

## 2. Action and Contemplation: A Living Paradox

### I. TOWARD INTEGRATION

Our drive to aliveness expresses itself in two elemental and inseparable ways: action and contemplation. We may think of the two as contrary modes, but they are one at the source, and they seek the same end—to celebrate the gift of life. If we are to end the tug-of-war between them and understand their vital relatedness, we must abandon ordinary logic and embrace the insight of physicist Neils Bohr: “The opposite of a true statement is a false statement, but the opposite of a profound truth can be another profound truth.”<sup>1</sup>

Rather than speak of contemplation and action, we might speak of contemplation-and-action, letting the hyphens suggest what our language obscures: that the one cannot exist without the other. When we fail to hold the paradox together, when we abandon the creative tension between the two, then both ends fly apart into madness. That is what often happens to contemplation-and-action in our culture of either/or. Action flies off into frenzy—a frantic and even violent effort to impose one’s will on the world, or at least to survive against the odds. Contemplation flies off into escapism—a flight from the world into a realm of false bliss.

There is a scenario of three stages that may describe the movement that some of us make as we work out the relation of these paradoxical parts of our lives. It takes us from separation through alternation and sometimes to integration. Separation is the starting point for many of us, a stage in which we feel forced to make a choice between contemplative and active life. Because our culture tends to value action over con-

templation, we often begin by choosing a life of activity that can become frantic, that exhausts and fragments our souls.

When exhaustion overcomes us, and we are too drained to keep up the pace, we move into the stage of alternation, which might be called the *vacation approach* to life. Exhausted by activity, we take a little vacation to refresh ourselves, then we plunge back into action until we are exhausted again, then we take another vacation until we renew the energy to wear ourselves down once more—and on the cycle goes.

Alternation is better than separation, but both stages reflect the mistaken notion that contemplation and action are mutually exclusive ways of life. By moving from separation to alternation we may save ourselves from terminal burnout, but we never allow the two poles of the paradox to interact in a way that would bring health to both ways of life. Our active lives remain harried and violent, never transformed by contemplation; our contemplative lives remain escapist, never transformed by action.

Many of us live a long time in the stage of alternation, but some people, at least some of the time, move on to the third stage, integration. This is the breakthrough into paradox, and we might be more likely to make it if we better understood how it happens. Some people make it simply because they are wise. But perhaps the breakthrough is most often made by people who abandon themselves so deeply to action that no vacation can help them. They become so profoundly exhausted that they are forced to give up all efforts to manage, direct, or control their lives. Compelled to live beyond ego and will-power, they find themselves falling into the sustaining power of paradox.

In the stage of integration we learn that contemplation-and-action are so intertwined that features we associate with one are always found at the heart of the other—just as the Chinese symbol of yang harbors a dark spot of yin, and the symbol of yin harbors a light spot of yang. Action becomes more than a matter of getting from here to there, but a con-

templative affair as well, a path by which we may discover inner truth. Contemplation becomes more than a luxury to be indulged when the worries of the world are behind us, but a way of changing consciousness that may have more impact on the world than strategic action can have. Contemplation-and-action are integrated at the root, and their root is in our ceaseless drive to be fully alive.

To be fully alive is to act. The capacity to act is the most obvious difference between the quick and the dead. But action is more than movement; it is movement that involves expression, discovery, re-formation of ourselves and our world. *I understand action to be any way that we can co-create reality with other beings and with the Spirit.* Through action we both express and learn something of who we are, of the kind of world we have or want. Action, like a sacrament, is the visible form of an invisible spirit, an outward manifestation of an inward power. But as we act, we not only express what is in us and help give shape to the world; we also receive what is outside us, and we reshape our inner selves. When we act, the world acts back, and we and the world are co-created.

To be fully alive is to contemplate. By contemplation I do not mean the practice of a particular technique, like sitting in the lotus position and chanting a mantra. In fact, the obsession with contemplative technique seems to me to reflect the hubris of technology more than the humility of the Spirit. *I understand contemplation to be any way that we can unveil the illusions that masquerade as reality and reveal the reality behind the masks.* One of the great threats to full aliveness is the sleight of hand practiced by our egos and our culture to keep us from seeing things as they are. Contemplation happens any time that we catch the magician deceiving us and we get a glimpse of the truth behind the trick. Whether it is a happy truth or a hard one, that truth will always quicken our lives.

