

**The Hole, the Lake, and the Mountain—Encouraging Insight,  
Wisdom, and Awareness:  
The Emerging Concept of Lightenment™**

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Faculty  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
degree of

Master of Arts in Liberal Studies

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June 2024

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis deals with the possibility that the emerging concept of Major Mindful Moments — Lightenment™ — could further drive mindfulness from a tangential activity to a more central societal concept. I coin Lightenment™, an arising wisdom related to the mindful state as a thought process that positively affects people's happiness and lessens suffering and changes how they interact and behave in the world. These changes, on a broad scale, affect culture and influence the world. Enlightenment, a concept that dates back thousands of years, is a state of continuing wisdom as opposed to Lightenment™'s intermittent wisdom. I explain the benefit of accessibility of Lightenment™ to the non-monastic. For the paper, I use the unique format of Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) (Nash, 2011), academic writing that incorporates personal experience as well as scholarly references. To accompany the written text, I include three videocasts—stories which include interviews of guests' experience with a Lightenment™ moment and benefits. In similar fashion to others' experience presented in the videocasts, this paper contains my story of a journey in discovering mindfulness and Lightenment™ to enhance wellbeing and life circumstances. These stories demonstrate that individual experience can ripple out into the collective to address current floundering political, social, environmental, and cultural attempts to create social justice and wellbeing.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis is an original, unpublished, independent work by author Andrea Marion.

I want to acknowledge the Master of Arts (MALS) Program at Dartmouth College and all my class professors for preparing me to write this thesis. I particularly want to thank Professor Elizabeth Tremmel, first reader, for guiding me through the thesis process. And thanks, as well, to Professor Phillips and Professor Shaw as readers. And thanks to Professor Emeritus Robert Ackland for his APA proofing. I received unstinting technical guidance and assistance from Town Meeting TV of CCTV—Center for Media and Democracy, Burlington, Vermont in producing the videos.

I undertook this work as a continuation of thought and development proceeding out of the Community Mindfulness Groups that I've been leading since 2014. The thesis culminates the fiction, non-fiction, essays, and screenplay study I am privileged to complete for a Dartmouth Master of Arts and Liberal Studies. I look forward to many new adventures in lifelong learning within the arts of media production and writing.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

The Hole, the Lake, and the Mountain— Encouraging Insight, Wisdom, and Awareness:	
The Emerging Concept of Lightenment™	i
Blank Page	ii
Abstract	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Table of Contents	v
Epigraph	vi
Section 1—I fell into a hole	pp. 1–9
Section 2—I climb out of the hole	pp. 9–15
Section 3—I see a lake and mountain	pp. 15–21
Section 4—The lake and the mountain are one	pp. 22–29
Section 5—Transformed by the lake and mountain	pp. 30–44
Section 6—Life as the lake and mountain	pp. 44–62
Section 7—I transmit the lake and mountain	pp. 62–67
Section 8—The lake and mountain future	pp. 67–68
Epilogue	p. 69
References	pp. 70–77

## EPIGRAPH

The Bluebird (excerpt)

there's a bluebird in my heart that  
wants to get out.

but I'm too tough for him,  
I say, stay in there, I'm not going  
to let anybody see you. . . . .

there's a bluebird in my heart that  
wants to get out.  
I say, stay down, do you want  
to mess me up?  
you want to screw up the works?  
you want to blow my book sales  
in Europe?

there's a bluebird in my heart that  
wants to get out.  
but I'm too clever. I only let him out  
at night sometimes,  
when everybody is asleep.

I say, I know you are there,  
so, don't be  
sad.

Charles Bukowski

— originally published in the 1992 collection *The Last Night of the Earth Poems*

## I FELL INTO A HOLE<sup>1</sup>

There is a philosophical anecdote, of unknown origin, passed by contemporary yoga and Hindu philosophy teachers to students. It goes like this.

There is lake at the base of a great mountain peak. The lake represents human existence or mundane reality; the mountain represents the divine or enlightenment.

Classical yoga, 400–450 C.E., interprets that the lake only exists as an occasionally true, but most often distorted divine mountain reflection due to the ripples, waves, winds, and dark storms of human foibles. This is a dualistic philosophy: matter and divinity are separate.

Two non-duality philosophies arose alongside the classical, dualistic viewpoint. Vedanta Yoga, occurring simultaneously in 400–450 C.E., interprets that only the divine mountain exists, and the lake is an illusion. Advaita Vedanta Yoga, appearing around 500–600 C.E., posits the lake and mountain as one entity, a mingling of matter and spirit unity. This corresponds with Tantra Yoga, which emerged in 500–1500 C.E. This philosophy erased the boundaries between matter and spirit, with the lake and mountain interpreted as equally beautiful and significant, and the lake having the divine capability of the mountain. Therefore, only one entity, the lake as one with the mountain, exists.

I interpret this anecdote as an explanation of different definitions of the relationship between humankind and some understanding of "god" or the enlightenment state. It relates to the questions I ask myself in explaining the relationship between the individual and the universal, the self and the Self. This is another way of expressing the lake and mountain analogy. The "self" with a small "s" would be the lake or the fallible

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<sup>1</sup> Portia Nelson wrote *There's a Hole in my Sidewalk: The Romance of Self-Discovery* (1988/2018). I have loosely modelled my thesis subheadings after the title page poem by Portia Nelson.

material world. The "Self" with a capital "S" represents the divine consciousness of the mountain. In some philosophies, there is clear dualism or distinction between the material and the divine. In others, non-duality or "everything is one" is the option, even if it means that the material world is an illusion or that so-called "evil" does not exist.

Over decades, since I began mindfulness and yoga practice, I've come to experience non-duality; to view and understand the lake and mountain as one. However, sometimes to see toward a lake/mountain horizon, one must come out of a "hole" of limited awareness. This is much the same as one who climbs out of a canyon and has no view of surrounding landscape until standing on the canyon rim. My "hole," or canyon, to climb out of was my first career in marketing that never was comfortable over 20 years. But let's go back to the beginning.

I spent my mid-teens to age 24 in adventuresome exploration. To fund myself, I babysat, washed dishes and waited tables in restaurants, and taught English in a high school in France. I travelled the U.S., studied, and lived in Europe for two years after graduating from college. The hitchhiking and trains took me over those two continents that included the whole gamut of experience from a woman who bandaged my blistered feet in Virginia to angry rams at midnight in the Scottish Highlands.

After I met my husband-to-be, Bill, when I was 21, I lived in a tent in the Colorado wilderness and skied or hiked every day while I worked in a bookstore. During that time a bear hunter with a knife kicked us out of our camping spot. We motorcycled (a Yamaha 650) and hitchhiked all over the western U.S. to camp beside and hike mountains and canyons. There were avalanches and blizzards. The Yamaha went down once on muddy, icy spring roads and we went flying. We pushed our bruised and broken



bodies back onto the bike in minutes and were back at work in a day. My friends from stable families got jobs, did community service work, and gathered with loved ones for holidays with grandchildren coming in future decades to sit on their laps.

By my thirties, settled with Bill in Burlington, Vermont, I wanted what my friends had, except for the kids. I thought a good career, marriage and owning a house would make up for the hurt and craziness of my growing up. When eventually, it was a major moment of mindfulness that moved me into a simpler and rich life. Both he and I had responsibilities raising our younger siblings and felt we'd already had families. Both he and I had college degrees, from terms pieced together at various universities or programs, in the U.S. and abroad. So, I talked him into getting a corporate management job, as did I, and getting married and buying a house.

From the start, corporate work was a tight-fitting suit that cramped my creativity and energy. I felt like "Pippi Longstocking," forced into a Catholic boarding school. Pippi was a character from one of my favorite books when I was around age eight. She appears in a series by Astrid Lindgren, published as three-chapter books between 1945 and 1948. I remember Pippi as red-haired, freckled, unconventional, physically strong, playful, and unpredictable. She laughed at social conventions, had a monkey and horse as housemates, and made her own way in life, even if that meant walking down the street with one foot on the sidewalk and one on the curb. The "Pippi" part of my personality wasn't a match for the corporate world. This work environment became practically a strait jacket that squeezed away my happiness. Bill got used to marriage and the house and excelled at his work. He adapted better than I did. He became an international businessman, but his health also suffered from the stress of 25 years of that work.

This was the fall into the big hole, as the future would reveal. We recreated hard on the weekends: skiing the steepest mountains, windsurfing hurricanes, and drinking too much with friends and too often alone.

Almost immediately as a marketing manager, I became. Who was I? What was my-self? What was beyond that self? And what was worth doing for me and others? Why had I wanted to be shut up in an office or a meeting or on business travel for 80 hours a week?

I was stressed. I developed a rare auto-immune disorder. Familial Mediterranean Fever caused monthly high fevers and excruciating abdominal pain. After about seven years from symptoms onset, my family doctor found an effective treatment using the prescription drug colchicine.

I cast about for those 20 years, looking for an excuse to quit my work. I found a few brief opportunities for hiatus but then relapsed into corporate work, worried about financial stability without a regular job. First, my husband's work moved us out of Vermont. Straight from the office in a suit and stockings, I took a job on a landscaper crew for a season. I was relieved to be in fresh air, building stone walls and patios, planting trees, and seeding lawns. We moved back to Vermont as his job prospects changed again. A glutton for punishment and a sucker for a middle management salary, I took an even higher-level corporate job, though increasingly uncomfortable with the stress and pace.

My first vacation from this position was a week at the Kripalu Yoga Retreat Center in the Berkshires in 2001. A massage therapist had suggested that I try yoga. I didn't just take a class; I took a full immersion week-long retreat. The vacation had a

huge impact. Within a few years, I had changed my profession to be a yoga teacher and studio owner and changed my way of life via insight due to mindfulness meditation practice.

I discuss mindfulness and meditation in depth later in this thesis, but to briefly introduce the concepts here, I quote Shinzen Young, my mindfulness/meditation teacher beginning in 2014 and author of *The Science of Enlightenment*. He defines meditation as an elevation "of a person's base level of focus. . . . If you are two to three times more focused in each moment of life, then you're living two to three times bigger, two to three times richer" (1998, p. 1).

I conflate the two words, mindfulness and meditation, as has the contemporary colloquial and secular domain. To fine point the differences causes more confusion among the non-monastic population than it helps in clarification. My experience is that they both lead to a continuum of altered consciousness and a connection to deeper self.

For this thesis, I investigate the process of mindfulness from several perspectives including my ever-evolving practice. And my mindfulness led to a concept I have trademarked as Lightenment™.

To briefly introduce Lightenment™, it is a major moment of mindfulness that appears as arising wisdom that positively affects people's happiness and changes how they interact and behave. These changes develop as culture and influence the world. This seems like a broad and impossible claim. But stick with me to the end of this thesis and then decide.

To explain my positions, I use a form for this thesis known as Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) as defined by Dr. Robert J. Nash, Emeritus Professor of Education at the

University of Vermont. He developed SPN during his 48-year teaching career and in his book, *Me-search and Research: A Guide to Writing Scholarly Personal Narrative Manuscripts* (2011).

Nash defines SPN as "public intellectual writing based in storytelling and self-disclosure, one that draws from a variety of academic and non-academic references and findings" (2011, p. 5). In an essay about his approach to teaching, Nash writes,

Whenever it's necessary, let's agree to huddle together within the protective cocoon of our mutual humanity for the comfort and affirmation we need when things go dismally wrong, or for that matter, ecstatically right. You share your meanings with me, and I'll do the same with you. (p. 10)

My experience with Professor Nash was that he seemed compelled or mission-driven to ensure each student found their voice in their writing in his courses. He graded on the discovered sense of self his students achieved as related to the research project. As never before in his classes, I found courage to speak up on the page about my personal experiences, as he insisted I do. Nash posits that:

Younger adults feel responsibility to become what they are supposed to be; middle adults are still in process of creating meaning, but the process has become a sharper, edgier undertaking as time ticks by; and older adults wonder if life has occurred when they weren't looking. Now what? I still have so much to do. (p. 12)

In this thesis, using Nash's approach, I weave together research and personal experience. I have found through MALS courses that my writing, fiction, and screenplay—as well as non-fiction—borrows fantastically from my personal experience.

Perhaps this a writer's flaw. Perhaps it dovetails the newer genre of auto-fiction or fictionalized memoir. Or perhaps it's a new take on what has always been.

