

## Chapter 7

### ON THE BRINK OF EVERYTHING

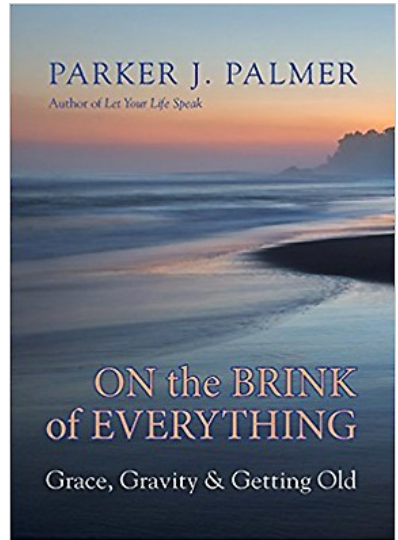
*Grace, Gravity and Growing Old*

by Parker J. Palmer

Reviewed by David Bradshaw

#### Introduction

Referring to himself as an “An Angry Quaker” Parker J. Palmer reveals how the narrow and often twisty road led him to discover a contemplative perspective of the greatest paradoxes of his life and modern American culture. Parker explains with clarity how to discover your vocation - where your great joy meets the world's great need.



Reflecting upon his last eight decades as a writer, teacher and activist, Palmer's latest book lives up to the title by helping readers discover his hard-won life lessons learned and how to age gracefully - which he describes in humorous prose and poetic beauty.

The book, which consists of a collection of 24 inspired essays, is a fun read whether you've followed his life and work over the last 40 years, or like me, this is your first. Either way, Parker's 10th book will likely have you nodding in agreement at his lovable, outspoken and very inclusive worldview.

Palmer shares a treasure chest of truisms encompassing the distilled common sense from many wisdom traditions. He paints his stories using colorful word pictures drawn from diverse palette of luminaries including; Thomas Merton, Rumi, Gandhi, George Orwell, Dickinson and Yeats, just to name a few.

Throughout history contemplatives and mystics like Palmer have warned us that when society does not see the world as a whole, we lose a divine perspective and ignore the edges of society, seeing them as “the others.” Parker reminds readers, quoting Kurt Vonnegut “out on the edge you can see all kinds of things you can't see from the center.”

Like his fellow contemplative teacher Richard Rohr, Parker concludes that everything in our life belongs - “the anger and the love, the anguish and joy...they now appear as strong threads of a larger weave.”

While Parker’s political views are left of center, he offers excellent common sense steps to facilitate healing our biggest cultural divides - starting with America’s still-all-to-prevalent racism.

I like the book’s easy readability, featuring a short introduction to each of the seven chapters and a paragraph summary of his 3-4 short essays and then a concluding poem in each chapter.

Parker Palmer is a mentor’s mentor. Read this book as you would drink a glass of fine wine, slowly, present to the nuances of its rich flavor, as each sip brings you closer to ‘the brink of everything’ delicious in life.

### **Here is a collection of my favorite ‘Palmerism’ quotes from the book...**

“Being human means being broken and yet whole. The word integrity comes from a root that means ‘intact.’...being ‘integral,’ whole and undivided - which means embracing our brokenness as an integral part of life.”

“Our lives leave a trail of words, even when we’re not speaking or writing. With every move we make...we’re dictating the next few lines of the text called our lives, composing it as we go.”

“Sanctuary is wherever I find safe space to regain my bearings, reclaim my soul, heal my wounds, and return to the world as a wounded healer...I need sanctuary if I want to loosen the grip of our culture’s violence on me...The one I need may not be a building, but silence, the woods, a friendship, a poem, or a song.”

“Heartbreak comes with the territory called being human...Suffering breaks our hearts, but the heart can break in two quite different ways. There’s the brittle heart that breaks into shards...then there’s the supple heart, the one that breaks open, not apart, the one that can grow into greater capacity for the many forms of love...Only the supple heart can hold suffering in a way that opens to new life. How can I make my heart more supple? The answer, I think, is to exercise my heart by stretching it, the way a runner stretches the leg muscles to avoid injury.”

If you do not have time to read this important book right now, below are another 100 inspiring quotes from all 24 of his wonderful essays...enjoy!

## Chapter I. The View from the Brink: What I Can See from Here

### Essay #1: On the Brink of Everything

“I like being on the brink of everything because it gives me new perspectives on my past, present, and future and new insights into the inner dynamics that shape and drive my life.”