With these definitions it is easy to see that contemplation-and-action are not apart from each other but are parts of each other. Whenever we act in a way that penetrates illusion and

brings us closer to reality, that action is contemplative. I think, for example, of John Howard Griffin, a white man who, in the mid-fifties, darkened his skin with chemicals and traveled as a black man in the South.<sup>2</sup> In that risky action he pierced the illusion of equality in America and touched the reality of racism—and he touched it more palpably than some of us do in prayer.

By the same token, contemplation can become a form of action, a movement of expression, discovery, re-creation. I think, for example, of Merton, the monk who spent most of the fifties sitting and praying in a cloister in rural Kentucky. Late in that decade he began to write of a great racial conflict that would shatter American life, a prophecy that one prominent urban activist attacked for its patent arrogance: "How dare this escapist monk tell those of us who labor for justice in the cities that our work will fail?" Several years later that critic publicly apologized to Merton, acknowledging that the monk's contemplative eye saw into racism more deeply than the eye of the activist.<sup>3</sup> Despite the fact that Merton never marched in a demonstration or participated in formal politics, his contemplation had an impact on the history of our century.

Of course, few of us have acted as dramatically as John Howard Griffin or plunged as deeply into contemplation as Thomas Merton. But that is beside the point. Rightly understood, contemplation and action are standard features of ordinary, everyday life. Our contemplative action may be raising a child, making things with wood, delivering mail, managing a company, operating a computer, volunteering to feed the hungry, writing a book. Our active contemplation may involve staring out a window, reading a book, thinking long and hard, grieving a painful loss. Whatever our action, it can express and help shape our souls and our world. Whatever our contemplation, it can help us see the reality behind the veils. Contemplation and action are not high skills or specialties for the virtuoso few. They are the warp and weft of human life,

the interwoven threads that form the fabric of who we are and who we are becoming.

When we take that fabric apart to examine it, we risk destroying something of beauty that we will never be able to reweave. But since most of this book will display the whole fabric of contemplation-and-action through stories and poems, I need to look separately at the two threads in this chapter. So many misconceptions surround these two words, and so many obstructions surround our living of them, that it is important to examine them individually here. I want to approach that examination not as someone unraveling a tapestry but as a weaver preparing to sit at the loom to weave—and to be woven.

## II. THE NATURE OF ACTION

If you are unemployed, if you are forced to do work that brings neither enough money or recognition, if you are young and uncertain about where you are going, or if you are unhappily retired, one of the most painful questions anyone can ask you may be simply “What do you do?” If you are unprepared, if you have not reflected on your situation and found ground to stand on, that simple question can open a dangerous chasm beneath your feet and trigger fierce defenses. Why so?

One explanation is that most of us need jobs to stay afloat financially, so when we cannot say what we do, the pit of financial instability opens beneath us. But that does not explain why the chasm may also open up for people who have no real economic concerns. Why do some people who work at home while their spouses are out making an ample income still experience vertigo when the question is asked?

Another explanation is that we are social beings who need to have meaningful places in the work of the world. Few people want to be marginal to society, and the way one moves toward the center is to have work that brings income or prestige. But this explanation also leaves questions unan-

swered. Why do some people who have retired from positions of power and visibility, people who have nothing left to prove, still sense the void when their "active days" are over, still need to justify themselves by rehearsing their achievements? Or, to turn it around, why do some dispossessed people who have no chance at the center of the circle live with more zest than many who are wealthy and well-connected?

Perhaps the primitive fear that some of us feel when we cannot answer the question "What do you do?" comes from a deep, unconscious intuition that inaction is a sign of death. When we are not "doing" we are forcibly reminded of our own mortality; we experience a sort of dying through inactivity. But when we are acting we can say to the world and to ourselves that we are here, we are alive, we are making a difference. Indeed, by acting we imagine that we can leave something of ourselves behind, marks that might give us a kind of immortality. In raising a child or shaping an institution or writing a book we may carry the silent hope that our mortal lives can somehow defy the barriers of death.

At this point, we often hear a voice of conventional wisdom. It warns us of the ego, the pride, the foolishness involved in trying to cheat death through action. We need to accept death, the voice tells us, accept the limits of our lives, or we will spend our energies building houses of cards. No matter how we exert ourselves to reach for immortality, death will sweep all our works away.