I have read fiction and memoir by the same author and the parallels can be uncanny. Particularly, I find this phenomenon in writing by Frederick Buechner, the Pulitzer-prize runner up from 1981 and National Book Award finalist from 1971. I read his novels: *Godric* (1980/1999), about familial affection, responsibilities, and disasters; *Brenden* (1987/2000a) about the complexities of faith; and *The Storm* (1998) about reconciling the past, fragmented families, and love's mysteries. His memoirs *Telling Secrets* (1991/2000c), *The Longing for Home* (1996), and *The Eyes of the Heart* (2000b) tell of his own living battleground of fragmented family and his longing for love and home that parallel his novels. Annie Dillard reminded readers that Buechner's novels are masterpieces.

It could be that this hybrid fiction/memoir genre is more prevalent due to internet social media where facts flex, bend, and snap to create a compelling post. Reader and writer accept and understand the blend. But it's clear that personal experience is relevant to readers. And Nash felt it was relevant to scholarly writing.

While I consider myself somewhere between Nash's middle and older adult, I do feel I have much left to do and am excited and energized by the prospects. I don't feel a sense of "now what", due to my own Lightenment™ moments.

I will attempt to argue for the ways in which we all can—and do—attain moments of clarity, a sense of Lightenment™ that arises in the midst of our days, without our efforts.

This is not a new idea, but exists in many traditions, going back thousands of years. I coined the term Lightenment™ as a playful and reduced extrapolation of long-stated, meaningful concepts of arising insight and wisdom, related mostly to enlightenment. Enlightenment is the highest state of consciousness according to Indian yoga guru and religious teacher Sri Swami Satchidananda, who gained following in the West in the 1960s (Satchidananda, 1978).

Paths toward higher consciousness include practices of yoga, meditation and prayer. Erin Johnson, Senior Research Associate and Lecturer in the Department of Sociology and an affiliate of the Religion and Social Change Lab, George Fox University, Salt Lake City, Utah writes, "Teachers and texts argue that these practices can help alleviate negative emotions—such as anger, anxiety, and depression—and cultivate feelings of joy and contentment. Research in cognitive science and psychology has suggested that mindfulness practices may, in fact, live up to these emotional promises" (Johnson, 2020, p. 576).

Ultimately, the enlightenment state involves a complete transformation of emotional reactivity, as explained by Jonathan M. Roth, writer, therapist, and fellow at the Insight Meditation Society, in Barre, Massachusetts (Roth, 2019).

Central to this thesis is the creation of three 10-minute beta videocasts. Each is a segment of what will be an ongoing series called *The Lightenment™ Show*. Each show features a guest interview and their personal story of insight that arose, without preparation or precedence, to solve a problem or to help themselves or help someone else find a way through a situation. For the thesis, I also call on teachings and writings from mindfulness practitioners in various traditions. My goal beyond this thesis project is to

create a more consumable videocast series for YouTube and social media, a broad presence for *The Lightenment™ Show*.

My intention is for viewers to have access, in a simple, meaningful way, to the powerful narratives of individuals as a portal to understanding major moments of mindfulness and their benefits. Each guest offers, in a sense, a taste of enlightenment. This paper complements the videos by explaining history, philosophy, and benefits of mindfulness and Lightenment™ that will be reflected, albeit in varying ways, in each guest experience. It is generally perceived that enlightenment is beyond reach of or interest to most. My goal is to use *The Lightenment™ Show* videocasts to make a higher state of consciousness accessible. This is possible through spontaneous major moments of mindfulness that are common if not frequent for most people. Lightenment™ may not be *the* highest form as in enlightenment, but it is available and understandable. So, let's pick up the story of how I emerged from the hole and saw a lake and a mountain.

## I CLIMB OUT OF THE HOLE

From the bottom of my "hole," amidst my corporate woes and health issues in 1990, a friend recommended the book *Full Catastrophe Living* (1990/2009) by Jon Kabat-Zinn, Ph.D. and Professor of Medicine at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. The premise of the book is that mindfulness practice, adapted and simplified for the modern practitioner, can alleviate medical conditions related to stress such as headaches, back pain, high blood pressure and heart disease. I started mindfulness practice using the exercises in the book.

The book exercises guide students to practice a gentle body scan (feel your right thumb, then your first finger, then— and so on through the body) and focus on "in breath" then "out breath." The aim is to change one's problematic attitudes based on eight patterns of thought and habit. For instance, one of the patterns is nonjudging, which means to see people and events firsthand and experience immediacy rather than life based on pre-determined concepts or labels and to be free of prejudices and discrimination. Another is non-striving, which turns one's attitude inward to allow arising wisdom to lead to action rather than work in a pre-determined way toward what will be, should be, or must be. Another pattern is living in the present, the here and now, without regret for the past or anxiety for the future (Kabat-Zinn, 1990/2009).

To progress beyond Jon Kabat-Zinn's book, on a random search in the local library, I found the 1975 book *How to Meditate: A Guide to Self-Discovery*, by Lawrence LeShan, American psychologist, educator, and best-selling author.

I was again intrigued with the benefits of mindfulness and mediation explained in this book. I did the exercises. LeShan introduced practices such as single point awareness or focusing on your in breath and out breath while counting backwards from 50 or 20 (LeShan, 1975). The book jacket author biography mentioned that LeShan lived in Vermont.

As I was a bit desperately looking for relief from my corporate lifestyle discomfort, I looked him up and called him. He was so kind and told me he was willing to guide me on a weekly basis for a few months of meditation. But I was too shy and felt too ignorant about the subject to take him up on his offer. I was surprised to reach a best-selling author by phone and that he was so kind and available.



I continued to practice meditation from books and found a foothold of peace and release from stirring thoughts: my work isn't good enough, what am I doing with my life, why don't I feel happier? That is not everyone's experience. Many people have trouble wrangling with thought or unwanted thought that arises once permission is given. With a good teacher, there are techniques to move through these phases. But discomfort did not happen for me. I felt peace and grounding right away. With each mindful foothold, I felt I had found a rock scree chute and was climbing out of a dark hole or canyon. When hiking canyons, in the absence of switchback trails, I had often climbed over the boulders of a scree chute, loose rock that had tumbled down in avalanche fashion, sometimes from the top all the way to the bottom. A few large rocks would get loose, and tumble and bring more with them. Earth shifts and gravity cause scree chutes. Tough hiking, but doable.

After my introduction to mindfulness from books, I felt relaxation and less irritation with my daily life, particularly the deadlines and the marketing problems. When my boss found a grammatical or content error in my publications for the department, I didn't berate myself, as I would have before mindfulness practice. I even reminded myself about the Native American practice of purposely weaving a mistake into every blanket because only the Divine could make something perfect. It was easier to go through the day feeling happy. I wanted to move further on this path.

I decided to try yoga, which I had read was a form of moving meditation. In 2001, I went to Kripalu, a yoga retreat center in the Berkshires, Massachusetts for a rest and relaxation program. I had chosen to be silent, which was optional, for my stay. I was relieved to be away from my stressful corporate job, my overbearing lifestyle, and my unhappiness at age 44. Here I began to investigate mindfulness as accessed through the

yoga body practice. Step by step, I had climbed to the rim and was no longer at the bottom of a big hole.

The word "mindfulness" was coined in the 19th Century by Thomas William Rhys Davids, a British magistrate in India, who considered it the closest association of the Pali word "sati" which literally translates as "to remember to observe" (Rhys Davids & Stede, 1921–1925/1972, p. 267). Originally yoga was not movement or poses but a form of meditation, which has many practices for investigating thoughts and sensations. In the 20th century, it became the moving meditation and physical practice that I learned.

Those 22 years ago, I remember entering the Kripalu retreat yoga Shala, a space where students gather to practice yoga. It was in the nave of a cathedral-like building that had previously been a Jesuit Monastery. The Christian iconography had all been removed, yet holiness abounded in the beautiful space. Krishna Das, an Indian singer, played on the sound system, in a deep bass voice resonating over the words of a Sanskrit prayer set to music. I was astounded, overcome with emotion and uplifted. I had a sense that life would never be the same.

Up to that point I had considered, in my limited meditation experience, that insight came from the mind and resulted in more selfless action through the body. With each down dog or forward fold in that Shala, I discovered that wisdom could arise from the body and appear in the mind. Yoga and mindfulness became similar practices for me.

At the last community meal when optional retreat silence ended, I had a chance to talk with some students. Their devotion was intense. Some made claims that yoga had cured them of symptoms from conditions such as Muscular Dystrophy or depression and

anxiety. One said she had only been able to crawl to a mat before practicing yoga and now enjoyed vibrant health and wellbeing.

The testimonials won me over. I was looking for a "fix." I was so impressed with the claims made by students that I began to practice Bikram Yoga, the only studio that I found at the time, when I returned home.

Bikram Yoga is a specific practice that grew in popularity starting in the 1970s. It was developed by Bikram Choudhury, an Indian American yoga guru. Choudhury claimed to have studied with a notable Indian Master, Bishnu Gosh, brother of Yogananda who wrote the 1946 *Autobiography of a Yogi*. Over decades, Choudhury organized hundreds of licensed studios worldwide. By 2017, he was the subject of sexual abuse allegations and fled to India, deeply in debt to his lawyers (Tilin, 2021).

His yoga, a specific series of existing yoga poses that he sequenced and trademarked, arguably an innovation, is still practiced under other names today. The standardized exercise program consists of a series of 26 postures guided via a standardized instructor dialog, performed in the same manner, in the same order, and held for the same duration—across instructors and studios (Tracy & Hart, 2013). It requires physical conditioning and practice in 104-degree heat. I still practice the Bikram sequence occasionally and find it brilliant in its ability to move the body in ways to relieve muscle and joint pain and temporarily ease emotional turmoil. It's well known that physical exercise produces endorphins and other hormones that relax the body, make you feel happier, and decrease levels of adrenaline and cortisol. I found I didn't have to spend a day skiing or windsurfing or hiking to feel the same benefits. It is all available in a well-taught one-hour yoga class.

I knew my husband Bill had the same penchant for vigorous sport as I, and I wanted him to try yoga. At age 48, he was suffering with high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and stress. Bikram seemed too "weird " as well as too rigid and highly structured for Bill. I doubted it would appeal to him. I had heard my friends talk about Ashtanga Yoga; a flowing practice newly taught in our town by an easy-going woman. It struck me as more accessible to my husband, though still a classic, dualistic interpretation as is Bikram. For my birthday, I asked Bill to go to an Ashtanga Yoga class with me.

Ashtanga Yoga was still early on the U.S. yoga scene at the time, having been brought to the west by a few vagabonding young men, such as David Williams and David Swensen, who travelled to India and began to teach back to the U.S in the '70s. I've taken workshops with both.

Ashtanga incorporated movement as meditation and encouraged practitioners to choose a focused gaze and a breathing technique called ujjayi breathing, which warms the body. To practice ujjayi, one would breathe as if attempting to fog up a mirror, only with lips closed (Ramirez-Duran et al., 2022). Unbeknownst to me at the time, Ashtanga practice would bring me deeper into mindfulness practice that would eventually lead me to the concept of Lightenment™.

Bill reluctantly agreed to attend the class for my birthday. In the warm studio, with other students on December 13, 2001, a teacher led us through the Ashtanga practice. After the fifth "down dog" pose I looked at my husband, from under my arm in the head-down position.

I whispered to him, "How are you doing?"

He whispered back, "I'm going to do this for the rest of my life." He was hooked. Indeed, he currently owns a yoga studio, continues to practice yoga daily, and shows every sign of being a lifetime practitioner. He's 70 now and founded a yoga studio business fifteen years ago that he still runs today.

I attended a workshop with Indian Master Shri K. Pattabhi Jois in Montreal in 2002. Jois developed and popularized Ashtanga Yoga as derived from Hatha Yoga, or postural yoga for body and mind refinement and wellbeing. Jois studied with Indian Master S.T. Krishnamacharya. At the workshop he said, "practice and all is coming." This I interpreted as advice to continue mindfulness and physical yoga toward attainment of the ultimate consciousness state of enlightenment. I took a big step at this point. I felt so empowered with new energy that I left my lucrative job during the 2002 recession and become a fulltime yoga teacher. Most people would have had a solid plan for such a move. I did not.

I was overjoyed. I came home and told Bill that I was going to teach yoga for a living. He said that was crazy. I made up simple flyers about a free yoga class I would teach at the Community Center near my house and distributed them to a five-block radius. The first night I had to mop the dirt from the cold floor and was prepared to sit there by myself, heart pounding. Thirty people showed up. I was out of the hole.

