

Preface

—*Richard Gunther*

I was in a Gestalt session at the Esalen Institute, sitting in a circle with other seekers, when I suddenly felt an urge to leave the group and walk onto the adjoining balcony of Fritz Perls's house, a circular dwelling that overlooks the dramatic Big Sur coastline. As I left the group and stepped onto this balcony, I walked into a world of unbelievable beauty. It was a brilliant day, the sun reflecting off the surf that broke on the rocks below. The shoreline extended south for miles, rock, sand, and waves, with the occasional seal. It was a breathtaking vista, completed by mountains just beyond the coast. I felt like the whole scene was smiling at me, awaiting my arrival, and I was flooded with contentment and the joy of feeling whole, of *being blessed*. It was as though I had walked through a sci-fi energy screen into a new world. The sun, the sea, and the mountains had always been external objects that I could describe by intensity (the sun), by scale (the mountains), and by color (the sea), but on that magic day these descriptions were merely linear, not

true reflections of all I was experiencing. For the first time ever, external physical elements had become a part of my internal world.

I am not a religious person, I am a very successful, highly rational businessman, but at that moment I experienced a profound spiritual awakening, an awareness that I was in a markedly altered state of being, a different reality. My awakening was this: *we are all part of a single entity*. I was part of all others and all others were part of me. I soared into this new awareness, losing all sense of myself as an individual. *There is no me alone, only a universal us*. Is this what it means to be truly human? I wondered. To feel—to know—that all reality is totally connected? Since all matter is a form of energy in motion, could there be a collective consciousness at the molecular level that stems from some sort of subatomic connection? I only knew that I had never felt this breadth and depth in my life before. I was certain, with no question in my mind, that I had had a fleeting glimpse of a new, wonderful level of existence.

What had caused this awareness, this opening to suddenly explode in me? Would this enhanced level of being become permanent, or would it disappear as soon as I left the balcony? And if it did fade, what could I do to revive the profundity? That experience was almost forty years ago, and while the dramatic peak of those moments has dimmed, the life-changing insight has remained. I realized then that I had been living my life in a narrow arc of reality. I was worker, husband, father, and citizen, and that was the circle of my days. I learned from those moments of insight that I was, in my soul, a highly spiritual person—I needed the shock of this opening to accept that truth.

This great realization has vitally affected my life. Today, some forty years later, I am open to thoughts and moments of beauty and love in ways that I wasn't in my early life. I joyfully participate in the world of service. I speculate on spiritual questions and the mysteries of God and the universe. I am amazed by the majesty of the heavens at night and wonder at the magic of existence. I still live a full life as husband, father—and now grandfather—businessman, and social entrepreneur, but now I am also often awed by the marvel of being alive.

Why did this awakening happen at this particular time, and were there unique conditions that precipitated the event? The environment at Esalen was certainly wonderfully supportive, and the setting full of physical

beauty. However, is it possible that what I experienced was a glimpse of the next natural maturational stage of a self-reflective person? A person whose vision has broadened and deepened to include a sense of wonder, awe, and mystery buried during an earlier, more combative stage of life?

Psychologist Erik Erikson (1982) describes the individual's growth process as comprised of eight stages. Stage eight, the final stage, he describes as "elder adulthood," a stage marked by a tension between integrity and despair. But is there perhaps a ninth stage? A stage in which an individual sees himself as part of a greater whole? A stage in which an individual outgrows the sole focus on self? With the enhanced vision of this stage could come the opportunity to explore a different path in life, to see yourself as a citizen in a wondrous new world, to become an active participant in this broader scene and invest yourself in the effort to create a more aware and compassionate world. In this stage, our expanded consciousness can lead us into the world of service as our next work in the world.

In my Jewish tradition there is a Hebrew phrase *Tikkun Olam*, which translates into English as "the repair of the world." It is to this path—to the work of repairing the world—that my Esalen enlightenment has led me. I offer this question: is transformation a necessary part of the human process for those who move along this path, either through choice or through some mystery of creation?

You may be wondering if this new insight has helped me through rough times. My wonderful twelve-year-old granddaughter Eva, a black belt in taekwon do, was representing California in the Junior Olympics when she stepped out to cross a public street and was hit and killed by a drunk driver. This most remarkable young woman was lost forever. I was crushed, devastated. How could this have happened? She had so much to offer—why her? I have never known such pain, for Eva and the life she will never have, for our children whose lives are shattered, for my wife and me.

Over the years since that tragedy I have gradually climbed out of the deep blackness of despair, still with no answer for my "why?" questions. But just as my joyous experience at Esalen opened my eyes to a broader awareness of reality, so, too, did this tragedy broaden my understanding of the complexities, anguishes, and unknowns in life. This broadened understanding has given me more compassion for the pain I see everywhere—for friends who are sick, some dying; for the millions of people starving around

the world; for the one-third of the world's population that suffers from crushing poverty. As I have seen our children, Eva's parents, battle back to life, I have been filled with admiration and gratitude for the strength of the human spirit. This insight has not only deepened my sensitivity and compassion, it has led me into my principal public service activity. I serve in the field of microenterprise, helping where I can to fight the battle against worldwide poverty.

I still cry when I think of Eva. Some nights I still try to reach my heart out to her heart. Is her energy out there somewhere for me to contact? Who knows what the next step will be when I move beyond this life. Maybe my spirit will contact her spirit, somewhere, someday. I believe that the transformations that I have experienced, both joyous and tragic, have awakened me to the great mysteries that exist—and for this awakening I am most grateful.

The purpose of *Living Deeply* is to make these transformative shifts in awareness available to all who seek them. *Living Deeply* is written by three scholars who have reached out to the great transformative teachers of our time and collected their accumulated wisdom in this volume. The authors and I share the belief that all human beings are born with innate capacities for compassion, joy, and service; unfortunately, living in our complex, torn world frequently buries these birth gifts. It is my hope that *Living Deeply* will, for many, open the door to a life that is wider, deeper, and more fulfilling than they had ever imagined possible. May it be so.

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