



Giving Judas a Chance

The Vision and Venture of Weaving Many Lives

PIETRO ARCHIATI

“Archiatì gives us a fresh viewpoint regarding Reincarnation and Karma that allows the reader to think from a new perspective.”

—JAMES REDFIELD

author of the Celestine Prophecy

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*The Vision and Venture of Weaving
Many Lives*

Pietro Archiati

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FOREWORD

by Joy Redfield Kwapien

It was on a warm Southern weekend retreat two years ago that I met Pietro Archiati for the first time. I will not elaborate upon the lengthy interplay of synchronistic events that led us to this retreat and his lectures. In retrospect, our meeting was against all odds, but thankfully I listened to “higher voices”, and made plans to attend. I must mention how important it is for humanity to become more and more aware of the pattern of events in our individual lives. How proud I am that my brother James Redfield wrote such a book as the “Celestine Prophecy,” and among other things awakened many to the importance of the subtleties of “synchronicity”.

I will try to give you a “glimpse” of Archiati, so that you may see the relevance of what he brings to humanity. As a religious scholar, he persistently searched for answers to the many questions of life that not only he, but many of us encounter. With his innate gift for languages, he went beyond the popular prose of the Scriptures and searched in the original Greek and Hebrew texts.

I believe that many of us process “unknown” or “new” information in one of two ways. We approach it analytically or intellectually, based on the sum of our previous experiences; or we merely “feel” or “intuit” that the information is believable.

Those who exist in the realm of the feelings are often uncomfortable intellectually analyzing new data by “thinking” through them. Those in the thinking realm are often uncomfortable trusting their intuition. How beautiful it is when we can blend the two, and have a meeting of the head and heart. Thus, approaching spiritual data with clear thinking is the brilliant blend we encounter in Archiati’s work.

Pietro has taken elusive, controversial issues relevant to our time and lectured on them from continent to continent, sharing his ideas with thousands of people. He has seen a future when humanity will no longer need an intercessor to determine communication between the Divine and themselves. As we begin a new millennium, one can certainly feel a new awareness emerging.

That summer, Pietro travelled from coast to coast, lecturing and answering questions from many Americans. For most of us, a lack of true answers leaves our questions lying dormant, but never dead. Archiati enlivens us by giving us fresh fuel with which to approach answers that lie at the divine centre of our soul. Pietro Archiati has published several books in German and Italian; they will be made available as needed in English. In this present autobiographical work centering around the question of reincarnation and karma, one can view Christianity from a new perspective. Archiati gives us a convincing view of the natural alliance between the teaching of Christ and the evolutionary laws of reincarnation and karma. In this age of enlightenment and of the emergence of the conscious individual, we are ready to take Archiati’s thoughts

out of the realm of the hidden, isolated, and even heretical. As Henry David Thoreau said: “We need to witness our own limits transgressed, and some life pasturing freely where we never wander”.

In “Giving Judas a Chance,” Archiati suggests a pathway whereby each of us may discover his individual truth. As we approach the laden mist of spiritual data with new tools, we can wander new pastures with clear thinking, so that, instead of merely absorbing more information, we emerge triumphant with true inner knowledge. Knowledge that brings enlightenment to the whole of our global family.

Joy Redfield Kwapien

PREFACE BY THE AUTHOR

This book is the result of my trying to do justice to the inextricable intertwining of truth and life, to the mutuality of what is universal and what is individual. It constantly alternates between autobiography and imagination, between being personal and seeking to disappear.

Many of us nowadays think that what our outer senses perceive is more real than what we experience inwardly. I think the very opposite is true: what goes on within us is more real to us and more consequential to our lives than all external reality. It is this conviction that has guided me in writing every page of this book.

In looking for an appropriate form to convey my experiences and thoughts, I could find no better one than the form of conversation. The Platonic dialogues have been the foundation of Western culture for nearly two and a half millennia. In conversing with one another, human beings can perhaps best look at reality from ever new points of view. A dialogue can be the most dynamic experience, challenging us to remain alive and creative.

Black Forest (Germany), October 1998.

Pietro Archiati

CHAPTER 1

REVIEWING MY OWN LIFE

(BLACK FOREST, 1998)

I was glad it was Carol, Dan and Rita who rang the doorbell. Having set my mind on writing a book specifically for America, I now needed some positive input — so what better people to ask than these three?

Carol, Dan's mother from New Jersey, keeps a close track of what is going on in the world today, especially in the U.S. She is rather pessimistic about the way Humanity is evolving at present, and she is particularly concerned that moral standards have reached an all time low.

Her son Dan represents the young American fully immersed in today's world of science and technology, keeping up on the latest innovations and excited to live at the present time.

Rita, Dan's German friend, is particularly interested in the spiritual quest of Humanity, in the new awareness and vision emerging in many people. So it is not surprising that it was she who eventually turned the subject of our conversation to my book.

"How is your new book coming along?" she asked with genuine interest.

“I’m not sure,” I replied. “I’ve been writing and rewriting it. I want to say something meaningful, but nowadays you don’t have a chance of being read unless you are entertaining at the same time.”

“What is wrong with that?” Rita asked.

“Well,” I replied, “everything I have written so far seems to me too dry for the average American reader. Do you have any suggestions?”

“I think there are many people out there,” she answered, “who are sincerely searching. In increasing numbers, people are looking for personal spiritual experiences. There really seems to be a new awareness emerging in Humanity, but the danger is that many attempts to experience the supersensible remain purely subjective. I think many are looking for basic orientations to interpret their spiritual experiences, similar to the orientations science gives us to understand the physical world. If you have any contribution to give in this regard, I’m sure enough people will be interested in what you have to say.”

“Can you give me a specific example of what you mean?” I asked.

“Well, think for instance,” she answered, “of the way an increasing number of people are now raising the question whether each of us only lives once or more than once. Some claim to have past life memories of themselves in former times. But who knows whether the images they see are not of the same kind as the images of our dreams? We know we have to

interpret or properly read those images through our ‘waking thinking’, if we want to reach objectivity. I think what is needed most today is an attempt to deal with the question of reincarnation on the basis of ‘waking thinking.’“

I looked at Dan and Carol, and they didn’t seem surprised at Rita’s answer. They both knew her well.

“I think I understand what you mean, Rita,” I said. “And I must say I actually agree with you. I think what I’m afraid of is the risk of turning off a lot of people by referring directly to spiritual experiences or realities. Some might think they are being served the same old pious stuff their parents preached.”

“So your problem is that you like to please *everybody*,” Rita said matter-of-factly. “If you try to do that, you will eventually please nobody. If you want to please everybody, you have to put success first and truth second. Knowing you as I do, I think it’s safe to say that you want the truth to prevail. So why don’t you just write the best you can and let people make of it what they will?”

“On our way here, we were discussing the fact that never before have human beings searched harder for the truth than today. Perhaps the reason is that there is so little of it to be found. The exercise of power and the pursuit of outer success have become so pervasive, that most people call you a fanatic or a fundamentalist if you dare to state that there really is objective truth and that searching for it can be the most fulfilling of activities. People *say* this, but I’ve never met a single person who actually believed it. Deep down people really long

for objective truth. Their higher Selves are one with the words spoken a long time ago: 'You shall come to know the truth and the truth shall set you free'."

"Pietro," Carol said at this point, "isn't one of your main concerns to address the issue of materialism?"

"Yes, Carol, very much so," I answered. "But how can one do that without giving a sermon and without boring the readers?"

"What you folks call materialism isn't boring at all to me," Dan intervened. "I don't want to hear how bad materialism is; every day I experience its value. Everyone enjoys the advantages that modern science and technology bring into our lives. Just think of the phone calls you make: would those who condemn materialism be ready to live without a phone? From the many conversations with Rita on this issue, it has become apparent to me that the real question of materialism is not what we have, but what we are missing."

"What do you think you are missing, Dan?" Carol asked. "I see you absorbed day and night in keeping up with all that is happening, with the latest scientific theories and the most recent technological innovations. How could you possibly find time or interest for anything else? Do you really mean it when you talk about missing out on something?"

"If you had asked me that question some years ago, before I met Rita," Dan replied, "I would have answered that I did not miss anything. Life was full of excitement and fun. Since I've

known Rita, I've become more and more familiar with her world. This world is gradually becoming no less fascinating to me than the material one. She can explain with her theories all kinds of phenomena science cannot explain, but that's not what attracts me. I'm not particularly impressed, say, when she uses the concept of 'karma' to make everything that happens in life seem reasonable or rational. No, what impresses me is how her convictions affect her, or I should rather say what they *make of her*. She has a loving acceptance of every person she meets, and she treats events, even the bad or painful ones, as gifts sent to us so we can make the best of them ..."

I think Dan would have kept going, but Rita interrupted him: "Dan, I'm just at the beginning of what you are describing. I'm really just *trying* to live that way."

"And that's what makes you so *trying* for me!" Dan answered. "But I like this kind of challenge very much. It seems like I have been looking for it for a long time, without even knowing it."

"One thing in particular would interest me, Pietro," Carol said. "You've mentioned on a number of occasions that one of the most important things we must do to overcome the one-sidedness of materialism is to become aware that we live more than one life, and that our lives are connected by the laws of destiny you and Rita call 'karma'. When I hear that, I get the impression that it is something important, but I have difficulty comprehending it. I want to hear more about it."

“Let’s go back to Dan’s suggestion,” I said, “that we consider materialism from the point of view of what many people are missing in their lives. I think what people are missing most is a positive view of materialism itself. They consider only its negative aspects. True happiness can only be found if we are able to see *everything* positively. This is possible, but our materialistic outlook has convinced us that everything painful, everything difficult is simply negative. For instance, we tend to consider illness merely as a negative experience, implying that life would be better without it. Also, look at the way our whole culture rejects the basic reality of death. I’ll never forget being begged in a funeral home in New York not to mention the word ‘death’ in the short address I was to give.”

“I like such direct references to life-experience,” Carol said. “This helps me understand what you are trying to say.”

“I think I see what you mean,” I said. “What if I read to you some of what I have written so far? I refer to life-experiences and I try to convey how reincarnation can work into our daily lives.”

“Yes, please do that,” was the unanimous reaction. “By referring to life-experience,” Dan added, “each of us is left free to look at the facts from his own point of view, without excluding the points of view of others. I think this is the best way to avoid all one-sidedness and dogmatism.”

So I began to read.

Some years ago, when I was in Berlin shortly after the Wall was torn down, there was a group of teenagers who were on their way to visit an elderly man whom they called Opa, or “grandfather.” They found a Russian woman, a young American man and me talking together about human freedom and they persuaded us to go along.

Shortly thereafter, we were sitting in a cafe, engaged in a conversation. It was easy to understand why the kids loved Opa. I had rarely met anybody so wise and loving. He had been talking about loving what is truly human in each person and loving Humanity as a single organism. He had just quoted the last lines of Goethe’s *Faust* for emphasis.

All of a sudden, the door flew open. In came five young men with shaved heads, dressed in black leather pants and jackets. The metal plates under the soles of their shoes gave an eerie military sound to their rhythmic steps. They encircled us and stared at us, their hands on their hips, as if we owed them some explanation for being in the cafe. Their look was deft’ ant, and seemed to betray an inner insecurity.

Opa stood up, went to the one standing closest to him and said: “May I shake hands with you?” His calm and loving manner was disarming. After a short moment of hesitation, the first shook his hand and then the others followed. Opa then told them:

“It would be nice if you could join us, even for just a few minutes. We were talking about important things and I’m sure we would also like to hear what you have to say about them”

“We don’t give a damn about your talking,” said the one who seemed to be the leader.” There has been enough ‘sweet talking’ around here. We want to see something happening. It’s time you *do* something, like smashing a table or the head of some bastard foreigner.”

He banged on the table with a baseball bat. Where did *that* thing come from, I wondered. Only now did I notice that two of the others also had bats hanging down behind them.

“I can appreciate you enjoying yourselves by beating on and smashing whatever comes your way,” Opa said matter-of-factly. “But what if all of us here were to start swinging back at you with bats as big as yours?”

“Yeah! That’s what you wanna do man!” was the answer, “Not just talk about it without doing it.

Come on! We’ll just beat your head in and bust you into little pieces. Come on! We’ll show you who is better at it. It was a crazy S.O.B. like you that said: I think, therefore I am. I say: I thrash, therefore I am.”

He gave the table an even harder whack, and I thought: thank God that’s not someone’s head.

“If you do nothing but hammer everything to bits all the time” Opa said as if he were having the most relaxed conversation, “you will never be able to really enjoy what you do. You can only enjoy it by giving yourself a break every once in a while so you can *look* at the results of your beating.”

“You better give us a break, you old wise guy”, the young man said. “Or else we are going to give *you* a break as well.”

“Of course I can give you a break,” Opa said, “and maybe a better one than you have ever had before. But you have to give me at least a couple of minutes. Why don’t you please sit down with us for a few seconds? Show that you can also mix with normal human beings; don’t just stick to yourselves as if you were some kind of gods.”

Most of the youngsters were standing up to make room for them. For a moment, though, I was anything but sure that they would accept the invitation. The leader of the five said: “You have your beard to thank if we do. But I tell you: you better damn make sure you come up with something that makes sense to *us*, not just to you and your fans around here, got it?”

“Whether I make sense to you or not all depends on how sensible you guys are, not just on me,” Opa replied. By now all were sitting. The five looked uneasy and ready to get up and leave any second. But Opa did not give up: “I have one question to ask you, and it is up to you to give me an answer that makes sense: what are you looking for with your baseball bats? Is there anything at all you want to accomplish? Do you care to tell us what it is that you’re after? If what you are striving for makes sense to you, there is no reason it shouldn’t make sense to us, as well.”

“Look,” said another of the young men, “I’m twenty seven years old now. When I was growing up I was promised everything good you can think of. I was promised I would find a

steady job, earn a lot of money to buy all the things I want. I was promised by the government that I would have a happy life, make all my dreams come true. And here I sit: no work, not even enough cash to buy smokes or booze so I can party with my buddies. You tell *me* what I'm supposed to do?"

"Well if all you want money for is cigarettes and alcohol," the Russian woman said, "it means you at least have enough to eat and a place to sleep. Think of the many people in the world who don't. What would you do if you were one of them? What would you do if you were forced to go to another country in order to keep yourself and your family from starvation and persecution — and the people there beat *you* up?"

Suddenly, the door opened again. A young man barely poked his head in to look inside. "Salaam," one of the girls shouted after him, but he was gone. She ran after him and before long they reappeared. She had convinced him to come back.

When Salaam returned, the five men stood up, as if ready to give him a beating. Once again, the situation became dramatic; once again, Opa managed to get them all to sit down. Salaam, whose arm the girl was holding to calm him, was still wide-eyed and trembling.

"Now, let's get down and really do something," Opa said. "There are some important issues on the table that we can only tackle together, and it could be a long time before we get another chance like this to talk. Salaam, let me ask you why you left your Muslim country to come to Berlin."

Salaam answered with hesitation: “I left home for two reasons: the first was to make some money so I could support my wife and my three children. But more importantly because I wasn’t allowed any personal freedom at home. Lately, though, I’m experiencing much hatred around here, but I can’t just go back to where I was born.”

“We’ll help you go back, don’t worry”, the leader of the five said. “Wait until the taste of this bat gets closer to your bones.”

“Let me make a suggestion at this point,” Opa said with determination. “My suggestion is that both parties, the one who fears being beaten and those who threaten to beat, consider for a moment what you have in common. You may have only seen what divides you so far, but there is something much deeper that unites you.”

“Yeah,” the one in charge said, “when we get the good wood with our little Turk ticklers here, we sure experience what unites us. It is that magical touch that creates the connection. Is that what you’re trying to say, old geezer?”

“What I’m trying to say is plain enough,” Opa answered, “if you would only please listen for a change. I mean business no less than you; only mine is different from yours. This is what I’m trying to say. We live in a modern society, where many things are automated, and everything is globalized. All those machines are doing more and more work for us, and they do it better than we because they are more reliable. So there aren’t any jobs out there, right? But the real problem is not lack of

employment. We don't need more jobs. We need a more just distribution of our wealth and resources. I don't mean that striving towards a more just distribution of wealth among human beings will be easy, or that we can solve all our problems from one day to the next. What I mean is that each person must make a fundamental decision whether he wants a fairer distribution or whether he *resists* it in favour of his own personal or group interests. So the first big step we have to take is to become aware of this fundamental choice each one must make. Everybody makes it anyway, whether he knows it or not."

"Oh, so now you're a shrink telling us how we work inside our heads, huh?" the spokesman of the five said. "Why don't you do that with your own head? Why don't *you* do something for a fairer distribution of wealth? And who gives a s*** about that, anyhow? All we care about is busting up stuff, got it?"

He swung the baseball bat playfully in a full circle and hit the table once again.

"One of the main strategies of the power-game, wherever it comes from," Opa continued unfazed, "is to deceive one's victims by setting them up one against the other. This way they blame one another and do not see how their common manipulator keeps them diverted from action against him. So you find yourselves beating up someone who is in the same position as you-or even worse off, because he's struggling for his daily food, while all you are struggling for is your daily *schnaps*."

“But the moment you stop emphasizing what makes you different and start focussing on what unites you as human beings, you will sense a tremendous purpose in your lives. Never heard this before? That’s the very reason I’m telling you. If you’d only care to take it seriously: you do have an awesome task lying ahead of you. Even if *you* don’t think you’re up to it, or you’re good enough for it, I do.”

“We been good enough already just listening to your B.S. for so long,” the spokesman said. He got up, the other four with him, almost simultaneously. They went towards the door, slapping the palms of their hands with their baseball bats. “Next time around we wanna see more action around here, okay?” They clomped out onto the street.

It took a while for the company to regain the inner calm that had existed before the skinheads came in. Salaam stayed, and Opa calmly resumed speaking to us. He sensed our deep interest in his words.

“It is unfair to complain about society not giving us jobs to make a living,” he said. “We cannot expect any more from society than that it take care of our material needs. After that, it is up to each of us to discover our life path. Each of us has a totally unique task to accomplish, and this is why it cannot be assigned to him by society. Each individual has to understand the special unfolding of his own biography and work on it himself. A good artist never needs to copy a model. The meaning and the purpose each individual can give to his life

cannot be copied either. It can only come from his own unique being.

“The restlessness a lot of people experience nowadays comes from the very dynamism of human nature. It is never satisfied; it is always striving for more. The easiest way to strive is to accumulate material things. Eventually, we realize that possessing things becomes boring, no matter how much we own. We recognize that *being* is more rewarding than having. So then we try to *be* everything, only to find out that doesn’t work, either.

“So we are called to realize that there is something even more interesting than being, and that is the experience of becoming. By steadily evolving, we experience the pure joy of striving, of working hard at something, of conquering it through the exercise of our freedom. The deeper meaning of life is realized by constantly expanding our knowledge and dedication to the world around us. This is what can give us a sense of fulfilment.”

“But what a person can become in his life is very limited,” Salaam said. “The drives and the desires each experiences within himself are limitless, yet we can realize only the smallest part of them in our lifetime. Why do we carry such a contradiction within us:

“It is a contradiction only if we limit ourselves to one single life,” Opa answered. “The unlimited drive each of us experiences is something new in Humanity. It is actually the result of modern science and a society that emphasizes the

supreme value of each individual person. In former times, the individual felt embedded in a larger community or in a particular culture. A person was content with just being a member of a larger group. But in modern society each of us wants to be a unit by himself, and this aspiration is a God-given one, it is part of human nature. Each individual now senses the desire to integrate within himself *all* the potential of human nature. And it is no mere desire; rather, it is a *calling*. And if we cannot experience all facets of human existence at once, we would like to be able to do it over the course of time. Can any of you tell me how this can be done?"

The silence that followed was intense. Everyone appeared fascinated at Opa's unusual question. It was as if each was trying to come up with an answer. I was reflecting, how little each of us can experience the potential in human nature in just one life. After a pause, Opa said as if confiding to us something most sacred:

"The striving to make our own everything that belongs to human nature is God-given. If we love all peoples and religions, all languages and all colours of the skin, we can assimilate them into our own being in the course of our evolution. The youth of today are restless and unhappy. They have yet to find their mission in life. There is a new vision emerging in Humanity, and with it the sense of a new mission. This mission lies in attaining the awareness that we all live on Earth many times, so that we can freely evolve and experience the entire spectrum of life as a human. Each of us is called to assume direct responsibility for

the entire evolution of Humanity as well as of the Earth by taking part in it all through repeated Earth lives.

“This is the new vision sought by today’s youth. Cherish this, for it will give new meaning and purpose to your lives. Taking hold of these limitless opportunities will fill your hearts with unending joy. The law that binds together the fabric of our many lives is the law of love. If you embrace this incredible drama more deeply, you will intuitively transform your present life to live according to these truths.

“Broaden your minds to seek truth and transform your lives to experience love: let this twofold journey be the unending task of your freedom and the everlasting feast of your heart. This is the decisive question for the survival of today’s Humanity: will there be enough people who will follow this path *now*, and lead the way for others? So I ask you: will *you* belong to those who have the courage to venture out into this spiritual frontier and become the pioneers of the new human quest? I say to you: each of you can do it, each of you *wants* to do it in your innermost being, in your true Self.”

A long moment of silence followed, then the American said: “I have a close friend who doesn’t like being a male; he is doing everything he can to be female. And I have another friend who is just the other way around. Are you saying that the meaning of multiple earth-lives could be the chance for one and the same person to alternate between being female and male?”

“This is one of the main reasons why each person has more than one life,” Opa answered. “The desire to experience directly both genders is legitimate; after all, both sexes belong to human nature. None of us can be complete if he or she experiences only half of what is human. Even the Bible says that God created the human being in his image by making it both female *and* male. The original human being was both at once, and the separation of the sexes came later. If each of us were to experience only one gender, we would only be half of God’s image. In order to experience both we need alternate lives. If we were to try to be male and female at the same time, we would end up being neither the one nor the other. Whether we like it or not, we have our gender for a whole lifetime. So the possibility of another life must exist for us to experience the contribution of the opposite sex.

“This is the real meaning of death: it gives us the possibility to form another body, and allows us to live through what we could not experience with the old one. If more people were to gain this new awareness, questions of gender would be understood and debated in a different way than in our society. The relationship between the two genders could grow in tolerance and mutual understanding, because each of us would acknowledge and accept their one-sidedness. This acceptance alone would enable each of us to *look forward* to living as the opposite sex in the next life.”

“Opa,” a young girl said, “we have been talking with friends about love of self and love of our neighbour. We thought it

would be ideal to be perfect at both, but we seem to be very far from that goal.”

“This is why we are still on our way, my child,” Opa answered with gentleness. “One of the main reasons we need more than one life is that each of us has to make a choice also in this regard. Some of us give priority to our own development, some of us feel the urge to be primarily at the service of others. Of course all of us must strive towards a balance between self-love and love of others. But if you look at the overall emphasis of a person’s life, you will see that each emphasizes the one over the other. We cannot do justice to both equally at the same time.

“One of the ways an individual’s repeated lives are interconnected is, if we do something one way this time around, the desire for what we lack will enable us to do the opposite in the next lifetime. Aware of this, the one who in this life puts self-development first will not need to justify himself by trying to convince others that *everyone* should do the same. Not only will he realize that the ‘other’ way is just as legitimate, but he will furthermore be grateful to those that dedicate themselves primarily to the service of others. He will realize that he is allowed to concentrate on his own advancement thanks to the primary concern of others who emphasize unselfish activity. The meaning of all that I do for myself, of all the skills I acquire, is that I’ll be able to subsequently put it all at the service of others.

“The one primarily devoted to serving others will in turn realize: what I am now able to be and do for others I owe to the fact that in the past I was allowed to concentrate on my self-development thanks to the dedication of others. Imagine how beautiful social life could become and how meaningful our relationships could be if more people could grasp and internalize these convictions and make them a part of daily life.”

“What about social justice,” Salaam asked, as if enthralled by what Opa was unfolding. “Why is there so much injustice in the world? What have I done wrong that my life is so difficult and threatened? Why do good people often have to suffer more than evil ones?’

“How can our eyes behold the higher justice governing our lives, my son,” Opa answered with deep empathy, “if we consider this one life alone? It would be like looking for justice in the events of a single day without considering yesterday and tomorrow. We go to sleep at the end of each day leaving many things unfinished, but we wake up to continue our work, to reap the results of what we prepared yesterday, and to undertake things we will again only be able to complete tomorrow. Modern man boasts of his knowledge and mastery of the world of matter, yet where his own life is concerned, he lives like somebody who has no idea today what he was or did yesterday and what he is to do tomorrow.

“If we assume we only live once, the appalling injustice we see everywhere in the world can only drive us to rebellion and

violence, or else to resignation and depression. Today's increase in both violence and depression is an alarming signal. It shows us how urgently we need a new vision enabling us to find meaning in all that appears absurd or unjust. We need to learn that everything we do to another person will fall back on ourselves, even if centuries later. This long-term justice is a far cry from the court-appointed justice we now experience. A more meaningful justice considers destinies over greater cycles of time."

The American interrupted him at this point: "I don't think the people who need these ideas the most are going to accept them. The ones who are most unjust to others, the ones who ruthlessly pursue power or possessions, are not going to be impressed by your nice theoretical attempt to enlighten them. They won't listen to the fact that any evil or harm they do to others will come back to them in a future life."

"I agree with you," Opa answered with amazing presence of mind. "Waiting until the powerful or the wicked are 'converted' will help neither you nor me very much. Our situation will never improve if we expect that they change before we change. However, my own life will improve swiftly and noticeably if I myself act on the conviction that there is absolute justice running through our recurring lives. It is my problem only to the extent that I have been envious of the powerful and the rich, wanting what they have. If I am convinced that envy doesn't pay in the long run, if I become aware of the justice running through many lives, I will not want to treat others unjustly, I will stop wanting to pursue only

power and possessions. I will have greater things to strive for and I will be reconciled with the life tasks assigned to me by my current destiny.”

At this point, a young man asked, with a tinge of melancholy: “What about our temperaments, Opa? They last a whole lifetime, too; they also make us one-sided. A melancholic person has a hard time with someone who is constantly cheerful, and the go-getter loses his patience with the slow-poke so easily.”

“You can find the answer yourself,” Opa answered him. “What must we have in mind when we plan to come down to Earth for another life? Each of us must say to himself: I now want to be the kind of person I have never been in the past. The purpose of our many lives is to experience human life and human nature from many points of view. If for instance I was an aggressive, hyperactive person in my last life, and I always ranted at those unambitious phlegmatic guys, I did that because I could never experience life as a real phlegmatic myself. I can only do that by having the corresponding physical constitution. Our temperament is to a large extent the result of the way we experience our own body. This is why none of us can be all the various personality types at once. In each life we have to set a priority.”

The Russian woman seemed to be quite surprised at what she was hearing. She seemed to be wavering between her traditional faith and her fascination with these new ideas. She asked at this point: “Does this apply to the polarity of faith and

science, as well? There is so much intolerance there, too! Listening to you, it dawns on me for the first time that also people of faith can be intolerant of the scientists by despising them or by thinking science lives only in the visible. Until now I had only experienced the other type of intolerance: scientists who claim that faith is outdated and good only for those who are not capable of logical thinking.”

“What you call faith and science refers to two basic ways of human self-experience,” Opa answered her. “Although the West has been treating them as two separate domains of life—faith is private, science is public—the issue is much deeper than that. Rather than two realms of life, these are two basic ways of *being*. The faith-person lives more on the basis of intuition and feeling; the science-person relies more on rationality and abstract thinking. For the faith-person to prove something means to experience it personally by living it out; for the science-person the proof has to be objectified so as to be logically valid and verifiable for everybody.

“But none of us can be both basic types at the same time, in one and the same life. Each of us is particularly ‘at home’ in one of them. Without an awareness of recurring lives, the one who lives primarily by feeling or intuition might easily call the scientist a cold and dry academic with no understanding of life. While the one who better appreciates scientific knowledge might consider the other an irrational dreamer who cannot think properly. Much of ‘political correctness’ consists in the accepted rule not to say such things even if we think them: as if

our behaviour had more to do with what we say than with what we think!

“Social life would change considerably if the reality of multiple earth lives became a conviction for large numbers of people. We would know that each of us has to *alternate* between the dominance of a life of science and a life of faith. We would stop believing that one way of living is better or worse than the other. And we would not get depressed or angry at what we cannot be in this one life, knowing we will get a chance in the next.

“One basic trait of the faith person is to approach life with a sense of trust and openness. The original meaning of faith is to have trust. The scientific person on the other hand wants to control the world through rationality and technology. Letting go and taking charge: both these basic attitudes belong to human nature, but they can only be exercised in succession.

“Just as being a male means being attracted to the female and vice versa, being intuitive or feeling deeply calls forth a longing for logical thinking; conversely, being rational evokes a desire for warmth of heart. In a following life, this previous longing reappears as the reality of one’s own being. What we are in the present is always the fulfilment of what we longed for most intensely and with the greatest endurance in the past. Isn’t this the true meaning of the words in the Gospel: seek and ye shall find?”

“What is the meaning of illness and good health?” one teenager asked. “Some people are healthy all their lives and

others struggle from one illness to the next. Can we also explain this in terms of the succession of different lives?”

“Our western culture has become very one-sided,” Opa answered, “by narrowing the horizon of our awareness to just one life. We know nothing of what happens with us before birth and after death; and we don’t even seem to care. In our materialism, we focus almost exclusively on outer achievement here on Earth. Just as we overvalue science and underestimate faith, we overemphasize outer success and think of illness and suffering as being only negative. We only see how an illness hampers our outer activity; we fail to consider the inner activity it can promote. We appreciate only the strong *side of life*: the vitality of youth, the myth of success, the resilience of prestige and fame. But this one-sidedness has caused us to repress the *deep side of life*: the better half of ourselves, which expands spiritually as the body declines, as illness and suffering come our way.

“Strength and good health are chances for us to be more at the service of others; illness and suffering summon us to work more on ourselves, to strengthen our inner being, to forge our character. By going through the difficulties of life, we can generate within ourselves the forces and skills that will make us capable, even if in a later life, of even greater achievements in the service of Humanity.”

It seemed now as if Opa was no longer speaking in answer to questions, but meditating aloud on the very foundations of our human existence:

“The masculine approach to life may be called strong, but the feminine should never be called weak. The living counterpoint to outer strength is not physical weakness, but depth of character. Cultivating inner strength calls for a greater endurance than required for physical exertion.

