

A Portrait of the Therapist as a Jung Man

By Reid Stell

PART ONE

Beginning

Long ago, in a small, faraway fishing village, there lived a boy who thought too much. He also felt too much and he often wanted too much. In fact, from time to time, he found himself wanting everything. And though he didn't know what everything meant or where everything was, he still wanted all of it; including the illusive something called understanding.

One of the things he thought too much about was also one of the things he wanted: He wanted to be a normal boy. He knew he was not normal and this troubled him deeply. He knew he was not normal because all around him were ways of measuring up to what was considered utterly and absolutely normal back then. The boy knew that powerful authorities provided ideal standards and measuring devices for judging what and who was considered ideal and therefore normal. Most of those measurement standards were delivered through advertising and religion. The boy could tell from watching and reading and listening to the advertisements, paid for by these mighty, unseen forces which he knew nothing about, that he was far from ideal. He judged himself about as far from normal as any boy might be. This was confirmed when he read the Bible and listened to his Sunday school teachers and ministers and deacons and elders. He believed he was doomed.

He might have given up wanting everything else if he could have had just this one thing: to just be normal. But he did not have it and he knew he could never have it. He also knew he could never have a normal father or a normal mother. It was too late for that, for he knew he was too old to change families. His sister had changed families. His family had adopted her when she was three days old. He often wondered how her family had compared to his in the normality department. He wondered if they missed her, or if his family would have missed him if he had been given away. He thought that if he had been given away to one of his friends' families when he was three days old, where the parents were normal, then maybe he would feel normal too; that he would be like the kids in those other families.

It would be many years before he learned the amazing truth that would have helped him to cope with his abnormal life: that this thing he wanted doesn't exist; that "normal" is a made-up idea and not a real thing, and that knowing this unexpected truth is better than having everything else. But even if he had heard this counter-

idea way back then—that normal is a myth—he would not have believed it. Because we believe what we want to believe, and back then, he wanted to believe that normal is possible.

By the time the boy had reached the seventh grade, he was hopelessly confused. He thought he knew what normal was but he had almost given up hope of discovering how to be it. He felt lost. He felt doomed to wonder about the “everything” he had wanted as a small child, about why he felt the way he felt, and most of all, what makes other people think and feel and do what they do. He wondered what it would feel like to be one of the normal people, or to be one of the authorities. He wondered what they had had to do to be that way. He would spend a lot of time in the school library, trying to figure out why life was so confusing, why all the messages he received from all the authority figures seemed to go against him. He wanted to figure out what was really going on.

Eventually, he decided that his wish of being normal was a thing that he simply could not attain. So he lowered his sights and decided he only wanted to understand the world. He reached for the books that seemed to be written about trying to understand the world. To quote James Joyce (who would later become the boy’s favorite wonderer), who was quoting Ovid, the exiled Roman poet, *Et ignotas animum dimittit in artes* (“And he turned his mind to unknown arts”). The boy read history, which made no sense to him; he read philosophy, which started to turn all his notions of normal upside-down; and he read books on the strangest subject of all: psychology.

Forty-seven years later, the boy, who now looked like a man, sat in a consulting room in his office with a group of anonymous individuals. They were talking about symptoms, dysfunctions, resentments, fears, pain, longings, regrets, losses, desires, trust, responsibility, and beliefs. The boy was facilitating group therapy. Later that week, he would post on his website the following comments:

Thanks for the great discussion on Wednesday, folks. Who knew that Charlie the Tuna, a crass commercial spokesman from the 60's, could spark such insights into self-esteem?

We want to be accepted and appreciated, but at what cost? If we are deemed "good enough" by society, do we lose ourselves, our individuality? Do we have to give up our special flavor in the process? Is it really the "finest" tuna that gets packaged into uniform cans and sold to the masses of cooperative consumers, hungry for the sustenance which feeds their desire for what's familiar and expected?

[1962 commercial](#)

Surely it's the tuna with no personality, no anxiety about life out of water, no depression about an unlived, deep destiny; surely it is they who accept the hook of the unseen entities on the surface of this vast sea—those anonymous overseers who float above it all and make the judgments about our quality, our fitness for duty, our non-otherness. What does it take to question the conventional “wisdom” of our time? Does it take letting go of what we think normal is supposed to be? It's not the 1960's anymore. So what have we learned? What will future misfits say about how genuineness was treated in the 2010's?

