

Why I Write and How I Think You Should Read Me.

Or, An Open Letter Written In Love, But Without Any Particular Recipient In Mind

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

I want to write essays in a way that continues and extends the dialogues that I am already having with my clients and students and teachers and peers of the present; have had in the past; and hope to have in the future.

Because my clients come in quite a wide variety of forms and with quite a wide variety of concerns, and also because I just want to help generally, I do cover some pretty wide swaths of ground in these essays. What I hope to do here is give interested readers a usefully broad perspective, as well as some usefully specific facts that seem to fit into that perspective, about topics that recur in sessions. But mostly I am hoping to help you own your own autonomy.

This is one of those open secrets folks: Own your own autonomy.

You don't have free will, maybe we will cover that in another essay another time, but you do have autonomy. And this means that the existentialists have it right when they basically say that: meaning is self-constructed; and therefore we have full responsibility for the meaning that we make of our lives.

At every decision point there is a wide variety of actions we could take, feelings we could experience, and opinions we could form, and yet we experience only a narrow range of those possibilities. We only know what we know, and have the flexibility we happen to have, at this particular moment that is happening right now, because our knowledge, creativity, flexibility, etc. are all obviously constrained to a significant degree by our past. For example I obviously cannot know something I have never studied or experienced before, therefore I cannot see a problem from a perspective I have never gained. Also, things like moods and beliefs are not random, but rather have both gross and subtle patterns of influence from many factors. My capacity to tolerate stress and flexibly meet life's demands likewise varies, tremendously in some cases for those with traumatic past experiences. Simultaneously however, certain situations tend to call for certain responses: feelings of sadness at the loss of a loved one,

feelings of anger at a perceived injustice, feelings of joy in a new relationship, feelings of fear as you peer from a great height. These are all human emotions and most humans would experience their idiosyncratic versions of them if placed in similar conditions. The ability we all have to imagine being in someone else's situation and realizing we would probably have felt and acted very similarly is what we call empathy. Which is very closely related to what some people call common sense. Which is supposedly common. And is common, it seems to me, in the sense that it is innately there in most humans, waiting to be tapped to its full potential. However it is not common, it seems to me, in the sense of being abundantly evident in how we treat each other.

So, although I don't really have free will in the sense that I can't really claim all that much freedom in my choices (as we have established they are highly constrained) or even in my experiencing thoughts feelings and sensations (also highly constrained), yet I have responsibility for my decisions because I do have *some* choice, and also, pro-tip, because I can always be conscious of how things are going. I can notice that I am struggling with a problem because I do not have sufficient information to solve the problem, and then decide to learn what I need to learn or ask for help from those already learned. I can recognize that I am struggling in a relationship because I have a tendency to think or feel certain ways, and I can try to communicate with the other(s) involved, or seek therapy or some other form of insight. I have autonomy, and therefore responsibility, because I can always lean one way or another. I can always try something, even if that something is to decide not to try, and I can and should then monitor how the decision goes and adjust accordingly. Only I can affect myself in this self-monitoring way, so the responsibility lies solely with me for me and you for you¹.

Let me be quick to point out that none of what I am saying implies that victims are somehow responsible for being victimized, nor does it support the simplistic version of Freud's repetition compulsion idea. Our lives are filled with forces and chance occurrences far beyond any hope of prediction. Victim's are people who were overwhelmed by circumstances beyond their control. Any of us can find ourselves in such circumstances very suddenly, it is what is known as an accident. No one is to blame for accidents, they are accidental. But we are responsible for choices (again to a very constrained degree in some cases) and therefore responsible to some degree for choices that led to harm to others. We are also responsible to some degree for how we respond after the accident is over even if we had no part in causing it. This is assuming you bought my original premise that you have some capacity for empathy and common sense. If not you should have stopped reading paragraphs ago.

Don't wriggle uncomfortably from the point. You have responsibility for you. Society also has responsibility for society. We should help people who have accidents and get them back on their feet so that they can help us when we have an accident. This is

obvious, commonsensical even. I feel stupid even saying such things on the page. I am sorry for insulting your intelligence, let's move on.