“I’ll know I’ve made it to heaven if I can get early-morning coffee there...I’m told they can dark-roast beans in the Other Place.”

“What I know for sure is this: we come from mystery and we return to mystery.”

### Essay #2: Does My Life Have Meaning?

“The question ‘Does my life have meaning?’ is a road to nowhere.... I don’t and can’t know the meaning of my life...all I can control are my own intentions and my willingness to give myself to them.”

“Once I understand that I’m not the sun, I can get out of the sun’s way and stop casting shadows. I can step aside to let the true sun shine on everyone and everything, making all things ripe with the glow of life.”

“It is not easy to subdue the overweening ego in order to free the adventuresome soul. But whenever we manage to so, it saves us grief and serves the world well.”

### Essay #3: Withering into Truth

*The Coming of Wisdom with Time* - “Though leaves are many, the root is one; Through all the lying days of my youth I swayed my leaves and flowers in the sun, Now may I wither into the truth.” -William Butler Yeats

“Here’s a collection of six lessons as birthday gifts to myself; 1. Actively embracing aging gives me a chance to move beyond ‘the lying days of my youth’ and to ‘wither into the truth’ - if I resist the temptation to Botox my withering.”

2. “Poetry has redemptive power for me. Poets...have provided life jackets to keep me from drowning, ballast to keep me from ascending to where there’s not enough oxygen to support life...and maps to keep me from getting lost in the wilderness.”

3. “Though I’ve written ten books and hundreds of essays...perhaps the most important sentence I’ve ever written is that one word ‘Enough’ ... that word can safeguard the soul and saying it comes more easily with age.”

4. “One thing I care about is the younger generation and the world they’re coming into...’generativity’ means offering whatever we know that they might find useful...and even more important, learning from them.”

5. “Most older folks I know fret about unloading material goods they’ve collected over the years...But the junk I really want to jettison in my old age is psychological junk - such as longtime convictions about what gives life meaning that no longer serves me well.”

6. “Sooner or later, ‘withering into truth’ culminates in death, the ultimate form of withering and perhaps the ultimate source of truth...I have no idea what I will learn from dying. This I know for sure: I have no bad memories of wherever I came from when I arrived on this planet, so I have no good reason to fear where I’m going...”

## **Chapter II. Young and Old: The Dance of Generations**

“When young and old connect, it’s like joining the poles of a battery. Together we generate energy for personal and social change that age-segregated society cuts off...the young yearn for us to take an interest in them, their fears, their dreams, and their futures.”

### **Essay #4. The Music of Mentoring**

“It’s unfair to lay all the responsibility for the future on the younger generation...We - young and old together - hold the future in our hands...it will take an intergenerational effort.”

“Let’s stop talking about ‘passing the baton’ to the young...and invite young adults to join the orchestra. As we sit together, we can help them learn the music of the emerging world, which they hear more clearly than we do.”

“Many people, said Oliver Wendell Holmes, ‘die with all their music in them.’ I was saved from that sad fate by a series of mentors who reached out to me when I was young to help me find my own music...”

“Mentoring is a mutuality in which two people evoke the potentials in each other...tell your stories of ‘creative failure’ to your students...when the moment is ripe.”

“Unlike many folks my age, the young people I work with waste no time grieving the collapse of the ‘old order’ of the religious, educational, vocational, and political structures that helped form their elders lives.”

“That freedom allows them to be loyal to their own gifts and visions, and to the relationships required to bring those visions to life...Mentors and apprentices are partners in the ancient human dance, and one of teaching’s great rewards it gives us is to get back on the dance floor.”

### **Essay #5: Welcome to the Human Race**

“Dear Courtney...We both know that everyone has inner wisdom, and that one of the best ways to evoke it is in dialogue. When we knock down the walls that keep us apart (e.g., gender and age) and in that in-between space, we all have a chance to wise up.”

“I never saw my vocational journey in terms of ‘achieving great things.’...I see it as a series of probes into my gifts and the needs of the world, trying to discover where they might intersect.”

“...Too many men lose their sense of identity...as their work roles diminish or disappear...It happens because we haven’t done the inner work required to develop a sense of self that’s grounded in who we are rather than what we do.”

“...Being human means being broken and yet whole. The word integrity comes from a root that means ‘intact.’...being ‘integral,’ whole and undivided - which means embracing our brokenness as an integral part of life...I yearn for the day men and women alike can sit with people they trust...and share the journey toward broken-wholeness.”