I want to remind you of that quote we talked about:

“...I myself stand in need of the alms of my own kindness...I myself am the enemy who must be loved...” *C.G. Jung*

Here's to taking the risk of responsibility, to speaking out, to standing up for the unwashed, to seeing what's on the roof, for choosing as much genuineness as we can stand, for choosing a different path—at least for now—if only to discover where it might lead.

The boy had left that fishing village of his youth, never to return. Eschewing his earlier fantasies of becoming a monk, his journey had led him straight to a career in advertising. He had embraced the very gods that had made him feel so different, so unworthy of having what he wanted, so confused about life. When he first entered that otherworldly world, he told himself he was only spying for the counterculture, that he would beat the authorities at their own game. But deep down, he knew he had turned his back on his quest for understanding; that the more he tried to fit in or to not fit in, the farther he got from the knowledge he sought.

When he turned 50, he left the old world he tried to know in favor of one he could never know. He turned his mind back to the unknown art he was destined to belong to. In middle age, when so many of us find ourselves in dire straits, he was forced to face what Dante faced in his *Divine Comedy*: “Midway in life's journey, I awoke in a dark wood, having lost my way.”



The 50-year-old boy sought the advice of a counselor. And then he went back to school and became one. His years of struggle against a current of mythic normalcy had prepared him to recognize the unfulfilled psychic potential in the people whose journeys he would join. He would feel his clients' yearnings for something undiscovered in them, to experience the calling of their yet-unlived lives.

Where do therapists come from? They come from broken homes and orphanages, from alcoholic families and cults, from trauma and tragedy, from confusion, from abuse, and from disturbed, disaffected, and detached places in human hearts. James Hollis, the eminent Jungian analyst, author, and lecturer, has said many times that "at some point in life, if your psychic disturbances are great enough, that is, if there is enough unresolved conflict between your true self and your false self, you will enter therapy. And if the disturbance is exceptionally great, you might become a therapist."

Finally, the boy had gotten his wish. He had learned about the power of unconditional positive regard, that acceptance is contagious. He had learned that understanding is about believing in questions, not answers. He had found that illusive "everything" he had been searching for all those years. He had found himself. And he was just getting started.

PART TWO

Adolescence

Gig Harbor was an isolated place in 1940, only accessible from nearby "civilization" by small, steam-powered passenger ferries called mosquitoes. If remote, sleepy fishing villages have consciousness, then you could say this village liked the separation very much. The collective unconscious of its inhabitants felt comfortably removed from all that noise, traffic, and general hubbub that crowded way of life had to offer.



When a mile-long suspension bridge was opened on July 1st of that year, the village somehow tolerated it for four months, then arranged for the wind to knock it down.



[Galloping Gertie Video](#)

But there was more: The world was at war again (only 22 years after the end of The War to End All Wars), The U.S.'s first third-term president was elected, nylon stockings were introduced, Bugs Bunny appeared on movie screens, the first McDonald Restaurant opened, and Leon Trotsky was assassinated. In short, up was down and down was up.

Eighty years earlier, Scandinavian and Slavic settlers had elbowed in between Suquamish villages to call this heavily-forested temperate paradise their home. For thousands of years the place had been teeming with crab, clams, oysters, deer, and salmon, seemingly waiting for their abundance to be enjoyed.



By the time our seven-year-old hero, the future psychodynamic therapist, arrived in Gig Harbor in 1963, a new, wind-resistant bridge had been standing for 13 years. But

the toll collectors ensured that the villagers' isolation would be maintained for years to come. After all, who had \$1.50 to spend on a roundtrip toll—just for the privilege of living in village and working Tacoma?



In 1968 the Tet Offensive snuffed out the light at the end of the U.S.'s Vietnam War tunnel. Our spy ship Pueblo was seized by North Korea. Two men were assassinated in our homeland: a King and a man who would be president. American black Olympic champions raised angry fists in Mexico City. The Beatles sang about pot, LSD, fixing holes, leaving home, getting better, and the existential angst of "...people who gain the world and lose their soul."

