

“*11 Days at the Edge* is an unusual narrative about evolution and enlightenment, as presented by spiritual teacher Andrew Cohen and as received by his student, Michael Wombacher. The teacher, the teaching and the taught come together in a highly engaging manner via Wombacher’s clear prose, honest journaling and insightful commentary.

Andrew Cohen places his teaching of enlightenment in a context of evolutionary development for the entire human race, as well as a context of cosmic laws, which operate impersonally and influence us as individuals and as a species.

The clarity, simplicity and integrity of Andrew Cohen’s teaching offer important guidance for modern spiritual seekers. Michael Wombacher captures it in a lively, honest account of his experience during an eleven-day retreat with his teacher and fellow students.”

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—Craig Hamilton,  
New Dimensions Radio and [evolutionaryspirituality.com](http://evolutionaryspirituality.com)

# 11 Days at the Edge

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**One man's spiritual journey  
into evolutionary enlightenment**

**Michael Wombacher**



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I also wish to thank my nine-year old nephew, Lucas Miles Chasin, for serving as an ever-present reminder of the imminent approach of the future and our need to take responsibility for it right now in order to leave a spiritual legacy for the next generation that may nourish and support them. In this way perhaps they, in turn, can evolve and pass it forward.

And lastly, a special thanks to Joel Pitney and Christiana Briddell for being friends and partners in evolution.

*To*  
**Lucas Miles Chasin**

## Author's Note

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This book contains seven appendices. Originally their text was contained in the main body of the work. During the editorial process it was decided that their content took the reader slightly too far away from the greater flow of events and therefore they were moved to the back of the book. However, I would encourage the reader not to think of them as literary afterthoughts, thus choosing to skip over them or read them at leisure. The material in these appendices is crucial to understanding the context for and thrust of this entire book. Therefore I strongly suggest that the reader not gloss over them but read them as near to their mention in the main body of the text as possible. Doing so will greatly enhance the understanding and appreciation of the rest of the material in this book.

**Michael Wombacher**

## Foreword

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Shortly before boarding an aircraft for an eleven-day retreat with Andrew Cohen in Montserrat, Spain, I was sitting on a grassy patch in my front yard after a Fourth of July barbecue with a longtime friend, gazing up at the majesty of a starlit California sky.

It had been long since the two of us had spent time like this together. After some quiet moments, my friend began relaying a story of a spiritual experience he had had a year or two earlier which had haunted him with whispers of the possible ever since. He spoke with a poignant combination of awe, wonder and melancholy. It was evident that, while he was deeply moved by what had revealed itself to him, he was equally convinced that his life could never be profoundly informed by its unspeakable glory.

We talked into the night and I shared with him my passion for the transformative teaching that would send me off on a jet bound for Spain in a few days. I asked him if he longed for a life in which he could realize the deepest qualities of manhood, courage, vision and a noble willingness to live a life that stands for the highest truth. Yes, he answered, and he meant it. I'd known him for many years and have always been impressed by the depth of his spirit, his sense of true friendship and his quiet appreciation of life's deepest values. In many ways I viewed him as embodying the noble virtues of knighthood. If I had to be in a foxhole, I often thought, this would be the man I'd want next to me.

So it was deeply distressing to see him there, seemingly raped by life, his spirit all but broken. It occurred to me then that in many significant ways he represented millions of spiritually disenfranchised men and women living in the richest country in the world, the beneficiaries of opportunity the likes of which no generation on earth has ever seen. In his early fifties, beset by practical concerns on every side, he reminded me of the saying that "the masses lead lives of quiet desperation."

Like myself, he had been an eclectic spiritual seeker for quite some years. Not only had he been to see various teachers, but he had also ingested a multitude of drugs, walked on coals, sat in drum circles, shared in men's groups and chanted at

solstices – yet it had all come to this: utter cynicism about the possibility of leading an entirely different kind of life and a hazy deadness in his eyes.

So a few days later, sitting aboard a plane bound for Europe, I decided that I would attempt to keep a journal while on retreat and share it with him upon my return. I sensed that if he gave himself even in the smallest way to the consideration of the teachings it would contain, he might find renewed hope for living a life of purpose and meaning. This book is the result of that journal – at least in part.

It is also the result of a long-standing desire not only to share my experience of and investigation into the pursuit of what has traditionally been an Eastern concept – Enlightenment – but in a Western context, and also to help redefine the timeless in a very new time, our own. In other words, I have long been interested in exploring the significance of enlightened consciousness, free from its accrued millennia of cultural baggage, in the post-post-modern Western world.

This interest goes back to my early twenties when episodes of enlightened consciousness found their way unsought into my life and transformed me – overnight and altogether unexpectedly – into a spiritual seeker. Even then I sensed that what was essential about this radical upending of the ordinary worldview and its revelation of the Eternal, had little or nothing to do with the cultural trappings and esoteric practices in which it was often couched – though I explored them all – but needed, from time to time, to be reinterpreted in accordance with the rhythms of time, the ever forward-moving thrust of cultural evolution and the increasing span of human knowledge. Therefore, I sought a teacher who embodied the timeless wisdom of the East in a thoroughly Western fashion and, at length, found one. I spent thirteen years with him and through him began to learn to harmonize all aspects of my being, spiritual and material, cosmic and carnal, under the banner of liberation and enlightenment. The experience of this relationship was so extraordinary that I set out to write a book about it (which I never finished), seeking to chronicle the student-teacher relationship as it played itself out on the streets of San Francisco, Manhattan, Miami, Los Angeles, Delhi, Calcutta and the many other places that served as a backdrop for the teachings I received.

However, it was not until I met Andrew Cohen that I found the full fruition of what I had suspected was possible – the perfect integration of the deepest insights revealed in the bottomless depths of the awakened self and the hard-won knowledge of the material universe of a technologically advanced culture freed from the superstitions of the past. In Andrew I saw an explosion of creativity, intellectual acuity and spiritual genius that was and still is, at least to my eyes, peerless. Ever since I became involved with him I have wanted to share what the experience of being on retreat with him was like. This, I discovered early on, was no easy task. Often, upon returning from retreat, friends would ask what it was like, whether I had fun, did I feel relaxed and so on. Unfortunately, other than employing useless

adjectives such as awesome, amazing, life changing and indescribable, I was utterly at a loss for words – an unusual state for someone usually blooming with them. The truth was that what Andrew was teaching was so deep, comprehensive and utterly penetrating that nothing short of a three-hour conversation could even begin to do it justice. There was simply too much depth to flatten out into convenient soundbites.

Speaking to my friend that starlit night, I keenly felt this inability to convey in very simple terms what it was that Andrew was teaching. And as I thought about it more, it occurred to me that while Andrew has written a respectable number of books, none gave an overview of the entirety of his teaching and, at least equally significant, none gave a sense of what it was like to be with him. That is when the idea for this book began to percolate. Wouldn't it be great, I thought, to be able to take the reader day by day along on this retreat, not only to discover the radically profound teaching that continues to emerge from Andrew, but to see how that teaching strikes the soul of an average seeker as he daily sinks deeper into it? Wouldn't it also be great to use my own experience as a seeker as a starting point for an examination of the state of the post-modern spiritual world and all its complexities? With that began the writing of this book.

Before diving in, I must mention that Andrew's teaching emphasizes evolution and development, a leaning that is directly reflected in Andrew himself. In the twelve years that I've known him, neither he nor his teachings have ceased, even briefly, to change and evolve, revealing ever deeper layers and potentials of psyche and soul, culture and cosmos. That means that this book, rather than pretending to be some grand and final statement of the entirety of his teaching, is merely a snapshot in time, a short clip depicting the teaching as it was for eleven days in July, 2005, in Montserrat, Spain.

**Michael Wombacher**

“This is the true joy in life, the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; the being a force of nature instead of a feverish, selfish little clod of ailments and grievances, complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy.

“I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the whole community, and as long as I live it is my privilege to do for it whatever I can.

“I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work, the more I live. I rejoice in life for its own sake. Life is no brief candle to me; it is a sort of splendid torch which I have got hold of for the moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to the future generations.”

—George Bernard Shaw,  
*Man and Superman,*  
*Epistle Dedicatory*

## Prologue

### Into the Looking Glass

---

It seemed an inauspicious way to begin a journey halfway around the world. I woke at four in the morning, violently ill from an unfortunate encounter with a tainted sandwich during lunch on the previous day and now, in a most miserable state, I had to catch an early flight for Barcelona, Spain.

Moved solely by the force of necessity, I dragged myself from bed, staggered about wearily and managed to get myself together. Before leaving I went downstairs to my office to make sure everything was in order. After all, I would be gone for two weeks and entirely out of touch with my exceedingly active dog training business. Having determined that all was as it should be, I logged on to my Yahoo page where I first saw the morning's headlines: *Bombs Explode in London – Kill Dozens*. It was July 7<sup>th</sup>, 2005, and terrorists had shocked the world once more with another cowardly attack on innocent civilians as an expression of their faith and hope for the world. It was a sobering reminder of at least part of the reason I was heading on this trip.

I had known Andrew Cohen informally for just over ten years and one of the things that had so attracted me to his teaching was that it embraced both my longing for liberation and my care for the world. In fact, it had awoken me to a care for the world that I had not previously known. His basic message, as I understood it, was this: the pursuit of Enlightened consciousness in today's times only makes sense when it is directly linked to a committed engagement with the world process for the sake of the upliftment of that process. To put it differently, the pursuit of Enlightenment merely for relief from one's own existential tension and neurotic pain, or as a way to transcend the world and its suffering, no longer made any sense and could even be considered selfish. Considering the state of the world and difficult to avoid fact that we, as a species, cannot continue along our present track much longer, gave my pursuit of spiritual liberation a moral context that it had lacked for many years. So, in a strange way, the unconscionable acts of the most recent slew of Islamic terrorists not only helped me to overcome my intense headache and nausea enough to make it out the door, it further fueled my aspiration for radical transformation and sanity.

A few hours later, having passed through a long series of queues and security checkpoints, I found myself seated almost comfortably in a coach seat aboard one of Delta Airlines' aging airliners. As my stomach was still heaving in violent convulsions and threatening to void its contents into a nearby airsick bag, I considered that I should be grateful for not being tempted by the scrumptious fare that I would soon be offered. Relieved of that possibility, I settled back into my window seat and, after watching San Francisco and the Bay Area shrink from a well-detailed skyline glinting in the morning sun to a haze of hills and valleys, I lay back, closed my eyes and considered the path that had brought me here.

Like many others, my first spiritual experiences were directly related to the powerful impact of certain chemicals upon the gray matter between my ears. In these, through some mysterious process, a portal was opened to a radically different perspective on life and my role in it. In this manner, I underwent a series of profound spiritual experiences that utterly unseated me and filled my consciousness with a dimension of knowledge I never knew existed. Not only did I discover, in the most dramatic fashion, the inherently immortal nature of all of life and the ecstatic unity from which it arose, I also discovered an intensely compelling moral context for my own existence. Despite my own testosterone-fueled, narcissistic immaturity at the time, I recognized in the passionate ecstasy of my own Source a demand that my life become an expression of the inherent perfection and wholeness of that timeless Ground. Inwardly I came to my knees in awe, determined to find a way to bridge the gap between what I had seen and the reality of my own condition. No small task, for that gap was more like a yawning gulf.

Further research into the matter suggested that there might indeed exist individuals in whom that extraordinary consciousness, which I had tasted, had become a permanent condition and that such individuals might take on others and endeavor to bring them into that same exalted state. With that supposition I set out in search of a teacher. Thus began a nine-year odyssey of sampling the spiritual marketplace that was as strange as it was thrilling. Over time two things became quite clear to me. First, it became painfully apparent after much dabbling, that the New Age, despite colorful claims to the contrary, was entirely bereft of depth, meaning and profundity. It felt as if a diet of this fare was akin to feeding a starving man junk food, which may have had an interesting taste going down but strangely failed to provide the least bit of nourishment. Second, while I was very attracted to Eastern Enlightenment teachings, having been swept off my feet not only by the Bhagavad-Gita, Upanishads, and Dhammapada, but also by the teachings of the extraordinary Advaita<sup>1</sup> master Ramana Maharshi and others of his kind, I could not see studying a spiritual tradition which expected me to take on a great deal of cultural baggage that I found distracting and unnecessary. Not that I didn't try. I spent a good bit of time with Eastern swamis and their Western devotees but I simply did not wish to play at being Indian. It felt profoundly

inauthentic and had little to do with the powerful experiences that had shaken my world and which pointed to a reality radically free from culture or a relative face of any kind. What I sought was an individual who could show me how to embody the timeless revelation of Enlightenment in the busy, Western world of which I was a product and in which I lived.

