

Why I Sit

by Paul R. Fleischman, M.D.

This morning the first thing I did was to sit for an hour. I have done that religiously for many years, and have spent many evenings, days and weeks doing the same. The English word "meditate" until recently had a vague meaning, referring to any one of a set of activities like extended deep thought, or prayer, or religious contemplation. Recently, "meditation" gained a pseudo-specificity: "T.M.," deep relaxation, or alpha-wave conditioning, with connotations of Hinduized cult phenomena like mantras, gurus, and altered states of consciousness. To "sit" is a basic word, with connotations ranging from chicken-coops to boredom and sagacity, so it forms a neutral starting point for an explanation of why I have spent thousands upon thousands of hours "sitting," and why I have made this activity the center of my life.

I

I would like to know myself. It is remarkable that while ordinarily we spend most of our lives studying, contemplating, observing, and manipulating the world around us, the structured gaze of the thoughtful mind is so rarely turned inwards. This avoidance must measure some anxiety, reluctance, or fear. That makes me still more curious. Most of our lives are spent in externally oriented functions that distract from self-observation. This relentless, obsessive drive persists independently of survival needs such as food and warmth, and even of pleasure. Moment for moment, we couple ourselves to sights, tastes, words, motions, or electric stimuli, until we fall dead. It is striking how many ordinary activities, from smoking a pipe to watching sunsets, veer towards, but ultimately avoid, sustained attention to the reality of our own life.

So it is not an intellectual intrigue with the platonic dictum that leads me to sit, but an experience of myself and my fellow human as stimulus-bound, fundamentally out of control, alive only in reaction. I want to know, to simply observe, this living person as he is, not just as he appears while careening from event to event. Of course, this will undoubtedly be helpful to me as a psychiatrist, but my motives are more fundamental, personal, and existential.

I am interested in my mind, and in my body. Previous to my having cultivated the habit of sitting, I had thought about myself, and had used my body as a tool in the world, to grip a pen or to chop firewood, but I had never systematically, rigorously, observed my body—what it feels like, not just with a shy, fleeting glance, but moment after moment for hours and days at a time; nor had I committed myself to observe the reciprocal influence of mind and body in states of exhaustion and rest, hunger, pain, relaxation, arousal, lethargy, or concentration. My quest for knowing is not merely objective and scientific. This mind-and-body is the vessel of my life. I want to drink its nectar, and if necessary, its sludge, but I want to know it with the same organic immersion that sets a snow goose flying ten thousand miles every winter and spring.

It seems to me that the forces of creation, the laws of nature, out of which this mind and body arose, must be operative in me, now, continuously, and whenever I make an effort to observe them. The activity of creation must be the original and continuing cause of my life. I would like to know these laws, these forces, my maker, and observe, even participate in, the ongoing creation.

Newton founded modern science with his assumption that there is one continuous world, one unbroken order, one set of laws governing both earth and sky; so along with this great tradition, and along with the ancient religions of India as well, I assume that the

physics of the stars is the physics of my body also. The laws of chemistry and biology, predicated on the laws of physics, are also uniform throughout nature. Since these laws operate continuously, without reserve or sanctuary, but uniformly and pervasively, I deduce that eternal, unbroken laws operate in me, created me, and create me, that my life is an expression of them continuously linked by cause and effect to all that antedated, all that follows, and all that is coexistent; and that, to the extent that I am conscious and capable of learning, a systematic study and awareness of creation's ways is available to me if I live with attention to this field.

Even if I am frequently incapable of actually observing the most basic levels of reality, at least the mental and physical phenomena that bombard me are predicated on nature's laws, and must be my laboratory to study. I want to sing like a bird, like a human. I want to grow and rot like a tree, like a man. I want to sit with my mind and body as they cast up and swirl before me and inside me the human stuff which is made of and ordered by the matter and laws governing galaxies and wrens.

Because the harmony in me is at once so awesome and sweet and overwhelming that I love its taste yet can barely compel myself to glimpse it, I want to sit with the great determination that I need to brush aside the fuzz of distraction, the lint of petty concerns. To sit is to know myself as an unfolding manifestation of the universals of life. A gripping, unending project. Hopefully one I can pursue even when I look into death's funnel. For me, this knowing is a great force, and a great pleasure.