There is wisdom in that counsel, but there is danger too—the danger of a passivity that retards the development of the self and the world, a dying before we are dead. Dylan Thomas spoke a corrective word when he said, "Do not go gentle into that good night."<sup>4</sup> Without deluding ourselves about achieving immortality, we need to act freely and sometimes boldly to express ourselves in ways that offer our gifts to others. Everyone has the right, perhaps even the imperative, to reach for self-expression not to gratify every whim but to serve as one was created to serve. Action, even death-defying action, is one

way to claim that right. It is sad to see people whose actions are driven by foolish dreams of grandeur. But it is even sadder to see people who have forfeited, or been denied, the chance to act with strength—people painfully lacking in the sense of self that comes as we declare and discover our own truth through the active life.

Much human action is laced with the problem of pride, the pride that shows itself when we try to impose our ego-designs on a child or a co-worker or a project. Not only is our action sometimes fueled by an inflated ego; action can lead to further inflation of the ego as well. But the development of a healthy ego is essential to personal and corporate health. Action—even action entangled with egotism—is a major source of that development.

Prideful action is often followed by a fall. But we make a mistake when we try to avoid that fall by withdrawing from action. When we suffer the cycle of inflation and deflation, we learn that it is one of the great engines of the human journey, one of the great mentors of the human spirit. I treasure that early Christian theologian who railed against the notion that the “fall” of Adam and Eve was pure and simple sin. Instead, he called it *felix culpa*, the happy sin, since without it we would still be living in the boredom of dreaming innocence and the great adventure of human history would never have gotten underway.<sup>5</sup>

The fall gave us the “gifts” of doubt, ambiguity, alienation. These do not feel like gifts when we first experience them. To know them as the gifts they are, we must enter into the struggles they pose for us. Once inside, we have a chance to find the self that remains hidden when we feel confident and secure, the seeking self that draws us into the human adventure. And that self is one of the greatest gifts we have.

To put all of this into a single word, action is *risky*. When we draw back from action, we are often motivated not by humility but by fear of risk. We risk so many things when we act: taking a fall, failing to achieve a goal, appearing incompe-

tent, evoking criticism or competition or resistance or anger, or simply being ignored. But most of all, we risk exposing ourselves—selves at once strong and fragile, known and unknown—mercifully, to the scrutiny of the world and, sometimes less mercifully, to the scrutiny of ourselves.

The greatest risk in action is the risk of self-revelation, and that is also action's greatest joy. No one can know us fully, not even we ourselves, but when we act, something of our inner mystery often emerges, and it can shock or delight when it does. In this age of the machine, we seem to imagine human action as a safe and predictable play-out of instructions stored in the mind, something like the functioning of a word processor. But real action is not simply the manifestation of the mind's concept or design. Real action is part mind itself, as well as spirit and soul.

When I act, as poet Theodore Roethke says, "I learn by going where I have to go."<sup>6</sup> Or, as the more popular saying has it, "How can I know what I think until I hear myself say it?" I am having that experience right now, as I write. Each new sentence is an unfolding of ideas and images that I did not know I had within me until I brought them up and out in the act of writing. And that entails risk.

Action has a life of its own, related to what we think we are doing, but often full of surprises. Action can take courses and have consequences that are decidedly independent of our own designs for it. For example, our actions sometimes reveal something false in us; as I write, my own words occasionally judge me. Or, our actions may reveal something true in us that others want to censure, as when our inner guidance defies conventional order. And sometimes our acts can change the course of our lives in ways quite beyond anticipation, as when we allow ourselves to care deeply for a person or a cause. The question is whether we are willing to act in the face of these risks, willing to learn and grow from whatever new truths our actions may reveal.



There is an intimate link between our capacity for risk-taking and our commitment to learning and growing. A risk is an effort that may not succeed, and the bigger the risk, the less the chance of success. So why would anyone take such risks? There are many reasons, but one of the most creative is that by risking we may learn more about ourselves and our world, and the bigger the risk, the greater the learning. If we do not value learning, we will not risk, and our actions will be limited to small and predictable arenas in which we know we can succeed.