[Within You Without You](#)

It was the end of America's innocence, and the boy was barely a teenager. But the roads were empty and his Schwinn Stingray had three speeds. He rode through the woods on hard-packed logging roads (2nd gear), up steep hills because they were there (1st gear), and down to Horseshoe Lake to swim (3rd gear). He rode past farms and log houses and sprawling pastures, wondering how far he would have to go to find a home where he felt he belonged,



On one memorable day, a day he was to think about continually until he died, he passed a barn. And in the distance, the horizon beckoned. He felt himself filling up that space—the space between his body and his bike and the rim of trees and the Olympic Mountains all those miles away. And he theorized that a person's soul

stretches as far as he can see; and that this is why people climb mountains: to feel their souls expand.



We never leave the child inside us behind, and in the session room he or she is ever present, whether we are counselor or client. Clients are more likely to be haunted by their unprocessed childhood traumas whereas therapists are informed by them. We therapists, we wounded healers, march ever forward into the breach. Part of why we become counselors has to do with facing our past, the other part is all about answering our calling to accompany others on their journeys toward repair and wholeness.

Jean-Paul Sartre said, “Freedom is what you do with what’s been done to you.” I paraphrase his admonition like this: “The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree. But sometimes it sticks out its thumb and gets a lift out of town, and ends up miles away—or a lifetime away—from the shade of its past.” Sartre’s is better, but seeing the world metaphorically is what those practicing depth psychology do. It’s who we are.

We could not do what we do as professionals if we did not come from where we came. And we cannot develop our talents and skills without continuing to get to know the real us. How can we propose to clients that insight and self-acceptance are essential to pushing through the fog of pathology, symptomology, and “dysorderliness,” if we don’t model the same aspirational practices?

Here are ten questions the great Jungian analyst, James Hollis, asks his patients, in an effort to help them get below the surface, to access the unconscious, to cut through the facade of persona and coax out some personal truth from that brooding, secretive, resource known as psyche:

1. Who am I?
2. Am I what I’ve done?
3. Am I what has happened to me?
4. How is the real me different from the outward me?

5. What do I fear?
6. Are these the same ones I had as a child?
7. Who will I become?
8. If I am a mansion, what rooms do I want to discover?
9. What answers from my youth are no longer relevant?
10. Why do I believe what I believe?

I invite you to ask your clients these same questions. More importantly, I hope you will ask them of yourself. We can be misled by thinking that professional development is an external practice, that we need to gather more learning from experts in our field and increase our knowledge of the current “best practices” or the newest “evidence-based treatments.” Who can resist learning a new trick to spice up our familiar approach? But who among us would doubt that the real magic in the session room comes from the limitless interdependent perspective that lies within?

PART THREE

The Practice

If you build a better mousetrap the world will beat a path to your door. Even if you only build a decent mousetrap a lot of folks will want to find you and try yours. In my experience, most people in the market to trap mice have tried a number of other traps before they happen upon your design. But they don't just happen upon you, of course. They do some kind of search. They ask friends about their own experiences, they talk to their doctor, or they contact their insurance company for referrals. There are many ways to skin a cat, but more often than not they get online and specify the kind of pest relief they think they need. Furry metaphors notwithstanding, getting found by these potential clients is at least as big a hurdle as getting licensed. But hey, we're supposed to understand psychology, why aren't we better at marketing our private practices?



If you are an established therapist with a broad referral network, or you're in a number of good insurance networks, or you work in an under-saturated community, then you have no need for advice from me. You are not in the same boat as so many of us counselors out here in the dog-eat-dog world of non-community mental healthcare. I answered my calling to become a helping profession only seven years ago, and I've only been practicing on my own for four years. If you're also just starting out, you know that these new times can be challenging for new practices. If your workload is not where you'd like it to be, I have a few tips that may be helpful.

When I entered grad school my intent was to leave the world of sales and marketing far behind. That was my old "meaningless" life. My new "enlightened" life was only about healing and transformation, and definitely not about brand messaging, market share, and return on investment. What a lovely dream that was for awhile!



I will not throw out the depressing statistics about the declining number of individuals seeking psychotherapy over the last two decades to help solve their emotional and behavior problems compared to those seeking well-advertised and doctor promoted psychotropic medicines. (But if you want to, you can read the American Psychological Association's article, "[Where has all the Psychotherapy Gone?](#)") And I won't rail against a healthcare industry and its big pharma bedfellows. But I will point toward the new wisdom when it comes to selling your practice.