II

I sit because of, for, and with, an appreciation of daily life. The great poets sing of the omnipresent ordinary, pregnant with revelation—but I know how easily and recurrently my own life yields to distraction, irritation, tunnel vision. I do not want to miss my life the way I once missed a plane at La Guardia airport. It may be ironic that simply to wiggle free of daydreams and worries I need a technique, a practice, a discipline, but I do; and I bow to that irony by doing what I *must* do to pry my mind off ephemeral worries, to wake to more dawns, to *see* my child unravel through his eddying transformations.

It may be contrary that I must work so hard to be at peace with myself, but I do; and I have become increasingly convinced, learning as I sit and live and sit and live, that "being at peace" is not a state of mind, but a state of mind and body. At the core of my life is a receptive drinking in. The simple beauty of things keeps flooding in to me. I live for this draught, and build my life around it. Yet it slips away. I can try to crash back through by taking dramatic journeys—to India, or to lakes at tree-line in the Rocky Mountains—but this kind of breath-taking beauty is only an interlude, a punctuation mark. It reminds me of what I intended to emphasize in my life, but like an exclamation point, it has limited use.

The clear direct sentence—the death sentence, the sentence of love—ends with a mere period. This declarative beauty is more like looking up over the slums of Montreal to see the moon wearing a pendant of Venus in 4:00 a.m. darkness. I am describing not what is sought or built, but what I discover when the walls fall away. Similarly when I walk alone in the autumn forest, up and down gneiss and schist hills and ridges of Vermont, and I become confused whether that intense pulsating drumming is the "booming" of grouse wings, or my own heart, strained by the last climb. This is an experience that is a metaphor also. We sometimes feel our bodies, our lives, beating in recognition. We absorb a dimension of reality that is the same inside and outside, an inner, lawful pulse to things. The tuning fork of my life hums in response to the living world.

This receipt—like a parent accepting back a soggy, half-eaten cracker—requires, for me, a framework, a matrix in my body, that simple as it should be, I do not simply have.

This knowing requires a bodily preparation. I sit to open my pores—skin and mind both—to the life that surrounds me, inside and outside, at least more often if not all the time, as it arrives at my doorstep. I sit to exercise the appreciative, receptive, peaceful mode of being filled up by the ordinary and inevitable. For example, the sagging floorboards in the crooked bedroom where I am a husband. Or my two-year-old son, tugging one splinter at a time, to help me stack firewood in new January snow.

III

I feel a need for a rudder, a keel, a technique, a method a way to continue on course. I need ceaselessly increasing moments of self-control (though not constriction, deadening, or inhibition). It seems to me that the best of human life is lived on a narrow ledge, like a bridge over a stream in Nepal, or like a trail in the Grand Canyon, between two chasms. On the one side is desire, on the other side is fear. Possibly it is because of my work as a psychiatrist, often with essentially normal people, who are nonetheless pushed and pulled about by their inner forces like tops, that I feel so sensitized to these faults that can send seismic shudders through apparently solid lives. But my own life has ground enough for these observations.

Sitting is, among other things, the practice of self-control. While sitting one does not get up, or move, or make that dollar, or pass that test, or receive reassurance from that phone call. But military training, or violin lessons, or medical school, are also routes to self-control in this ordering and restrictive sense. Sitting is self-control around specific values. Observation replaces all action. What is the point of committing one's life to this practice, only to spend the time with erotic daydreams, or anxious yearnings for promotion and recognition? Of course, those will happen anyway. They are part of the human make-up. Cultures would not have proliferated the ubiquitous moral codes, the Ten Commandments, if we were not so replete with ten million urges.

But moral invective, preaching, always seemed feeble to me—possibly just a measure of my wild horses and snails. I need a constantly useable, constantly renewable lens to see through my yearnings into my loves, to see through my anxieties into my faith. What is a bedrock feeling, the core of my identity, and what is a titillation that will ultimately be discarded? What characters walk in front of the mirror of my soul day after day, year after year, and who are the clowns that steal the stage for a scene?

An hour of sitting is one thing; longer periods another. Once a year, under the guidance of a teacher, I sit for ten days, all day. That kind of practice induces pain. To face pain has become a regular, inescapable part of my life. It is for most people—laborers, poor, infirm, cold, infected, hungry people throughout the world. But I have not elected sentimental, identificatory masochism. I am looking at another side of myself. While I spontaneously seek to avoid pain, a higher wisdom than knee-jerk reaction tells me that, in Socrates' words: "...pain and pleasure are never present to a man at the same instant, and yet he who pursues either is compelled to take the other; their bodies are two, but they are joined by a single head." (Phaedo)

Just how serious am I about being who I said I was? How integrated do I want to be with this screaming body that has to be fed, slept, positioned just right, or it howls unbearably? I sit because I know I need a self-control that does not lecture or stomp on my tendencies, but reorganizes desire into love, and pain and fear into faith.