Our capacity to take risks and learn from them depends heavily on whether we understand action as *instrumental* or *expressive*. The instrumental image, which dominates Western culture, portrays action as a means to predetermined ends, as an instrument or tool of our intentions. The only possible measure of such action is whether it achieves the ends at which it is aimed. Instrumental action is governed by the logic of success and failure; it discourages us from risk-taking because it values success over learning, and it abhors failure whether we learn from it or not.

Instrumental action always wants to win, but win or lose, it inhibits our learning. If we win we think we know it all and have nothing more to learn. If we lose we feel so defeated that learning is a hollow consolation. Instrumental action traps us in a system of praise or blame, credit or shame, a system that gives primacy to goals and external evaluations, devalues the gift of self-knowledge, and diminishes our capacity to take the risks that may yield growth.

I find it fascinating that the most “successful” of all modern activities—science—is one that rejects success and failure as the primary norms for its acts. For the pure scientist, a failed experiment is no failure at all, but a vital step toward learning the truth. Such “failure” narrows the range of relevant hypotheses to be tested and may contribute some positive findings as well. Science, seen by many as our most powerful instrumentality,

has achieved its eminence in part by freeing itself from the stranglehold of instrumentalism.

Of course, scientific knowledge is often used by technology in action of the most instrumental sorts. Such action, action that links means to ends, will always be a part of our lives, will always play a central role in a world with finite resources and infinite needs. As long as we live embodied lives, the demands of instrumental action will always be with us.

But when the standards of instrumentalism dominate, our action is impoverished and our lives are diminished. Only when we act *expressively* do we move toward full aliveness and authentic power. An expressive act is one that I take not to achieve a goal outside myself but to express a conviction, a leading, a truth that is within me. An expressive act is one taken because if I did not take it I would be denying my own insight, gift, nature. By taking an expressive act, an act not obsessed with outcomes, I come closer to making the contribution that is mine to make in the scheme of things.

The doing of pure science is an expressive act, an act that simply manifests the scientist's own desire to know the truth. Paradoxically, as science demonstrates, an expressive act is more likely to achieve real ends than is an instrumental act calculated to reach such ends but not rooted in the actor's own reality. When an act is true to one's nature it is more likely to have outcomes that are true to the field of action. I do not mean that we will always find the outcomes of expressive action to be acceptable, pleasing, or "good." I mean simply that whatever the outcomes may be, they will be convergent with a larger sustaining truth. They will not be temporary illusions imposed on reality by our false and frail images of how things ought to be.

And that brings us to the subject of contemplation and to the difficult insight at the heart of contemplative life: Truth is always preferable to illusion, no matter how closely the illusion conforms to our notion of the good—or how far the truth diverges from it.

### III. THE NATURE OF CONTEMPLATION

When we reflect on the nature of action, we inevitably come to the question "What is real?" Every action originates in some assessment of reality, no matter how mistaken. No action will have lasting effects if it is inconsistent with reality. Ultimately, action will help to reveal what the reality is, if we pay attention to its outcomes. These are the crucial links between action and contemplation, for the function of contemplation in all its forms is to penetrate illusion and help us to touch reality.

Contemplation is difficult for many of us because we have invested so much in illusion. Sometimes we even seem wedded to illusion as a way of survival. When I look at my own life I am appalled at the illusions I have cultivated simply to get me through the day—illusions about my motives, my abilities, my desires. I am appalled at the pain that my illusions have caused me and others, and at the thought that right now I harbor illusions I cannot even name because I depend on the belief that they are real.

When I look at the society around me, I see illusions as thick as my own: the illusion that violence solves problems, that both rich and poor deserve their fate, that young people sent to die in wars fought to defend the rich are heroes rather than victims, that murderous drugs are the way beyond despair—just to name a few.

These illusions serve a societal function: They keep us in place. If my child is murdered in a distant war for wealth, the government awards medals, and I display them to keep from going mad. If my life is degraded by racism and injustice, the economy dispenses cocaine to dull my anger, and soon I can feel nothing at all. Meanwhile, the people who benefit most from the illusions are declaring "peace in our time" and "a war on drugs," more illusions, but so functional for both perpetrators and victims that they are widely mistaken for reality.