Nine years after my search began it ended in a series of unlikely events that proved the truth of the old adage that when the student is ready the teacher appears. That teacher, Peter Steward, a bona fide master of the ancient art of kundalini yoga,<sup>2</sup> was a former student of the legendary American spiritual teacher known simply as Rudi (whose extraordinary life colored the streets of Manhattan from the fifties into the early seventies). Peter Steward was just what I'd been looking for - a successful businessman who lived in Manhattan supporting himself in high style with a thriving business and using the money that came to him to support not only his own spiritual pursuit but that of dozens of his students as well. My first encounter with Peter was like being dropped into a vat of LSD. In his presence my mind and heart exploded with the same force and velocity that they had years earlier with considerable pharmaceutical assistance. It was my first experience of "transmission"<sup>3</sup> and it would initiate a thirteen-year relationship during which I was the beneficiary of a great deal of spiritual training and which unfortunately ended with great acrimony. How this came to be, and the important lessons inherent in this tale, will be revealed in more detail in the pages that follow.

I had been studying with Peter for some years when a friend of mine invited me to hear Andrew Cohen speak at the Corte Madera Yoga Center, just outside San Francisco. Initially I declined the invitation, having seen entirely enough of the assortment of spiritual teachers that tended to make their way through the Bay Area. I was also content, after such a long search, to keep my attention focused on what was turning out to be an extraordinary relationship with Peter. However, when my friend handed me a thin newsletter boldly entitled, *What is Enlightenment?* the direction of my life was inexorably altered. The lead article was simply entitled, "The Student-Teacher Relationship." As I read, it became immediately apparent that the person who had written it knew what he was talking about. Word after word, line after line, in language pregnant with spiritual power, he described the deepest essence of what I had been experiencing with Peter over the past five or so years. Whoever this man was, he seemed to possess uncommon depth and authenticity. So, I decided to take my friend up on her invitation and attend the upcoming talk.

When I first saw Andrew walk up to the podium through the gathered crowd of about 150 people, it was not his short, dark hair, neatly cropped mustache or the piercing intensity of his eyes that got my attention. It was his small stature that surprised me. I didn't know why that should be other than that the magnitude of his presence stood in stark contrast to the size of his physique. Similarly, when

he spoke his voice was pitched slightly high belying the deep resonance of truth that imbued the words he spoke. Once he began teaching, however, fielding a variety of questions from the gathered crowd, all such concerns quickly faded away. Within a few moments I was shocked to find myself in the presence of that mysterious and powerful transmission to which I had grown so accustomed in Peter's company. Having seen so many teachers who utterly lacked this capacity, I had arrogantly assumed that Peter was the only one, or at least nearly the only one, who stood in possession of such power. As it turned out, I was wrong.

And there was more. Andrew spoke for over two hours, in a way that I had never heard anyone speak of spiritual matters. Whereas most, including Peter, often spoke in a very vague and indefinite way about the mysteries of consciousness, which are, in fact, often defined as ineffable, Andrew did not. He spoke with a level of articulate precision regarding the subtlest aspects of Enlightenment and the spiritual life that to this very day I have found in no one else. The result was that I was not only deeply nourished by the transmission that poured from him ceaselessly but also intellectually satisfied by the clarity of his answers to questions that I had never heard anyone else answer satisfactorily. Andrew's capacity to articulate the smallest points with razor-sharp clarity has often caused him to be accused of intellectualizing, but I have come to realize that this is more a reflection of the rampant sloppy thinking which one tends to find in spiritual circles and which often hides the fact that perhaps people simply don't know the answers to such questions. "Just surrender," "be as you are," "it's only the mind that's a problem," and other overly simple responses to complex inquiries are most commonly heard in the modern spiritual marketplace. Indeed, it was on the same night that I first heard Andrew say, *"I try to teach my students how to think, not to stop thinking."* This was a revelation to me. I felt as if my intellect had been at least temporarily freed to inquire in a way I never had before. But there was more. I found Andrew's manner of engagement with people, which continues to be controversial to this day, utterly refreshing. Rather than pandering to people's egoic sensitivities he was quite direct, occasionally painfully so. While this quality failed to be appreciated by all, I enjoyed its authenticity and recognized its liberating potential. Finally, and most significantly, it was clear that Andrew was deeply enlightened and that was the most extraordinary recognition of all.

After the teaching my wife Rose and I were able to see Andrew privately and I was impressed by his natural simplicity, openness and kindness. As we drove home we were both in a state of spiritual shock. Neither of us had been prepared for an encounter of such magnitude. "You know, Mike," Rose said to me as we drove beneath the fog-draped towers of the Golden Gate Bridge, "this is what's missing from our teaching." She was referring, of course, to the teaching both she and I were receiving from Peter at that time. I acknowledged her sentiment with a slight shudder, hardly suspecting its profound implications for the future direction of our lives.

Accompanied by Rose, I went to see Andrew teach at the Corte Madera Yoga Center a number of times during the next year or so and in late 1995, during an exchange where he confronted my superficiality by asking me if I was coming to see him merely as a form of spiritual entertainment, he challenged me to attend a long retreat with him. The next one was set for January 1996, in Bodhgaya, India, the birthplace of Buddhism. The gauntlet had been thrown down. Had I not accepted his challenge I would have found it difficult to live with myself and continue to take seriously my own spiritual aspirations. Yet accepting it threw me into quite a quandary, as well. After all, I was deeply involved with another teacher whom I loved dearly and did not wish to betray. I struggled with this issue at some length but at last concluded that Truth itself is the final yardstick of any spiritual endeavor and as such had to come first. With that I decided to go to India.

Bodhgaya marked a turning point in my life. The town itself was less than unassuming despite bearing the considerable distinction of being the site of the Buddha's awakening under the legendary Bodhi tree, the descendant of which still stands today in the shade of an extraordinary stupa<sup>4</sup> that is at least 2,000 years old. However, aside from the spectacular Buddhist temples erected there by each of the world's Buddhist countries, the visitor to Bodhgaya can expect to be greeted by the worst aspects of dehumanizing poverty. The town, strewn with rubble and adorned with grotesqueries of concrete and twisted rebar, seemed inspired by the dreams of Bosch and Breugel and left the distinct impression that war had ravaged this community and no one had bothered to clean up in its wake. The surrounding countryside was an entirely different matter and consisted largely of farmland and neatly arranged rice paddies that stretched to the feet of the mountains in the distance. The land possessed a timeless quality that made it easy, in moments of reverie, to see the Buddha himself traversing those fields on his fateful trip from those very mountains to the sacred tree under which he awoke and realized the Truth. Little had changed here in a very long time and this fact filled the air with a palpable stillness that remained unmoved in the midst of the tumult of Indian village life.

Andrew set the tone for the retreat by asking the 300 or so seekers from around the world to consider what it means to "let everything be as it is." The contemplation of and meditation on this quickly led to one of the most profound recognitions of Truth that I have ever experienced. I discovered that resistance of any kind to the experience of life, inner and outer, as it is, creates the painful illusion of a separate self that then has to struggle for its own existence against the onslaught of forces beyond its control. Simply relinquishing this position results in the overwhelming discovery that one never actually existed as the person one thought one was, a discovery that is simultaneously unsettling and liberating. In that recognition all boundaries disappear, as one's self-sense expands infinitely in all directions and one finds that "the world exists within me, not I in the world."

(This is not, by the way, metaphoric wordplay but simply the actual view from the perspective of the Self Absolute). Equally remarkable was that I was not alone in being immersed in such staggering realizations. In fact, the majority of retreatants shared similar experiences of depth and expansion, which was a reminder of why Andrew had gained a reputation as such a powerful teacher. After all, where else can one go and, within a few days, share enlightened consciousness with a significant number of others simply because of the skilled guidance and transmission of one individual? Nowhere that I knew of.

As the days rolled on and our immersion in the teachings deepened, I noticed that the state and the understanding that had been mine for some days began to fade. I saw myself hold onto a memory and, in my discussion with others, relate from that rather than from the moment-to-moment unfolding of my own experience. I began to pay close attention to what was happening and why, and after some days it became apparent that what lay behind this dissipation was pride. At first I refused to acknowledge it. But, for better or for worse, I have always been slightly more interested in the simple truth of things than in how I would like them to be. With grim determination, I stayed with this stinging realization. I was unprepared for the humiliating truth of my own condition. What I began to see was the degree to which pride had infested nearly every area of my mind and life. Behind almost every motivation I saw its dark face lurk. Like a skulking thief, or a shadow at the edges of my mind, pride had wound its dark way through the very fabric of my being. I was horrified. I'd always thought of myself as a good guy with sincere motivations, but now I could see that even that was simply another manifestation of the selfsame pride. I was emotionally overcome.

It was evening and time for meditation. I tried to rise but my knees buckled, and I fell back in my chair. I wanted to escape from myself. A few friends came over and physically assisted me into the meditation tent. "Let everything be as it is" had been the refrain of the retreat so, drawing on some hidden storehouse of emotional reserve, I determined to do just that. Slowly the crushing emotional pain thinned until ultimately I was left with just my simple insight: pride is the enemy and the enemy is everywhere.

Andrew did not seem the least surprised when I spoke to him the next day. In fact, he pointed out that pride is the only obstacle to Enlightenment and that what I experienced was essentially the simple truth for us all. Putting a positive spin on things, he pointed out that I should be grateful for this realization. Most people, he added, go through an entire lifetime without knowing this and, therefore, no real progress is possible. In short, I had experienced with shocking depth both the goal and the obstacle - not bad for a two-week investment of time.

I recovered my balance and some newfound sobriety about the whole undertaking as the retreat drew to its conclusion, one that ended with Andrew's passionate call for all of us to become "living expressions of the opposite of everything

that's wrong with the world." Having climbed to the heights and fallen to the depths, I determined to let what I'd understood inform my life once I was home again.

On the way there I had an extraordinary opportunity to meet someone whose life indeed expressed the spirit behind Andrew's call. While in Calcutta, at the immaculate Oberoi Hotel where we had six or so hours to kill, I discovered that Mother Theresa's mission was only ten minutes away. Upon my arrival there I was shocked to find that the world-renowned mother of the dying and a saint by anyone's standard, was standing right in front of me asking me where I was from. I told her and she smiled, that spider web of wrinkles creasing her face as she pressed a small amulet of the Holy Mother into my hands, gave me a blessing and encouraged me to help the victims of AIDS at her mission in San Francisco. What struck me most about her was not her face but her feet, gnarled and broken from years of work, gripping the earth like the twisted roots of a mighty tree while supporting a life inspired by Heaven. I could not bring myself to have a picture of the two of us taken as I felt it would be an expression of the very pride I wished to destroy while in the presence of the very humility that was the goal. I thanked her and, after a short meditation in her chapel, headed back to the hotel and from there back home.

On the endless flight across that strange time warp known as the international dateline, I had ample opportunity to reflect on the things that, in addition to my unexpected encounter with the enemy within, had most struck me during the retreat. Several things in particular had caught my attention and I wished to speak with Peter about them. That chance would arrive shortly, as I planned to attend a retreat with him in New York just two weeks after my return from India. I wondered, with no small amount of trepidation, whether worlds would collide or a deeper understanding of his teaching would emerge.

In the short time between retreats I was shocked to receive a phone call from Andrew to see how I was doing following my time in India. It seemed to me an expression of unusual care. After all, who was I? Andrew was involved with hundreds of people who'd given themselves to his teaching fully and here he was calling me to see how I was faring after the retreat. After a few brief pleasantries I asked him the question that had been nagging at me since my return: "What do you think of me being involved with two teachers?"