The idea of long-term therapy is not as much a part of modern thinking as it used to be. Today's clients, even the older ones, want help right now. Remember, they're not buying a mousetrap, they're buying the feeling they'll have when the mice are gone. It's the solution they want so that's what we need to offer them. It's sales and marketing 101. Yes, I wanted to forget all about that huckstery stuff, and maybe the thought of selling yourself gives you the creeps too. But the reality of this marketplace dictates that we need to think differently. Hey, that's what we teach clients to do. Let's reframe our disdain for marketing the same way we push for compassion. Maybe we need to convince ourselves that these practices are just part of the new price for doing what we love.

In a nutshell, here's the best advice I know: Brand yourself as a specialist who solves problems efficiently. Get yourself an attractive website which features modern touches like videos of you discussing specific problems you are expert at working with. On your site and other marketing materials, ask the questions that your narrowly targeted audience would want to ask: "What do I do when my child won't

listen to me?” “How do I know if my marriage can be saved?” “How can I get over my social anxiety once and for all?”

And once we get their attention, we need to keep it. We need to make them know that we are a good fit for what they’re looking for. They need to like what they see in us right away—whether that’s our homepage or the initial free phone consultation or the first visit. I still make the mistake of taking clients at their word when they say they want to get started right away. They really don’t. They actually only want to feel hopeful right away, but they don’t want to know about the work they’ll have to do. It may feel dishonest (it sure does to me) but I think it’s best to stay a little superficial at first, at least until I can build some trust and they feel invested in the process.

We are not their primary care physician whom they’ll only see twice a year. We will be their weekly companion, a capable guide whom they will trust to help them navigate frightening, mysterious, dangerous terrain they have probably never been able to even look at on a map.

Journalist turned therapist Lori Gottlieb, in her article for the New York Times Magazine entitled “[What Brand Is Your Therapist](#),” describes the disconnect between the empathic, attuned, arcane skill we’re taught in grad school and the marketing sense necessary to present in a relevant way our psychosocial solutions to a target audience. Her story will sound familiar if you’ve tried to be all things to all clients. But the market is not looking for generalists. It wants the exact right answer to their specific situation.

Finally, I’ll offer you 10 tips that I’ve collected during my four first years in private practice. I hope you find them helpful.

1. **Identify the clients you’re best suited to help.** Clients are attracted to specialists who work on their exact issue.
2. **Set yourself apart.** Describe how your particular approach is different.
3. **Offer solutions, not processes.** They need to know you’ve got answers, not just an approach.
4. **Be consistent with your message.** Though you may use different media and materials to get your message out, keep the look and feel coordinated.
5. **Demonstrate expertise right away.** Prove that you are the expert they are looking for by showing them you understand their situation.

6. **Listen.** Those who are new to therapy are not used to being listened to. One of our most powerful therapy skills is also important in sales: relationship building.
7. **Deliver your specialized message in several ways.** Keeping your message consistent doesn't have to be monotonous. Be creative in your word choices.
8. **Evaluate the effectiveness of your marketing.** Set targets so you'll know if you're making progress. This is how real-world companies measure success.
9. **Be a generous resource.** Refer clients outside your expertise to trusted colleagues and ask for referrals which fit your niche.
10. **Be daring.** If you've been cautious up to now and it's not working, maybe boldness is called for. This is your journey, after all. It may be time for your inner hero to step forward!

PART FOUR

Group Work

Irvin Yalom, the father of modern group psychotherapy, taught that groups are places to listen and empathize as well as to be heard and felt. They are psychoeducational microcosms in which the members not only learn through others' experiences but practice new *in vivo* experiences themselves.

Whatever goes on in group therapy, I like it. I like it because I see people change in ways different than in individual counseling. One-on-one therapy is much safer than group work, but that risky dynamic is what makes members' vulnerability pay off. It's a balancing act, and it feels risky leading my weekly anxiety and depression group. But the vulnerability helps me grow as well.

Speaking of balancing acts, "Balance" was the theme of our 90-minute adventure the other night, as a bunch of us sat in a circle and talked and listened and tried on new ways of exploring and being. We typically don't start out with a theme, but often as not, one emerges. There are a million and one ways to look at balance, especially when you think of clients seeking help. Eventually, though they've often gotten used to their daily disequilibrium, living



emotionally off kilter leads them to therapy. And once they consider making personal and interpersonal changes, they have to address what balance would feel like.