This is why the contemplative moment, the moment when illusion is stripped away and reality is revealed, is so hard to come by; there is a vast conspiracy against it. But the hopeful fact is that all of us have such moments whether or not we seek them, are ready for them, or know what to do when they arrive. Try as I might, I have found little help in the intentional disciplines of contemplation, so I have no spiritual techniques to suggest here. But I have learned that life compensates for my disability by providing moments of unintentional contemplation, and those are the experiences of unintentional contemplation, and those are the experiences that I want to explore. If we pay attention to them, such experiences can become the disciplines of contemplation for some of us.

In the moments I am thinking of, the foundations of life often seem swept away, so we may find it difficult to experience them as either contemplative or hopeful, especially if we labor under another common illusion, one that pictures contemplation as a direct flight to Nirvana. But if we drop this notion of how contemplation is supposed to feel, we begin to see that life makes contemplatives of all of us, whether we want to be contemplatives or not. The only question is whether we can name and claim those moments of opportunity for what they are.

For example, there is the experience we commonly call *disillusionment*, when a trusted friend lets us down, an institution we had relied on fails us, a vision we had believed in turns out to be a hoax, or—worst of all—when we discover ourselves to be less than we had thought. Many of us try hard to avoid such experiences, and when we are in the midst of them we go through a kind of dying. But the very name we give these moments tells us that something positive is happening through our pain. We say we are being “dis-illusioned.” That is, we are being stripped of some illusions about life, about others, about ourselves. As our illusions are removed, like barriers on a road, we have a chance to take that road farther toward truth. Instead of commiserating and offering a shoulder

to cry on when a friend says that he or she is disillusioned, we ought to congratulate, celebrate, and ask the friend how we can help the process go deeper still.

Pain is one of the sure signs that contemplation is happening. Contemplation may lead eventually to bliss, but first it will give us the pain of knowing that some of our dearest convictions are shallow, inadequate, wrong. Contemplation first deprives us of familiar comforts. Then it replaces them with an inner emptiness in which new truth, often alien and unsettling truth, can emerge. The contemplative journey from illusion to reality may have peace as its destination, but en route it usually passes through some fearsome places.

If disillusionment is one of life's natural forms of contemplation, the experience of *dislocation* is another. This happens when we are forced by circumstance to occupy a very different standpoint from our normal one, and our angle of vision suddenly changes to reveal a strange and threatening landscape. I think, for example, of the man who lives forty years in perfect health until one day the doctor tells him he has terminal cancer. I think of the woman who has held the same job for thirty years until an overnight corporate takeover leaves her unemployed at age fifty-eight. I think of the person finally forced to admit that alcohol has made life so unbearable that the only choice is to change or to die.

The value of dislocation, like the value of disillusionment, is in the way that it moves us beyond illusion, so we can see reality in the round—since what we are able to see depends entirely on where we stand. Standing in the middle of a field, it is easy to imagine that the earth is flat. Standing on the moon and looking back at our planet, we can see more clearly what her true form is.

Of course, contemplation that comes through dislocation is likely to leave us lonely; others often do not share our dislocated view of things, and sometimes they are threatened by our new truth. I once heard the story of a medieval Irish monk who died and was buried, as was the custom, in the

monastery wall. One day the monks heard noises from within the wall and removed the stones to find their brother alive and well. He began to tell them what he had learned on his journey beyond—and everything he said was contrary to the teachings of the church. So the brothers put him back in the wall and sealed the crypt forever.

That story suggests one more way that life draws us into accidental contemplation, the way of *unbidden solitude*. Some of us find it as hard to choose solitude as to choose dislocation or disillusionment because solitude removes us from the collective life that often reinforces our comforting illusions. But life sends many moments when the group excludes us willy-nilly, moments when we say or feel or do something that the group does not want to deal with, moments when we are forced to find our way without collective support. In these moments, we once again have the chance to penetrate illusion and touch reality.

Solitude is a painful condition at first, as are disillusionment and dislocation. But, unlike those two, solitude is something that sometimes grows on people. There is a reason for this. Disillusionment and dislocation are temporary conditions, passages we must make in order to move beyond illusion and live in truth. But involuntary solitude is the permanent truth of our lives: We are born in solitude, we die in solitude, and we have opportunities to learn to live creatively with that fact in the years between birth and death. The fruit of disillusionment and dislocation is the capacity to enter and enjoy our solitude, compelled by the painful grace of a life process that is bent on helping us to "get real."