“Western culture should now overcome the one-sided thinking in which we emphasize outer achievement and belittle those who are ill or cannot be materially productive. The engineer of our interwoven earthly lives is aware that these two fundamental human experiences are needed polarities. If we feel a profound sense of gratitude for all physical suffering, we can look with no less gratitude at the weak among us, or at those who are handicapped. For then we know that the true Self of these persons is seeking to cultivate the most precious qualities of human nature and is preparing them for the great tasks of the future. Those acquired virtues and abilities will later be made visible in the great achievements of human civilization.

“If we can look at our suffering, at our struggles and setbacks as our best chance to give priority to inner growth, we will not feel the need to boast about our outer performance. We will know that we have been able to acquire all our skills only thanks to the sacrifice of others. We will never need to be ashamed of the suffering that comes our way, knowing that it is our best opportunity to become inwardly rich. We will stop seeing good health as good and illness as bad: we will see both as equally good, as equally necessary for the overall development of each person.

“If we take to heart this more comprehensive view of life, we fulfil the purpose of modern science and technology, which give us the outer instruments we need to enhance the inner human being. The perfection of what is outside of us finds its true fulfilment in the perfecting of our spirit. Our culture now thirsts for a knowledge of the spiritual realms that is every bit as thorough and scientific as our knowledge of what is visible. This is the great new vision dawning across the planet at the dawn of the new millennium.”

I had the impression that Opa could have gone on forever. The teenagers, the Russian woman, the young American, Salaam, and myself all seemed to have become oblivious to time. Our differences seemed to have disappeared. It was as if Opa’s words had made us one mind. He had taken us step by step into the new vision, into the fascinating adventure waiting for all those who want to make it the primary goal of their lives.

As I read these last words to Carol, Dan and Rita, I felt that we were engulfed in a similar moment right now. It was as if the intensity of the encounter with Opa were repeating itself through the very strength of his words, even without his physical presence.

“But tell me one thing,” Dan asked after some silence. “Did the five guys ever return, or did they disappear for good? Your Opa doesn’t seem to have achieved much with them...”

“I was asking myself that very question,” I replied, “and I was curious to find out. So I called up one of the young men about two weeks later. He told me that the same five skinheads

had shown up twice in the meantime, and that Opa had managed each time to have them stay a bit longer. He thought that eventually they might begin viewing life somewhat differently.”

“I’m now thinking of what lies ahead of us,” Dan said thoughtfully: “the beautiful but difficult task of overcoming the materialism of our culture. It is a powerful challenge, but Western man likes a challenge as much as he likes an adventure. And who knows? This might just be the most fascinating adventure we have ever known.”

“The first thing we have to do,” Carol said, “is to understand more clearly what materialism really is. I think its most basic feature is that it lacks knowledge and experience of anything that is not sense-perceptible.”

“Yes, that’s what materialism really is all about, Carol,” Rita exclaimed. “Human beings fight over material things because they do not know that there is something much better in life. They do not experience the reality of the spirit. Nowadays, when you talk of spiritual realities, most people think you have gone berserk. Look at the way you refer in English to something as being ‘immaterial’. You can go through all the words beginning with “im”... and you will find that they always mean the opposite of what follows. Immature is the opposite of mature; impatient is the opposite of patient; impartial is the opposite of partial, and so on. So what should the actual meaning of ‘immaterial’ be? It should mean the opposite of

material, which is spiritual. What is immaterial or non-material is spiritual.

“Ask any American what he thinks of when he hears the word ‘immaterial’! He knows that it means something unimportant, insignificant. It’s immaterial to me, means, I don’t care, or it doesn’t make any difference to me. The experience of what is spiritual has so completely vanished that what is immaterial or spiritual is for today’s human beings of no consequence. We say that something doesn’t matter; Plato would have said: It doesn’t ‘spirit’. So, matter is what is real and important to us. Matter is the only thing that ‘matters’ for us... Can you imagine yourself saying: as a spirit of fact, instead of: as a matter of fact? It’s really amazing how our materialistic outlook has permeated our very language. We say ‘there was nobody in the room’; it would never occur to us to say that there was no-soul or no-spirit in the room. No, the ‘body’ is the only thing that is real to us.”

I loved Rita’s linguistic considerations. Carol and Dan also seemed to enjoy them and to find them convincing. Still, I thought I noticed a slight expression of sadness in Dan’s face.

“If this is all true, we have *zero* appreciation of our own experience of spirituality. We’ll have to start from *scratch* ...” he said.

“But that insight is the most exciting side of the story,” Rita interrupted him. “One of the things I like most about America is the ideal of the pioneer. What kind of people were the Founding Fathers and all the pioneers who came to the New

World? Individuals who had the courage to start all over again in life, to start from scratch! That's what makes them so great in our eyes. So the most terrific side of materialism is precisely that it gives us the chance to start from scratch, the challenge of fulfilling America's most powerful dream: that of the human being who is given nothing, who starts out empty-handed, and sets out to conquer everything."

"Yes," I added, "I remember when I was in the States the last time. I was raving about American materialism! I went around asking people: what do you think is most important in overcoming materialism? People would answer all kinds of things, but nobody would think of *my* answer. They would say things like 'we need to start praying again', or 'we have to be kind to each other'. When they stopped guessing, I said: the most important thing in order to overcome materialism is to have it in the first place! Everyone would laugh of course, not being able to object to that. I was serious, though. Only someone who has thoroughly experienced materialism will sooner or later feel such an emptiness, such a sense of bereavement, that he will out of his own free impulse set out on the quest for the spirit. He will do this not in order to obey some law or commandment, not out of fear of going to jail or to hell, but out of his own free will, as an expression of the unquenchable thirst of his own spirit."

"Pietro," Dan said, "I feel deeply moved by the beauty of all this. Somehow, the response it evokes in me is a sense of both thankfulness and yearning. But what did Opa actually mean when he said that awareness of repeated lives interwoven by

the basic laws of our destiny is indispensable for our culture? How can such an awareness wrench us out of the constraints of materialism?"

It struck me all of a sudden that Dan's remark was less a question than a *plea*. He wasn't trying to learn something unknown to him. Rather, he seemed to be looking for help to change his life so that it would be more fulfilling. So the real question for me now was, how can I help? Can I really help?

"Dan," I said, "I cannot answer your question in terms of some theoretical truth. The only thing I can do is to tell you the vision of my own life, a vision that is woven of thousands of encounters with human beings all over the world. I have known the suffering of the poor and the hungry. I have had teenagers at school in Laos who had known nothing but war since their birth. I lived in South Africa with people who defined themselves in terms of race and the colour of their skin. But the poorest of all human beings were those I found among the rich and the powerful, whose every material need was fulfilled, but who had little happiness. I have asked for the strength not to despise these poorest of the poor. I have tried to love them by striving to make their untold suffering and their unvoiced longing my own. "The question I often asked myself is: how can the rich and the powerful become less selfish, if they know of nothing more fulfilling than earthly power and material possessions? What can I do to help these poorest among us discover the unending riches of invisible worlds, and experience the pure joy of loving and truly caring for one another?"

“We have become innovative and enterprising in our use of natural resources and in the deployment of economic power. We have experienced our freedom up to now by subduing the material world. But this is only the beginning of a much more rewarding exercise in freedom. Now we desire to become enterprising and creative in the way we deal with the inexhaustible resources of our minds and hearts.

“This is my vision, Dan: that each human being can feel the deep joy of creativity in the invisible realms of life. What would our daily lives be like, if more people dealt with one another as friends who have known each other through centuries and millennia? What would our encounters be, if each of us knew that everything we are and all that happens to us makes sense out of our own evolution in past lives? Would people be depressed because of aging or death, if they experienced birth and death as alternating states of consciousness guided by a higher Self that can never be born and can never die?

“Would we still see violence in our cities if more people knew that whatever we do to others we do *in actual fact* to ourselves, that the way we treat others exerts the most profound influence on our own being? If we do find the inner strength to prepare a whole life long for our greatest achievements, will not their sheer beauty engender in us the courage to wait until a next life to see the fruits of our endeavour? Is not our spirit woven with the stuff of eternity? Are not impatience or decay unknown to the one who has millennia at his disposal and knows that nothing is ever wasted or lost?”

We were silent for some time, until Rita said: “Pietro, I think the truth you have to express in your book is the truth of your own life. Don’t be afraid of being personal if you write for Americans. And if the truth of your life is your passionate love for human beings, if your personal suffering is for the suffering of the poorest among us, your desire to help will fill your words with truth: it *will* set many free.”

“I agree with Rita,” Carol added. “Only by referring to your own life-experiences can you avoid making abstract theories. I think a lot of information about spirituality today runs parallel to life, inducing people to live in two different worlds. What we urgently need is a real transformation of our way of living.”

After my friends departed, I was left with the resolution to begin with a chapter that could grant the reader a glance into the basic values of my own life. It was not an easy decision to make, for the glance into my life would have to take more of an inward look than just an external one. I thought I would start with the years I spent in Laos, where the very foundations of my existence first began to clarify.

CHAPTER 2

SEEKING OUR TRUE SELF

(LAOS, 1970)

Rachel was driving her father's jeep very slowly: it was raising great clouds of dust and the road was quite bumpy. We had a few miles to go to visit our friend Savang, a Buddhist monk at the pagoda of a small village.

I had been in Laos almost two years by now, and the three of us had already met on many occasions. Daily life was dangerous due to the Vietnam war, and one often felt lonely due to the cultural and geographical isolation. I was all the more grateful for the few meaningful relationships I had, for friends like these two, to whom I knew I could speak openly.

There had been a recurring theme in our conversations: it was as if each time we would start somewhere at the periphery, to then be drawn to the same magical centre. And this centre was the question of the Self, of the free human individual. Rachel and I were both convinced that, of all the differences between East and West, the most significant is the emergence in the West of the autonomous individuality. Although Savang's command of English was by Laotian standards exceptional, we were both often left wondering whether he could understand what we meant when referring to a self-determining and reliable human being.

Rachel mentioned this again while driving, and once again I voiced my conviction that each of us can only truly understand what he can directly experience in his own life. I said, the most specific and significant contribution the West has made to the evolution of Humanity has been the creation of the life-conditions that make it necessary for each person to experience himself as an independent human being. The concrete and daily experience of having to act as a responsible and ethical individual, not just some abstract theory on freedom, seemed to me the most important bestowal of the West on human evolution.

“Take your father for instance,” I said to her. “By holding a position of responsibility such as his, he is constantly challenged to behave as a free and independent individual. He has to take personal responsibility not only in making the decisions required, but even more so in carrying them out.”

We were silent for a while. I was thinking of the conversation that lay ahead with Savang.

“I hope you were able to copy the text of Emerson we were talking about,” I said.

“Yes, I have it with me,” she answered. “I am looking forward to hearing Savang’s comments. It will be a good point of reference for our exchange of ideas.”

“Here in the East the whole culture, especially the language, is imbued with spirituality,” I said. “What is your impression when Savang criticizes Western materialism?”

“He certainly has a point there,” she replied. “No matter what we do, we cannot conceal our far greater concern with material affairs. Spiritual concerns that are so important to them hardly seem to exist for us. I’m not saying that one way of life is better or worse than the other; I’m just stating the obvious fact of the great difference. It’s *your* criticism of Western materialism that really puzzles me. I’m not sure how things are in Europe, but in America there is a lot of spiritual renewal taking place. I don’t mean certain movements within the traditional Churches; I’m thinking more of the many new movements pleading strongly for a spiritualization of Western culture by reevaluating the old wisdom of the East.”

I had always found it hard to explain to Rachel my viewpoint on Western materialism. I thought it even expresses itself in Western spirituality. I assumed that Rachel was attributing my attitude to my conservative upbringing within the Church. I thought that this ride would allow me to gain greater clarity about what she called “Western Spirituality.” So I said:

“This subject has been bothering me for a long time, Rachel. I can’t find any peace until I get to the bottom of it. Are you interested in hearing what I’ve come up with so far?”

“Of course I am,” she replied, as she began to slow the jeep down. “You know me well enough. Our conversations are one

of the few things I really enjoy in this remote and dangerous place. If there were no need for me to keep my father company, I would have stayed here only a few days.”

“What intrigues me the most,” I began, “is the cultural contradiction I see in the West. The West affirms the free and enterprising individual, yet it borrows an old spirituality from the East, which basically views the ego as an illusion one should overcome. I wonder whether this is just a new form of the classic separation between faith and science. Faith is considered everyone’s private business, which means it should not interfere with real life, and science has the leading role in social and ‘real’ life. I ask myself whether the West is setting up a new kind of luxury spirituality, again intended to run *parallel* to life, so that it doesn’t disturb it in its materialistic approach to daily affairs. This seems to me like a new version of the classic relationship between Church and State: as long as they leave each other alone, they can coexist. The Church takes care of the spiritual life once a week; the State takes care of *real* life the rest of the time. Or do you think the new spirituality you refer to can directly affect our way of living?”

“Are you saying,” she asked, “that you see a contradiction in the fact that we have on one hand a full appreciation for each individual’s role in shaping the visible world — this being what you call Western materialism — and on the other hand an Eastern spirituality aloof from life, because it doesn’t recognize the importance of the individual? Am I understanding you correctly?”

“That’s more or less what I’m trying to say,” I answered.

“I never thought of it that way before,” she said, “but it’s an interesting idea. I can’t say whether you are right or wrong; I would have to think about it. Are you also implying that fostering a kind of spirituality that runs parallel to life, without interfering with it, is actually in the interest of a materialistically oriented life and of the exercise of worldly power?”

“It certainly makes one look better than those communists who are supposed to be godless and to have no spirituality at all, doesn’t it?” I replied. “But don’t get me wrong. I’m not trying to make a case for bringing religion back into public life. What I mean is something very different. The question I’m asking is: why should the human being be capable of all the great accomplishments of science and technology in mastering the material world, yet at the same time have to remain in an infantile stage in regard to spiritual matters? We rave about evolution and all the progress we have made, and rightly so. Everything is evolving, nothing stands still; the inventions of science and technology can only be admired. But the question is: if our spirituality is meant to enliven our modern lives and not just be a decoration to life, how can a spirituality that was suited for human beings thousands of years ago still be good for us today? So much has changed since then.

“Think of another basic contradiction: the West considers the material world to be the only reality. Eastern spirituality has always claimed matter to be pure illusion, ‘maya’, having no reality at all. By simply taking over eastern spirituality we

repeat the same cultural and psychological schizophrenia brought about by the separation between faith and science. If we adopt a spirituality that declares the material world an illusion it can only remain aloof from our lives, to be in direct contradiction to our whole way of living. We shape our existence according to our ability to experience only what is material, and we adopt at the same time a spirituality in which the spiritual is considered the only reality, and matter a pure illusion.”

“Maybe we in the West have been conquering the world of matter by losing sight of the world of spirit. This thought came to me suddenly as you were talking,” Rachel said thoughtfully. “Why do you think we have been told all along that objective, or scientific knowledge is possible only within the world of matter, but is not applicable to the invisible world? In my Jewish upbringing this was an absolute dogma, and in your Catholic background, where the spiritual can only be approached by faith and not by science, I imagine it must have been pretty much the same.”

“But this is precisely what I call the basic contradiction of our culture,” I said excitedly. “The same person who is able to investigate scientifically the world of matter, who can be reliable and responsible for all tasks concerning material life, is considered totally incapable of acquiring knowledge of what is spiritual except by divine revelation and grace. I can’t help thinking that both religious and civil powers are pursuing a similar interest here. Could the explanation be that the church would like to continue to exercise spiritual power over the

individual, while worldly powers do not want people to find out that there is something more rewarding than just focusing on the material world?”

“That sounds pretty much like the kind of dangerous stuff your famous guy came up with 2000 years ago,” Rachel said with the kind of dry humour I liked in her. “Don’t you think you are being too idealistic by emphasizing the calling of the individual to become independent as far as spiritual matters are concerned? I think we have enough fanaticism and fundamentalism, enough dogmatic ideologies in the United States due to the fact that nearly everyone claims to be an infallible pope in matters of truth. Isn’t the Catholic Church more sensible in deciding to have only one?”

“You know well enough the kind of difficulties I have with the Church,” I answered her. “They sent me here to show the Buddhists their ‘error’ and to convert them to the ‘truth’ of Christianity, or rather I should say of Catholicism. Instead, I am coming to love and appreciate Buddhism and the Buddhists more and more. But there is one thing that troubles me about Western spirituality, which I think also explains why this war is taking place: in this new Western spirituality, there is hardly any place for the Being that has been the most important in my life since I was born. You know from our past conversations which Being I’m talking about. I often feel very lonely, because not even among the missionaries do I find one that understands me.”

We had discussed on several occasions whether or not there is a single spiritual Being guiding the whole of Humanity's evolution. I had been arguing in favour of it from the point of view of Judaic and Christian monotheism. All that exists or happens has to be explained by referring to individual — monotheistic! — spiritual Beings, which alone can envision worlds and perform actions out of their own inventive intuition. In the chain of causation, each cause is in turn brought on by other causes. In order to explain it, one has to go all the way back to a first cause, which can only be a Being capable of originating all things out of itself, without itself being in any respect caused from outside. This kind of exclusively original creation is only possible through independent thinking and willing. So I kept saying that there must be a Being who has conceived and set in motion Humanity's evolution as a whole unit. I had been insisting that it is of no importance which name we give to this Being, and that we would be better off by using several names to characterize this being, to prevent dogmatizing any single one of them.

“For my mother,” I continued, “the Being I'm referring to was more real than the daily polenta we had, or sometimes didn't have, to eat. When I went to the seminary at the age of ten, I suffered very much over a sense of being uprooted; it took me a long time to understand this feeling. It seemed to me that within the Church, the way I experienced it, that Being was less real than he was for my mother. If it weren't for this Being I would not be here, trying to help these people the best I can. Can you understand what it feels like to see a spirituality taking

hold in the world, in which this Being is practically unrecognized?

“I think you know me well enough to realize that I do not mean that any one religion is better or worse than any other. Only people can be better or worse, not religions. What I mean is the awareness of the reality of the all-encompassing Being of Love, who was more present than anything else in my mother’s life, giving her strength through all of life’s difficulties.

“If what you are calling ‘Western spirituality’ were to put this Being at the centre, one could be a truly spiritual person only by striving to really love the whole of Humanity as one’s own family. This kind of spirituality would for instance give absolute priority to the question: how do the industrial and economic powers of the West influence Humanity? Is our money really expressing our love for Humanity, or is our first priority to get the highest possible returns on our investments? If our own interests come first, then we should be honest enough to admit that our money is more important to us than our spirituality. It is used to exploit Humanity, not to love or foster it. And if we go on speaking of love of Humanity, we indulge in a spirituality that is no less aloof from real life than the faith of many of those in the church. Can you understand my sadness at what you call Western spirituality and what I call Western materialism? Can you understand what I mean when I say that love of Humanity must not remain a theory but should become an actual way of living?”

She looked ahead at the road as she answered: “This is the first time you’ve ever talked to me in this way about yourself. But as I was listening, it was as if you were not talking about yourself at all ...”

We spent some time in silence, then she suddenly dared a side glance at me and said excitedly: “Why, Pietro, you are crying!”

It was as if something pent up for a long time was pouring forth, like a large reservoir of water pushing a dike aside. The words I had just said to Rachel had been living in me for a long time and I had never been able to share them with another person in such a simple and direct way. Now, these words had found their way from one heart to another.

“I’ve always thought of myself as being the most unsentimental person in the world,” she said, leaning forward on the steering wheel and still looking straight ahead. “When I was growing up we were simply not allowed to cry. I guess people didn’t know how to handle it. So I wonder why your crying now isn’t embarrassing me in the least. It feels as if it were some event of nature, as if the sun were allowing the rain to take care of all this dust that seems to permeate down to the very marrow of our bones. But I want to tell you something that has been living inside me for a long time as well; I feel that I can now find words to share it with you.”

She paused without looking at me. It was indeed as if she was searching for words that would convey something that had been living in her for years, waiting to be spoken and shared.

“I feel as if ideas that I’ve been struggling for years to grasp are suddenly becoming clear to me. It’s as if I had been struck by a bolt of lightning and I now see the meaning of what you and Savang have been calling our ‘higher Self. Yes, there must be an invisible Being in each of us who speaks a universal language of love and wisdom. It all depends on how much or how little each of us is in touch with this deeper side of themselves. We can only understand our true nature if we look at it from the point of view of a very long evolution. I remember that you said this again and again and I had always agreed. But now it seems to me that I actually understood very little.

“If we have gone through a long evolution to get where we are now, there must have been a first stage in our journey at which each of us was directly connected with his invisible Self, a time when we were living mainly in the realm of spirit and just beginning to experience the world of matter. Isn’t this the stage we observe our children repeating somehow? After all, they are much more at home in the world of fairy tales than in the matter-of-fact world of adults. And isn’t this the stage the East has somehow preserved? After all, its spirituality is imbued with the memory and the nostalgia of times long past, when we were more at home in the beautiful world of spirit than in the muddled world of matter.

“Yet we had to leave that stage behind in order to become separate and independent individuals, for each to become a reliable and responsible person. What we were lacking in the first stage was self-awareness and personal freedom: these can only be acquired by entering the world of matter, which creates

beings separate from each other, and where human beings can exercise their individual talents in freedom while helping each other through the shaping of the material world. “But then there must also be a third stage lying ahead of us, and I think this is what you have been trying to say all along. In the first stage we were connected with our spiritual Self, but we lacked self-awareness and individual freedom. Now that we have acquired self-awareness, we are acting freely within the material world, but we have lost the connection with our own spiritual being, with our true Self and with all spiritual reality. So whether we know it or not, we long to reconnect with our spiritual Self. But we want to do this without losing our self-awareness and freedom, quite to the contrary: this long process of reuniting ourselves with our true Self should amount to the most encompassing exercise of our individual freedom, bringing it ever closer to perfection.”

It filled me with joy to hear Rachel speak out of her unfolding awareness.

“Our Western culture,” she continued, “is now getting to the end of its second stage, or rather to the beginning of the third. Our earth-bound self is now deeply longing to reunite with the spiritual Self. We have gone through our youth and are now reaching the point of maturity. We have become intoxicated by our physical strength and by our power to conquer the Earth. But at a certain time the universal wisdom intervenes and a point of reversal comes about: as a plant grows, it eventually reaches a point of maturity and then begins to decline; the building up of an animal body is at some point

reversed and it begins the process of death and decay. Likewise, it is the law of human life that early adulthood has to give way to maturity and old age, compelling us to reverse our direction. The single life-cycle is really a parable, a telling image of Humanity's evolution at large: the very same physical forces that have once been growing and determining the course of events, later reverse their course and begin to dwindle.

“At this point of our evolution, we are called to grasp the *positive* meaning of this reversal both in our single lives and in our culture at large. What has previously been built in the physical realm, later has to become the foundation or the instrument for something higher, like all that is dead becomes the foundation of what is living. What previously was the goal of evolution, later becomes the tool for the next goal. We reach this next goal by *using* the instrument we built. So all that is material is there to be used for our spiritual evolution. Physical forces are built up in the first part of life to be *used* in the second: *their* diminution or loss can serve our growth in wisdom and love.

“All that is material eventually reaches a point of saturation. At that point, we are called on to invert our course: to ‘convert’ ourselves by using all that is material as an instrument with which to cultivate more carefully the quality of our minds and souls. All our outer achievements in shaping the Earth are but a preparation for the greater work of our life: the fashioning of our inner being. And since we are barely at the beginning of this third stage, we fear and resist it

unconsciously. We are afraid of the consequences the great cultural 'conversion' will have for our lives."

After a moment of silence, Rachel looked at me again. She saw that the flow of my tears continued. She stopped the car, then turned towards me and stretched out her arms to hold my face between her hands.

"Pietro," she said, "you are here because you love these people; my father and I are here because there is a war going on. In a single year you have learned their language, to the point that now you are teaching in Laotian. I tell you, many people will come to you in your life because they are unconsciously looking for the Being of Love. Let him speak to them through you and allow his love to heal human suffering. Let him be the 'higher Self within you, placing your lower self increasingly at his service.

"You will want each person to become independent so that each might fulfil their mission in life. But you too will stand alone; and yet you will not feel lonely, if only you learn to experience ever more deeply the universal communion in the realms of the invisible. As I hold you, I think I understand for the first time what the word 'holy' really means. Your tears are holy, but their holiness belongs to your mother no less than to you. It belongs to us all."

What Rachel was telling me brought to my mind similar words my mother had told me many times. I wanted to tell Rachel, but I was unable to speak.

“Be patient with human beings,” she carried on, “be loving to them. Your great temptation will be impatience. Even when you feel as if you are on a mountaintop with no one to share your vision, do not let your loneliness close your heart. Even when you see human beings inflicting unending suffering upon one another, do not let your sadness harden you. Never become bitter. You can only heal Humanity’s wounds with love, and love is always merciful and gentle. Do not count the seeds of truth and of love that you sow; let the invisible Beings decide on the time of the harvest. Do not look for the results of your sowing, for they do not belong to you. They belong to the Being of Love who is alive in each person.”

While hearing these words, I was thinking: isn’t this the proof that there truly is a wise and loving Self living in each of us? Rachel now withdrew her hands and leaned her elbows on the steering wheel. She continued looking straight ahead, as if talking to herself:

“There are so many who hardly experience the joy of love because they are addicted to outer sensation and success. You will be able to heal their fear of failure only with an unconditional love. You will learn that love has the whole of eternity at its disposal. The farmer knows that when he sows seeds he must wait until they sprout and grow. And between the sowing and the reaping he comes to know the caring and the waiting. Don’t parents know that they could not experience the joy of being parents if their children were born as adults? We are called to be there for one another like the well at the roadside, which out of its abundance gives water unselfishly to

the good and the bad alike. It restores the pilgrim without asking for anything in return. Rather, it enables him to leave it behind without guilt and continue his journey.

“There will be much suffering for Humanity, which you may think you cannot heal. You will learn, though, that we are not called to abolish suffering, but rather to make it holy in the eyes of men. When we realize how precious suffering is in the eyes of God, we kneel down before each suffering person and behold the beauty of each human tear which is given to us to keep alive the yearning for what is everlasting. If we walk through life with a heart filled with idealism, we will find that many react with cynicism and scorn. Love never scorns in return, but returns the scorn with forgiveness.

“If we experience within us an unquenchable thirst for truth, we will be led to truths so beautiful and liberating that we will know that our knocking at many doors was not in vain. But I warn you, Pietro: the more meaningful the truths we discover, the stronger the temptation to go out and tell everyone.

So you will come to learn the truth about all truths: that even the most beautiful truths are worth very little if they remain in the head and do not transform the heart, if they enhance our pride, but do not change our life. Real inner change can never be brought about by merely telling people the truth. Look at the truths of Christianity that have been preached for 2000 years. How much of that has become integrated into practical life?”

Very little, I thought. But who am I to reproach others, knowing how little of that spirit I have been able to make a part of myself? Rachel drew me back into the flow of her thoughts and words:

“You will learn that the forces of evil are shrewd enough not to fight directly against the truth. It would be much too easy to unmask them if they tried to inspire us with outright lies. Rather, they want us to know and to proclaim the truth, but they render it harmless by making us indifferent to it, so that we don’t draw any consequences for our individual lives. They know all too well that a truth proclaimed is less dangerous than one kept secret, providing that people do not strive to live according to it and consider it to be naive idealism, lacking all sense of reality. The dogma which decrees that a comfortable and easy life is a good life is not an outright lie. It is a half-truth. It serves to hide the better half of the truth, which is that the purpose of making our lives materially easier or more comfortable is to give us the possibility of dedicating more time and energy to our inner journey and to our spiritual growth. True inner growth can never be easy or comfortable. On the contrary, it gives us joy and satisfaction only to the extent that it is not easy or comfortable.

“Look now at the way many of us live: we have turned that half-truth into the whole truth of our lives. Taking it easy and being comfortable is all we live and strive for. Our heart would be deeply saddened if we were to realize how many people are indifferent to the sacred realities of life. We are called to ask the Being of Love for strength not to loath the indifference of

human beings, but to dedicate our love to their poverty of spirit. By loving the Being of Love, who is present in everyone, we can stir within them their unseen longing for the spirit.”

I was overwhelmed at the flow of words coming from Rachel. I knew she was speaking from the vastness of a world filled with wisdom and love. I listened quietly while she continued:

“Political allegiance prohibits us questioning power. True love can never be powerful, for its desire is to set all human beings free. It leaves each person free by allowing him the opportunity to ignore even the most beautiful truths. By commending each person to the inner guidance of the Being of Love, we transform our love into surrender and make each encounter an experience of our own death and rebirth. We die to ourselves by leaving each person unconditionally free and are born again when we behold the face of the Being of Love in each human face. Does this all make sense to you, Pietro?”

In saying this, she turned toward me, as if expecting an answer. I nodded repeatedly, still unable to speak. She continued, keeping her elbows on the steering wheel, with her face now resting on her clasped hands:

“In the great reunion, when we join together our innermost Self with the true Self of others, there will be no barriers. When we help people transcend all that divides them, we help them experience what they all have in common. And there is nothing more common to all human beings than the call to love. Let each person address the ‘Being of Love’ in their

own way, for he is the one we all seek. May I beg you not to call him by the name of 'Christ'? This name has been appropriated by the Christian Churches who claim that we can find the Being of Love only through them, thus making themselves more important than he. Will you forgive them and so help me find within myself the strength to do the same?"

These words touched me deeply. Suddenly I realized that the wound dividing Judaism and Christianity can only be healed if each individual makes up his mind to cast aside all that divides human beings and to forgive, out of the strength of the love that unites us all. Rachel continued:

"Forgive them for having caused this name to be ignored or even hated by many. We give the Being of Love different names that we use in fighting one another, because we only have the names on our lips and we carry little of his transforming love in our hearts. We do not understand that truth can only be something we are all called to seek unceasingly, and not something we already possess. Love is not something we can call our own, for it is the very call to love that sends us forever on a path. Be merciful with those Christians who consider the Being of Love their private property, and who think that all others have to bow before them in order to find him.

"Tell all those who call themselves 'Christians', that this is the simple truth of those who call themselves 'Jews': that we are all seekers, that we are all pilgrims like the Founding Fathers, that we can only be saved if we keep growing, that the Messiah, the Being of Love, can only be said to have visited us

already if we experience him as coming ever anew. We are called to heed his voice warning us never to become self-satisfied. The Being of Love we all carry in our hearts is all-encompassing and he embraces all human beings equally through his love, for in his loving embrace we all belong together.”

By now, the flow of my tears had stopped. Rachel’s words were like a healing symphony.

“Deep in my heart I always knew,” she concluded, “that the Being of Love is a real living Being. But his invisible and loving presence is becoming a reality for me today more than ever. You didn’t try to teach me the truth about the Being of Love. You allowed his words, words I never knew before, to flow from the depths of my heart. Oh, I hope I will never forget these words, so I can say them again when I see tears filling the eyes of human beings. Will those tears be able to repeat this magical wonder and call forth these very words again and again from the depths of my soul?”

