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A Karmic Autobiography

by Robert McDermott

As the wandering seabird which crossing the ocean lights on some rock or islet to rest for a moment its wings, and to look back on the wilderness of waves behind, and onward to the wilderness of waters before, so stand we perched on this rock or shoal of time, arrived out of the immensity of the past and bound and roadready to plunge into immensity again. — Ralph Waldo Emerson²

[The true self is a] life whose unity and connectedness depend upon some sort of interpretation of plans, of memories, of hopes, and deeds. — Josiah Royce³

The healing social life is found when in the mirror of each human soul the whole community finds its reflection, and when in the community the virtue of each one is living. — Rudolf Steiner⁴

Introduction

Bishop Gene Robinson, emeritus Episcopal bishop of New Hampshire, the first openly gay bishop of a mainline church in the United States, and the recipient of countless death threats from members of various Christian denominations, was the CIIS 2013 commencement speaker and recipient of a CIIS honorary doctorate. On the preceding Saturday morning my wife Ellen and I had the privilege of hosting Bishop Robinson for a breakfast with five colleagues committed to the ideal of gay spirituality. I opened the discussion by asking Bishop Robinson how he would add a spiritual

¹ I am grateful to Ellen McDermott, Matt Segall, Becca Tarnas, and Aaron Weiss for corrections to earlier drafts of this essay.

² Robert D. Richardson Jr., *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 336. In introducing this passage Richardson writes: "In 'The Present Age' he had used an image reminiscent of a famous trope from Bede's Ecclesiastical History." No page given for "The Present Age" or for Bede.

³ Quoted in Jacqueline K. Kegley, *Focus on Royce* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008), 15, from Josiah Royce, *The Problem of Christianity* (Chicago, IL: Regnery, 1968), 2:iii.

⁴ "Healing Social Life," inscribed by Rudolf Steiner in a book on the Threefold Social Order, November 1920, from Rudolf Steiner, *Verses and Meditations* (London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1979). Trans., Christopher Schaefer.

dimension to an academic program on human sexuality (which CIIS is in fact creating). He replied something like: "Well, my goodness, what could be more spiritual than 'coming out'? Our very biographies are spiritual." I agree.

In the 1980s, while a professor of philosophy at Baruch College, CUNY, I was also director of the Life Experience Portfolio Program at the College of New Rochelle. For this process I appointed five readers of portfolios by which "returning adult" applicants to the School of New Resources could earn up to 30 college credits. The autobiographies of mothers and grandmothers, artists, construction workers, former addicts, individuals from hard families of origin, hard marriages, hard financial circumstances, all told their stories not merely as a chronicle, but as an account of the parts of their life experience that they had been able to render pedagogical. Each semester, committee members read perhaps a dozen 50-75 page portfolios and assigned a number of credits, one to thirty, before we met. Then at an all day meeting we discussed each portfolio and assigned a final number of credits. Each prospective student learned from writing his or her portfolio as well as from our feedback (which, based on the committee discussion, I wrote and sent to each student). The committee members learned both from the portfolios and from each other. I would like some of this same kind of learning to be realized in the course, *Karma and Biography* (fall 2013).

This essay is intended as a model exploration of some of the approaches, themes, relationships, events, core challenges, and aspirations that might be included in the essays that each student will write in this course. Each essay, like this essay, will require each student to adopt a conception of karma and to select examples from his or her biography that support and are aided by the assumed understanding of karma. Other concepts, such as spiritual journey, destiny, unity or thread of one's life will all figure in this exploration and expression.

The first section of this essay is based mostly on the work of Sri Aurobindo, Tibetan Buddhism, and anthroposophy according to Rudolf Steiner. The remainder of the essay narrates my own biography in four subsections: first twenty-five years—early life, family, and education; ages 25 to 50—my family life and work as a professor in New York; the past 23 years at CIIS and in San Francisco; and the last quarter which is still prospective.

Karma, Biography, Afterlife, and Rebirth

This essay assumes that karma is a spiritual reality that deeply, and rather mysteriously, influences but should not control our behavior. "Everything is karma" (or karmic) means that everything influences karma and karma in turn influences everything that follows, but karma is not a lock or script, it is not mechanical or completely determining. It assumes freedom and the possibility of assent, resistance, and transformation—depending on the spiritual wakefulness of the person.

I think of karma as being at my back while I try to discern my destiny, and work toward it. Karma, which is always appropriate, guides my effort to formulate the primary task—or primary tasks—of a unified life. It can point a person toward some ultimate destiny but fulfillment of one's destiny requires one's informed and steady cooperation. It would be wonderful if we could discern the relationships and events that are influencing each of us at a deep level—and so far as possible those influences that are a distraction from our true goals. According to Josiah Royce, one becomes a true self by forming a coherent but never-completed life goal and remaining faithful to it.⁵

This entire project, theory and examples, presupposes freedom and growth. The individuals I admire most and wish to emulate are the ones who have recognized and accepted their task, their "given," and deepened it in service to their own life and to the

⁵ See Kegley, pp. 42-43.

welfare of their communities. As Josiah Royce has argued, it is the community that precedes the individual, and then with the help of the community's contributions the individual is able to give back to the community. A short list of examples of a positive, and inspiring, relationship of community and individual includes M. K. Gandhi, Albert Schweitzer, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King, Jr., Rachel Carson, Thomas Merton, Wangari Maatthai, Joanna Macy.

At the same time that I began to write this essay I was invited by my friend Will Keepin to speak on "My Spiritual Journey" at a conference on Interspirituality. I tend to think of the term "spiritual journey" as a success term whereas I consider my life, including my spiritual effort, as a series of complex commitments leading to a mix of successes and failures, with most results in between. But I would like to find and express a thread, a theme, or task, something deep and unifying, something clearly pushed by karma and deserving to be called my destiny. This essay is my attempt to find a deeper meaning to my life, both in its individual parts and as a totality. Clearly, the major pieces are my four-generation extended family, my career as a professor of philosophy and religion and as an administrator, and anthroposophy. I am sure that these are the core pieces; I am less sure just how they cohere into a unified life with one goal or destiny. Presumably, I am their coherence but I do not usually feel, or think of myself as, coherent. I experience myself as trying, not entirely successfully, and not with any sense of finality, to hold together in one life entirely different competing activities and commitments.

I suspect that such an endeavor will almost certainly be limited by faulty subjective memory (a fact established by Freud, Bergson, and Royce) reconstructed under the influence of present needs, and an inescapable dose of presumption. Clearly, my life is rather small and ordinary when compared to the life of a genius, such as

Royce, Einstein, or Jung, or someone in the eye of a historical storm, such as J. Robert Oppenheimer, Daniel Ellsberg, or Edward Snowden.

At this stage of inquiry and writing, my theoretical understanding and my examples are mutually dependent, or co-arising. As my understanding of karma as a phenomenon, or a spiritual fact, improves, it helps me find examples, and as I do so, my understanding of the mystery of karma deepens. At the outset of this investigation of individuals who have been karmically significant in my life, three groups come immediately to mind: family members, both my birth family and the family I have created with my wife Ellen; friends, especially those with whom I share some kind of spiritual awareness; colleagues who have been significant by way of collaboration, or in some cases by what is sometimes called "a karmic connection."

Assigning a specifically karmic influence is not easy work: it requires more discernment than I have been able to bring to it. Some friendships, of course are easy to identify while other relationships seem to me more difficult to interpret from a karmic perspective. Quite simply, some relationships that seem important in some specific respects might be karmically insignificant, or they might have a potential karmic significance to be realized a decade or two later—or perhaps in a subsequent lifetime!

I try to keep in mind that despite the wide range of importance among friends and events, every relationship, every event, illness, pleasure, skill that is part of my life will have some karmic effect. From the perspective of karma, all of my friends, colleagues, and significant situations rush in, more than can be mentioned in this essay. There are also individuals for whom I have been a karmic influence (so I have been told), by virtue of which I am privileged to strengthen the bonds of an invisible community of karmic relationships.

If it were easy to track one's karma, and more dramatically, one's prebirth and rebirth, the great minds and souls of our time would surely do so. Instead, such research is still a minor paradigm. In his *Human Survival of Bodily Death* (1903),⁶ F. W. H. Myers makes a case for the afterlife while Ian Stevenson's *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation* (1974)⁷ and *Reincarnation and Biology* (1997)⁸ trace birthmarks and deformities of a living person to a previously deceased person who had left similar marks on his or her body. These works, while important, seem to reinforce the conviction of individuals previously committed to rebirth and seem to have little impact on the culture at large.⁹

Helena Blavatsky (HPB), Rudolf Steiner, Sri Aurobindo, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and Stanislav Grof all contribute knowledge to this topic while the following major twentieth-century religious teachers generally ignore karma, prebirth, and rebirth: William James, Henri Bergson, Rudolf Otto, Mahatma Gandhi, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Thomas Merton, C. G. Jung, Martin Buber, D. T. Suzuki, Huston Smith, Thomas Berry,¹⁰ and Thich Nhat Hanh. James and Bergson were both presidents of the Society for Psychical Research but in the end were unable to affirm survival of personal

⁶ F. W. H. Myers, *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death* (NY: University Books, 1961) (1903).

