

THE GRACE OF SHADOWS HEADED

by

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When I was eleven and twelve, in the early morning, in the quiet before the rest of the family arose, I'd step into the living room to release the celestial music I knew was inside me. The sun streamed and streamed over the kidney-shaped swimming pool, the water lilies and goldfish in the fish pond, the rosebushes, the birds of paradise, and the baby's breath and streamed through our floor-to-ceiling windows to fill and warm that welcome, quiet room. Champion, our male beagle, would accompany me. I had a funny relationship with music—I really enjoyed the emotions and brightness of the LPs we had from shows we'd seen, but other music—particularly orchestral music—sounded thin, tinny, not fine enough. I felt that far more glorious music existed—gorgeous, rich, ethereal, transporting, continuous melodic sound—and that if I showed up at the right moment and perhaps cocked my head at the right angle, that somehow it might issue forth from me. Even if I couldn't hear it with my ears, I would hear it in my head.

In my pajamas, in front of Champion, I'd summon my inner resources and slightly tilt my head and open my mouth and open it wider, willing the glorious sound to come. In the powerful morning sun-filled silence, I'd take a step and then another, with arms outstretched, just wanting to release and become part of that continuous melody that was coming through me. Champion

would lift his head and sniff the air one place after another, but we never let on to anyone what I did.

Although I attended Sunday School for several years, the only thing that made an impression on me was when I was seven and we had a substitute teacher. She said that we should only pray by thanking God for all that we have. That really struck a chord, so that night, once I was alone in bed, I mentally composed a prayer to God, thanking Him for all that I was blessed with. It seemed to cover everything, so I repeated it each and every night as soon as I turned out the lights. When I told Mother two months before she died that since I was seven I had prayed every night to thank God for everything He'd given me, she was shocked. Shocked! A self-assured agnostic, she overcame her momentary consternation to assert, "I never taught you to pray!" Prayer had never been spoken of in our family. She never understood that children don't come from you—they come through you, and within me was the seed of prayer.

"'Tis the sunset of life gives me mystical love, And coming events cast their shadows before."* Looking back at the shadows that passed through my early years, I am grateful that they afforded me moments when I could miraculously get in touch with who I was and who I was meant to become. Momentarily shielded from the harsh glare of my mother's and other's judgments, it was as if my self's own special light came forth, and within that unique halo, I could sense what was coming and use that to inspire me to explore and express what was most pressing.

Most of my memories before our move to California are lost, but one vivid memory of life in suburban Chicago was after we'd just moved into our brand-new tract home in Park

* 1803 T. Campbell *Poetical Works* (1907) 159

Forest, and I was six. I was playing outside one day when I noticed a trail of ants moving along the low-slung ledge of our living room window. Their industrious zeal impressed me. I was curious what would happen if I bombed them, so I found some small pebbles and started to bomb the ants. Most of the bombs missed, but a few were hits, and when I crouched down and saw ants with broken legs and behinds moving frenetically in circles trying to recover, I felt bad. I dropped a few more pebbles and looked again. A few had their bodies crushed and seemed to be in real pain. A dark, forbidding cloud seemed to pass over me—what I did was wrong. I knew it. I never did it again.

Mother declared she could not survive one more winter with her bursitis, so when I was ten, we moved to Marin County, California. Living in Bel Air, in Strawberry, close to Mt. Tamalpais, the Magic Mountain, with its summer fogs that arrived right at four o'clock from the Bay to sweep up through the hills, refreshing the dry golden grasses and bringing a new subdued intensity, and with the eucalyptus trees suffusing the air with their awakening fragrances, I seemed to shift into becoming an altogether different person. I started to feel strongly that I wanted to communicate with the spirit world, higher dimensions. I came by a book on automatic writing, and tried doing that, letting go, and letting a purported spirit write through me. The writings were weird and unexpected, but it felt strange, and it felt like something I shouldn't let myself fall into. Another book I explored and practiced was on self-hypnosis. I'd put myself in a trance, repeating the word, "relax." I loved the letting go, repeating "relax." It seemed a key thing for me.