Rachel paused. We spent a few moments in silence; then she started the jeep again. She drove on and we soon reached the pagoda.

Savang was waiting for us, and greeted us joyfully upon our arrival. “Sabahee dee”, he said, joining his hands before his forehead and bowing with that indescribable oriental grace that makes any Western imitation of it appear awkward and clumsy.

He had prepared tea for us; Rachel pulled out her notes from Emerson. She had made three copies of the text I had chosen. I had suggested that we take time to comment on each sentence, sharing with one another its meaning to us. This text, taken from Emerson's 'Spiritual Laws', is one of my most cherished. I find Emerson to be marvellous in his emphasis of the endless resources of the free individuality. For by free individuality he means not just the resources the person has for dealing with the physical world, but also the calling to be no less at home and creative in the reality beyond space and time.

Rachel asked Savang to read aloud the text to us. He complied and read slowly, solemnly, giving each word its due weight. It was the first time I was hearing these most "Western" of thoughts from the mouth of the most Eastern of my friends.

A man's genius, the quality that differences him from every other, the susceptibility to one class of influences, the selection of what is fit for him, the rejection of what is unfit, determines for him the character of the universe. A man is a method, a progressive arrangement; a selecting principle, gathering his like to him wherever he goes. He takes only his own out of the multiplicity that sweeps and circles round him.(...) Those facts, words, persons, which dwell in his memory without his being able to say why, remain because they have a relation to him not less real for being as yet unapprehended. They are symbols of value to him as they can interpret parts of his consciousness which he would vainly seek words for in the conventional images of books and other minds. What attracts my attention

shall have it, as I will go to the man who knocks at my door, whilst a thousand persons as worthy go by it, to whom I give no regard.

When Savang ended, we remained silent for a while. The majestic statue of the Buddha, with his inward smile, seemed to be meditating with us, echoing his presence from 2500 years ago.

Savang was the first to break the silence: “Oh, how wonderful these words are! How can we merely converse with one another on these deepest of truths? Are they not meant to be meditated upon day by day and to disclose their meaning to us little by little in the course of time? I will cherish them as my new mantra, Rachel. It seems to me that these words express well the true calling of each of us, but I think we are barely at the beginning of the road leading us to our true Self, the Self which this text calls our Genius.”

“Savang,” Rachel kindly asked him, “these words of Emerson seem to be very meaningful to you. Yet I think they speak of a human self-experience which was not yet possible at the time when Buddha lived. At that time, the individual was still upheld and guided by the larger community, like the child today. Don’t you think Buddha himself would speak to us quite differently today, calling each individual to take personal responsibility for his or her own evolution?”

“Was not the meaning of the teaching of the Buddha at that time to lead us out of our infancy into adulthood? Was he not the first to teach human beings that each of us has to walk

the eight-fold path out of his own assent and free will? Don't you think he has continued to inspire Humanity since his death? Something tells me that the important question we have to ask is: where is Buddha now? What is he saying to us now? Wouldn't his teaching have been in vain, if after 2500 years we were still the same and needed the same advice? Would we not consider him to be dead if we wanted only to hear from him today the same words he told us then?"

Hearing these words, I looked up at the statue of the Buddha again. Those timeless eyes now seemed to open a little, as if to look at me. That indescribable smile now seemed to be directed at me. I asked him from my heart: where are you now, great Buddha? How can we find you today? Why don't you speak to us again in our time, telling us the words we need to hear for our life today, a life with different challenges than at the time you walked the Earth? Are you not still a great teacher of Humanity? Are you not to this day one of the great friends of the Being of Love, you who preached compassion and love for all beings?

As if in answer to my silent question, those mysterious lips now seemed to move. For a moment, I thought I heard him gently whispering to me: "I am still alive and I am with you always. Even now, my voice is speaking to all human beings who can hear me, saying things I could not say in the past, because the time was not ripe. The great Being of Love now lives within each one of you since he walked on Earth. Since that time I, too, speak with new words to each human heart and inspire each human mind to new actions.

“When I spoke to human beings a long time ago, I warned them to beware of the physical world. They were like children, still too weak and unable to fully immerse themselves in the world of matter without getting lost or being damaged for the rest of their evolution. But now you are called to behave as adults: you are called to no longer fear what is material, but to love it as the realm where you experience your freedom and your love. You are called to no longer flee from all elements of the earth, but to transform them while transforming yourselves through love.

“When I spoke in the past, I said that the I, the individual human Ego was an illusion and a temptation that had to be overcome. At that time, it would have been a danger and a presumption to claim to be already an independent individual, at the beginning of such a long journey of becoming. Now, since the Being of Love has been at work for a long time in each person, I am helping each of you to see the true individual Self as the most sacred calling and responsibility: not only as a right, but even more as a duty. Uniting with the higher Self in a more intimate way is the great task of your evolution in freedom and love.

“It is not my voice that has become silent: rather, the ears of human beings have become deaf to my words. Will you cleanse your heart enough to be able to hear the words I speak at the present time, those words of wisdom and love for which all human beings now living on Earth hunger?” I promised the Buddha I would do all I could to listen to his voice, to heed his new and comforting words.

I was jolted out of this moment of ecstasy by the sound of a Land Rover approaching rapidly and braking sharply to a halt. Savang remained calm, but Rachel and I exchanged a worried glance. We heard hasty steps outside; then her father stood in the doorway, frantic.

“Rachel,” he called out loud, coming to join us, “I’ve been in agony for over an hour. I received news that two people were killed. I didn’t know where you were until somebody told me they had seen the jeep driving along this road. We are too close to the jungle here.” He looked exhausted. Having sat down on the thin bamboo mat, he lowered his head toward his knees, speaking as if to himself:

“Sometimes I wonder what we are doing here. I’m the one in charge; I find myself having to make decisions on my own, mostly in emergency situations, with no one to consult. Where is wisdom supposed to come from? You hope that the voice of conscience will be good enough. You young people do not have that responsibility, that’s why you simply get up and go, without so much as asking whether the area is safe.

“As I see so many people being killed on both sides, I try not to become insane by considering more closely what we are doing here or by asking further questions. I find it absurd to divide human beings into two categories, with the bad guys over there and the good guys over here (on our side, of course). How can we be so naive in our thinking? Each person, no matter what side he is on, has a lot of good and bad within himself. Aren’t we supposed to be on Earth to help each other,

instead of fighting and killing each other? By thinking we are the good guys, we are no better than those Catholic missionaries around here. They think they have the whole truth and go around selling it to others without searching for it themselves. By unquestioningly thinking we are the good guys, we make sure we don't have to work on ourselves to become good.

"I'm supposed to be here in the service of my Country and to act in the name of my Country. But of late I have been fed up with having to resort to the bottle each evening to remain sane, so I started asking myself: what is my Country, *who* is my country? Is it not made up of people, of human beings like you and me? Who decided to wage this war? Who has wanted it? *Who wants it now?* We speak of the interests of our Country all the time: who actually has an interest in this war and what kind of interest is it? There must be somebody who has an interest; otherwise, we would drop it immediately. There *must* be somebody interested in America running the whole world. Am I here to serve these interests at the risk of my own life without even knowing them?

"The words J. F. Kennedy said seven years ago still ring in my ears: Not a Pax Americana enforced on the world by American weapons of war ...', he was saying, 'not merely peace for Americans but peace for all men and women'. He was talking of peace as 'the product of many nations'. Is this why he was killed? Here was a man who still seemed to understand that Humanity is a single organism. He was saying that no nation, however big or powerful, can in the long run thrive

economically or otherwise by overpowering or exploiting others. I can't help thinking that behind this crazy war there are not so much ideological or political reasons, but the economic interests of a few very powerful people whose identity we perhaps don't even know.

“Don't we just use the word 'Nation' to obliterate the individual and make him disappear into the impersonal? Do not dark forces take over when the reasons given for doing something refer to necessity instead of freedom? I keep hearing from all sides: we have no other choice, we must act this way. And we still claim to be the land of freedom?

“Each individual of a country or a Nation experiences two basic tendencies within himself pulling him in two opposite directions. It's almost like having two personalities or two selves. It doesn't matter which name you give them: you can call the one force egoism, the other love; you can call the one the urge for power or fame, the other one the will to care and to share. I don't care how you name these two basic forces, but they are there, they are at work in each of us. Sometimes I have the impression that all this emphasis on the group, on the Nation, is to make the individual give up his personal responsibility.

“Beware when a person says 'I've done my duty, I've obeyed my superiors', without making the effort to assess the moral quality of what is asked of him. Doesn't the Catholic Church require a person to obey and do his duty without questioning, to leave the decision to the Church concerning

what is good and what is bad, what has to be done or not? I think when a person is satisfied with just obeying orders, all he is doing is surrendering himself to human power, to the will of other human beings who are no less human than himself. If he wants to preserve his inner freedom and dignity, he must be able to stand alone. He cannot simply identify with what human power wants to achieve through swallowing the individual. I think each of us eventually has to choose for himself between impersonal power and personal responsibility. Necessity is neither a reason nor an excuse here. Each person is free to decide for himself; each person does in fact decide, whether he knows it or not, and bears the consequences for his own life.”

I was overwhelmed at the words of Rachel’s father. Each one rang so true for me. I had always liked this man from the time we had met, but now for the first time I felt a deep spiritual affinity to him.

We sat silently for some time, until he broke the silence again: “Rachel, you drive Pietro home. Then make sure you park the jeep inside the gate, so it won’t be seen from the outside.”

On the way back, we were both silent. When we reached the wooden house next to the grade school where I lived, Rachel got out of the jeep and came around to the other side where I was standing. “I don’t think I’ll be seeing you again, Pietro,” she said. “This place is getting too dangerous.” She stretched out her arms and kissed me gently on the forehead.

Suddenly she turned, and, without looking back, got into the jeep and disappeared.

Four years later, on the day of my ordination to the priesthood back in my home village, Rachel's gentle face appeared to me again. As I looked up at the bishop anointing me to be a priest of the Church, it was her face I saw, surrounding him like a radiant aura of light. I knew she was coming to bless me to be a priest of the Being of Love, calling me to love all human beings without distinction or preference. The words she told me never ceased echoing in my mind, for she had spoken to my heart out of the longing for the love that unites us all.

I had difficulty concentrating on the words of the bishop. Although he was speaking loudly enough, Rachel's words of wisdom and love were echoing even truer and louder in my mind and heart. The bishop was speaking to me in the stern language of the Church; Rachel was speaking to me with the winged words of the human heart. The bishop was charging me to go out and teach people the truth, Rachel was begging me to go out and let people teach me out of the yearning of their souls. The bishop was reciting words centuries old, Rachel had words welling up as fresh as living water from the spring of her heart, thoughts so new she hadn't known she could express them. The bishop was telling me to convert people to Christ; Rachel was telling me to convert myself to the Being of Love that lives in each person, to let my heart be open to the unquenchable craving of all human beings, the longing to

behold one day the face of the Being of Love, and to hear his words, which alone can give us wings to fly.

For a moment, it was as if I wasn't hearing the bishop any more. I heard only Rachel's words. I vowed in my heart to do all I could to help all human beings experience in each other and through each other the Being of Love.

CHAPTER 3

CHANGING THE UNCHANGEABLE

(LAKE COMO, 1977)

It was a beautiful, sunny day. I was pacing up and down the narrow path bordering the water. I had been here since leaving New York a few months earlier: this lake, which was now glittering in the gentle breeze like a magical cascade of musical notes, had become the domain of my hermit life. I was making a rare exception of spending time with visiting friends, and I felt all the happier for it.

Waiting for Dieter and Tom, I was reviewing all the things that had happened since the great change in my life: from the daily experience of the New World's teeming melting pot, to this lonely place. I still couldn't believe that a man by the name of Rudolf Steiner had become so important to me, that I was now reading nothing but his works. I had never heard or read about him before. Never had I imagined there could be something as vast and as beautiful as this man's work, in which both my mind and my heart now found inspiration.

Everything I read seemed to me to gravitate around one single, central truth. This central truth, as I perceive it, is that each one of us must have at his disposal as many lives on Earth as he needs, in order to make all the skills and experiences that are *potential* to human nature — his *own*. This can only take

place through his individual and free striving: it lies in the very essence of human freedom that each person becomes in the course of time what he himself makes of himself. Each of us is at the present moment the result of his own free decisions and actions made during a long past; in the future, each of us will be what he makes of himself *now* through the exercise of his free will.

But whenever I thought of this central truth, the words Rachel had spoken to me in Laos would come to my mind: that truths only become meaningful for us to the extent that they transform our lives. I felt that I was at the very beginning of this process of inner change myself, and I wondered how long it would take for the whole of Humanity to go through this process of self-transformation, a process that must necessarily be long, but immensely rewarding.

Multiple lives on Earth — which is called “reincarnation” — and “karma”, the earnest but irresistible calling to a self-determining freedom: this twofold law and reality of human evolution was opening up vast horizons for me. I was scarcely beginning to fathom the consequences of this realization for my own life, let alone the consequences for humankind at large.

What fascinated me most was that I wasn’t finding only one more truth to be placed beside others familiar to me, like the Catholic, the Marxist or the Buddhist teachings. No, what captivated me was the fact that there was no boundary being defined here at all.

Everything rested on the basic assumption that reality is absolutely inexhaustible, that the legitimate points of view in looking at it are infinite, and that the bliss of evolution consists in experiencing and making one's own as many points of view as possible. Although they will all be different and partial, they can all be objective and true — like the many human beings who are all different but are all real and true, each being “objectively” what he actually is. It's like looking at a huge tree or at a mountain or a landscape: the possible points of view are infinite, but they are all legitimate and objective. They can be compared to one another and brought into an ever broadening picture, which in the process becomes ever more whole, but remains open in principle.

No one will ever experience *all* the possible viewpoints a mountain can offer, but someone might have experienced more of them than someone else, and can bring them together into a coherent picture. It's like putting together the pieces of a giant puzzle, creating a larger and larger picture that is coherent, and yet so huge that you never run out of pieces and you never “complete” the job. It is the beautiful experience of a never-ending puzzle or a game of unending fun.

This quality of “unending fun” was the one that convinced me the most. It can of course only be fun if the different pieces do fall one after the other into the right place and the picture unfolding makes sense. What a beautiful way, I had been saying to myself again and again, to avoid both the dogma of relativism — which decrees that *no* objective truth at all exists or can be found — and dogmatism or fanaticism — which

claims to have found and to possess the *whole* truth! I had gained the conviction that life is like a beautiful game. The relativist doesn't even start playing, he gives up before beginning. The dogmatist stops playing, claiming to have won the game already. Between lazy resignation and illusory victory, though, there is the joy of continuous *play*, which can be as unending as the pulsating of our blood or the breathing of our lungs.

At this point in my reflections, I could once more experience within myself the impatience and the temptation to go out and shout to everyone how life could become more meaningful if we all were to live "according to reincarnation and karma". But then I would remind myself of the basic reality of freedom in our lives. Each of us is called to freely forge his own destiny. We want to decide on our own which help or which influence we want to welcome, and which we want to reject. No one can make others into seekers by just telling them truths.

Then I would once more review Steiner's *scientific* study of the world beyond our senses, which I saw as his truly unique contribution to Humanity. Ancient writers claimed to have direct experience of the spiritual, but what we know as modern scientific thinking created by the individual human mind was not yet possible at that time. In modern times, plenty of scientific thinking has been applied to sense experience. To my knowledge, however, no claim has been made anywhere to combine modern scientific thinking with a direct perception of the invisible. I thought, what a gigantic task lies ahead for

Humanity: applying the same method of scientific thinking to a direct perception of the spiritual, with the same intellectual rigor we demand for investigating the physical world.

The two friends I was waiting for were now coming down the steep pathways of the park. We had agreed we would meet near the water under a small pergola of roses. Tom had just flown in from America and Dieter was coming from Switzerland, just north of Lake Como, not far from where I was living. Tom was a real seeker, ever eager to learn. I had written him about my fascinating discoveries, and he had conveyed that he had found the truth of reincarnation in reading Emerson. Dieter I had come to know recently on my search for inexpensive books by Steiner. He had read much more of Steiner's works than I and was eager to "convert" all who would listen to the new truth.

We had no sooner sat down in the shade of the rose-tree, than the two were already intensely debating the best way to prove reincarnation.

"Why do we need Steiner for America if we have Emerson," Tom was asking, "and also others, like H. D. Thoreau or B. Franklin — who all lived before him. They all believed in reincarnation. B. Franklin even stated it on his epitaph. I have copied one particular text of Emerson, which I would very much like to read to you both."

"That may well be," Dieter answered, "but there is no way you can compare some rare and vague hints you find in

American writers to a full-fledged, scientific worldview all based on reincarnation.”

“I agree with you,” Tom replied, “that the real meaning of a truth lies in the way it affects life. But the question is whether you are just believing something because Steiner says it or whether you can account for it out of your own conviction and life experience. What is the difference between the way a good Catholic believes what the Church tells him and the way you believe what Steiner tells you?”

“But reincarnation is something you can prove,” Dieter answered emphatically, “it is not something you just have to believe.”

“You can prove reincarnation?” Tom asked incredulously. “How do you mean that? People in the past have been proving the existence of God, for instance. They also thought you don’t have to just believe it. But it turned out that their ‘proof only convinces those who already believe in the existence of God and need no proof. Those who are not convinced of God’s existence have never been impressed by anyone trying to prove it. Can you prove that this Lake exists to somebody who has never experienced it?”

“May I make a suggestion?” I pleaded. “I know each of you has brought along a particular text for us to talk about. Tom, you told me you would be bringing one from Emerson’s ‘Nominalist and Realist’. And Dieter, you have a reference from Steiner. Maybe we should hear what both have to say. I’m sure

that will provide plenty of further thoughts for us to share with one another.”

They readily agreed. Tom began reading Emerson with deliberation and emphasis, sometimes reading an entire sentence over again, especially toward the end:

Nature keeps herself whole, and her representation complete in the experience of each mind. She suffers no seat to be vacant in her college. It is the secret of the world that all things subsist and do not die, but only retire a little from sight and afterwards return again. (...) All persons, all things which we have known, are here present, and many more than we see; the world is full. As the ancient said, the world is a plenum or solid; and if we saw all things that really surround us, we should be imprisoned and unable to move. (...) Nothing is dead; men feign themselves dead, and endure mock funerals and mournful obituaries, and there they stand looking out of the window, sound and well, in some new strange disguise. Jesus is not dead; he is very well alive; nor John, nor Paul, nor Mahomet, nor Aristotle; at times we believe we have seen them all, and could easily tell the names under which they go.

“My goodness,” Dieter exclaimed after some moments of reflection, “I didn’t know you had people of such calibre in America. I’ve been in the States more than once, but I never heard anybody refer to thoughts such as these; I’ve never even read anything like them. How can such a thing be so totally unknown to Americans — unless maybe this is just some obscure hint that Emerson dropped only once or twice, without

he himself drawing any real consequences from it for his own life...”

“But Dieter,” I intervened, “maybe we should also hear your Steiner reference, so we can better compare the two”.

“You’re right of course,” he readily agreed. “What I’m trying to say about the difference between Emerson and Steiner will become evident once you hear this. It is the description of a real case, not a made-up one. I’ll try to summarize something I have here in German. Steiner speaks of a person who had been mentally handicapped in his previous life, and then came back as a genius of humanitarianism in the next. This account presupposes Steiner’s ability to perceive both lives, and to see that it is the very same individuality living out both. He also needed to be able to see that the reason for the first, painful life was the *positive* result it would bring about in the next. What Steiner emphasizes in relating this case is the positive meaning of karma, always choosing what helps to develop further towards the future.

“All forms of suffering or illness are certainly in accord with the past of the person who goes through them, but they are never meant as a punishment. They are always meant as a positive challenge to grow further. If a mentally handicapped person was able to become a genius of humanitarianism thanks to the self-chosen suffering of a whole lifetime, it could even be that there are human beings not capable yet of living out such a destiny. The true meaning of karma always lies in the future and in what we freely make of it, never in the past. What I

would like to emphasize by referring to this example from Rudolf Steiner is the fact that reincarnation is not stated here as an abstract theory without real consequence for life. On the contrary, it shows that *the whole life* of a person only makes sense in the context of his repeated lives, like one day only makes sense in the context of the previous and the subsequent ones. One particular day may be full of hardships, because we prepare something. But then we reap the positive results of our efforts”.

“The case you’ve quoted is a quite impressive one, Dieter,” Tom said. “But where does someone like Steiner get all that from? How can one verify his assertions? You say this was written at the beginning of the 20th century, so why is it that Steiner is still pretty much unknown, even in Germany?”

“Well, I do everything I can,” Dieter answered, “to make him more known. He does have some following throughout the world, but many people consider his followers more like a sect and his thoughts are often terribly distorted by those who do not want him to become more widely known”.

“If Steiner’s contribution to Humanity,” Tom said, “is as vast as both of you are implying, I imagine that after some time one has to distinguish between the original impulse and what the followers make of it. I guess it’s like having to keep apart original Christian spirit from what the Churches or even the Christians have made of it in the course of time. I would not be surprised if most people project on Steiner the picture they

gain of his followers, without ever getting to know the source directly”.

I suddenly caught sight of Angela who was waving to us from the house that it was time to catch the ferryboat. We had planned an outing on the lake for the rest of the day, and she was one of two other friends joining us. As a young woman, she had been deeply disappointed by the Catholic Church and had turned against the clergy, as had many of her fellow Italians. She had been particularly saddened through her conviction that the Church conceals basic truths for the sake of power. She was fond of quoting to me with particular emphasis the different passages from the Bible that to her clearly support the truth of reincarnation.

The uncrowded ferryboat and the beautiful weather gave our small company a better opportunity to enjoy the ever-changing panorama of the Lake, the interplay of water and light, and each others’ company. Angela had brought along her friend Maria. We were sitting at a small table behind the navigator’s cabin and, not unexpectedly, the conversation returned to our previous subject.

“I mean,” Angela was saying as if it should be clear to everyone, “what Christ said about John the Baptist couldn’t be clearer. It is stated plainly in all the Gospels, to be read the world over by all Christians of all confessions, that John the Baptist was the Elijah who was supposed to return. How could Christ say more clearly that *there is* reincarnation?”

She started going into other quotations from the Gospels to prove reincarnation.

“But the Bible,” Dieter said interrupting her, “has also been studied and hallowed through the centuries by people who have been condemned by the Church. How come none of them seem to have noticed these things you say are so clearly stated?”

“And are you sure, Angela,” Tom added, “that it is due to the power drive of the Church that certain truths haven’t as yet been discovered? The fact that power is exercised doesn’t automatically mean that it is the direct or principle cause of what happens in history. Assume, for example, that the father of a family is a very dominating person, constantly exercising power on his five-year-old child. This alone cannot explain why the child is still unable to grasp certain truths. The father may well dominate his child, but you cannot say that the reason the child still cannot understand certain things is because the father prevents him from discovering them. The one reality is not the cause of the other; they are independent of each other, each has a separate cause.”

“If we take the example of John the Baptist,” Dieter said, “we cannot say that the Church has concealed the truth expressed by the gospel. Anybody can read the text. And the Church has given her own explanation of the statement you quoted, an interpretation which has been accepted by many people to this day. This explanation runs as follows: Christ is saying that *one and the same spirit* is at work both in John the

Baptist and in Elijah. God's spirit is manifesting itself in the same way in both. What does that have to do with reincarnation as such?"

"But Christ is saying," Angela insisted, "that Elijah and John the Baptist are one and the same person!"

"*You* say that, *you* read that into it," Dieter countered, "but the text doesn't put it that way. It has been and still is a puzzle to me why Christ does not state plainly: dear folks, I tell you something which is very important: *there is* reincarnation, each human being *does* live repeated lives on Earth. If reincarnation is a reality with tremendous consequences for our lives, as I believe it to be, why doesn't Christ, who claims himself to be the Truth, simply *say* that? Why does he for instance take recourse to fiction all the time by telling stories or parables that everyone then interprets in a different way?"

Everyone was silent. Maria seemed to be the only one thoroughly enjoying the splendour of the lake. She had been carefully and quietly listening, yet she also seemed to be somewhere else. Every few seconds she would look towards the middle of the lake where she saw somebody swimming.

"Do you also believe in reincarnation, Maria," Tom asked her, trying to draw her into the conversation.

"Well," Maria replied as if searching for words, "saying I 'believe' in it might be easily misunderstood. Let me say instead that I am absolutely *convinced* of it."

“In that case you believe in it,” Tom was pleased to add.

“For me, believing in something and being convinced of something are two very different things,” Maria explained. “I ‘believe’ in something if I consider it to be true without actually experiencing it directly in my own life. When people say they believe in God, for instance, they mean they have no direct experience of him. But a mother doesn’t say she ‘believes’ she has a child if she really *has* one. She is busy with him the whole day, she never doubts for a second out of her own experience that she has the child; she doesn’t ‘just believe’ it.”

“Do you mean to say by that,” Dieter asked, “that reincarnation is a real experience for you? Do you have an experience of your past lives perhaps?”

“No, no,” Maria was quick to add, “I am talking about the way we all can experience this life we now have at our disposal. The way we can experience love in particular leaves no doubt in my mind that we live on Earth many times and that our lives are wisely connected with each other like the many single days of one life. And speaking of love: can you prove that you love someone? If you do love a person, you’ll *show* your love, and you’ll need no proof. And if you *don’t* love him, what is there to be proved? The same goes with believing: if you really experience your love for a person, you will not say you just *believe* you love him”.

“So you are saying,” Dieter asked, “that you get the certainty of repeated Earth lives from the way you experience

love in daily life? If that's correct, I'm very interested to hear more concretely how you explain that."

"The easiest way to explain it is perhaps to take one of the parables from the Gospel," Maria said, "for instance the one of the Good Samaritan. The 'Great Samaritan' — as I would like to call the one who tells this parable — had been asked by a Jewish lawyer what the most important thing in life is. The Great Samaritan answered: your Torah tells you! What do you read there? Well, the lawyer replied, it says that *love* is the most important thing in life: love of God and love of neighbour. So the Great Samaritan told him: and you need more? Your Torah is right: if you truly love, you'll find everything you need. But the lawyer wanted to set a trap for him, because the current interpretation of the Torah did not consider everyone to be one's neighbour, but only the Jews and those fully integrated into the Jewish people. So he asked further: and who is my neighbour?"

"At this point the Great Samaritan told him the beautiful story of the Good Samaritan, which you all know, I'm sure."

"I'm not too sure I remember it," Tom said. "Would you be so kind as to tell us the story and then say where you see the connection with reincarnation?"

"I'll gladly do that," Maria answered. "In my youth I made my own German and English translations of it directly from the Greek, trying to be as faithful and precise as possible, if sometimes at the expense of the flow of modern language. It has accompanied me through my whole life. I know it by heart

like a text one uses for meditation. Listen: 'A human being was descending from Jerusalem towards Jericho and fell among robbers, who stripped him of his raiment, gave him blows, and went away leaving him half dead. By coincidence, a priest was descending along that way and, seeing him, he passed by on the other side. Likewise a Levite, coming upon that place and seeing the man, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan (a foreigner), who was on a journey, chanced upon him and seeing him was deeply moved to compassion. He came to him and bound his wounds, pouring on them oil and wine. He put him on his own mule and brought him to a hostel and took good care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins (the wages of two days), and gave them to the lord of the hostel and said: take good care of him and upon my return I will give you in return all that you have given out'.

Maria told the story with the loveliness of a grandmother telling a fairy tale to her grandchildren. I was enchanted as if I was hearing that story for the first time. It took some time for Tom to repeat his plea:

"You wanted to tell us what this story has to do with reincarnation ..."

"Well," Maria said hesitantly, "when he finished the story, the Great Samaritan asked the lawyer which of the three who had passed the injured man had become his neighbour. Obviously, it was the one who was moved to compassion, the lawyer answered. So the Great Samaritan told him: go and do the same and you will come to know what love is. And the

lawyer must have gone away angry, because he could find no objection to this. On one hand, he thought his neighbour to be only he who belonged to the same blood or to the same people, on the other hand he couldn't object to a foreigner saving the life of a Jew. If he himself had been the one lying there half dead, he certainly would not have refused the help even if coming from a stranger like the Samaritan. So the Great Samaritan was actually telling him that true love knows no barriers and embraces all human beings without exception or distinction.

“And now I must tell you something,” Maria added. “I had been meditating on this story for years when one day it suddenly dawned on me, as if in a great flash of light, that the Great Samaritan had actually reversed the question he had been asked. The lawyer had asked: who *is* my neighbour? And the Great Samaritan turned his question upside down by asking him at the end: who of the three was able to *become* the neighbour of the man in need? I even remember the place in the woods where I was sitting as this insight came to me. I thought: the Great Samaritan is then saying that no one can just *be* my neighbour. It is I myself who have to *become* his neighbour by treating each person I encounter as lovingly as the Samaritan treated the person who was lying half dead. Nobody can be *my* neighbour unless I work on myself in order to transform myself into *his* neighbour.”

“I still do not see any connection with reincarnation,” Dieter said with visible impatience.

“I’m coming to it right now,” Maria answered without losing her composure. “According to this parable, I think we only have two choices. The first would be that the ideal presented in the story is nice in theory, but totally unrealistic and naive, and that no one can in actual reality become as loving as the Good Samaritan. In this case, what the Great Samaritan is saying would be excellent in theory, but no more applicable to practical life than a fairy tale.

“The second possibility is that the Great Samaritan is absolutely serious in giving us this ideal toward which to strive. In this case, we are really meant to become as loving as the Good Samaritan with each person we meet. But if we are to become in actual fact as loving as the Good Samaritan with every person we encounter, we must have at our disposal more than just one life, for in one life alone no human being can possibly fulfil this ideal. So if we want Christianity to become a reality for our lives and not just remain an abstract theory or an unreachable and unpractical ideal, each of us must be given more than one life.

“This is what I meant when I said that I am absolutely certain of reincarnation, without needing to just ‘believe’ in it or to prove it theoretically. The love of which I am now capable, I find it to be so weak and imperfect, that I have no doubt that I would need many, many lifetimes of work in order to acquire the love of the Great Samaritan. I have no doubt that in his abundant love for each of us he is giving us the gift of life over and over, thus making the beautiful ideal of love really attainable for us. I’m sure he gives us all the necessary time,

experiences, and challenges we need to attain the perfection of love. He certainly doesn't want us to be plagued by our conscience for falling short of an ideal that seems unreachable. Neither does he want us to look for excuses to give up altogether.