Without missing a beat he responded, *"I think what you need to face into is that your teacher is not meeting you in your interest."*

I felt like I'd taken a body blow. "But," I stammered, "he is a genuine teacher. He's not corrupt (Andrew had, during the foregoing year, been railing relentlessly against corruption in spiritual teachers) and..." ("I love him," I wanted to say).

*"That's not what I said,"* he cut me off. *"I said you need to face into whether your teacher is meeting you in your interest."*

Secretly I had wondered whether my engagement with Peter and his with me could be more intense and focused, but I had not wanted to look too deeply for fear of what I might find.

“I will look into that,” I said sheepishly.

We talked for a few more minutes during which I made it clear to him that I was very interested in his teaching. Now, in those days, committing to a deeper engagement with Andrew’s teaching could only be accomplished in one way: by moving into his community. We talked about this briefly and our conversation closed first with a warning and then a welcome.

“Mike,” Andrew said in a serious tone, *“just know that if you join this teaching you should prepare to have your whole life taken away from you.”*

“Okay,” I said rather stupidly, as if there were nothing particularly out of the ordinary in this.

And then, after inviting me to a picnic on the following day, he said, *“Great, Mike. Welcome to the revolution!”*

With that our conversation ended. I sat on my bed terrified. I considered what it would be like to leave my wife Rose, my budding dog training business and my beloved teacher. I cringed. I didn’t have the mettle for it and I knew it. I never went to the picnic and I didn’t see Andrew for some years thereafter.

However, it was clear to me that I needed to speak with Peter, primarily to address our relationship but also to inquire into two aspects of Andrew’s teaching that I had found compelling and had not heard Peter speak about. Two weeks later I found myself sitting in front of him in his vast Manhattan loft; a large, antique desk decorated with a bouquet of flowers and a small collection of Indian and Tibetan bronze sculptures separated the two of us.

“Well, what is it?” he asked in his typically edgy yet not unkind tone.

The first question I asked him concerned a statement I’d heard Andrew make during the retreat. He’d said that it’s not our experience that’s so important but the conclusions we draw that determine whether we are free or not. This had come as a surprise to me because until that point all of my spiritual understanding told me that it’s about having experience until the point that that experience becomes a permanent state of consciousness. I had thought about this after Andrew had said it and it made perfect sense. I realized that two people could enter into the same vastly expanded state of consciousness and draw dramatically different conclusions about what it meant. For example, one individual might conclude from their experience, “I am Jesus,” and promptly become a megalomaniac. Another might conclude from the very same experience, “I am nobody,” and express an uncommon and powerful degree of humility – a vastly different result. And the “neither here nor there” conclusion which I, and I believe most other spiritual seekers, draw was that while definitely realizing in some fundamental way that “I am That,” the felt sense of it was more along the lines of “something amazing

happened to me.” The powerful experience of the Absolute did not eradicate the separate sense of self; rather, it seemed to become an object in relation to it (which, of course, it is not) and thus its potentially transformative implications were reduced to the level of mere experience and relegated to the halls of memory. The truth is, all of these outcomes have played themselves out countless times since the dawn of human explorations into the depths of our own nature, and in every case the conclusions that were drawn about the experience were more significant than the experience itself. “*This*,” Andrew had said, “*is why I put so much emphasis on understanding.*”

When I brought this question of understanding to Peter, however, he was dismissive. “All understanding is in the mind,” he said, “and the mind is bullshit. It has all of the answers and none of them at the same time. It’s an insane asylum. The only thing that’s important is to open and surrender and everything else will take care of itself.” It was difficult to take issue with that logic and I wasn’t going to argue with my teacher. Still, I felt a bit deflated by his response and he had definitely not met me in my interest.

I moved on to a related question. During his teaching Andrew had made the statement that Enlightenment is as much a perspective on one’s experience as a state of consciousness and that in many important ways the perspective was more significant than the experience. After all, he’d said, at the end of the day one wants to be free from all experience. To be honest, I barely understood his point. To me it had been all about experience and I wasn’t sure what he meant by perspective. When I put this issue to Peter, he responded, “You know, Mike, I’ve heard that before and I don’t believe it. Perspectives and understanding all have to do with the mind, but an enlightened person knows nothing at all and is simply open to the Higher Creative Energy in the Universe. Their life is one of surrender, mystery and wonderment, not certainty, knowing and perspectives.” Once again, it was difficult to argue these points, as even now I know that they are true. But I suspected that this response overlooked layers of depth and subtlety that were significant. Andrew, on the other hand, had grappled with these layers and thus was able to articulate them impressively. This bothered me.

Finally, I addressed Peter regarding the issue of not being met in my interest. Of course, I could not simply raise my concerns in this manner, so I said, “I really want to be taken on; I want for you to do whatever you need to do to break down my ego the way Rudi did with you. I can take it. I want to grow.” I was unnerved by the words that came out of my mouth, not knowing what they might bring on. But I meant them and felt ready.

Peter fell silent and leaned back in his chair for a few moments. Then, in a soft tone, he said, “You know, Mike, I don’t want to have relationships like that with people anymore. I did that for years and it never worked. People just get angry and leave. They are driven away from God and I don’t want to drive people away.

I want them to grow at their own pace and I want to have warm, nourishing relationships with them. My role is to give people energy and a teaching that will help them to build a connection with the Higher Energy in the Universe. What they do with it is up to them. This energy, this shakti<sup>5</sup> that comes through in our classes, marinates and develops people and takes them to the place where they are ready to take the next step in their lives and then on from there. It's like a spiral staircase leading into infinity. My role is to provide the energy. I have a lot and I'm willing to give it, but the work people have to do is their own."

Once again, I felt deflated, unable to argue with either his logic or his sentiment. That more or less finished our conversation. There was a great deal more on my mind but it was clear to me that the dialogue was concluded. It had given me a great deal to think about. However, while questions about Peter's teaching persisted, at this point they were not enough to persuade me to leave. After all, he was a very powerful teacher who surpassed in many important ways most others that I'd met. Not only that, but over the previous six years he had literally taken me by the hand, given me invaluable spiritual training, helped me to start my own business, and mentored me in the business of living in a way that is almost unknown in today's time and culture. In short, it was clear to me that everything that was good in my life at this point had largely to do with his influence. That was not the kind of relationship I was about to turn my back on simply because there were aspects of his teaching that I questioned. Besides, where was I going to go? Andrew's demand had proven too much for me, and this was a teaching that I could objectively see had transformed my life dramatically during the last six years. So I went on for seven more, eventually even teaching under him and allowing the questions to persist.

As time passed, my list of questions grew. A fundamental and increasingly disconcerting one revolved around what I viewed as the dualistic nature of his teaching. That is, in profound episodes of spiritual revelation one discovers "I Am That," which is another way of saying that there is only One. This may seem a subtle point to the uninitiated but it's actually rather important insofar as one's approach to spiritual matters is concerned. *One* means no relationship between this and that. It means **One**, period. This is a truth that the most profound teachings from every time and culture consistently point to. That being the case, the idea that an individual has to develop a chakra system and cultivate a powerful flow of kundalini energy in order to *connect* with the Higher Energy in the Universe, as was taught by Peter, was suspect, especially when the non-dual nature of things was never deeply discussed in the teaching. It was also confusing because the fact is that when the kundalini force is activated, the non-dual nature of things is usually quite obvious. So why was everything always spoken about in dualistic terms? Unfortunately, Peter was never easy to approach on matters like this. In fact, it was clear that penetrating questions into matters of spiritual subtlety annoyed

him. His responses to such inquires were usually brief and pointed. “Stop trying to figure it all out in your head. Just bring your attention into the chakra below the navel and open to the Energy. Then all your questions will disappear. Fools think they know something. Wise people know nothing.” That was all well and good (and also, in large measure, true) but the problem for me was that, despite following his advice, the questions did not disappear. Apparently I was not sufficiently wise. Once again, Andrew’s words resounded quietly in my heart – “*your teacher is not meeting you in your interest.*” Nonetheless, I stayed in the relationship and grew ever closer to Peter. We took trips to India; he often taught retreats at my house; I transcribed his teachings into a book, then got it published and supported him in a myriad of ways as an expression of the gratitude in my heart.

Throughout this time I maintained tenuous contact with Andrew, who kindly exchanged emails with me several times a year and who was always gracious on the few occasions that I attended his public teachings. A thread of connection lay dormant under the surface.

A big moment came when Andrew sent a manuscript of his soon-to-be published book, *Embracing Heaven and Earth*, to Peter for review (he and Andrew had met briefly some years earlier and while the results of that meeting were, shall we say, less than cosmic, I sensed that Andrew had respect for Peter nonetheless) and after he’d read it I asked him what he’d thought of the manuscript.

“You know, Mike,” he said, “when I read it the first time I hated it. But when I read it the second time I hated it even more.”

“Why?” I asked, taken aback.

“Because it’s so absolute,” he responded without hesitation. “The thing is, everything he’s saying is true, but it doesn’t leave any room for one’s humanity.”

That set off alarm bells in some interior room located in the vicinity of my conscience and its implications would explode into my life within the next two years.

What did he mean by Andrew’s teaching not leaving any room for one’s humanity? I knew exactly what he meant. When Peter spoke of one’s humanity, he was referring to our human foibles, the collection of our assorted shortcomings and neurotic inclinations. The expectation that those would disappear in their entirety over the course of one’s spiritual evolution, he viewed as naïve. Even spiritual teachers, no matter how evolved, he held, would always be subject in some degree to their human weaknesses. In this regard he often quoted Rudi: “If you look up a cow’s ass you see shit,” adding that, “When you go to a cow you don’t go to its ass, you go to the udders where the nourishment is.” At other times he’d say, “Only God is perfect. All the rest of us are just trying to grow as best as we can every day.” In other words, don’t expect moral and ethical perfection even from a powerful spiritual teacher, because such a thing is not possible. You take what’s good and is helping you and overlook the rest. If you dislike something about the

teacher's behavior you can always leave but you are in no way qualified to pass moral judgment on him or her. The basic sentiment is best encapsulated by the statement, "I'm only human."

Andrew, however, had an entirely different take on this statement, one that stood in stark contrast to Peter's proposition. "*What if being human,*" he often asked, "*rather than being a pseudonym for all our weaknesses and shortcomings instead became synonymous with all the highest aspects of what it means to be human. Human beings are capable of the greatest virtues: courage, integrity, generosity, kindness, honor and dignity. What if they became the standard for what it means to be human rather than all our weakness and frailty?*" Ever since I first heard Andrew ask this question it utterly captured my attention because it deeply resonated with my own earliest episodes of spiritual revelation during which I'd intuited this call for a total transformation of our human character. When I first heard Andrew say that one of his definitions of Enlightenment was "*coming to that point in our own evolution where we no longer cause suffering to others due to acting out of ignorance and selfishness,*" my spiritual heart burst open and I felt some inner permission to at least aspire to such a possibility. This aspiration to the perfection of human character, even if never perfectly attainable, struck me as infinitely more compelling than a foregone resignation to ethical mediocrity.

From one perspective, however, Peter's view seemed entirely reasonable and defensible. After all, nearly every spiritual authority figure since the sixties has fallen on their face in a series of twisted ethical scandals that would make an ordinary, spiritually disinterested person red with righteous wrath. That in itself should be proof enough that our human shortcomings are here to stay, no matter what depth of spiritual revelation may have first ignited the passion of these teachers. However, it also throws into question the ultimate value of Enlightenment itself. If individuals who had authentically attained such a level of development were able to behave ethically in a way that a completely ordinary person would never consider, what is the ultimate point of spiritual experience? To feel better about oneself?

It was precisely this point that lay behind Andrew's public assault on corruption in spiritual teachers, which was in full swing when I first met him in the mid-nineties. His main point was that these individuals, through their selfish actions, had so tainted the entire concept of Enlightenment – traditionally understood to be the pinnacle of human attainment – that it had created in the public mind an almost impenetrable wall of cynicism. It was this wall of cynicism – which was perfectly exemplified by the friend I mentioned in the Foreword – which Andrew was constantly up against. When he dared challenge it by naming names and pointing his finger directly at the worst offenders, nearly the entirety of the prevailing spiritual culture turned on him with a vengeance. It was, however, his position that served both to impress me with his character and inspire my own

passion for at least attempting to become a different kind of human being. After all, it took an enormous amount of guts to come out the way he did because implied in his position was the claim that “I am going to be different and prove with my very own life that something extraordinary actually is possible.” It was an absolute stance that did not seek qualifications with claims of being “only human.” It was a dangerous tactic unless one was fully committed to backing it up. It also gave me tremendous confidence in Andrew as a teacher.