Solitude is not simply physical isolation. It is easy to be alone and yet continue to be in the crowd, to be governed by collective values; and it is possible to be physically in the midst of a crowd and yet to be in solitude. To be in solitude means to be in possession of my heart, my identity, my integrity. It means to refuse to let my life and my meanings be dictated by other people or by an impersonal culture. To be in

solitude is to claim my birthright of aliveness on its own terms, terms that respect the life around me but do not demean my own. The solitary is someone who, to paraphrase Merton, is able to give her heart away because it is in her possession to give—a possession not possible when we are caught in the silent conspiracy of collective illusions.

So solitude is not antithetical to community. The poet Rilke once defined love as the capacity of two solitudes to “protect and border and greet each other,” and that kind of love is the key to the paradoxical relationship of solitude and community.<sup>7</sup> The healthy community is one that leaves the solitude, the integrity, of each individual intact; if its members do not respect their own solitude, they will continually violate the solitude of others. The only thing we have to bring to community is ourselves, so the contemplative process of recovering our true selves in solitude is never selfish. It is ultimately the best gift we can give to others.

#### IV. THE HIDDEN WHOLENESS

If we are to understand the paradox of contemplation-and-action, we must attend to what Thomas Merton called “the hidden wholeness” that lies beneath the broken surface of our lives.<sup>8</sup> Until we know the hidden wholeness we will live in a world of dualisms, of forced but false choices between being and doing that result in action that is mere frenzy or in contemplation that is mere escape.

Our movement toward the hidden wholeness is not easily mapped because it is different for each person and always a mystery. But I can at least suggest the general direction of that movement, which is downward—contrary to the upward imagery of much Western spirituality with its fear of “the fall.” Annie Dillard has offered some words about downwardness, and about the hidden wholeness toward which it takes us, that are full of insight for our exploration into contemplation-and-action:

In the deeps are the violence and terror of which psychology has warned us. But if you ride these monsters deeper down, if you drop with them farther over the world's rim, you find what our sciences cannot locate or name, the substrate, the ocean or matrix or ether which buoys the rest, which gives goodness its power for good, and evil its power for evil, the unified field: our complex and inexplicable caring for one another, and for our life together here. This is given. It is not learned.<sup>9</sup>

With Merton, Dillard knows that there is unity behind diversity, a wholeness behind the divergent forces of life. We find this wholeness, she says, not in an upward sweep to abstraction but in a downward plunge to the depths. This image of the spiritual quest is challenging, even frightening, in a culture that seeks wholeness in atmospheric generalities rather than in subterranean stuff. But I believe that the culture is wrong and that Dillard is right. We will find the hidden wholeness on which contemplation-and-action depends only if we are willing to go down and into our lives, not up and out of them as we are sometimes urged to do.

Dillard also departs from convention by insisting that the hidden substrate of our lives does not conform to normal standards of goodness. It "gives goodness its power for good," but it also gives "evil its power for evil." Here is an even more challenging, more frightening, notion in a culture that puts good and evil in airtight compartments, picturing them as antithetical impulses.

Again, I believe Dillard is wiser than the culture. When we plumb the depths of full aliveness, we draw close to the source that empowers all else, and in that power there is not only grace but danger, not only healing but wounding, not only life but death. Dillard is saying neither more nor less than the prophet Isaiah: "I am Yahweh, unrivaled, I form the light and create the dark. I make good fortune and create calamity, it is I, Yahweh, who do all this" (Isa. 45:7, JB). When we meet the Spirit that gives life we encounter *all* the powers, including death, and we cannot be selective.



In fact, if Dillard is right, the clue to full aliveness is found in the very forces of calamity that we would avoid if we had the power to choose. Speaking of the "monsters" we will meet on our journey downward, she urges us to "ride these monsters deeper down." Once more she upsets the conventional wisdom that warns us to flee from monsters lest we lose our lives. On the contrary, Dillard suggests, those monsters are the only reliable guides to the deeper reaches of our lives. Only by riding them down, despite the risks, will we be able to find the primal source of ourselves and our world.