At the end of August we left our rental in Bel Air and moved to Novato, which was cheaper and had some of the warmest weather in the Bay Area. Responding to my mother's

questions in the kitchen and at the dinner table, listening to teachers, and talking to kids at school, I realized more and more that there was a “big dirty secret” that no one ever talked about. I wondered about it and paid better attention, and yes, there was a massive, universal cover-up: death. The subject was surrounded by a dangerous, seemingly unsurmountable border. To simply mention the possibility of someone’s death was to enter a forbidden country. I realized that people were afraid, were avoiding it, that to speak of death was the worst thing you could do.

One day, I was in the bathroom brushing my teeth, when I remembered again that I would die. Because I’d raised tropical fish since I was five, I was familiar with death, but I hadn’t known any person to die. I wanted to confront that, so with toothbrush poised in midair, I looked at myself and thought, *You are going to die*. I repeated it over and over. I imagined myself dying, then gone—my consciousness snuffed out completely. Sick dizziness and nausea overcame me and I bent over, as if sucker-punched. I grabbed the sink and forced myself to rise up and look at myself again in the mirror and repeated, *You are going to die, you are going to die*.

I left the bathroom still shaken and queasy, and the walls, the furniture, the very air seemed as if some cosmic earthquake had struck and they all had separated feet apart on some inner fault line. I wondered if anyone sensed what I’d gone through, but no one noticed anything different. I wondered where the dead guppies and the swordtails were that I’d flushed down the toilet. Over the next few weeks, I returned several times to the bathroom I shared with my dad and brother and locked the door and concentrated on looking at myself and feeling, really feeling, what it would be like to be *dead*. Each time I became violently ill and dizzy, and had to grab the sink. I could not accept that my consciousness would end, so after my bedtime prayer,

with the door locked, thinking and feeling about my life, I vowed to dedicate myself to finding a way to achieve immortality. I made it my absolute top priority. I was sure there was a way to attain immortality. I just had to find it.

In bed after my prayer, I decided that there was figurative immortality and literal immortality, with the latter being the true prize. In the years that followed through my teens, I systematically thought about, explored, and tried out various paths to immortality, analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of each considered path to literal and figurative immortality, using the latter ones as my “fallback position.” An example of the figurative was becoming a famous actor who would live on in his art. Literal was continuing to live, in some form, fully conscious and, ideally, existing in absolute knowledge and joy. Still, during my interactions with classmates and adults, I would look at them and wonder: Did they not notice the very real, dark cloud that was hovering over them, trailing them, thickening in menace? Would they ever stop and face it and try to do something about it? Or, would they continue to chase after the blinding light of their dreams?

I loved much of the TV show *The Twilight Zone*, and one year after our April 1 arrival in California, a new series, *Way Out*, premiered right after *The Twilight Zone*. The first show made a huge impression on me. It concerned a professor whose imminent death from cancer was defeated by keeping his brain alive! With his brain immersed in a sustaining fluid and attached to an artificial heart and an eye, he was thinking, he was being. Something deep within me thrilled—to exist without a body, forever. I remember the last scene in which the wife, quite happy with the new situation, comes into his hospital room, smokes her cigarette, and blows clouds of smoke at him into his warm, briny tank to aggravate him. I thought about existing like

that. Being an avid tropical fish breeder and a nascent biologist, the concept, though far-fetched, felt possible, doable. But I knew it would make me ill at ease—if anyone like my brother got into the room, he'd take real delight in tipping over the tank. Yet, I knew I was onto something—there was something far, far better. I could exist consciously for eternity.