Let me bring you back to the existential concern.

Can you really fathom the implications of the possibility that you are completely responsible for your own life²?

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

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

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

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

By the way, if this essay affects any of your personal decisions, whether those decisions be to work with me specifically, or some other therapist or non-dual teacher somewhere out there in the spiritual marketplace, or leads you to start a new project of some kind for that matter, then I am equally happy. I wish you well, please take all of this in with my good intentions in mind. I am just offering some scaffolding meant to help you lean into decisions for yourself. The decisions are yours, the scaffolding is what I am seeing between and among the hundreds of people I have talked to. I think it is deeply present, what I am trying to describe. Not mine or yours, just deeply ours, and our lives go better the more we are in alignment with the structure of things, even if we don't like what is happening. Likes and dislikes are completely unrelated to deep structure and yet also cannot be ignored. You should look into this if it is not already clear to you.

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

other will eventually lead to some form of sensible world government that supports the unique diversity and potential of each individual. It really isn't that complicated. All we need are basic laws and structures that provide for the fundamental needs of each person, and all that really takes are some basic guidelines that all cultures can agree to. There will still be many complicated details of course, but the lawyers can work that out as they already do anyway. We just have to give lawyers appropriate legal boundaries within which to play, and those boundaries are pretty obvious from a non-dual perspective. Everyone on the whole planet should be granted access to sufficient food, water, clothing, education and opportunity. It really isn't all that hard. If you can create nuclear missiles, land people on the moon, work towards artificial intelligence, model complex economic systems and even chaotic systems like the weather on Jupiter, then you can sure the f*** figure out how to trade in some weapons and some big ships to just give people health care and food.

Did I mention I curse some?

There would still be plenty of competition and challenge for even the most red-blooded capitalist among us. There are clearly powerful forces that would prefer that this not happen though. It's a real problem to be power hungry in a system that doesn't promote power hunger. So in our current acquisition driven culture, the kind of reform I am after just ain't happening anytime soon, but still Gene Roddenberry kind of nailed it.

Thanks Gene.

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

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

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

Besides, I grew up in the South. We tell stories there and many of us also curse artfully. Stories are a really nice way to teach and learn deep truth. You should learn to listen to stories for deep truth if you haven't already. Stories are one of the few ways we have to adequately convey complex moral, social, and personal information without boring people to tears.

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

See? You kind of tuned out a little didn't you? Most people would have anyway. Some people like that kind of verbal play, and some like to ape it because they think that makes them seem smart, but most of us just sort of tune out....carefully constructed statements of a didactic nature...what the hell is this guy saying? That's how academics write. Academia appears to be another complex system out of whack these days.

Meanwhile... cursing is great stress relief if done with artfulness. I'm not claiming that I myself am an artful cursor, but I sure the f*** aspire to be one.

So, in other words, I'm inviting you to buckle in and hang on for a little ride through my mind and the minds of those I have worked with, where I will probably not use so many curse words, since I am writing, but I probably will convey some strong opinions while offering you some advice based on a certain perspective. I may tell some stories, certainly clinical ones since that is my day to day work, but other kinds as well.

In the meantime let me recommend some other stories that have already been written to get you in the right frame of mind. There is this fellow Jesus, and this other fellow known as the Buddha, and then there is this guy who is still alive named Wendell Berry, and they all tell some interesting stories. There is also Zen literature and Taoist literature replete with one story after another. Although in Zen many of the stories are unnecessarily obscured by changing language and culture, so I wouldn't recommend reading Cleary's translation of the Blue Cliff Record³ for example, but Aitken's translation of the Mumonkan⁴ is worth a read. Tibetan Buddhism has a tradition of story telling about past teachers that is very instructive if you're into the Dalai Lama or whatever. I find even the Brothers Grimm and Aesop to generally have more wisdom and be more useful to most people than say, Saint Thomas Aquinas or some dry philosophical treatise on the Diamond Sutta or whatever. Sorry Tom. You were great, but not much of a story teller as far as I know.