“What I'm saying about the story of the Samaritan holds true for everything else we find in the Gospels. Christ is less concerned about stating the theoretical truth of reincarnation than in helping us experience it through love. If he were to simply state it, we would have to 'believe' him without making progress in our own understanding of human nature. But if we come to know through our own experience of loving others what the ideal he gives us implies, we will know for certain that we need more than one life to make it a reality”.

I was so taken by Maria's words, that I had almost forgotten we were on a boat. I really wanted her to continue. She was clarifying for me issues that I had been struggling with for months. I realized now that the depth out of which Maria spoke can only be reached through gradual inner growth.

At this point in our conversation something incredible happened.

Not far from us, a motorboat buzzed by, and Maria immediately noticed that the woman she had been watching, swimming a scant 50 yards away, had been caught in its wake. She started knocking at the cabin, making signs to the captain that this was an emergency. He didn't want to be bothered; no doubt he thought she was exaggerating. Maria persisted, and at

length he lost his patience: “Why don’t you go and save her yourself? A ferry is not allowed to stop for anyone swimming in the lake”. “But I cannot swim,” Maria had replied in desperation.

She came back to us, insisting that we do something. I kept looking at the woman swimming in the turbulent water; I couldn’t tell whether she really needed help. But Maria’s determination made me think that she perceived a danger.

In those few dramatic seconds, I knew this was an extraordinary coincidence, and that Maria was not going to give up. I assessed my capabilities: I could swim, but I was by no means a good swimmer. I saw no way for me to help the woman. The odds that both our lives would be lost seemed to me far too high. Still, the sight of her made me apprehensive, because something similar had happened to me once. While I had been swimming, a motorboat had gone by too closely, and I had nearly drowned.

As these thoughts flashed across my mind, Maria jumped into the water, without so much as taking off her shoes. I plunged in immediately after her, having heard her say she couldn’t swim. There was one important thing I remembered: never allow a drowning person to grab your waist, especially if you are untrained in lifesaving. So I grabbed one of her hands and tried to pull her toward the boat while at the same time signalling for a life preserver. Maria was absolutely determined to reach the other woman.

When in her clumsy efforts she started pulling me away from the ferryboat, I began to realize that she was at least able to stay afloat. I was amazed at how fast she was actually learning to swim. By now, she was pulling me towards the other woman. She didn't seem to doubt for a second that she would reach her; rather, she bent her full will on doing what needed to be done. Her swimming was getting better and better. I signalled to the friends, who were anxious to help, that we could manage, and that everything would be all right.

Shortly, we emerged from the wake of the ferry, and I had no doubt we would reach the other woman. But could she manage to stay afloat that long? I kept seeing her bobbing head and I just hoped.

When we were about half way to the woman, it dawned on me that I had long since dismissed the old belief in miracles. But what I am experiencing now, I thought, is clearly beyond the normal or even the possible, according to the laws of nature. Maria said she couldn't swim, and now she is pulling me more than I am pulling her...

We were getting very close, to within some 30 yards. I could see the other woman much better now and it became clear to me that Maria had been right: the woman was exhausted and was flailing about in panic. I couldn't understand how she had managed to stay afloat. And what was just as incomprehensible: we were moving faster and faster towards her.

We finally reached the drowning woman. A few seconds later, and we would have been too late. I was too busy with both of them to be able to wonder at the miracle taking place. It was as if some mighty force field had been drawing these two women toward each other across the water. The surface of the lake was calm now, and I managed to get the woman to lie on her back. Maria was still making all kinds of funny movements, but only now, as I relaxed knowing we were all safe, did I notice that she was smiling and as fresh as a young woman. She showed no signs of exhaustion in helping support the other woman, as if she were the most experienced lifesaver in the world.

I looked around and saw a fishing-boat at the other side of the lake. It took some time but I managed by waving and calling to catch the attention of the old man sitting in it. He gave a sign that he had seen us and began rowing in our direction.

Once we were safely in the boat, we laid the exhausted woman on a makeshift mat of fishing nets. Her head was propped up a bit, her eyes closed. She seemed to be sleeping. Now, Maria sat beside her, beaming and fresh as if she had not exerted herself at all. She was lovingly caressing the other woman's forehead and smoothing her hair. The lake was calm and beautiful, the evening sun turning from gold to red.

"Three days ago," Maria started telling me with a calm voice, her face lighting up, "I had a dream. I saw the Good Samaritan walking down the road again and being moved to compassion. I saw him helping the man half dead. I have had

this same dream several times , but this time something was different. As the Samaritan and his neighbour were sitting on the mule on the way to the inn, they started talking in my dream for the first time. As soon as the wounded one had recovered enough strength to be able to speak, he clasped the arms that held him and said: 'You have been so good to me. You cannot imagine how grateful I am to you. I'm sure I would have died if you, a stranger had not helped me. Not even the priest of my own Jewish people stopped to help me. I wish with all my heart that there were something I could do to help you in return for what you have done for me'. "Then I heard the Good Samaritan say to him: 'Your gratitude and desire to help me is very strong and real. If you keep nourishing it, in the course of time it will create such a bond of love between the two of us, that it will draw us to each other again and again. Without your knowing, you will be drawn to the place where I in turn will need your saving help, just as I have been drawn towards you in a way I could not resist.' When I awoke from my dream I was filled with joy because the Good Samaritan had spoken to me".

Maria paused and looked at the woman, who was now beginning to open her eyes. She had recovered sufficient strength to move her arms a little and slowly she managed with both hands to grasp Maria's hand on her forehead. She lowered it to her lips and gave it a gentle kiss, looking up at her for the first time with a wonderful smile.

After a while, Maria said to me, her eyes filled with joy: "When I heard the Good Samaritan speak to me in my dream

for the first time, I knew he was calling me to save his life, to show my gratitude for his having saved my life in the past”.

Hearing Maria’s words, I could now compare two very different ways of dealing with reincarnation and karma. On the ferryboat, we had been discussing the subject as a theoretical truth. We were asking how one can “prove” it. We had hardly touched on the far-reaching consequences for daily life. Now Maria stood before me as one whose strong convictions about reincarnation and karma moulded her very existence. She made visible for me the spiritual forces which united her with the other woman in a bond so strong that it must have taken many lives to form. Isn’t this, I thought, what the word “karma” actually means?

Once more I felt helpless in the face of the question: what can I do to help human beings become aware of the reality of reincarnation and karma? How can I show the beauty and meaning of a life lived according to these realities? How can I convince human beings that this awareness is urgently needed to subdue the ever increasing waves of violence and depression, caused by the lack of meaning in our lives?

The old fisherman was rowing slowly, as if living not in time but in eternity. I broke the silence by asking Maria: “Have you ever heard of someone by the name of Rudolf Steiner? He has become very important for me at this time in my life”.

“Oh, yes,” she said, becoming more enlivened. “My parents knew him personally and I grew up in Southern Germany surrounded by many memories of him”.

“Why didn’t you make any reference to him earlier,” I asked, “when we were discussing reincarnation?”

“Because you were discussing!,” she answered without any hesitation. “I know that discussion doesn’t bring us to the truth. Reincarnation and karma can only become realities for a person if he begins to *live* according to them. If someone ‘believes’ in reincarnation, but behaves like those who do not ‘believe’, well, for him it still doesn’t exist, it hasn’t become a reality yet for that person. What is the point in theoretically ‘proving’ reincarnation and karma, if our lives remain the same? This is why the Great Samaritan did not directly state such a truth to us, but rather wanted to help us mature morally, so we arrive at that truth through our own life experiences.”

“And yet,” I said, “nothing seems to be more desperately needed by Humanity today than this awareness. It alone can give the moral strength necessary to change our lives. Only by knowing that we live repeated lives will we stop wanting to grab everything in one life. We will stop complaining about injustice, knowing that from one life to the next each of us reaps what he has sown. Only if we know that the way we treat others shapes our very being more than anything else, and that each of us is *today* what he has done to others in the *past*, will we find the strength to be less inhuman to one another. We would deal more responsibly with our mother Earth, if we knew that we come back to her again and again, to fashion our body in accordance with what we have made of *her* body. We would know that we find in the realms of nature the results of our moral behaviour...”

Maria was looking at me intensely. We were both silent for a while, knowing that no words could express what we wanted to say. Then, looking at the calmness of the lake now set afire by the evening sun, she said:

“It is not easy to have a sense of urgency and to be patient at the same time. There is only one thing that can help us keep the two together, and that is love. If we strive to love humankind and each human being more deeply every day, we find the right inspiration for each moment of our lives. The more we love, the more we find the wisdom and the strength to turn the sense of urgency towards ourselves, and become ever more patient and gentle with others. As we become aware of how slow our own spiritual progress is, we can better understand the weakness of others.”

“Maria,” I said, “earlier, you told us that we can only know through our own experience that we are in the middle of a sequence of recurring lives on Earth. How does one come to that kind of experience?”

“I have nothing against the discussion you were having on the ferryboat,” she answered. “What I meant is that all theory is but a preparation for real life experience. Let me give you an example from my own life. I had not been married for many years and had small children, when another man came into my life. I had no doubt that a deep karmic connection was uniting us, because the attraction was strong for both of us and did not subside.

“I started reading again the epic of Tristan and Isolde and one day, I realized that this was a story about reincarnation. Isolde *has* to be faithful to king Mark, since she is his wife; yet she *cannot* renounce Tristan, due to the magic-karmic love potion. The only solution is to live out in a later life what cannot be lived out in the present one. I could not believe that the strong conviction of repeated lives can generate in us the strength to remain loyal inwardly by waiting until the next life to live out externally a meaningful relationship. I felt the inner connection to that man was becoming even deeper after I decided that I wanted to wait until the next life to live it out. But these are questions that each person must decide on his own. If you tell other people as a moral injunction that they ought to behave this way, some will laugh at you, some will get angry, saying you are crazy. But the two well-known solutions are not satisfactory: if you follow what the more morally conservative people advise, you would avoid the situation completely. But in this way you end up repressing something real within you. The more liberal people would say: go ahead, live it out. But there are definite limits to what we can live out in one life”.

“Is there anything we can do to help other people,” I asked her, “turn theory into life-experience? Have you ever been able to convince anyone else of reincarnation?”

“We are here for each other,” she answered, “what the farmer is for the plants. There is a lot of help we can give in terms of theoretical reflection. When I was younger, I tried harder to convince people of my viewpoint. Later I realized that

it only makes sense to offer an answer when the other person asks a question. The spiritual poverty of today's Humanity consists in the fact that many people are too distracted or too busy to ask deeper questions. Their time and energies are all consumed with the material necessities of life. Years ago, one of my best friends got pregnant in her late twenties. She seemed to be convinced of reincarnation, at least in theory, yet she was determined to have an abortion. We had been talking about one of the basic alternations of repeated lives: that the persons who are blood relatives to us in one life, as a rule, become the persons we choose freely as our friends in the next. The total lack freedom due to blood ties engenders a strong desire to experience the same people through a relationship based on freedom. "I'll never forget the day my friend told me she had decided not to have an abortion. She said elatedly that for weeks she had been conversing with her future child, and that he had been telling her of their freely chosen friendship in a former life. He told of all the good intentions he had in order to make up for all his selfishness towards her in the past. She said she felt such renewed strength, she had no doubt that this future child was giving her all the help necessary for her to *want* to be his mother, so they could continue their relationship and their mutual karma by loving one another as mother and child.

"That day, I saw the difference between my trying to 'prove' reincarnation to her as a theoretical truth, and the reality of her own inner growth, which brought to her the real forces and the moral maturity to live it out as the reality of her

life. We cannot make people mature morally just by telling them truths. Each is entrusted to the mystery of his own individual evolution, which has a long past and a long future”.

“I think I understand better now,” I said, “what it means to find the right balance between having a sense of urgency and being patient. For the growth of others, we can only give help from outside, but our own growth is our individual responsibility”.

“I believe the Great Samaritan sent us someone like Rudolf Steiner,” she said, “to make Humanity aware of the mysteries of reincarnation and karma. Rudolf Steiner maintained that without this awareness and its application to life, we will plunge ourselves into an abyss of unending self-destruction and suffering. This is why I beg the Great Samaritan each day to send us enough human beings who find the strength to be pioneers of this new vision and moral renewal. Humanity at large can only make progress if there are enough pioneers not only showing the way but going the way themselves.

“And the Great Samaritan embraces in his universal love the pioneers and those who follow alike. He comes to each of us each day, finding us only half alive in the middle of our evolution: living only in the half of the world that is material and being dead to the better half, which is spiritual. He heals our wounds with a love that can be patient and gentle, for it generously gives us through many lives the opportunity to become true Samaritans for one another. His everlasting love

can change what seems unchangeable to us: he transforms our hearts of stone into hearts of love.”

We were now approaching the shore, at a place where the mountains plunge steeply into the water. Looking at the ageless face of the silent fisherman and the timeless stroke of his oars, I thought: “And who were you when we met in a past life, what did we do with you, for you to turn for us this time into a fisher of men?”

As I was asking myself this question, words from Emerson’s “The Over-Soul” were rising from memory to mind and descending from mind to heart:

Oh, believe, as thou livest, that every sound that is spoken over the round world, which thou oughtest to hear, will vibrate on thine ear! Every proverb, every book, every byword that belongs to thee for aid or comfort, shall surely come home through open or winding passages. Every friend whom not thy fantastic will but the great and tender heart in thee craveth, shall lock thee in his embrace. And this because the heart in thee is the heart of all; not a valve, not a wall, not an intersection is there anywhere in nature, but one blood rolls uninterruptedly in endless circulation through all men, as the water of the globe is all one sea, and, truly seen, its tide is one.

As I watched Maria now embracing the other woman to help her to the shore, the words of Emerson resounded again: “Every friend, whom not thy fantastic will but the great and tender heart in thee craveth, shall lock thee in his embrace.” So is the embrace of the Good Samaritan, I thought, so is Maria’s

loving embrace, so is the universal embrace of love, holding and uplifting us all and making us one.

CHAPTER 4

GIVING JUDAS A CHANCE

(SOUTH AFRICA, 1981)

"What do you think about reincarnation?" I was teaching philosophy and theology in a Catholic seminary near Pietermaritzburg in South Africa when I was asked this question. It was at the beginning of a lecture I was giving for students from various religious orders preparing for the priesthood. "You have asked an interesting question", I replied, "and a very important one as well."

It was clear to me that I was not going to hold a theoretical lecture on reincarnation. I did not believe in proving or convincing, but I was willing to give some basic orientation on the subject, so that each student could deal with it out of his own thinking.

"I have an idea," I said. "How about acting out what happens to Judas right after his death? Some of you fellows are born actors. Come on, this may help you answer some of your questions, and you'll get to skip today's lecture."

Among the students was a microcosm not just of South African society, but of Humanity at large. There were different ethnic groups of Blacks, Coloured, Indians, Boers and

Europeans from various countries. Their age ranged from early twenties to late fifties.

The students decided who would take which role, and I was curious to see who would play Judas. We had God the Father, his son, Mary (some suggested she should plead in a motherly way for Judas not to go to eternal Hell). I was delighted at the one who volunteered to play Judas. He will do a good job, I told myself.

And he did. He started out by addressing God the Father like someone who was condemned to death, has nothing left to lose and is seeking desperately to save his life. And he was not mincing words or being polite, either.

“What do you mean I betrayed your son?” he asked God. “You are the great God sitting on your throne up here on the clouds; *you* are supposed to be the smart one, who is aware of all that happens on Earth. You should know better than to believe the kind of’ B.S.’ human beings come up with.”

There was absolute silence in the room. In a matter of a few minutes, Judas had everyone spellbound. It was difficult even for God to stop him, not only because he talked non-stop, but also because God had been caught off guard and did not know how to respond.

“You know very well that I wasn’t trying to betray your son,” Judas went on. “I had been with him for three years. I had witnessed his spectacular miracles. Just think of him bringing his friend Lazarus back to life! I knew the kind of powers he had

at his disposal. I wanted to force him to show the Romans and the Jews his power, so that he could deliver us from political and religious oppression and set us free.”

Judas briefly caught his breath. Everyone seemed too shocked to interrupt. He then went on with the same fervour:

“I’m positive he could have delivered us, if he’d only wanted to. But no, he showed that we were not important to him in the least. It was more important for him to look good before God the Almighty, whom he was raving about as being his personal father. At first he taught us the nice prayer “*Our father*”; but later he kept referring to *his* father, as if you only belong to him. And instead of smashing those bastards, he surrendered himself and left us in the lurch, showing that we didn’t mean a thing to him. He is the one who betrayed us all, not me. He played it big right up to the last moment as the Son of God, but when he could have done something for us he behaved like a son of a b****.”

Judas’s last word was drowned out by a sudden uproar. Nearly everyone in the room started shouting at him. The students suddenly seemed to have remembered they were in a Catholic seminary. The strong message to Judas was: you’d better watch your blasphemous tongue.

“You people had better watch *your* tongues,” he roared, banging with his fist on the lectern. “I’m the one being Judas here, not you. You folks don’t have the faintest idea what Judas is like. And if you don’t like what you see, you might just as well get the hell out of here.”

There was complete silence again; everyone was too stunned to reply. As Judas stopped momentarily to savour the silence, God the Father recovered his composure:

“But you did get 30 silver coins for betraying him. So obviously you were out for money...”

“You know as well as I,” Judas retorted, “that I threw the money back into the temple. I couldn’t have cared less about the money. Nobody has ever bought Judas, is that clear?”

“But Judas,” Mary pleaded with a compassionate ‘male’ voice, “why did you take your own life? How could you resolve to choke your own breath? How could you deny yourself the sunlight of the day and the sight of the stars at night? I can understand your bitterness in seeing that my son refused to make the Earth his kingdom. I have pity for the desperate kiss you gave him. But why has your pain led you to destroy what is most sacred to every human being: your own life full of hopes, your life that my son also loved so dearly? Why, Judas, why have you betrayed your own life?”

This remark silenced even Judas. It was as if Mary, with a few words, had helped everyone realize that suicide weighed far more in Judas’ destiny than a disputable betrayal. For a few moments, Judas seemed to be looking for an argument to defend his suicide. The intense silence seemed to indicate that none of us wanted him to be condemned to eternal damnation for suicide. I am sure everyone hoped he would find a way to defend himself here, as well.

“My dear mother,” he said to Mary “are you the only one not to accuse me? You are the only one concerned about the life I threw away. If your words are true, my tragedy is not the betrayal of others, but of myself...”

Judas began moving about the stage with open arms, as if looking for something. He reached the far end, then turned toward us:

“Where now is the life that I have forsaken? You bring it back to memory, dear Mother, the very life I have abandoned. In these strange heavens I see it far away on the horizon, like the tail of a broken comet. To whom does that life now belong? What will become of it, if I have done everything wrong and am now dead, dead forever?...”

Judas paused, the rest of us were still. Everyone seemed uncomfortable about this turn in the discussion, not just because Judas’ pleading guilty might mean the end of the show. Rather, we didn’t like the idea of Judas being guilty, period. I think each of us felt a part of Judas in ourselves. *His* guilty plea would incriminate us all.

He must have felt our sympathy, for when he resumed, he spoke with the inner strength of our combined voices:

“Okay... okay, let us suppose I’ve done it all wrong. Now after death I can see my whole life from a new perspective. What I couldn’t do while I was alive, I can do now: be objective, look at my life as if from outside. I can see above all the illusion and the tragedy of my suicide. I can see that I have been

greedy, that I have been concerned only with myself much of the time, that I stole and cheated and told lies...

“But we have always been told that you are the God of love. You are said to care lovingly for the birds of the air and the lilies of the field. It is said of you that you love human beings above all creatures of the Earth, as being your own children. I come here before you after my death to look at my life for the first time as an objective spectator.

“You are the One who forged human nature, you have decreed that to be human means to grow by trial and error. I have done so much wrong and I would like to have a second chance. I was expecting you to help me assess my life, lovingly, so that I might improve. Instead, I hear you talking about eternal punishment... How can you be the God of love? You are so lavish with the colours of the flowers and sunsets, with the fish in the depths of the sea. You are so beneficent with all plants and animals, giving them endless opportunities to repeat their lifecycle.

“Why then are you so miserly with us humans that you don’t give us even a second chance? Why have you given us unlimited drives and aspirations, if you only allow us to realize an infinitesimal part of them? Each of us dies barely at the beginning of his development. I can’t believe this is true. If you have been so clever, or I should rather say so devilish as to invent eternal Hell, you are the first one who belongs there. I can only imagine you are joking-or are you really serious about it?”

“Who is demanding a second life here?” God the Father said with visible satisfaction at having found a good counter-argument. “Is it not the very Judas who has thrown away the life he had in the first place? Shall I grant you a second life, so you can throw that one away as well?”

“You don’t need to be sarcastic,” Judas said, somewhat resigned. “In your omniscience, you should know very well what goes on in a human being in those last terrible moments. If only I could have severed the cord of my death as easily as the umbilical cord of birth is severed! What kind of God are you, if in order to reign over me you need to cast me into an abyss of fire for all eternity?”

His low, sad voice had gradually become louder, again. The students on the improvised stage seemed to have all forgotten they were actors; they stood there motionless like spectators under a spell. Only God the Father, being addressed directly, was not allowed this privilege. All eyes were fixed on him. Everyone in the room was glad someone else had to answer Judas’ daunting question. Judas broke the silence by repeating his question with a forceful voice: “I’m asking you, dear, loving God: Will you really not give me so much as a second chance? Do you really want to punish me in hell forever?”

There was no way God could dodge that question any longer. He had to come up with something. What would it be?

“Judas,” he said hesitantly, as if trying to gain time to think of something that would make sense, “you were told all your

life that after death there is eternal reward for the good and eternal punishment for the bad, weren't you?"

"Yes sir," Judas snapped, "I have been told all kinds of bull all my life. But even if I *had* believed it during life, you knew all along that it is not true. Why do you con human beings into believing such nonsense, if you come up with a new divine revelation every couple of years? The point is not what I believed during life, but whether or not you are giving me another try at a life on Earth and a chance to learn from my past mistakes."

"Judas," Mary said with a whispering voice, "don't you think you are being a bit too harsh on our heavenly father? He is not used to being treated like that, you know. You might want to be a bit nicer to *him-please*⁷."

"The hell with being nice," Judas retorted. "If he wants me to roast in his hell forever he cannot expect me to be polite to him. I remember you as being the most loving of mothers: you know what love is all about. Now tell me: if your son had hurt himself when he was a child and had come to you with his head bleeding, would you have punished him by slapping him in the face so that he bled even worse? Well, isn't this what our dear loving father is doing to me, after I've hurt myself as badly as a human being can? If he is the father of us all, am I not supposed to be his child like everyone else? If I have hurt myself more than others, why should he punish me forever? Is that why you expect me to be respectful to him?"

“But Judas,” Mary gave it another try, “don’t you remember the last words my son said to you before you left the Last Supper? He said to you: ‘What you are to do, do it quickly’. Was he not telling you to go on with your life task without wavering or hesitating?”

“Dear Mother,” Judas answered her, “please reflect properly on the words you just quoted. Don’t you understand that one of the twelve *had* to point out to the enemies the one they were looking for? They promised me money not to indicate to them where he was, but *which one* he was. Have you ever asked yourself why they could not identify him themselves, and were afraid of arresting the wrong one? With his words to me, your son meant that it was my job to point him out to them.

“And don’t you think he also knew that as a consequence of having to hand him over I would fall prey to despair and take my own life? I have no doubt he knew all that, yet he didn’t do anything to keep me from doing it. On the contrary, he simply said, ‘What you have to do, do it quickly’. After saying that one of us would have to hand him over, the one to whom he would give his bread to eat, he gave it to me. Why should I be made accountable for what your son wanted to experience, with the excuse of having to obey the will of his father to save Humanity?”

Poor Mary seemed to be caught off guard at how well the Judas-actor knew the Gospel of John, which he was quoting almost literally. He had been told he should defend Judas

before God, and he seemed at a loss for having to defend God before Judas. Even so, it was obvious that he was enjoying what Judas was saying. His plight lasted only a short moment, for Judas had hardly stopped to catch his breath:

“Look,” he went on, “we have always been told that the gap between God and man is infinite, man being a limited creature and God being the infinite and transcendent creator. Transcendent meaning: unapproachable, untouchable, and incomprehensible. So we have been told, at least. Now if your God is as ‘all wise’ as he claims to be, how come he doesn’t notice the blatant contradiction he has created here? If a human being is a finite and limited creature, his actions can only have finite and limited consequences. Now to have him roast in hell for all eternity means to attach infinite consequences to finite actions. Would you please ask him in your nice and sweet way, how he proposes to explain this kind of nonsense?”

There was silence again. Mary was perplexed and could not answer. I was sitting there thinking, how glad I am I did not give a dry lecture on reincarnation! Never could I have come up with something so good and so powerful. I was thoroughly delighted at the way the play was unfolding.

“You brag about being smarter than other human beings,” God the Father said with new confidence, as if he had finally found something that could silence Judas. “You speak of eternal hell as if you knew already what that is. You call me miserly, because you think I won’t give you any chance of developing

further. But you actually know nothing of what lies ahead of you. What if 'eternal hell', as you call it, would be the struggle you have to go through in order to amend the wrong you did? Isn't this what you are pleading for?"

"I do not object," Judas answered, "to having to pay for my mistakes. I am more than willing to take upon myself the rightful consequences of my actions. What I mean is that however my further development will unfold, it will have to take place on Earth, with me inhabiting once again an earthly body. Only on Earth can I experience the striving which is the bliss and the burden of human nature. Only on Earth can I learn to deal with earthly power in a more human way. Only on Earth can I overcome the temptation allowing money and possessions to become my only passion. Only on Earth can I wonder at the beauty of flowers and sunsets, hear the thunder of a storm and marvel at the majesty of the mountains. Only on Earth can I behold the innocence of a child's face and learn to overcome selfishness through experiencing human love. Only on Earth can I learn to die not by taking my life, but by giving it for others. Only on Earth..."

A long, intense silence followed. Judas's last words echoed loudly in the room for some time. The other actors seemed to have exhausted all their attempts at countering him. For a moment, I thought this might be the end of the lecture.

Then, all of a sudden, Judas began talking again, as if he were alone in the room. He transformed the dialogue into a monologue. What he had been saying had been so staggering,

so fascinating, that I am sure everyone wanted to hear more. When he began speaking again, his voice trembled.

“It was shortly after he was condemned to death and was carrying his cross,” he began slowly, looking up and away from the improvised stage. “I was so desperate, I kept running for hours without direction or purpose. I was just trying to run away from myself, un-till I collapsed somewhere in the dark, exhausted. I thought it was still afternoon, only hours after he had been condemned to death at noon, but the sky was as dark as if the sun had disappeared. I kept falling asleep and waking up in the middle of terrible nightmares. I had no one to turn to for comfort and understanding. I thought there was no place left for me on the face of the Earth. In my nightmares, I saw myself knocking at many doors asking for food and shelter and being cursed and rejected by everyone as if I were some kind of terrible monster and not a human being.”

Judas moved slowly from one end of the stage to the other. The silence was so intense that the sound of each step was magnified. The scene seemed surreal. All eyes were fixed on him; nothing else existed.

“Life on Earth had become so unbearable to me that I eventually took my own life. In my last and darkest hour, I dreamed of myself after my death. I saw myself leaving the Earth, expanding into the vast reaches of the sky. I came to a golden and ruby-studded door, and I knew it was the gate of paradise. Remember? A loving father waits there for all his prodigal children to come back to him, ready to make a great

feast for each of them, no matter how good or how bad they are in the eyes of men.

“I knocked at the door with a trembling hand and a pounding heart. As it burst open, I saw an old Man coming towards me with outstretched arms. He hugged me and kissed me and there were tears of joy streaming down his cheeks. It was only with great difficulty that I managed to stammer the words I had rehearsed a thousand times: ‘Father, I have sinned against you and against the whole of Humanity. I have betrayed your Son, the best and most loving one of all. I have taken my own life in my utter desperation.’ I wanted to add: will you forgive me, Father, even if no one on Earth will ever forgive me? But I didn’t get a chance.

All of a sudden the Man I had betrayed appeared from nowhere, and enveloped me with a veil of light, until I fell asleep in his embrace. In my dream I was now a small child resting on his knee. He was telling me the most beautiful story I have ever heard. I remember every word of it:

“Once upon a time, a man and his wife had a beautiful child. Both of them had had similar dreams, in which they had seen their child fulfilling all the prophecies of their Jewish people. So they named him “Judas.” He would bring to fulfilment the words Jahve spoke to protect Cain from all dangers of life on Earth. He would fulfil even the dreams expressed in the myths and legends of the pagans, particularly the one of Oedipus. Without knowing it, he would also help the awaited Messiah to fulfil his mission, begging him with a kiss to

give his life for us all. He would then wander through the centuries of human history from people to people like a “wandering Jew” to tell everyone the most beautiful story ever told, the true story of the Messiah, of the Being of Love coming to fulfil all the dreams of human beings, those of Cain, of Oedipus, and of Judas himself...”

“When the story was over, I awoke from my dream and saw the Man I had betrayed now standing silently before me, looking at me with his eyes filled with love. I had no words that I had rehearsed this time: I had not been expecting this. I was no longer even sure that he was a man. His human features, which I remembered from life on Earth, were now fading, a radiant aura of light was transfiguring his face. For the first time, I had a glimpse into the mystery of love being *at once* male and female. It was an intuition I couldn’t express in words.”

Judas went on with his story as if he were now inspired by his higher Self. It was as if he had lifted us up to another level of reality and awareness. As he continued his voice seemed to come from far away:

“At this point of my dream, the Man I had betrayed, the one who always called himself the Son of Man, had taken on a human form that was made of pure light. I heard his voice, mighty and gentle at the same time, as if coming from all parts of the universe. He was speaking to me, yet it was as if all the human beings on Earth and in Heaven were listening at the same moment. He said: “Judas, what a joy to welcome you

here. You just left behind the most difficult life a person can have on Earth. At some stage in the long journey, each human must go through the abyss in one form or the other. Your life has been the darkest that human consciousness can experience. A life where one experiences oneself as a betrayer of every-thing truly human in oneself, by destroying the very life given for the purpose of developing unlimited human potential.

“Even when a human being appears to be completely evil, he is not really evil in his true Self. In his efforts to numb the pain of not finding good, he allows himself to be possessed by dark forces that do not belong to human nature. The temptation of earthly power is still so strong in you, Judas, that you will need more than one life to overcome it. Now you see the reason for going through the eye of the needle, through death, again and again. It is to be able to see life from a wider perspective, to overcome the dark and narrow view of things imposed by the constraints of material existence.