In my bedroom I had a cheap mirror from Woolworth's with a narrow chrome frame, and it hung above my bright, two-tone blue, thrice-painted dresser. In the summer's late afternoon, long before dinner, when it was very quiet in the house and the neighborhood, I'd go into my bedroom and lock the door. With the sun beating against the drapes, instead of trying to feel death, I'd stare at the mirror and try to open my "third eye," which I pictured as just above my two physical eyes. I don't know how the idea of a third eye entered my consciousness. I just seemed to know that I had a third eye, and I had to find a way to open it. Standing before the mirror, letting the feeling of time slip away, I'd look at myself and lose my vision, but let it rest in an altered state above my eyes on my forehead and consciously will my third eye to open.

Also right after I turned eleven, on a bright, late summer early evening, I was futzing with a fish tank while *The Huntley-Brinkley Report* was on. A local reporter reported on a man who had walked from San Francisco to Salt Lake City. The man was a vegetarian. That was the first time I'd ever heard the word "vegetarian," and instantly I knew I'd become one. When I asked myself when, I knew it would be when I'd become legally responsible for my actions.

When Mom and I took the Greyhound bus or Dad drove us into San Francisco to visit art galleries on Sutter Street, after some viewing I'd feel an irresistible pull to look at metaphysical books and slip away. I particularly liked the store close by upstairs on Sutter Street, and there I'd pull down books, feeling that there was a rare, special book that would provide the answer or, at

least, open a path, however circuitous. I pulled down book after book and skimmed the table of contents and various pages, taking mental notes and, not finding what I was after, not feeling that this was the one, I'd put it back. I never bought one.

The first time I spent the night away from home, I was fifteen and slept over at my parents' friends in San Francisco. There I came across a book by Norman Podhoretz: *Letting Go*. Staring at the cover, I knew, I absolutely knew that letting go would be of signal importance to me throughout my life.

By some fluke of drawing school district lines, I had to attend a high school nearly eight miles away rather than attend the local one I could walk to in twelve minutes. I soon made a friend, Henry, another freshman who shared several classes, and to enable me to participate in an after-school discussion group, he'd invite me to spend the night. As we got to know one another, we discovered a mutual interest—actually, a driving yearning to find the answers to what life was really about. Even after I started attending my local high school my third year, we'd get together and take long walks, trying to figure out the mysteries of life and how we could find the ultimate. Searching with Henry, I keenly felt an inner conviction that I was to trust him above all others, and that, some day, through him, I'd find the “pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.” That was the phrase that kept repeating in my head and that I felt would come true. We stayed in touch, and the summer before I was to leave for my junior year abroad in England, we'd figured out that what we were seeking included meditation and being a vegetarian. I started transcendental meditation to tide me over in England, and he was experimenting with raja yoga, but we knew that these were temporary.

In Coventry at the new University of Warwick, truly on my own for the first time, I did start being a vegetarian, and my quest to find the answer to life and death reached a fever pitch. I was meditating often five times a day far into the night. Then, while the campus slept, I took breaks from studying and meditating to pull open the drapes and look across at all the blank, darkened dorm windows. I'd pull the drapes back and pace the room. Why wasn't anyone doing anything about death? Looking into the mirror over my bedroom sink and averting my gaze, I'd try losing myself again to open the third eye, and I'd see the strangest faces come over mine, linger, and flicker by to be replaced by something more beguiling. But then I'd feel strange, more lost.

I wanted help. I had no books, no one to talk to, but at times hope was kept alive by the most audacious desire: I wanted to *become God*. This had first come into focus when I was fifteen and lay in bed at night plotting my life. Now, in the grip of cold bleakness, a luminous shadow might filter through my consciousness, and sensing that, then I'd remember the audacious desire and, if I responded to the grace, I'd close my eyes and become still, and imagining and imagining being God, it was as if long-forgotten senses were awakened and were opening and filling...and I'd feel infinity...Love *being* in the darkness...everywhere. Later, back in the mundane, at times I'd feel lightened by the feeling that something was coming.