By the way, I am not comparing myself to those personages. They are each far beyond me as far as I can tell based on their recorded words, but I would rather aim high and fall short than aim low and succeed. So let me admit here that I am very much writing in the Berrian style, insofar as I have correctly taken in Mr. Berry's deep message and insofar as I have any skill with words. He writes as a literary and spiritually aware farmer, who came to his awareness via Christian practices. I am a salty and spiritually aware psychotherapist, who does read literature, though not so much as to be able to write professionally, but I do think I write clearly if you pay close attention. I do not

think I am an easy read, but things are complicated, and I don't want to infantilize you... I came to this perspective via a hodgepodge of techniques, experiences, and ultimately grace. I think I write in the same vein as Mr. Berry and with somewhat the same spirit. However, perhaps I misunderstand Mr. Berry. In any case, all faults are most certainly and obviously mine.

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

I want you to understand that this is all meant with love, and if any of the strong opinions seem to really piss you off, please let me know, I would genuinely be interested in dialoguing with you. Mostly I state things with passion just to get the conversation started. I don't really believe anything specifically, but dialogue like storytelling is another one of those tried and true methods. It quickly gets us where we need to go, at least if both people are on the same page about what they are trying to do in the bigger scheme. If not it can be quite a mess in my experience (I wrote a little seventeen page essay on relationality that talks about some of that complexity in communication, please check it out if you have any questions about communication in relationships. I'm sure you don't. I'm sure relationships never confuse you. But just in case you ever feel confused by relationships I wrote it for you...and me...we are all in this together).

In the meantime, also please keep in mind that your reaction might be about something worth exploring in you. I'm just trying to speak from a certain perspective that landed on me some years ago after about 15 years of meditation and 5 years of psychotherapy. That perspective has become mixed in with 13 years of being a professional psychotherapist where, until recently I saw 35 to 40 people a week. Now, in semi-retirement, living in Quebec but working just across the border in the beautiful but wild and traumatized Northeast Kingdom of Vermont, I see 20 to 25 a week generally speaking. Twenty to twenty-five people a week, about half of them drawn from a population of maybe 50,000 or so, spread out rurally through small hamlets that used to have paper mills and now have dollar stores. People who are mostly either severely and complexly traumatized, impoverished, or both. The other half work with me online and come from all over.

I don't know anything for sure, but I sure enjoy talking with people. And I sure do like it when people get turned on to the non-dual perspective. When it actually happens everything seems to go much better for them. Join in the conversation if you like. Or don't, your decisions are your own. For myself, I'm happier than I can conveniently express in words and simultaneously horrified by the destruction I see wrought in people's lives. I'm just trying to share the love. However, I find that this love I am

feeling often seems out of step to others. I am sorry about that, but every method I have tried seems to have it's pitfalls, so I'm just doing my best.

Anyway, if you bother to read these essays then I'm going to tell you some stories and give you some thoughts and advice, and I'm also going to bore you with didactic statements. If you're a client various parts of various essays may sound familiar because we have touched upon similar things, but it is rarely appropriate in session to explain in full detail why a topic might be useful and important. Sessions flow unpredictably, at least with a therapist like me who mostly seeks to be non-directive, and therefore I am often talking to clients about affect theory, or sex, or relationality, or what a personality is, etc., but not always in a cohesive way. A question, or set of associations, or a dream we are working with, or the way the conversation seems to be flowing, or any number of other indices may suggest that a client needs or wants to understand something about something complicated, but I don't always have the luxury of explaining the complicated something in its entirety, assuming I even understand it, instead our dialogue simply brings us to our unique version of a universal human concern. Nevertheless, certain topics keep coming up in my dialogues with people, so I shall write on those that I happen to have some useful information about.