All this raised another issue, one that would take me some years to even begin to understand. How is it that a person could be “enlightened” on the one hand and ethically corrupt on the other? It seemed to me that either the Enlightenment, by definition, would have undermined any corruption in the personality or, if the corruption was still present, actual Enlightenment had not, in fact, occurred. How could both exist in the same human being? At this point I had not heard Andrew’s teaching on “the enlightened ego,” but it would not be long before I would have a full frontal encounter with it myself.

During the year and a half following this incident, my relationship with Peter was more exciting and fulfilling than in all the years that had passed before. We took trips to India, met across the country for retreats and lectures, encountered an endless parade of interesting people and delved ever deeper into consciousness, carried on a surge of shakti that flowed through him like a mighty river coursing through a deep canyon. But quietly and in the depths, change was stirring in the chemistry between us. While Peter’s response to Andrew’s book lingered at the back of my mind like a faintly bad odor of indeterminate origin, I began noticing other increasingly distressing signals that something was amiss. For instance, I had recently managed to edit and get published a book by Peter and from that moment he developed a growing obsession with fame. “I have karma with fame,” he even told me once, a sense of inexorable destiny in his tone. Suddenly more and more of the talk around Peter was about promoting the book, getting on “Oprah,” and rubbing shoulders with minor celebrities in L.A. In fact, suddenly more and more of the talk around Peter was about Peter himself.

Alongside this disturbing narcissistic self-obsession, signs of petty selfishness grew like thorny creepers through a garden. A most striking incident occurred one hot August weekend at Peter’s beautiful new home nestled in a green embrace of wooded hills in New York State. The occasion was his birthday, which we marked annually with a festive retreat that included many hours of deep meditation, sumptuous feasts and all the work entailed in their preparation, entertainment of various forms and the simple camaraderie of being together. As was always the case, around 40 people had arrived from every corner of the globe and many had arranged to stay at his home. It was the height of summer and the heavy air hung densely around us, the heat slowing time to a crawl. I felt like a stick of melting butter. In that dense oppression we had three classes a day, the shakti shimmering

like heat waves between us, all without the least benefit of the readily available air conditioning. The temperature hovered around 100 unrelenting degrees. The nights were not much better, the clammy warmth seeping into sleep and allowing only for fitful turning, tortured dreams and sweaty sheets.

When I raised the issue of using his quite functional and impressively efficient air conditioning system, Peter replied in a somewhat hushed and conspiratorial tone, "Oh, I'd run it if it weren't so expensive." I feigned understanding but was aghast. Gathered at his home were 40 of his closest students, most of whom had supported him in innumerable ways over the years. Each had paid about \$300 for the weekend, bringing the total take for three days of teaching to around \$12,000. In and of itself, I had no problem with that, as he incurred a good deal of opportunity cost in teaching these retreats and \$300 for a weekend retreat, inclusive of food and lodging, was more than reasonable by market standards. However, I simply could not fathom how he could watch these people, some with small children, wither in the heat when a few hundred dollars of air conditioning would have made everyone quite comfortable. It struck me as simply reprehensible and did not line up with the man I'd known even a few years earlier, a man who had at one point paid \$7,000 a month simply in order to rent a space large enough to accommodate the 50 to 60 people who attended his nightly meditation classes for free. Something was changing, and while the imperative to change was key to his teaching, I did not think this kind of change was moving in the right direction.

Some months later, Peter sat in my living room in San Francisco, having just finished teaching a retreat at my home. We had eaten dinner and he was engaged in an easy phone conversation with a student and friend of mine in Eugene, Oregon. It was clear from listening to him that the conversation had turned to the issue of healing. Over the years I'd repeatedly witnessed the miraculous healing gift with which Peter seemed to have been endowed. During my early years with him I watched in amazement as he helped a parade of people afflicted with everything from cancer to AIDS, either freeing them from their illness altogether or significantly decreasing its intensity. As with everything else, he never charged a dime. At one point he chose to discontinue his healing work because, he said, "I don't want to run a hospital; I want to help people grow." He felt that in many cases people were sick because they wanted to be, drawing to themselves a kind of attention and care that they did not receive in their ordinary life. Once relieved of their physical burdens, however, most went back to being exactly who they had been prior to the onset of their illness. That was not where Peter's interest lay. He wanted to help people grow and change, not to empower them in "energy vampirism," that is, draining life force and goodwill from others to satisfy their own emotional self-indulgence. Fair enough. On this night, however, I heard him tell my friend in Eugene in a most businesslike tone that he had decided to resume his healing work, but with the proviso that it would cost \$100 per session. "I

don't care how sick they are or what their financial position is," he added. I cast a sidelong glance at Rose who stood nearby. Obviously she had also noticed. The bell that had begun tolling some time earlier rang another knell that reverberated deeply in my increasingly troubled conscience.

Then came our final trip to India, which in many ways it was one of the most extraordinary experiences of my life. The fact was that despite everything I still deeply loved Peter and held out hope that this was a passing phase that would be swept up and transcended in the dynamics of change that had defined his life every day that I had known him. Together Peter, Rose, Deanna (another student and friend) and I spent three weeks bouncing across that ancient terrain. The trip combined business, tourism and spiritual practice in an adventure as mixed and spiced as the dishes we ate along the way. This whirlwind spiritual odyssey included, among other things, a visit to an orphanage in Calcutta near the Ramakrishna temple at Dakshineswar; an afternoon with Ramesh Balsekar, close disciple of the famed sage Nisargadatta Maharaj<sup>6</sup> (more on that later); and a three-day stay at Tiruvannamalai, formerly home to perhaps the greatest sage of the twentieth century, Ramana Maharshi.<sup>7</sup> This sudden interest on Peter's part in teachers other than those with whom he was already familiar was uncharacteristic and added significantly to the thrill of this trip. Rose and I had long sought to expand his vistas in this regard and something had shifted in him one morning at our home some six months earlier when he saw a picture of Ramana Maharshi propped up in a corner of our bedroom. The timeless gaze from that famous photo had struck Peter in the heart. We explained who he had been and almost immediately, fired by some surge of spiritual illumination, he invited us to accompany him to India, adding, "and I want to see as many teachers as possible while we're there." Rose and I were thrilled at the prospect of the non-dual teachings of Advaita finding their way into his teaching. It was the first time he'd expressed an interest in such teachings, and not a moment too soon, for the dualistic nature of his teaching style had begun to concern us both. Unfortunately, after three days at the sacred mountain of Arunachala, home to Ramana for most of his life, Peter concluded that the calling for his remaining days was to go back and teach Rudi's work as it was. Rose and I were crestfallen and, sitting in the lingering vibrations of the great Maharshi, we suspected that this was the beginning of the end. A few days later, after meditating together near the Kali Temple in Dakshineswar in the room once inhabited by the great Sri Ramakrishna,<sup>8</sup> Peter shared with me that he had been told in a vision, "Want nothing." In itself it was a poignant moment but its significance grew considerably in relationship to what would soon unfold. I never again heard him mention this divine exhortation, unusual for a man who often freely and repeatedly shared the most intimate aspects of his own spiritual evolution.

Back home, Peter's obsession with "name and fame" grew to disturbing proportions and stood in glaring contrast to "wanting nothing." Then, in a series of

startling revelations, a whole aspect of his life of which I had been naïvely unaware, was unveiled in painfully short order. As it turned out, Peter, a married man with a child, had been carrying on affairs with a number of his female students. He had always maintained that there was nothing wrong with the practice of Tantric sex between a teacher and his students and had gone even further to assert that, in effect, a man had the right to sleep with any woman at any time and that such escapades were not even the business of his wife. Therefore, he was technically not in violation of his own stated code of ethics, such as it was. However, he had lied not only to his wife about these relationships but to myself and many others as well, including the other women with whom he was involved. In other words, each labored under the misguided impression that she was the only one, though none seemed to have the slightest issue with the fact that he was married.<sup>9</sup> Throughout this whole sordid process he had managed to turn his entire student body against his wife, at one point telling me straight to my face, “My wife is crazy. She thinks I’m having affairs with all my students.” This was particularly painful for me for I was, during those years, not only his closest student, but his most staunch defender against any and all accusations. I felt like a total fool, like a knight who had gone into battle for his king only to discover his king in bed with the enemy.

Looking back, it now made perfect sense why Peter should have so despised Andrew’s book, *Embracing Heaven and Earth*. After all, that slim volume contained a call to an uncommon level of integrity, a challenge to rise to a relationship to life that would allow each of us to “become a living expression of the opposite of everything that’s wrong with the world.” Embracing such a view would, of course, utterly destroy the kind of self-serving worldview out of which such grossly selfish actions could arise. “Everything he says in that book is true,” Peter had said, in a strange acknowledgement of its ultimate validity, “but it doesn’t leave any room for one’s humanity.” In other words, it didn’t leave room for people to do what they want, when they want, how they want, for any reason that they want. It destroyed what Andrew called “negative freedom” and called one to its opposite, “the bondage of liberation.” In that state one was shackled by spiritual conscience to doing the right thing for the right reasons even when it didn’t *feel* like the right thing to do. Of course, that, as I understood it, was the entire point.

It was then that I knew my time with Peter had run its course. It had been an extraordinary 13 years and it would be quite impossible to overstate the radically positive impact this relationship had on me. In fact, nothing I can say can encompass its magnitude and significance. He had been a combination of father, business mentor and spiritual guide and had expressed a level of care for my well being that leaves in its wake a debt that can never be repaid. However, between the philosophical problems I saw in the teaching itself and the shocking display of ethical misconduct that I saw play itself out, I simply could not go on. It was a momentous and profoundly unsettling realization.

When I told Peter of my decision to leave he exploded in a fit of “narcissistic rage,”<sup>10</sup> accusing me of being a traitor, a hypocrite and “no better than a snake in the grass.” “Good riddance,” he added after a vitriolic barrage that landed like the psychic equivalent of the bombing of Dresden. My soul was ravaged and I felt the very ground falling from under me, not because I was leaving him but because something that had been so positive and even sacred should end so horrifically. Yet as the emotional firestorm burned, I began to see, dimly at first and with more clarity in time, that what remained in its wake was not a barren desolation but a fertile forest floor ready to sprout new life. In short, I knew that I could now give myself more fully to Andrew’s teaching, whose call had haunted me for years and had begun again to grow in its insistence during the foregoing eight months.

This renewed pull to Andrew’s teaching had been triggered when, shortly after the horror of September 11<sup>th</sup>, Andrew appeared in Santa Rosa, about an hour and a half north of San Francisco, to give an evening teaching. It had been years since I had seen him, though throughout that period we had had sporadic communication, so Rose and I decided to go. On that evening I was first exposed to the then newly-emerging evolutionary dimension of his teaching, a dimension that has continued to fuel my inspiration to this very moment. His message, which will become clear further on in the book, was so profoundly awe-inspiring and life positive that my whole body shook when I first heard it. Once again, the power of his transmission swept me into cosmic consciousness and, from that infinite vantage point, I saw the thrill, the glory and the obligation of being human in an evolving universe. It was a dimension of insight and understanding entirely absent not only from Peter’s teaching but also from every other teaching I’d ever encountered. The reason for this was simple: it was something utterly new. This was virgin territory on the expanding frontier of human consciousness.<sup>11</sup> It was after Andrew’s explosive exposition that, seven years after my first retreat with him, I finally felt ready to throw in my lot with his cause.

Andrew welcomed me heartily after all these years and generously waived the fee for Rose and I for a ten-day summer retreat in Les Courmettes, France, which we could otherwise not have afforded. That retreat was a revelation to me. Not only was it evidence of the fact that Andrew and his teaching were ever evolving – for little of this seemed familiar to me from the days I’d known him in the past – but it was a thrilling new vision that I recognized as being able to bridge the gap between my spiritual longing and my care for the world, enabling me to address both in a way I’d never done with either alone. It set me in earnest upon the road that was now leading me to Montserrat, Spain.