“The world you live in is filled with love. Love calls on every human being to become ever more loving, which means ever more divine. In so doing, it bestows on each of you an endless opportunity to experience every possible facet of human nature. Look at the long evolution you have behind you. Like all human beings, you have already lived on Earth many times. You yourself have been the Cain of which the sacred scriptures write. You are the one who later came back as Oedipus.

“Your own hand took the life of your brother, took the life of your father, and now took your own life. You now realize that it has always been one and the same hand. All that you have done to others you have done to yourself. Now you see yourself in your brother, now you no longer curse the father who gave you earthly life. Each human must learn that the evil done to others is done to oneself and that the love we bestow on others comes back to us a hundredfold.

“But look now, Judas, at your lives as a woman, when you were able to experience the other side of love and of life. The fixation on the male side of life, emphasizing earthly power and physical strength, is due to the present materialism of Humanity. It wasn’t like that at the beginning and things will change again in the future, as human beings learn again not to feel threatened by the feminine, loving quality of existence. No human being has buried himself as deeply in the furrows of the Earth as Cain and Oedipus and Judas. But as a woman, you harvested your crop from those furrows and you made your bread from the harvest. As a woman, you were able to unravel the riddle the Sphinx had once posed to Oedipus turned blind. As a woman in the future, you will marvel at the violet flowers of the Judas tree.’

At this point,” Judas continued, “I remember struggling very hard to picture myself being a woman.

As I was trying to do this, I saw a vast panorama in front and all around me. I saw in pictures the whole past history of Humanity. I tried to look closer, and to make out more precise

details. I saw myself not only alternating between female and male lives, but also practicing different religions, being born in different cultures, each time inhabiting a totally new kind of body. Each time wearing another skin colour, in each life having new experiences and learning all kinds of things... I remember being overwhelmed with gratitude and love. I was so filled with joy I wanted to shout out to those poor people on Earth to see through their narrow-minded illusions. But I realized I had no voice that could be heard on Earth.

“‘Judas’, the Being of Light said to me, ‘if human beings on Earth could hear you, there would be no need for them to die. With their consciousness they would be both on earth and in heaven at the same time. All is a matter of the scope of consciousness each being has. The reason you come back here again and again after each life is that you will learn to hold this vision even when you are on Earth. When you are able to see things this way while on Earth, it will be transformed for you into Heaven. Heaven is the state of consciousness you are experiencing now. Can you comprehend a greater Heaven?’

“How could I? I thought. Being in Heaven felt so blissful that I wondered why I couldn’t stay here forever. Why return to Earth at all? Where would I go? I had just come from there and I had been so lonely and desperate that I had thrown away life at a very young age... As I was thinking this, I realized that he could read my thoughts. He was only waiting for me to think out my question in order to give me the answer I was seeking. The sun does not do otherwise when it waits for the rose to unfold all her petals.

“‘Judas’, the Being of Love said to me, ‘just as the purpose of ascending to Heaven each time is to widen your awareness, it is the purpose of descending to Earth to deepen your love. In Heaven your mind is made into light; on Earth your heart is made into love. But no one can grow stronger in love without suffering. So we had to create a world full of obstacles and counter-forces, a world of matter that would make it possible for humans to overcome separation. Only through self-overcoming does one learn to love. This is why I myself had to leave Heaven and come down to Earth, in order to experience human love, especially by going through death. Death is the greatest of all obstacles, because in order to give one’s life out of love for others one has to fully overcome all feelings of separation or exclusion that make us feel lonely and aloof.

“‘And by learning to love, Judas, you will no longer want to be released from suffering unless the other human beings are taken into Heaven with you. When you love, you feel that all people belong together like the branches and the leaves of a tree, like the members of one and the same body. You can only be happy if everyone else is happy. The same applies to all other creatures on Earth as well: the animals, the plants and the stones. Think of how long they have all been lovingly at the service of human beings. Now they long to be loved by you in return, and to be taken into Heaven as well... Are you sure you want to remain here? Would you not rather return to Earth again and again, so you can learn how to love all beings?’

“I remember at that point looking up at the Earth. It looked like a tiny vessel sailing in the vast ocean of a dark sky. But all of

a sudden I saw it illuminated and shining forth like a sun. I knew it was the loving thoughts and deeds of all human beings making the Earth shine forth like the Sun. I'll never forget the irresistible love I felt for our Earth at that moment, and for all her creatures. It was clear to me that I wanted to go back there many, many times, to learn to love all beings ever more deeply.

“In that last dream, given to me as a last sacrament before my death, I spoke to the Earth with words I could hardly say while living: O dear Mother mine, virgin mother of all human beings, Earth blessed and made holy with our own lives, to your womb I want to return, from you I want to be born again. The Being of Light has made of you his holy Body; in you he becomes the Being of Love helping us to transform you into our own body and blood.

“The body you gave me, o Mother, I have this time destroyed. But you call me to you again to clothe me anew with your living body. To you I want to return: you alone, O Earth, can be my Heaven.”

Judas paused. He slowly lowered his eyes to the ground and remained motionless for a few moments as if pondering what to say next. Then he moved slowly to the centre of the stage and sat down on the floor with his elbows on his parted knees and his forehead bent down to touch his clasped hands.

As I watched this, I knew there was nothing more to be said. I think we all experienced a moment of eternity. We were silently looking at Judas, his words still echoing in our minds and hearts. I thought to myself: how do we go back to reality

now? But immediately I corrected myself: no, *this is* reality! So where do we go from here ?

The answer came when the silence was broken by the bell, announcing the end of the lecture. Everyone heard the bell, but no one moved.

Then, abruptly, the students—nearly all of them at once—got up and rushed toward Judas. They raised him to his feet. Everyone wanted to be the first to hug him, or give him a pat on the shoulder. Quite a few had moist eyes, which they didn't want to be seen, so they quickly disappeared. Even Judas, moved by all the affection, now had two big tears on his dark cheeks.

Soon, I was the only one left in the room. I knew in my heart that I would never forget the day of the best lecture of my life..., the one I never gave.

CHAPTER 5

MERGING THE HUMAN WITH THE DIVINE

(*ROME 1984*)

“Strada, come join us!” my old classmate Jan from Poland called out to Tomas as he was walking by. We had nicknamed him “Strada” because of his obsession with Fellini’s movie *La strada*. We were standing in the solemn entrance hall of the Gregorian University in Rome, where I had completed my studies in philosophy and theology.

Conversing with us was Liliana, a young Italian woman who had been one of the first female students to enrol when the centuries old male-only rule was overturned by the spirit of the Second Vatican Council in the sixties.

“What I mean, Jan”, I said, “is not that human beings all of a sudden can become like God. What I’m trying to say is that our concept of ‘God’ has become far too rigid. We use it only for the one Man upstairs, whereas in ancient times, and even in Christian scriptures, many beings were said to be divine, not only the highest God. Just as there are many degrees of being ‘human’, one also distinguished in the past various levels of being ‘divine’: from a human being hardly aware of his divine calling, through more or less highly evolved Angelic beings, on up to the divine Trinity.”

“So you mean”, Jan said, “that all these beings find themselves at different stages of evolution from the human to the divine, and that there is *continuity*, which gives each being the opportunity to ascend gradually from the bottom to higher levels, or even to slip back. Am I getting you right?” “Yes”, I answered.

“But right there we have the first big problem”, Tomas objected vigorously. “For centuries, all the best minds have spoken of an absolute *discontinuity* between the human and the divine. And they were certainly no lesser thinkers than we are — I only need to remind you of our friend Thomas Aquinas, my name’s sake. The Church has always maintained that there is an unbridgeable gap between man and God. If you are human you are simply not divine, and vice-versa. There is no way you can blur that distinction.” “What disturbs me about this idea of continuity,” Jan added, “is the other implication, that of *evolution*. Pietro, you simply state that human beings are in constant evolution on a continuum that goes from the lowest of the human to the highest of the divine. But I don’t think you will ever be able to prove that.” “I don’t see why you have a problem with evolution,” Liliana said. “I see it happening everywhere

I look. Is not each plant and each animal evolving constantly, going from birth to death and from death to new birth? Doesn’t every child evolve from being small and unable to think for himself to becoming independent in his thinking and willing? Are we not evolving right here and now, as we strive to go one step further in our understanding of the world

in which we live? As for the question of continuity, look at the contrast between the child and the adult. A newborn infant is unable to think, while the adult is fully capable of thinking. Do you see there a discontinuity, an unbridgeable gap between the two, or do you see a continuity and a gradual progress going from one stage to the other?"

"But that's exactly the problem", Tomas answered. "How can something evolve to become the very opposite of what it is at the beginning? How can total dependence—of the child—evolve into the independence and autonomy of the adult? How can this occur, if the very concept of dependence is that it has nothing of independence in it?"

"Remember the seminar we had together a few months ago on Plato's 'Phaidon'," Liliana reminded him. "One of Plato's main thoughts is that you can never expect one thing to become or evolve of itself into its opposite, the opposite being something it opposes and fights against. The lack of autonomy of the child can never by itself evolve into autonomy; the autonomy of the adult cannot be produced or caused by its deficiency: it must come from somewhere else. If a raw piece of marble has nothing of the form of a statue, you cannot expect it to be able to become a statue on its own. If an ape has nothing in itself of a human being, it can never engender one".

"But the block of marble eventually *does* become a statue", Jan said, "and apes *did* turn into human beings, just as the small child *does* develop into an adult in the course of time. And a plant that at one point grows and expands does of itself

develop into a plant that withers and decays. But it is and remains the same plant”.

“What you say is all right”, I said to Jan, “and neither Plato nor Aristotle would object to it, since you are simply describing what our eyes see. But neither Plato nor Aristotle was concerned about describing what physical senses perceive; anybody can do that. They were rather interested in *explaining* the phenomena we see. They were asking the question of causality. They wanted to answer the question: *Who is doing what* in the continuously changing and evolving world around us?

“We all agree that a piece of marble cannot become a statue of its own accord. Neither are we saying that it cannot be made into a statue. The question we are asking is: *who is the agency* when a piece of marble is turned into a statue? What I call here ‘agency’ Aristotle called the ‘cause’, or the originator. For Aristotle, the actual cause can only be a spiritual being endowed with the capacity to think and to will on his own. Just now, you didn’t simply say that a plant which is at first growing later turns into a plant that withers, which would be the description of what we see. You added something else, which is an interpretation of what we see. You added that the plant does this ‘of itself, implying that one and the same agency is responsible for both growing and withering”.

“Did I really say that?”, Jan asked with surprise.

“Yes, you did”, I answered. “And Plato would not agree with it. He would of course express his disagreement through

the politeness of Socrates, and would say: how can the same force that makes a plant grow, which for him is the spiritual reality of the growth-causing 'idea', suddenly begin to behave the opposite way and totally contradict itself by causing decay? How can the same force, if it is its nature to cause growth, at another time provoke death? If the plant that was previously growing is withering at a later stage, this means that the forces that cause growth *have been made to recede* by opposite forces, which take their place and operate contrary to them. Only forces that are opposed to the growth forces and which by their nature fight against them, can cause the withering. I think this is what Plato is trying to say whenever he talks about 'ideas' in his dialogues. He uses ideas precisely to explain all change and evolution in his own way".

"This would mean", Liliana followed up, "that when an ape turns into a human being, we would be wrong in saying that it is the ape which 'of itself turns itself into a human being, while having in itself nothing of what is specifically human. We have to say that the ape-forming idea or force is made to recede by the human-forming idea, which then takes its place. Just as ape-forming forces have previously formed matter in the form of an ape, so now the human-forming forces generated by a human being drive them out and take their place by shaping matter in the form of a human being. What Plato called the real idea of the ape or of the human being, the Scholastics called 'apeness' and 'humanness'. In both cases is meant something very real, which is at work in the world of matter.

“So we are saying: the agency or cause which gives matter the form of an ape *cannot* at the same time give it the form of a human being. Only by causing the ape-forming agency to recede can the human agency take its place and give the same matter a human form. The actual *cause* of a human being formed physically in the course of evolution can be neither the matter of an ape nor the ape-forming agency or idea; it can only be a human-forming agency. So Plato is actually saying, wherever matter is turned into an ape, there must be at work an ‘ape-forming Being’. Wherever matter is turned into the body of a human being, there must be a ‘human-forming Being’ at work”.

“While listening to you”, Tomas said, “I was picturing someone making an ape out of a block of marble. Then I thought, suppose this marble-ape turned out to be too big for the sculptor, because he needs more space in his studio. So he decides to ‘downsize’ his ape by turning it into a small child. Now he has a tiny marble statue of a child. Does this mean that the previous ape has developed or turned itself into a human being? Yes and no! In a way, we can say that the former marble-ape has ‘turned’ into a marble-human being. But we are wrong if we say it has done this ‘of itself. Wow! I think I’m beginning to understand what Plato is all about. But now what about the agency: what would be the actual agency of the marble-child?”

“Plato would say”, Liliana answered “that there must a be human-forming agency working on the marble. There must be at work within the artist the idea or the form of the human

body for him to be able to transform the marble ape into the statue of a child. Only in this way can you explain that the marble ape has actually been transformed into a marble child.

“This is the way Plato explains all changing and evolving. His focus is on the fact that the nature of an active cause can never be changed, least of all into its opposite. Black, or ‘blackness’, can never ‘become’ white, it is always black. But it can be pushed aside from a certain place or be made to disappear so as to give way, for instance, to ‘whiteness’, which is then made to take its place. In other words: what can be changed into something else can never be an agency, and an agency can never be changed into something other than what it is. Being an agency or a cause means to be able to cause change, as opposed to being changed. Matter as such cannot cause anything and can therefore be changed and be made to become anything: it is pure receptivity, as opposed to an active agency, which is pure activity. This totally receptive matter is what the Ancients called ‘first matter’, devoid of any forming force of its own. On the contrary, an active cause can be made into nothing other than what it is, in fact it cannot be made at all: it makes whatever it can to be its likeness. Wherever ‘whiteness’ can be at work, it makes all white, never black or purple”.

“Now let’s go back to your idea of the gradual evolution of human nature into divinity”, Jan urged. “How can we use what we have just agreed on to substantiate your claim? Before Strada joined us, we were talking about the basic difference between Plato and Aristotle. We said that Plato was only

interested in the invisible ‘ideas’, which always remain self-identical in their nature. He was not interested in the world of sense perception, where everything material is constantly changing and ‘becoming’ something different. Aristotle was on the contrary the first great Greek thinker to focus his attention directly on the ever-changing world of matter.”

“And that’s why he had to come up with something more complex than Plato”, Liliana said. “Plato has only one type of cause or agency, which he calls ‘idea’. According to Aristotle—and to Thomas, who found him to be unbeatable—you need no less than four concurring causing factors, if anything is to happen in the sense-world.

“Take again the example of an artist making a statue out of a marble block. First of all you need the marble—Aristotle calls it the *material* or purely *potential cause*. Then you need the mental picture in the mind of the artist, who decides ‘what’ he wants to make of the marble. If he doesn’t picture the block becoming a statue of a person, you’ll never have a human statue come out of it. As we all know, Aristotle and Thomas call this second agency the *form-giving cause*. It determines which form or shape the marble is going to take. This type of cause is similar to what Plato had in mind with his ‘ideas’ or ‘ideal forms’.

“A third factor is then needed: the artist must find a motivation to really get working at the marble and make the statue. This agency is in a way even more decisive than the previous one. If the artist knows what he could make of the

marble, but has no purpose or motivation to actually do it, nothing happens. So this third cause is the one making sure that he does it, and is called by Aristotle the *goal-setting*, or *goal-intending cause*. The artist must have a reason, he must envision an aim he wants to achieve in order to actually make the statue. For instance, he decides to decorate a newly built temple that would otherwise remain empty.

“But the fourth cause is the most important of all: it is the artist himself. For Plato, this was so obvious that he didn’t even bother mentioning it. Aristotle calls the fourth cause the actually *effective* or *acting cause*, in other words the actual agency. It has to be a real spiritual Being, capable of creating something out of its own thinking and willing. So everything that happens in the world of sense perception can only be explained, according to Aristotle, by the creative activity of *real spiritual Beings* endowed with *thinking* and willing. Through their thinking, they conceive the different *forms* they want to give to matter and in their willing they envision the *goals* they want to achieve. The world of matter in which they work is pure potentiality because it can be made into anything they want.

“Being an active cause in the sense of a creative spiritual Being is for Aristotle and Thomas the same as being ‘divine’. To be divine means to be inventive and active through one’s own thinking and willing. Such a divine nature allows infinite degrees—from barely being able to think and will a few things only for oneself, to being able to think and create entire worlds. If we try to explain the process of the world in terms of ‘energy’, of energy-fields or energy-flow, we would according

to Aristotle be considering only the form-giving causation, which is by nature impersonal, totally incapable of making anything happen on its own. The changes of energy can only be explained in terms of *Beings* who bring about those changes through their thinking and willing. We could also call the four realms Aristotle is talking about the realm of dead matter, the realm of form-giving life-energy, the realm of soul passions or intentions, and the realm of creative spiritual Beings.

“Human beings are also ‘divine’, in as much as they are endowed with the capacity to think and will individually. But they are presently just at the beginning of their ‘divine evolution’. This is evident from the fact that they sadly neglect their calling to become more divine. On the other hand, the individual often likes to think that he is divine already, resisting the hard work necessary to increasingly become divine.

“If we now compare the first three Aristotelian causes to the fourth, which is a creative spiritual Being, we have to say: the first three agencies are actually no more than necessary conditions or tools in the hands of the real agency. It is only due to the fourth cause that the other three can work together. Without the actual artist—a human being who is an artist—no marble block could be formed into a statue. A non-artist might have the material, the mental picture of a statue, the motivation to make a statue, but not the ability to do it because he is simply not an artist. So it is the artist who is the actual origin, the true cause of the statue”.

I was amazed at how intensely all of us had been listening throughout Liliana's survey. These were all things we already knew, but the point now was to recall them in their essentials, in order to see their bearing on the relationship between the human and the divine. Then there was the issue of their relevancy for a discussion of reincarnation.

When Liliana ended, we were all silent for a while. The university hall was now empty. I knew Tomas was keen on the essential role of the Catholic Church. The church in Chile had sent him to Rome to train, so he could return one day as one of her leaders. Jan was very different: his eastern soul dwelt more in the realm of spirit than of matter. He loved relating to God in terms of faith and prayer. I knew he did not like the idea of having to come back to Earth again. He was an ascetic at heart; he felt heaven was his home, and that he was on Earth only briefly as a pilgrim. As for Liliana, her keen intelligence had drawn her to the renowned university of the Jesuits, where some of the world's most brilliant minds taught. But what I had come to like most about her through the years was her openness and her eagerness to learn. I was the one to give our dialogue a new direction. I asked them if I could summarize again my main thoughts on the question of repeated Earth lives, and they all seemed willing to listen.

"At this point", I said, "we have to consider seriously the fact that in the realm of sense perception everything is in constant change and evolution. Not even the stones remain the same forever, if we consider long periods of time. *Evolution* is the ongoing, unending interaction of the four types of causes

Aristotle and Aquinas are talking about. The realm of matter, which we can call the realm of all potential forms. The realm of forming forms, that keep all matter in constant formation and transformation. The realm of goal envisioning, of experiencing intentions and desires, ideals and passions. And finally, the realm of individual spiritual Beings, capable both of setting goals for themselves and of thinking different forms to confer on matter. The independence of the individual is the most wonderful thing imaginable. It is the very notion of being 'divine', allowing infinite degrees of variation.

“Being divine is so beautiful and so captivating, that anybody experiencing it however modestly, will quest for more, and will desire to share it with others. This is why those who were divine Beings before us decided to ‘share’ with us the very best they have. This is why God made humans in his own image, which means: he called them to constantly seek the divine in themselves. The difference is that divine Beings are already accomplished in skills we are still acquiring. So we are at the very beginning of the process of *becoming* divine, which means independent in thinking and willing. The only place we can become independent is the world of matter, because it makes us separate from one another. Its very purpose is to individualize us. But once a human being has *acquired* separateness or independence through existence in the world of matter, it can still *retain* individual autonomy even in the world of spirit. This is the true meaning of what is called the immortality of the human soul: that even without matter, after

death, we do not cease to be an individually thinking and willing Being.

“So we had to be gradually brought down into the realm of matter-this is what has been called ‘original sin’-until eventually we were able to experience no other reality than matter. This is the point in evolution where we are now. Most people think that matter is the only reality, because they can experience nothing of ‘spirit’. But the purpose of joining ourselves with matter is not that we forget what is spiritual, but that we become ever more individualized and autonomous, that we learn to be ever more individually responsible and creative, like all divine Beings.”

“If things are that way”, Jan said, “I do not see what is wrong or bad about original sin. You seem to imply that it was simply necessary for our own evolution.’

“And so it was”, I answered. “Descending into matter was necessary in order to acquire freedom, and only our way of using freedom can be good or bad. The tragedy of modern materialism is that nowadays most people consider the Aristotelian material agency to be the only agency there is. Instead of saying for instance that some human cause or artist must have transformed the existing ape-body into a human body, we simply say that the body of the ape *developed*, by evolving itself, into a human being. This makes as much sense as if we said that a marble block develops into a statue on its own. What appears outwardly at the end through the change in the world of matter, must be working within it *from the*

beginning. Only a human agency can change an ape-body into a human body.”

“What is the difference,” Tomas asked, “between an ape evolving in the course of time into a human being, and a small child evolving into an adult human being?”

“The difference in an ape-body and a human body is qualitative,” I answered him. “The difference between a child’s body and an adult body is quantitative, merely a further growth of the same. This means that the transformation of an ape-body into a human body must not only require two different ‘effective causes,’ but also a much longer time than the other transformation, which we see taking place in the course of one life.

“But the principle of evolution remains in both cases the same. If we are content to say that the child’s body turns into an adult body, we are just describing the change we observe in the physical or material realm. We overlook all three other causes, which are the decisive ones if we want to explain the fact that what we observe *does* in fact happen. To simplify the process, let us concentrate on the evolution of the brain. Suppose the brain of a child is less or differently structured than the brain of an adult, this being the reason why it cannot yet be used as an instrument for thinking. A raw piece of wood, intended to become a violin, is not yet a suitable musical instrument, either.”

“So now the question is,” Jan interjected: “how does the further structuring of the brain take place? What is the cause or the agency there?”

“The Aristotelian-Aquinian answer is: you need a thinking and willing agent,” I replied, “that is, a spiritual Being who has the mental picture of the structuring required for the brain to become a good instrument for thinking, and who is capable of and willing to give it such structure. This Being will use those forming forces to fight against the forces resisting the further structuring of the brain. When this Being sets in motion the structure-fostering forces to counter the structure-resisting forces, the goal-setting agency will be his intention of using the brain as an instrument to think individually. Thus, by observing the child progressing in its ability to think, we are compelled to say that there must be at work in the child’s body a human spiritual Being already capable both of thinking and willing, for it to shape an instrument allowing him to express both of these faculties at the physical level.

“This in turn means that each human Being must have already existed before he begins moulding his body and must have a long evolution behind him, in which he has gradually acquired the ability to forge the brain as an instrument for individual thinking. According to science, any faculty can only be acquired through as much exercise and experience as is needed to become proficient at it. Now it is obvious that each of us already has a fully developed ability to individually structure the brain, because each of us has done it in a way that perfectly corresponds to his capacity to think, which is

absolutely individual and unique in each person. No one has ever demonstrated a greater or lesser capacity of thinking than his brain allows and brain studies tell us that no skull or brain is exactly equal to another”.

“But what about the so-called mentally handicapped?” Liliana asked.

“They also confirm what I am saying”, I answered, “provided we don’t make any wrong assumptions. Most people assume implicitly in this case that ‘nature’ tried its best to shape those brains, but didn’t quite manage. Or they attribute mental handicaps to ‘chance’, without giving a real explanation. The assumption of an effort gone amiss is a fallacy in thinking. For if there really were human beings totally *incapable* of properly and individually structuring the brain, we should find among humans *all degrees* of that capability. But this is not the case. All those who *do* fashion their brain into an instrument for individual thinking, do it perfectly.

“So it follows, that the so-called mentally handicapped are not human beings who tried their best at structuring the brain and failed. Quite the contrary, they must be human beings who have chosen to *renounce* forming their brains, that is, willingly refraining for a whole life-time from what we call ordinary thinking. The reasons leading them to this free choice will vary of course from person to person. They can only be individual, just as any other form of renunciation or sacrifice can only have personal reasons. But they will always be good and positive reasons, never the mere incapacity to form the

brain properly. The true Self of a person can only choose what is good”.

“You mean it is only our so-called lower self, Jan asked, “which can also choose what is bad”.

“Of course”, Liliana answered. “The reason of the two selves within us is precisely to make us free to let the one or the other prevail”.

“Let’s go back to the normal faculty of thinking,” I said. “If we agree that any perfect and fully individualized faculty can only have been acquired gradually in the course of evolution, we must assume a long history of individual interaction between each person as a spiritual Being and their bodily instrument. This long interaction is what is meant by the word ‘reincarnation.’ The way each ‘normal’ human being nowadays shapes the instrument of his brain is on one hand utterly complex and refined and on the other hand unique and individualized. Any sound, scientific thinker should ask the question: when and how has the architect at work acquired to such an accomplished degree this individualized and complex faculty?

“Doesn’t science maintain that no faculty can just appear ‘miraculously,’ but must be gradually acquired through so-called heredity and adaptation in the course of a corresponding evolution? Denying reincarnation is like believing in irrational ‘miracles’. If we look for a rational explanation concerning all phenomena of nature, we must be consistent concerning the most important and comprehensive phenomenon of all: the

emergence of *Homo sapiens*, of individually thinking and willing human Beings. I say 'individually', for each of us is keen to say, I think, I will, and to show his unique way of dealing with thinking and willing."

"That was *the* big dispute in the Middle Ages," Tomas said, "between the Scholastics and the Arabs.

The Arabs maintained that our thinking is not the work of an individual human agent. They claimed that it is the one and same God thinking and willing within all human beings".

"If we were to assume a unique and common agent", I answered, "for the forming of all human brains and for the exercise of all human thinking, we would have no explanation of the fact that each of us uses the word T. We would have to deny the uniqueness of each human individuality and the very process of individuation which is the essence of becoming human. We could not attribute any moral responsibility to a person. We would have no right at all to use the word T. Even if we said 'God in me', the word 'me' would be a problem. There should be only God, and we shouldn't exist or be speaking at all - but of course we are!

"If we now go from the brain to consider the entire human body, the point becomes even clearer. If human beings were only at the beginning of acquiring the ability to fashion their body in their own image, we should have all different degrees of perfection of the human body, we should see around us the simultaneous presence of all intermediate forms between animals and humans. There should at present exist all the

different degrees of being human. But this is in no way the case. In all human races, we have only one and the same human body and the racial differences are variations of an absolutely single reality. All human beings form a human body, equally and essentially different from all animal bodies on three fundamental accounts: the perfectly erect posture, the faculty of language and the faculty of thinking. These three elements are all perfectly present in every human being (even if not all of them, as we noted, choose to express those faculties at the physical level). These faculties are more than sufficient to show the *essential* difference between animal and human. So we have to infer that all human beings have in the past gone through a long individual experience of interaction with the body, having now all reached this perfection in their ability to form it both in a perfectly human and in a totally individual way.”

We all suddenly turned toward the entrance to the university snack bar, our attention drawn by the clatter of hasty steps. We spotted Jeannette, who was moving across the hall, no doubt on her way to an afternoon seminar.

Tomas called to her and she turned around, then resolutely approached us.

“I assume you’ve been preparing some oral presentation for your seminar over a cup of coffee,” Tomas said.

“Oui, monsieur”, Jeannette answered with her lively manner. She was the embodiment of what I would call, for lack of better words, “the spirit of the French Revolution.” But of

the three mottoes — *liberté, fraternité, égalité* — I think *Liberté* was for her by far the most important. Even in the Gregorian University, or maybe there with particular *élan*, she was way ahead of her times in matters of women's liberation.

It was clear to us that she really had little time to spare. Nevertheless, she so thoroughly enjoyed both talking and us, her dear friends, that she remained with us to the last second.

“Our Seminar is on creation and evolution and my presentation today is going to be on morphology and evolution. I'm very excited due to the heated discussion we had during the last session. I'm afraid I'm going to get some of the fallout myself this time.”

“Was someone giving the professor a hard time?” Jan asked.

“Yeah,” Jeannette answered. “It was the guy from the English College, David, who wasn't being very diplomatic. The professor had once more been pretty heavy regarding the separation between science and theology. He insisted that it is all right for science to describe the observable facts and the outer sequence of evolution by comparing the different forms or stages with one another after they have appeared. As far as explaining the facts that can be observed, and looking for the causes that must be at work before a particular form appears, he claimed that modern science didn't even have the thinking tools needed to tackle the job. For instance, he said that most scientists don't even know or understand the difference between describing and explaining”.

“What did David find disturbing about that”, Tomas asked.

“He came out very strong against directly recurring to God for everything the professor could not explain, either. He said, that we complain that science doesn’t have the proper thinking tools to interpret the complex phenomena of evolution, that we are not coming up with any better thinking tools if we keep referring to a direct intervention of God to explain everything that happens in evolution. He even said at some point that it makes as much sense to him as trying to explain the motion of the hands of a clock by saying that invisible demons stand behind them and push them forward”.

“I can imagine the reaction of the professor”, I said.

“He was furious!” Jeannette confirmed. “He threw all of his Jesuit weight around, telling us we understood nothing of the whole matter and that we are in this seminar to learn, not to teach. Knowing David, I was asking myself how he managed not to strike back. He vented his anger with us *after* the session was over. I wonder whether he is going to show up again today or whether he has given up”.

“I would be very interested”, I said, “in hearing your professor discuss God’s intervention as being the direct and only cause of all natural phenomena. I have no problem with the idea of spirit being continuously and directly active and creative in all nature. I think the important question is whether we assume there is *only one* spiritual Being responsible for all that happens, or whether we think there are many. In the first case, everything would be a mere effect of just one Being’s

thinking and willing and no one else would have any freedom or creativity of their own. In the second case, there would be *many* spiritual Beings endowed with individual thinking and willing to be responsible in different ways for what happens in the physical world.” Jeannette looked at her watch: “I must go!” she said; and off she went. We watched her silently for a few moments, until she disappeared down the hall.

As Jeannette was speaking,” Liliana said after some moments of silence, “I was reminded of the statement in the Gospel of John, which says: ‘Ye are Gods.’ Maybe we can better understand both the position of today’s science and of theology by investigating the meaning of that sentence. If we don’t take evolution into account, we only have two basic options: either human beings are divine, or they are not. Saying they are divine creates a problem, because enough people act as if they were God. This is why the Church states that human beings are simply not divine. Inasmuch as we are ‘not yet’ that far, they are partly right; we are just at the beginning. But they are wrong when they say that we have no part in divinity or that we can never become divine.”