IV

As I understand it, love is not an emotion, but an organization of emotions. It is not a room, but a dwelling; not a bird, but a migratory flyway. It is a structure of emotions, a meta-emotion. This is in contrast to love understood as a sentimental gush of attachment, or as romantic sexuality. Sitting has helped me to find love, to live by love, or at least, to live more by love. It has helped me come alive as a husband, father, psychiatrist, and

citizen, within the bounds of my character and capabilities. It has pried me open beyond either my previous sentimental position or my rational moral knowledge and has given me a tool, a practice, an activity expressive of love. For me it is both crowbar and glue.

As Erik Erikson has written, it is only “ambivalence that makes love meaningful—or possible.” In other words, it is only because we are both separate, and united, that love exists. If we had no individual existence, no personal drives, there would be merely the homogeneous glob of the world, devoid of emotion, unknowing, like a finger on a hand. Yet if we were irreconcilably separate there would only be self-maintaining cold stars coexisting in dead space. I understand love to mean the organization of human emotions into those complex states where separation and merging, individuality and immersion, self and selflessness paradoxically coexist. Only an individual can love; and only one who has ceased to be one can love. Sitting has helped me develop both these poles. It breaks me open where I get stuck; and where I fall off as a chip, it sticks me back on to the main piece.

Sitting pushes me to the limit of my self-directed effort; it mobilizes my willed, committed direction, yet it also shatters my self-protective, self-defining maneuvers, and my simple self-definition. It both builds and dismantles “me.” Every memory, every hope, every yearning, every fear floods in. I no longer can pretend to be one selected set of my memories or traits.

If observed, but not reacted upon, all these psychic contents become acceptable, obviously part of myself (for there they are in my own mind, right in front of me); yet also impersonal, causally-linked, objective phenomena-in-the-world that move ceaselessly, relentlessly, across the screen of my existence, without my effort, without my control, without *me*. I can see more, tolerate more, in my inner life, at the same time that I am less driven by these forces. Like storms and doves, they are the personae of nature, crossing one inner sky. Psychic complexity swirls up from the dust of cosmetic self-definition. At the same time, the determination and endurance I have to muster to just observe, grow like muscles with exercise. Naturally the repetition of this mixture of tolerance and firmness extrapolates beyond its source in sitting, out to relationships.

There is little I have heard from others—and it is my daily business to hear—that I have not seen in myself as I sit. But I also know the necessity of work, training and restraint. Dependence, loneliness, sensuality, exhaustion, hunger, petulance, perversion, miserliness, yearning, inflation are my old friends. I can greet them openly and warmly in people close to me, both because I know them from the inside and therefore cannot condemn them without condemning myself; and also because I have been learning to harness and ride their energy. To love, I try to hold the complex reality of myself at the same time that I try to catch the complex reality of another.

I have known my wife for decades. We have dated and swam, married and fought, traveled, built cabins, bought houses, delivered and diapered together; in short, we have attained the ordinary and ubiquitous. In a world of three billion people, this achievement ranks with literacy, and would have no bearing on why I sit, except that it does. Even the inevitable is fragile. I, we, am, and are, buffered by un-shy thanks. We are sharpened by life with an edge.

I sit and life moves through me, my married life too. This sphere also takes its turn before my solitary, impeachable witness to my own existence and its eternal entanglements. As a married man, I sit as if in a harbor from my selfish pettiness, where the winds of my annoyance or anger have time to pass; I sit as a recipient of a generous outpouring of warmth that I have time to savor; I sit as a squash or pumpkin with his own slightly fibrous and only moderately sweet but nonetheless ample life to lay on someone else’s table; I sit as one oxen in a team pulling a cart filled with rocking horses, cars, and porches that need paint; I sit knowing myself as a sick old man of the future awaiting the

one person who can really attend, or as the future one whose voice alone can wave death back behind someone else's hospital curtain for another hour; I sit as a common man of common desire, and as a dreamer who with the bricks of shared fate is building a common dream; and I sit alone in my own life anyway.