"Only the soul knows what the ego might find most fulfilling in life. Only the ego is capable of manifesting in the world the soul's desires."

Bill Plotkin, *Nature and the Human Soul*

Our conversation was like a Sunday drive along an unfamiliar route. We followed where the terrain led, each having a hand at steering. At one point, we made a rolling stop at the intersection of two curious streets: *What We Do* and *Why*. After a moment or two of hesitation, it became clear that continuing blindly onward was not a viable option. We had a choice to make: We could turn left, onto an unlit lane that meandered down a steep slope toward the mysterious depths of the unconscious mind; or we could turn right, onto a spacious boulevard lined with research laboratories and clearly marked as the way to consciousness. We could delve into feeling, emotion, intuition, insight, and the unknown, or we could cruise along the well-marked route toward rational thought, empirical data, and shrewd analysis. This may surprise you, gentle reader, but we chose the scientific route and proceeded immediately to a subject even experts are sketchy on: neuroanatomy.

I've heard people say they don't believe there's such a thing as *left brain* thinking and *right brain* thinking, but I must respectfully discount that opinion as a possible case of *wishful* thinking. It's all right to wish that we are not torn between two ways of perceiving and operating in the world, dictated by nature's bifurcated design idea, to think that our precious brains are not split like a walnut into opposing forces we

may or may not be aware of, but whatever the reason for wanting to believe in a simpler model of how we think, it's just not that simple. There is overwhelming evidence that our left cerebral cortex is in charge of certain of our functions (including being in charge), and our right cerebral cortex is charged with other functions (including not caring about who's in charge).



I summarized what little pertinent info I've retained about the hemispheric differences by citing examples of data collected from stroke survivors ([*My Stroke of Insight, A Brain Scientist's Personal Journey*](#) is one excellent example). I said that it seems fairly clear to me that the thing we call our head or our rational mind or our ego or our logical self, resides in the left frontal cortex and the thing we think of when we think of our soul is probably swirling around up there in the right frontal cortex. Our left mind sees things as well-defined, black and white (that is, either/or), time-bound, measurable, fixed, and serious. Our right mind knows that we are all one, that our place in the world is blended with everyone else's, that reality is infinitely colorful and fluid, that peace and tranquility are always there for the choosing.

I recommend listening to some music that suggests wholeness as you read the rest of this. Here's a [link](#) to the only full-length album by The Postal Service. It's called "Give Up" and has been with us since all the way back in 2003. What's so "wholenessy" about this record? Well, its precise melodies, harmonies, rhythms, and pop structures could only come from left brain order; while the ethereal, sweeping feeling, the metaphorical lyrics, and general impression the compositions and performances leave us with (not to mention the title) is the territory of the right brain. Is it too poppy for you? Why not try this [link](#)? This one is newer, from just three years ago, but it sounds much older, with roots in 70's psychedelic rock. This is Tame Impala's "Lonerism." Enjoy either one as we continue to explore balance together.



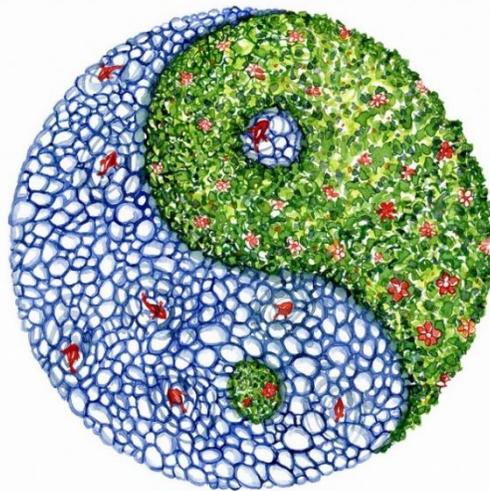
But really, what is there to explore? Why not just practice it? Why not spend some time, as our group did, using words and memories and logic to define what it means to use thoughts to describe our world and our places in it? This is a familiar street for those of us who try and think our way out of situations our emotions have gotten us into. And the familiar is always more comfortable than the new. Even familiar things (and places and people) which are painful or counterproductive or even destructive are often more acceptable to us than venturing toward the unexplored. But this familiar highway only goes so far. Eventually, we come to a dead end and we know we have to head back the way we came. We know it's time to descend down that darker roadway, toward the numinous depths of that thing that is sometimes called the soul.