### **Essay #6: Living from the Inside Out**

(Commencement address to Class of 2015 at Naropa University, Boulder, CO.)

“My first suggestion is simple: be reckless when it comes to affairs of the heart...offer yourself to the world...with openhearted generosity...cultivate a beginner’s mind...take the risk of failing and falling...in the service of love, truth and justice.”

“Second, as you integrate ignorance and failure into your knowledge and success... take everything that’s bright and beautiful in you and introduce it to your shadow side...Everyone has a shadow...too many leaders refuse to name and claim their shadow...value self-knowledge...if you choose to live an unexamined life, I beg you: do not take a job that involves other people.”

“Third, as you welcome whatever you find alien within yourself, extend the same  
75 welcome to whatever you find in the outer world...hospitality to the

stranger...The old majority in this society - people who look like me - is on its way out...collaborate with them, and help remove the obstacles in their way..."

"Fourth, take on big jobs worth doing, like the spread of love, peace and justice... refusing to be seduced by our cultural obsession with being effective as measured by short-term results...a standard that supersedes effectiveness...is 'faithfulness'... public education is a tragic example...millions of kids...long to be treasured, not measured."

"Fifth, since suffering as well as joy comes with being human, I urge you to remember this: violence is what happens when we don't know what to do with our suffering...The good news that suffering can be transformed...exercise your heart by taking in life's pains and joys...it will make your heart supple...a greater capacity for love."

"Finally, I quote Saint Benedict, who said, 'Daily keep your death before your eyes.'...If an unexamined life is not worth living, it's equally true that the un-lived life is not worth examining... Diane Ackerman reminds us to live - truly live - our lives...'It began in mystery, and it will end in mystery, but what a savage and beautiful country lies in between.'"

### **Chapter III. Getting Real: From Illusion to Reality**

"The spiritual journey is an endless process of engaging life as it is, stripping away our illusions about ourselves, our world, and the relationship of the two, moving closer to reality as we do."

"Death is, after all, the end of all our illusions - so why not do what we can to lose our illusions before death strips them from us? That way we are less likely to die disappointed or in despair."

#### **Essay #7: Contemplative by Catastrophe**

"I was about thirty when I first felt drawn to the contemplative life. Inspired by reading Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk, I had vision of joining a monastic community...it struck me that contemplation didn't depend on a particular practice. All forms of contemplation share the same goal: to help us see through the deceptions of self and world."

"Contemplation is any way one has of penetrating illusion and touching reality...When I succeed at something...I am fortifying one my favorite illusions...But when failure bursts my ego-balloon, I spend long hours trying 76

to understand what went wrong, often learning (or relearning) that the ‘what’ is within me.”

“Failure is one of the many forms contemplation can take...When you are with someone who values you not for what you do but for who you are, there’s no need to pretend or wear a mask.”

“...Why do we commiserate with others when they tell us about an experience that’s ‘disillusioned’ them?... Surely it would be better to say ‘Congratulations!’... Please let me help disillusion you even further.”

“I envy people who have whatever it takes to practice contemplative disciplines day in and day out... I call these people ‘contemplatives by intention’... I’m a ‘contemplative by catastrophe’. My wake-up calls generally come after the wreck has happened and I’m trying to dig myself out of the debris.”

### **Essay #8: A Friendship, a Love, a Rescue**

“...The deepest level of communication is not communication, but communion. It is wordless. It is beyond words...” -Thomas Merton

“I met Thomas Merton a year after he died...through his writing and through the communion that lies ‘beyond words’...Without Merton’s friendship and the hope it has given me over the past forty-five years, I’m not sure I could have kept faith...”

“For nearly half a century, Merton has illumined the path and companioned me on my journey...Here are reflections on four of those ways... 1. The Quest for True Self...the pivotal distinction Merton makes between ‘true self’ and ‘false self’...the quest for true self eventually led me to Quakerism, with its conviction that ‘there is that of God in every person.’ ‘Most of us...live lives of self-impersonation’ I can’t imagine a sadder way to die than with the sense that I never showed up on earth as my God-given self.”

“2. The Promise of Paradox...Merton taught me to look at life not only through the logical lens of ‘either-or’ but also through the paradoxical lens of ‘both-and.’...this is the key to creativity...personal wholeness...Merton’s lived understanding of paradox came to my rescue: to be whole, I must be able to say that I am both shadow and light.”