“What do you mean”, Tomas asked, “when you say that human beings are called to become increasingly divine? Do you mean that the Church will cease to be necessary in the course of time?”

“It’s similar to parents or teachers dealing with a child growing up”, was Liliana’s response. “If they are good parents and teachers their goal is to make themselves unnecessary with

the passing of time. They will want the child to become increasingly independent, they won't try to keep him dependent on them forever. Likewise, the Church had the role of a mother during the time when human beings were more like children. But in the course of time each mother is bound to become a grandmother, and the children grow up to be autonomous adults."

Liliana was looking at Tomas waiting for a reply, but he kept silent. After a while, Jan said:

"And what if all you are saying is an illusion coming from human pride? I can acknowledge being independent from the Church; after all, it is made up of human beings like us. I mean that we are all dependent on God and on his grace. We are called to obey him, we are his creatures, we are not the creator!"

"I think what you are saying brings us straight to the question", I said, "whether we live only once or more than once. The common assumption in the West has been, that we live only once. The fact that western Christianity thought this way is understandable. It's like dealing with a child: we cannot tell him truths he is unable to grasp. We have to wait for the appropriate time. This is why Christ said to the apostles that he had many more things to say to them, but they were not ready to comprehend them. The point here is again whether or not we take evolution seriously. If Humanity develops by going through different stages like the child, it would be wrong to maintain that Christ is always saying the same old things to us.

It would be like a mother saying the same things to the one-year-old child, to the ten-year-old, and to the thirty-year-old. Saying new things at a later stage, doesn't mean that they contradict the old ones, they are simply added to them".

"And what does this have to do with reincarnation?" Tomas asked.

"I think this means", Liliana answered him, "that Humanity is now just beginning to be able to grasp the truth of reincarnation, part of which is to realize the far-reaching implications for our lives. Since everything is in evolution, some people will come to this realization more quickly than others. The reason why it is now becoming more and more urgent to deal with this question openly, is that ignoring it will increasingly create problems. This was not the case in past centuries. Nowadays, unlike in the past, a growing number of people think they have the right to possess or to experience everything, while at the same time having to admit that in one life they can only accomplish so much, or rather so little. Fewer and fewer people are today prepared to put up with their past, with their failures or shortcomings. They rebel against the apparent injustices of life, while people in the past were more ready to submit. Being convinced that we only live once, the reaction of many who are not satisfied with their condition is to increasingly show either aggression or depression, according to their temperament."

"It strikes me", Tomas said thoughtfully, "that in our whole curriculum both of theology and philosophy not even a single

lecture is dedicated to the issue of reincarnation. It is simply taken for granted that we live only once. Otherwise, I'm sure we would have some of these powerful Jesuit minds defending the view of the church by coming up with all kinds of arguments *against* reincarnation."

"But our point is not in changing the Church as such, either", Liliana said. "Church is everybody and nobody. Suppose we agree that the human being is the only 'divine' being existing in the physical world, increasingly capable of thinking and willing for himself. We would have at the same time to admit that he is just beginning to unfold an unlimited potential. The distinction that Thomas Aquinas and Aristotle made between potentiality and actuality, between *being able to* become or to do something and actually *being* or doing it, is a most important one. We have been given the *ability* to become increasingly autonomous in our thinking and willing, but we are just at the beginning of the evolutionary process of making that capability a reality, of actually putting it to work."

"I do not see what this has to do with reincarnation", Tomas said.

"If you assume that we only live once", Liliana continued, "then you have to say that human beings simply *cannot* reach divinity. At the present stage of evolution, even the very best of human beings dies far short of having attained this goal. If we only live once, the gap between God and man remains in principle unbridgeable, which is what the Church has been saying all along. But then Christ's statement 'Ye are Gods'

would make no sense. The Church emphasizes the unbridgeable gap perhaps because it wants to be and remain indispensable forever, claiming to be the only bridge to the God we cannot reach ourselves”.

“I do not see what should be wrong with that”, said Tomas. “You still haven’t come up with any positive reason in favour of reincarnation”.

“I think the basic point here is our interpretation of the Christ event as a whole”, I said. “When you speak of God becoming man, you are implying that Divinity and Humanity can merge. You say that they are compatible with each other. But now comes the important question: if Christ in his so-called miracles were performing deeds no human being can ever do, he could not at the same time claim to have become truly and fully human. He would remain totally beyond what is within the reach of human nature. This would be the case if we say for instance that he *physically* walked on water, inferring that he wasn’t subject to the law of gravity. Gravity is essential to human nature and to human self-experience. This holds no less true if we say that his human nature is a perfect one and ours is a ‘fallen’ one. This would mean that the perfection of human nature shown in his deeds expresses the evolutionary potential of human nature as such. What he is and does should be the goal made possible for human evolution and cannot be in *principle* unreachable for our human nature.

“On the other hand, there is no way we can reach human perfection as shown by Christ in one single life, even though it

is inherent to human nature and even though we carry it within ourselves as a total potentiality for never ending growth. This means that God must be giving us as many lives on Earth as each of us needs to actualize within himself the perfection of human nature as manifested in Christ in a way that is possible only by living on Earth.”

“But what do you have against divine Grace”, Jan said, “doing for us all the things-there are so many of them-we cannot do ourselves even with the best of our will and effort?”

“Once again, it’s like in the relationship between the mother and the child”, Liliana answered him. “Of course the mother has to do all kinds of things for the child as long as the child cannot do them himself. But the point is whether the child is supposed to remain at that stage forever, or whether there is a real evolution toward a growing self-determination and responsibility. A responsible mother would rejoice as the child becomes more independent. She would want the best for him. She doesn’t want to keep him dependent on her forever. God must be doing the same with us, if he really loves us. This is why he has given us a human nature that is full of dynamism and capable of unending growth.

“Aspiring to spiritual autonomy need not be arrogance. It can also be an expression of moral responsibility. Likewise, wanting to remain totally dependent on God for everything need not be a sign of humility, it can also be spiritual laziness. By emphasizing the dynamic resources we have within us, we become more active and responsible in relating to the world.

True, the West has so far experienced the dynamism of human nature mainly in changing the physical world. But I think the inner attitude is the right one. By striving to be more creative and autonomous, we will eventually desire to extend the same spirit of endeavour and conquest to the non-material realms”.

As Liliana was saying this, I was looking at Tomas, who seemed to be listening, yet distant. Perhaps he was thinking of the significance of our discussions for his own life. It was not how heretical these thoughts might be, but how dangerous. There is no doubt that there are many people who still need the motherly guidance of the Church. At this point in our conversation, though, the question was not a child’s need of the mother, but the intrinsic nature of human development. If the mother does everything to make the child independent, she is a good mother and she acts in accordance with the being of the child. If she prevents the child’s growing independence by being restrictive, then she is *not* a good mother, because she acts against the whole being of the child.

Tomas must have read my thoughts, for after a moment of silence he said: “Pietro, how do you manage to stay within the Church with such ideas? How can you be teaching in a Catholic seminary of all places?”

“I wonder myself regarding that very question,” I answered. “As far as our students in South Africa are concerned, I think things are going all right. But the mistrust on the part of my colleagues is mounting, so I don’t think I’ll be able to stay much longer. Most priests think that being

convinced of reincarnation is a terribly dangerous heresy, although, as you know, Catholic dogma as such has never decreed that we live only once. I don't think the main difficulty is heresy, though. What creates difficulty with my position in the Church are the practical implications the idea of reincarnation has for life.

“If you tell people they are called to aspire to freedom and independence as spiritual Beings and that they have more than one life at their disposal, you'll get into trouble sooner or later. The powers that be-and the Church is by all means one of them-get worried when this information reaches the people. They say it is extremely 'dangerous', and they are right. But they are wrong when they equate danger with evil. We ought to be careful of the real dangers of freedom, but there is no reason to give it up in order to spare ourselves those dangers. If freedom is the most 'dangerous' thing of all, it must be at the same time the most precious and rewarding. Isn't this the gist of what someone we know said some 2000 years ago? Wasn't he also 'dangerous' for having said we are all called to become increasingly divine?”

“When I look at the Gospels”, Liliana said, “at all the words and deeds of Christ, it is apparent to me that we have to take human evolution very seriously. I think the past 2000 years must be seen as a kind of infancy for Christianity. Christians had to believe at first what they could not yet understand, and they had to expect from divine Grace what they were *not yet* capable of doing themselves. And this was right for that stage, as it is right for the child to trust the mother to take care of

him. But everything that belongs to human nature, everything we experience in ourselves tells us that it should not remain at that stage.

“How can we claim Christ to be the Being of Love, if in his miracles he is constantly doing all the things we *cannot* do in principle, if we are *never* capable of doing them ourselves? By acting this way, he would be far from truly loving us. Is this what a loving mother does with her child? Does she not want her child to become capable of doing all the things she as an adult can do? If we understand evolution as the ‘education’ of each individual human being on his way to become ever more ‘divine,’ we must give him more than just one life. It is apparent that this kind of ‘education’ requires a very long time, and that in a single life we can move only as far toward the full realization of our divine calling as a child moves toward adulthood, say, in a few weeks. Saying we only live once is like saying that a child has only a few weeks at his disposal to grow and then everything is finished.”

“This brings us back to our idea of a continuum,” I said. “I think all beings are in constant evolution, even divine beings. Our problem is that we have equated being in evolution with being imperfect or lacking. Yet we say of God that he is eternally creating and creative. By that we mean that something ‘happens’ even in the Godhead—or maybe it happens there more than anywhere else. If we understand being divine as being creative and dynamic, as the opposite of being passive or static, then we can picture all divine Beings as setting for themselves ever new goals in their unending

evolutionary progression. Each Being would call 'divine' the stage he has not yet reached. For us as humans, the 'divine' goal is to rise to the level of the nearest divine beings above us, which have traditionally been called 'Angels'. 'Angels' will in their turn call divine *their* evolutionary goal, which is to evolve to the stage of those who have been called 'Archangels'. And so on. 'Divine' means for each Being what he has not yet attained and what he is striving to become. To put it in terms of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, all that we are already can be called 'human'; everything we have the potential of still becoming is the specific 'divine' calling of our human nature. The divine calling of 'Angels' is a higher one than ours, and so on up to the other spiritual hierarchies".

"But even if things are the way you say," Jan said, "there is always for each of us the danger of thinking we are much farther in our evolution than we actually are. Many like to think they are able to do things they are actually not yet capable of doing. Pride and presumption are very real factors in human nature and in human life".

"And this is what the Church is trying to make us aware of all the time," Tomas approved enthusiastically. "If we all agree that the human journey is a very long one and that we can only move slowly, it is obvious that human beings will always claim they are moving much faster than they actually are. Is it not a dangerous temptation to declare that humankind is ready to leave behind the infancy stage of belief and dependence on Grace, when in fact human beings are still very far from being good without the care of the Church? I'm sure you mean that

the divine calling of humans should be seen as the calling to become ever more loving and morally co-responsible for the whole of creation. But look at those who emphasize freedom nowadays: they only want to get rid of all norms and of all responsibility. They are much more egoistic and self-centered than human beings ever were”.

“And not only that,” Jan intervened with no less fervour than Tomas. “It is not the first time that someone comes along emphasizing human freedom. What it amounts to in the end is a denial of the need for divine grace. Is it not important to warn human beings of the danger of believing in self-redemption, which would mean denying the need for the redemption brought about by Christ?”

“The only real problem in what you say,” I answered, “is the basic assumption you are making without noticing. You are taking for granted that divine grace and human freedom oppose or exclude each other. Or to put it in another way, you assume that an increase in individual responsibility on our part means a decrease in the working of divine grace. But in actual fact only the opposite can be true. No matter how free we become, it is only divine grace no less, which can provide all the conditions necessary for the exercise of human freedom. These conditions amount to the entire world in which we live. Is that not enough divine grace? The problem can only be that we are not aware of or not thankful enough for this infinite, overwhelming grace.

“Now, considering the other point, if we are just beginning to freely take part in spiritualizing the world, divine grace, instead of diminishing, will have to *double* its work. Divine love will have to add the work of repairing and making good all the damage we do to ourselves and to the Earth due to the *imperfection* and to the mistakes of our budding freedom. When the children grow up and in their teen years *just begin* to exercise their freedom, do parents have less of a role to play than before? I think most would say they have a lot more to do. I think Humanity is now in the teenage years of its freedom, which will last for several more centuries, at least”.

We were distracted by some students walking down the large staircase near the entrance in the hall. A wonderful afternoon sunlight was now flooding the glass roof, filling the whole hall with a warm light. Tomas spotted Patrick, an Irish friend. He called him, signalling him to join us.

“Patrick, we are having a heavy Platonic dialogue here with Pietro. We are allowing him the discussion since he just returned from South Africa. He is trying to make up in one afternoon what he missed from us. Why don’t you tell us what you exegetes have been doing with the Holy Scripture upstairs?”

“I tell you, the whole thing is absolutely crazy,” Patrick answered with his sanguine temperament. “Today we went through the infancy narratives, comparing the versions in Matthew and Luke. One thing becomes clearer to me each time: our professor is a lot smarter than all four evangelists put

together. He knows better than they who copied what from whom and who wanted to convey which theological message.

“You just have to make sure you don’t ask the stupid question of whether the Gospels relate to anything that really happened. If you do, everybody looks at you as if you were an absolute idiot, wondering how on earth you got enrolled in a seminar on exegesis. You are expected to be far beyond the naive stage of asking what actually happened. You are supposed to find out what the ‘theological message’ of each Evangelist is. I tell you, if I didn’t have to memorize this stuff to pass the exam in order to become a priest, I would have gone back to Ireland a long time ago. I keep thinking I’m losing my catholic faith here in Rome, assuming there is any left to lose. I can’t help being convinced that my mother understands the Gospels better than all those highbrows put together”.

We all loved Patrick for his directness, and for his sincere and loving demeanour. There was something at times even childlike about him. We were all amused but not in the least surprised at what he was saying. It was all familiar to us.

“So what is the Church doing here, dear Strada,” Liliana asked Tomas. “Is she bringing people to Christ or away from Christ, if her professors deem themselves more divinely inspired than Holy Scripture?”

Patrick, still frustrated, didn’t give him a chance to answer.

“Pietro,” he said to me, “you claim that your Steiner makes the Gospels even holier than they have been considered so far.

Can you tell me how you see the divergences in the infancy narratives?”

“For Christ’s sake!” Tomas raved. “With that can of worms you can be sure you’ll get yourself stuck for at least two more hours”. Everybody laughed.

“I think he is right,” I said.

“Well,” Patrick said in earnest, “if you folks don’t want to do it now, we must agree on some other time. May I invite you to the Irish College?”

“Are we going to get some real Irish coffee from you?” Tomas asked.

“Of course you are,” Patrick answered emphatically. “That’s the very reason I’m inviting you. How can you talk sensibly about anything without a cup of Irish coffee? Tomorrow afternoon at four, is that all right?”

“What about me,” Liliana said jokingly, “am I invited, too?”

“Oh,” Patrick said with surprise, his face now suddenly matching his red hair, “I hadn’t thought of that. Of course we students have absolutely nothing against fair ladies. But as you know, the staff is not quite of the same opinion. You just make sure you come and I’ll make sure you get in.”

We parted with the certainty that no one would be missing at the Irish College

CHAPTER 6

LOVING HUMANITY AS OUR SELF

(BERLIN, 1990)

It felt great to be in Berlin only months after the Wall had fallen, and with it the Iron Curtain dividing two worlds. Most of the Wall had disappeared already, but there were still jagged remains to be seen. You could even buy souvenir pieces of it, cheap.

I approached the historical Brandenburg Gate. On this Sunday, there were people everywhere, especially around the many improvised stands. Looking at the items being offered, one had the impression that the whole Eastern block was one giant sales booth. For a couple of pfennigs one could buy a Communist Party catechism, a picture of Lenin, parts of obsolete East German police outfits—the inventory could go on indefinitely.

For most people in the West, the collapse of communism meant the victory of capitalism, as if finding one rotten apple were proof that the one beside it must be good. As I was going from one small stand to the next, I was amazed at the cosmopolitan crowd gathering here. One could hear people speaking all the different variations of the Slavic languages, as well as German, of course. There was also a clear dominance of English, in different versions.

I felt in my element in the midst of this microcosm of Humanity, in their communal elation. This was one of those truly momentous events in history: when human beings experience the mysterious and indefinable bonds of universal Humanity. Few realize that the joy and intensity of such an experience does not come readily in places where there are no barriers to be overcome. Today's celebration was in full proportion to the great trials and obstacles that had been surmounted in Eastern Europe.

Here, two opposite worlds were now seemingly coming together. There was talk of East and West, and the victory of the West seemed to imply that the East should give up being on the wrong side of history and join the right side. So you have to take sides, I thought, and make sure you are on the right side. But if everybody joins the right side, there will be only one side left in the end and everybody will be one-sided! My whole being rebelled against this simplistic approach. I had long since come to the conviction that wherever you have two opposing sides, both have to concentrate on being *against*, rather than on being for something.

The goodness of human nature, on the contrary, can only be experienced in the never-ending endeavour to find the right balance between all kinds of opposites or extremes. This cannot be done by taking sides, but rather by integrating as many viewpoints as possible, even when they seem to exclude each other. To mention only one example: the market and profit oriented economy of the West is made to function by the corresponding *mentality*, which is shared by the vast majority

of the population. How can this same way of life function in the East, in a culture where not even a minority of the people have the corresponding mind structure and daily behaviour? How can a materialistic culture be imposed on Eastern people, who appreciate spirit more than matter? Those who will adopt materialism, will be entirely 'possessed' by it, not being able to internalize it out of their own freedom.

I had just come upon a little vendor selling some beautiful Eastern icons. They were displayed in such a way that one was reminded of an Iconostasis: the partition in Eastern Orthodox churches separating the congregation from the place where the great mystery takes place. A Russian woman in her fifties was tending the stand, along with her daughter. A young American had stopped just before me and was holding an icon of Christ in his hands.

"Are you sure you want to sell such holy objects," he asked the Russian woman, who spoke fluent English.

"Yes, I'm quite positive. Of all the things you can buy around here, this might be the one you need most," she answered with a firmness that had nothing of bitterness or reproach, but seemed to come from a strong inner conviction.

"How do you mean that?" the young American asked.

"It's very simple," the Russian woman replied. "You are celebrating the victory of the West. That means for you the victory of America. These icons would like to remind you that yours is the victory of Western materialism, which is wiping

away true spirituality from the face of the Earth.” Again, there was no bitterness in her words: she seemed to be speaking out of a deep spiritual earnestness and concern. This encouraged the American to engage in a sincere exchange of ideas of the kind that most of us long for, rather than the usual superficial type of discussion involving the weather or football. Unfortunately, we seldom realize that it is in our power to make such an exchange happen.

“But we have been fighting against Russian communism all these years,” the American said in his surprised reaction, “precisely because of its atheistic outlook, which stifled and persecuted all free expression of religion.”

“You may have been told this again and again,” the Russian woman said in reply, “and you may have believed it because you grew up thinking that what you are told in America is the truth, while what we were told in Russia is ideological propaganda. But I tell you: both Marx and Lenin were products of the West. Their materialistic outlook is the opposite of eastern spirituality, and has nothing to do with the Russian soul.”

“I don’t think you can make the West responsible for all that has happened in the Soviet block in the last seventy years,” the American replied. “Capitalism is certainly no ideal system, but look at the way individual freedom has been stifled in the communist countries. This has made them so sterile that the whole system has now collapsed. Isn’t this a fact, or have we been misinformed also on this point?”

“I certainly agree with you that the Communist Party was evil in many respects,” the Russian woman replied, “but what I mean is that even communism is a product of Western culture, imposed upon the Russian people from the outside like a yoke, under which the people have suffered unimaginably. Just think of Stalin and the many millions who died in his time. The godless spirit of communism, which considers only the material reality, was and is a Western spirit. It is totally alien to the Russian soul as it lives in the masses of the people. Only because this soul is imbued with spirituality was it able to endure the unending suffering brought about by communism.”

Overhearing this dialogue fascinated me. I saw here two opposite positions clashing with each other without mediation: the earthy approach of the American on the one hand and the deeply religious approach of the Russian woman on the other. I was very interested in getting both sides to further clarify their positions, so I decided to join the conversation:

“I find your dialogue most interesting. I hope you will allow me to take part in it.” They readily complied: “If you don’t mind, what would interest me most would be to hear your ideas of *human freedom*.”

They each reacted differently. The American was indicating enthusiastic approval. There was no doubt that human freedom meant a lot to him. The Russian woman looked puzzled, not sure what I meant by “freedom.” So I said to her:

“You have the word ‘svoboda’ in Russian. Can you tell us what you think of when you hear or say that word?”

The American couldn't wait: "I know very well what the word 'liberty' evokes in me," he said. "But it is something so beautiful and so strong that it is difficult to put it into words without making it sound much smaller than it is. In America, liberty means the right each human being has to try out his talents, to apply his individual skills in the service of others by fostering science and technology. Liberty means trusting the inventive resources of each individual to make our existence better, to raise our standard of living, and to bring happiness to as many as possible."

"And what comes to your mind when you think of the word 'svoboda'?" I asked the Russian woman.

"Well, certainly nothing of what I just heard," she answered. "Human beings are not here on Earth just to be comfortable and have a nice life. 'Svoboda' means to me to be free of all the needs and instincts material life imposes on us, to be free above all of our egoism. We are most free when we pray and communicate with the spiritual world, and we are totally free only after death, when we reach heaven, our final destination."

The American's expression indicated that he did not comprehend what the woman was saying. He was looking at me as if asking for an explanation.

We were distracted by a small pickup truck slowly driving by the different stands. A group of teenagers sat on it, singing merrily to the accompaniment of a guitar. Their youthfulness and cheerfulness were contagious. As they came near us, the

boy playing the guitar stopped and asked us in a joking and friendly manner: “What are you folks talking about so seriously?”

“We are talking about freedom, about liberty and ‘svoboda’,” I answered, emphasizing these two last words.

He started a rhythm on his guitar and everybody joined in singing or shouting the three syllables of Li-ber-ty and Svo-boda. There was no doubt these German youngsters were enjoying themselves, but they seemed both friendly and earnest in their behaviour.

The pickup truck had stopped for a moment, and before it started moving again, one girl snatched my beret off my head and laughingly put it on.

“Why don’t you come along?” said one of the boys. Our ‘Opa’ will tell us everything about freedom.” Opa is German for grandfather or any wise older man, but I was now more concerned about getting my cap back than about Opa. One couldn’t get angry at these young people, because they were really good-natured even in playing tricks. Before I could find a way of getting my cap back, the guitarist was already inventing a tune for an improvised verse, of which he would sing two lines at the time, to be cheerfully repeated by everybody. I enjoyed their improvisational talent. Translated into English, the verse they were singing was something like:

If you have a head Without a hat We have a hat Without a head;

But if your hat Can't find your head, Make sure your head
Will find your hat.

These kids are great, I thought. They were stretching out their arms to pull me onto the truck and somehow I couldn't resist. Moreover, I liked the idea of meeting the man they were calling their Opa. But I would also have liked the American man and the Russian woman to come along. I wanted to continue our dialogue on human freedom. As the youngsters were happily making room for me to sit down, I told them they should get the other two to come along, as well. They were more than willing and started gesturing for them to join us, while improvising a verse on freedom:

Svoboda is the name Liberty is the game; Freedom is your right
Freiheit is your fight.

The American had already been pulled aboard, but the Russian woman was resisting. On the one hand she seemed to be suspicious, unsure whether she could trust us. On the other hand she didn't want to leave her daughter alone. The guitarist had no problem in finding a clever verse to solve even that problem:

A daughter and a mother Nobody would bother; But if the
mother goes The daughter has no foes.

The daughter looked at the mother as if to say: they are right. Although she seemed to be unconvinced, the mother finally gave in, and was pulled lovingly and with respect onto the truck.

We were moving faster now. After turning into a side street, away from the crowd, a boy remarked:

“Sometimes we make up songs by asking somebody to tell us his wildest idea, so that we can sing a verse about it. So what is your wildest idea?”

I was caught by surprise. I wanted to find something difficult, which would enhance the fun. So I said: “Reincarnation!” They were surprised and silent for a moment. Some repeated the word thoughtfully, one girl asked me: why do you call that your wildest idea? Before I could answer, the guitarist took over, slowly, placing emphasis on each syllable:

Reincarnation
Like navigation:
Too long a word
Too long a go?

If you say no
I’ll say why not:
I’d like a lot
Another go!

“Yippee,” everyone shouted, those near the guitarist patting him on the shoulder to compliment his skill.

We found Opa sitting in a corner of a small cafe, which was empty at this hour of the day. He had a white beard and two youthful, sparkling eyes. I’m sure he was at least eighty, but his

liveliness and demeanour did not suggest his age. Several newspapers were lying open on the table.

In turn, the youngsters each gave him a loving hug. This ritual was moving to watch. When all of us were seated around the large, round table, a long interval of silence followed, surely also part of the ritual. During this time, I sensed a feeling of peace within me. I had already come to love these young people, and as for Opa, I was anticipating that something good would happen. I was filled with gratitude at the whole chain of coincidences that had led me to this place.

“I see you brought along some friends,” Opa said. One of the girls told him who we were and that we had been discussing the meaning of freedom. “Can you tell us your thoughts on freedom, Opa?,” she asked him. “We love the things you tell us. This time we would like our three friends to hear your ideas, too.”

“It is difficult to condense such important issues into just a few thoughts or sentences,” Opa said. “Experiencing freedom is much like eating and drinking: you can’t do it once and for all, you have to repeat it each day. Freedom is the love of life you young people experience within yourselves. You could call it enthusiasm, or being filled with idealism. Freedom is the awareness of all we can become by unfolding our full humanity, by experiencing the boundless potential lying within us. We are free when we overcome our shortcomings and learn new things. We are free within ourselves when we consider others to be no less important to us than we are to ourselves. We

become free when we truly listen to others the way we would like them to listen to us. When we *fall* in love we are only half free, but if we manage to *stay* in love, we are fully free.”

“Our American friend,” I said, “was saying earlier that he sees freedom as the possibility of working in the material world without being hindered by anybody. Our Russian friend did not agree, maintaining that you can only experience freedom by communicating with the spiritual world, especially after death.”

“So there you have two opposite views on freedom,” Opa calmly replied. “What should we do when confronted with opposite views? I think we want to find the right balance by looking beyond the views, to see the people expressing them. It all depends on whether we regard the *human being* as our most important reality. So the first thing you have to do when you hear one person having one idea and another the opposite one, is that you do not take sides by saying that one is right and the other wrong.

Instead, assume they are *both* right, then ask: how can I *love both* of these human beings equally, regardless of their opposing beliefs? Their views are not just something they have, but something they *are*. They are part of their being and their being is not something I can simply *judge* as right or wrong, but something I’m called to *love* for what it is and for what it wants to become.”

“I don’t see,” the young American said, “what love has to do with the idea of *freedom*. What you just said about love is rather abstract to me, because everybody understands love in a

different way. I'm more interested in hearing what your idea of freedom is. I think the concept of individual freedom is the most tremendous contribution of Western culture to the rest of Humanity."

"The American understanding of freedom," Opa answered him, "is to be free *to do* whatever an individual wants, inasmuch as it doesn't interfere with someone else's claim to the same freedom. By putting the emphasis on *doing* something, you experience freedom mainly in the outer achievements of human activity as made possible by modern science and technology. You feel free when you are transforming the material world. You experience freedom by making or producing something. You want to show the tangible results of what you do, you want to experience some measurable success from your free activity. Does what I'm saying somehow ring true to you?"

"Very much so," the American agreed. "I can subscribe to every word you've said."

"Well," Opa continued in a more reflective tone, "there is another way of understanding freedom, which may not be as familiar to you. Before Central Europe embraced natural science and materialism in the 19th century, the German word 'Freiheit' did not refer primarily to the outer freedom to do or to perform something, but to a way of *being*. 'Freiheit' refers primarily to the creativity of the human mind, to an inner quality of the human being that makes him capable of creating entirely new worlds out of his own spirit. This is an *artistic*

quality. A true artist identifies his freedom not so much with the outer result of his creative activity, or even with the activity of carrying out what he envisions, but rather with a core experience related to the inner *activity* of conceiving. Carrying it out is but a consequence.”

“I think you were right in warning me,” the American said good-heartedly. “What you just said sounds Chinese to me!”

“All the same,” Opa went on, “you may better understand what I mean when I speak of freedom as the love of the *human being* as such. You see, I think there is also a tragic side to American culture. By focusing almost exclusively on the increasing perfection of tangible results, the outer performance has become ever more accomplished, but the inner life of the human being has been sorely neglected in the process. By emphasizing outer achievement, human beings become more like empty robots. They are increasingly used as a mere instrument for material success and profit. The law of survival of the fittest, the daily stress due to ruthless competition is but evidence that we have to a large extent lost sight of the inner harmony and fulfilment of the person. People feel somehow more and more hollow in their souls. They perceive the ‘Waste Land’ to be the common place where their very existence is being squandered. “Not being able to experience inner joy and not finding deeper meaning in our lives, we look for outer distractions and sensations. New forms of entertainment are constantly being devised to ‘distract’ people from the fact that they feel less and less fulfilled. In this process, people become more superficial and dissatisfied. As a result, both aggression

and depression have never been as widespread as they are today. Even seeking fame or prestige is a mere attempt to look at oneself with the eyes of others, being afraid of looking at oneself with one's own eyes. What people say about us becomes important, because we do not want to look at who we really are. Our obsession with social status or class, not to mention with race or gender, shows how little individual freedom we have, and how much we are still engulfed in a group spirit with all its expectation and demands. So-called 'public opinion' has never been as decisive in determining world events as it is today. Yet few people realize that the public opinion of the many is mostly the result of manipulation by the private interests of the few."

"What you say," the Russian woman said after some moments of silence, "reminds me of one sentence of the Gospel that says: not the person for the Sabbath, but the Sabbath for the person. If I understand you correctly, you are saying that in making the perfection of our technical devices our primary goal, we risk losing our humanness by using the person as a mere instrument."

"That's very much what I meant," Opa confirmed, "when I was saying that we have to put the love for each human being first. Don't you think Western culture is far from placing as the priority the inner richness of each person?"

"I find convincing what you say about love," the Russian woman answered, "I agree that love of human beings should be

primary, but how do you deal with Western materialism and with its product, atheistic communism?”