You can call it your soul, your spirit, your unconscious, your psyche, your dark side, or anything else, because it doesn't care what you call it. It doesn't need to go by any name. It is the unnamed place, or maybe the unnamable place, it is the unexplored territory. Carlos Casteneda called it *A Separate Reality* or *Ixtlan*. Whatever it is, wherever it is, it is much harder for us to explore with our conscious mind. It is, by definition, unconscious. But we know it's there. We feel it when we make decisions that go against our "better judgment," or when we "know" something we couldn't possibly know, or when understanding defies description, or when we fall in love.

When most of us feel imbalanced, it's our right brain that's feeling left out. But it's our left brain that must cooperate if we are to feel in our right mind. Our best guidance system is useless without a place to guide toward. If you want to feel more balance in your life, try this balancing exercise: stop thinking. It's easier said than done, but keep trying. Chances are, the harder you try, the harder it will become; so stop trying. Don't think and also don't not think. This will take a lot of effort and it will take no effort at all. It will make sense and it will make no sense. It will eventually stop being an "it." It may transform to a "not-it." Or it may transform into transformation. Words don't help when describing this shift from imbalance to balance, so listen to music with no words, or in another language. Look at a picture. Or a tree.

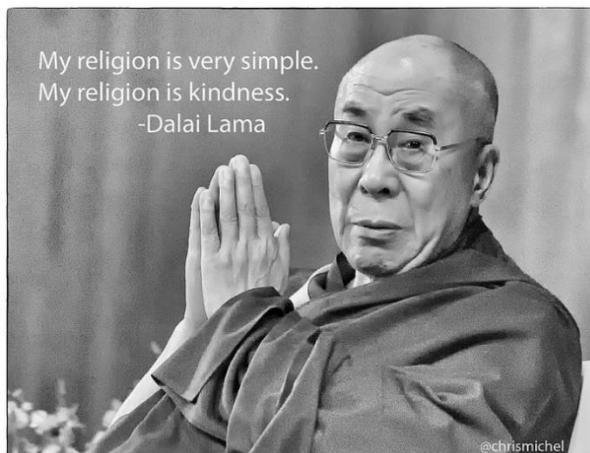
Just as taking the scientific road on our journal to wholeness led us right back to the swamplands of uncertainty, your ego will not like this exercise. But it knows it needs to do things it doesn't like. It knows that it needs its better half, its soulmate, if it's going to ever feel fulfillment. It will eventually cooperate. And when it does, it will stop needing to.

You never know what you're going to get when you step into the consult room. But when you step into the group therapy room, you know it has the potential to take you far from home. More egos and souls in the room means more variables to be surprised and thrown by; and the surprises all have stories attached; and the stories weave together into one story. And you get to do it all again next week!



PART FIVE

Lovingkindness Meditation in Therapy



When David Richo, the Jesuit-trained, Zen Buddhist and Jungian psychotherapist, leads meditation retreats, he is sometimes asked very difficult questions during the teaching breaks. But he's used to it. What he is teaching is also very difficult: "How to Be an Adult!"

But despite the difficult subject matter and despite the difficult questions, his answer is often surprisingly simple. When he is asked, "What can I do in the following impossible situation?" or

"What should I say when this awful scenario unfolds?" he advises his questioners to

repeat a phrase taught to him by the Dalai Lama, and to repeat it as many times as it takes for them to be reminded that control over our reactions is a choice.

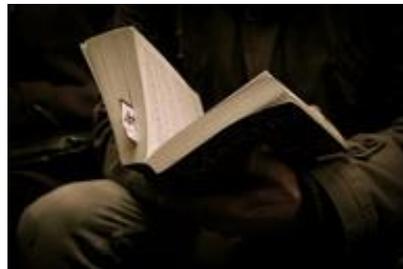
Here is that phrase:

***May I show all the love I have
In any way I can
Here, now, and all the time,
To everything and everyone, including me,
Since love is what we are—and why.
Now nothing matters to me more
Or gives me greater joy.***

[Lovingkindness meditation](#) is an ancient practice accessible to all those willing to open their hearts to the selfless goodness abounding and abiding within. This font of love is sometimes buried deep beneath a foundation of cracked and deformed bedrock laid down before we can remember. But accessing it can change our outlook and thereby change the world we create every day.