“3. The Call to Community...”In 1974 I left my community organizing job in Wash. D.C. and moved with my family to a Quaker living-learning community  
77 called Pendle Hill near Philadelphia...in the Quaker tradition I found a way to

join the inner journey with social concerns, which later led me to found the Center for Courage & Renewal...whose mission is to help 'rejoin soul and role'."

"4. The 'Hidden Wholeness' in a Broken World...the spiritual eye can discern beneath the broken surface of things - whether political systems, relationships, or a broken heart...in a program we called Living Room Conversations...we helped people act on their deep-down desire to live in 'connectedness' that the human spirit yearns for. And it worked...a community that might have been shattered became...more whole."

### **Essay #9: Down Is the Way to Well-Being**

"During my first forty years, I'd been driven by the notion that 'up, up and away' was the right direction to go...Wrong. Living at altitude is dangerous....But a life on the ground, grounded in reality of our own nature...allows us to fall, get back up, brush ourselves off, and take next steps without doing ourselves great harm."

"...The spirituality I'd embraced was more about flying above life's mess than engaging with in on the ground. How did the Christian tradition in which I was raised - centered in 'the Word made flesh' become so disembodied?"

"...An image that helped me understand how depression can have a 'befriending' intent - and how my failure to 'listen to my life' had left me in a place of deep pain...Imagine a friend walking a block behind me, calling my name, trying to get my attention...to tell me some hard but healing truths about myself...I, afraid of what I might hear...kept on walking...closer he came, now shouting my name, but I walked on...frustrated he began to throw stones and sticks to get my attention... But despite my pain, I kept walking away...there was only one thing left for my friend to do: drop a boulder called depression on me...not with intent to kill but to get me to turn toward him and ask a simple question: 'What do you want?' ...I finally made that turn...to take my first steps on the path to well-being."

"Thomas Merton's name for that friend is 'true self.' That is not the ego self that wants to inflate us. It's not the intellectual self that wants to hover above life's mess...not the ethical self that wants to live by someone else's 'oughts'...not the spiritual self that want to fly nonstop to heaven."

- "True self is a true friend - it's a friendship we ignore at our peril. And pass the word: friends don't let friends live at altitude."



## Essay #10: Notes from a Week in the Winter Woods

“Woke up about 5:00 AM...watching some of my dark emotions rise phoenix-like from the ashes of the night and flap around to get my attention. ‘Welcome and entertain them all!’ says Rumi in his poem *The Guest House*. ‘Be grateful for whoever comes, because each has been sent as a guide from beyond.’...Rumi’s ‘beyond’ was right: peace comes from embracing the interplay of shadow and light.”

“Solitude does not necessarily mean living apart from others, rather it means never living apart from one’s self...it is about being fully present to ourselves, whether or not we are with others.”

“I read in *A Year with Thomas Merton*...as he reflected on the complex mix of rights and wrongs in his own life: ‘I am thrown into contradiction: to realize [this] is mercy, to accept it is love, and help others do the same is compassion.’...Merton goes on to say that the contradictions in our lives are the engines of creativity. It’s true...what we get wrong makes us reach for something better.”

“Most of my heroes are no strangers to laughter. Grandpa Palmer comes quickly to mind. The man was proof-positive of William James’s claim that ‘common sense and a sense of humor are the same thing, moving at different speeds.’”

“On this final day of my retreat, I’m still meditating on the opening line of the January 13 entry in *A Year with Thomas Merton*: ‘There is one thing I must do here in my woodshed hermitage...and that is to prepare for my death. But that means a preparation in gentleness.’...The prospect of death...makes it clear that my calling is to be gentle with the many expressions of life, old and new...and that includes me.”

### Chapter IV. Work and Vocation: Writing a Life

“As we grow older, it’s important to get clear about the difference between a job and a vocation...My grandfather Jesse Parker, was a machine tool operator who crafted parts for John Deere tractors...he was forced to retire at age 65...But Grandpa’s vocation was not making tractor parts - it was a love of turning raw material into things of use or beauty, and he pursued it passionately following his retirement.”

## Essay #11: The Accidental Author

“Now and then, someone asks me for advice on how to become a writer...I don't offer advice. Instead I ask questions in hope of evoking my conversation partner's inner teacher, the most reliable source of guidance anyone has.”