Doing so, of course, requires a radical change of perspective for many of us. We must abandon the commonsense notion that the monsters we meet within ourselves are enemies to be destroyed. Instead, we must cultivate the hope that they can become companions to be embraced, guides to be followed, albeit with caution and respect. For only our monsters know the way down to that inner place of unity and wholeness; only these creatures of the night know how to travel where there is no light.

Though this change of perspective is radical, it contains a common sense of its own. The nonmonstrous parts of ourselves, the parts we consider angelic, are parts that separate us from others; they make for distinction, not unity. These parts give us pride because they make us different, not because they unite us with the common lot of humankind. Our successes and our glories are not the stuff of community, but our sins and our failures are. In those difficult areas of our lives we confront the human condition, and we begin to learn compassion for all beings who share the limits of life itself. It is not the angels in us but the fallen angels who know the way down, down to the hidden wholeness.

For example, if I allow my life to be deformed by the fallen angel called "fear of failure," I will never be fully alive. I will withhold myself from actions that might fail, or ignore evidence of failure when it happens. But if I could ride that fear all the way down, I might break out of my self-imposed isola-

tion and become connected with many other lives, because failure and the fear of it is universal. I would learn that failure is a natural fact, a way of discerning what to try next. I would be empowered to take more risks, which means to embrace more life, and in the process I would become more connected with others. The monster called fear of failure (or ridicule, or criticism, or foolishness, or any of the other fears that are so easy to regard as mortal enemies) would become a demanding but empowering guide toward relatedness.

But on *this* side of such an experience, we may wonder why we should go anywhere near the monsters, let alone ride them all the way down. After all, they are monsters, and they do harbor powers of destruction as well as of creativity. Even if riding the monsters is the only way to reach safe ground, there is no guarantee that we will get there. People have fallen off before the end of the journey and have been stranded in some bad places. So why take the risk of riding the monsters in the first place?

My own experience offers a small parable to answer that question. It happened several years ago in the outdoor challenge program called Outward Bound. I took the course in my early forties, a time of life when monsters abound, and in the middle of that course I was asked to confront the thing I had feared most since I had first heard about Outward Bound: A gossamer strand was hooked to a harness around my body, I was backed up to the top of a 110-foot cliff, and I was told to lean out over God's own emptiness and walk down the face of that cliff to the ground eleven stories below.

I remember the cliff too well. It started with a five-foot drop to a small ledge, then a ten-foot drop to another ledge, then a third and final drop all the way down. I tried to negotiate the first drop; my feet instantly went out from under me, and I fell heavily to the first ledge. "I don't think you quite have it yet," the instructor observed astutely. "You are leaning too close to the rock face. You need to lean much farther back so your feet will grip the wall."

That advice, like the advice of some spiritual traditions, went against my every instinct. Surely one should hug the wall, not lean out over the void! But on the second drop I tried to lean back; better, but not far enough, and I hit the second ledge with a thud not unlike the first. "You still don't have it," said the ever-observant instructor. "Try again."

Since my next try would be the last one, her counsel was not especially comforting. But try I did, and much to my amazement I found myself moving slowly down the rock wall. Step-by-step I made my way with growing confidence until, about halfway down, I suddenly realized that I was heading toward a very large hole in the rock, and—not knowing anything better to do—I froze. The instructor waited a small eternity for me to thaw out, and when she realized that I was showing no signs of life she yelled up, "Is anything wrong, Parker?" as if she needed to ask. To this day I do not know the source of the childlike voice that came up from within me, but my response is a matter of public record: "I don't want to talk about it."