Dwelling on these memories, time seemed to have been lost and emerging from my reverie I found that the end of the first leg of my journey to Spain via New York was surprisingly near. JFK airport, it was announced by the canned yet confident voice from the cockpit, was fifteen minutes away. Pulled back into

something close to full consciousness I discovered that the unpleasantness from the previous day's sandwich was still very much with me. A few more minutes, a few deep breaths and the routine ceremony of deplaning followed with predictable certainty: fold up the tray tables, raise your seat backs, wait, land, wait, stand, wait, walk and 20 minutes later I found myself sitting and yes, waiting, this time in the international terminal, for my flight to Barcelona. There I slowly sank back into a trance-like stupor until, unexpectedly, I was pulled from its grasp by the appearance of familiar faces.

"Mike!" I heard a woman's voice shout above the jumble of flight announcements and CNN news feeds droning from nearby televisions.

"Ronnit!" I waved at the thin brunette who had also been a student of Peter and had left along with a number of us during the aforementioned spiritual divorce.

"You're on our flight," she said as she approached and sat down next to me. "Jason and Gerard are here, too."

And there they were. First I spotted Jason, the classically handsome Italian chiropractor who, along with Ronnit, was a "novice" in Andrew's teaching and who lived, with two others, in the "Manhattan Center," a three-story brownstone, which was the focal point for Andrew's teaching in New York. Then, moments later, Gerard appeared. He was a tall, olive-skinned man with dark hair, big puppy eyes, a neatly-trimmed goatee and an accent that blended elements from a variety of languages which created a more pleasing English than that commonly spoken by the rest of us. Gerard, a "formal student" of Andrew's, was not only a world-famous mentalist<sup>12</sup> but also a strong player in the push to bring greater public awareness to Andrew's teaching and what was arising out of it, in order to help create the leading edge of an emerging cultural revolution. Within moments we found ourselves huddled together, excitedly catching each other up on the most recent developments in our lives and sharing our anticipation of the upcoming retreat.

As I talked in animated fashion with Gerard, Jason and Ronnit I also quietly considered how much had changed in the way Andrew approached his relationship with students since the time he had welcomed me to the "revolution" in early 1996. In those days the only real option for a profound engagement with the teaching had been leaving one's entire life behind and moving to the community where, as he'd warned me, one had to prepare to have one's whole life taken away. The lifestyle around Andrew in those days had been essentially monastic in nature and had demanded the surrender of the entirety of one's personal life in favor of the possibility of radical transformation. That's where I'd balked. Had I dared take that outrageous leap at that time I could not have stood behind it. I simply had not been mature enough and would have ended up falling away as abruptly as I'd entered in. Recognizing the reality of different levels of development, Andrew

had since created corresponding levels of participation, allowing people to step in and stand behind what they'd stepped in to. He had spoken to a small group of us regarding this topic about a year earlier and emphasized that he was more interested in individuals taking small steps that they could back up without backing off, rather than taking big steps and then, under pressure, retreating. The former built confidence, the latter destroyed it, and in Andrew's view nothing was more injurious to one's progress on the spiritual path than the loss of the delicate and precious confidence in the living possibility of radical transformation.

These new levels of participation were also, as I understood it, a direct reflection of how Andrew had approached his entire teaching career. He did not set out with a grandiose vision of how it was all going to be and then go about systematically implementing it. Rather, he responded to the needs and demands of situations as they evolved around him. For example, in his first years as a teacher, the vision he'd held for his own life involved simply traveling from place to place and sharing his own experience with those who came to him. Such sharing, he had seen from the very outset, seemed to spontaneously immerse those around him in the same illumined state that had become his home. Naïvely, he had assumed that others would respond to that state of revelation with the same depth of surrender that had irrevocably altered his own life. He felt that he would then be free to move on, traversing the globe like a minstrel of consciousness, bringing not only the good news of Liberation, but Liberation itself, to as many seeking souls as possible. I suspect that at that time he had shared Rudi's sentiment that, "if an organization ever formed around me I'd be the first to leave." However, it turned out not to be quite so simple. To his own surprise, he found that people, swept away by what they experienced in his company, were spontaneously leaving their lives behind to follow him from teaching to teaching, from city to city, from country to country, and in such numbers that he had no choice but to respond by creating a structure that could accommodate them.

Similarly, he had assumed that the response of those around him to the explosive revelation of Enlightenment would be surrender and final liberation, as it had been in his own case. What he discovered, to his surprise, was that while people could and did have the most extraordinary spiritual experiences, this in no way guaranteed that they would change on the level of their basic humanity, a connection upon which Andrew insisted. It was this that prompted him to begin examining more closely the nature of ego; thus the bulk of his early teaching emerged as a direct response to presence of the ego and its profoundly negative relationship to life.<sup>13</sup>

It was this same adaptivity to changing circumstances that had prompted him to create what he called "practicing membership." This program set forth a daily practice and study of Andrew's teaching for those who wished to deepen their understanding and experience of it without either leaving their lives behind or

making a formal commitment to Andrew as a spiritual teacher. It was that level of commitment to which I signed on after having left Peter. Then, about six months before my departure for Montserrat, Andrew initiated the “Student Network.” This was a direct response to practicing members, like myself, who found that they wanted to engage with the teaching in a dramatically more committed way, officially take Andrew on as a spiritual teacher, yet not leave their lives “in the world” behind. It was also a response to the growing recognition within his community that perhaps the community model, in and of itself, was incomplete as a vehicle for the growing nature of the teaching. After all, did it truly make sense that everyone deeply interested in Andrew’s teaching should live near or with him? If a cultural revolution was indeed the goal, wouldn’t it make sense to have committed people live the teaching within the pulsing flesh and blood of that culture and demonstrate with their own lives that something completely different was possible? The consensus was a resounding “yes,” and with that the Student Network was created. I joined immediately.

Jason and Ronnit, on the other hand, were “novices.” Novices were individuals who had decided that they wished to live together under the umbrella of Andrew’s teaching, give their whole lives to him and his teaching, yet not necessarily live in Foxhollow, the location of Andrew’s world center in Massachusetts. In such an arrangement there were strict rules and daily practices with an emphasis on shedding the personal life altogether. Finally, there were “formal students” and “committed students,” most of whom lived at Foxhollow directly under Andrew’s tutelage. Of the nature of their commitment and relationship with Andrew I am not certain, other than to say that it is deep, committed and undoubtedly intense. The important point with respect to all this is that in each case these levels of engagement were conceived as a response to a demand and as such created “platforms of engagement” upon which people could stand without falling back and upon which their confidence could grow in an organic fashion.

The long and the short of it was this: Andrew’s teaching, which is about evolution in the most profound sense, was evolving consistently in response to forces, both inner and outer, and was a living expression of the very evolution it called all of us to participate in. In a strange way it appears to be both the path and the expression of the goal simultaneously – constant evolution to higher levels of complexity and integration. It was that fact that had created an opening for me to engage in a way that felt natural and authentic rather than forcing upon me a level of participation that I, in all likelihood, would have found hard to live up to. It was largely because of this that I was sitting here ready to take the next step forward.

As it turned out Gerard – whom I did not know very well – and I had seat assignments fairly close to one another and with a little cajoling we managed to convince the man assigned to sit next to him to trade his aisle seat for mine. That

meant we would spend the next eight or so hours making each other's acquaintance more thoroughly, something which I greatly looked forward to.

I have long felt myself drawn to spend time in the company of Andrew's more senior students as they consistently emanated certain qualities I found enviable. First, everyone I'd met over the years who had been involved with Andrew in a serious way was impressively functional. These were not individuals who had opted to live in a spiritual community simply to escape shouldering the burden of life "in the world." On the contrary, many of these individuals had attained uncommon levels of success either before entering the community or while there. Gerard was a perfect example. As mentioned, he earned his living as a "mentalist," and not just any mentalist, mind you, but one of the most accomplished in the world, commanding approximately \$10,000 per performance.

This degree of functionality lined up perfectly with an aspect of my former teacher's teaching that I had deeply appreciated and which had made an enormous difference in my own life. That is, he used to rail against what he had appropriately termed "the rent control mentality," by which he meant always finding the easiest, cheapest way to live in order to avoid the pressure of life, under the guise of being "spiritual." On the contrary, like Rudi before him, he felt strongly that the bigger one's inner life was the bigger one's outer life, as a reflection of it, should be. "There's no place to rest," he'd often say. "Whatever level you've attained is simply the jumping-off point for the next level." To this end he'd often advise me to, "take on a little bit more than you can handle. That'll force you to grow and keep expanding your life in all directions." Once, in my early days with him, I jokingly suggested that I wished to hit the Lotto, to which he responded rather pointedly, "Mike, I hope you never hit the Lotto. It'll be the death of you. Learn how to make it." Those teachings have stayed with me, steadfastly helping me in taking bigger and bigger steps with my life, much as he had done with his. It was an ethic of work, ambition and accomplishment that deeply appealed to me and among Andrew's students I saw this same ethic flourish. The recognition that one's spiritual passion need in no way conflict with creative and financial success is, in my view, an important message that needs to be heard more often in our spiritually starved postmodern world and, more importantly, a message that must find expression in the lives of profoundly engaged human beings.

My attraction to Andrew's senior students, however, was not based solely on their high functionality. After all, such individuals may be found in abundance throughout society. There was something more that I found so compelling, something I could only call uncommon dignity and strength of character – qualities which seemed to become visibly more pronounced in direct relation to the length of time they had been involved with the teaching. And while these qualities were equally present in the men and the women, it was mostly to the men that I looked for inspiration, for the simple reason that I am a man and we all tend to look to

those of our own gender in search of role models. It has occurred to me on more than one occasion how unusual it is for a 46-year-old man like myself to find a role model in the example of another, often one younger than myself, and think, “Wow, I want to be like that,” because I recognized in them some quintessential quality of manhood as yet undeveloped in myself.

I’d recently heard Andrew advise a gathering: *“Watch out for nice guys, especially in spiritual groups. They’re the ones out to prove that you have nothing to fear from them. In men, don’t look for niceness,”* he’d added, *“look for strength and integrity. A real man should be able to intimidate you with his integrity.”* That had stopped me cold. I’d never given this much thought but a little reflection quickly brought to light that I had, in fact, spent the better part of my adult life playing at being a “nice guy.” I suppose that’s better than being a nasty guy but closer scrutiny revealed it to be little more than a clever ruse useful in convincing both others and myself that “I’m different.” Underneath, ego festered freely, having simply hit upon a useful stratagem for being seen as special. It certainly had nothing to do with “intimidating others with one’s integrity.”

What would it feel like to be intimidated by someone else’s integrity? It would feel precisely the way I felt around people like Gerard, who was currently running a last-minute check of his e-mails via a nifty little gadget called a Trêo. It would feel like the best, most authentic part of you was being pulled upon and called to the forefront of the self. It would make you stand up straight and look the man in the eye. And in his gaze you would find a certain transparency and some ineffable quality that might be described as “undivided.” It would be a position that that individual would take unselfconsciously because it was simply who he was. And as such his very presence would exert on others something Andrew commonly referred to as “evolutionary tension,” a natural pull toward that which is higher and deeper, a silent demand to develop those “quintessential qualities of manhood as yet undeveloped in one’s self.”

Now, to notice such qualities in someone like Andrew is one thing; after all, he’s reputed to be the “enlightened teacher.” It’s easy to set him upon a pedestal like some alabaster Buddha, an unattainable ideal, and in so doing let oneself off the hook. But when these qualities emerge in individuals who you know started out more or less like yourself, it brings both the promise and the challenge of transformation directly to your own front door. The question, of course, is, will we answer the call? It was a question to which I longed to say “yes.”