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

I write these essays because after 13 years of daily, generally intense, conversations with hundreds and hundreds of people, it has become clear to me what some of the underlying issues are that my clients tend to share. And that even though, or rather especially because, my clients come in two apparently dichotomous types, there are certain universal lessons to learn. Actually everyone is deeply related. Obviously. So what I see cutting across the (generally though certainly not always) healthier and more open and curious seeker type, and the (generally though certainly not always) non-seeker type who tends to be somehow traumatized to some extent, are the universal or archetypal issues it pays to be aware of for both health and awakening...which are not separate in case you mistook me just now. I want to cut straight to those issues in these essays and make it clear that these are human issues primarily. Dialectical tensions if you will. A general something experienced by most everyone in some way or fashion, but of course experienced very differently by each individual who naturally filters the experience of their life through their own unique genetically and behaviorally shaped self.

Okay, let's pause and assess. We've established that you and I have no choice but to take responsibility for you and I, that I'm writing for my clients (mostly), and that I'm

trying to be useful but also provocative at times. Everybody with me so far? Great. When I write something for this website I am writing to my clients past present and future in a continuation of ongoing dialogues as stated above. Cool. Here's the problem, or the solution as I already alluded to. I have two types of clients, so I feel like I have to try to hold both simultaneously in mind, and although all clients are simply trying to feel better, my clients seem to have radically different ways of understanding the world sometimes. I am trying to work out how to communicate with both groups and I have a sense that there are more fundamental aspects of life that we might all usefully turn our attention to, but the breadcrumbs have to be laid a bit differently. The two types are the spiritual aspirant type, and the non-aspirant type. By this somewhat silly dichotomy I mean to say that there is a significant percentage of my clientele who contact me specifically because they are, let us say, non-dualists, while the other clients have never heard the word non-duality in their lives (all terms are problematic, please cut me some slack). The spiritual aspirant types say they want to awaken, whatever exactly they think that means varies, but they say they want to awaken, and they hope that someone like me, someone who has a foot in the non-dual but who is also a trained professional and licensed psychologist, might be of assistance to them in awakening. They have come to think or feel, and they are right, that there is a great deal of overlap in the sort of work that can be done in psychotherapy, and the sort of work that can be done with meditation. They have come to think or feel that maybe, and again they are correct although the doing of it is often more complicated than the thinking of it, that in some ways and for some problems psychotherapy is actually better than meditation (severe trauma is a clear example). Meanwhile, probably more than half of my clients are people who just walked in the door. They just need someone to help them with something that's happening that doesn't feel very good. They don't actually know much about me, and often don't really care, they just need some licensed person who can charge their insurance company to help them sort out whatever it is that's bothering them. This can range from anything as pedestrian as marital or familial stress, or stress from overwork, to things as serious as psychosis.

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

I do not have many psychotic clients because most such clients are routed towards hospitalization in our society, but I do take the clients who wish to avoid hospitalization. This is a fairly rare client, at least for me, and such clients are quite challenging for all of the obvious reasons, but I and a few other people who know each other are willing to try. Meanwhile, I'm happy to report that work with folks labeled as Schizophrenic or Bipolar is often met with great success. At least in my limited clinical experience (and that of Bertram Karon's extensive experience. He published peer reviewed studies strongly supporting the superiority of psychodynamic therapy over medication for Schizophrenia as defined by DSM IV-TR criteria back in the 70s; go, read the damn reference⁵ before you disagree with me). But again this sort of severe

presentation is relatively rare in the small town Vermont outpatient psychotherapy world because again, most people with the severest forms of mental health problems are steered more towards medical intervention. I think that this is a great shame and that anyone who wants to look carefully at the research on the genetic links in conditions like schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, but also look at the research showing correlations between early trauma and later severe psychopathology, and then the research on epigenetics, will come to the same conclusion that I have. Which is that our current DSM nosology is too loose to accurately sort patients into useful categories, and that most of the medications are basically major tranquilisers.