Clients are sometimes wary of the idea that something so simple can be useful to them. Couldn't they just take a sophisticated drug? Couldn't I just use magic on them? But lovingkindness is as sophisticated as it is magic. When I lead them through it in my office, it can come as a shock to their system. They're not used to being so generous with their love. But they often find it's worth the shock. Hey, what they've been doing all these years hasn't worked, so why not try it?

***Click on the book
to learn how to commit
to lovingkindness
for someone,
for many someones
for the world
and even for yourself:***



Click on the mushroom to hear a guided lovingkindness meditation. You or your client will be gently helped to help your thoughts and feelings cooperate with your intention to radiate the love, kindness, and goodness that resides within you.

Two very simple methods are demonstrated for stopping negative thought patterns in their misguided tracks and redirecting them toward positivity. These practices are more than 2,500 years old, yet they feel fresh and new and revolutionary. For those not used to tapping into this aspect of the Self, it can be quite eye-opening. As I

continue to discover, encountering a state of ultimate peace and happiness is not so mysterious. It is within anyone's grasp. It only takes trying.

PART SIX

The Wishing Well

The boy had become a therapist. He had attained his heart's desire. It would be years before his student loans were paid off, before he was in all the insurance networks he thought he wanted, before he felt secure. But he was on his way. He was 59 years old, his schedule was full, and he was helping. What could go wrong?

He had tried several office settings before settling, like Goldie Locks, on that illusive perfect fit. He had rented a shabby-but-affordable office by the hour, he had shared space in a large a la carte practice setting, he had temporarily joined a multidisciplinary practice, but eventually he came to share space with several other therapists in a small suite of four consult rooms, a waiting room (with coffee, tea, and music), a closet converted to a mini-workroom, and some storage cabinets. The suite was in a tall office building occupied by lots of other healthcare providers. His office was on a high floor with a view (on clear days) of Mt. Rainier.

One of the first things our hero noticed as he was moving in was the private, staff-only bathroom. It was not for clients, just for the main tenant (another therapist) and the subletters. Our hero liked having a private bathroom. It felt very grown up to him. At nearly 60, he didn't always feel so grown up, but knowing that room was just for professionals, who had worked hard to get this far, made him feel like a man.

It wasn't the kind of bathroom you could take a bath in. It was more of a lavatory, a washroom (if you translate lavatorium from the Latin). It was perhaps twice the size of lavatory on a 737, with just enough room for a small sink and a small toilet. The sink and toilet were not as small as you'd find in the lavatory of a 737—that would be weird—they were like you'd find in a small house. But in a tall building with 19 floors full of surgeons and physical therapists and dentists and radiologists and psychiatrists, our hero expected large, industrial-sized toilets to be the norm. And they were the norm in the public restrooms on every floor by the elevators. But that norm apparently didn't apply to the hero's private lavatory.



And the small, home-style toilet would have been fine. He was used to small toilets. He'd lived in lots of apartments and houses and he was well acquainted with that size of toilet. And it fit in this private restroom quite nicely. The toilet wasn't the problem per se, it was the seat. The seat was the large, industrial type of seat you'd find on a large, industrial toilet and so it did not fit this little toilet properly. That is, the hard plastic, hinged

seat didn't match up with the porcelain bowl at all. It was so large by comparison that it sat very far forward on the bowl. The back of the seat covered quite a lot of the opening of the bowl, so when you sat on it, there was not much of the opening exposed. This resulted in a very small "target area" when seated, leaving cold porcelain at the front end of said target area.

He was not a complainer, and there was so much right with the suite that, by in large, he was very satisfied. Still, though he was not the most assertive counselor you might meet, he was able to raise the issue with his friend, colleague, and landlord.

The landlord understood completely and passed the complaint on to the building management company. They sent their maintenance team right up. And before you



knew it, there was a properly fitting seat installed on the diminutive throne. But there was a new problem. The new toilet seat was one of those squishy ones. It was one you might see in a grandmother's house, or a great-grandmother's house. And sitting on that vinyl-covered padding felt very creepy. All that being said, one complaint per toilet was all our hero had in him. So he decided to accept his fate, the same fate his suitemates would also have to suffer.