“My best writing originates not in expertise, but in a place called ‘beginners mind.’...writing is not about gathering facts...it begins with dropping deep into my not-knowing...I want to make my own discoveries, think my own thoughts, and feel my own feelings before I learn what the experts say about the subject.”

“Write about what you want to know because it intrigues and puzzles you. That's the hunger that keeps me engaged with a craft I find endlessly challenging.”

“For whatever it's worth, my ‘advice light’ boils down to this (1) Care more about the process than the outcome. (2) As you are getting started, give your work away in order to maximize your chances of dumb luck...(3) Be willing to dive deep, spend a long time floundering, and practice beginner's mind no matter how loudly your ego protests.”

## Essay #12: Born Baffled

“I love the challenge of writing and the feeling of aliveness it brings me..here's a place where faith and writing converge: no matter which path you're on, it's often hard to tell whether you're wrestling with angels or demons...As Mark Twain said, ‘Go to Heaven for the weather, Hell for the company.’”

“I became a writer because I was born baffled...Like writing, faith is a way of dealing with things that baffle us until we look at them through new eyes...so my approach to writing is simple: I find something that baffles me, write enough to peel back the first layer of my not-knowing - at which point I find another bafflement, then another, and keep writing...”

“When I was young, my ego often became bloated...I forgot the counsel my father gave me... ‘Remember, Park, today's peacock is tomorrow's feather duster.’...When my ego becomes bloated with the illusion of expertise, I risk losing the gift of bafflement that has always animated my writing.”

“When you share your story of struggle, you offer me companionship in mine... that's the most powerful soul medicine I know...The God I'm familiar with does not work like GPS, but accompanies me as I try to grope my way through the darkest of dark places...a good writer can do a little bit of that for the reader.”

“Writing allows my mask to fall away so my true face can appear and I can get a clearer look at things I need to be facing into.”

“I have a sense that the words I choose to put on paper are intersecting with realities that are already ‘out there,’ but will remain invisible until someone gives them verbal form.”

“When people of any [wisdom] tradition insist that the treasure cannot be carried except in their earthen vessels, they commit idolatry, and sometimes people die: idolatry is the driver behind all religious violence. Why do we do it? Because we are afraid of how we’d have to change if we freed the sacred from our credal cages...”

### **Essay #13: The Poem I Would Have Writ**

“Our lives leave a trail of words, even when we’re not speaking or writing. With every move we make...we’re dictating the next few lines of the text called our lives, composing it as we go.”

“My life has been the poem I would have writ, But I could not both live and utter it’ -Henry David Thoreau...What a remarkable notion, that the text one writes with one’s life might be a poem...Pay attention to what they say, and occasionally they will surprise you by composing something of meaning.”

“It took me fifty years of being dogged by Thoreau’s couplet to arrive at this destination - not a book of many pages, but a five-stanza poem...That’s one stanza per decade.”

### **Essay #14: Begin Again**

“I’ve been feeling stuck as a writer... forgive me for adding a trivial personal problem to my list of major social ills, but we all live at the intersection of our small worlds and the big one around us. If we want to serve others, we must attend to both.”

“The day after I watched ‘Begin Again’, the movie’s title came back to me in the form of guidance. You need to begin again...with what Buddhists call ‘beginners mind.’ To get unstuck, I must let go of my ‘career’ as an established writer and begin again as a novice.”

“I am a novice in every new moment of the day - each of them presents possibilities unknown and untried...As Zen teacher Shunryu Suzuki said, ‘In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities, in the expert’s mind there are few.’”

## Chapter V: Keep Reaching Out: Staying Engaged with the World

### Essay #15: What's an Angry Quaker to Do?

"I'm a Quaker... a religious tradition that asks me to live by such values as community, equality, simplicity and nonviolence...I frequently find myself in deep oatmeal when it comes to politics, where I seem to have an anger management problem...A few years ago a friend...gave me a T-shirt that says, 'One Mean Quaker.'"

"Occasionally, I'm taken to task by people who regard anger as a spiritual flaw to be eliminated. But I beg to differ...I know anger has the potential to harm the person who's angry...But I also know that anger buried under pious cover poses more threats to my well-being...than anger expressed nonviolently."

"What does it mean, in the words of May Sarton, to 'at last act for love'? For me it means...to redouble my efforts to help us renew our capacity for civic community and civil discourse. I want to harness the energy of anger and ride it into action that helps bring citizens together in life-giving encounters."