#### I SEE A LAKE AND MOUNTAIN

The glimpse of the lake and mountain interacting as one happened when I met a local Vermont teacher in 2004. She introduced me to a type of physical yoga practice based on non-dual Kashmir Shaivism or Tantra Yoga called Anusara, which means

"flowing with grace" in Sanskrit. John Friend is the American yoga guru and creator of Anusara Yoga in 1997, his interpretation of yoga based on classical poses. It is based on a philosophy of intrinsic goodness and a series of bio-mechanical principles of alignment (Williamson, 2013). Friend has a background of study in Ashtanga Yoga beginning in 1984 with Pattabhi Jois. In 1990, he adapted Iyengar Yoga, developed by Indian Master Yogacharya B.K.S. Iyengar. Iyengar devoted his life to the evolution of his approach to yoga, based on the traditional eight limbs of yoga taught over 2,500 years ago by the sage Patanjali.

His principles involved muscle, bone, and energy alignment that guides the body through movement, such as spiraling the inner thigh in as the pelvis spirals out. It was a more spontaneous, innovative physical practice based on the Tantric mindfulness philosophy that postured the lake and mountain as one entity of intersection between the divine and humanity. I began to study the physical practice developed by Friend and taught to me by one of his senior teachers, Todd Norian.

I found the Tantric perspective to be freeing, lacking the rigidity of previous philosophies I had studied, including Bikram Yoga and Ashtanga. Tantra is forgiving of human foibles as natural, even inconsequential, considering the limited duration of an individual life amidst the grand scheme of time. It was my first exposure to a philosophy that presented my weaknesses, along with everyone else's, as essentially meaningless. The focus of practice was to unveil intrinsic goodness, worthiness, and supreme nature in all things. I studied the tantric perspective that merged the concept of lake and mountain as one, or non-duality, from 2004 until 2014.

In February 2012, an Anusara employee claimed that Friend was having sexual relations with employees, leading an all-female Wiccan coven that practiced rituals of a sexual nature, freezing Anusara employee-benefit plans on the sly, and asking employees to accept shipments of marijuana (Tilin, 2021). Obviously, freedom can have consequences. I abandoned study of the Anusara practice in disgust.

Another exposure to non-duality, or the lake and mountain as one, happened after Friend's sexual allegations scandals sent me looking in a new direction. A neighbor mentioned that "a group of monks" were renting space for a modern monastery and were living at the Quaker Meeting House a block from my house. I was intrigued.

They had public meditations every morning at 8 A.M. and all-day Saturday. One Saturday, I walked in and Shinzen Young, trained in the Zen non-dualist style of meditation, was teaching and answering questions. During the Q&A period, I told him I could sit and find peace and have insights, but I couldn't live continually in that peaceful and insightful way. He answered that I needed to integrate my meditation experience into my everyday life. And that would happen as my brain developed the capacity to repeat my meditation experiences "on the fly." Over years, I have gained understanding and practice "on the fly." I continued to attend Shinzen's talks and retreats, and he became my teacher.

Though trained in the Zen Buddhist non-dual tradition in Japan, Young had a no-nonsense, practical, and science-based approach to mindfulness that felt safe and real to me. He adapted his teachings to accommodate Western culture and developed an interest and expertise in neuroscience to "take the mist out of mysticism," as he often says. He is now co-director of the leadership team for the University of Arizona Science Enhanced

Mindful Awareness Laboratory (SEMA), a lab that investigates the effects of targeted ultrasound to the brain to enhance mindfulness.

Shinzen outlines steps toward mindfulness practice. First, develop clarity or knowing what is happening to you in the present and having the intention to experience whatever occurs. Then concentrate, which is extraordinary focus that allows you to cultivate deeper and deeper mindfulness states. Always have at hand the state of equanimity, or *no push-no pull*—you don't grasp or reach for anything, nor do you push experience or sensations away (Young, 1998). It's wholesale acceptance. Shinzen says "what few people realize is that these states of presence and focus are trainable . . . and the fact that extraordinary focus can be intentionally cultivated is one of the most significant findings by the human species" (Young, 1998, p. 27).

He places value on the complete experience, meaning to experience something with clarity, concentration, and equanimity. Complete pleasure delivers pure satisfaction but has little substance. Complete pain is poignant but not problematic. Complete mental confusion nurtures intuition. According to Young (1998), mindfulness involves investigating the senses - visual, auditory, and sensation, either within as thought or emotion or without as actually seeing, hearing, or physically feeling.

When I practice or teach mindfulness, I inhabit these spaces. I illustrate these sensory spaces and techniques. As an example, I explain my thoughts on a night in which I had a hard time falling asleep because I was worried about my choice to leave marketing to become a yoga teacher offering private sessions and classes. What if I failed?



Lying in bed, I close my eyes. I take a breath in and FEEL my belly and ribs expand; a breath out causes me to FEEL the belly and ribs contract. I breathe like this several times. This is one sensory space of physical sensation. I then turn my attention to emotional sensation; I FEEL more relaxed due to this gentle, focused breathing. But a worried thought (How dare I do this? Do I think I can just jump off the ship I've been on for 20 years?) barges into my awareness. I gently set that at the outside edge of my thinking. The senses of smell and taste are included in physical FEEL.

I then turn my attention to sounds in my environment and HEAR a car pass on the street through a puddle outside my window. To shift focus, I turn inward and HEAR my thoughts—I'm thinking "it's raining." Then I hear myself ask, "Will I get enough private clients to make a living?" Again, I set that aside without judging myself and make a choice to listen to the rain. These are the auditory sensory spaces.

I let go of listening. I shift to SEE the images behind my closed eyelids and in front of my eyes. There's a pattern of black and white and some red color mosaic, then it turns to an image of myself lying in bed. I open my eyes and they land on the light from the moon in the west window, partially shaded, with all other objects in the darkened room in my peripheral vision. These are the visual sensory spaces. I then spontaneously allow thought to arise, and I hear the words Bill has spoken to me many times about various situations: "Why don't you take it one step at a time and see where you end up?" I FEEL better and fall asleep.

So, there are two spaces, inward and outward, in each category of SEE, HEAR, FEEL.

I could have been ruminating, worrying, telling myself I was helpless about my uncertain life changes of career and philosophy. I let those thoughts go to the outside edge of awareness and focused my mind on the sensory spaces. I waited for wisdom to arise. If I don't get wisdom or intuition about a situation in the moment, I can be patient and wait for another occasion. I have enough experience with mindfulness to know, at this point, that wisdom is coming.

Noticing these spaces can be practiced at any pace, from rapid fire to s-l-o-w, amounting to many breaths for each individual thought, to pairing a thought with an inhale, exhale as the breath arises.

"Noting" is a practice that can enhance concentration, according to some, as when one feels an emotion and silently repeats the word "FEEL" in thought space to make sure attention is on that space; or hears a thought, and silently repeats the word "HEAR" in thought space (Young, 1998).

I found, with practice, that I can isolate one thought or sense space. There's always something there, even if it is nothingness, which is called rest. For me, the "monkey mind" abates, the jumping from thought to thought that is so detrimental to an overwhelmed nervous system and the bane of enlightenment or highest consciousness.

In line with Young's approach but simplified and stripped down of any doctrine is the approach of Ellen Langer, the first woman psychology professor to be tenured at Harvard University. In her 40 years of research, her mindfulness approach focuses on an intention or attempt to simply notice change, or novelty, in the environment. Her method doesn't require a specific body position (sitting), or specific technique. Pirson, Langer, and Zilcha (2018) completed a study of Langerian Mindfulness using a 14-item

questionnaire and 4,139 participant responses to measure four factors—Novelty Seeking, Engagement, Flexibility, and Novelty Producing. Their research demonstrates that participants who are aware of change are also able to engage with change, be flexible around change, and capable of action to produce change in their lives. They note that:

Mindfulness as cognitive flexibility is understood as the ability to draw novel distinctions which is reflected in novelty seeking, novelty producing, and higher engagement overall. As such, mindfulness is theorized to lead to higher levels of psychological well-being, understood as intrapersonal well-being. Such psychological well-being is heightened via mindfulness not only because of higher awareness levels but also because it can buffer against depression. The ability to draw novel distinctions allows for reappraisal of situations of suffering better than mindless behavior can. (p. 178)

Harvard University Fellow Sayyed Mohsen Fatemi studies Langerian mindfulness and the significant role it might play in peace-making. He explains Langer's point of view with the following scenario: "Why does the bully bully? Because they feel weak and unsafe. If we taught bullies how to feel safe and help them acknowledge perceived weakness instead of telling them not to pick on the weak, we would be presenting a more mindful, truthful reality" (2012, p. 33).

Fatemi explains that Langer's model of "active noticing" varies from the many Buddhist-based mindfulness models of introspection or meta-awareness. It's simple, even naive, common sense. In the Langerian model, one merely notices what's happening without critical assessment, and clarity presents itself (Fatemi, 2012). We can drop inattentive behavior and develop the habit of merely noticing.

## THE LAKE AND MOUNTAIN ARE ONE

From 2014 to 2020, I studied techniques such as gyrotonic exercise, like Pilates, and Postural Restoration Physical Therapy, a technique that has developed in the last 20 years, to add physicality expertise to my teaching. To continue mindfulness study, I attended retreats at a monastic academy, at that time, heavily influenced by Shinzen Young techniques. Over these six years, I did ten seven-day silent retreats with teachers trained by Shinzen or with Shinzen himself. These immersion experiences shifted my perspective of the lake and mountain once again. With ten or more hours a day of sitting practice, I was continually seeing the divine mountain as the lake of my being. In deep concentration states on these retreats, the boundaries between my awareness, seemingly inside my head or body, tends to merge with the physical reality around my body—the Zendo meditation hall, my fellow retreatants seated around me, and the view of mountains and trees outside the windows. It all begins to feel and look like one continuous fabric.

A retreat day starts at 4 a.m. when I wake in my dorm bed to my phone alarm and ease myself to stand and walk into the common bathroom to wash up. Usually about 15 others are doing the same. Quickly, I pull on dark-colored warm clothes, if it was winter, or lighter-weight clothes for warmer days. The Zendo, or meditation hall, is only minimally heated in winter and cool even in summer, being located at the top of a mountain. Bright clothing and uncovered shoulders or limbs are never allowed in the Zendo, even in hot weather. Bright clothing is considered an unnecessary adornment to the body; bare limbs are considered tempting to the opposite sex. Upon entering the

Zendo, some of us rush to the table where a large pot of hot coffee is steaming. I gulp two cups quickly. The coffee, though not encouraged, is provided as a service for those of us who would get a headache without it due to habituation.

I make my way to my zabuton, or three feet by three feet thick square mat, and sit on a zafu, or raised round cushion, in the middle of the zabuton. The fifteen others around me are doing the same. The zafu brings my seat above my hips so my legs rest, folded, on the thick mat. Immediately, my body relaxes, and I start a technique which I choose for the morning. Listen to the thoughts in my mind, then let them go. Then watch the images in my head and let them go. This is HEAR IN and SEE IN. I practice at my pace, as quickly or slowly as I choose. Often my mind wanders so I bring it back to focus on HEAR IN or SEE IN. I might be aware that I'm hungry. Or cold. Or my knees hurt. I am still and make only slight movement changes. I let go of any arising image or auditory thought and wait for the next thought. And keep my focus.

Every 30 minutes, a soft bell rings, and we all shift position, perhaps standing up and walking a few steps, then sitting when the bell rings softly again five minutes later.

The time from 7 to 8 is exercise period. I walk in the woods, in any season, and keep my focus on tree leaves, branches, bark, the sun streaming, or the sounds of my footsteps. I'm aware of whatever arises in the present to notice in my mind, not trying to control anything, but not holding onto any thought either. For example, I notice the sun streaming, and then notice a maple sap bucket fixed to a tree. Instead of noticing the sun streaming and then going off on a train of thought that said in my head, "Isn't that nice, I wonder if the sun is shining in Burlington, and I wonder if Bill has taken the dog for a walk yet." That is mindlessness.

I may also go for a swim in the pond. I've been in the pond when I've had to push through ice chunks to get up to shoulder height, stand quietly with my fists balled under my armpits to hold in heat, and breathe for three minutes. Then calmly walk out of the water. Others of my colleagues may have lifted weights or danced or taken a run on the mountain's dirt roads surrounding the retreat center.