How fortunate to have this cave, this sanctuary, this frying-pan, this rock, and this mirror of sitting, in which to forge, drop, haul, touch, release my love and not get lost. To sit is the compass by which I navigate the seas of married love. It is also the string by which I trip up the fox on his way to the chicken coop. To live is a deep yearning and hard work. It cannot be done alone! There are many ways to receive help, and many ways to give it. Martin Buber says that men and women cannot love without a third point to form a stable triangle: a god, task, calling, or meaning beyond their dyadic individuality. What about two who just know the pole star?

There is a joke in the comic strip "Peanuts": "I love mankind. It's just people that I hate." I think love is concrete and abstract. If it is only an amorphous generalized feeling, it remains a platitude, a wish, a defense against real entanglement. This is what sounds hollow in the pious, sanctimonious "Love" of some churches and martyrs. But if love is only concrete, immediate, personal, it remains in the realm of possession, privatism, materialism, narcissism. This is the paternalistic love a person has for his house, cars, family. My understanding is that actual love expands outward in both spheres. Riding the wings of the ideal, it sweeps up and carries along those who are encountered.

I sit to better love my wife, and those friends and companions with whom I share even a day's journey on my flight from the unknown to the unknown. It is difficult to love the one with whom my fate is most closely entangled during those moments when I would like to batter down the corridors of that fate. But it is easy to love her when we sweeten each other's tea. It is easy to feel affection for friends I encounter on weekends devoted to family life and outdoor play; it is difficult to let our lives, our health and finances entangle. Such an embrace threatens private safety. And it is more difficult still to try to place this way of being, first among all others, and risk myself over and over again.

Shall I keep all my money, or risk it on a charitable principle? Shall I study the text sanctioned by the authorities, or sing out from my heart? When I sit, money does me little good; approval evaporates; but the tone of the strings of my heart, for better or worse, is inescapable. I sit to tie myself to the mast, to hear more of the song of elusive and unavoidable love.

V

A baby looks fragile, but if you neglect his meal or hold him the wrong way, your eardrums will have to reckon with an awesome wrath! Anger springs from and participates in the primary survival instinct of the organism. Yet how much trouble it causes us in daily life, not to mention large-scale social relations! Probably the height of inanity would be to sit, angry. What is the point of such impotent stewing? I sit to grow up, to be a better person, to see trivial angers rise up and pass away, arguments on which I put great weight on Thursday morning fade by Thursday noon; and to be compelled to reorder, restructure, rethink my life, so that, living well, my petty anger is orchestrated ahead of time into flexibility, cooperation, or the capacity to see other viewpoints. Sitting helps me to transcend the irritable, petulant infant in me.

But that only solves the periphery of the problem. I am no longer angry about my diapers. I am angry that my votes and taxes have been turned to oppressing other nations; I am angry that I will be judged for the rest of my life by multiple choice exams; I am angry that research is ignored and dogma is used to coerce one religion's point of view; I am angry that mountains are scoured for energy to manufacture throw-away soda cans. I

sit also, then, to express my anger, and the form of expression is determination. I sit with force, will, and, when the pain mounts, something that feels fierce. Sitting helps me harness authentic anger.

I have been sitting at least fifteen hours a week for years, and when, as often happens, I am asked how I find the time, I know that part of the certainty in my aim is an anger that will not allow the rolling woodlands and hilltop pastures of my psyche to be bulldozed by TV, non-nutritional food, fabricated news, tweed socialization, pedantic file-cabinets of knowledge, or loyalty rallies to leaders, states, gods, and licensures. The voices of the herd will not so easily drive me from my forest cabin of deeply considered autonomy and honest talk, because I have had practice in this sort of firmness. A child's anger is the kindling of adult will. I can stay true to myself yet mature, be willed but not willful, by sitting in the spirit of Woody Guthrie's song: "Don't you push me, push me, push me, don't you push me down!"

VI

As I understand it, the lifelong disciplined practice of sitting is not exactly religion, but is not *not* a religion either. For myself, I am not bound to scriptures, dogma, hierarchies; I have taken no proscriptions on my intelligence, or on my political autonomy; nor have I hidden from unpleasant realities by concretizing myth. But I have become increasingly aware of the inextricable role of faith in my practice.