"By discussing our differences openly, honestly...we honor the intentions of the framers of the Constitution...that regards conflict not as the enemy of a good social order but as the engine of a better social order - if we hold our conflicts creatively."

"Spirituality and anger (and humor) are not necessarily at odds. Or so it seems to One Mean Quaker as I continue to stumble through life..."

### Essay #16: The Soul of a Patriot

"On January 20, 2017, the country I love inaugurated a president who embodies many of our culture's most soulless traits: adolescent impulsiveness, an unbridled drive for wealth and power, a taste for violence, nonstop narcissism, and massive arrogance...How do I stay engaged and whole when my country is under attack by an enemy that we invited in?"

"There are three types of patriots, two bad, one good. The bad ones are the uncritical lovers and loveless critics. Good patriots carry on a lover's quarrel with their country, a reflection of God's lover's quarrel with the world." -William Sloan Coffin...What would it mean to have a lover's quarrel with my country right now? Four responses...

"First, it must be a quarrel about what is and is not true...Second, we must engage in civil discourse across political divides...Third, this lover's quarrel needs to

surface what is not being said...Finally, if it's to be a lover's quarrel, we need to keep the love alive."

"You're not the boss of me...Those words remind me that among my unalienable rights is the freedom to follow my soul instead of my leaders, if in doing so I serve the common good. They also encourage me to persist in my lover's quarrel with my country, as a patriot must."

### **Essay #17: In Praise of Diversity**

"At a time when so much of American life is driven by fear of 'otherness' - by false and toxic nostalgia for 'the good old days' when 'we were all alike' - let's ask where we would be without diversity."

"Mother Nature can help us answer that question...Biodiversity makes an ecosystem more creative, productive, adaptive to change, and resilient in the face of stress...The parallels between biodiversity and social diversity seem clear and compelling to me. Here are just a few of them:"

"Diversity makes our lives more vital...Diversity makes us smarter and more creative...the collective becomes smarter than any individual in it...Diversity gives us a chance to increase our personal resilience...Diversity ups the odds that we will enjoy the benefits of the human comedy."

"I urge those of you who cling to your dreams of the 'good old days'...to take a nice nap and dream on, dream on...The rest of us will help midwife the rebirth of America, hoping that our national nausea in this moment is just another symptom that our country is pregnant with change."

### **Essay #18: Seeking Sanctuary**

"Sanctuary is wherever I find safe space to regain my bearings, reclaim my soul, heal my wounds, and return to the world as a wounded healer...it's about spiritual survival and the capacity to carry on."

"We live in a culture of violence... People have different ways of dealing with cultural violence. Some turn to escapism by embracing world-rejecting religious or political beliefs. But this leads to deepening isolation... and paranoia about 'those people'...trying to destroy or control us."

"Others jump into the American mosh pit, seeking wealth or power or notoriety, contributing to the world's violence as they do...Others try to call our culture back to sanity and make the world a better place."

“Merton names one of our deepest needs: to protect and nurture the ‘root of inner wisdom’ that makes work and life itself fruitful...we need neither flee from the world nor exploit it. Instead we can love the world with all of its (and our) flaws...”

“I know I need sanctuary if I want to loosen the grip of our culture’s violence on me...The one I need may not be a building, but silence, the woods, a friendship, a poem, or a song...my friend and colleague Carrie Newcomer sent me a song *Sanctuary* ...The song itself has become a place of sanctuary for me. May it serve you that way as well.”

## Chapter VI. Keep Reaching In: Staying Engaged with Your Soul

“Some people don’t know what reaching in means, despite the fact that for millennia the world’s wisdom traditions majored in mapping out various pathways to the soul...From elementary through graduate school, we receive little guidance for the inner journey, even though Socrates... regarded self-examination as key to a life worth living.”

### Essay #19: Embracing the Human Frailty

*The Guest House*... “Being Human is a guest house. Every morning a new arrival. A joy, a depression, a meanness, some momentary awareness comes as an unexpected visitor. Welcome and entertain them all! Even if they’re a crowd of sorrows, who violently sweep your house empty of its furniture, still treat each guest honorably. He may be clearing you out for some new delight. The dark thought, the shame, the malice, meet them at the door laughing, and invite them in. Be grateful for whoever comes, because each has been sent as a guide from beyond.” -*Rumi*

“If you live your life experimentally, the failures will be personal, and some will be spectacular. And yet, as every good scientist knows, we often learn more from experiments that fail than from those that succeed.”