Vegan breakfast follows from 8 to 9 a.m. Everyone helps set up tables and assists the assigned cooks to finish food preparation. I remember one morning being fascinated watching a colleague chip every bit of garlic meat from the clove, even the ends that are usually thrown out. I watched intently as he plied that last morsel from the husk. Everything, even garlic, wants to fulfill its mission, I remember thinking. Why deny the ends of the garlic their destiny to be in the soup? The assigned cooks present the bowls of rice, vegetable and bean soup, salad, and fruit. All stand at the back of their chairs until the last person is in place. Then we chant the Gayatri Mantra in Sanskrit. It is believed the Gayatri Mantra bestows wisdom and enlightenment by way of supreme godliness and illumination. After eating, each washes their own dishes in bins of hot soapy and clear water. In minutes the bell softly rings to bring us back to our seats for the longest period of sitting of the day, 9:30 a.m. to 1 p.m., again with a five-minute movement break every 30 minutes.

Sometimes I dread this long period and struggle to keep my focus on my practice. Other times I enter deep states of concentration. During this time, a series of bells ring, and a retreatant stands and goes to the interview room for a brief exchange, or interview, with the teacher. The order of interviews is pre-established, and everyone knows when

their turn is. An interview is a time to ask questions or discuss difficulties or successes in practice.

Another meal of similar food and activity follows from 1 to 2 p.m. And from 2 to 3 p.m., we have an assigned chore. I always try to find a corner or crevice filled with dust or dirt that had been overlooked, perhaps for many months. Once I stood at the second-floor railing and swung my dustmop below, over the high walls. Many previously undiscovered spider webs and dust motes descended. I was delighted.

Free time, in silence, in keeping with the entire seven days of the retreat, follows. I nap, swim, or walk. At 4 p.m. the bell rings softly, and we sit until 6 p.m. when there is an hour-long dharma talk. The word "dharma" has roots in Sanskrit along with the related Pali word "dhamma" which means "to hold or support." It's also related to the Latin "firmus" meaning firm or stable and has taken the meaning of cosmic order or law (Rhys Davids & Stede, 1921–1925/1972, p. 133). Kabat-Zinn expresses dharma as “. . . resembling scientific knowledge, ever growing, ever changing, yet with a core body of methods, observations, and natural laws distilled from thousands of years of inner exploration through highly disciplined self-observation and self-inquiry" (Kabat-Zinn, 2016, p. 567). A dharma talk is a transfer of some aspect of dharma principles to the students.

I listen intently to every word, as the teacher often uses students' questions from the personal interviews, anonymously shared of course, as the focus of his talk. Once, I recognized my situation in his talk. This is useful to tie the group together, as we all, in a way, know what the others are going through.

From 7 to 8 p.m., we sit. From 8 to 9 p.m., there are interviews again. Occasionally, we have an open question and answer period, the only time talking is allowed during the retreat. Again, this brings the group together; it is uncanny how others are thinking as myself. I feel at home and not alone amidst a community that seems to know me better than my own family, though I never speak a word to anyone the entire week.

From 9 to 10 p.m., there is one more hour of sitting. The bell rings for the end of the practice day. We silently make our way to the dorm area to brush teeth, wash face, slip into pajamas, and crawl into a firm twin bed or bunk with thick quilts. I sleep immediately and soon awake to my phone alarm at 4:00 a.m. I don't think "Shit, I gotta get up." Or "I'm so tired." I quietly set aside the quilt and begin the day.

I experience deep rest and stages of consciousness. But am I able to actually "no think"? I'll tell you what a great and ancient sage has to say about this.

Some experts date meditation practice to having originated in northern India over 5,000 years ago. At that time, it was called yoga, not a physical practice but contemplations designed to attain the Samadhi, the yogic term for enlightenment (Bīrūnī et al., 2020). A definitive work, the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali are 195 verses or sutras from the early centuries that appeared around 400 C.E., attributed to author Patanjali, but perhaps composed by many authors. Sri Swami Satchidananda's book on Patanjali (1978) is a standard required reading in most yoga teacher trainings in the U.S. The Swami created Integral Yoga, which included postures and philosophy, and established a Yoga Center in San Francisco in 1970. In 1969, he sat in lotus position in an orange robe with flowing beard and addressed the 500,000 people at the Woodstock music festival. He



taught yoga in prisons and drug rehabilitation centers and received the Juliet Hollister Award, presented by the United Nations in 1996, among many other humanitarian recognitions. A decade before his death in 1991, several women accused him of sexual misconduct which he denied, and criminal charges were never filed (see Cohen, 2002).

In Patanjali's sutras, mindfulness is referred to as sadhana, or practice and discipline aimed at discriminative discernment (a.k.a. enlightenment). The Patanjali Yoga Sutras refer to yoga as Ashtanga, or Eight Limbs of meditative practice. The Sutras make brief mention of a physical practice with little specific detail. Researchers have found the rise of postural yoga or asana came about around the middle of the 19th century, perhaps encouraged as preparation for soldiering, as explained by Mark Singleton, yoga scholar and research fellow from the University of London (Singleton, 2010).

One of the most noted and quoted verses from the Patanjali Sutras is "Chitta Vritti Nirodha," which refers to highest consciousness or "Samadhi" often translated as "yoga is the cessation of the fluctuations of the mind" (Satchidananda, 1978, p. 32). Such a change would lead to holistic emotional modification of habits and dispositions. Research on spirituality and change has been conducted by Erin Johnson from the Department of Sociology at Duke University. She investigated self-formation within two diverse communities—an Integral Yoga Studio, which would align with Patanjali texts, and the Catholic Center. Her work found parallels in both traditions that link practices of prayer and yoga/meditation to holistic emotional change. Each tradition has a regimen of practices or techniques to overcome negative emotional habits and cultivate joy, peace, and contentment that ripples from the individual to the collective. Whether a practitioner

believes in heaven or samadhi, the enlightenment state, great change can occur (Johnson, 2020).

I don't adhere to a literal interpretation of Patanjali's concept of "cessation of fluctuations of the mind". I have been able to focus on one thing and let other distractions go to the outside edge of my awareness and not interfere with my concentration. I have also been able to grasp that deep awareness is absolute truth and distractions are relative truth. But "emptying" my mind hadn't happened. And science interprets that perhaps this isn't possible.

Mark R. Davis is director and principal investigator at the UK College of Hypnosis and Hypnotherapy and a world-wide leader in evidence-based hypnotherapy. Cessation of the mind has been debunked by many psychologists, including Davis in his 2013 dissertation *There is a Hole in Holism*. He applied evidence-based practice in psychology to Focused Mindful Approaches (FMA), his term for mindfulness. By instituting evidence-based psychological interventions to individuals in the FMA state, he determined that the subjects maintain self-awareness and perceptions in an altered state or radically change mind-set during these focused mindful approaches. He concludes that the individual's same attitudes, preconceived ideas, and expectations enter the focused states (Davis, 2013).

In another study, Anna Castiglione and researchers at the University of California investigated the potential for an individual to stop a thought, such as a memory, from occurring by recruiting right frontal beta brain activity. But just as the body doesn't completely cease all activity like blood flow and breathing when one stops an action – for example, moving an arm touching someone else—so does the brain continue activity

through the processes to disentangle, detect, and attend to preventing a certain thought. There's still thought about stopping a particular thought (Castiglione et al., 2019).

Davis and Castiglione question the higher consciousness states as described by Patanjali and modern interpretations such as those described by UC Davis Professor Michael R. Hagerty, Graduate School of Management, and Julian Issacs, Professor of Parapsychology, J.F. Kennedy University (Hagerty et. al. 2013). They record subjective accounts of the jhanas, or "eight altered states of consciousness which can arise during periods of strong concentration" (2013, p. 1). And the final stage of the jhanas is cessation or nirvana or enduring enlightenment.

In retreats, I may be in a concentrated state, on a point of focus for hours. In my meditations, I have reached a place of nothingness when all that exists for me is a sort of swath of darkness that is very comfortable and free. There was still something—the swath of darkness, or dark velvetiness, the one fabric encompassing my physical body and surroundings as well as my awareness, representing lake's humanity and the mountain's divinity.

Both Davis (2013) and Castiglione (2019) as well as Patanjali and Hagerty could be accurate if the description of cessation of the mind is accounted as highest consciousness unobstructed by partisanship. Brain activity in the areas of compassion, understanding and non-discriminative states remains while brain states associated with rumination, worry, fantasy, and prejudice are inactive (Hagerty, et.al. 2013). It's as if the lake completely has the characteristics of the mountain for intermittent or prolonged periods.

## TRANSFORMED BY THE LAKE AND MOUNTAIN

On those silent retreats, I was introduced to Buddhist concepts through the dharma talks and 10 to 14 hours of sitting each day. Life was beginning to feel open to me, even if not completely understandable. I began to relax and accept the openness and uncertainty. Again, this is a habit which I have not perfected and still work on today. On these retreats, I had an opportunity to learn from two teachers, Shinzen Young was one of them, who had each spent many years in Buddhist monasteries in Japan. They had studied the strict and disciplined practice as the path towards enlightenment and non-duality, as previously defined.

The Buddha's teaching on breathing and mindfulness is recorded in the sutras. The word "sutra" translates as "threads" of information. Sutras were used in the Hinduism (Yoga), Jainism, and Buddhist traditions to record oral information in written form. The term was also initially descriptive, as the words were written on bamboo slats and bound together with thread (Horiuchi, 2023).

In my experience reading the Yoga and Buddhist sutras, I found them to be "threads" of information that I could follow as clues to practice in reaching higher states of consciousness. The "threads" would often seem tangled or not easily understandable, and my work, as a student, was to intricately sort the threads among the tangles and gain understanding.

Buddhist monastic ascetic meditation entered a Buddhist reform movement during the first half of the 20th century. Robert Sharf, Professor of East Asian Languages and Cultures at UC Berkeley, says these changes were attempts to allow

laypersons access to medieval Buddhist practice and insight, previously reserved only for renunciate monastics (Sharf, 2014). The reforms allowed for meditation to take the form of “bare attention”—a sort of non-judgmental, non-discursive attending to the moment-to-moment flow of consciousness (Sharf, 2015, p. 1).

This reformed, accessible practice was unlike the single point sitting or koan practices designed for those trained in medieval orthodox Buddhist faculties and understandings of the mind.

In the traditional single-point practice, one observes and remembers the self and increases sensitivity to the exact nature of the reactions of the mind by bringing one's attention to a particular object, thought, or feeling. To be adept at this, one must understand that the mind is "Buddha-nature," that afflictions are "bodhi," or associated with enlightenment or nirvana, and that there is ultimately no need for antidotes to experience (Sharf, 2015). Koan practice consists of meditations on cryptic utterances of past masters.

Other types of meditation include vipassana, or the observation of things as they are. It was practiced by the Buddha 2,500 years ago and popularized in the 20th century by such teachers as Joseph Goldstein, Tara Brach, Gil Fronsdal, Sharon Salzberg, Ruth Denison, Shinzen Young, and Jack Kornfield (Kumar & Singh, 2024). The Buddha also taught mindfulness of breathing, which is widely taught today by teachers such as Thich Nhat Hahn in his YouTube meditation *Calm – Ease Guided Meditation* (Plum Village, n.d.). The Dalai Lama, spiritual and temporal leader of the Tibetan people, advocates analytic meditation or focusing on information accumulated in the mind from various resources and using reasoning to decode and decrypt it (Nagpal, 2017).

I appreciate the reformed "moment to moment consciousness," like vipassana, that leads to insight. I realize this capacity has been common to me since I was a child. I learned to listen to my own intuitions rather than take the example of my parents. My father was highly intelligent and from a privileged background. My ancestors, my father's grandparents, Leroy Frost and Marion Towt, are listed on page 294 of the 1929 *New York Social Register*, a publication that indexes the members of American high society, first published in the 1880s and maintained today. Though they lost their fortunes in the 1929 stock market crash, the family culture maintained high expectations for achievement and judgement of those considered of lesser standing in society, even into my generation.

"Marion" was my middle name but became my legal last name in 2023. I had used "Andrea Marion" as my writer's name for many years and decided to make the change permanent, as writing has become my central work-study-life focus over the last five years. I thought I had been named after my Aunt Marion Leroy. It wasn't until my recent research revealed the *Social Register* listing that I discovered my great-grandmother, Marion Towt.

However privileged his position in society, my father had dyslexia from childhood and a dysfunctional upbringing. At age 18 in June 1944, he enlisted in the Army and marched through Germany to liberate the concentration camps toward the end of World War II. He endured war trauma and developed subsequent narcissism that persisted through his lifetime.

My mother was a first-generation college student due to patronage from a self-made aunt who became a lawyer, and eventually a partner in a Boston law firm. This aunt

started as a secretary and made her success in a day when woman lawyers were rare. My mother was a sweet, small-town girl, daughter of an electrician and a housewife. During her college years and marriage, she suffered depression upon finding herself in circumstances that were more complicated and difficult than she could handle.