⁷ Ian Stevenson, *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation*, 2nd ed., rev., enl. (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1974). First edition: American Society for Psychical Research, 1966.

⁸ Ian Stevenson, *Where Reincarnation and Biology Intersect* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1997).

¹⁰ I recall from a discussion with Thomas in the late 1970s his polite but definite expression of disinterest when I tried to explain Steiner's ideas on rebirth.

consciousness.¹¹

In his "Address of the President before the Society for Psychical Research (1896)," James made a compelling case for "one white crow," one individual who might bring information from the other side of death:

If you will let me use the language of the professional logic-shop, a universal law can be made untrue by a particular instance. If you wish to upset the law that all crows are black, you mustn't seek to show that no crows are; it is enough if you prove one single crow to be white. My own white crow is Mrs. Piper.¹² [*add footnote on Palladino Piper.*]

But thirteen years later, in "The Confidences of a 'Psychical Researcher,'" a famous essay written the year before he died, James, ever the pluralist and open-ended thinker, offered a very cautious summation of the meticulous work that he and the Society for Psychical Research had conducted for a generation:

For twenty five years I have been in touch with the literature of psychical research, and have had acquaintance with numerous 'researchers.' I have also spent a good many hours (though far fewer than I ought to have spent) in witnessing (or trying to witness) phenomena. Yet I am theoretically no 'further' than I was at the beginning; and I confess that at times I have been tempted to believe that the creator has eternally intended this department of nature to remain baffling, to prompt our curiosities and hopes and suspicions all in equal

¹¹ While William James was president of the American Society for Psychical Research he accepted the irresponsible report of Richard Hodgson against the integrity of H. P. Blavatsky (HPB). One hundred years later the *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* completely recanted its false report on HPB but in the intervening years the charge of fraud stuck to her name. See Vernon Harrison, *H. P. Blavatsky and the SPR: An Examination of the Hodgson Report of 1885* (Pasadena, CA: Theosophical University Press, 1997).

¹² William James, "Address of the President before the Society for Psychical Research (1896)," in *Essays in Psychical Research*. Introduction, Robert McDermott. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 131. Paladino Piper.....

measure, so that although ghosts, and clairvoyances, and raps and messages from spirits, are always seeming to exist and can never be fully explained away, they also can never be susceptible to full collaboration.¹³

As William James, like the rest of us, was not a "white crow"—not one of the rare individuals able to know "the other side"—it is too bad that he did not know of Rudolf Steiner (surely the whitest of white crows) and His Holiness the Dalai Lama (whose "whiteliness" is acclaimed by the entire world outside of the People's Republic).¹⁴

Fifty years later, C. G. Jung, arguably the greatest psychologist subsequent to James and Freud, wrote cautiously in his autobiography, *Memories, Dreams,*

Reflections:

We lack concrete proof that anything of us is preserved for eternity. At most we can say that there is some probability that something of our psyche continues beyond physical death.¹⁵

Clearly, it is not easy to be confident of survival of personal consciousness.

One body of literature that has permeated popular culture describes the so-called Near Death Experience (NDE) literature.¹⁶ The first volume on this phenomenon, *Life*

¹³ William James, "Confidences of a 'Psychical Researcher,'" *Ibid.*, 362.

¹⁴ The Dalai Lama is not such much known for his claims concerning reincarnation or life after death as for his being a possible evidential case—that he himself is believed to have been reborn thirteen previous times.

¹⁵ C. G. Jung, *Memories, Dream, Reflections*. Recorded and edited, Aniela Jaffe. Trans. Richard and Clara Winston (NY: Random House/Pantheon Books, 1961). This was a considered statement that Jung dictated at the end of his life. The key phrase is probably "concrete proof." In his *Red Book* Jung clearly affirms the need for individuals to try to communicate with the dead. See Sonu Shamdasani, ed., intro., C. G. Jung, *The Red Book: Liber Novus. A Reader's Edition* (NY: Norton, 2009) and James Hillman and Sonu Shamdasani, *Lament of the Dead: Psychology after Jung's Red Book* (NY: Norton, 2013).

¹⁶ See Raymond Moody, *Life After Death* and similar books by Kenneth Ring and Elizabeth Kubler-Ross.

After Death, by Raymond Moody, sold 14 million copies. The reliability of Eben Alexander, author of *Proof of Heaven*, has been questioned rather severely.¹⁷

In his book *The Problem of Rebirth*,¹⁸ Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950), the foremost spiritual philosopher and spiritual teacher of 20th-century India, offers a trenchant defense of karma and rebirth. Perhaps more importantly, he argues for the indissolubility of karma and rebirth: for Aurobindo, karma is the instrument of the divine for advancing (divinizing) the consciousness of individuals and civilizations. Karma requires that individuals return repeatedly to take up where they left off at the end of a previous life, and thereby to draw from and contribute to the total evolutionary arc.

One of the most prominent features of Aurobindo's defense includes a strong—we might say inaccurate and intemperate—critique of both Advaita Vedanta and Buddhism. He rejects the philosophy of Shankara (8th century), the dominant metaphysical worldview of Hinduism, because of its monism—all is Brahman, "One Reality without a second"—which, according to Aurobindo, essentially denies individuality and history. Aurobindo similarly rejects Buddhism because, in his view, Buddha and Buddhism deny the reality of the individual self which for Aurobindo is the carrier of the evolution of consciousness (in adherence to the will of the divine—which Buddhism also allegedly denies). Aurobindo's understanding of Buddhism is arguably fair concerning early (Theravada) Buddhism but rather unfair with respect to Mahayana Buddhism (with which, surprisingly, neither he nor Rudolf Steiner show any familiarity).

Irrespective of Aurobindo's critique of Advaita Vedanta and (Theravada) Buddhism, his *Problem of Rebirth*, which presupposes familiarity with his major works,

¹⁷ See Luke Dittrich, "The Prophet," *Esquire*, August 2013, p. 89ff.

¹⁸ Sri Aurobindo, *The Problem of Rebirth* (Pondicherry, India: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press, 2005) (1952)

especially *The Essays on the Gita, Synthesis of Yoga, The Life Divine, and Savitri*, argues compellingly that each human life is potentially a contribution to the realization of divine consciousness in human history. This is the essential meaning of his oft-quoted statement: "All life is a secret yoga."¹⁹ Of course not all souls make a positive contribution to the evolution of consciousness in each lifetime: some souls will return in a deficient state, desperately needing, to but often unable, to benefit by the advances of consciousness made possible by individuals whose lives are thought to manifest the divine will.

The source of the Tibetan teaching of prebirth and rebirth dates to the enormous, authoritative text by the 8th century Tibetan lama, Padmasambhava. The Dalai Lama, Sogyal Rinpoche, and Robert A. F. Thurman are among the prominent commentators on this text in the last decade. Although this text is known in the West as "The Tibetan Book of the Dead," the more proper translation, as Thurman explains, would be the subtitle of his translation: *The Tibetan Book of the Dead: Liberation through Understanding in the Between*.²⁰ This readable translation leaves little doubt that "the between" for all of us who have spent our lives half asleep and attached to self and other illusions, will very likely be a horrific experience that will land us in another disastrous incarnation.²¹ Because of his spiritual training and depth, and his preeminence in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, the Dalai Lama's comments on the text of Padmasambhava carry extra authority. As I read these sources, it seems that the

¹⁹ Robert McDermott, *The Essential Aurobindo* (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne Press, 1987), p. 165, from Sri Aurobindo, *The Synthesis of Yoga* (Pondicherry, India: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press, 1972ff), 591.

²⁰ Robert A. F. Thurman, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead: Liberation through Understanding in the Between* (NY: Bantam Books, 1994).

²¹ Anyone wishing to avoid this horrendous fate would do well to read and heed the advice in Anyen Rinpoche, *Dying with Confidence: A Tibetan Buddhist Guide to Preparing for Death* (Boston: Wisdom, 2010).

Tibetan tradition boasts vast accumulation, over many centuries by many fabulous lamas and rinpoches, of experience of the "between" (also call the Bardo). But this same tradition seems also to face a theoretical challenge, namely, its idea of the self as insubstantial yet accumulating karma and carrying it from life to life. The significance of the Dalai Lama as an enduring self would seem to be inseparable from his being the fourteenth reincarnation of Avalokiteshwara, the bodhisattva of Wisdom and Compassion.