As the authors of DSM IV wrote, and then wrote again when DSM-5 was published, the DSM nosology was never meant to remain as created. It was always assumed that science would move forward and give us a much more useful way of categorizing mental illness. Most folks who have given thought to this matter agree that a categorical nosology is neither reasonable nor possible at this stage of our ability to measure mental health. Unlike other forms of medicine, mental health does not have signs, we only have symptoms (a fever is an example of a symptom rather than a sign. A fever can occur for many possible reasons, it is not sufficient for diagnosis. Instead we need some kind of image, or chemical assay, or biological assay, which tells us that there is a substance or a virus or a bacteria or an injury present. Those would be considered signs, and those would then explain the presence of the symptoms. Sometimes we can deduce illness based solely on symptoms, but usually we would want their to be signs as objective criteria to refer to in case of doubt or misdiagnosis). In mental health, with the exception of Alzheimer's, we only have symptoms and no signs. This should concern you. If you are not concerned please re-read the essay from the beginning, you have not been paying enough attention.

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

Uh-oh, trauma, here comes another riff:

I have a deep interest in some psychoanalytic writings. Thomas H. Ogden for example is, in my personal experience, one of the most evocative writers of any discipline and any genre that I have ever encountered. He is a writer's writer, a thinker's thinker, a psychoanalyst's psychoanalyst, and much more. The dude f***** rocks okay? But I

still have deep ambivalence about seeking analytic training. It just seems too...I'm not sure what word to use... bourgeois?... upper class bourgeois?...is that a word?... what do you call it when there is a group of people who have luminary members like Ogden (and Faibairn, and Ferenczi, and Sullivan, and Kohut and, in my opinion, people like Bromberg, but definitely not, in my opinion, people like Klein, even though she is spectacularly useful for understanding how to work with borderline level process, but that is because she seems to be writing from a borderline perspective herself) and yet also full of people who make it strangely plain that they still owe allegiance to Sigmund Freud, like sort of Oedipally strangely plain how clearly they state that Freud is a genius of geniuses kind of strange.

You know, here's a true story. I was participating in a study group run by a group of analysts once and they were talking about Freud in this weird way that I'm trying to find words for. And I chimed in, my usual charming self, and I said, "you know, physicists don't talk about Newton this way, and he was a genius. Don't you find it a little bit strange or even, Oedipal, that a bunch of adults sit around talking about a man as though he were a genius among geniuses, a virtual God among men, while people of equal genius, like Sir Isaac Newton, are simply acknowledged as having moved the ball forward?" Dear reader, this comment went over like a lead balloon. So much so that I found myself wondering if I was somehow amiss in my perspective. Some years later I stumbled upon an essay by Harry Guntrip, an analyst who is generally well regarded by other analysts to the best of my knowledge, and he used literally the same analogy about Newton with the same intent. So that was a relief. Thank you Harry⁶.

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

Here's another historical tidbit about Freud that seems eerily resonant with today's mess. He trained in Paris with Janet. Janet was pioneering attempts to use hypnosis for severe cases (that means people severely traumatized). More important than the clinical technique, Janet was pioneering a theory of dissociation, the sort of theory we need to treat trauma. Freud came back to Vienna from his training, and his writings show him to be filled with Janet's ideals and filled with hope for treating the most severe problems in his community, what was then called hysteria. He did drop Janet's technique, finding that hypnosis is not a long term solution for complex problems (though it can be useful for things like smoking cessation, or used as part of a more complex therapeutic process, for example as a method of self soothing), and had

“discovered”/co-created with his clients the technique of free association. This new technique, combined with the underlying perspective Freud had learned from Janet, was producing excellent results. But then, mysteriously, we see Freud move away from a dissociation model of the mind to a repression model of the mind, all in the course of a single case study he publishes regarding treating a young woman from a well connected family. The young woman was having...fantasies or memories?...memories or body impressions?...body impressions or hysterical fantasies and symptoms?...of being sexually molested as a child. Certainly such things could not be really happening in the good families of Vienna? Perhaps in those poor communities over there, but certainly not among the genteel well-to-do...I hope you notice how familiar this all is..

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

Here are some facts about trauma. We are talking about, conservatively, 25% of the population in the United States of America. I've looked at some of the data for Canada, and it looks as bad or worse. Twenty-five percent! Conservatively!