I came to rely on incidents of insight that arose from observing nature or people. For example, at age five I walked amidst maple trees that appeared to be walking with me as friends. Interaction with the trees led to insight that I could trust beings such as trees that appeared to accompany me through life. At age 12, when I sat in patches of violets, the flowers seemed a part of myself and exuded and infused me with inner steadiness and grounding, again a concept that might ordinarily be associated with parenting.

These insights were frequent in life—and often momentous. At age 17, I sat on the back of my parents' house with my high school boyfriend on a hot summer night. In previous weeks, he had talked about marriage. It was late; probably nearly 2 a.m. as I had a curfew of being in the driveway by ten p.m. on weekdays and midnight on weekends, but my parents never questioned what was happening in the car or as we sat outside. That night, I was talking about dreams and thoughts, intent, pensive, urgent. I sensed he wasn't listening, probably wishing we were doing what we usually did in the big front seat of his parents' gold Chevy Impala. The car embarrassed me, though it was comfortable for making out in the driveway. It was an 70s Big Boat Car, a couch on wheels. My father had switched to smaller foreign cars, being one of the first to drive a VW in the early 60s. A family of six with four kids ages two to ten fit in a Beetle to drive six hours to the grandparents' house for Thanksgiving. Many of my friends' parents and friends drove

VW Wagons, the first subcompact Ford Pinto, the funny Gremlin, or if the family was better off, a Saab.

I said, "I have a feeling I am boring you."

He replied, "You are."

I knew in that heartbeat I would not marry him. That statement made my decision. I learned to embrace these insight experiences over time, and they guided me through significant life transitions. Beginning when I was 44, during my retreat in the Yoga Shala at Kripalu, I shifted my career and life trajectory. Ultimately, my journey in developing mindfulness practice led to the ten seven-day silent retreats from 2015 until 2020.

In these intensive retreats, I experienced altered states of consciousness resulting from long periods of concentration. In the Buddhist canon of sutras, these states are called jhanas and are mentioned as one of the paths to liberation or enlightenment. A teacher on the eight jhanas, author and researcher Leigh Brasington, has published on states of consciousness recorded on fMRI and EEG reports along with Hagerty, previously mentioned. Proceeding through jhana states includes fading internal verbalization and altered personal boundaries which result in reports of feeling joy. The brain imaging and electrical activity scans show brain activity in 11 regions that correspond to the subjective reports of joy (Hagerty, et.al, 2013). Eventually, jhana consciousness proceeds to concentration that surmounts any distractions.

I have journeyed through most of the jhanas during retreats. I can't tell you whether I progressed through the jhanas in 20 minutes or over several days. I did quietly sit on my mat while experiencing/noticing these states.



Seated in the meditation Zendo, I settle onto my zabuton and zafu, a pad and cushion provided for meditation. I close my eyes and focus on hearing one thought at a time. I let all other sensations go to the outside edge of awareness. I can still feel my seat on the cushion, or hear others breathing, shifting in the room. But my focus is on what I hear in my head. I pause between each thought to wait for the next one. Then I let each thought go as it arises. A feeling of deep comfort comes over me, as if I am sitting with dear friends or loved ones or walking through a beautiful snowy field with a calm mind. This is the first jhana or pleasant sensation. It can extend from delight all the way to rapture.

I feel silly. I partially open my eyes and watch the incense smoke curl through shafts of sunlight in the room. The smoke looks like it's dancing. I want to get up and dance, laugh, smile, be silly, and move with the smoke, but I stay still, seated. This is the second jhana, as comfort and pleasure begin to incorporate surreal experiences. It also entails rapture or ecstasy, a highly engaged, active state.

I come down from that to contentment, a feeling as if nothing is wrong, anywhere, at any time for me, or anyone else, even though plenty is always happening that could be violent and/or unjust for me or anyone or anything else in the collective universe. This is the third jhana.

The third jhana is not a state of denial. It is a perception that can lead to effective activism. Shinzen Young predicts that through his investigations into neuroscience, he will find the physiological genesis of mindful states and be able to produce them. If this can happen, he says, "we will probably be able to foster an enlightened age on this planet" (Young, 1998, p. 9).

As Young predicts, so H.G. Wells forecasted that meditation may play a significant part in societal development. In the *Outline of History*, Wells implies that Buddhist teachings may largely affect human destiny toward compassion, contentment, and cooperation among humanity (Wells, 1920/1922, p. 455). Wells has a significant prediction track record including his references to email and lasers 50 years before those technologies were invented.

From the third jhana state of contentment, further concentrated attention moves me into a feeling as if I am "one with everything." This is an experience of non-duality, as if my being and that of the meditator next to me, as well as the trees outside the Zendo all share the same essential existence. Additionally, I no longer feel pain in my knees from sitting so long, or pain in my mind as various thoughts arise. Young describes this realization as a radical perception shift (Young, 1998). As the fourth jhana breaks down barriers to others, therefore, the increased prosocial responsiveness and empathy can lead to collective responsibility. Radford University researcher Daniel Berry found, through subjective and EEG indicators, that empathy increases among those with a known connection as opposed to a stranger (Berry, 2017). The feeling of delight or pleasure or rapture from the third jhana fades. It's not necessary.

In experiencing the fourth jhana on retreat, I had an occurrence of terrible images coming up in my mind: violent scary images of blood splashing and disturbing gruesomeness. I felt "at one" with or not separated from those images, an understandably frightening experience. It is known since ancient times, and well documented in modern times, that mindfulness or meditation can have adverse effects. Disturbing thoughts may arise and include subsequent depression, suicidality, and schizophrenic breakdowns

(Taylor et al., 2022). It is also a risk for those who've experienced trauma or emotional imbalance, as I had in childhood. Indeed, in the monastic community of my retreats, a young man had a mental breakdown, became aggressive toward other participants, and had to leave suddenly. Others witnessed his behavior and deterioration over a period of days. He was gone by the time I came for a retreat, but I had met him. In retrospect, I and others could see there were signs that he may have been unstable. He had an air of superiority toward other monastics and a tendency to be dictatorial. I had been honest with my teachers about my background, and they told me to expect discomfort, distress, and fear, even terror, at times and to use the interviews to address such issues. In retreat orientation, interviews were explained to me as an opportunity to privately report my experience to the teacher and be guided and given further instructions.

I took my pain from those images in the fourth jhana into the interview room to talk to the teacher. During my 15-minute conversation. I sat down on the zabuton in front of him and cried. I told him of the images in my mind. He listened.

He said, "You can try a technique, only if you want to."

I said, "I want to try."

He said, "Bring up the gruesome images in your mind again."

I did.

He said, "Look at them hard, really stare at them. What happens?"

"I get scared," I said.

"Keep looking. Deeply, intently, as hard as you can. What happens? Look with all your focus and attention. What do you see now?"

"I see the space between my eyelids and my eyes."

"There's nothing there," he said.

"Nothing is there," I said. "It's empty. Only black and white fuzz or occasional color or nothing at all."

"Now bring up the terrifying images again. Concentrate. Focus on the image and wait for the space between your eyelids to appear. Can you do that?"

"Yes," I said.

"That space is called 'rest.' You need never stay in a place of terror or violence again," he said. "You know where to go. Those disturbing images are not real. No images are real. You can do this with any visual or sense experience."

I am forever grateful to him for teaching me to overcome this fear. I've never felt fear in the same way, as I've always been able to go to the place of rest when I need to. I was fortunate to have expert guidance in order to see the lake and mountain as one and set aside illusion of the gruesome images. It would have been distressful to me to see myself, the lake, as faulty, like the images, and the mountain outside myself, as divine. This non-dual forgiving interpretation was comforting.

I moved onto the fifth jhana. I have a sense that my body boundaries take on a vaporous quality, extending beyond my own space and into a greater space. I can take this as far as I want—I can fill a room, the neighborhood, a town, country, the world and beyond. This is not disassociation, although that is also a risk for those with trauma or emotional imbalance who practice deep meditation without adequate guidance. I don't so much "not" feel my body as I sense myself in an infinite space.

Next, I have a feeling as if my awareness and mind can absorb or comprehend whatever comes my way, yet I can't explain the context in words. The information passes

through my brain like smoke through bare tree branches. Although there is no brain that I can feel or tree branches that I can see. This is the sixth jhana.

Nothingness is next, a feeling of entire existence, mine and everything around me, as far as space extends, as merely a black nothingness, as if I'm swirling in a black velvet swath. Many people would think this is a scary sensation. I am careful when I teach it, and rarely do as I don't want to scare people away from mindfulness. Also, I'm not in a position when teaching a group, in-person or on Zoom, to do interviews to hear and address individual concerns. Ultimately, in my experience, nothingness is a completely comfortable state. Again, I've been fortunate to have expert guidance in experiencing this jhana at retreats and I am now comfortable with it on my own.

I haven't experienced the eighth jhana. Hagerty and colleagues (2013) write about it as a state —

where there is no labelling or recognition of mental state although perception requires such mental activity of labeling and recognition. It's essentially complete lack of attachment to any reality or formation. One doesn't qualify or deny there is an experience. It's an experience without labels, including the painful self-label. It's described as the mind struck by the indecision to hook onto or land on perception or nothing. (p. 3)

Nor have I consistently reached the ninth jhana, although I've glimpsed it in seated formal meditation and spontaneously in my lifetime. It is Patanjali's reference to cessation of fluctuations of the mind and the Buddhist's nothingness as described in the Diamond Sutra, translated in 2002 by Red Pine (Bill Porter) —

As a lamp, a cataract, a star in space,

An illusion, a dewdrop, a bubble,  
A dream, a cloud, a flash of lightening,  
View all created things like this. (p. 103)

Eckhart Tolle, spiritual teacher and self-help author, indicates the first step toward enlightenment or nirvana is to realize there exists a stream of commentary or thought. This realization is not a thought, he says; it's awareness or new consciousness or absolute truth. He argues that most of us experience this state intermittently (Tolle, 2022). All the phenomenon or thought streams that we experience are not intended to be interpreted as reality but are relative truth. Tolle's realization about thought, in my experience, is the perception that nothingness is the absolute reality and thought streams and experience are relative reality.

I think I've seen this enlightened state in others at the time of death. I was with my brother when he succumbed to COPD, or lung failure, in 2008. I was fortunate to have a hospice person with a hand on my shoulder, speaking softly, compassionately to me. He told me that I could stay or leave, whatever I wanted. I was crying and scared. Without the professional's knowing hand, I'm not sure what I would have done. My brother's last words were "Love is the answer." With the hospice person's support, my fear dissolved, and I was able to SEE the blissful cessation, though not experience this "death" myself. I do believe it's possible to experience this kind of "cessation" while living.

Three years later, in 2011, I witnessed my mother, minutes before her death, lift her head and chest from her bed and open her eyes. Before that, she hadn't moved at all for 24 hours. She looked through me, as if she was seeing the most amazing, beautiful thing in the world beyond my shoulder. A wondrous aura surrounded her. She lay back

down. Closed her eyes. And a few hours later, she died. I've always thought that she saw and experienced ultimate consciousness, referred to by Tolle and Young.

To continue to pursue experience with awareness, I celebrated my 60th birthday on a monastic retreat in 2017. I felt a bit like the White Queen in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* when she says, "Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast" (1871/1946, p. 76). Now I was learning my mind's lay of the land, climbing over neuron after neuron in mindfulness practice, like vaulting boulders on that mountain as one with myself.

The life I found in retreat amidst simple chores and brief interactions with people and sitting meditation was ecstatic. It was amazing how well I knew and loved a fellow retreatant just from seeing them walk across the room or cut a clove of garlic. I enjoyed the place where only the mountain exists. I felt supported by my everyday experience with loved ones, in death and life. I felt I had integrated the lake and mountain as one in my being and this is where I would live.

Not so simple. I love my husband. I didn't want to give up living with him to live in a modern monastery. A year passed with me doing bi-monthly week-long retreats. I did experience resentment toward Bill when I returned home. My resentment was unfounded by his actions but arose because I thought I wanted to be back at the monastery, and he was the only reason why I wasn't living there. Bill didn't offer an opinion on my frequent retreats. In our long history of 45 years together, he has developed the skill of letting me find out about life experience on my own.

In March 2018, I was once again in retreat. At this time, there was some consternation in the community. A few young women monastics had abruptly left,

complaining that women's issues and concerns were not respected by the teacher and leaders. I had not experienced that myself but had talked to these women monastics and didn't doubt their experiences.