Months went by and apparently no one else cared about that squishy seat, though it seemed self-evident that getting it truly clean was unimaginable. To be sure, worse toilet-related events had happened and would surely happen again. Our hero knew firsthand that this was true, thanks to his numerous experiences with train station toilets in Spain in the 1970's. So, he settled in to the notion that this was just another in a series of lessons he needed to learn. What this particular lesson might be, he couldn't guess. "Be careful what you wish for?" "Things can always get worse?" "Caveat emptor?" Whatever the lesson was, our hero had learned it somehow. Or had he?

More time passed and the boy would soon have an important birthday. As he contemplated what it meant to pass this momentous milestone, and reminisced about his psychotherapeutic practice and all that had come with it during the preceding twelve months, his thoughts turned to the advice in Richard Carlson's book, *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff*. Our hero decided to try and stop thinking of small things in favor of thinking about some larger ones. As he felt his efforts paying off, his thinking did indeed enlarge and he was able to push aside a lot of "small stuff" that now seemed too insignificant to bother with.

Turning his mind to "big stuff," if there were such a thing, he felt expansive, the way he felt on his bike, riding around Horseshoe Lake, through Crescent Valley, and through the countryside surrounding Gig Harbor when he was young but not young, when he was free but not free, when he was preparing to become himself. Eventually, he thought about something that seemed significant. It seemed important enough to write about:

Journal Entry on My 60th Birthday

There are four legendary elements. But we would know this without legends. These elements manifest as Fire, Water, Earth, and Air. When we encounter one of these, fire, for example, we tend to become silent. We stare into the campfire and feel lost in thought, or lost in the absence of thought, in "no-thought," as Buddhists call it.

Likewise, when we encounter the forceful power of a great waterfall or of the sea, we lose ourselves in its vastness, feeling as small as we actually are in this immeasurable universe. We stare silently, listening, perhaps remembering something from long before our ancestors were born.

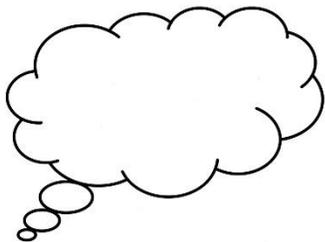
And when we gaze at a sweeping landscape, stretching in all directions, pushing past the periphery of our perception and imagination, we are reminded how far we can go in any direction, perhaps in search of ourselves. We fall quiet, dumbstruck as searchers always have when encountering such paradoxes.

But what of the fourth element, air? We ignore so easily for most of our waking lives this essential, invisible mixture of gases, vapors, and particles that surrounds and penetrates us. We don't

have to seek it out, we only need to breathe and be present with it. When we focus on our breath, then we appreciate air. When we sit silently, or walk silently, or run or swim, or dance or cook silently, it is then we can become mindful of and be struck with awe at this fourth element.

We can go a long time without encountering the first three in their immense glory, without seeing and smelling expanses of earth or ocean, without being overwhelmed by the power of leaping, consuming flames. But our breath is permanently and steadfastly with us wherever we go. We only have to pay attention to it, to hold it in our awareness, to accept the primordial, biochemical, almost divine essence it contains; to remember what we do not know, to reconnect with everything and anything; to feel whole and holy.

Re-reading his journal, our hero wondered if these new thoughts were possibly profound or merely pretentious. He wondered if this was just another example of his thinking too much. He wondered if thinking about feelings was worse than just feeling them. Then, he wondered how we can ever know what is better in life and what is worse until after we commit to one or the other. He made a concerted effort to practice no-thought. He tried just feeling. Then he tried just being.



After letting things be for a while, he was pretty sure he could never be sure about whether the thoughts he felt compelled to write in his journal were worthwhile. He decided that if he kept them to himself they would probably be as profound as he wanted them to be, and that if he showed them to others their pretense would be open to the subjective scrutiny they deserved.

In the end, he took the middle path. He compromised. He shared them with a select few only. And he left it up to them to decide for themselves if he was onto something. Perhaps he *had* learned something from that squishy toilet seat after all.

Reid Stell, LMHC, is in private practice in Seattle and Bellevue. Professional development chair of the Washington Mental Health Counselors Association, he previously served as their executive director.