The faith I have been discovering in myself is not blind, irrational, unsubstantiated, or wishful ideas. Following the definitive clarification of these English terms by Paul Tillich, I would call those former "beliefs." I hope sitting has helped me to free myself from my beliefs even further than my scientific education did. Nor does faith mean what I live for—goals, personal preferences, commitments, and loves. These are ideals, visions, tastes—very important—but not faith. Faith is what I *live by*, what empowers my life. The battery, the heart-pump, of my becoming. It is not the other shore, but the boat. It is not what I know, but how I know. It is present, rather than past or future, and is my most authentic, total reaction, a gut reaction deeper than my guts. Tillich defined faith as a person's ultimate concern—the bedrock of what we in fact take seriously. I would like to describe faith, as I have found it, to be the hunger of my existence.

Hunger springs up from my body. It antedates my mental and psychological life, and can even run havoc over them. I do not eat because of what I believe or hope or wish for, or because of what an authority prescribes or what I read. I eat because I am hungry. My body is a dynamic, metabolizing system, an energy exchanger, constantly incorporating, reworking, remolding—this is the vitality intrinsic to the life of any oak, deer or human. This creature I am consumes, reworks, then creates more emotional, spiritual life. Not what I digest, but the ordered process in me that gives coherence and direction to this continuous organism, constitutes faith.

Faith is not something I have (e.g., "I believe!"); it is something that I realize has already been given to me, on which the sense of "me" is predicated. I find it or receive it, not once, but intermittently and continuously. It is not a set of thoughts, and it provides no concrete, reducible answers. Who am I? What is this life? Where does it come from? Where is it headed? I don't know. On these important questions, I have no beliefs. Yet no day has shaken this strange bird from his perch!

I sit with impassioned neutrality. Why? This activity is not *in order to get* answers with which to live my life. It *is* my life. Bones are not in order to hang skin and muscle on. (In scientific thought, too, teleology—goal-directed thinking—leads nowhere. Who knows the goal of the universe? Then what is the goal of any part of it?) I eat, I read, I work, I play, I sit. If I have no big intellectual belief by which I can justify my day, myself, my life, my supertime, I eat anyway! Usually with pleasure.

I am neither an existentialist, a Marxist, nor an anorectic. Hunger is a spontaneous action of life in me. The hunger of my existence also demands sustenance daily. The nourishment I take becomes my body; the sustenance I take becomes the unfolding process of “me.” To be alive, to be alert, to be observant, to be at peace with myself and all others—vibrating in ceaseless change—unmoving: I find this is my sustaining passage through the incandescent world doing the same.

As a scientific fact, I know I am alive only inside the body of life. Physically, I am aware of myself as a product of other lives—parents, ancestors. I breathe the oxygen created by plants, so that, as I breathe in and out, I am a tube connected to the whole life of the biosphere, a tiny, dependent digit. Through digestion and metabolism I biotransform the organic molecules created by plants and animals, which I call food, into other biochemicals with which I mold this form called my body, which is constantly, continuously being remolded, reformed, like a cloud. And this form will eventually cease its regeneration and vanish, as it arose, from causes, forces in nature.

It is easy for me to comprehend this description of physical reality, which is so obvious and scientific. But my person, my psychological reality, is also a product of causes: things I have been taught, experiences I have had, cultural beliefs, social forces. This uninterrupted web of causality —physical, biological, psychological, cultural—connecting from past to future, and out across contemporaneousness, is the ocean in which the bubble of my life briefly floats. Death must be inevitable for such an ephemeral bubble. Yet while it is here, I can feel how vital is this breathing, pulsating being, alive, resonant in exchange with past and future, people and things—transducer and knower.

The faith that underlies my practice is not in my mind, but is the psychological correlate of animation. I experience faith not as a thought, but as the overwhelming mood which drives this thrust upward of emerging. By sitting I can know, assume, become, this direct hum of energy. Retrospectively, verbally, I call this “faith.” When I am bored, pained, lazy, distracted, worried, I find myself sitting anyway, not because I believe it is good, or will get me into heaven, nor because I have particular will power. My life is expressing its trajectory. All mass is energy, Einstein showed. My life is glowing, and I sit in the light.

VII

Sitting enabled me to see, and compelled me to acknowledge, the role that death had already played, and still continues to play, in my life. Every living creature knows that the sum total of its pulsations is limited. As a child I wondered: Where was I before I was born? Where will I be after I die? How long is forever and when does it end? The high school student of history knew that every hero died; I saw the colors of empires wash back and forth over the maps in the books like tides. (Not me!) Where can I turn that impermanence is not the law? I try to hide from this as well as I can, behind my youth (already wrinkling, first around the eyes, and graying), and health insurance: but no hideout works.