With the last boarding announcements complete, our tray tables up, seat backs straight and Trêos turned off, we roared off the asphalt and made our way towards Barcelona. As the plane hit cruising altitude, Gerard and I engaged in easy conversation. Initially it revolved around our respective businesses, his as a mentalist, mine as a dog trainer (his definitely the more curious), and how to structure them so that they might generate greater revenue with a lesser time

commitment, thus freeing up resources to more deeply engage in “the revolution.” I had, over the years, become acutely aware of the good fortune that had enabled me to free myself from the shackles of corporate servitude and become successfully self-employed. Having spent eight years as a corporate jock, thinking that that was the most logical use for my master’s degree, I had a painfully clear sense of the mind-numbing routine under which so many labor daily and the often profoundly inhibiting impact of such constraints on one’s deepest longings and highest aspirations. That’s why I felt so strongly about engaging creatively and effectively with the life process on a business level so that my work could, in some way, become a reflection of my aspirations rather than an inhibition of them. In this regard I found a kindred spirit in Gerard.

Soon, however, our conversation drifted from business to spiritual matters, a shift catalyzed by his passing mention of the fact that he had just emerged from a six-week silent retreat under Andrew’s guidance. I had long been fascinated by these lengthy retreats to which Andrew routinely subjected his close students, considering them to be Herculean feats of spiritual endurance (another friend, Craig Hamilton, had once gone through a six-month silent retreat). It occurred to me that now, with ample time on our hands, might be a good opportunity to quiz Gerard about his experience.

“What’s your daily routine like on a silent retreat?” I asked curiously.

“Well,” he replied casually, “it’s about 16 hours a day of meditation and contemplation.”

I marveled at this, not only because of the endurance demonstrated by such an undertaking but because of my considerable envy of his ability to steal that much time from the rigors of everyday life to pursue the rigors of the inner life.

“So what was your experience like?”

“Well, it was interesting on a lot of levels,” he said, quickly warming to the subject. “First of all, I thought, ‘Hey, now that I’ve got all this time to meditate I’ll spend my days just sinking into the Ground of Being.’<sup>14</sup> I was expecting a lot of bliss and peace and transcendent consciousness. But it didn’t exactly turn out that way.”

“That’s interesting,” I said, somewhat surprised. During my own meditation practice I often found myself distracted by the looming pressure of everything that awaited me the moment meditation was over, the tyranny of my inner check list. Thus I assumed that if one had been entirely relieved of that pressing burden, such distractions would no longer trouble one’s mind and thus all obstacles to simply melting into the Ground of one’s existence would have been swept aside. “What happened?” I asked.

“Well, my mind just went crazy and wouldn’t stop and on top of that I was hounded by sexual thoughts and desire.” Once again I was surprised, having assumed that someone associated with this teaching for as long and intensely as Gerard had been would have long transcended such afflictions.

“Did you speak to Andrew about this? How did you handle it?”

“Yeah,” he said in a soft but concentrated tone, “I spoke with Andrew and we talked a great deal about the importance of letting everything be as it is.”

I had flashbacks to my understanding around this issue that had first emerged during the retreat in Bodhgaya nearly ten years earlier.

“I realized, in a way that I hadn’t before, that really letting everything be as it is levels out all experience, from a busy mind full of sexual fantasies to the most sublime spiritual experiences. It all becomes the same. You let it all be as it is and then none of it means anything.”

“What are you left with, then?” I asked.

“What do you think?”

The answer flashed through my mind. “You’re free to give.”

He smiled, dark eyes glinting. “Hey, you got it. That’s exactly right.”

We settled into silence for a while after that. I considered what he said, realizing that our relentless obsession with the quality of our inner experience so completely consumes us that we literally have very little attention or energy available to give to life. I’d heard this teaching of letting everything be as it is quite often, but there’s understanding and then there’s understanding. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that there are levels of understanding regarding the same teaching that emerge as one’s own awareness of and sensitivity to such things deepen. This was equally true for one of the core positions of Andrew’s teaching that is most simply articulated in his statement that, “*it doesn’t matter what you think and it doesn’t matter what you feel, it only matters what you do.*” From this followed his emphasis on being able to bear your experience, no matter what it was, and still do the right thing for the right reasons, especially when it didn’t *feel* like the right thing to do. And finally, of course, there was his exhortation to never, ever draw any conclusions about yourself based on any aspect of your inner experience. If you had to draw conclusions about yourself – and, from the point of view of this teaching, you definitely should – it should only be based on what you *do*.

A brief examination of such statements will reveal that when taken together they create a radically different position in relation to our inner experience than the one we’re commonly taught. In fact, if we look closely we will find that this position actually has the potential to utterly liberate one from enslavement to and identification with any aspect of their inner experience. In this, the separate self-sense, which is constructed precisely by intense and unquestioned identification with one’s mind and emotions, would dissolve and the door to liberation would spontaneously and mysteriously appear on all sides. As I spoke with Gerard, I had already gained some understanding from my own experience of the truth and power of this position (not that I had been able to embody this with any kind of consistency), but this was the first time I had connected it to our capacity to give.

Of course, it made perfect sense. Freed from our fixation on a mind-created and illusory separate self-sense, the energy of Life that animates us all would be free to use our individuated life to care for Itself in its Infinite manifestations. As such it represented not only our own freedom but our capacity to unselfconsciously give in a way that is inconceivable to the ego.

I was struck deeply by this brief and seemingly passing exchange between us as Gerard and I sat there, crammed into our coach seats, streaking through the stratosphere at 600 miles an hour. As we talked I could feel into his depth and in so doing became more aware of my own. I could feel the pull of another's integrity ignite the inspiration to step from my own level of engagement with life to one much greater. As I would soon discover, this conversation set the tone for my entire experience of the upcoming retreat, which I could feel approaching solemnly as we flew into the night, bound for Barcelona and the mountainous monastery of Montserrat awaiting our arrival. As efforts at sleep proved futile, I spent the remaining hours drifting fitfully between awareness of my crumpled, nauseated body and the hazy world of half-dreams where the real and unreal merge in a strange miasma of semi-lucid fantasy.

Sunlight shining in from Gerard's window and the smell of cheap coffee pulled me from that lurid world. Soon, prompted by tin can announcements, we set about filling out customs and immigration forms. Slowly we dropped from the bright blue sky into the cloud cover hovering over Barcelona. Excitement sharpened my consciousness in compensation for lack of sleep. Soon we found ourselves on terra firma once more and after some delays due to harassment by bored and pompous customs officials (who all seem amazingly alike regardless of what country one encounters them in) Gerard and I were hotel bound in a zippy Spanish cab. We had decided to share a room and spend that day and night in Barcelona cleverly disguised as tourists. After a two-hour nap and an hour of meditation we headed out to the Plaça Reial, an old square where the Middle Ages encounter modernity in seamless style, to meet up with Jason, Ronnit and a number of others from the New York Center who'd already been in Barcelona for a week. We sat in a beautiful little sidewalk café off the ancient plaza, enjoyed several courses of exquisite Spanish cuisine and talked excitedly about what had been and what was yet to come.

After lunch and much laughter it was time to explore. We meandered down the cobbled, narrow alleys of an old part of town. The small, flower-lined balconies jutting out from the stone walls of ancient buildings faced each other above us at such intimate proximity that you could, standing on your own balcony, nearly touch a neighbor on their balcony in the facing building. Such architecture harkened back to a time and culture where community was a much more integral part of living than it is today. With the advent of cars and industrialized life, however, the streets of Barcelona became wide and time became short as the fast

pace of modernity consumed the old traditions and ways of living. The beauty of Barcelona, however, was that wherever you turned, evidence of the old traditions co-existed organically with the new realities. While the old merged with the new more in some areas than in others, the passage of time and transition of culture, which had moved Barcelona from its birth in the days of Rome to its flowering during the Renaissance and finally on to our postmodern present moment, was greatly in evidence on all sides. Old churches and plazas led onto busy streets choked with cars and busses; ancient buildings with low doors and arched walkways offered views of gleaming hotels and apartment buildings; and open-air markets and street vendors in tiny stalls stood near supermarkets, computer stores and discotheques.

Something else became apparent as we headed down La Rambla, a tree-shaded boulevard adorned with flower stalls, street performers, assorted kiosks and a general explosion of life, toward the city's port, which had been the focal point of so much of its turbulent history. Wandering along I slowly became aware of the fact that, despite the distinct cultural undercurrent that could simply be called the "Spanishness" of this place, it sported many features that were culturally easy to identify. Many of the little shops, both in the back streets and along the major cultural artery of La Rambla, were essentially indistinguishable from their entrepreneurial counterparts back in California. There were New Age bookstores, home furnishing galleries, tribal arts importers and an assortment of merchants and vendors, any of whom could have set up shop in the Bay Area and fit in seamlessly. There was even a headshop with a window display made with such a psychedelic splash of color that it looked as if a hippie had exploded in it. But it was more than all that. There was a certain style and attitude among the people that was also easily recognizable and somehow, despite obvious cultural differences, not "other." The clothing was familiar, the music heard here and there from loudspeakers in stores and from headsets of scantily clad, pierced teenagers' iPods, could have been heard anywhere in North America and pretty much anywhere else in the modern world.

What I was becoming aware of in a way that I never had before was the globalization of culture. And somehow this amounted to more than the mere "corporatization" of modern culture evidenced by the annoying presence of KFC's and McDonald's – arguably among America's most insidious exports – in even the most charming locales of old Europe. No, it was an attitude and spirit that reflected the value system of the secular, postmodern culture, which, for better or for worse, represents the leading edge of the planet's cultural development. It is a spirit that is, on the one hand, cheerfully free of the oppressive strictures of the past and yet at the same time expresses a cynical superficiality that flattens our view of life into a one-dimensional perspective that is as impervious to wonder and mystery as chrome and glass are to green and growing things. Endlessly ob-

sessed with slick surfaces, with Tinker Toys, gadgets, entertainment, stimulation and digital distractions of various sorts, it is a culture that, freed from tradition and a higher moral context, has become both obsessed with its clever ability to manipulate experience and simultaneously alienated from the larger mystery of life. Yet at the same time it is educated, liberal, humanistic and creative, but lacking in higher purpose it also lacks a channel into which to pour those precious energies in the service of our world. Of course I belong to that culture and as such am afflicted with both its virtues and its vices. It was the cultivation of the virtues and the addressing of the vices to which Andrew had long set himself, which is why I found myself here considering these things.

Soon our walk along La Rambla led us to the waterfront. This was the city's ancient port, replete with silos, warehouses, cargo ships and cruise ships, all of which still plied the maritime trades that had been the city's lifeblood since its inception several millennia earlier. We wandered along beside the water, a salty breeze tousling our hair, the cries of gulls on the wind, until the path led to an artful promenade beyond which lay the Mare Magnum, a gleaming leisure city of shops, restaurants and theaters that rose like a jewel from its drab surroundings. And just beyond that, a pillar 100 feet high shot from the ground proving, upon closer examination, to be a pedestal for a larger-than-life Christopher Columbus. He struck a bold stance, his eyes questing for the New World beyond the line of the horizon. It was here, some five centuries earlier, that he braved the hazards of the ocean and embarked upon his fateful voyage. That excursion changed the world, dividing it definitively into "old" and "new." One stood for the past and the other for the future; one contained the sum of the known, the other offered uncharted vistas. When Columbus set sail he could not have known that he was triggering the birth of an era so unimaginably different from his own. It was he, in many ways, who set in motion the dramatic sequence of events that has culminated, five long centuries later, in the very cultural globalization of which I had just become aware.

Columbus' voyage had been a watershed in the development of humankind and, fixed on the spot from which he had set out, my scattered perceptions sharpened and resolved into a singularity of understanding. Standing between the sculpture and the ocean, half facing both, I looked over my right shoulder to gaze back in time, first upon Christopher and then beyond him to an ancient fort set on a high hill overlooking the city – once its primary defense against invaders and marauders of every stripe. As I gazed to the left my eyes came to rest on the Mare Magnum, which symbolized in every way our blazing acceleration into the future. With one brief sweep of my eyes I took in the broad sweep of history fully in evidence on all sides: behind me, Columbus pointing from the mists of antiquity to the as yet undiscovered New World; in front of me, the New World fully realized in all the glitter and shine of modernity.