I'm standing here, and I don't know who I'm supposed to turn to. Because when I turn towards the psychologists, I mostly see people who want to be doctors. They're trying to out doctor the MD's, seeking prescription privileges and offering mental techniques in much the same spirit as offering a pill...here just do this and it will help. And yet, the biological sciences just don't seem adequate to help heal those who most need healing. Or rather, the very relevant biology of trauma still gets short shrift overall. Insofar as I am accurately understanding the literature that I am reading on the biology and neurophysiology of trauma, we can understand a great deal that is useful, but what we seem to understand does not seem to suggest that we should spend more money developing more cognitive interventions or pharmaceutical treatments⁷. This

is not to say that pharmaceuticals are somehow bad. But just to point out that we seem to be in a short term profit corporate driven culture of late. These observations, if correct, have very significant implications. You should think carefully about this. I am alarmed, I believe for good reason, and yet when I raise the alarm at conferences I don't get much traction. No doubt it is me or my style, I am also autonomous and therefore responsible, but I can't help but wonder about denial. In recent history we have discovered and lost the knowledge of trauma at least several times. Freud had it and turned away. WWI and WWII, and then Korea and VietNam, and then most recently Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Afghanistan, have taught and then re-taught us that trauma is real. We have data from every state that shows that little girls and boys are being raped, tortured, neglected, abused, etc., and that data is only the *reported* cases, that were then *investigated*, and then *substantiated*. What about the unknowable number of unreported cases? What about the cases that were really bad, but the social worker had worse ones to deal with and had to put the water on the biggest fire while other fires burned? What about the cases that were bad but the social worker made a judgment call that intervention wasn't possible? Unless I am totally missing something, you should be extremely upset right now, and you should be motivated to learn more about what I am saying and do something in your community. This is literally an epidemic that has vast social and economic ripple effects, and yet we spend hardly any money on the problem in either research or intervention⁸.

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

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

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

If you're a medical professional, why do you know, know for a fact, that antidepressants are the best way to treat depression? This is not a fact. In fact, the data would indicate that, on the whole, antidepressants are a resounding flop. They are clearly less effective, on the whole, than psychotherapy generally is. And I'm lumping together metadata to say what I'm saying, I know that there are many methodological complications with measuring efficacy, but on the whole the data is pretty damn clear⁹. Look at the data if you don't agree with me and then tell me why I'm wrong. *After* you've read the actual studies though, not just the abstracts or whatever summary you just read in your favourite journal because, newsflash, big pharma got some big hooks. I will bet you cash that I can turn to any recent issue of any big medical journal and many a psychological journal, and I can find you some bullshit study that claims something good for some medication or other, but where the lead author's abstract doesn't fit their own damn data. Go and prove me wrong, I want to be wrong on this one, but I believe you'll find I am right.

To the spiritual types I am also taking up a few issues that I feel need to be presented to their attention. And again, truly, just an attempt to help, if what I'm saying doesn't resonate for you just stop reading, please, just stop. But if you're still reading then let me say this, what the hell is wrong with you? And by you of course I mean all of us. But honestly what the hell is wrong with you? You say that you want to wake up but you don't practice for example? Or you say that you want to follow the Buddha path, or the Ramana path or whoever, and yet you don't address the obvious hypocrisy in your life? Let's talk about the Dalai Lama for a second. Everybody loves the Dalai Lama right? I mean, I don't know the man personally, but he seems like a darn wonderful fellow. So nothing against the Dalai Lama, but I can't help but notice that he's male. Anyone else noticed that he's male? Also everyone around him appears to be male. Anyone else noticed that everyone around the Dalai Lama is also male? Now I'm a little confused here. I'm not a deeply scholarly man when it comes to Tibetan Buddhism, but, I'm pretty sure that enlightenment is non-gendered. Why aren't there female Lamas attending to the Dalai Lama? If even the Dalai Lama isn't quite knocking it out of the

park, what are the rest of us to do? How do we manage to tap in to the infinite and not bypass the everyday?

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

...