Every day ends with darkness; things must get done today or they will not happen at all. And, funny, rather than sapping my appetite, producing “nausea” (which may be due to rich French sauces rather than real philosophy), the pressure of nightfall helps me to treasure life. Isn’t this the most universal human observation and counsel? I aim each swing of the maul more accurately at the cracks in the oak cordwood I am splitting. I choose each book I read with precision and reason. I hear the call to care for and love my child and the forest trails that I maintain as a pure ringing note of mandate. I sit at the dawn of day and day passes. Another dawn, but the series is limited, so I swear in my inner chamber I will not miss a day.

Sitting rivets me on the psychological fact that death is life’s door. No power can save

me. Because I am aware of death, and afraid, I lean my shoulder into living not automatically and reactively, like an animal, nor passively and pleadingly, like a child pretending he has a father watching over him, but with conscious choice and decision of what will constitute each fleeting moment of my life. I know that my petals cup a volatile radiance. But to keep this in mind in turn requires that an ordinary escapist constantly reencounters the limit, the metronome of appreciation, death.

I sit because knowing I will die enriches, and exorciates my life, so I have to go out of my way to seek discipline and the stability that is necessary for me to really face it. To embrace life I must shake hands with death. For this, I need practice. Each act of sitting is a dying to outward activity, a relinquishment of distraction, a cessation of anticipatory gratification. It is life now, as it is. Some day this austere focus will come in very, very handy. It already has.

VIII

I sit to be myself, independent of my own or others' judgments. Many years of my life were spent being rated, primarily in school, but, as an extension of that, among friends and in social life. As much as I tried to fight off this form of addiction, I got hooked anyway. As often happens, out of their concern for me, my parents combed and brushed me with the rules of comparison: I was good at this, or not good, or as good, or better, or worse, or the best, or no good at all.

Today I find that sitting reveals the absurdity of comparative achievement. My life consists of what I actually live, not the evaluations that float above it. Sitting enables me to slip beyond that second, commenting, editor's mind, and to burrow in deep towards immediate reality. I have made progress in becoming a mole, an empty knapsack, a boy on a day when school is canceled. What is there to gain or lose as I sit? Who can I beat, who can I scramble after? Just this one concrete day, all this, and only this, comes to me on the tray of morning, flashes out now.

I am relieved to be more at home in myself, with myself. I complain less. I can lose discussions, hopes, or self-expectations, more easily and much less often, because the talking, hoping, and doing is victory enough already. Without props or toys or comfort, without control of the environment, I have sat and observed who I am when there was no one and nothing to give me clues. It has happened that I have sat, asked for nothing, needed nothing, and felt full. Now my spine and hands have a different turgor. When I am thrown off balance, I can fall somewhat more like a cat than like a two-by-four. When I sit, no one—beloved or enemy—can give me what I lack, or take away what I am.

So as I live all day, I can orient myself into becoming the person I will have to live with when I next sit. No one else's commentary of praise or blame can mediate my own confrontation with the observed facts of who I am. I'm not as bad as I thought I was—and worse. But I'm definitely sprouting and real. It's a pleasure to relinquish yearning and fighting back, and to permit ripples. And I sit to share companionship with other spring bulbs. I feel like one leaf in a deciduous forest: specific, small, fragile, all alone with my fate, yet shaking in a vast and murmuring company.

IX

Sitting is a response to, and an expression of, my social and historical conditions. Although I practice an ancient way that has been passed on from person to person for two and a half millennia and must be useful and meaningful under a variety of conditions, I sought and learned this practice for reasons particular to myself.

One of the most powerful forces that pushed my life into the form it has taken was World War II, which ended, almost to the day, when I was born. It was a backdrop, very present in my parents' sense of the world, and in other adults around me, that left little scope for hope. Fear seemed the only rational state of mind, self-defense the only rational

posture. Cultured, civilized men had just engaged in an extended, calculated, concerted sadism the scope of which is incomprehensible. Victory by goodness had brought reactive evil: nuclear weapons. The worldview I was taught and absorbed was to study hard, save my money, and build my own self-protective world, using the liberal, rational, scientific cultures as stepping stones to an anxious fiefdom of private family life. It was only in that private space that the sweet kernel of affection and idealistic aspiration could be unveiled. I did that well, and to some extent it worked.

