'm not going to turn my back on it now."

Ending a book on spirituality with a reference to a *tush* may seem ill-advised. But paradox will have its way, however much we might try to pretty things up. Dr. Bob Smith, after all, was a proctologist. When one of his colleagues heard that the surgeon was devoting his life to helping alcoholics, he commented, "Well, I guess Smitty's still working with assholes."

And so, through the humor that signals not the hiding but the embrace of pain, we circle back to humility and our common humanity. If we can accept the reality of our imperfection, the fact that we are put together funny, that we are, by our very nature, limited and thus do not have absolute control over our lives, we are taking the tentative steps that are all that we can take on the pilgrimage that is spirituality. Once we accept the common denominator of our own imperfection, once we begin to put into practice the belief that imperfection *is* the reality we have most in common with all other people, then the defenses that deceive us begin to fall away, and we can begin to see ourselves and others as we all really are.

A passage often referred to as "the promises" appears on pages 83

and 84 of the book *Alcoholics Anonymous*, shortly after the reminder: "The spiritual life is not a theory. *We have to live it.*" Because so much of this book has been inspired by A.A.'s spirituality, it seems fitting to conclude with that paragraph, for we believe that it applies to all who seek a spiritual way of life.

If we are painstaking about this phase of our development, we will be amazed before we are half way through. We are going to know a new freedom and a new happiness. We will not regret the past nor wish to shut the door on it. We will comprehend the word serenity and we will know peace. No matter how far down the scale we have gone, we will see how our experience can benefit others. That feeling of uselessness and self-pity will disappear. We will lose interest in selfish things and gain interest in our fellows. Self-seeking will slip away. Our whole attitude and outlook upon life will change. Fear of people and of economic insecurity will leave us. We will intuitively know how to handle situations which used to baffle us. We will suddenly realize that God is doing for us what we could not do for ourselves.<sup>29</sup>

To those "promises" we would add: If we learn to accept our imperfection with humor, as the reflection of our very humanity, we will experience humility and tolerance, we will understand that we are already filled with forgiveness, we will see the gift of our lives, the chains will fall away, and we will be free—free not so much *from* fear or "dependence," but free *for* love, for life itself.