“Look here, my dear lady,” Opa said with loving gentleness, “here you have an American, whose path is now crossing yours. This is no random coincidence. Can you go beyond his views or convictions and love him as a person the way you would like to be loved yourself? Isn’t this what the Gospel you just quoted tells you to do by saying: love your neighbour as yourself? Each human being is good, and what we call bad or evil is never what a person is, but always the good that he still lacks. Each of us is lacking in many respects and this is why we keep meeting each other all the time: to allow each of us to receive from the others what we lack and to give others the good they are seeking.”

“Opa,” a young girl asked, “what is the good of a person who lives materialistically and cares only about money and possessions?”

“It is the love of the material world: that is the *good* side of materialism. It is the love of all things that are visible, the appreciation for all the things you could not live without. The evil of materialism lies not in the love for the world of matter, but in the lack of love for the world of spirit. These are two quite different things. The materialistic person should never stop appreciating what is material—in which case he would lose also what is good in him—but should start loving what is spiritual, as well.”

“So you mean,” said a youth who was listening very intently, “that it is better to always see everything as good and to affirm it by additional good. As I was listening to you just now I asked myself: what is good about egoism or self-love, which the Churches have often condemned? Can you find a good side to that, as well?”

“The very word you used tells you, my young friend,” Opa answered, opening wide his sparkling eyes. “You spoke of self-love, and rightly so. So there you have the love of self as the good side of so-called *egoism*. Love for oneself is not bad. What is bad is the absence of love for one’s neighbour. So we never solve the problem of egoism by abolishing self-love—which is not possible anyway—but by *adding* more and more love for our neighbour. The sentence I just quoted—love your neighbour as yourself—is the central maxim of Christianity as it is taken over from the Jewish Torah, but you find it in all religions. In this motto, self-love is set up as the ideal for the love of one’s neighbour, so it must be good enough! It doesn’t say we should stop loving ourselves, neither does it say that we should love our neighbour more than ourselves. An organism cannot favour one of its organs over another; they all belong together and form one unit.”

“If I understand you correctly,” the American said, “you are saying that the down side of materialism is the lack of appreciation of what is spiritual, just as the down side of egoism is the lack of love for one’s neighbour. I have no problem following that in theory, but I guess as a good American I’m looking for concrete examples to bring the theory

down to a practical level. Can you help with some specific examples?”

“I can give you one major example,” Opa said becoming more serious, “but watch out: it might strike you as a dangerous idea. You will see what I mean by ‘dangerous’! Take the example of so-called ‘national interests’. Many things are done in the world by the U.S., and other nations, with the rationale of defending national interests. A nation is a big ‘We’ of individuals sticking together on account of common values and interests. But even a nation is made up of individual human beings; the basic psychology remains the same as with the single person, as rooted in human nature. So the good part of so-called national interests is the self-love a group of people have; but here again the bad part of it is the lack of love for other groups. It’s as if in an organism one group of cells or of organs were sticking together to defend their group-interests by fighting against or by damaging another group. Pursuing national interests means therefore to live in the illusion of getting some advantage for one’s own group by exploiting other groups of people. In the long run, this can only result in a disadvantage for all, not least for those who thought they could profit from it.”

“So you are making the basic assumption,” one girl said, “that Humanity is in reality one single organism, in which no organ or group of organs can achieve any real advantage in the long run by damaging other organs. If we follow this analogy further, we would have to say that so-called ‘national pride’ is also pure illusion. Whatever skills a nation or a group of people

have, they have drawn them from the common pool of Humanity; they cannot attribute these skills only to themselves and boast about them as if they were better than others. It would be like the brain boasting about being able to do what the heart cannot do, without realizing that without the heart it couldn't even exist."

"We can take your thought one step further," said the boy next to her. "If there is one nation that is economically better off than others and is doing everything to defend that economic dominance, we would have to say that it can only do so by unrightfully exploiting other parts of Humanity's organism. In an organism, you can't have organs that are better off than others: when even a single one of them is sick, the whole body is sick. If one organ tries to 'exploit' the other, both will suffer. If one portion of Humanity tries to exploit another, it will damage itself no less in the long run, but only in the long run."

"So meanwhile," Opa followed," it may live in the illusion that this is not so. The same holds for individual relationships. In the long run, self-love without love of the other is going to damage one's own self, as well. Egoism is actually a short-sighted form of self-love and adding love of neighbour is the *better* way to love oneself as **well**.< **The** one who *only* loves himself, loves himself less than he who loves *also* his neighbour. By loving others too little, the 'egoist' paradoxically ends up loving too little his own self."

“I think the consequences of this for life are tremendous,” the same boy said, “both for individuals and for Nations, or even corporations. So I think we should look more closely at the basic assumption we are making: that Humanity is in reality one single organism.”

“I cannot give you a rational explanation on that,” the Russian woman said, “but if I use my intuition, there is no doubt whatsoever that Humanity is just one big family and that I want to love *all* human beings equally. Love tends by nature to embrace all beings, because excluding even a single person would mean not to love. So we either consider *love* to be the central force of human nature, inspiring each of us to overcome all divisions and to strive towards the oneness of Humanity; or else we have to say that some other force has the leading role.”

I was enthralled at the intensity and depth of our discussion. Seldom had I witnessed such a sincere and open exchange of ideas on such fundamental issues. Opa seemed to be in his element. He followed up on what the Russian woman said:

“You young people must apply your own minds in dealing with these issues. Do not just trust prefabricated theories or ideologies; rather, form your own judgment and apply it even now, as I try to articulate the oneness of our Humanity. The mighty organism ‘Humanity’ is unified and diverse at the same time, just like the biological organism. Human nature expresses itself in three basic ways, comparable to the three basic systems of the physiological organism: the nervous, the

rhythmic and the metabolic. We must distinguish three different main contributions that are necessary for the well-being of Humanity. The first is the expertise in organizing our economic and material life; the second focuses on all that is spiritual or that pertains to science, art and religion; the third has the task of harmonizing both worlds by concentrating on the human being as such, as the meeting place of matter and spirit. Correspondingly, we find three basic cultures in Humanity, each with a particular talent in one of these spheres.

“The special talent of America is the love of the Earth. Thanks to the skills it has, it can best organize the material world, to place it at the service of Humanity. Neither Europe nor Asia can take up the leadership role in the realm of technology and world economy. They simply lack the specific talent for it. The East, or Asia, has shown for millennia its outstanding talent for cultivating and venerating all that is spiritual. Likewise, it is called to put this talent at the service of today’s Humanity.

“Europe — Central Europe in particular — does not have the specific talent of putting either matter or spirit at the centre. It has the special gift of focusing directly on the human being. This gift is at the same time a calling: to explore creative forms of interaction between spirit and matter. The Western expertise in the world of matter and the Eastern reverence for the world of spirit are to meet together in the human Soul. Each human Being is called to be the meeting place of Body and Spirit by holding them together through his love. So the task of a young person growing up in today’s world is to experience all

three facets of Humanity's expression. To do this, he would have to travel and spend some time in *all three* basic cultural spheres. Only in this way can he really appreciate and integrate into his own being the specific contribution of each culture."

"Why must each culture be one-sided?" the American asked. "What prevents America, for instance, from striving towards a balanced synthesis and harmony of human values by overcoming one-sidedness? Isn't each of us supposed to become as complete and versatile as possible?"

"What you ask is very important," Opa answered. "There are two ways in which human nature can be complete: either in each single person or in the whole of Humanity. But it can never be complete in any kind of group or Nation as such. There are two main reasons for this. First, a group cannot have a thinking, feeling or willing of its own. Only single individuals can think and will, and can thus individually strive towards the wholeness of human nature by loving all that is human and all human beings.

"The second reason is that each group always excludes at least some people, otherwise it would not be a particular group. Here again, the bad side is not in what it includes, but in what it excludes. It is inherent in each specific culture or nation that they are unable to represent universality for the whole of Humanity. To do that, they would have to stop distinguishing themselves from the rest, and so lose their own identity. You can only speak of America by *excluding* Asia and Europe. The same applies to Europe and Asia, of course. In each group, only

the individual can open up to the whole Humanity by recognizing also what it has to receive from other groups, besides considering what it is called to give.”

“But Humanity as such cannot think or will, either,” one of the young men said.

“You are right,” Opa replied. “And this is why the first reason I gave is no less important. Humanity can be made to be real, even though intentionally, in the thinking, feeling and willing of each individual. But it will be real only to the extent that not even a single person is excluded. Each human individual has the ability and the calling to embrace in his awareness and in his love the whole of Humanity, not leaving anyone out.”

“So this means that what our European culture lacks,” one of the girls said, “or does not have in terms of specific skills, can only be found or experienced by living in America or in Asia. Am I getting you right, Opa?”

“You certainly are,” Opa answered. “This is why I said that a young European ought to travel both to America and to Asia to experience what he cannot experience in Europe. As far as those born in Africa are concerned: they have the possibility of a greater objectivity in regard to all three specialized cultures, not being personally identified with any single one of them.”

“What puzzles me now,” the American interjected, “is your statement that a specific culture cannot be universal, whereas the individual can. I have difficulty following that.”

“Of course, the individual also has to set priorities,” Opa answered. “He has to open up to universality by loving all human beings, but he can do this only through *intention*, through his striving. This is the true meaning of what we call *love*. A group as such cannot love at all: this is what makes the difference. Each individual can on the contrary *love* all the individual manifestations of human nature, even though he cannot *be* all of them at the same time. With a group or a culture, it is different. A culture that has the specific task of organizing the physical world, cannot at the same time specialize on cultivating and deepening spirituality. This is the reason why America is turning to the East to borrow the spirituality it seeks. But it must be aware that ‘Americanizing’ Eastern spirituality will in many respects be the same as ‘materializing’ it, if I may use this paradox.”

“So what comes out will be a kind of ‘materialistic spirituality?’” one boy asked. “If so, could you explain that further?”

“That’s a very important question,” Opa said, “but a hard one to answer. The special and unique contribution of America to Humanity is to make everything work and function properly in view of our life on Earth. Whatever most Americans undertake-be it so-called ‘spirituality’-the question they asks is: what can I do with it, what do I get from it, how does it benefit my life here and now? Take the example of meditation: the average American wants to see how meditating helps him function better in his daily life. If he is a manager or a bank director, he wants to be sure that meditating makes him a

better manager or bank director. And ‘better’ means for him: more successful at his job. What would our Russian lady have to say to that?”

“Spirituality has nothing to do with worldly success,” the Russian woman said vigorously. “For instance, if you meditate only to be happy or more successful in your business without asking how your business affects Humanity, you are only thinking of yourself and your own happiness or success. It is just a more refined form of egoism, made even worse through the illusion of considering yourself to be a spiritual person because you practice meditation.”

“But human beings are not angels,” the American man reacted no less strongly. “If spirituality is supposed to be good for human beings, it has to make us happy here and now as people living on Earth. We have to feel fulfilled in all the daily tasks we have to accomplish.”

“I think you are *both* right,” Opa said. “Once again, the problem here is not what is positive to either East or West, but what each of them is lacking. The East tends to neglect or even to despise what is material. It must learn to appreciate all the things we can only experience by living in the physical world. And the West, if it acknowledges the existence of the spiritual at all, tends to consider it simply in terms of what it can contribute to enhance worldly success and material comfort. What it needs is a greater appreciation for what is invisible or intangible for its own intrinsic value.”

After some moments of silence, one of the girls said: “So you’re saying that both of these expressions of Humanity-East and West-are by nature one-sided. This means that they can only be brought to interact and to better understand each other by a *third* type of culture, which centres specifically neither on matter nor on spirit, but on finding a balance between the two.”

“Very much so,” Opa replied. “But this third culture could never exist if the other two were not there. It can only be the meeting place of both thanks to the fact that both do exist, each with its specific identity and task. If a culture focuses on the human being as such, it cannot at the same time be primarily concerned with the realm of pure spirit or with the organization of the material world.”

At this point the American interrupted Opa by saying:

“You talk about appreciating Western culture no less than the Eastern. But I must make you aware of the fact that we have been talking for over an hour already and haven’t done anything! We are sitting here in a cafe as if we were in some school or university. Let me treat you all to something to eat and to drink, so that we get some movement at least in our stomachs, if not in our legs. Otherwise our brains might soon stop moving as well!”

His words were greeted with general laughter. I think everybody was pleased to see the American being allowed to be American for a while. But the happiest of all seemed to be

Opa, who got up from his place, went to the American and gave him a heartfelt hug saying:

“Sorry my friend, for being too theoretical. You see: this is the very reason why Humanity absolutely needs Americans: to bring the rest of us back to reality again and again.”

With those words, Opa had won another friend for life. The American was visibly moved and ordered a Coke and the biggest piece of cake for Opa. But don't think for a moment that Opa shared his privilege with anybody else: he was now eating and drinking so eagerly, one would have thought he had never been so hungry or thirsty in his life.

“Don't get me wrong, I wasn't trying to finish off our conversation,” the American said after everybody had been served. “On the contrary, I wanted to stimulate it; I don't know about you all, but I find it hard to talk on an empty stomach.” He turned to Opa and said: “Can you tell us *in more practical terms* what these three basic cultures are all about and how they can concretely interact with one another?”

“I'll try to be as down to Earth as I can,” Opa said. “But don't forget that it's like defining what love or friendship is, concretely. You can't pin it down to something tangible. You know what? I'll outline the main idea briefly, and then I'll try to illustrate what I mean with an example which I hope will be concrete enough. Is that all right with you?”

“Okay,” the American replied. “Now you are making me very curious.” Looking around, I had the impression that both

the Russian woman and the teenagers were also very keen to hear what Opa would say. And I no less!

“Our social life is made up of three basic realms,” Opa began, “which keep interacting all the time. We have first the *economic* realm, where we deal with material things: we produce goods and services; we distribute them through a world trade that is getting ever more complex; but the actual purpose of the economic realm is the consumption or the use of what we make. As the world economy becomes more and more global, money or capital increasingly decides which goods will be produced and which will not. Conventional advertising becomes increasingly obsolete and is being replaced by more subtle ways of steering world commerce.

“The realm opposite to this is the *cultural* one, where we deal not with material, but with spiritual things like our own ideas and values, which we then express in science, art and religion. In times of materialism, this sphere has almost totally been put at the service of the economic one. Just think of education: it should be treating the child like the gardener handles the flowers by creating the right conditions for the child to unfold according to his own being. Instead, our education gears and drills the child to properly serve the economic sphere.

“The third realm regards all that we experience in the pure relationship from person to person: it is all that has to do with the dignity of the human being as such, where we all feel equal in our mutual rights and duties. This sphere can be called the

juridical or the *political* one, as distinct from the economic and the cultural.”

“But we cannot put all three realms at the same level as if they were all equally important,” the Russian woman objected. “The economic sphere is necessary, but it only serves as an instrument for what is the real purpose of life, which is to prepare us to go back into the world of spirit after death.”

“If we are here just to prepare to go to heaven,” the American said humorously, but without ill intent, “why don’t we start off in heaven right from the beginning? What is the point in going through the hassle of life on Earth if we are only meant for life after death?”

“I think we can better answer your question,” Opa said, “through the specific example I promised. I hope this example helps us to see that there is a middle way, where what is material and what is spiritual keep meeting *within the human being*. This can only be achieved by experiencing both matter and spirit as serving the well-being of each person.

“For my example, I’ll use this local paper I was reading just before you came in. I found one article most fascinating, because it leaves no doubt that the writer was using a computer and not his own mind to choose the synonyms he was looking for. Whenever a word seemed too ordinary to him, he must have randomly picked a more compelling one from the list of synonyms in the computer’s thesaurus. In other words, he was treating synonyms as if they were all absolutely equal and interchangeable, like the equal parts of a machine you

substitute when one is broken. For the computer, all those words are of course equal, because only a thinking human mind can distinguish the difference of nuance between them. If you read this article, you will laugh yourself to death because some word combinations are absolutely impossible and go from ridiculous to outright stupid.”

“Now what does this have to do with the economic, the cultural and the judicial realm you were talking about?” the American said somewhat bewildered.

“I’ll tell you,” Opa went on. “I think we have here a good example of what happens to human beings when they consider only the material aspect of life: their main purpose in doing things is more often than not to make money. But in this case the writer doesn’t seem to be aware of the fact that by giving up his own activity in choosing the right word, he deprives himself of one of the most human and gratifying experiences: that of using one’s own *mind* to determine which word is the most appropriate in a certain context. By letting the computer choose, we become mentally ever more passive and dull. The economic sphere of life—in our case: getting an article done so as to get paid for it—can become so prominent that one forgets about the person and the importance of being spiritually creative for the self-fulfilment of the person. Isn’t this a good example of what materialism is doing to us and of how it impoverishes not only our relationships, but also our inner being?”

“I think I begin to get your point now,” the American said thoughtfully. “As you spoke, I was trying to picture myself not being able to recognize the difference between two synonyms any more and needing the computer to make the choice for me. At that point the computer would start being superior to me and might begin telling me to move over, that I stand in its way. This reminds me of a friend of mine who creates all kinds of pictures with the computer. He always tried to convince me that this kind of art is superior to the old or conventional art by someone like Raphael, for instance. I could never clarify to myself or to him why I didn’t agree. Now I think I can understand it better: computer generated art stifles creativity and is degraded to machine operating. But a skilled machine operator is far from being a true artist.”

Silence followed. Everybody seemed to be thinking of where this kind of trend-making our machines ever more perfect and the human being ever more dull and dependent on them—would eventually bring us.

“Opa,” I asked, breaking the intense silence, “are the three realms of social life you were talking about just three different realities? Or are we also supposed to behave differently according to whether we are dealing with economic, cultural or juridical matters?”

“Of course we have to behave differently,” Opa replied. “It is the three different types of human behaviour that make the whole difference. All that has to do with economic life can only thrive through a corporate spirit of solidarity and mutual help.

Where there is division of labour and globalization, no one can in reality work for himself. Everybody is in actual fact working for all the others. The mentality of self-profit, even though still widespread, is totally anachronistic and illusory. World economy is the best challenge to overcome one-sided egoism and group egoism in all their forms.

“As far as the cultural realm is concerned, the inner attitude that gives it life is the sense of freedom that must be kept alive in each person. Just as the economic sphere deals with our needs, the cultural sphere deals with our talents and skills. And the best way to put talents at the service of others is to allow them to unfold freely in each individual. The great sin of the West is to have neglected mutual help in economic life; the great sin of the East is to have stifled the free unfolding of individual talents in cultural life.”

“If I think of the three ideals of the French revolution,” one boy said, “I would have to see fraternity or brotherhood governing the economic life, liberty or freedom inspiring the cultural life, and equality of dignity, that means of rights and duties, would be the value to be upheld in the juridical life. Is this right, Opa?”

“Yes, yes,” Opa replied. There followed a longer period of silence, which was finally broken by the American:

“Now I understand better what you meant when you said there is also a tragic element to American culture and to the ‘American way of life’. Most Americans think of it as being the only good way of life, but you are saying it represents just one

third within the wholeness of our human experience. It is one-sided in overvaluing material welfare and comfort. You seem to imply that 'Americanizing' Europe means at the same time to stifle its specific contribution to Humanity."

"You are right," Opa answered him. "This began to happen in the second half of the 19th century. The triumph of natural science has led Central Europe to forget the very best examples of Humanity in its midst, such as Goethe."

"You remind me of someone like Emerson," I said at this point with excitement. "His vast and universal spirit is little known in the United States. You do not find the slightest trace of nationalism in him. He takes his ideas from all of Humanity."

Opa's eyes lit up as he heard this and joined in with no less enthusiasm: "Who of you knows the admiration Emerson had for Goethe? You might not believe me if I quote a verse of Emerson on Goethe, where he even refers to the Gospel scene where Christ writes on the Earth. While hearing this verse you may ask yourselves: what did Emerson find in Goethe to be able to say such words about him? Here is what he says:

Goethe raised o'er joy and strife
Drew the firm lines of Fate
and Life.

And brought Olympian wisdom down
To court and mart, to
gown and town, Stooping,
his finger wrote in clay
The open secret of to-day.

“Wow,” the American exclaimed, “that’s very impressive! Can you say that once more?”

Opa complied.

“This means,” the young American added, “that Emerson must have been very familiar with Goethe. Today, you can travel all the way across America and I doubt very much you will find even a few persons who hold Goethe in such esteem.”

There followed moments of deep silence.

All the tables in the cafe besides ours were still empty. The teen-agers were now looking in expectation at Opa. Knowing him as well as they did, they anticipated that all that had been said so far was but a preparation for something more profound and beautiful. After this moment of silence, my intimation was confirmed. The words he now spoke to those young people, which I can only attempt to relate, were like a grandfather’s blessing, or like a sacrament of confirmation, entrusting to them their life-mission and calling. Words cannot recapture the intensity of that moment, nor give an idea of how deeply moved we were.

He looked at each of the teenagers with eyes filled with wisdom and love, and said to them: “You have been born between East and West; your task is to reconcile both worlds through loving all that is truly human. The gift of the East intended for us all is the love of Heaven, the gift of the West is the love of the Earth. In discovering how lovely and worthy of love our common Humanity is, you will, in the face of each

human being, be able to contemplate the radiant face of the very Being of Love. Each person becomes ever more human by reconciling Heaven with Earth within his heart. Through your love, let the divine love of Heaven for our Mother Earth become one with the human yearning to turn the Earth into our Heaven.

“Never complain that life is meaningless, or that you have no job to do. You will make life meaningful by finding and giving meaning to all that you do. Let your life’s calling be the fullness and the beauty of being human. In loving the endless resources present in each person, you will come to the certainty that each of us comes back to Earth again and again to learn to be ever more human. The West will gain the certainty of repeated earth lives through loving the Earth: it will come to know that its moral responsibility for its transformation cannot be confined to a few decades, but must be extended throughout Earth’s entire evolution. Likewise, in your love of all that is potential to human nature as the longing of every human heart, you will feel the thought of living only once unbearable. You will know with inner certainty that divine grace wants each of us to take responsibility for the entire journey of all human beings on Earth-and Earth is the only place it can be accomplished-until the end of time, until Earth and Mankind will have become one again in the resurrection of all flesh.

“Spirit is above us, matter is beneath us; love alone is within us. We become human when our hearts burn with a twofold love: our spirit’s love of deeds within the world of matter, and our body’s love for the joys of the spirit. The desire

of the spirit to become visible is incarnation; the persistence of this yearning beyond death leads to reincarnation. The will of the material world to be freed from all necessity is resurrection: resurrection not from the flesh, but of the flesh. Resurrection of all flesh is our ultimate freedom. In the crucible of human love, all material gravitation becomes transubstantiated into spiritual levitation. Love alone can enlighten us and make all things light. Only he who truly loves has wings to fly.

“I have a long life behind me, but looking at your youth I feel rejuvenated. Oh, if you could fathom the beauty of being human and the great mission entrusted to you by your true Self in deciding to be born into the heart of Humanity, where spirit and matter seek to meet and to mutually embrace in the utmost beauty of being human. How meaningful your lives can be, if you give them this encompassing vision, if you come to know the greatest adventure of all, that of becoming increasingly truly human through our many lives on Earth. To understand humanness, you have to transcend all thinking in terms of opposites, and find what has always been called the Trinity. All duality, all division bears the mark of evil. The essence of all that is good is love and love always seeks to reconcile extremes and looks for the right balance and harmony of opposing forces. Wherever you find two sides fighting against each other, your love will seek to create a third force, striving to reconcile and to unite them.

“To love means to transform all mutually destructive opposites into dynamic and constructive polarities. Male and female, too, are two opposite sides of human nature. They can

deal with one another either destructively by fighting each other or constructively, by mutually enriching one another. Evil always sows division, love always reconciles and heals. The Evil One does everything to convince us that spirit and matter are enemies that work against each other, and that we have to choose one or the other. He is equally happy if we choose in favour *of* spirit by despising matter, or if we opt for matter by ignoring the reality of spirit. What is important for him is that these two realms work against each other, for this is the essence of human evil. But the goodness of human nature is the thousand fold experience of mutual love between spirit and matter. Your mind and your heart will be made good in comprehending and experiencing the infinite ways in which these two worlds are meant to interpenetrate and to foster each other.

“As I prepare to close this lifetime, I ask myself what our Mother Earth will look like when I come to see her again. I know she will bear the mark of the moral evolution of human beings. To you I entrust this evolution. I entrust to you our ‘Faust’, the highest ideal of being human. May he grow each day within you as you grow each day with him. Share with all human beings this most beautiful parable of the unending vision and venture of becoming ever more human. May the closing words of ‘Faust’ express the truth and the beauty of your own lives:

All that is perishable Is to us a parable; What no one ever wrought Becomes our boldest quest; What no one ever

thought Becomes our bravest gest; Our Virgin, Bride and Mother Forever finds her lover.

Opa was very moved by these words. It was difficult for him to utter the last two lines. One of the girls, perhaps the youngest, stood up and gave Opa a hug.

All of a sudden, the door flew open. In came five young men with shaved heads, dressed in black leather pants and jackets...

CHAPTER 7

HEALING OUR SUFFERING EARTH

(LAS VEGAS, 1994)

I travelled all the way from Tucson just to see the Grand Canyon and I planned to spend the night in Las Vegas. It had been as hot as any summer's day in the Southwest and the car was not air-conditioned.

While sitting in the restaurant of the Casino hotel in Las Vegas, I was struck by the polarity between the two places. The Grand Canyon is entirely the result of nature's untiring labour through the millennia, with nothing made by humans. Las Vegas impressed me immediately as a "wonder" of human culture, with little or nothing of nature in it. As I reflected, the contrast became more and more meaningful to me. Looking at nature, one can marvel at the wise laws that govern its evolution. Looking at man's artifacts, we may wonder to what extent humans, in their freedom, will turn against the wisdom of nature. I was surprised to see that even the restaurant was filled with gambling machines. It suddenly became clear to me why the visit to Las Vegas was so inexpensive. I had been given numerous coupons to play the machines. Everything seemed to be geared towards gambling. I marvelled at the complexity of some of the newer machines. Operating them seemed to be something one had to really learn, so the "newcomers" had to be enticed in such a way that the allure would be irresistible.

As I was finishing my meal, I noticed how one of the employees, who had apparently finished her work shift, got a box of coins and began playing one of the machines. The woman was immediately transfixed by the lure of the machine and oblivious to her surroundings. Besides the machine and the money, nothing seemed to exist for her. I was impressed by how isolating gambling is in the social context.

A sudden salvo of laughter distracted me from this sight; it came from a small group of people at one of the other tables. As I approached, one man noticed me and realized that I was interested in joining their conversation.

“Come on,” he waved, “join the club!”

I was delighted to join them. He continued as I walked up:

“I’m Alex. Let me tell you who we are. I’m a professional gambler: there is nothing in the world I enjoy more than gambling. This is my wife, Anne. She calls herself an ‘environmentalist’ because she loves nature more than anything else. And here we have our two friends, William and John. William is a genetic engineer and John is a nuclear physicist. I thought I would be able to distract them from their discussions for once by teaching them how to gamble, but they are too engrossed in their subject.” They all laughed heartily, and I had the impression that they had been friends for a long time.

“I didn’t mean to interrupt your discussion,” I said. “I’m sorry to say I’m not a gambler myself, but I am quite interested in joining your conversation.”

“So I’ll end up being even more in the minority,” Alex said. “But great people are always in the minority, aren’t they?” His humour was good-natured and sincere.

“Let me briefly fill you in on what we were saying,” Anne said with kindness. “We were debating the relationship between human beings and nature. Both John and William maintain that it is our right to use nature and to place the resources of the Earth at man’s disposal, while I argue that human beings also have definite duties and responsibilities towards the Earth, not only rights.”

“I think that’s the main point I find hard to accept,” William said. “Somehow I resist all talk of duties. Ever since the Ten Commandments were issued, we have been hearing about human duties. I think it is the great achievement of the New World to have had the first Constitution in the world based on *human rights*. Isn’t that more in accord with human dignity than insisting on human duties?”

“Let me explain what I was trying to say,” Anne said. “I agree with the Bible when it says we should subdue the Earth for ourselves, and I have nothing against the pragmatic American approach to life, which asks: what good is it to me? What am I going to gain from it? I agree that the Earth has to be at our service. My main point, however, is that we can never benefit ourselves by damaging the Earth. Any damage we do to

the Earth we also do to ourselves, either in the shorter or longer run. Often enough, we are not aware of this because we consider ourselves separate from the Earth, but we are actually part of it. So what we need to address is the self-deception in which we live, thinking we can profit as human beings by exploiting the Earth.”

“But you are just assuming,” John remarked, “that certain technological interventions are damaging both for the Earth and for human beings. We claim they are advantageous to both. Take the classic example of genetically altering plants in order to make them more resistant to certain types of insects or pests, which would otherwise wreak havoc on our crops and deprive human beings of their nourishment. What is wrong with this kind of human intervention in nature?”

“I think we have to look closer at what I would like to call our philosophy of exploitation,” Anne answered. “We Americans scarcely notice how deeply the mentality of exploitation has become embedded in our culture. Our society is based on the assumption that if each individual is left free to fight for his own interests, everything will be all right. This might work for a while, because in the struggle for life, the people who are the best fighters will at first have the upper hand. So far, the West has proved to have easily the largest number of gifted fighters who have survived at the cost of those less gifted. In the short run, Darwinism seems to be working. But my question is: what if in the long run a point of reversal is reached, where the disadvantages we have inflicted on others fall back on ourselves?”

“How do you mean that?” William asked.

“Take our two basic tools of exploitation: capital and technology,” Anne replied. “We exploit the rest of Humanity with the power of our money on the one hand, while we exploit the Earth with the power of our technology on the other. When you get down to it, there are only two possibilities here: either we are separate from the rest of Humanity and from nature or we are part of both of them. If we are separate, it should be possible for us to have an advantage even in the long run, by damaging Humanity and the Earth; if we are part both of Humanity and of Nature as a whole, we can only live in the short-term illusion of profiting from exploitation. In the long run, we are actually damaging ourselves more, unless we realize the illusory nature of our actions.”

“But why don’t we also consider the opposite assumption?,” John asked. “Let us suppose that the effect we are having on the rest of Humanity and on the Earth is good both for them and for us. What if we can say that we are not really exploiting them for our own profit, but that we are helping and fostering them. None of us wants to do harm to the rest of Humanity or to the Earth. So where is the problem?”

“Let’s consider first what our money is doing to the rest of Humanity,” Anne answered. “I think we deceive ourselves if we say that we are helping poorer nations. In actual fact, we are only allying ourselves with their leaders, and with the rich and the powerful. We are compelling them to squeeze as much as possible out of their people, to make themselves and us

wealthier. But in this process, an increasing percentage of the world population is getting poorer and suffering more than before our 'help' started. This is due to the way we deal with world capital. Globalized capital is like the blood in the body: it has to circulate as much as possible to get to each single cell of the organism and it is not allowed to surpass the right amount. The blood is constantly being consumed and needs constant regeneration.