Yet at the same time I had been guided to, and later chose to, spend my summers in the woods learning about white-tailed deer, mosquitoes, freedom, and canoes, surrounded, it seemed, by a primal monistic goodness that I located in nature and those who lived close to it. I read Thoreau the way many people read the Bible. The world of cold streams running under shady hemlocks, and its ecstatic prophets, seemed an antidote to the haunted, dull, convention-bound, anxious lives of my immediate environment. Moving between these two worlds, I learned a dialogue of terror and ecstasy, survivorship and care, that filled me with an urgency to find the middle way. This motivated a search that led through intense intellectual exploration in college, medical school, and psychiatric training, and finally to the art of “sitting,” as taught by S.N. Goenka, a Vipassana meditation teacher from whom my wife and I first took a course near New Delhi in 1974. Those ten days of nothing but focusing on the moment-by-moment reality of body and mind, with awareness and equanimity, gave me the opportunity ironically both to be more absolutely alone and isolated than I had every been before, and at the same time to cast my lot with a tradition, a way, as upheld, manifested, explained, and transmitted by a living person. I am continuously grateful to Goenka for the receipt of this technique.

Vipassana meditation was preserved in Asia for two thousand five hundred years since its discovery by Gotama, the historical Buddha. His technique of living was labeled, by western scholars, “Buddhism,” but it is not an “ism,” a system of thought. It is a practice, a method, a tool of living persons. It does not end its practitioner’s search. For me, it provides a compass, a spy glass, a map for further journeys. With daily practice, and intensive retreats mixed into the years, I find the marriage of autonomy and heritage, membership and lonely continuity. Vipassana is the binoculars—now I can search for the elusive bird.

Before I received instructions in how to sit, my journey through life was predominantly intellectual. I had found lectures and books to be inspiring, suggestive, artful, but evasive. One could advise, one could talk, one could write. But sitting is a way for me to stand for something, to sit as something, not just with words, but with my mind, body, and life. Here is a way to descend by stages, protected by teacher, teaching, technique, and practice, into the light and darkness in me, the Hitler and Buddha in me, the frightened child of a holocaust world riding a slow bus in winter through dark city streets, and the striding, backpacking youth wandering through sunlight cathedrals of Douglas fir, who, shouting or whimpering, spans the vocabulary of human potentials from sadism to love.

I now can see that I carry the whip and boots of the torturer, I suffer with the naked, I drink from mountain streams with poets and explorers. All these lives live in me. And I find ways, often covert and symbolic, to express these psychological potentials in me as overt actions in my daily life. Everything I am springs from the universally human. I cause myself, I express myself, as the conditions of the world roll through me. I see this fact, as I sit, as clearly as I see the impact of history and the inspiration of vision. I sit in clear confrontation with everything that has impinged on me and caused me to react, and in reacting, I mold myself.

Life begins in a welter of conditions; mere reactions to these conditions forge

limitations; awareness of and conscious response to conditions produces freedom. This clarity regarding my choices enables me to return from sitting to action as a more focused, concentrated vector of knowing, empathic life.

Sitting itself transforms my motives for sitting. I started in my own historical circumstances, but I was given a technique that has been useful in millions of circumstances over thousands of years. I started with personal issues, and I have been given timeless perspectives to broaden my viewpoint. My search is particular, but not unique. The transmission of this tool has made my work possible. Because others have launched the quest for a fully human life, because others will follow, my own frailty, or villainy, can become meaningful, because these are the soil which I must use to grow. And my own efforts, however great they feel to me, are in the shadow of the much greater efforts of others.

I can flower as one shrub in a limitless forest of unending cycles of life. To flower, for a human being, is to work on the science of honest observation that enables a true picture of humanity to be born. Even coming from my conditioning of nihilism and dread, without the comfort of simple beliefs, aware of awesome human evil and hatred, of wars that kill decamillions, I can be, I will be, an expression of contentless faith. I cannot be much but I can root deep into what is true, how to see it, and how to pass it on.