My commitment to anthroposophy (which will be evident throughout this essay) also includes a devotion to His Holiness the Dalai Lama as well as to the Tibetan Buddhist tradition which produced him and which he advances so inspiringly. Rather, Steiner and anthroposophy support and encourage my relationship to world religions and major philosophies. Steiner lectured extensively on great souls both historical and contemporary. I wish he had lived to appreciate Gandhi and Sri Aurobindo, His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh, Thomas Merton and Teilhard de Chardin, Wangari Maathai and Joanna Macy. He would have referred to them as Michaelic beings, a term he used for individuals who embody the ideals of individual integrity, warriors against the forces of evil, and devoted to the evolution of humanity. In his view, great souls, increasingly since the 15th century in the West, exemplify his characterization of anthroposophy as "a path of knowledge to lead the spiritual in the individual to the spiritual in the universe."²²

Improving the understanding of karma, prebirth, and rebirth in the modern West was one of the missions that his Master, whose identity is unknown, gave to Rudolf

²² Rudolf Steiner, *Anthroposophical Leading Thoughts*, trans. George and Mary Adams (London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1973), p. 13, and in Robert McDermott, ed., intro., *The New Essential Steiner* (Great Barrington, MA: Steinerbooks, 2012), p. 9.

Steiner at age eighteen.²³ Steiner's research on karma and rebirth is one of the two commitments (along with the founding of the General Anthroposophical Society²⁴) that Steiner pursued by his own initiative. He was extremely eager to bring these concepts to Western thought and culture. He wrote his closest colleague, and personal physician, Ita Wegman, a description of lives that he claimed to have shared with her.²⁵ My attempt to attend to karma is based almost entirely on my reading of Rudolf Steiner, though I must admit that some of the examples in Steiner's lectures, particularly in *Manifestations of Karma*, seem to me too deterministic. I prefer to speak of tendencies or attractions rather than causes.

To cite an example that lives in recent American experience, the "9/11" leveling of the World Trade buildings, I believe that there is simply too much indeterminacy (whether freedom or chaos) for those, and only those, "whose time was up," to have died in that conflagration. I cannot accept the idea that those who stopped for coffee on the way to their office that morning were not karmically intended to die whereas all of the several thousand employees as well as the tourists who visited the World Trade Center buildings on September 11, 2001, were intended to die that day.

I will take up the influence of Rudolf Steiner and anthroposophy toward the end of this essay, but even the following section on my own biography will probably, if subtly, evidence Steiner's influence.

Birth to Twenty-Five Years

²³ Rudolf Steiner, *Autobiography—Chapters in the Course of My Life: 1861-1907*. Collected Works, v. 28 (Great Barrington, MA: Steinerbooks, 2005), 29-31.

²⁴ See Christoph Lindenberg, *Rudolf Steiner: A Biography* (Great Barrington, MA: Steinerbooks, 2012), pp. 666-82.

²⁵ T. H. Meyer, *Rudolf Steiner's The Core Mission: The Birth and Development of Spiritual-Scientific Karma Research* (Forest Row, UK: Temple Lodge, 2010).

I was born in New York City on August 5, 1939, approximately 7:30 am. I mention the date, time, and place because astrological research is built into the Karma and Biography course. I was not surprised that on the morning of my interview at CIIS in April 1990 I was asked repeatedly for my date, time, and place of birth. Prior to moving to CIIS, I of course knew that my natal chart showed me to be a Leo. I had my chart read by a woman in Greenwich Village in the early 1970s. In the Aurobindo communities to which I belonged from 1970 to 1976, my leonine status was considered privileged because it is close to Sri Aurobindo's birthday on August 15. I did not know about transits until Richard Tarnas read my chart in the early 1990s, before he came to CIIS. As a result I have been conscious of the prominence in my natal chart of Jupiter, Venus, Saturn, Mars, Mercury, and Uranus.

I am certainly conscious (mostly by contrast to others) that according to Jung's personality types, I am definitely extroverted, and am often referred to as intuitive. Using the four temperaments that Steiner developed at length, I am especially conscious of my stubborn sanguine and choleric temperaments, and my almost total lack of melancholia and phlegma. I have spent a major part of my waking life trying to listen, think, speak, and act less quickly. Contrary to the popular conception of sanguine, however—moving lightly and quickly, starting without finishing projects—I have had one wife, one profession, lived in only two cities, and have worked full-time for only three institutions.

Without focusing on karma, I wrote "Lineage and Legacy: An Intellectual Memoir," in response to Brian Swimme's request that I write such an essay for a volume of essays by our department faculty. We did not follow through on the volume but I did finish and post the essay on the PCC website.²⁶ That essay is focused primarily on

²⁶ Robert McDermott, "Lineage and Legacy: My Intellectual Journey" (August 2011). CIIS/PCC/Faculty/robertmcdermott/publications.

teachers, texts, and thinkers with no reference to karma; this essay is focused on communities, institutions, and individuals and with a consistent focus on karma.

More precisely, this essay is a chronicle told as an attempt to sort the essential relationships, influences, and events that seem to me karmically significant, as though their meanings survived in a vision of light. I have not had a near death experience but I want to report as though I had, as though I really could distinguish the enduring relationships from the superficial. Surely some facts at birth are inescapably karmic: parents, date and location, gender, language, class, religion, extended family, and certain inherent capabilities waiting to be developed. In my case, white, working class, Irish New York Catholic could not but be influential and presumably appropriate for my karmic tasks. The first fact of every person's karma would seem to be one's birth and birth family.

My mother was pious, dependent on Roman Catholic narratives and rules; my father was moral, an observant Roman Catholic but his actual religion was his family and work. He frequently said: "Work will save us." I think it is clear that, following my father, I have aspired to morality, loyalty, and work; following my mother I have been inclined to conversation, affection, friendship, religion, and beauty. Following my father I am Saturnian, following my mother I am driven by and drawn to Venus. Following my mother I am a Platonist (i.e., focused on ideals); following my father I am an Aristotelian (focused on practical concerns). Following both I am devoted to my family.

My oldest brother John was extremely dramatic and academically brilliant; he was often at odds with my (practical) father and adored by my (romantic) mother. My two sisters, Mary and Ann, who not insignificantly were born after him, were in the opposite situation. All of my adult life I have had a professional as well as a fraternal relationship with all three brothers whereas my sisters did not pursue academic careers. John is a

scholar and advocate of classical American philosophy, from Emerson to Dewey. He is a University Distinguished Professor of Philosophy and Medical Humanities at Texas A&M. As will be noted throughout most of this essay, he has exercised an enduring influence on my academic career.

My slightly older brother, Joe, who is universally loved, did all-but-dissertation in political science at The New School, was director of 250 Peace Corps teachers in Sierra Leone, founded and directed the School of New Resources at the College of New Rochelle, and then founded and is president of The Coalition for Worker Education, a significant institution for the education of union workers in New York City. The sixth child, Ray, my third brother, also beloved of all who know him, is a professor of anthropology and education at Stanford. Two brothers born after me died in infancy, one when I was two, and one when I was four. Following each of these deaths my mother was extremely depressed. I believe that she prayed to her deceased babies for many years after.

Fitting into this mix was certainly a karmic challenge, but perhaps because I was at home in a family guided by loving and competent parents, I also felt at home in my neighborhood, school, church, newspaper route, and New York beaches. Although I was restless in elementary school (and everywhere else), I was too scared of the nuns, and in high school of the brothers, to misbehave. I was not a particularly successful student because I could not read very well. I almost never finished an exam in high school and in college I almost never finished a book when due. It was not until I was writing my dissertation that I learned that I had seriously faulty stereopsis.

These seem to be the major threads and the most enduring influences of my early life, presumably all karmically significant. But, of course, there are countless other influences and relationships which warrant consideration. My closest friend by far from age three to thirteen was Chuck Spitaliere, still one of my closest friends today. Chuck

and I played basketball and stickball many hours of every week with no need to keep score. Another friend took me to Jones Beach with his parents several nights a week throughout the summer. My summers age fourteen to nineteen were spent at a camp in the Catskills. The first summer I washed dishes and rode horses, to the point where I was riding bareback in a bathing suit. (Forty years later, when I mounted a horse in Crestone, Colorado, after a Lindisfarne Conference, the pain was unbearable.) At age 15 I was responsible for a cabin of eight boys, all age ten. Three meals a day and bedtime were definitely a challenge. Eight weeks on a lake surrounded by mountains exercised on me a deep love of nature, especially lake swimming and canoeing.

I attended an academically inferior all-boys Catholic high school on West 61st Street and 10th Avenue, in a building replaced by Lincoln Center. Many of the teachers, Irish Christian brothers and laymen, were anti-intellectual; a few were sadistic. My memories of age 13 to 17 are mostly my social life with a group of very enjoyable teenagers, all cool (or so we thought), dancing, sports, innocent romance. I had an enjoyable afterschool and Saturday job for a Fifth Avenue haberdashery. I delivered custom made shirts and expensive ties to apartments in midtown Manhattan, and more than once to Rockefeller Center offices where, thirty-five years later, I would meet Laurance Rockefeller in the famed Suite 5600 of 30 Rockefeller Center.