When all participants went to bed that night at 10 p.m., I decided to sit through until dawn. Alone in the Zendo, in the dark, I sat for 30 minutes, then walked around the room for five minutes, then sat for another 30 minutes. I remember being comfortable and not sleepy. I was present to my experience of being alone, in the dark, in the cold room. I felt the blanket around my shoulders. I practiced various techniques of SEE, HEAR, and FEEL and was unbothered by distractive thinking.

By morning light, when others returned at 4:45 a.m. for the day's practice, I got up, went to my room, and packed my bags. I left the monastery in my Honda Fit, a small car that slid down the mountain on an icy dirt road, with snow piled in high banks on both sides. The woods were still; bare tree branches reached around me; the ground was blanketed with deep snowfall. I felt free and happy. I was going home.

An awareness had come to me at dawn; go home, your practice is amidst daily life. This is much harder to do than when on retreat. I don't know how much of my awareness was influenced by the women monastics. Unfortunately, gender-related misconduct happens amidst monasteries and ashrams, among gurus/teachers and students, as described in the cases of Friend, Bikram and Satchidananda.

Several years later, in a west coast adjunct monastery to where I did my ten retreats, there was a student accusation of teacher sexual assault, although it was never litigated or determined who was at fault. Bill was not surprised by the accusations and admitted to me that he was worried that I had been involved in a cult during those five



years that I was doing monastery retreats. I seemed, to him, to have excessive devotion to this group and an unquestioning attitude toward the teachers. In retrospect, I did lack discernment and it was in my night-long sitting practice that I gained a clarity to move on from the group and practice mindfulness amidst my life with Bill.

At that time, I had already been a yoga and mindfulness teacher and studio owner for 14 years, so I integrated my new awareness further into everyday work and life. I had a formal sitting practice for as little as ten minutes a day and several week-long online retreats per year with Shinzen Young. "Nothingness" was happening for me often during "life as usual," along with contentment and right action. Still a flawed human being, with intermittent awareness of enlightenment, I was able to accept myself. My intention was to live as the integrated lake and mountain as one in my daily life, rather than remain on retreat where this state of being is common and more easily attained due to lack of worldly distractions. This is a large task, and I am successful at times; at other times I must wait until the unity is apparent due to arising awareness.

A magnet has been on my refrigerator since my days as an Ashtanga practitioner. It says, "Yoga is the practice of tolerating the consequences of being yourself." The quote is misattributed to the *Bhagavad Gita*, a 700-verse Hindu scripture dating from the second half of the first millennium BCE. It's uncertain, but the quote may have come from a CEO of the Kripalu Yoga Center in Massachusetts, as an interpretation of a Gita verse. Letitia Walker uncovers the derivation of this and other internet misattributions (Walker, 2015).

Twenty years ago, at the beginning of my yoga journey when I first read this saying, I did not want to "tolerate" consequences; I wanted to "eliminate" them. In my

naivete at the time, I thought that was possible with dedicated practice. So, this saying distressed me. As I've grown over 20 years in yoga and mindfulness, I've learned that tolerating the consequences of being oneself is acceptance and compassion toward the ever-evolving "self". And "tolerating" versus "eliminating" is not only possible and but brings great peace and represents wisdom.

## LIFE AS THE LAKE AND MOUNTAIN

In tandem with exploring consciousness over decades, I've always wanted to be a better writer. With increased interest in mindfulness as central to life, I've wanted to investigate aspects of myself and others, mindful and otherwise, as characters in fiction, screenplay, non-fiction, and poetry.

In 2018, I matriculated into the Dartmouth Master of Arts and Liberal Studies (MALS) program to fulfil that desire around writing. Mine is a long MALS career, usually a two-year stint. I'm still here after six years. To allow time for my master's studies, I incrementally reduced my role at the family business yoga studio, until by 2023, I was barely involved in management or teaching.

With expert professor support and teaching, I've taken time to investigate non-fiction, fiction, screenplay, as well as film and video production. Initially, I wanted to learn how to tell others about my experiences, joys and suffering, through writing and media, both the life adventures and mindfulness journey. I thought it might help readers enhance their own joy and circumnavigate their own suffering.

A conversation with Dartmouth Professor Barbara Kreiger helped me uncover new intentions in writing and free myself from long-conceived notions. I took her course

on "Writing Nature" in Spring 2023. She pointed out that one of my writing pieces was not exactly in line with the assignment. I could certainly include my personal perspectives but needed to investigate the unknown, rather than pre-supposing conclusions at the outset of my writing. And I needed to link my "inner nature" to "outer nature," which was the focus of the course.

I blankly blurted out, "But this is what I need to say."

After a kind pause, she replied. "Well, go ahead, then. Say it."

I did finish that last essay, the way I wanted, for her course. But I had a surprising realization upon finishing that work. In my six years at MALS, I've written 720 pages of screenplay, two novellas, dozens of short stories and essays, and made a ten-minute film—and I get it now. Writing, just like meditation, is a process of discovery. And to share discovery is much better than disguising my writing as inexpert instruction about life choices.

The reason to write is to discover aspects of life or concerns by putting stories or commentary on paper. If I can look at what happens to me and my characters in words, maybe I can better understand beliefs, actions, and consequences. As when you hear yourself say something aloud, often it can make more sense.

The process of discovery had led me from musings as a child over maple trees and violets to Jon Kabat Zinn in the 1990s to the moment in my writing class with Professor Kreiger in 2023 and continues here, writing this thesis.

The question, "What is myself?" has been consciously with me since my early career days in marketing. Like Dorothy in the *Wizard of Oz*, perhaps the answer has been with me all along. As a result of mindfulness practice and retreats, I view the answer,

always unfolding, as the intersection of matter (the lake) and spirit (the mountain) in circumstances merged with awareness. In a state of complete presentness and rich experience, I can do the dishes feeling the warm water on my hands, the smooth bowls and plates, as well as seeing the plants in my garden outside the window and hearing the birds and even the bumblebees on the flowers. The alternative is a mindless, empty state, for example, daydreaming or worrying.

Robert T. Ackland, Professor Emeritus of Literacy and Teacher Education at the State University of New York College at Plattsburgh, refers to synchronicity, or meaningful connections that chance brings together in the present, as in doing the dishes and hearing birds. He writes, "Events may be meaningfully connected simply because chance happened to bring them together at the same time. If we want to develop a clear picture of what is going on, those connections are worth looking into" (Ackland, 1999, p. 42). He points out that there is always more going on than we think. Mindfulness, or noticing all that we can, can help us understand why we do what we do; why other people do what they do; and what nature is communicating to us. And the result can be greater compassion among individuals, society, and the Earth. I've had recent insights about this intersection and found inspiration from the teachings of Thich Nhat Hahn. Nhat Hahn founded the Plum Village Tradition and many retreats centers around the world and teaches a concentration practice, simply, on the in and out breath.

Nhat Hahn integrates the lake and mountain as one and uses a similar metaphor when he writes, "The clear still water of a mountain lake reflects the mountain and sky with pristine clarity. You can do the same. If you are calm and still enough, you can

reflect the mountain, the blue sky, and the moon exactly as they are. You reflect whatever you see just as it is, without distorting anything" (Nhat Hahn, 2015, p. 49).

Although I've known about this great teacher since his activism against the Vietnam War when I was in my teens, he surfaced again in my life in a surprising way. I was at a memorial service in Summer 2023 for a dear, dear friend and yoga mentor who died at age 53 from brain cancer. From the start of the service, I was quite overcome with emotion. With our deceased friend's beautiful life in mind, a speaker quoted a familiar passage by Thich Nhat Hahn:

This body of mine will disintegrate, but my actions will continue. . . . We don't need to wait until the total dissolution of the body to continue—we continue in every moment. If you think that I am only this body, then you have not truly seen me. When you look at my friends, you see my continuation. (see Duerr, 2022)

In another section of his writing, he mentions the end of life while referring to a wave and ocean as one, as if the wave is the individual and the ocean is the divine or universal. "The wave does not need to die to become water. She is already water" (Nhat Hahn, 1998, p. 111).

"Thich Nhat Hahn, Thich Nhat Hanh, Thich Nhat Hanh . . ." repeated through my head for days. I began to listen to his podcasts, thankfully recorded by the Plum Village Association in advance of his compromised physical state following a stroke in 2014 and death in 2022.

Nhat Hahn explains that enlightenment is always present in small ways. To breathe in and feel alive is to touch the miracle of enlightenment. He explains extraneous

thought, or "mental formations," as including worry, ruminating, and fantasy (Plum Village, 2013a).

According to Nhat Hahn, awareness shifts, as in one being able to see another's point of view and responding with compassion rather than on a continuum from resistance to hostility, are small miracles. The compassion involves recognizing each individual person's "island" of higher inner awareness, which corresponds with every other person's inner "island" of awareness. This "island" is available in all things, including animal, vegetable, and mineral beings (Plum Village, 2012). It's the component of divine expression within humanity. Individuality happens outside this universally shared "island."

Such insight and compassion came to the forefront for me, as Nhat Hahn describes, in November 2021, when my middle sister Brenda went to the ER in Portland, Oregon, her hometown, with cardiac symptoms. She was admitted to the ICU for monitoring. Ten hours later, she had a massive seizure and cardiac arrest that resulted in anoxic brain injury or lack of oxygen to the brain.

My youngest sister, who lives in Seattle, called and reported the ER admission in the evening and the severe event the next morning. Grief for both of us was overwhelming, along with indecision on how to help. For comfort and insight, I turned to my "island of awareness" as I understood from Thich Naht Hahn, instead of being paralyzed with grief and fear. While I was initially experiencing the news of her ICU admission that first night, I listened to rain outside the bedroom window to keep present and calm.

In my head, I could have been ruminating, worrying, telling myself I was helpless. I let those thoughts go to the outside edge of awareness and focused my mind on peace and ease, inhabiting the island of awareness. I waited for a possible wisdom to arise, which it eventually did. LET'S GO HELP NOW.

I could open my eyes and focus on the weeping birch tree with small holiday lights just outside my window. That focus was calming. I could close my eyes and see my sister in an ICU bed, unconscious, and feel my grief. And then take a rest from that and focus to see the fuzzy black and white spaces between my eyelids and eyes, or calming images of rain glistening in trees. While focus enabled me to truly feel grief and comfort, the process led me to enhance connections to both sisters.

I was on a plane the next afternoon, and my youngest sister was in her car from Seattle; and both of us arrived at Brenda's bedside by 9 p.m.

We weren't sure what we would accomplish, but as it turned out, we were able to help our sister to wake slowly from unconsciousness over three weeks. We arranged for her to stay out of a nursing home. With a team of Brenda's friends, we all carried out a breakthrough plan for Brenda to receive care, first in an Air BnB staying with me in Portland, then soon after in my home in Burlington, Vermont, then supported by my youngest sister in Seattle and Brenda's friends back in Portland, then living on her own as of February 2024.

Intuition helped me, my sisters, and my sister's friends meet on the shared "island of awareness." For example, in moment-to-moment decision making, both my younger sister and I met immediately in Portland at Brenda's bedside. One of us, or a cousin, were with Brenda daily in the hospital, serving as her advocate. This is necessary in today's

health care environment, because if no family is present, the complex team of specialists often don't communicate well, and care gets overlooked. When neurology came around, we could remind them "check with respiratory about what they say on removing the breathing tube." We had heard the respiratory team conversations in rounds as we were present at bedside. When cardiology was present, we could say "Neurology recommends (x) and respiratory says (y), so please touch base with them."

In addition to conventional specialist care, Brenda started receiving alternative treatments as soon as she was released from the hospital. My youngest sister has an adopted daughter with autism and had investigated alternative brain development modalities such as Functional Neurology and Neuro-Movement. Functional Neurology, also called chiropractic neurology, is a clinical evaluation and treatment method for the central and peripheral nervous systems, or an exercise system for the brain. Neuro-Movement, developed by movement therapist Anat Banal, is a system of neuroplasticity exercises used at any age to rewire the brain to reach higher levels of physical, emotional, and cognitive performance.

When it came time for discharge, there was no discharge planning advocate available due to short staffing. The nurses planned to send Brenda to the only available nursing home. We looked it up online and a review said, "If you have a choice between sending your loved one here or having them live under a bridge, choose the bridge." With quick thinking, I talked to a doctor friend of mine in Vermont, gave him the details on Brenda's condition, and asked, "Do you think I can handle her care in an Air BnB?" He said, "Yes, as long as it won't be too emotionally hard for you." I knew immediately that I could do this.