“This is the demanding path toward wholeness...that takes us toward being fully human, one that can be walked only by those willing to fall down and get up time and again.”

“Today, when people share their brokenness with me, my first goal is to create safe space where they can give voice to whatever they thought was unspeakable... Rumi’s words help us stay faithful to the task of becoming fully human in a world where we can neither survive or thrive until we embrace the human frailty with reverence and respect.”

## Essay #20: Confessing My Complicity

“My confession is simple. Daily I get hooked on my anger about our arrogant and unprincipled president...Anger isn't the problem. The problem is getting hooked on anger - addicted to an emotion that gives you a fleeting high but leaves you feeling worse...robbing you of well-being and creating an insatiable desire for the next hit.”

“When I look at myself closely and honestly, I see a form of white supremacy that's subtle but pernicious...I held an unacknowledged assumption that 'white is normal,' that white ways are the 'normal' ways. All others are 'exotic' at best, often 'strange'...and sometimes 'scary'.”

“On a planet where white people are in the minority, the arrogance of 'white is normal' is breathtaking - and like all arrogance, it distorts one's view of self and world.”

“Is there any hope for white illusionists like me? ... My friend Valarie Kaur... has been helping me understand what hope in action looks like through her *Revolutionary Love Project*, which envisions a world where love is a public ethic and shared practice...this is next-generation embodiment of revolutionary nonviolence.”

## Essay #21: Heartbreak and Hope for New Life

“Heartbreak comes with the territory called being human...Suffering breaks our hearts, but the heart can break in two quite different ways. There's the brittle heart that breaks into shards...then there's the supple heart, the one that breaks open, not apart, the one that can grow into greater capacity for the many forms of love.”

“Only the supple heart can hold suffering in a way that opens to new life. How can I make my heart more supple? The answer, I think, is to exercise my heart by stretching it, the way a runner stretches the leg muscles to avoid injury.”

“My heart is stretched every time I'm able to take in life's little deaths without an anesthetic: a friendship gone sour, a mean-spirited critique of my work, failure at a task that was important to me...Taking it all in - the good and the bad alike - is a form of exercise that slowly transforms my clenched fist of a heart into an open hand.”

“Alternative responses to suffering are within reach in our personal and political lives. Will we use them? It depends on our willingness to exercise our hearts...so  
85 that when suffering strikes, they will break open to new life.”

## **Essay #22: A Season of Paradox**

“I’m a professional melancholic, and for years my delight in the autumn color show quickly morphed into sadness as I watched the beauty die...Then I began to understand a simple fact: all the ‘falling’ that’s going on out there is full of promise. Seeds are being planted and leaves are being composted as earth prepares for yet another uprising of green.”

“It’s easy to fixate on everything that goes to ground as time goes by...But I’ve come to understand that life ‘composts’ and ‘seeds’ us as autumn does the earth, I’ve seen how possibility gets planted in us even in the hardest of times.”

“There is in all visible things...a hidden wholeness...Diminishment and beauty, darkness and light, death and life are not opposites: they are held together in the paradox of the ‘hidden wholeness’. In paradox opposites do not negate each other - they cohabit and co-create in mysterious unity at the heart of reality.”

“Split off from each other, neither darkness nor light is fit for human habitation. But the moment we say ‘Yes’ to both of them and join their paradoxical dance, the two conspire to make us healthy and whole.”

## **Chapter VII. Over the Edge: Where We Go When We Die**

“The finality of death is meant to challenge us to decision to be fully present here now, and so begin eternal life. For eternity rightly understood is not the perpetuation of time, on and on, but rather the overcoming of time by the now that does not pass away.” - Brother David Steidl-Rast, Benedictine monk

“No need to wait until you die to collect your rewards in some heaven high. Pay attention to what’s right here, right now, and you’ll be rewarded immediately - the Beloved Community is in our midst.”

## **Essay #23: Fierce with Reality**

“You only need claim the events of your life to make yourself yours. When you truly possess all you have been and done...you are fierce with reality.” -Florida Scott Maxwell, Psychologist, Author

“Today, as I close in on eighty, I know there are no shortcuts to wholeness. The only way to become whole is to put our arms lovingly around everything we know ourselves to be: self-serving and generous, spiteful and compassionate, cowardly and courageous...my shadow as well as my light...We must be able to say...‘I am all of the above’.”