On graduation from high school, for reasons that have never been clear to me, I went to a Paulist Fathers pre-seminary college for two years. I enjoyed the community life, the discipline and especially what I considered to be the high purpose, but I clearly was not in the right place. I cannot explain why I stayed a second year; it was not due to family pressure. Remarkably, my five siblings and I had total freedom to choose the schools we attended. I suspect the real (karmic) purpose of those two years was for me to befriend the brilliant, inspiring, beloved Patrick Hill. I still feel the profound loss of

Patrick's death five years ago. Patrick and I attended Queens College and Boston University together, two institutions that seemed to us entirely positive. He had no interest in either Sri Aurobindo or Rudolf Steiner but we shared the influence of my brother John and Thomas Berry, *Cross Currents*,²⁷ Dewey, Buber, Teilhard, and John and Robert Kennedy. Along with Patrick I appreciated Martin Luther King, Jr. but it was not until teaching King's writings in the last decade that I came to appreciate adequately the miracle of his courage, insights, and global significance; MLK gets better every year.

At Queens College, where I majored in Classics, I founded and edited *Triangle*, a Queens College annual journal for Catholic and Jewish thought sponsored by the Newman Club and Hillel. Two years later Patrick edited the third issue of *Triangle*—and several years after that my brother Ray edited *Triangle*. In my last semester at Queens College I applied to five graduate schools in five fields: philosophy, religious studies, theology, American studies, and liberal arts. I attended Emory partly to study with Charles Hartshorne, which I did, but when he left so did I, for Boston University where I belonged. While working for a doctorate at B.U. I lived and worked at the Fessenden School, an elite pre-prep school in West Newton. All of the boys on the floor that I monitored had pennants of the Ivy League schools that their fathers had attended, schools to which they were certain to be admitted by legacy admissions policies.

3. *The Second Twenty-Five Years*

As everyone who knows me is well aware, perhaps the deepest karmic relationship of my life is my forty-nine year marriage (following a seven-year friendship) with Ellen Dineen. Thomas Berry officiated at our wedding and baptized our two children, Darren (b. 1967) and Deirdre (b. 1970). Ellen brought constant fidelity to me

²⁷ My first publications were in *Cross Currents*, editors of which—Joseph Cunneen, William Birmingham, and Eugene Fontinell—became my friends as well as collaborators.

and to our families and friends as well as an enthusiasm for jazz, art, literature, gardening, cooking, clothing, conversation, and, of course, romance. For the three years before my romance with Ellen, I was in a serious relationship with another woman who left me one week after we arrived at Boston University to study for doctorates. I never saw her again. As this was not my decision, and as it ended so suddenly with a brief note, it took some time for me to see, thanks to the joy of my relationship with Ellen, the karmic rightness of this ending. I hope Arlene had as positive a marriage as I have had, thanks curiously to her, and very obviously to my unfailingly loving wife.

I can confidently say that through all the nearly fifty years of my marriage my family has been my first commitment—spiritually, socially, financially. Although I spoke a vow at our wedding on Thanksgiving Day, 1964, in front of Thomas Berry and about 200 family members and friends, I subsequently decided, probably due to the influence of existentialism, that I do not believe in vows. I think it is not possible or responsible to make a commitment for a lifetime. I have never considered ending my marriage to Ellen, but not because of a vow; rather because every day our marriage seems to me right. Not the least of the reasons (in addition to an abiding karmic sense that we were meant for each other), quite simply, Ellen is kind and generous to me, to relatives, friends, and colleagues. Which doesn't mean that our marriage has been easy. We are often frustrated by our different temperaments: I want big pictures, Ellen wants details. I go too fast and am too confident; Ellen is cautious and meticulous. Of course, these very qualities sometimes save me from self-induced disasters. We are well used to the conflict between our temperaments, and we think we are making progress, rather slowly, in dealing with them.

The challenges that Ellen and I have confronted—in addition to pace and different interests, Ellen's craniotomy, two strokes, and breast cancer—have always

seemed to me somehow ours. The grace with which Ellen has dealt with five major surgeries has clearly indicated to me she has accepted these as part of her karma, and therefore indirectly but no less certainly I accepted them as part of mine.

Similarly, raising our children seemed to me exactly what I should be doing. Although I was not as "on board" as Ellen in the first two years of our children's lives, I was totally on board once they each reached age two or three. I was intensely devoted to our children thereafter, a responsibility I thoroughly enjoyed—and still do, now with grandchildren. It has always seemed to me that caring for children, whether or not one's own, is the most sacred of obligations and, fortunately, among the most rewarding.

My marriage to Ellen is certainly one part of my life for which karma has been an obvious fact. It would have been a good idea to marry Ellen if only to watch her work with children, especially with our children and grandchildren but reaching to many other children both in classrooms and in social situations. My father often said, "Quite a girl that Ellen." In later years, here in San Francisco, my mother (who believed in heaven) often said, "That Ellen is going straight up." In response to Ellen's unfailing kindness, her husband has been heard to say, "But I don't want to be as kind as you do."

Equally obvious as candidates for karmic significance are our two children and four grandchildren. Our son Darren was born when I was 27, while I was teaching full time, plus serving as part-time dean, and finishing a doctorate at Boston University. Fortunately, Ellen beautifully cared for Darren, for me, and three years later for our daughter Deirdre. Once I moved to Baruch, however, I had only one job and a lot of time at home for family life. Beginning in 1972 we lived in the affluent town of Rye, NY, across from a beautiful beach on Long Island Sound. It was pretty close to perfect. Darren and Deirdre went to Rye public schools. Darren went on to Amherst, Columbia Journalism, and the *Wall Street Journal* until he joined the Brunswick Group after 17

years at the *Journal*. Darren made an ideal marriage to Julia (a therapist for the deaf) with whom he is raising two exciting daughters, Benna (b. 2003) and Kate (b. 2005).

Because Deirdre was unhappy at Rye High School, for the academic year 1985-86 we moved to Columbia Teachers College where Ellen studied for a masters degree and worked as the nursery-kindergarten teacher at the Rudolf Steiner School (on 79th Street off Fifth Avenue). This made it possible for Deirdre to attend Rudolf Steiner High School. Deirdre's time to flourish came when she did a fifth year at the Sacramento Waldorf School, followed by Hampshire College, a UCSF MA, and a career as a nurse practitioner. Deirdre, too, has an excellent marriage (to Jan, an engineer) with whom she is raising two delightful children, Liam (b. 2005) and Neve (b. 2008). Ellen and I both experience the deepest possible relationship to our children, their spouses, and our four grandchildren. This part of my life has always seemed to me karmically right, and truly a joy.

Not all of my activities, or even commitments, however necessary they might have been in some respect, seemed to me then, or seem now, to have been part of my central karmic task. I spent hours countless hours repairing our house—shingling the roof, putting in skylights, fixing broken pipes. When I responded to an amazing psychic that I visited in the early 1980s that I was not interested in doing some work that he thought I should undertake, he replied that I had avoided that same work in my previous life. I do not remember the exact nature of the work I had been avoiding but it was almost certainly something to do with details, probably housework.

Maybe work that seemed to me peripheral was indirectly important, intended and right. Maybe, as I often hear said (and do not believe) everything is positive just as it is. My Daoism, which, admittedly, is not as deeply entrenched as my Confucianism, involves insight and discipline, and does not accept the passive bail-out, "everything

happens for the best." (I can hardly control my disapproval at each annual faculty staff orientation sitting beneath a sign that announces: "Every one who needs to be here is here." No: some faculty were not meeting their responsibility; they could have and should have been there.)

The continuing influence of my oldest brother John is not least because like him I studied philosophy, including American philosophy.²⁸ Interestingly, probably in ways that are subject to many interpretations, my entire (karmic) orientation is in favor of religion and spirituality, both of which he has opposed since his mid-twenties, and ever more passionately in later years. My other siblings ranged from indifferent to explicitly hostile to the Catholic Church, the only religious tradition of which they have any experience. I read myself out of the Catholic Church in college but I did not at all lose interest in religion, spirituality, or Christianity itself.

As a counter as well as a complement to John's world view, beginning at age 14 I had the direct influence, inspiration, and friendship of Thomas Berry. I studied Asian religions and Sanskrit with him, and he introduced me to the thought of C. G. Jung, Mircea Eliade, and Eric Voegelin. I did not follow his interest in Native Americans in the 1960s or his interest in ecology in the 1970s. Two mistakes, or so I think now. In 1975, Thomas arranged for his Fulbright to the Open University in England to be awarded to me.

In recent years, due to my friendship with Brian Swimme, Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, the influence of Thomas Berry, and my gratitude to him, has been intensifying. In preparation for a course on Teilhard and Thomas that I co-taught last year with Brian Swimme I read Thomas' collected works. Between Teilhard and

²⁸ See his editions of the works of William James, Josiah Royce, and John Dewey, as well as a collection of his essays: *The Drama of Possibility: Experience as Philosophy of Culture*. Ed., Douglas R. Anderson (NY: Fordham University Press, 2007).

Thomas, I finished that course, at least with respect to his explicit spirituality, closer to the thought of Teilhard.