While living in that Air BnB for three months, Brenda became able to walk in parks, go out to cafes, visit with friends, and receive valuable alternative care instead of lying in a nursing home bed. After the Air BnB, she tried assisted living for three months, but it didn't suit her. So, she moved to Vermont for six months to live with me and Bill and our dog. Brenda was camping, kayaking, swimming and gardening, and getting regular Functional Neurology and Neuro-Movement care instead of living in rehabilitation facility getting physical/occupational therapy once a day.

By October 2022 she was ready to go home to Portland. My youngest sister coordinated with Brenda's friends, a couple, for Brenda to live with them, semi-independent but with support. By February 2024, she was ready to live on her own in a senior housing community. My sisters are not formal mindfulness practitioners. But my thesis is that insight and wisdom similar to such states engendered by mindfulness is available to all, at intermittent occasions, with or without practice. My observation is that simply meeting on the "island of awareness" could have created opportunities for the three sisters to make on-the-spot, best care decisions, with Brenda participating in the process. The usual way of doing things (nursing home, then rehab facility) had to be circumvented with intuition, cooperation, compassion, and openness.

I lived through my sister's first year of recovery, mostly with energy and hope. I do confess, at times I "fell into a hole" of my own opinions and judgements and the result was discord with other team members. For example, I wasn't as frugal as both my sisters would have liked, including spending liberally for alternative health care. And I did more for Brenda than my younger sister thought was best, such as taking Brenda to all appointments and bringing her on outings with friends for kayaking and gardening when

my youngest sister thought I should have required Brenda to use the Special Services Transportation system. I judged my youngest sister as being mean, when she was only trying to help Brenda learn to be as independent as possible. I had Power of Attorney over Brenda's finances and health. This caused tension between all the sisters.

In hindsight, mine was an intermittent awareness, not a continuous state of enlightenment. According to the non-dual third illustration in the lake and mountain story, the flux and flow of matter and spirit, human and divine, is perfect. It may be compared to the sun shining in a clear sky or lingering behind a cloud; neither state is imperfection.

I was often under strain, trying to maintain a thread to my master's program and my relationship to my husband while doing the full-time job of supporting my sister. Yet, we all credit Brenda's rapid recovery to the non-conventional living situations and care. Though differences of opinion arose, for the most part, the entire team was in tune with circumstances and making the best decisions possible. And the mood was uplifted and positive; the activities were geared toward fun with recovery in mind rather than the reverse. Nhat Hahn describes such opportunities: "There is a huge ocean of good energy and if you know how to get in touch with it, you will receive the healing and nourishment you need" (Plum Village, 2018, p. 46).

My practice during this time was Young's SEE, HEAR and FEEL. My concentration in these spaces and discernment led to Nhat Hahn's focus on breathing non-fear, calm, ease, cooperation, and compassion. Langer would say focus on the changing circumstances enabled each care team member to have simple understanding related to Brenda's improving health or setbacks that led to right action.

The example of my sister's brain injury recovery shows evidence of the non-duality in mindfulness and points to similarities common to individuals and within circumstances. It must be noted that there are some characteristics of what mindful awareness is "not," as documented by studies and teachings.

Arrival at awareness is not a slow, deliberate process, a weighing of various solutions, and analysis of risk/benefit. Take for example, my experiences of abruptly leaving a boyfriend or a mountain retreat center or getting on a plane within hours to spend months in an Air BnB while my sister re-learned to walk, eat, and bathe by herself. Rapid awareness also drove me to leave corporate marketing soon after I asked, "And why did I want this?" at a yoga retreat center. Right action happens quickly and is solitary as opposed to the type of information or knowledge that results from a longer process of reflection or debate, alone or with the counsel of others.

Peter Verkoeijen, a cognitive psychologist and endowed professor at the Erasmus School of Social and Behavioral Sciences, conducts research on incidences of intuition (or quick decisions), finding that they lead to more cooperation than decisions made slowly and based on long-term reflection. In research, Verkoeijen and Bouwmeester conducted experiments using a four-player public goods game and found that people contributed more money to a common project when they had to decide quickly (i.e., a decision based on intuition) compared to when they were instructed to reflect and decide slowly. This intuitive-cooperation effect is scientifically and practically important because it argues against a central assumption of traditional capitalistic economic and fight/flight evolutionary models (Verkoeijen & Bouwmeester, 2014).

Awareness resulting from mindful/meditation practice also doesn't begin with answers or knows. American writer and meditation teacher Susan Piver says meditation "begins with questions, and the real questions assume a dialogue as a link to the source where answers come from. Asking a question is a simple profound way of initiating a relationship with energies and powers around and in you" (Piver, 2004, p. xxi). When I decided not to marry my high school boyfriend, or to leave a marketing career, or to help my sister recover, my decisions and actions created more questions.

Writer, historian, and activist Rebecca Solnit refers to awareness that arises from the "unknown." She writes, "That's where the most important things come from, where you yourself came from, and where you will go. The art is not one of forgetting but letting go. And when everything else is gone, you can be rich in loss" (Solnit, 2006, p. 4). The unknowns of my high school self and the loss of a future mate led to the opportunity to find my current mate which is a great richness; the unknowns I experienced as I stepped away from corporate work led to the richness of a career as a yoga and mindfulness teacher and onto my aspirations as a writer.

Mindfulness attention is obviously *not* worry, anxiety, ruminating, and fantasy. The latter causes increased activity and connectivity in the Default Mode Network (DMN), according to many documented studies including one by Psychiatrist Celia Westbrook and her colleagues. Forty participants underwent fMRI imaging while engaging in worry, which showed activity in the DMN areas of the posterior cingulate cortex and medial prefrontal cortex. Participants were then instructed to engage in three techniques: focused attention (I will feel my inhale and exhale); suppression (I won't worry about this); or acceptance (I accept these circumstances that worry me).

Disengaging from worry with these techniques showed activity switching to the frontoparietal and salience networks associated with calmness and ease. Focused attention was the most successful (Westbrook et al., 2023).

An earlier study by Marcus Raichle, a neurologist at the Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis and trail blazer in brain function and development study, shows related results. He and a colleague found that when not in a state of focus on a particular event or happening, or mindful activity, the brain leads a person into memory, ruminating, fantasy, worry, or simply spacing out, i.e., the DMN. And the brain remains unnecessarily active during DMN states and requires more energy; in fact, up to 20% of the body reserves are used to continue ongoing processes (Raichle & Gusnard, 2002).

Mindfulness meditation that leads to awareness is not poppycock, airy-fairy, new age, invalidated mystical-schmystical machinations, as some might think. It is not a merely self-absorbed inward focus. Articles appear from time to time such as the one by Ronald Purser in the *Guardian* in 2019 titled, "The Mindfulness Conspiracy," which decries the inward focus of meditation as the enemy to activism. Purser's argument is that activating the brain's reward system with meditation would be selfish and counter-productive to procreation because it short circuits evolutionary survival systems.

To counter Purser, mindfulness meditation that leads to individual and collective awareness has been supported, for example, in the work of Charles Keifer. In 2013, he helped pioneer concepts and methods that help large organizations change from reaction to circumstance and compliance to action based on aspiration and commitment. Keifer and Constable argue that with mindfulness, the DMN components of mental processes, or mental formations according to Nhat Hahn, decrease. This leaves room for awareness or

the "Art of Insight" (Keifer & Constable, 2013). Rather than using established tactics such as group brainstorming or problem-solving, organizations can recognize the opportunity of individual arising awareness that ripples out. The result is solutions to intractable problems such as personality conflicts, strategy impasse, or staff tensions.

Having worked in Corporate Marketing for 20 years, I've had my share of experiences of such difficult situations that would have benefited from Keifer and Constable's processes. For example, I was responsible for a new incubator farming initiative sponsored by the larger gardening supply organization, my employer. In marketing communications, I wanted to highlight the farmers as individual entrepreneurs, while the Creative Director wanted to credit the farms' viability to the parent gardening business. Our opposing viewpoints were a result of a broad identity confusion, multiple unknowns, and tension within the organization.

Suppose I had had the sudden insight that the Marketing and Creative Departments were striving toward the same goal. I would have decided that the individual farmers could share their success with the larger organization. My individual insight could have led to a greater good for the parent business, the farmers, and the community served by fresh local foods. This could have also served other organizations nationally and internationally that could look toward this business/farming initiative as a model. (Eventually, this did happen.)

But to quickly recognize, accept, and set aside these concepts that represented the unknown and impermanence weren't available to me at the time. Instead, I was stuck in the DMN, such as worry about the farmers not getting credit and ruminating about the Creative Director's resistance to my point of view.

Keifer and Constable describe each default mode thought, such as my worry and ruminating, as a used cafeteria tray. They build up in the washroom. When the trays are taken away, you can see what is in front of your face, rather than see a towering pile of dirty trays. By placing all this default mode thinking into the background, space is available for insight to eventually or immediately occur (Keifer & Constable, 2013). My mind's washroom was built up with unwashed trays, not allowing me to "see" this insight.

There are practical physiological functions documented by Keifer and Constable's research as to where awareness can lead from the individual to the organization, community, and beyond. But first, as in my case above, the individual needs to shift thought patterns from those that create DMN activity to those that create calm, ease, and cooperation (Westbrook et.al., 2023).

Another body of work to corroborate these approaches is contributed by University of Arizona SEMA (Sonic Enhanced Mindful Attention) lab co-founders Shinzen Young and Jay Sanguinetti, who are also Assistant Directors of the University's Center for Consciousness Studies. With experimentation, they have found that ultrasound waves modulate, by stimulation or inactivation, specific parts of the brain responsible for meditation, shifting activity from the DMN to brain centers that activate positive emotions and mindfulness.

They [Young and Sanguinetti] found that experienced meditators feel mindful effects right away, as in the effects of the jhanas. Non-meditators may report nothing or that they feel "less attached" to their thoughts, which is a good description of a mindfulness benefit of "equanimity" or no push or pull against reality. (Rajalakshmi, 2023, p. 2)

Mindfulness training, as suggested by Shinzen Young, can result in greater happiness, contentment, compassion, and a common ground of best possible action outcomes (Young, 1998).

Sister Dhang Nghiem, one of the Plum Village monastics visiting Dartmouth in April 2024, explored that common ground when she gave a dharma talk about the three powers of Buddhism—understanding, love, and transformation. The order is important. Love cannot bloom without understanding. And transformation will not happen before the other two (personal communication, April 2024). As an example, when I was marketing manager, I could have practiced understanding others' opinions and wants, thereby creating compassion (a form of love); consequently, misconceptions and actions could have been transformed.

Sister Dhang offered several deep teachings. She indicated that if we are not transforming misconceptions and suffering, then we are transmitting them to others and furthering un-awareness, misunderstanding, and un-love, as happened to the Creative Director and me, as generated by the larger organizational issues.

The organizational marketing/creative department example might be analogous to a tempest in a teapot compared to world conflicts. My point, however, is that the process of individual insight can ripple out and potentially have dramatic effect. Resolution to the individual and departmental rifts did occur. Today the incubator farm program is an independent, successful non-profit, launched by the larger gardening business which has grown additional for-profit ventures.

Another of Sister Dhang's deeper teachings is evident in my subsequent situation as business consultant for that gardening business company owner. While I was starting



my own yoga business, he hired me to help on his new initiative: an incubator farm program in an endangered watershed in Central America. I travelled there to work with him for a few weeks. One evening we were sitting on a veranda, overlooking the ocean.

I joked, "Let's avoid the chaos that happened in the Vermont program."

He smiled and said, "What chaos?"

I was dumbfounded. But he went on to explain his view that chaos is natural in organizations that need to develop and among staff who need to grow. Things were just fine in Vermont, according to him, and is evidenced by the current success.

I didn't understand then, but I do now. He had the patience to wait for individual mindful awareness to happen and ripple out to the organizations. As in the situation with my sisters, he had inherent access to wisdom and insight related to what is possible from mindfulness practice. Though he was not a formal mindfulness practitioner, he had a background in spiritual pursuit. He could see the non-dual perspective, the "oneness" of the staff and businesses as the lake and the overarching "mountain" mission of farm and food sustainability, common to both organizations, departments, and to both me and the Creative Director. He modelled mindfulness and the "island of awareness," without formal knowledge of such and in the days before I began my practice and study that led to this thesis.

Mindful individuals create change that ripples outward, organization-wide, community-wide, and beyond. Young makes the dramatic statement that those who develop meditation skills may contribute to correcting a basic evolutionary flaw that is responsible for the world's unnecessary suffering (Young, 1998). Eventually, solutions

arise, as in mindful processes outlined by Keifer, Young, Hagerty, Sister Dhang, and their colleagues.