And so, that's why I write.

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

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

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

The world honored one said, "ladies and gentleman I'm super enlightened" [just joking, that's me paraphrasing]. The world honored one said [something much more flowery], "I have the eye treasury of right Dharma, the subtle mind of nirvana, the true form of no-form, and the flawless gate of the teaching." [so, like I said, super enlightened] "It is not established upon words and phrases. It is a special transmission outside tradition. I now entrust it to Mahakysapa."

Mumon's Comment

Gold-faced Guatama [another name for the Buddha] insolently degrades noble people to commoners. He sells dog flesh under the

sign of mutton and finds it quite commendable. Suppose all the monks had smiled, or that Mahakyasapa had not -- what then?

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

See? Totally clear and really complicated. Like most koans in the Zen tradition, if we can get through the obscurations of translation from another time, place, language and culture, then we read a creative description of one or several aspects of the awakened perspective. Then we can practice inhabiting that perspective. At least I think that's what the Rinzai and Sanbo Kyodan people are doing.

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

Here's a sad story.

Up here in the little Northeast Kingdom of Vermont, a place I certainly would never even have heard of until I happened to move to Vermont, is a place that turns out to have an interesting history for free thinkers of various sorts. Among other hidden attractions, we have the very first retreat centre of the Shambhala organization (not far away are the Bread and Puppet people who are also very interesting to look into. They have nothing to do with non-duality so far as I know, but they appear to be very interesting people to hang out with, and, as one of the best examples of truth in advertising I can think of, they make great bread and really cool puppets). Shambhala is the organization that was founded by Trungpa Rinpoche, a man famously enlightened, and notoriously drunk. Just a few years ago we heard that Trungpa's son and successor, not that one would ever think that combining the words son and successor could possibly be a bad idea, was accused of various sexual and social indiscretions. The accusations ranged all the way from public drunkenness, which frankly seemed pretty easy to believe, to statutory rape, which I didn't want to believe at all. Unfortunately, being a therapist in a small community leaves me hearing many many stories, and while I cannot know the veracity of a story, I came to the conclusion that Trungpa may well have had sex with teenage girls based on what I was hearing from people that had some personal association with the organization. There was an

investigation by a law firm, though one hired by the Shambhala organization so presumably the law firm has certain obligations to their client that are not necessarily in alignment with full disclosure of criminal behavior, and that investigation did not support statutory rape as a legitimate allegation. However, it certainly supported at least two cases of severe sexual harassment, and seemed to strongly indicate that Trungpa was having sex with students. Sex between adults can be quite a complicated affair, all puns intended, and so I don't rush to judgment about those things, but I can't help but question the obvious power dynamics in such a situation as appears to have played out in the Shambhala organization. Sexual relations between adults and non-adults on the other hand is just obvious. If you have any questions about that topic you do need to go to therapy right now.

Later on, if you decide to read the essays on this website, you'll find some pretty clear statements about the dangers of Guru worship and abuse of power. This hits close to home for me, not because I've ever suffered particularly from a teacher's abuse, nor was I ever sexually abused, but because I have clients who were abused as children. Survivors of childhood abuse can be very vulnerable because of their trauma histories, and they do get enmeshed with teachers where some sort of abusiveness gets unleashed, and I'm not really okay with that, though I also obviously don't have any authority to intervene. But I sure the fuck ain't going to mince words on that one. More generally, we all have our personal proclivities and areas of struggle or trauma, so there are always complex interpersonal and intrapersonal dynamics happening. It seems to me that the basic motivation for most of us to take up therapy or to take up practices like meditation (or an exercise program or what have you) is generally a simple wish to feel better. Where the "spiritual" crowd seems to often falter is in a lack of thoughtful, culturally appropriate to our time and place, structures that would provide scaffolding for continued growth past the initial relief offered by a practice, a community, or a charismatic teacher.