Within days of defending my dissertation on the philosophy of Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan at Boston University, in spring 1969, I received notice of being awarded a two-year grant to study Indian civilization during summer 1969 at Syracuse University and summer 1970 in New Delhi. In the Syracuse University library I discovered the writings of Sri Aurobindo and resolved to write on his two careers, his radical political activism against British rule of India (1893-1909), and his career as a mystic, yogic philosopher in Pondicherry, South India (1910-50). After six weeks of study in New Delhi in August 1970, I went to the Sri Aurobindo Ashram and Auroville in Southeast India. I was scheduled for a private meeting (*darshan*) with the Mother of the Ashram (the former Mira Richard) on my birthday, but I was told by her secretary that she cancelled in order to enter a battle with psychic forces. I was present when she gave a public *darshan* on Sri Aurobindo's birthday, August 15. Devotees around me seemed transported in ecstasy but I felt nothing. Twenty years later, when Bob Thurman introduced me (in Tibetan) to His Holiness the Dalai Lama in the penthouse of the Fairmont Hotel, I definitely felt something. What is the significance of these two very different *darshan* experiences? The handshake? Twenty years? Bob Thurman's several-minute introduction in Tibetan?

On the way home from Pondicherry, August 1970, I met with Haridas and Bina Chaudhuri and visited the California Institute of Asian Studies that they had founded four years previous. The meeting had the strongest stamp of karma; I somehow was convinced that he and I would work together, and we did. In 1972 we edited and

contributed essays to a special issue of *International Philosophical Quarterly (IPQ)*.²⁹ It was tragic for the future of CIAS/CIIS and for Sri Aurobindo scholarship in the United States that Haridas died of a heart attack in 1975. Eight years later I was offered the opportunity to succeed him as president of CIAS but I did not accept. When I was offered the presidency again in 1990, with the help of Elizabeth McCormack and Laurance Rockefeller, I was able to accept. Everything to do with Haridas and Bina, and my being appointed president of CIIS, seems to me to have the strongest possible karmic significance. On assuming the presidency full time in February 1991 I wrote an essay for the Institute newsletter that I entitled "Autobiographical Reflections as a Schooling in Karma."

I did not accept the teaching position that Haridas offered me in 1970. As our son was three years old and Ellen was expecting our daughter, I needed a real salary. Further, I was heading for tenure at Manhattanville College, an institution I admired and enjoyed. The students had been to excellent high schools and enjoyed learning. They also had values: many volunteered for the Catholic Worker and protested the Vietnam War. I was a dean of a class of 350 students, most of whom I knew. I was also faculty advisor to SDS (Students for a Democratic Society). At a national SDS meeting in Kansas, 1969, I observed sadly that the leaders of SDS hated learning, including Plato, Shakespeare, and history. I have ever since been fascinated by the double-edged sword of "concerned" professors, the term by which those of us who opposed the Vietnam War referred to ourselves. I continue to approve "concerned" against injustice but "concerned" sometimes includes commitments that I do not respect and that lead me to prefer less "concerned," more dispassionate, scholarship.

²⁹ See Robert McDermott, "Sri Aurobindo: An Integrated Theory of Individual and Historical Transformation," pp. 168-80, and Haridas Chaudhuri, "The Supermind in Sri Aurobindo's Philosophy," pp. 181-92, *IPQ*, XII, 2, June 1972.

In 1971 I left Manhattanville where I had taught philosophy for seven years, where I had thrived and to which I have ever since been grateful. I also thrived at and was grateful to my next school, Baruch College, CUNY, where I taught for twenty years, was chair of the Philosophy Department for twelve years and chair of the Religion and Culture program for six years. I was well paid, promoted, granted tenure, awarded teacher of the year, and other honors. Yet during my entire tenure at Baruch I had a sense (an intuition, more than a desire) that I was not to stay there permanently.

While at Baruch I had many outside commitments. I served as secretary of the American Academy of Religion, secretary of the Society for Asian and Comparative Philosophy, president of the New York Center for Anthroposophy, and president of the Rudolf Steiner Institute. I delivered more than fifty lectures at the New York Open Center and edited five books. I also attended the Columbia University Oriental Seminar directed by Wm Theodore de Bary. My close academic friends included Jim Carse, acclaimed professor of religion at NYU, and Douglas Sloan, professor of history and religion at Columbia Teachers College. With such a rich academic and social life I had no reason to be unhappy at Baruch but I sensed that something would move me onward, and it certainly did.

While at Baruch I received several tempting offers, including a prestigious position and a promising future with John D. Rockefeller IV (Jay), arranged by Elizabeth McCormack, but Ellen and I agreed that we did not want to move to West Virginia. I was also offered chair of a joint philosophy and religion department with a high salary and an opportunity to make six appointments, but we decided we did not want to move to Florida. Then, I was offered president of A.R.E, the Edgar Cayce headquarters (with a serious interest in Steiner) but again we walked. Were any of these intended or were they diversions from the straight path to CIIS and the San Francisco Bay Area?

None of the three opportunities just mentioned resurfaced, but some others did. In 1972 William Irwin Thompson and I were guests on Lex Hixon's radio program, *In the Spirit*, to discuss Auroville, where we had both recently visited. In 1976, after I returned from the Open University where I had begun to study Rudolf Steiner, I was invited by Bill Thompson to teach a course on Sri Aurobindo and Rudolf Steiner at Lindisfarne, which was then in Manhattan, a few blocks from my office at Baruch. I did not see Bill again until 1993 when Laurance Rockefeller offered to finance Bill's salary if I could appoint him to CIIS, which I did. Soon after Bill invited me to join Lindisfarne Association, a remarkable group of thinkers, all invited by Bill, who meet for a week each summer. Wendell Berry, Mary Catherine Bateson, Wes Jackson, Amory Lovins, David Orr, Lynn Margulis, and Jane Hirshfield are only a few of the impressive colleagues I came to know through Lindisfarne.

Thanks to Ellen's work in clay we both became close friends of Mikhail Zakin, a nationally known potter. After an impossibly difficult childhood, Mikhail became an inspiring teacher of music, clay, culture, cooking, and all aspects of life. Without a college education she served as chair of the Fine Arts Department at Sarah Lawrence College. She founded and directed the Old Church Cultural Center and School of Art in Closter, New Jersey, where Ellen taught pottery. We bought a house together in Truro, Cape Cod. Quite simply, Mikhail was an amazing person, tremendously important to me and to our children, and, of course, especially to Ellen.

It seems that my friendships with individuals with spiritual awareness (Buddhists, Christians, and anthroposophists) tend to form quickly, presumably because of a karmic relationship. For thirty years I have been friends with at least a dozen individual anthroposophists with whom I talk and exchange emails regularly. Due to our shared devotion to Rudolf Steiner and anthroposophy, my friendships with these individuals

began and continue with an added dimension. I find it easy and enjoyable to support the work of individuals with a moral compass and spiritual awareness.

My devotion to Rudolf Steiner and anthroposophy has been my spiritual base and the center from which I engage the world. This is in keeping with Steiner's characterization of anthroposophy as a path of thinking, feeling, and willing as ways to join the spiritual in the individual to the spiritual in the universe. All of my academic work has at least a slight tincture of anthroposophy, and some, as in this essay and the forthcoming course, a thorough coloration.

I am often asked how I came to anthroposophy. The story is worth telling because it shouts karma. Ellen was taking a pottery course at Greenwich House in Manhattan with Mikhail Zakin. At the end of the class I saw Mikhail showing photos of living forms reproduced in *Sensitive Chaos* by Theodore Schwenk,³⁰ a book that had been recommended to her by her close friend, M. C. Richards, a life-long anthroposophist and author of the 60s classic, *Centering in Pottery, Poetry, and the Person*.³¹ In order for me to purchase the book for Ellen's birthday, Mikhail directed me to 211 Madison Avenue, at 35th Street. As it was on my walk from Grand Central Station to my office at 26th Street and Park Avenue, I often had occasion to pass "211," the library and bookstore of the Anthroposophical Society. Furthermore, my first two books³² were published by E. P. Dutton and Schocken Books, both at 210 Madison Avenue, but I always avoided "211" across the street because it looked too weird, too nineteenth-

³⁰ Theodore Schwenk, *Sensitive Chaos: The Creation of Flowing Forms in Water and Air* (London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 2005) (1965)

³¹ M. C. Richards, *Centering in Pottery, Poetry, and the Person*. Foreword, Matthew Fox (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1989). See also M. C. Richards on Waldorf education: *Toward Wholeness: Rudolf Steiner Education in America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1980).

³² Robert McDermott, *Radhakrishnan* (NY: E. P. Dutton, 1970), and *The Essential Aurobindo* (NY: Schocken, 1974).

century occult.

Once inside the library and bookstore of 211 Madison I found 200 books by an author whose name was entirely new to me. A few years before I had published an essay review of commentaries on the Bhagavad Gita,³³ and here were two books on the Gita unknown to me (this was before Google search). I purchased and read Steiner's *Occult Significance of the Bhagavad Gita* and *The Bhagavad Gita and the Epistles of Paul*. (In 2009 I edited *The Bhagavad Gita and the West*, containing these two volumes with my introduction.³⁴) During the academic year 1975-76, while on a Fulbright to the Open University (thanks to Thomas Berry), I had the chance to read Steiner extensively and attend lectures at Rudolf Steiner House in London. For my Open University work I wrote a small book on Gandhi and Sri Aurobindo and wrote the script for *Avatar: Concept and Example*, a BBC video on Krishna and Sri Aurobindo, but my spiritual compass was already pointing me to Steiner and anthroposophy.