“Our money represents all the different commodities and services we use. It serves Humanity better, if it is similar in behaviour to that of the goods and services it represents. All of the things money stands for *depreciate* in the course of time; their value diminishes, because they are all usable or perishable. But with our money we do the opposite: we force it to gain in value with time, by demanding interest. This is very much like forcing the organism to perpetually increase the amount of its blood. If we try, we soon realize the absurdity of it. But global capitalism has not yet come to the point of realizing the same absurdity. If our world economy had a healthy monetary system, all the existing money would each year automatically be made to lose part of its value—for instance five or ten percent. This was the actual purpose of the Tithe or ten percent that was given away in earlier times as a donation for non-lucrative purposes.

“In order for money to gain value against its nature, capitalism has to exploit Humanity. It does this for instance by provoking and financing small and large wars, where the weapons and products of the richer nations cause so much

destruction, that the people are forced to buy things all over again. This only augments the value of world capital and its potential for exploitation. The result is that the few rich become ever fewer and richer, and the many poor become ever more numerous and poorer. The problem is that we already have perhaps two or three times more money circulating than is required for a healthy global economy. This is like the body having twice the amount of blood it needs, with the surplus blood doing everything it can to increase further. Most of that money cannot really circulate or be distributed. It is concentrated in the hands of the few monetary powers who make the all-important decisions.”

“You cannot just say that everything we do for other nations serves only ourselves,” William said. “Some of them, especially the poorer ones, couldn’t even survive if we didn’t sell them our advanced technology.”

“Okay,” Anne responded. “Let us look a bit closer at our modern technology, especially at its overall impact on nature. My main contention is that modern technology may have made our lives more comfortable in the material sense, but in this process we have completely overlooked two basic questions. The first is whether a more comfortable life materially is indeed the better one, that is, the one that gives us more fulfilment as human beings. The second question is the long-term impact of our industrial culture on the Earth. When we begin to see the first signs that something may be fundamentally wrong in our civilization, we look the other way and deny it by denouncing as alarmists those who try to warn us.”

“Can you be a bit more specific?” William asked.

“Just consider the main features of the impact our civilization has on nature,” Anne complied. “Let me only mention the following: the systematic destruction of large rain forests, which are vital for the life-cycle and the climatic pattern of the Earth; the increasing emission of carbon dioxide in the air, along with a decrease in the vegetation necessary to produce oxygen; the poisoning of the water supplies by hazardous chemical wastes. The increase of radioactive forces we set free in our addiction to the power engendered by nuclear fusion... This list could continue.”

“You told us some time ago” John said, “that you get confirmation of your ideas from a book like Al Gore’s ‘Earth in the Balance’. But a lot of his assertions seem to be exaggerated and not many in this country agree with him.”

“What impresses me about this book,” Anne said, “are not so much the specific issues or claims it makes, but the stress it places on our moral responsibility to the Earth and our real potential for damaging it. What I like most about it is the attitude of love toward the Earth. My basic question is not whether the damage we are doing to the Earth and its atmosphere is great or small. My question is whether we are damaging it at all. Or, to put it in other words, I think the main question is: are we moving in the right or the wrong direction? Asking this is far more important than simply asking, how fast or slowly we are moving. If we move in the wrong direction, does it matter how fast or slow we move ?”

Silence followed. An older man passed by our place with a small bowl of coins. His stride and the movements of his body were noticeably mechanical. As he sat down at one of the machines and started operating it, the mechanical movements of the machine and the man fit well together; man and machine became one. Tragically, I thought, it is not the machine that is being humanized, but the human being who is being mechanized. Anne brought my attention back to our table. She said:

“I think there is something intrinsically wrong in genetic engineering, wrong in the sense that we are damaging ourselves no less than we are damaging the Earth. Take the case you mentioned of our altering the genes of a plant in order to make it resistant to certain pests. The argument of science runs as follows: by making the plant immune to certain pests we will have a stronger plant and get rid of the pests. But this seems to me simply wrong thinking. If you prevent a plant from *fighting against* a certain threat by removing it in advance, you make the plant weaker, not stronger. I believe the plant would eventually get stronger if allowed to deploy all the defences it needs when challenged to fight against the counter-forces. In this sense, the plant *needs* its natural threats. Each force is made stronger by *fighting*, not by avoiding the matching counter-force.”

“You are very radical with your ideas,” John said.” I don’t think you are going to convince many people of them.”

“The point is not whether my ideas are radical,” Anne replied, “but whether they are right. A few days ago one thought suddenly came to me: suppose there is one particular gene of the coffee plant that appears exclusively in Ethiopia, and that we suppress that species altogether. Now there will be no coffee plants left on Earth with that gene. Suppose consuming coffee containing that gene would cause a most subtle, but very real and specific structuring touch to our brain fabric, which would allow it to be the instrument for thinking the corresponding thought patterns. That gene now having disappeared, our brains would be forever deprived of those finest structuring forces, and we wouldn’t be able to think the specific thoughts which are only made possible through them. Isn’t our whole body somehow the result of all that we eat and of all the vital forces at work in nature?”

“Through this whole process we would be making our brains-our bodies-poorer and consequently our thinking duller, which means less human. Our bodies would lose out on specifically *human* qualities. Instead of structuring our body according to the life-forces specific to that gene, we now structure it according to the thoughts and intentions we had in suppressing it. These may be purely egoistic and materialistic, aiming only at a more comfortable life. This means we would be making our thinking poorer and our bodies more instinctual. We would thus bring our bodies back closer to the animal level, and farther away from the specifically human. If this is so, just imagine what we are doing to ourselves by suppressing many thousands of genes each year, as we are actually doing.”

“What do you think of the experimentation now going on,” I asked the two scientists, “to see whether it is possible to create embryos by combining human and cow cells? Do you think no limitation should be imposed on experimenting, or do you see the ethical question asking about good and evil as having a role to play here?”

“You are getting right at the core of the debated issue,” William, the genetic engineer answered. “I have nothing in theory against asking the question of good and evil. The problem begins when each tries to impose on others the line he draws between the two. I think we’ll never get to a substantial agreement on good and evil, and even a majority would have no right to impose its ethical standards on the others. I think that’s what political correctness is actually all about. You have to respect everybody’s right to experiment.”

“But what if experimenting,” Anne objected, “brings damage to the body of the person, or even to his mind or psychological functions? Would that not be against basic human rights, like the right to physical and psychic integrity and well-being?”

“In most cases,” John said, “you can only find out afterwards what the results or even the side-effects of an experiment might be. That’s the whole point in experimenting: that you do not know in advance what exactly will come of it. Who would have suspected mad cow disease before the animals started showing that particular kind of behaviour and before the effects showed in human beings? If you want to

forbid taking any chances, you would also have to forbid all experimentation that leads to good results for medicine and for us.”

“I only partially agree with you,” I said. “It all depends on where you draw the line between what can and cannot be known in advance. Let us consider a cow’s ovum and reflect on the fact that within that substance there must be at work all the life forces that will later show up in the formed body of the cow. If those forces were not there, we could not explain the actual development of the whole organism. I think, if we comprehend those forces properly, there is a lot we can know in advance about them, because we see them at work in the adult cow. If we mix human and animal embryos, we can know in advance that we will have a combination of animal and human forces, which is what makes possible the regeneration of human cells we are looking for in the first place.”

“But even if we were to agree on that,” William said, “I do not see what should be wrong in helping human beings regenerate the life forces of their cells or even of entire organs by getting that help from animals.”

“We would have to consider closely,” I said, “the inevitable effects of blurring the separation between human and animal. I think the fundamental distinction between humans and animals, is freedom: humans are capable of freedom in their thinking and willing, animals have *no* freedom. By inserting vital forces of a human into a cow egg or embryo, the ensuing human being will experience biological instincts and drives

which are closer to those of animals, which means: more compelling and less free. By continuing along this path, we make human beings more akin to animals. This would happen not because human beings are like animals, but because it is open to human freedom to undo itself by allowing the human being to fall back to the level of the animal, where the determinism of natural forces allows no freedom.”

“Can you explain more concretely,” John asked, “the effects of this loss of freedom?”

“We can look at the difference,” I answered, “between a human being and an animal in the way we think, the way we experience our feelings, and the way we make decisions. There are infinite degrees of freedom or lack of freedom in the way we can create our own thoughts or take on passively the thoughts of others; in the way we make our own free decisions or we allow ourselves to be influenced by someone else’s will and goals. By inserting animal forces into the stem cells of a human being, we make his will forces weaker or more instinctual—more similar to those of the animal—we make him less capable of dominating his own feelings. Most important of all, we diminish his ability to be free in his thinking: the mind processes will become more automatic, lacking free will; they will be closer to the processes our computers perform, which lack entirely the ability to freely choose. I have no doubt that there are powers that be with an interest in human beings becoming more instinctual in their drives and more mechanized in their minds: this way, they can better use them for their purposes, as they now use animals and machines. In this way

there would be no possibility of freely opposing the exercise of human power. If all this is true, don't you think that it is our duty to ask the fundamental question whether it is morally wrong, or evil, to deprive human beings of their most basic right, the right to freedom, by forcing their physical constitution to revert to the animal level?"

"If what you say is right," William answered, "there should be no objection to cloning human beings. If this becomes possible one day, you cannot say we are having a mixture between animal and human. We would remain in the human realm. This is why I don't understand that the most violent reactions of ethicists and the strongest barrier to public acceptance are directed against experiments in cloning a human being."

"I think the negative reaction of many people," I said, "has to be taken seriously. Many have a strong feeling that it is wrong, without being able to give a rational explanation for their feeling. I think their gut feeling is right in this case. A human being is not just his physical body. He is made up of life-forces, of passions and drives. But our most important difference from animals is what humans refer to with the word T, which means our very being in its freedom in thinking and willing. If we 'double' a human being by cloning, the question is what concretely happens to all four elements of his being: the physical, the vital, the animal, and the specifically human. Suppose the vital forces are capable of 'doubling' on the whole line, and that both organisms, the old and the new, can have their full amount of living cells and of life-forces. The animal

forces may not be able to simply 'double' like life-cells do, and the question will be, what will go to the one and what to the other, both being deprived of perhaps a decisive part.

“Most problematic of all is the reality of the I, of the individual human spirit. The Latin word ‘indi-viduum’ means: not divisible, something that cannot further be split. But cloning wants to achieve precisely this: to make two human Beings out of one. I think if we grasp the true nature of the I, or human spirit, we see the tragedy inherent in cloning. The spiritual Self will have to keep inhabiting-undivided-one body. And the daunting moral question we have to ask is: who will inhabit or take possession of the other body, in which no human self has been at work to form it into its own image? A human being can only inhabit a body it forms itself in its own image. Can we exclude that there might be non-human spiritual beings eager to take unrightful possession of a human body to exercise their power on earth? Wouldn't such a phenomenon of human possession be intrinsically evil? If we believe it is in the nature of the human body to be the instrument for the expression of human freedom, then possession will totally pervert the moral goodness of the human body. The most perfect instrument of freedom will be turned into the most unfree instrument of possession.

“I am overwhelmed at the thoughts you are expressing,” Anne said visibly moved. “Although I cannot follow you completely, I have the impression that you confirm many of my deeper intimations. I hope we'll have a chance to talk again about this issue. However, it is apparent to me from what you

said, that we have to be careful and responsible in the way we deal with all the forces of the Earth. Especially as they are expressed in the minerals, plants and animals, and as they are all brought together in the body of humans. Our bodies can never be better than what forms the body of the Earth.”

“But one thing still isn’t clear to me,” John said. “It is your claim that diseases can be good for a person and that we may be wrong in wanting to prevent them.”

“What I meant is that each disease constitutes a special obstacle,” Anne said, “which in turn provokes a highly specialized strategy of resistance in the body. We still know far too little regarding the specific reactions an organism must establish in order to overcome specific diseases. The other question I raised is, whether it is in all cases better for a person not to go through a disease. I ask you the simple question: according to what criteria do we establish what is ‘better’ for a person? How can we be sure that what is more comfortable is also better? In real life, we know that often enough the opposite is true: things that we have to struggle for give us the greatest satisfaction by evoking our best efforts. A life that is easy is not necessarily better.”

“Now wait a second,” John, the nuclear physicist, said. “Life has enough trials and hardships as it is. Don’t you think it’s a good idea to alleviate some of it by preventing diseases whenever we can?”

“I’m talking about our basic *attitude* towards suffering,” Anne said. “We think of suffering as entirely negative: the less

the better. But such thinking actually only makes matters worse: if we hate the suffering that comes our way, we become less able to bear it and actually magnify it. Paradoxically, if we were to *accept* suffering as being necessary for our growth, we would suffer less, thus truly alleviating it. And if we accept the suffering that comes to us, we do not have to look for more: each of us receives as much as is right for him. A basic assumption has lived in past cultures, that a higher power is guiding our lives and bringing us the mix of suffering and joy, of difficult and successful events that is right for our development.”

“Are you saying,” William asked, “that by preventing plants from fighting against certain diseases to overcome them, we not only make the plants weaker, but also the human bodies that will be nourished by those plants?”

“That’s exactly what I’m trying to say,” Anne noted with approval. “A body which is allowed to fight against a disease to overcome it will be stronger than a body which, through prevention, has been denied such possibility. We are unaware of this self-deception, because it takes time for us to become aware of the effects of our manipulation of nature. In past civilizations, human beings feared nature and gazed at her in wonder. In our civilization, there appears to be a reversal. Nature is beginning to fear humans who use their power to dominate the Earth without wisdom. Many valuable plant species are being lost every year because of our insensitivity. Also, I see fear of humans in the eyes of many animals. We

inflict much senseless suffering on animals by exploiting them for selfish purposes.”

I thought, while listening to Anne, how important the inborn sense of right and wrong is in our lives. Some people still possess it, but they are becoming fewer and fewer. I asked myself: what is it that deadens the sense of right and wrong? Is it indifference? If so, what causes indifference? If it is superficiality, what is it that makes human beings superficial?

“In what ways do you think our relationship to the Earth has to change,” I asked Anne at this point.

“I think our present way of dealing with the Earth is tragic in many respects,” she answered. “I feel infinite sadness when I think of all the species of plants and animals we are extinguishing forever. Plants and animals that human beings and the Earth have relied upon for millennia. Our science and our technology haven’t been able to produce one single gene, yet we destroy many thousands of them each year. We do to the living organism of the Earth what we would do to our own physical organism if we were to kill the genes that are vital to it one after the other. A healthy body consists of multiple organs which function together as the instrument of our mind and soul. I believe the Earth is no less a living, unified organism than our body; it must also have a mind and a soul of its own, a spirit of the Earth as it were. I see the soul of the Earth suffering incredibly at our hands. Modern science is capable of dealing with the body of the Earth, but doesn’t know what it is doing to the Being of the Earth, because we don’t really care.”

“How can we learn to care more?” I asked.

Anne hesitated a little, and then she said: “I do not know. I have asked myself that question many times and all I know is my struggle not to become angry or fearful. Sometimes, my bitterness just turns into sadness, which is only another form of resignation. Sadness overcomes me for instance when I think of the words of an eight-year-old boy from New York, which I read in Al Gore’s book. He describes in most vivid terms how he and his four-year-old brother are sitting on the window sill after the death of their baby. They are watching pigeons fly and they spread crumbs in the hope of catching one. They sit motionless so they won’t be noticed, and as soon as one dives for the crumbs they slam down the window right on it. The pigeon is not dead yet, they notice that only one eye is open. He says that they wanted to see what it looks like to die slowly like their baby did, so they dip the pigeon again and again in the water pot they have on the hot plate.”

“Oh,” Anne continued visibly moved, “every time I think of this scene, an infinite sadness fills me. How can you avoid being sad about a Humanity that has become so insensitive? This child got his attitude from his parents, from our society, and here I see the tragic part of it. You asked what we can do to overcome this abyss of human insensitivity, and I have no answer. Do *you* have an answer? All I know is that I shiver at the thought of how a child like this is going to treat his fellow human beings as an adult. And there are already far too many adults who were once kids like this. Do *you* have an answer?”

I knew I also had no answer. I knew there is no easy answer. Silently, helplessly, I was looking at Anne. I think she genuinely expected an answer from me. As I saw her eyes getting moist, I thought it would be better for me to withdraw. I excused myself, said good night, and returned to my room. What I had heard had been both wrenching and inspiring. But the fatigue of the travel and the events of the day had a strong effect, and I soon fell asleep.

That night, I was brought back to the majestic Grand Canyon by an unforgettably strong and vivid dream.

It was sunset. The scorching heat of the day was giving way to a cooler atmosphere enlivened by a gentle breeze. As the glare of the sun receded, infinite hues of red painted the eternal layers of the daunting crevice. The colours were so moving for me that they coalesced to form a colossal face hovering over the Canyon: a Native American woman was suddenly gazing at me, her ageless eyes filled with sadness. This is the true Soul of America, I thought, and of the Grand Canyon.

I asked the majestic Woman why she was so sad. The words she spoke felt like a symphony of tectonic thunder and crashing waterfall, of high winds and raging fire: "O my child: look at what the Whiteface is doing to the Earth of our Fathers. They are oblivious to the Great Spirit's habitation of the Earth, they treat her as if she were of dead matter and not of living spirit, as if she belonged to them, not knowing that they belong to her. I feel within me an unspeakable suffering as I hear the

painful cries of all the spiritual beings of the Earth, of the Water, of the Air, of the Fire.

“I am the ancient Soul of this Land. In my love for the Great Spirit of the Earth whom you call the Being of Love, I suffered my own passion and death when the Land was taken by humans who did not recognize Spirit as reality. They see only the body of the Earth and ignore her Soul and her Spirit, just as they only care for the physical body of the human being, starving to death his soul and ignoring his spirit. Night after night, I revisit these ancient places and I recite with infinite sadness words similar to those I inspired Chief Seattle to say to the White Man, who was taking away his land. Do you remember those words? As you now hear them again from the depths of my soul, will you remember them when you awaken, so that you can remind all human beings?

“Every part of this earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every meadow, every humming insect. All are holy in the memory and experience of my people (...) Will you teach your children what we taught our children? That the earth is our mother? What befalls the earth befalls all the sons of the earth. Thus we know: the earth does not belong to man, man belongs to the earth. All things are connected like the blood that unites us all. Man did not weave the web of life, he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself.”

As I heard these words from the Native Soul of America, I felt a yearning to do all that I could to help human beings cultivate an attitude of love and reverence for Mother Earth. I asked the Woman with the majestic face: “What can I do to help human beings hear your voice and heed your suffering?”

The sadness of her face gave way to a faint smile.

“Many Moons ago,” she replied, “I asked this same question to the Great Spirit of the Earth, to the Being of Love. It was midday; in a sudden vision of Light, the Spirit of the Earth, whom I have loved and served since the foundation of the Earth, appeared to me. He spoke:

“O dear Soul of the Earth, Soul of my own Body and Being: do not loose heart when the time comes in which the minds of human beings will be blinded and their hearts hardened. There will be a time when they will no longer hear your voice. You will find the strength to forgive them as I did at my death. You will find the strength to forgive them, knowing that they do not know what they are doing. Yet the time comes and it is at hand, when they are called to know what they are doing, just as the child has to leave behind the stage of unconsciousness and learn to act in a conscious and responsible way. You will help human beings to know the truth, to know the truth about their Mother Earth, because only the truth can set them free.

“Let your heart ever be comforted in cherishing the two great prophecies, the two promises that have been laid at the foundation of Earth’s evolution. You will inspire human beings to draw ever new hope and strength from them. In the words

of the Jewish scriptures as quoted by the last of the Christian Gospels they read: “No bone of him shall be broken”; and: “They will contemplate the One whom they have pierced”.

“At that point,” the Soul of the Earth said to me, “I felt a strong desire to grasp the meaning of those words, and I asked the Spirit of the Earth to explain it to me. I remember each of his words, which he uttered with infinite love. He said:

“O Soul of my Earth, you Virgin, Bride and Mother of the never-ending quest of the human heart: these two prophecies contain the unending potential of human nature and of human evolution. The “bones” stand for all that has an identifiable form, a structure to be grasped by human thinking, which is called to imitate the creation brought about by the divine thoughts in summoning all visible forms into being. The “piercing” of the Body of the Being of Love will be the piercing of your own body: it is the calling of human love to dissolve all that is material and thus resistant or separating. Love is called to “pierce” through and through and to disintegrate all matter, so as to allow all incarnate spirit to resurrect in the form of a New Earth. Heaven and Earth will pass away in their ephemeral form of material estrangement and separation among beings, so as to rise up to the great reunion of a universal communion’.

“Hearing these words from the Being of Love filled me with joy, but my joy gave way to a sense of earnestness as he spoke further:

“You will help human beings understand the *warning* contained in those two great promises, as well. The first warning is that they should never “break the bones”: this word they must heed when genetic engineering will give them the power to alter the forming forces of nature or to prevent the perception of many species by depriving them of the life-seeds that bring them to incarnation. Altering or obliterating the generating forces of the Earth is called “breaking the bones” of the Spirit of the Earth. It is the most tragic sacrilege human beings can perpetrate in their not knowing what they are doing. But woe to those who will do it in *knowledge* of what they are doing: their lot will be tragic beyond imagination. All life-forms of the Earth are eternal thoughts of the cosmic Word, of the universal Logos, offered to human logic to be pondered upon in the course of the millennia, so that human beings learn divine thinking and their minds become more divine. But manipulated forms engender distorted thoughts, and so lead to error and fallacy. And extinguished forms, species no longer allowed to be perceived, will engender sins of omission in human thinking. They will impoverish the human mind by depriving it of perceptions necessary for thoughts that are as vital to it as the air for the lungs and as the food for the body.

“Just as the first warning speaks of the evolution of thinking, so the second of the evolution of love. The first speaks of the forces of life, the second of the forces of death. The “piercing” of the body both you and I inhabit, all radiation dissolving matter should happen only as a consequence of the spiritual radiation engendered by human minds contemplating

the spiritual Being of the Earth. Pure human thinking is called to contemplate spiritually the face of the Being of Love who is thus ever visiting human beings and ever returning to them. It is this very radiation of human love for all creatures of the Earth that spiritualizes matter and consumes it radioactively. Human hearts long to be pierced with love in contemplating the Spirit of the Earth. In the crucible of human love, the physical element of separation will be consumed and Earth and Humans will be born anew spiritually.

“Not to break the bones ought to serve as a warning for all genetic engineering; contemplating him whose body is thus dissolved, shall be the warning to make proper use of nuclear energy and of all that enhances the radioactivity and the disintegration of matter. This disintegration is meant to increase in the future in order to bring about the spiritualization, the resurrection of all flesh. But woe to human beings if the falling out of all matter of the Earth happens through the most encompassing sin of omission, the sin against the human spirit. This happens when they dissolve the Earth’s body, *without* being pierced by the lance of love of the Spirit of the Earth. Each human being is called to contemplate him spiritually in his ‘second coming’ as pure Light’.

“After I heard these words, I vowed to do all that I could to inspire in human beings moral responsibility for the Earth and for their own evolution, as thinking and loving beings.”

I remember that I wanted to tell the Soul of the Earth how I also wished to do all I could to encourage human beings to sanctify and love the Earth. But a new vision appeared.

I suddenly saw the face of Anne hovering over the Grand Canyon, looking at the Native American woman, who now turned to her. Their conversation was deeply moving, but I don't remember whether it took place in the form of thoughts, or language. It is difficult to translate into words what I witnessed.

“Oh my mother,” Anne said to her, “I come to you with great sadness in my heart. How difficult it is for human beings to understand what they are doing to the Earth. Many still do not grasp that we humans belong to the Earth and that the damage we do to our Mother we do to ourselves.”

“My child,” the Soul of the Earth said to her, “never let your sadness turn into despair. When you visit me in your dreams you seek comfort and hope. Let me tell you of the two great sources of hope you have been seeking for a long time, but only now are able to comprehend.

“Your first source of hope will be an awareness of the love the Spirit of the Earth has for the Earth's body. You will feel consolation at the fact that human beings have *neither* the existence *nor* the destruction of the Earth in their power, for the Earth is the Body of the Being of Love, not yet the Body of Man. The Being of Love brought to resurrection his human body by freeing it of all mineral dust: thus he was able to make the whole Earth into His own body. He is the one who in his

dying transformed the human blood into pure life-forces of compassion and love. His love alone can decide over the destiny of the Earth. He has made the Earth into His body, wanting to safeguard for you to the very end all earthly conditions necessary for your long evolution towards freedom. Human beings will learn to be grateful for His lasting gift of the Earth to them. They will come to understand that even though life and death of the Earth are not in their hands, increasingly they can influence her health or sickness. They will learn that true moral responsibility for the fate of the Earth is a path between paralyzing despair and wanton exploitation; it is called to avoid both.

“Your second source of hope will be an awareness of the gift of repeated earthly lives given to each human being. The Being of Love has made the Earth his Body, willing to help each of you to do the same in the course of time. Your love of the Earth is now still imperfect, and this is why you abandon her each time you die. But you are called to build up and inhabit an earthly body many times, until you transform the body into the image of your own spirit. Only in coming back to the Earth again and again will you experience your true loyalty to the Being of Love and to his sacred body, the body of your Mother Earth. She longs to be transformed by you into the body of your spirit’s resurrection, just as with your thoughts you transform each day matter into spirit. With your works of art, you transform body into beauty; and with your religion you adore what is divine and eternal in all earthly creatures.”

“Is there a special mission for America?,” the woman asked. “Many people look to America for leadership, but all we seem to convey are materialistic goals.”

“My child,” the Soul of America said to her, clothed with the timeless layers and the spaceless colours of the Grand Canyon, “you thought that the essence of materialism lay in cherishing matter and despising spirit. You will learn a deeper truth when you realize that the deeper evil of materialism is not in despising what is spiritual, but in despising what is material. The materialist is the great despiser of matter, not of a spirit he doesn’t even know. This is his tragedy: that he lives in the illusion of loving and appreciating the very material world he in reality belittles.

“The sacredness and radiance of all that is material comes from the spirit that inhabits it and gives it reality. Not to see spirit in all matter is the greatest profanation of the world in which we live: all things are made profane and empty by the one who sees only their material side. The materialism of modern man is indeed the most tragic desecration of the Earth. What exists for the purpose of making the spirit manifest and visible, is seen by the spiritually blind as devoid of all spirit. Can you think of a lover who perceives in the beloved only the material body and not his love? What would that body be worth, if it weren’t inhabited by a loving spiritual being who makes of it a musical instrument for the expression of all the love melodies of the heart?

“The Great Calling of America is to love the Earth as the supreme Heaven given to human beings, and to teach Humanity to love the world of matter as the incarnation of human spirit. All Spirit can only become truly human by becoming manifest. Love becomes human by flowing from hearts into actions aimed at transforming the Earth. Human deeds of love can only take place in what you call the world of matter, and which I call the world of humanized spirit. My great dream is that the American people will transform the Earth into a world of human beauty and love. The gift of America for the whole of Humanity is the love of the Earth.

“Any religion that strives only for a redemption of humans without redemption of the Earth is not worthy of the human being. You become human not in leaving the Earth behind you, but in loving and redeeming it. Those who call themselves Christians and look for a Heaven away from the Earth, for spirit divorced from matter, must still learn to become Christian. True Christianity, like all true religion, is the imitation of the Being of Love, who so loved the Earth that he gave his beloved body to her. The true essence of religion is the redeeming love for all creatures of the Earth: the celebration of the eternal liturgy that transubstantiates Earth into a Heaven. Not flight from the flesh is your calling, but resurrection of the flesh. Didn't much of Christianity in past centuries express contempt for the world of matter, by seeing it as evil? You become truly human only when you cease seeing matter as evil, and transform it through the goodness of your heart. The central mystery of Christian love is the incarnation of the divine: the

highest Spirit becoming flesh in the body of the Earth. The central mystery of human love is reincarnation of humans, the repeated decision to love the Earth as the Body of the Being of Love. This is the only place in our universe where you can experience human freedom and love, where you can communicate with one another by being separate and one at the same time.”

At this point in my dream, I saw Anne looking so intently at the Soul of the Earth that her face gradually began taking on the same features. This transformation was beautiful to behold and I had a glimpse of how love can move two beings into one. It was as if the Soul of the Earth were giving her own eyes to the woman so that she could see the Earth with the same love. After they had gazed for a while into each other’s eyes, the Soul of the Earth said to Anne:

“Now you can look at your fellow human beings with the same eyes through which I look at them. Do you see them streaming to this place by the thousands and by the millions?”

The woman looked around and acted as if she weren’t perceiving anything, but suddenly I realized that the entire Grand Canyon was filled with translucent human faces, some lighter, some darker.

“Each night all these human souls come to visit me,” the Soul of the Earth said to Anne, who beheld all those faces with wonder. “While they sleep and their daily consciousness is interrupted, their true Selves yearn to hear from me the words they cannot hear on Earth in this time of darkened human

consciousness. They listen to the words I spoke to you: they have been here all the while I was speaking to you, but only now are they becoming visible to you.” “What can I do,” the woman asked, “to help all those human beings remember, when they awaken, the words you speak, so that they will learn to love the Earth and honour her holiness?”

“When you truly love the Earth for the sake of the human Beings, and when you love all human Beings for the sake of the Earth: then this twofold love will transform your dream into the truest reality of your life. You will then see the Being of Love in every person and you will foster in every person the strong love that can transform the Earth into your Heaven.”

When I suddenly woke up, it was well into the morning. I went to the window and looked down at the restaurant. There were already people sitting at the gambling machines. From the Grand Canyon, I was now back in Las Vegas; from the world of nature to the world of culture. Of culture? I wasn't so sure. From my dream I had been brought back to reality. From dream to reality? The dream had been so real, and reality seemed such a nightmare. Deep in my heart I felt the longing for a world in which our best dreams can become reality, a world in which all profane reality is made sacred through the best of our dreams and visions.



Pietro Archiati was born near Brescia (Italy) in 1944. He studied Philosophy and Theology in Rome. He taught and worked in Laos, New York, and South Africa, and lived for a time as a hermit at Lake Como.

His inner development was particularly influenced by the spiritual heritage of the Christian culture, by his direct experience of Humanity in different continents, and by the modern science of the spiritual realms inaugurated by Rudolf Steiner. Since 1987, he has been working independently in various countries as a lecturer, workshop leader and author, aiming at a true spiritualization of our materialistic culture.

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