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

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

Ezra Maurer

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

Notes:

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

Also, I have in mind here as I write the words you just read that lead you to this footnote, a plethora of neurophysiological research on consciousness, and also a fair bit of reading in my past on western philosophical attempts to grapple with the so-called hard and soft problems of consciousness, as well as what philosophers mean by free will and responsibility. There is too much to go into in a footnote, but for the moment just know and ponder that some great minds have come to some general consensus about consciousness, or at least we appear very close to consensus (which is very different than clear understanding by the way, and very, very, different than being able to engineer consciousness), and I would say the consensus is that we own some significant degree of responsibility for our own experience. We therefore, at least in my analysis, have responsibility for making ourselves better. It appears to follow logically to me. What do you think?

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

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

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

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

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

Anyway, lot's of ways to practice.

3. Thomas Cleary. Look him up if you like. My understanding is that he was a professional academic. His own insight into what he was translating doesn't seem very non-dual to me though, so I don't really recommend him so much as acknowledge gratitude for the great translations he provided.
4. Robert Aitken. Worth looking up for any serious non-dualist of any sort. American born, trapped in Japan during WWII, he wound up becoming quite fluent in Japanese and scholarly about Sino-Japanese and Chinese language groups generally. Excellent writer. Deeply enlightened personage. Along with Phillip Kapleau, Aitken Roshii was the first American born Zen master to carry Zen to America. Aitken established a zendo in Hawaii while Kapleau established one in Rochester, New York. All works highly recommended but especially his artful, poetic and whimsical "Zen Master Raven."
5. Bertram Karon. Hundreds of high quality peer reviewed journal articles. Look him up. I direct your attention most specifically to his magnum opus, Psychotherapy of Schizophrenia: The Treatment of Choice. 1977. Pretty damn

provocative for 1977. Pretty damn provocative today. Still buried and ignored. Hmmmm....wonder why....follow the money...? Anyway, the book has the Michigan State Hospital Project Data at the end. You can also look that up as a paper but you might as well read Karon's thoughts on technique if you are going to read the data showing his technique definitively beating the pants off medications.

6. Guntrip, Harry. 1971. *Psychoanalytic Theory, Therapy, and the Self: A basic guide to the human personality in Freud, Erikson, Klein, Sullivan, Fairbairn, Hartman, Jacobson, and Winnicott*. Basic Books.
7. Stephen Porges. Alan Schore. These are must reads. Then there is about 100 foundational journal articles (which I cannot claim to have read all of either) that one should also read if one wants to claim expertise about the neurophysiology of trauma. I claim a moderate degree of expertise, and my viewpoint is that traumatology is a serious candidate for a transtheoretical paradigm that could encompass most forms of healthcare, be that medical, psychological, or so-called alternative, but that traumatology has not received serious attention.
8. For one of the clearest and most accessible examples of how trauma is both clearly relevant and also clearly underfunded and ignored, google "ACE". This stands for Adverse Childhood Experiences. The research, which interestingly began with a bariatric clinic run by Kaiser-Permanente in California, was then taken over by the CDC (Center for Disease Control) and then, mysteriously to me, dropped. All of the data collected by the CDC, as a government entity, is free and open to the public (go to CDC.gov and search). Most of the Kaiser-Permanente data is pretty easily accessible as well as it was eventually published in peer reviewed journals. Along with studies by the WHO that show the ineffectiveness of anti-psychotics for Schizophrenia, the lack of empirical support, at least that I have been able to find, for the classes of drugs used to "treat" Bipolar Disorder, the very clear lack of efficacy of SSRIs and related "newer generation" (that's marketing language for "better but not really") "anti-depressants", I'm looking at trauma data and thinking, "Well, jeez, it's all trauma."
9. Look, it's pretty complicated, but this all started with a fellow named Rosenweig who was arguing for a common factors model to explain therapeutic efficacy. There is a very complex debate here that involves technical statistical, methodological, theoretical and ethical questions that are not easy to grapple with, and many thousands of articles have been written on efficacy and the various implications of there being support for both a common factors understanding and a specific factors understanding, but frankly, overall the

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

Here's a reference I just pulled off of google scholar in about five minutes:

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

It's right in front of you if you look.