Unlike the exclusivism of Christianity, particularly the Irish version of Roman Catholicism on which I was raised, anthroposophy is embracing of the texts, teachers, and practices of Hinduism and Buddhism. My informed and reverent relationship to Krishna and the Bhagavad Gita, Mahatma Gandhi and Sri Aurobindo, as well as to Buddha, Thich Nhat Hanh, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and Joanna Macy are part of my life as an anthroposophist. Steiner delivered fourteen lectures on Krishna and the Bhagavad Gita, and carefully researched the positive relationship between Buddha and

³³ Robert McDermott, "Indian Spirituality in the West: A Bibliographic Mapping," *Philosophy East and West* (April 1975), XXV, No. 2, 213-39.

³⁴ Rudolf Steiner, *The Bhagavad Gita and the West*, in *The Collected Works of Rudolf Steiner*, vols. 142/146. Introduction and notes, Robert McDermott (Great Barrington, MA: Steinerbooks, 2009).

Christ.³⁵ Once I began to think inside anthroposophy I felt at home spiritually because I was able to bring with me the great texts and teachers with whom I already had developed a relationship. More importantly, I was able to bring to them Steiner's perspective, especially on the evolution of consciousness.

Although neither a Hindu nor a Buddhist, I try to practice the three yogas of the Gita (spiritual thinking, selfless action, and love) and the Three Jewels of Buddhism (the teacher, teaching and practice, and the community). Steiner's three disciplines, which he refers to as thinking, feeling, and willing, are essentially the same as the yogas of the Gita. In my practice, I revere Rudolf Steiner (whom I regard as the preeminent initiate of the age). I study his teaching and practice the disciplines he recommended, and I try to serve the communities (not only anthroposophical communities) to which I belong.

I believe that as I was born to be married to Ellen and with her raise two children (and be enchanted by four grandchildren), be a professor of philosophy and religion, and serve as president of CIIS, I was born to be an anthroposophist. In karmic terms it makes sense to me that I started life as a Catholic, left it in favor of many religious and spiritual ideals, and since age 35 have been nourished by anthroposophy. I am grateful that Ellen led me to Grace Cathedral, but the Episcopal Communion, of which I am an active member, is supplementary to my anthroposophy. If the Grace Cathedral community were not an important part of my life with Ellen, I would be more active in the Christian Community, the Church that Rudolf Steiner essentially gave to Lutheran priests³⁶ as a way of renewing the Christian seven sacraments.

³⁵ See Robert McDermott, ed., intro., *According to Luke: The Gospel of Compassion and Love Revealed* (Great Barrington, MA: Steinerbooks, 2001).

³⁶ See Alfred Heidenreich, *Growing Point: The Story of the Foundation of the Movement for Religious Renewal, The Christian Community* (London: The Christian Community Press, 1965).

Vincent Ragone, the psychic referred to above, casually commented that I would publish *The Essential Steiner* with Harper and Row. At first I was astonished that he could know that I had just weeks before submitted a proposal for *The Essential Steiner* to a new friend who was an editor at Seabury. I replied to Vincent that my editor friend had recently phoned to say that I would be receiving a contract in a few weeks. After the conversation with Vincent, my friend phoned again to say that Seabury had discovered that Harper had contracted with a highly accomplished anthroposophist for a Steiner anthology. At first I concluded that Vincent had fused my proposal to Seabury with the Harper volume which was presumably forthcoming. With the help of Jacob (Jerry) Needleman, I was able to contact the vice president of Harper who explained that the Steiner anthology was not making progress and asked if I had a proposal. A week after I sent my proposal I received a contract from Harper for *The Essential Steiner*. I definitely do not understand precognition. I often quote Whitehead's comment that there are no future facts, but there do seem to be examples of individuals who can see and genuinely know what has not yet happened in linear time. Clearly, there are "white crows" of precognition.

In 1983, in my role as president of the Rudolf Steiner [summer] Institute, I invited Owen Barfield to teach a course on one of his books. He agreed. The Institute that summer was held at Wilson College, where I was able to bring it thanks to my years of collaboration with Harry Buck. But then Owen wrote to say that at 85 he was really too old to teach, that I should teach the course. In the end, I co-taught with Owen Barfield a course on books by Owen Barfield, one of the most admirable as well as most learned and wise individuals it has been my privilege to experience. In 1995 he wrote a letter to me celebrating CIIS which I think he would not mind my quoting:

Dear Robert,

It was good of you to remember me. I was impressed by both the articles you enclosed with your letter, your own and Richard Tarnas's, and glad to have had the opportunity of reading them. They confirm the impression I have had for some time (on admittedly slender evidence, as I am not really in touch) that the C.I.I.S. is one of the very few positive signs that there may be some hope of a paradigm shift being accomplished by our civilization in time to avert a total catastrophe. (February 17, 1994)

Steiner seems often to be viewed as a German philosopher who just happens to have started Waldorf Schools and Biodynamic agriculture, or as someone with visions of angels and devils, and wild ideas about rebirth. In my view, Steiner is a high initiate—one sent by the spiritual world with a wide and deep mission, a kind of Western avatar—who was wise, selfless, and incomparably productive. Jung comes close to Steiner's productivity but Steiner worked in the same four or five disciplines in which Jung worked plus he also contributed to systematic philosophy, a detailed account of and case for evolution of consciousness, cosmology, architecture, mystery dramas, economics, social theory, education, and agriculture. He was astonishingly clairvoyant, he delivered 6,000 lectures, he was patient and kind, and at the end of his life he established both an esoteric and exoteric organization to advance esoteric research. For me, Rudolf Steiner is the teacher, the first jewel.

It is not an exaggeration to claim that my commitment to anthroposophy has widened and strengthened my commitment to spiritual teachers who are the first jewel of other traditions. From anthroposophy I reach, for example, to Christian thinkers, including Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King, Jr., Teilhard de Chardin, Thomas Merton, Josiah Royce, Valentin Tomberg, and Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Steiner lectured extensively on great souls both historical and contemporary. Surely, the Dalai Lama and

Archbishop Tutu are preeminent examples of precisely this relationship: a free, unique, creative individual in intimate positive relationship with the spiritual world, with many religious leaders, national destinies, and the Earth.

The second jewel is *dharma*: teaching and practice. Although I have been studying books by and about Steiner for more than 35 years, and practicing anthroposophy in many different ways, I still feel that I am at the beginning. But the essential criterion for success in anthroposophical practice is faithful effort. Practicing anthroposophy is essentially a life-long process of transformation of one's thinking, feeling, and willing—the three yogas of the Gita—except that Steiner formulated these transformative disciplines precisely for modern Western practitioners. Consequently, thinking, as Steiner explains, needs to take account of the lack of participation characteristic of Western consciousness, lost steadily for many centuries, and severely since the 15th century in the West. The practices Steiner recommends are aimed at the development of warm, will-filled, original, spiritual thinking.

The esoteric research that Steiner conducted throughout his life, and the vast esoteric, as well as exoteric and practical knowledge that he bequeathed, all support the fundamental need of the time. Steiner offers a new, modern Western *dharma*: to think originally, feel deeply, and will deliberately, all in service of the divinely guided (but not determined) evolution of consciousness. This three-fold discipline is intended for the transformation of each individual life, and the whole of humanity. It has been developed in stages by Krishna, Buddha, and Christ. In Steiner's view, it has been aided by a host of other high beings including Siddhartha Gotama, the historical, physical Buddha and Jesus of Nazareth, the historical, physical Christ, as well as by the mother of Jesus, John the Evangelist, Michael the Archangel, and indirectly by the tempters, Lucifer and Ahriman.

Another way to understand and practice anthroposophy, in relation to which I have made a serious effort, is to steer between the two tempters. Lucifer leads us to think that we are already liberated (as in Hinduism), enlightened (as in Buddhism), or saved (as in Christianity). Lucifer is the champion of grandiosity and presumption; on the other side (of Christ) is the tempter Ahriman, the advocate of materialism and reductionism, insisting that money, sex, and power are the only realities.³⁷ Like most people, my adult life has been inevitably entwined with pressures that Steiner characterizes as Luciferic and Ahrimanic.³⁸

The third jewel is the *sangha*, the community. While Steiner advocated ethical individualism, completely continuous with Emerson's, he also, like Buddha, supplemented the ideal of individual effort by his commitment to the improvement of old institutions and creation of new ones. He worked literally to his death in service of institutions and organizations which would enhance the opportunity for individuals and groups to glimpse the spirit. It was a deed of astonishing generosity that at the end of his life he offered to the spiritual world that his karma be joined to the Anthroposophical Society that he had just refounded. During the years that I served various anthroposophical institutions, I often thought that I could find a better use of my time but then stayed the course because of the possibility that the destiny of Rudolf Steiner, one of the great spiritual figures of our time, might depend on precisely these institutions so manifestly unworthy of his sacrificial life.