And between the two moved an endless stream of tourists from lands Columbus could only have imagined: Japanese, Chinese, Thai, Vietnamese, Turkish, American, German, French, Australian, Arab, Asian, African, young, old, gay, straight, singles, couples – all combed the city with the same buoyant curiosity that carried me through the tangle of its ancient streets and the graceful curves of its modern boulevards. They spouted an array of languages that might have sent a U.N. interpreter into a spin and sported lifestyles as varied as the cultures and generations from which they came. Yet more striking than the many variations on the human theme was the one that seemed to bind us all together: a globalizing culture that had made available wealth, education and the freedom to travel on an unprecedented scale and with unprecedented speed. Even 50 years ago such a sight would have been inconceivable; aided by the rapid spread of technology, in less than two generations millions upon millions of individuals have been freed from the constraints of the past, from the weight of culture, religion and strictly ethnic ways of seeing. They have benefited from higher education and have embraced a modern worldview. Despite our cultural differences, it was this that made them feel so familiar to me.

Such ruminations on progress and the nature of culture led to still others, these concerned mostly with the nature of the times into which we are heading. I have felt for some time that we lie at the crossroads of two ages, the current age of cultural evolution, which began some six millennia ago being quickly superseded by the age of technological evolution. This presents us with both good news and bad. On the one hand, our rapidly advancing technology promises to deliver us from many of the problems of our imperiled world. On the other, it threatens us in previously inconceivable ways. The ultimate outcome will be determined largely by how we cope with the cultural, philosophical, ethical and spiritual implications of such change. (For a more in-depth discussion of this topic, key to the understanding of this book, please see Appendix 1, *At the Crossroads of Two Ages*).

All of which brings me back to Christopher Columbus pointing from his pedestal to the New World on the waterfront. As I stood there and observed the crowds, I wondered where such individuals, many lacking a higher moral, spiritual and ethical context for their lives, would find the wisdom and vision from which to address the decisions that will inevitably have to be made to deal with a world on fire and a technology accelerating out of control. Of course I too am a product of the postmodern secular world obsessed with individuality and lacking all but the filmiest veneer of moral certitude. And for this reason I hoped to discover and embody a spiritual context that would not only allow me to come to terms with all of this and my place in it, but to find a way to engage creatively with life and help to give rise to a postmodern spirituality capable of addressing the challenges of our time and anchoring us deeply in our own Source. Like Columbus, I also sought a new world and deeply desired to participate in its creation.

As our small troupe left the port to meander back into the heart of Barcelona, I was reassured to be in the company of others who shared in equal measure the interest and passion that had brought me here. That company grew steadily as the day wore on for it seemed that we could scarcely turn a corner or wander into a shop without colliding with yet another familiar face from yet another corner of the globe who, like us, had arrived early and now combed the bustling streets in search of small diversions. By the time darkness had settled over the city a group of perhaps twelve of us had gathered and settled into a stylish vegetarian restaurant. There we talked and laughed until the inevitable pull of jet lag began exerting itself on even the most ardently enthusiastic among us and the allure of soft beds and deep sleep slowly overtook the spirit of adventure. Thus we finally headed for home. There, with my head thrown back on an unfamiliar pillow I fell into a deep sleep.

It was only the dappled play of sunlight dancing on my eyelids that retrieved me from those depths some hours later and, upon waking, I found myself blessedly relieved of both jet lag and the digestive problems that had been a constant companion since the beginning of this trip. After breakfast Gerard and I spent a bit more time visiting tourist attractions and by mid-afternoon we were in a cab headed for Montserrat, some fifty minutes away. Our cab ride took us past the outskirts of Barcelona into a low-lying area dotted with an odd mixture of farmland and industrial plants and, just as it seemed we were bound for rural pasturelands, the saw toothed mountain of Montserrat rose up in the distance like a cluster of broken teeth pushed up from the earth in some primal act of release. That sacred mountain had been a place of Christian devotion for a millennium, its dramatic leap from the valley floor having inspired poets and visionaries through the ages to laud it as a symbol of the inner life and spiritual aspiration. "An immense conflagration of petrified flame," one poet had called it, while another claimed that, "with a saw of gold, the angels hewed the twisting hills." The truth was that the oddly shaped mountain, with its jutting spires of stone pressing each other skyward, was both imposing and austere, and its inaccessibility and commanding view of the surrounding area made it a perfect center for retreat from the world and simultaneous contemplation of both it and its Source. For a thousand years seekers, renunciates, ascetics and monks had made this place a destination on their spiritual journey and it occurred to me that I, in my turn, was now performing a contemporary version of that same pilgrimage.

As we slowly climbed the narrow switchback roads leading to the mountain's peak I was drawn both inward in anticipation of the imminent retreat and outward by the thrill of the view and excitement of the new. To my surprise the road was busy with joggers and bikers struggling up the winding road's merciless grade with bowed heads and stoic determination. Gerard, hanging out the window, supplied them with encouraging cheers and enthusiastic thumbs ups. Finally, as

we approached the summit and our destination, my surprise was enhanced by the fact that we were welcomed not by the serene confines of a monastic retreat but by a sea of tourists, vast rows of parking, an abundance of traffic signs and a cadre of crisply dressed security guards asking questions and issuing directions. I suddenly wondered if we had somehow strayed into a parallel dimension in which Montserrat was a spiritual theme park rather than a monastery for reflection and meditation. In truth, it appeared there was little of the monastic life in the air here. What was in the air, and jubilantly so, was sight seeing and entertainment, for this was a full-blown tourist attraction replete with gift shops, cafés, beer and ice cream. It was not until I saw the large sign announcing “Andrew Cohen Retreat” with an arrow pointing down a narrow road to a small group of buildings a bit further on that I was sure we were at the right place.

A few moments later our cab halted in a small plaza ringed by several aging buildings bearing no distinguishing characteristics whatsoever. Judging by the driver’s gesturing for cash it seemed that we had arrived. That fact was confirmed the moment we stepped out whereupon we were instantly surrounded by a horde of pleasantly familiar faces. There was Martin from Denmark, a handsome man with auburn hair, dark eyes and gregarious disposition whom I’d made friends with on several previous retreats. We hugged and exchanged warm greetings. Then Gail came along and gave me a warm embrace. She was a former student of Andrew’s, a scrappy brunette and had been a good friend through tough times. For the last year she had been in India running a center for Andrew in Rishikesh and traveling hither and thither across that vast subcontinent to stir interest in his teachings. She was radiant. Then came Deanna, with her bright blue eyes and impish expression. She had also been a student of Peter’s who, along with a number of others and myself, had jumped ship and who was now living in London as a “novice.” In one’s and two’s the welcoming committee grew until soon the air was alive with the sounds of many voices exchanging hearty greetings in a colorful array of languages. A lilting syllable of Swedish could be heard colliding with the rough edges of some Hebraic phrase, a baroque curl of French winding itself around a blunt thrust of German, while rolling cadences of Spanish laced themselves throughout and all, of course, were contained within the familiar resonance of English itself, a language which, if I recalled correctly from my childhood,<sup>15</sup> resembled to foreigners speech attempted with a mouth full of marbles. It was great to be here.

After registration I found my room in one of the nearby featureless buildings. I had requested the most basic and least expensive type of room and looked forward to the rugged intimacy that sharing such close quarters and sparse accommodations would likely offer. It would be a nice counterpoint to the “I need my own space” mentality that so often divides those of us with the privilege to be able to afford it. We are so accustomed – addicted even – to having everything to and

for ourselves that the togetherness available in communal situations with a shared purpose is an entirely alien experience to most of us. With brief exceptions it was certainly true for me. Five of us had been assigned to a rather austere room in which the shower consisted of a rusty pipe hanging from the ceiling dribbling out a trickle of water so anemic as to better be described as a leak. The room's small central meeting area had three cells running off of it. These were so tiny that they could not properly be referred to as rooms and each sported two small beds equipped with a hard mattress and a wool blanket as scratchy and old as an unshaven hermit. My four roommates consisted of two Germans, one Englishman and another American. My cellmate was a young British man named Anatole who, with his tightly cropped black hair, olive skin and Romanesque nose, looked more like a centurion than a proper English gentleman. He turned out to be an altogether amiable chap with, as I would soon come to see, a fierce degree of spiritual determination. Unpacking took literally no time for there was no unpacking to speak of, nor was there any closet to unpack into. Thus, with a quick shove of our suitcases either under or beside our beds the move in was complete.

All practical details having been tended to, I decided to take a walk around what would, for nearly the next two weeks, be my home. Stepping out into the streets from the cool, stone corridor of my building was as much of a shock on the first day as it would be on the last; I simply could not get used to the interminable swarm of tourists that had overrun this town like a horde of army ants on the skeleton of some long dead delicacy. It was a strange mixture of the sacred and the profane upon which I would repeatedly ruminate during the course of the coming days. At any rate, I wandered from my hostel through an arched gate across the street, up an inclined walk that opened onto a very large plaza. This, in turn, led to a set of impressive doors beyond which sat the basilica, without a doubt the spiritual heart of Montserrat. Far to my right the plaza ended in a short wall upon which rested a series of small arches, each supported by a stone saint and beyond which the wide valley floor spread out far below in vast undulations to distant rises and hills. I headed straight through the next set of doors toward the basilica.

Passing through them led to a central atrium of inlaid marble depicting elaborate insignias and symbols of the Christian faith. On one side stood a Gothic cloister several stories tall and directly ahead, the basilica façade, featuring three massive iron doors above which the twelve apostles stood ensconced in niches overlooking the flow of the faithful. I passed under their stoic gaze into the cool darkness of the church itself. I was immediately touched by the sense of the sacred, no doubt a result of both the countless worshippers that had used this as a place of prayer since its inception in the sixteenth century and the spectacular architecture whose massively vaulted ceilings drew one's eyes and mind up while manipulating an elaborate play of light and shadow across the marble, the gold, the gargoyles,

the saints and the many curves and arches whose sole purpose was to sanctify form and glorify the Divine. Venturing further inward I discovered a number of side chapels, each rich with Christian iconography and laden with historical and spiritual significance. Some contained tombs of important historical figures while others served as displays for an assortment of religious art. And above the altar, in a small recessed room on the second floor, sat the church's central feature, "Our Lady of Montserrat," a simply wrought Madonna, her blackened face serene, the Christ child in her lap, flanked by gilded scenes of the nativity on one side and the visitation of Mary on the other. I was stilled into reverence despite my long-standing ambivalence toward Christianity. I walked along the aisles passing worshippers in prayer and reflection until, finding an empty pew, I sat to meditate.

I was quickly drawn inward but equally as quickly I was drawn out again, first by the ring of a cell phone, then a crying baby, then people chatting and laughing, then... The truth was that despite the many faithful who indeed respected the sanctity of this ancient place, many others did not. In fact, an annoyingly large number of people composed themselves with as much quietude and dignity as one might find, say, at the mall. It said much about the current secular culture and its flat perspective that valued only surfaces and has managed, in near miraculous fashion, to squeeze the sacred even out of the sacred. Even the holiest of places have been reduced to one-dimensional cutout versions of their former selves, less serving to uplift the human soul than merely to amuse and entertain it. I looked up from my meditation. On the end of my pew sat a man of about thirty, a stroller with a whining infant by his side, drinking a soda and checking emails on his cell phone. His wife snapped flash photos in one of the nearby side chapels. Further along I spotted a column of Japanese marching through with the efficient organization of a factory tour. These were followed by a gaggle of Spanish teenage girls dressed as if headed for spring break at Daytona Beach, the rapidly developing swells and curves of their femininity on easy display for all to see. And so on.