In response to the overwhelming sense of evil, fear, meaninglessness, and paranoid privatism of my times, and in response to the hope, idealism, and pregnant sense of eternity of my youth, I learned to sit, to better stand for what I found most true. This helps me live out what had before been an unconscious faith. It helps me express something healing, useful (in both my personal and professional life), and meaningful to me despite apparently absurd conditions, because it is a link to the universal. It puts me in touch with the fundamentally human that is present in every gesture of mine, and every action of other people, in each immediacy. This in turn has enabled me to join with the generative dance of nature. I practice knowing myself, and make that the workshop of the day. I refrain from measuring events by my own inchworm life. I frequently forget time, and so join history.

X

I sit in solitude to lose my isolation. What is least noble in me rises up to the surface of my mind, and this drives me on to be more than I was. When I am most shut into my dark self I find the real source of my belonging.

Freud claimed that the bedrock of human fear is castration anxiety. This, he felt, is more feared than death itself. I understand castration anxiety to mean physical pain, bodily mutilation, and social isolation, ostracism, loss of membership, generativity, continuity in the cycle of generations. The two greatest difficulties I have, in fact, faced while sitting for extended hours or days are physical pain, and the loss of the social position that I had previously seemed headed for and entitled to in the community of men. Pain that starts in the knees or back can flood the whole body and burn on and on. The self-protection of calculated membership, and its comfortable rewards, are lost to me in those aching, endless hours.

I imagine my other options: a better house, winter vacations in the tropics, the respect of colleagues listening to me speak as I climb the career ladder. I imagine the financial crises I am less prepared to withstand. I imagine the humiliating rejection that crushes the refugee from poverty or racism or any form of powerlessness, all of which are in my heritage and possibly in my future (and in anyone's heritage or future if you look far enough). Why do I sit there? A thrush hops onto a low limb at the edge of a wooded clearing and shatters the Vermont evening with triumphant song. Knowing yet staying, I am an inheritor and transmitter, flooded with gifts from those who loved and left their

trace; and this still, glowing, posture is the song of my species.

Sitting helps me overcome my deepest fears. I become freer to live from my heart, and to face the consequences, but also to reap the rewards of this authenticity. Much of what I called pain was really loneliness and fear. It passes, dissolves, with that observation. The vibrations of my body are humming the song that can be heard only when dawn and dusk are simultaneous, instantaneous, continuous. I feel a burst of stern effort is a small price to pay to hear this inner music—fertile music from the heart of life itself.

It has been my fortune along the way to find and follow many friends who, like long unobserved mushrooms, no longer can be shaken from the stump because their roots have reached the heartwood. From them I have caught a glimmer of two lights: devotion and integrity. And it has been an extra pleasure—and sometimes I think a necessity—to be able to sit beside my wife. Even the stars move in constellations.

XI

I sit to find mental freedom. I was lucky to be able to think rationally, logically, scientifically, in a culture where focused, aggressive thought is the sword of survival. But even Reason's greatest apologist, Socrates, balanced himself with equal reverence for mythopoetic knowing. In fact, many Socratic dialogues point towards the limits of logic and the essential role of myth. As I sit, a million thoughts cross my mind, but in keeping with the traditions passed on from ancient India's great teachers, I attempt to let all of them go, to let them pass like clouds, like water, like time. Needless to say, I often get caught and find myself spinning around one point like a kite trapped by the uppermost twig. But eventually boredom, exhaustion, will-power, or insight—the wind—spins me free and I'm off again.

Sitting gives me a way back to fluctuant, preformed mind, the pregnant atmosphere in which metaphor, intuition, and reason are sparks. Surrounded by a culture of intellectual conquest, I have a preserve of wholeness, a sanctuary in which the wild deer of poetry and song can slip in and out among the trunks of medical cases and conferences. In this sense, sitting is also a nag, tattletale, a wagging finger, reminding me as well as enabling me. I've got to return to the potential, because any one tack is just a shifting situational response to the originless wind.

XII

I sit to anchor my life in certain moods, organize my life around my heart and mind, and to radiate out to others what I find. Though I shake in strong winds, I return to this basic way of living. I can't throw away my boy's ideals and my old man's smile. The easy, soothing comfort and deep relaxation that accompany intense awareness in stillness, peel my life like an onion to deeper layers of truth, which in turn are scoured and soothed until the next layer opens. I sit to discipline my life by what is clear, simple, self-fulfilling, and universal in my heart. There is no end to this job. I have failed to really live many days of my life, but I dive again and again into the plain guidance of self-containment and loving receipt. I sit to find and express simple human love and common decency.

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