My service to the third jewel has not been limited to anthroposophical institutions. Serving as class dean at Manhattanville, department chair at Baruch, and president of

³⁷ Steiner created a thirty-foot statue of Christ, whom he named the Representative of Humanity, between the figures of Lucifer and Ahriman.

³⁸ See my "Money, Sex, and Power," PCC website.

CIIS are among my many ways of serving Sangha, institutions which make it more possible for participants to work on their transformation and realize their destiny, irrespective of how unconscious they might be of these. Without the Anthroposophical Society it would be difficult for an individual to find Steiner; without the visible Church it would be more difficult for individuals to awaken their souls and to find Christ. All of these institutions are obviously imperfect—and so are the individuals who need them and complain about them. I think "spiritual but not religious" needs an upgrade to "spiritual and therefore religious."

The Third Twenty-Five Years

I was offered the position of president of CIIS in 1983 but I thought it would be too difficult to lead an institution with inadequate resources and so much dissension. I applied in 1990 only because Bina Chaudhuri had asked Michael Murphy to urge me to do so. Because I was ambivalent about the school (deep affinity with Haridas, little appetite for chaos and controversy), I deliberately did not work to be appointed to this position, neither when I allowed my name to be entered as a candidate nor at any time in the process. I recall thinking that if this is the right move (I probably even said "karmically right" move), which I had to ask Ellen to make, I needed it to happen without my effort.

The meeting in July 1990 at which the CIIS board voted to offer me the position of president has often been told by long-term members of the CIIS community precisely as a karma story. I was one of two candidates with strong mutually exclusive backing. The other candidate had been president of three community colleges with no relation to the mission of the school; I was the professor deep in the mission. Because of a zoning rule, the board had to vacate the building at 9:00pm. At approximately 8:50 the board was about to vote on the two candidates with the almost certain result in favor of the

other candidate by one vote. At that very moment a message came from the receptionist that Rina Sircar's sister had just suffered a heart attack. Her doctor, who was a board member and had announced for the administrator candidate, said he had to leave immediately. The vote was postponed. When the board met two weeks later, the doctor announced for me; I was offered the job. By the way, Rina's sister recovered that night and was released from the hospital the next day.

It might be one of the characteristics of a karmic influence that it happens without one's effort, as with a synchronicity—a so-called non-causal coincidence (but actually causal at a deeper level) which, if one heeds it, in effect turns one's attention to an important shift of consciousness, and revelation important for the present situation. The first karmic event that happened in relation to CIIS without my direct action was the board meeting in July 1990; the second was my meeting with Laurance Rockefeller two weeks later.

Although I could not have recognized this in 1964 when Elizabeth McCormack appointed me instructor in philosophy at Manhattanville College, Elizabeth has proven to be one of the most significant influences in my life. She appointed me dean of the class of 1971, and most dramatically twenty years later introduced me to Laurance Rockefeller at a meeting in the Rockefeller office, 30 Rockefeller Center, in July, 1990, that changed my life.

I had attended the first of three *Esalen Revisioning Philosophy Conferences* in 1987 where I met Rick Tarnas (and in 1988, Brian Swimme), and fifteen other prominent philosophical thinkers, including Don Hanlon Johnson, Sam Keen, Robert Solomon, Steven Rockefeller, and Robert Bellah. I have ever since referred to this conference, to which I was invited either by Michael Murphy or Huston Smith, as proof positive of karma! After the conference, Elizabeth McCormack, who was Laurance Rockefeller's

close associate, called me to her office for a candid report on the conference which (unknown to me) Laurance had funded. One immediate result of that meeting was a three-year project that I co-directed with Arthur Zajonc and Douglas Sloan. But a more dramatic result came in July 1990 when I phoned Elizabeth to say that I had been offered the position of president of CIIS. Elizabeth's opinion of CIIS was such that she responded unhesitatingly, "Well you can't take that!" When I nervously admitted a desire to take it, and included something about my relationship with the founder, she offered to introduce me to Laurance Rockefeller.

Within minutes of meeting Mr. Rockefeller in his office (behind a wall of Monets and Matisses), he said that he was interested in the mission of the school—"body, mind, and spirit." He then asked me what I meant by "spirit." It was such a defining moment in my biography and the future of CIIS that I remember my reply exactly: "I think that the mind is behind the body and spirit is behind the mind." Three days and three meetings later Laurance offered me five million dollars for CIIS. As I observed Mr. Rockefeller offering this pledge, I said to myself, "This is happening to me."

Laurance Rockefeller's incredible gift through me to CIIS led to Ellen's and my moving to CIIS, San Francisco, and a new life. In January 1991, Ellen and I left Grand Central Station on an AmTrak to Oakland, CA. Ellen faced back, to New York, and read Jill Kerr Conway's book about her coming to Smith College; I faced west reading Josiah Royce's book about California.³⁹ I assumed the presidency; controversies ensued immediately and did not let up for eight years. After we laid off about a quarter of the faculty and a quarter of the staff (including a vice president and two deans) in years seven and eight, the ninth year, my last as president, was a time of quiet healing.

³⁹ See Josiah Royce, *California, from the Conquest in 1846 to the Second Vigilance Committee in San Francisco [1856]: A Study of American Character* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1886).

Elizabeth McCormack served on the CIIS board from 1990 to 1995 and chaired the board from 1995 past my retirement in 1999 when Joe Subbiondo succeeded me as president. Elizabeth, whose 90th birthday was hosted by Bill Moyers and the multi-generational Rockefeller family, continues as a friend to CIIS and Joe Subbiondo, and of course to Ellen and me.

I had a few friends among the faculty, especially Rick Tarnas (who created the program in Philosophy, Cosmology, and Consciousness, or PCC), and Brian Swimme (who created the Center for the Story of the Universe). Both Rick and Brian attracted a host of intellectually compatible Bay Area friends and colleagues. Anne Teich, my assistant for eight years and currently executive assistant to Academic Vice President Judie Wexler, has been a friend from the time of my appointment to the present.

In the early and mid-90s, I was able to appoint Andrew Harvey, Joan Halifax, and William Irwin Thompson, each for three years. Bob Thurman and I taught a course on Gandhi and the Dalai Lama. It was definitely an exciting time but controversy, chaos, and distrust, as well as the constant fear that WASC (the accrediting agency) would place us on probation, clouded every endeavor. It was certainly not the same institution which for the past ten years has been administered so ably and pacifically by President Joseph Subbiondo and Academic Vice President Judie Wexler.

Rick and Brian at first, and then Sean Kelly, Elizabeth Allison, and Jake Sherman, have surely been part of my karmic destiny: they are all friends and highly influential colleagues. PCC has given me a superb education and an opportunity to study and teach as though *en famille*, which, in my experience is a very positive term. Mostly through Rick, or perhaps also through Roger Walsh and Frances Vaughan, or all three, or that I was president of CIIS, I was invited onto the board of the International

Transpersonal Association (ITA), founded and directed by Stan Grof. In the early 90s I delivered talks with the ITA in Killarney (in the home city of Ellen's family) and in Prague (where I spoke to an audience of 500 on "The Spiritual Mission of America"). I was also on the board of the San Francisco Zen Center—where I observed that for a non-religion, Buddhism sometimes looks a lot like what I consider religion to be.

A more comprehensive list of karmically influential settings and institutions include my childhood house and neighborhood (neither of which were special to me but surely were influential), mid-town Manhattan (which was very special!), Queens College, Manhattanville College (also very special), the Boston University Philosophy Department, *Cross Currents*, Matagiri, The Sri Aurobindo Ashram and Auroville, the New York Branch of the Anthroposophical Society (president for five years), the Rudolf Steiner Institute (president for twelve years), the Anthroposophic Press/Steinerbooks (board member for five years), Sunbridge College (board chair for seven years), Rudolf Steiner College (board chair for seven years), International Transpersonal Association (board member for five years), CIIS (president for nine years and professor for the past 13 years, my intellectual home), and Esalen Institute, where I have spent more than 20 memorable weeks since 1987 and which I serve as a member of the Esalen corporation. I ascribe deep karmic significance to my work with Carol Cole: I am the founding chair of the board of the Sophia Project that she founded and has directed for the past thirteen years.

Two friendships which emerged in connection with CIIS have transcended my years as president. John Levy, a third- or fourth-generation San Franciscan and former executive director of the C. G. Jung Institute, was an advisor to families with generational wealth. While I was president, John invited prominent friends to a lunch that Ellen hosted almost every month. These savvy individuals, including Angeles Arrien,

Frances Vaughan, Philip Moffet, Wink Franklin, and others served as informal advisors on how to lead an institution that claimed to be a family but spent a lot of energy in self-destructive activities. Because of my commitment to academic excellence, and my amazing connection to Elizabeth McCormack and Laurance Rockefeller (who gave CIIS another eight million dollars during my presidency), I was probably a good appointment but I have to admit that I was not gifted in responding to statements or behavior that seemed to me irrational or destructive of the institution. I was also insufficiently compassionate in response to colleagues weighed down by fear. I was busy practicing karma-yoga (selfless action) when the institute probably needed someone advanced in bhakti-yoga (love). I did love CIIS but I had trouble with individuals whose behavior, it seemed to me, was hurting it. Of course, many of these same colleagues had the same opinion of my influence.