I got up to leave, not as much offended as astounded. At that moment it occurred to me why those in the world who define themselves by tradition, who anchor their self-sense in orthodoxy and who cherish the values of conservatism are revolted by the vulgarity of a culture devoid of higher principles. It was easy to understand the world's violent swing to fundamentalism. And it was equally easy to appreciate the fundamentalist rampage against modernity.<sup>16</sup> In fact, in some strange way I found myself sympathetic to that rage. The growing secular, planetary culture that had resolved into sharp focus for me on Barcelona's waterfront stood, in every way, as an affront to its values. Those, at least in theory, are devoted to a spiritual ideal that cherishes modesty, humility and reverence for the mystery at the source of our existence. Of course these virtues are enshrined (or perhaps entombed) in a tortured, medieval worldview that most of us – the educated elite, both secular and spiritually interested – would find difficult if not impossible to embrace.<sup>17</sup>

Which leaves many of us who are spiritually interested at a crossroads. We cannot go back because the view is too small. Yet there is not much to move forward into. Neither the East-meets-West nor the New Age cocktails of designer spirituality have proven a suitable fit for the needs of our time. Morbid, self-indulgent, or just downright silly, they have promoted the culture of narcissism from whose womb they sprang, but have failed, by and large, to give rise to individuals who can “intimidate you with their integrity.” Having replaced the need for submission to the Absolute with the worship of the individual, each a religion of one, society today is more fractured than ever. And much hangs in the balance. My own concern at this point was not simply the matter of my own liberation<sup>18</sup> but a consideration of what we spiritually inclined postmodernists might do to drag the sacred back into the business of living. And not just as an adjunct, a palliative for neurosis and existential angst, but in a way that denies nothing, pulls upon the best parts of our humanity and points the way to an integrated future. Looking around it occurred to me that perhaps Montserrat was an ideal place for the exploration of such questions as the clash of world views was so greatly in evidence all about. Exiting the church, I dared consider what might emerge if the best elements of liberal culture – human rights, environmental care, embrace of the most promising technologies, and so on – were informed by submission to an Absolute Principle without in any way denying our recently liberated humanity or compromising our hard won scientific understanding of the cosmos. That was the culture I wanted to live in and help make manifest. That was why I was with Andrew; and that’s why I was in Spain.

I spent the remainder of the afternoon meandering along the many branching paths that wound themselves like vines around the mountain and threaded together a string of abandoned stone dwellings, simple chapels and even a “holy cave,” like so many beads on a well-worn rosary. These had all, at one point or another, served as habitations for the various and sundry pilgrims that had walked these trails for the better part of a thousand years. My excursion ended on a small hill upon which stood a simple hermitage, its modest bell tower stretching humbly heavenward from the weathered tile roof, its courtyard decorated with a fountain around which a large mosaic of ornate beasts symbolized the Creation. This was the original monastery of Montserrat, dating back to the tenth century and affording a view that not only spanned the chasm of the ages but also the gulf of air and light that stood between us and the mountains rising from the mist-shrouded valley in the distance. My spirit awed and my mind silenced, it was time now to return to the others.

Later that evening about ninety of us<sup>19</sup> had been gathered together by Chris Parish, a slight, unassuming man in his middle years and one of Andrew’s closest students, to announce that we would be in silent retreat for the next eleven days. The silence would commence the following morning. It was not uncommon on retreat for Andrew to select individuals who had made a relatively serious commitment to the teaching to

participate in very concentrated practice for the duration of the retreat. Just how concentrated it would be was evident from the schedule posted on a board:

Chanting – 5:15 a.m. to 6:15 a.m.  
Meditation – 6:30 a.m. to 7:30 a.m.  
Breakfast – 8 a.m. to 9 a.m.  
Teaching – 9 a.m. to 11:30 a.m.  
Meditation – 12:00 noon to 1 p.m.  
Lunch – 1:30 p.m. to 2:30 p.m.  
Chanting – 3:30 p.m. to 4:30 p.m.  
Teaching – 5 p.m. to 8 p.m.  
Dinner – 8:30 p.m. to 9:30 p.m.  
Chanting – 9:45 p.m. to 10:30 p.m.

I looked forward to the challenge and rigor of submerging myself in practice in a way I never could at home. This being my third silent retreat I had a sense of what to expect. Obviously we would not be allowed to speak (other than to Andrew during the teaching.) We would also be segregated from the others on retreat, sitting in a separate area of the dining hall. Finally, we would be discouraged from making eye contact with one another. In short, we would be truly on our own with only the teaching to guide us through our experience.

My first silent retreat had come about two and a half years earlier, had tested me in the extreme, and had revealed in a dramatic and surprising way the insidious and ravenous nature of ego as well as the door to freedom from it. The silence, I'd discovered, I could handle. The eating separately – no problem. But not making eye contact presented a surprisingly unyielding straight jacket for the ego. I had not, until that point, realized how much affirmation the ego pulls in for itself simply through meeting the eye of another. “Do you see me?” it desperately wants – no, *needs* – to know. And when the affirmation comes, no matter how slight, the ego swells like a bloated tick, cheerfully returning the favor in an unspoken collusion whose existence only becomes apparent when this avenue of expression is cut off. In fact, this cutting off had the effect on my psyche of poking a stick into an anthill. My initial response to such ego starvation had been raw terror; there was no place to go, no one to turn to, and no way to distract myself from the full fury of the ego's reaction to being marginalized to the point of perfect irrelevance. In that context its ugly face exploded from the dark unconscious into perfect view and, being strapped into silence, I simply had to bear it. This brought on the next surprise, which was that the mere presence of the extremely unpleasant did not in any way prevent the emergence of enlightened consciousness and its expression. This I discovered in the so-called “enlightened communication” groups for which we gathered twice daily and about which I'll say more later. This was a turning

point in my understanding of the spiritual life, an understanding that is ever in flux and which I hoped would deepen in the coming days.

After being briefed we were left to our own devices for the remainder of the evening. I returned to the spare confines of my hostel to find my roommates already there, taking full advantage of the last few hours of permissible speech. There was my “cellmate” Anatole from London, Chris, a psychiatrist from Chicago, and Mike and Carl from Germany. Of the latter two, the first was a short, dark haired fellow with ruddy features and a clever smile, while the other was tall, bespectacled and looked intelligent. I was particularly interested in them. Having spent the first ten years of my life in growing up in Germany, I’d wondered much about that culture which, while having left strong traces in me, had not stamped the full measure of its weight into my character. I often wondered how I might have been different had I grown into adulthood there? I looked to them for clues but time being short no startling realization emerged. Nonetheless, being German I felt a strange kinship with these two. Yet while I resonated with their German-ness I felt my own American-ness and the gap between those cultural modes. It struck me at that moment how deeply we are shaped by our surroundings, that inkling throwing into question the sense of rugged individuality to which I, as an American, am particularly prone. I sensed that we are much more shaped by our culture than we like to think and that the sense of being a unique, free thinking individual, independent of his surroundings might be, by and large, a charade. I would get to think on that a good deal more in the days ahead.

The hours swept by nearly unnoticed as we discussed with passionate intensity our interest in the teaching that had brought us here. With silence nearly upon us, it occurred to me how much I would miss this sort of engagement with other men. What made it unusual was not merely the vast context of the teaching itself but the total absence of the macho dimension so common in male gatherings. I considered where men most commonly find brotherhood – business, sports, strippers, and war – and it occurred to me that I was interested in discovering what it means to be a man who is in no way denying his masculinity yet simultaneously free from its darker aspects. What that was I didn’t know for I had neither transcended the worst aspects of myself nor brought into fruition the strength and integrity to which Andrew had pointed. Yet it was precisely this aspiration that the five of us shared that evening and within which we discovered, however briefly, the potential inherent in human relationship. It was upon such considerations that our conversation turned until, at nearly one a.m., we finally retired to bed.

## NOTES

1. Advaita: literally “non-duality”; a Vedantic doctrine that identifies the individual self (atman) with the ground of reality (brahman). It is associated especially with the Indian philosopher Shankara (788–820).

2. Kundalini: a yogic term indicating the latent female energy believed to lie coiled at the base of the spine. Through the practice of kundalini yoga that energy may be triggered, rising through the chakra (psychic energy centers associated with various aspects of human experience) system to open the chakra in the top of the head, inducing a state of enlightened consciousness.

3. The state of consciousness of the teacher, which is being transmitted directly to the student by mere proximity and attention to the teacher is often also referred to as the transmission of “shakti,” the powerful spiritual life force that animates everything, but is particularly pronounced in awakened individuals.

4. Stupa: a Buddhist shrine, temple or pagoda that houses a relic or marks the location of an auspicious event. The Tibetan word is Chorten, which means “the basis of offering.” It is a symbol of enlightened mind and the path to its realization.

5. Shakti: from the Sanskrit, meaning power or divine energy, especially in its female principle.

6. Nisargadatta Maharaj: (1897–1981) worked as a cigarette seller in Mumbai (Bombay) but was world renowned for the depth of his enlightenment and admired for his direct and informal teachings, a selection of which are in his most famous book *I Am That*. Nisargadatta is widely considered to be one of the 20th century’s most articulate communicators of Advaita Vedanta.

7. Ramana Maharshi: (1879–1950) was born in Tamil Nadu, South India. At sixteen (1896) he had a life-changing experience: while sitting alone in a small room upstairs, a great fear arose in him that he was going to die and he ventured to scrutinize what that might mean. He lay down and turned his attention very keenly inward, realizing that, “Untouched by death here I am still existing and shining. I am indestructible.” He soon left home for Arunachala mountain in the town of Tiruvannamalai in Southern India where he spent the rest of his life and became world renowned as the century’s greatest master of Advaita Vedanta.

8. Sri Ramakrishna: (1836–1886) Widely considered the greatest Hindu saint of the nineteenth century, he is known for the depth of his enlightenment and habit of exploring all religious paths. One of his most noteworthy devotees was Swami Vivekananda who made his way to America where he helped spark Western interest in Eastern teachings. Ramakrishna was a highly unorthodox and controversial figure in his time and for some time many thought him mad. He was intensely devoted to Kali and was an influential figure in the social and cultural movement known as the Bengal Renaissance.

9. It was only when some of the “other women” found out about each other that the whole charade exploded. For an interesting article on women who sleep with their gurus, see Jessica Romischer’s article, “Women Who Sleep with their Gurus and Why They Love It.” In *What is Enlightenment Magazine*, Issue # 26. You can also read the article at <http://www.wie.org/j26/women-who-sleep.asp?page=1>.

10. A phrase Andrew had coined for the horrific emotional outburst one would be subjected to when the ego of another was laid bare and exposed to the light of day with no possibility of avoidance, denial or escape.

11. It must be said, however, that there have been, throughout history, intrepid thinkers who have, here and there, carried the torch of evolutionary spirituality through their time. While, as is so often the case, they were thoroughly underappreciated by their contemporaries, they did hold

taut a thread of development that is now beginning to bear fruit in a new time and culture. For a fascinating overview of the historical development of evolutionary spirituality see Tom Huston's overview of its best and its brightest at [www.andrewcohen.org/teachings/history-evolutionary-spirituality.asp](http://www.andrewcohen.org/teachings/history-evolutionary-spirituality.asp). You can also read his article, *Tracking 300 Years of a Radical Idea*, in issue 35 of *What is Enlightenment?* Magazine.

12. Gerard Senehi, "The Experimentalist." Check him out on the web.

13. To read more about the emergence of Andrew as a teacher see *My Master is Myself* (Lenox, MA: What is Enlightenment Press, 1989), a small journal that Andrew kept during the two week period of his realization and transformation, and *Autobiography of an Awakening* (Lenox, MA: What is Enlightenment Press, 1992), in which he chronicles his awakening, his early experiences as a teacher and the painful rift with his own guru.

14. The Ground of Being is a phrase used to refer to that unnamable mystery in which all being has its roots, that timeless source of time, the root of our very own self that is the target of discovery in all enlightenment teachings.

15. I lived in Germany for the first ten years of my life and did not speak a syllable of English until my arrival in New York, which, of course, forced the issue. And while for a very long time English has been as much a part of me as breathing, I can distinctly recall the days when that was not the case, when to my young immigrant ears it did indeed seem speech attempted with a mouth full of marbles or, perhaps more true to the American stereotype, speech attempted while chewing gum.

16. According to various statistics, approximately sixty percent of the world's population can be considered to be in the fundamentalist camp.

17. Of course, some of the educated elite also revert to fundamentalist views but the amount of denial involved in such a shift of allegiance seems to me to be extreme, a harsh bargain demanding that we set aside large hunks of reason and hard won knowledge in exchange for a brittle sense of existential certainty.

18. Liberation from fear, ignorance (of our true nature) and selfishness; in other words, enlightenment.

19. The retreat totaled about two hundred and forty attendees.