“How can we learn to embrace with love the whole of who we are? ...meditation, journaling and therapy have all been helpful to me. Here are three others that I sometimes find even more helpful:

“1. Reach out to the younger generation - not to advise them but to learn from them, gain energy from them and support them on their way.”

“2. Move toward whatever you fear, not away from it. If, for example, you fear ‘the other,’ get into his or her story face-to-face, and watch your fear shrink as your empathy expands.”

“3. Spend time in the natural world, as much time as you can. Nature constantly reminds me that everything has a place, that nothing need be excluded. Wholeness is the goal, but wholeness does not mean perfection. It means embracing brokenness as an integral part of life.”

#### **Essay #24: A Wilderness Pilgrimage**

“Every August for the past twenty years, my wife and I have visited the *Boundary Waters Canoe Area* of northern Minnesota, a million acres of federally protected wilderness along the Canadian border...I soon realized that my annual trek to this patch of heaven, the Boundary Waters, was a pilgrimage to holy ground, a place of healing.”

“It’s not just tranquility alone that make this wilderness a place of healing for me. It’s the patient, resourceful, resilient way nature heals itself, showing me what it takes to heal my own wounds so I can be in the world as a wounded healer.”

“On July 4, 1999, a derecho - a line of fierce, fast moving windstorms and create an inland hurricane - ripped through the Boundary Waters. It took down millions of trees, creating tinder for numerous fires to ravage the forest over the next few years...it was several years before I felt able to try a familiar trail...When I did I saw how the void created by death had been filling with new life...giving me a chance to witness resurrection.”

“For years, I’ve been asking myself the ancient question, ‘How then, shall we live?’ But at age seventy-nine, as I also ask ‘How then, shall we die?’ no path serves me better than those I’ve tracked through the Boundary Waters. It’s a place where, time and again, I’ve been taken to ‘the brink of everything’ and given a glimpse of heaven.”

“As far as I can tell, matter and spirit are intertwined and indivisible, a distinction  
87 without a difference, two sides of the same coin...If flesh and matter are not

infused with spirit, how could we and the natural world be so full of beauty, healing and grace?”

“When my own small life ends in some version of wind and fire, my body will be transformed by the same alchemy that keeps making all things new, witness this wilderness...dross will be turned into gold.”

“It’s all good and it’s all gold...I won’t be glad to say goodbye to life...But I’ll be glad to play a bit part in making new life possible for others...that makes life worth dying for.”

## **On the Brink of Everything Great**

(Based on *On The Brink of Everything*)

We are born into this world from mystery,  
And, when life’s done, we return to mystery.  
The meaning of life no one can be sure,  
But I can & do control my intention to serve.  
To free my adventurous true soul,  
I must flee my old self-seeking ego.  
I’m aging now as my time slips away,  
Moving beyond my lying childish days.

How shall I then live, my dearest friends?  
How shall I then die, when it finally ends?  
As my small life on earth now grows old,  
May the dross graciously be turned into gold.

Now it’s time to jettison all my mental junk,  
Long-held views I must rid from my trunk.  
I’m called to embrace both darkness & light,  
To co-create a unified heart, yeah that’s right.  
My big chance to connect both battery poles,  
Come let’s re-connect, both young and old.  
I’m investing my life now, becoming a mentor,  
Sharing lessons-learned, seeking what’s in store.

How shall I then live, my dearest friends?  
How shall I then die, when it finally ends?  
As my small life on earth now grows old,  
May the dross graciously be turned into gold.

I embrace suffering and joy, a holy couple,  
God teach my heart how to remain supple.  
A spiritual trip to new reality from illusion,  
Means embracing diversity & full inclusion.  
The great quest in life to find our true-self,  
Is found loving God & neighbor as our-self.  
We now join our inner journey toward soul,  
With outward action - to rejoin soul & role.

How shall I then live, my dearest friends?  
How shall I then die, when it finally ends?  
As my small life on earth now grows old,  
May the dross graciously be turned into gold.

The key is moving toward that which I fear,  
Not away from it, as if it's something queer.  
Matter and spirit have been forever joined,  
Intertwined - two sides of the same coin.  
We are born into this world from mystery,  
And, when life's done, we return to mystery.  
The meaning of life no one can be sure,  
But I can & do control my intention to serve.