Through John Levy I met Bob Graham who had been a successful accountant and had created a family foundation that had been doing micro-lending to Mayan women in Guatemala. Bob finished a PCC MA and also served as chair of the finance committee of the board. It was Bob who, with my encouragement, spent three weeks in our finance office, after which he reported that CIIS had no resources, owed a half million dollars, and was counting on collecting a half million dollars in bad debts. Bob gave the first financial report that faculty and staff said they believed. It was also a financial report that gave us six months to cut one million dollars from a five-million-dollar annual budget or face closure. A few weeks later, at a lunch for which Laurance Rockefeller and Elizabeth McCormack had flown from New York, Laurance Rockefeller turned to Bob and said: "You are my barometer. Whatever you give I will match." Bob gave generously, Elizabeth gave generously, Laurance matched generously, confidence was restored, and the school was saved. An observer familiar with the concept of karma

would have had to admit that it was working overtime at that lunch. Once again I was led to say, "I am not doing this; this is happening to me."

One of the great advantages of life in San Francisco, at least for someone such as myself with an abiding interest in religious community, symbols, rituals, and architecture, is Grace Cathedral, a haven, a masterpiece, and a source of inspiration. Its liturgy is beautiful and believable. The sermons are intelligent and liberal. Ellen's friendship with Lauren Artress led me to Grace. Once there, I came to know Alan Jones, the dean, with whom I drove to Frances Vaughan and Roger Walsh's home in Tiburon for monthly discussions with Ram Dass, Stan Grof, Angie Arrien, Huston Smith, and Charlie Tart. In a sweet bit of karma, at the Top of the Mark Hopkins Hotel, Alan offered Ellen the position of assistant to the dean which she held for the next eleven years. In recent years we have been friends of Mark Stanger (who led a pilgrimage to Jerusalem that we joined—four months after Ellen's second stroke), Dean Jane Shaw, and the bishop of California, Marc Andrus, and his wife Sheila.

Fourth Quarter: Looking Ahead

Mick Jagger and Paul Simon (who went to Queens College two years after me), are both 70. My brother John, at 81, recently won a teaching award at Texas A&M and was recently appointed University Distinguished Professor. Edgar Morin, 92, Sean Kelly's primary mentor, recently delivered a stirring keynote speech to the Integral Theory conference. With these and many other examples of individuals remaining productive in their 70s and 80s, and some in their 90s, my perspective on my karma reaches to the end of this decade, until 2020, or age 80. On the other side of this consideration, our intellectual community just lost Robert Bellah. With various dimensions of aging and death in mind, particularly with increasing awareness (from previously almost no awareness at all!) that my life could end, certainly eventually and

perhaps suddenly, I have begun to plan the next "five plus" years with an eye to the shrinking of opportunity, energy, and years. Here is a summary of what I like to think is a karmically-informed game plan.

I plan to continue teaching as long as I have academic energy and interests, and as long as my CIIS colleagues and students want me to. Courses I want to teach include: *The Karma of America; Krishna, Buddha, and Christ*; with Steven Goodman, *Anthroposophical and Tibetan Perspectives on Karma and Rebirth; Modern Spiritual Masters*, and if *Karma and Biography* will be successful, I will teach it again.

I plan to finish writing *Unique Not Alone: Steiner and Others*, a full-length book, now 80% finished and due in December 2013. On sabbatical, spring 2014, I want to write a lengthy introduction to Steiner's lectures on the Gospel of John (which my friend Fred Amrine plans to translate). Following that, I would like to edit and write a lengthy introduction to a volume of Steiner's writings on Buddha, a companion to my edition of *The Bhagavad Gita and the West* which was published in 2009.

I am committed to tracking the ecological situation and finding ways to bring ethical (as in virtue ethics) and spiritual perspectives (especially anthroposophy) to that ominous fact of our lives. As "there is no away," there is no way to hide from this topic. We need to practice the yogas of the Gita, or the Buddhist Eightfold Path, or Steiner's thinking-feeling-willing, in a determined effort to restore the loving relationship between humanity and Earth, both of which are permeated with divinity, both of which are suffering due to human ignorance, indifference, and greed. As Thomas Berry understood deeply, the classical Chinese texts provide an ecological world view that is so needed. The *Neiye*, a proto-Daoist text teaches

The Way [Dao] fills the entire world.

It is everywhere that people are.

But people are unable to understand this.⁴⁰

I want to think through just how best to understand the relationship among certain terms such as Dao, Spirit, and perhaps Karma, that join, or rejoin, humans to their Earth body, to the Cosmos, and to divinity itself. I plan to continue to read, teach, and write in the wide space between theism and naturalism.

I hope to continue researching a few topics that are entirely new to me but suddenly quite compelling: wisdom (as in my essay for the volume on wisdom edited by my friend Roger Walsh⁴¹); forgiveness (as in Archbishop Tutu's book, *No Future Without Forgiveness*⁴²); and hope and grace, as in the late writings of Josiah Royce. In recent years Royce has emerged as my favorite philosopher, a champion of loyalty, individuality, hope, grace, the Logos, and the Beloved Community (a concept which he introduced and which later migrated across the Charles River to Boston University Divinity School where Martin Luther King learned of it and devoted his tragically short life to it).

About seven years ago Arthur Zajonc invited me to serve as a mentor in a Fetzer Institute project concerned with introducing spiritual perspectives in higher education. We met several times a year for four years, with very positive results for almost every one involved. Paul Wapner, another mentor, and I were able to organize a seminar on "Ecology, Spirituality, and Social Justice" for one week each summer for twelve colleagues, including Elizabeth Allison and Jake Sherman. We have met at Lama, near Taos, New Mexico; Upaya Zen Center, in Santa Fe; and in January 2014 we will meet

⁴⁰ Quoted in Robert Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011) 445, from Harold D. Roth, *Original Tao: Inward Training (Nei-yeh) and the Foundations of Taoist Mysticism* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1999).

⁴¹ Roger Walsh, ed., *The World of Wisdom* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, forthcoming).

⁴² Archbishop Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (NY: Random House, 1999).

as a Center for Theory and Research Seminar at Esalen. Additionally, this project led me to a friendship with B. J. Miller, M.D., initially head of palliative care at UCSF, and for the past several years head of the San Francisco Zen Hospice.⁴³ He and I are gathering a group of colleagues in order to study death and afterlife.

While I have an entire semester to deepen my understanding of karma and its place in my biography, it would be nice to be able to attempt a few generalizations, still speculative, but perhaps useful as a plateau for the next stage of investigation.

While writing this essay I have had to admit the extent to which my memory is both flawed and selective. As I have been reminded by my recent reading of Royce, all thinking about the past is present. This essay is shot through with my present understanding of myself, my family and friends, of individuality and community, anthroposophy, higher beings, Buddhism and Christianity, New York and San Francisco, CIIS, aging, forgiveness, and death. This is a very different essay than I would have written twenty, or even ten, years ago, and it seems reasonable to assume that I will write a different one after teaching this course, and again ten years from now.

My overall state of mind, or orientation and approach, to my karma and my autobiography is gratitude. I have had a pretty easy and privileged life. I am also aware of a mix of positives and negatives that are already present and surely on their way. I am more keenly aware that in terms of energy, productivity, and some kinds of excitement, I feel that I have peaked. I am getting a sense that the sun is lower in the sky—not setting exactly, but definitely past late afternoon. No more meetings with Laurance Rockefeller. Compensatorily, my current mode of excitement is increasingly quieter and deeper. I am watching my grandchildren grow, my students succeed, my books and essays accumulate. I am also taking on deeper topics: wisdom, forgiveness, hope, afterlife.

⁴³ See B. J. Miller, M.D., or San Francisco Zen Hospice Project.

I must admit that I am not certain to which events and relationships to characterize as karmic. While I am able to identify relationships that seem to me karmically significant—families, philosophy and religion, Aurobindo, Steiner, Royce, Haridas Chaudhuri, Elizabeth McCormack, Laurance Rockefeller, CIIS and PCC), I am not sure if I have a single identifiable destiny. Whenever I try to discern a single destiny, I find not one but a three or four possibilities. I am conscious concerning all the ways that my identity has been formed by institutions, communities, colleagues, and friends.

While president of CIIS I learned for the first time the power of fear, and since retiring as president, thanks to a calmer life and increase in years, I am learning, by theory and practice, the overwhelming power of love. Knowledge surely counts—in fact, it is necessary, as is an active will—but it is way overrated. My parents, Ellen, Royce, Steiner, Teilhard, His Holiness the Dalai Lama are all correct: Love (also called compassion) is the one absolute goal of every human life, of the whole of human consciousness, of the spiritual mission of Earth, and of the inestimable contribution of high spiritual beings, particularly Krishna, Buddha, Christ, and Sophia.