Further into my yoga and mindfulness practice and teaching, I had an awareness that relates to Sister Dhang's concept of understanding, love, and transformation regarding the Creative Director. I called her new place of employment.

After chilly hellos, I said, "I know I wasn't easy to work with back then. I'm sorry."

Her voice softened immediately, and she said, "What a nice call to get!"

But what about the suffering of the past conflict between us and the two organizations?

Mindful awareness as actionable includes the possibility that one reaches back in time to resolve issues. This is a key teaching in many yogic and Buddhist teachings including the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, composed by monks as early as 1st century B.C.E. and completed around the 4th century B.C.E. Only fragments of the original script remain. Thomas Cleary, an American translator and author of more than 80 books related to Buddhist, Taoist, Confucian, and Muslim classics, calls this Sutra the definitive statement of Indra's Net, the cosmic Buddhist vision of radical interconnectedness, interrelatedness, interdependence (Cleary, 1993).

A mythological story that points to resolution of past or ancestral issues involves Indra, the Hindu god of rain, storms, lightning, thunder, and the ruler of heaven, comparable to the Greek God, Zeus. The mythical infinite net hangs over Indra's palace on Mount Meru, with a jewel in each vertex or node, and each jewel reflects in all the

others. The net is said to spread in all directions with no beginning or end, therefore transcending time and space.

In her talk on understanding, love, and transformation, Sister Dhang went back in time to her mother's life. During the Vietnam War, as a young girl, her mother lost her family and left a bombed-out village to find work in Saigon. Subsequently, Sister Dhang and her brother were born. Their father was an American soldier. Sister Dhang and her brother were sent to foster care in the U.S. where they both endured physical and emotional abuse. Sister Dhang told us that transformation of her own suffering has reached back to resolve her mother's suffering (personal communication, April 2024).

I told Sister Dhang that my mother had also suffered tragedy, both in her marriage and with the early death of my brother. Consequently, I had suffered and created more suffering because of my own mindlessness since by human nature, the past has tentacles that reach into the present. As a result of mindful awareness practice, in a lesser way than she but still, I had transformed. She said softly, "For our mothers," as she took my hands, and we stood in silence and peace, eyes closed, for many moments.

Purser argues that mindfulness is a selfish endeavor detrimental to species survival. However, much research points to the contrary. In Langer's work, she elaborates on current definitions of individual mindfulness toward noticing novelty or change which creates beneficial quality of life outcomes. Hagerty et. al. show fMRI and EEG results that indicate focused attention leads to disengaging from worry and other troublesome thought patterns. Keifer et al. show how the "Art of Insight" can have positive impact on organizational conflicts. Raichle points out that thought patterns can tend toward the useless and often uncomfortable DMN or a state of present focus that is pleasant and

advantageous. Lastly, in Sister Dhang's Thich Nhat Hahn tradition, the focus on the in breath and out breath creates calm, ease, and cooperation, a practice that can even reach back in time.

## TRANSMIT THE LAKE AND MOUNTAIN

A concept that I believe has the potential to lead to individual and societal solutions to conflict is Lightenment™, based on the interpretation on the non-dual view of the lake and mountain that I have been studying and practicing for two decades. I view Lightenment™ as a major moment of mindfulness that leads to transformation. Based on the teachings of Shinzen Young, Thich Nhat Hahn, and Ellen Langer, Lightenment™ presents mindfulness as accessible and a natural occurrence in everyone's life, whether they are aware of it or not.

Young indicates that human beings are meant to traverse two realms: "to submerge beneath the water of oneness into a world of completeness, fluidity, connectivity and vacuity, and then to come out into the solidity, separateness and somethingness of dry land for certain kinds of functions" (Young, 1998, p. 103). This "traverse" or intersection reverses the terrains of the lake and mountain story, but the teaching is the same. Lightenment™ is a momentary dive beneath the surface, to use Young's analogy, or an insight of the divine mountain, to parallel my story.

Lightenment™ engenders compassion, in the same way as Thich Nhat Hahn's mindful breathing techniques bring quality to the practitioner's life. And, as Ellen Langer theorizes, mindfulness, an ancient eastern concept, can be adapted to a Western

perspective tied to creativity, perspective, and engagement with activities, people, and contexts (Pirson et al., 2018). To disseminate the message of Lightenment™, I created a social entrepreneurship videocast series that educates and entertains audiences with stories of arising insight and subsequent transformation that is infinitely accessible.

As an outcome, *The Lightenment™ Show* is a small stream that joins large rivers of teaching by Joseph Goldstein, Tara Brach, Gil Fronsdal, Sharon Salzberg, Ruth Denison, Shinzen Young, and Jack Kornfield, as well as media giants such as Oprah Winfrey and Shonda Rhimes. Combined, all create an ocean of transformative opportunity that spreads far and wide, bringing mindfulness from a tangential activity to a more central societal concept, as outlined by Young and Sanguinetti and predicted by H.G. Wells.

Granted, the attainment of full and consistent enlightenment and accompanying perennial bliss is far-reaching and inaccessible. The intention of my project is to persuade viewers that they indeed have the capacity to achieve and recognize major mindfulness moments and the associated individual and collective wellbeing. In fact, we all practice mindfulness informally, in various moments, each day—when a smile, a sunset, a flower bloom, or an insight to solve a problem has our full attention, as evidenced by the Langerian Mindfulness Scale (Pirson et al., 2018). I've seen examples of Lightenment™ in others throughout my life, including the many notable occasions observing my former employer and business mentor and my sisters. He created a work environment and then instinctively stepped back to allow individuals to learn and develop, thereby taking the business or organization toward harmony. My sisters led me to greater realizations of opportunity during a crisis and recovery period.

In the process of working to creatively present the concept of Lightenment™, video seemed the best option with the widest potential audience. This turned into new discoveries in media development for me. I had to rely on insights, balancing focus and rest, to learn how to script, produce, and edit these shows with a complex software, Premier Pro. Since this program doesn't run on my MacBook Pro, I reserved time at the Public Access TV Station in Burlington, Vermont to edit my work. Three beta videocasts of *The Lightenment™ Show*, shown on CCTV, accompany this research paper.

The long-term goal of *The Lightenment™ Show* is to present the emerging concept of Major Mindful Moments of Lightenment™ to an expanding audience. There has been a five-fold increase in mindfulness practice in the last five years and it is likely that we will see that growth replicate itself in the coming five years (National Center for Contemplative and Integrative Health, 2022). Audience access to *The Lightenment™ Show* is through Public Access Television, CCTV Burlington, Vermont, other public access venues, YouTube, social media outlets, as well as via my website and personal network. The shows cover the progression from introduction to integration of Lightenment™ concepts into daily life, thereby enhancing wellbeing individually and collectively.

To produce videocasts for *The Lightenment™ Show*, I ask a guest to think of a time—today, yesterday, or decades ago—when, at a busy party or walking alone in a sunlit field, a flash of insight, wisdom, or awareness suddenly arose about how to solve a problem, how to help oneself or others, or where to turn next in a decisive moment in life. It could be about a big issue of concern such as a health problem or job change, or it could be about a less significant issue such as how to help a friend celebrate a birthday or

resolve a petty argument. This insight is a beneficial contribution, in a small or grand way, and is always intended for the highest good, for oneself and others.

In the episode, "Briana's Impermanence," the guest, at age 22, experiences the death of her beloved fiancé. Despite her devastation, a Lightenment™ experience brings her to understand impermanence—as in nothing is eternal or stays the same—in an astounding way. She never had experienced such a great loss and came from a privileged background. To have the world turned upside down by death made her open to deep compassion. By age 28, her wisdom has helped her recover from grief and move into Family Physician training and residency, as well as a recent new marriage engagement. She incorporates her hard-wrought understandings and compassion into her profession and life. Many who view the show say, "I want her for my doctor. (Marion, 2023).

In "Andy's Openness," the guest experience is a surprising insight after completing his degree at the University of Vermont in 1971 as a first-generation, low-income graduate. It occurs to him that he won't proceed with a career. This is certainly unexpected by his family, who struggled to put him through college. Andy has an inspiration to take a yearlong motorcycle trip across the country. The experiences of this trip, along with the '70s song lyrics he loves, led him to a clarity that he maintains for his lifetime as a successful employee, husband, father, and eventual widower. He is an example of one who achieves satisfaction in life due to his openness to paths outside cultural/societal norms (Marion, 2023).

In "Dulce's Unknown," the guest is a protected, low-income Mexican American teen from a close-knit family in Los Angeles. Dulce couldn't speak English when she started school. At age 12, she has a Lightenment™ insight that she will be a writer

someday. As her childhood progresses, her exceptional aptitude leads her high school teachers to connect her to opportunities. She eventually matriculates at Dartmouth College to begin her own novel, a progression from the stories, poems, and essays she had been writing in notebooks for years (Marion, 2023).

To further develop this series, I am applying for grants through the Burlington (Vermont) City Arts Community Fund (October 2024) and the Dartmouth College Hopkins Center Funding for Student Initiatives (January 2025). Grants will fund further technological and content development as well as create a sustainable non-profit business model.

Also included in my plans is a Fulbright Program proposal (Fall 2026) to take *The Lightenment™ Show* to the Netherlands. One main partner would be AT5 Public Broadcasting in Amsterdam, producer of *The Damsko Show*, a series which is a "man/woman/they on the street" style show about ordinary and interesting people and situations in the city. It is fast-paced, fun, touching, and entertaining. Another partner would be the Mindfulness and Compassion Based Interventions at the University of Amsterdam Summer School Program with Academic Director Dr. Maja Wrzesien.

I plan to research the Lightenment™ at the basis of Dutch society as a model for others. The Netherlands is known for a stable political and macroeconomic climate, a highly developed financial sector, a well-educated and productive labor force as well as an informal, friendly, and welcoming culture (Proctor, 2024). The Dutch have perfected the practice of languid relaxation, or "niksen," a Dutch verb which means "doing nothing," which can be roughly translated as "nixing." In their culture, it's considered a strategy to counter work-related health problems, stress, and burnout. "Niksen" and other



factors have made the Dutch some of the happiest people on earth (Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development, 2023). Numbeo, the world's largest database of user-contributed data, ranked the Netherlands second for quality of life globally, behind Luxembourg.

## THE LAKE AND MOUNTAIN FUTURE

My theory is that today's societal systems need to be infused, and then transformed, by individual insight leading to collective acts of compassion. Humanity and divine awareness, functioning as one entity, is the paradigm that will bring about freedom from socially unjust biases. It's the practice of the lake and mountain as "one" that could prevent species extermination due to violence and environmental degradation.

Unfortunately, groups of individuals' reactive behavior, ranging from dislike to violence toward other groups of individuals is based on misperceptions of race, gender, age, and other characteristics. Genocide, slavery, lack of housing, food, medical care, and education as well as other forms social and economic injustice, including environmental destruction, have become normal and even legitimized by certain leaders in power.

It's possible, as I did when I "fell into a hole" or clashed with the Creative Director or my sisters, to be blind to this "oneness". These instances show a narrowed perspective and less ability to connect with and influence the collective in a positive way.

However, based on research and personal experience, I believe Lightenment™, and the many current mindfulness and meditation initiatives on insight and wisdom, do arise naturally and help to foster understanding and compassion. This may be a solution

to society's crumbling systems, as awareness can lead to actions based on the belief that myself is yourself is every self is everything.

There's a joke about the Buddhist monk ordering a hotdog. When the vender asks, "What do you want on it?" the monk answers, "Make me one with everything." It's a reference to the phrase that indicates a hot dog with all the condiments as representative of the highest state of consciousness when one's entity—mind and body, are essentially a part or "one" with everything.

As for my story, I enjoy continuing to learn how to "be one with everything" and will graduate from MALS, keep teaching and practicing mindfulness daily, and expand my involvement with mindfulness communities. My hope is that these endeavors result in the greater good for those who encounter the message of arising awareness, or Lightenment™. My work is to contribute to the opportunities for transformation and positive social action.

## EPILOGUE

### The Laughing Heart (excerpt)

your life is your life.  
don't let it be clubbed into dank submission.  
be on the watch.  
there are ways out.  
there is light somewhere.  
it may not be much light but  
it beats the darkness.  
be on the watch.  
the gods will offer you chances.  
know them.  
take them.  
you can't beat death but  
you can beat death in life, sometimes.  
and the more often you learn to do it,  
the more light there will be.

Charles Bukowski

— originally published in the 1996 anthology *The Laughing Heart*

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