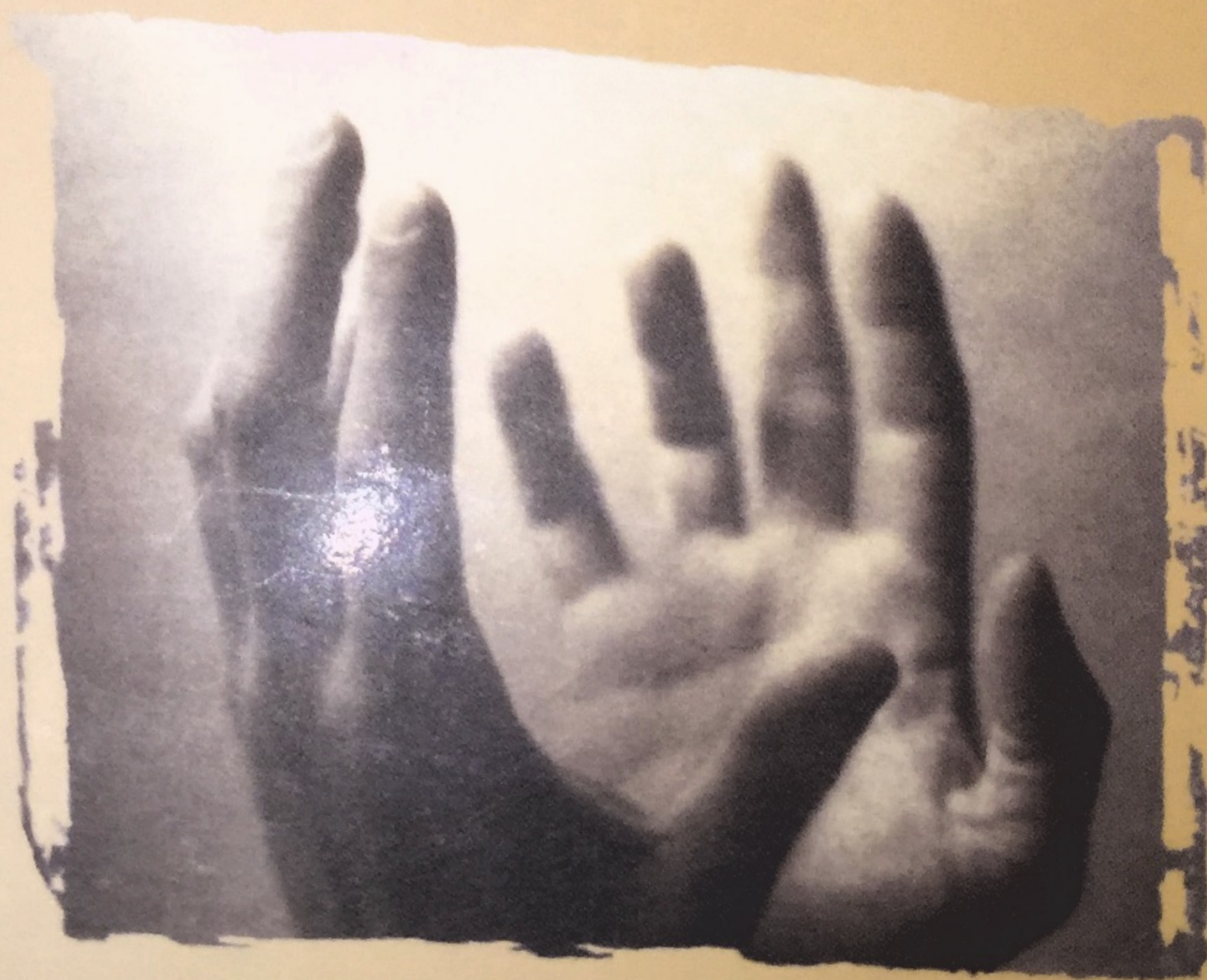
The instructor yelled back, "Then I think it's time you learned the Outward Bound motto." Wonderful, I thought. I am about to die, and she is feeding me bromides. But then she spoke words I have never forgotten, words so true that they empowered me to negotiate the rest of that cliff without incident: "If you can't get out of it, get into it." Bone-deep I knew that there was no way out of this situation except to go deeper into it, and with that knowledge my feet began to move.

That is why we must sometimes ride the monsters all the way down. Some monsters simply will not go away. They are too big to walk around, too powerful to overcome, too clever to outsmart. The only way to deal with them is to move toward them, with them, into them, through them. We must learn to befriend some of these primitive powers that seem so much like enemies. In the process we will find them working for us, not against us, working for life, not for death.

When we live a full life of contemplation-and-action, the monsters will always be aroused, and we will be compelled to search the depths. It is good to know that those very monsters can take us to the depths we need to explore. It is even better to know that in those depths we can find the hidden wholeness that unites and energizes us, the source and the power that make us fully alive.

# THE ACTIVE LIFE

A SPIRITUALITY OF  
WORK, CREATIVITY,  
AND CARING



PARKER J. PALMER

Author of *The Courage to Teach*