For spring break I wanted to visit France and Italy and get as warm as possible. I was no longer vegetarian, having had the utmost difficulty finding vegetarian food on campus. In Paris I dropped acid with my best friend Brad, who was studying there. We spent most of the day without food in the freezing Bois du Bologne with me in a ridiculous thin, plastic coat. That evening I got sick, so crazy sick I didn't think I'd make it. I can't remember ever asking God for

anything in my prayers, but that night I prayed like mad, promising him that if he just got me through this, I'd give up drugs and do anything, *anything*. I got through it, but the combination of the acid (and other tamer drugs) with meditation wasn't good. It felt like coils of my brain had congealed and were gasping for oxygen and vital fluids.

With a French friend of Brad's, I drove south toward the sun, advancing through and seeing Lyon, Marseilles, Cassis, Saint-Tropez, Cannes, Monaco, Genoa, Portofino, and then he left me in Florence. I spent eleven days there, walking the streets at least twelve hours a day. It felt very oppressive, but I felt compelled to keep walking, feeling as though I had to walk up and down and along every street, searching for a way out. Finally, I escaped to Rome, where the sun felt stronger and it felt as though my life was opening up. But I still wasn't warm, and after asking people about points south, I felt pulled to Positano.

I loved Positano, with its pastel-colored houses that hugged treacherous cliffs, reaching up into the sky. I spent two weeks there, really enjoying the locals and the motley international crowd, and it gradually warmed as we came to the end of April, but I felt lost, spent, from the cold desolation that enveloped me. Most times when I walked to or from the town center, rather than take the myriad steps, I felt drawn to walk way down below along the beach, searching the coarse sand and pebbles. After a few days I realized I was looking for something, but what? There wasn't anything natural or man-made to find, as it seemed that the beach had been combed clean decades ago. Beachcombing was uncharacteristic of me—I was usually too much in my thoughts or busy enjoying views—still, I couldn't keep my eyes off the beach.

The last afternoon on my last walk back from town, I took the beach route and wasn't even looking for anything when it was as if someone took hold of my jaw and moved it left and

down. Piercing black eyes stared from a face. I picked up a triangular piece of terra-cotta—perhaps a piece of pottery or a tile—its edges smoothed and rounded from an infinite number of waves—and the thick glaze was of a man with white hair, beard, and moustache, and powerful, piercing eyes. The face ended just above his eyes. One final wave had delivered it, but no one had taken it. I stood there, holding it, and knew that it would have utter significance for me.

I was going to spend the summer in Mykonos, but money was low, and feeling inexorably pulled back to California, I returned and settled back in Berkeley. A few weeks later, a call from Henry surprised me. He asked to visit me. After he came into my front room of the tiny Berkeley house I shared, I looked at Henry and knew he'd found what we were looking for.

I actually locked the doors to my room—I wasn't going to let him out until he'd told me what he'd found. He started to talk about his new spiritual path and teacher. Everything he said sounded right and so very welcome. I was intent to learn more, but he was leaving soon for three months and had no books with him about this path. I asked if there were any books I could buy. He told me that they were only privately published, but that I might possibly find one at Shambhala Books.

I walked down to Telegraph Avenue and found the book. After reading several pages of the author's foreword, I jumped up with excitement. I'd found it. I knew it. *This* was the book I'd been searching for. Two weeks later I turned twenty-one and became a vegetarian and gave up drugs. Several months later I was initiated onto a mystical path of glorious inner sound and light that promised an ultimate transformation to attain God realization—immortality and a consciousness of indescribable absolute love. The all-important daily meditation concentrates on opening the third eye. The meditation is synonymous with prayer, a prayer of gratitude and

calling to God. A key aspect is letting go and, indeed, letting go has been a life lesson to plumb and practice. The Teacher who initiated me and attuned me to the audible life stream did remind me of the man on the piece of terra-cotta I found in Positano and, as I later experienced, his piercing black eyes shimmered with light and love.

These are some of the highlights that I've remembered through the years. We live our lives wrapped up in the false skein of events and thoughts and time, making our way as best we can, following false threads, dazzled and dazed by the false glare of the world, our best self trying to find and follow the thread out to freedom. And love. But blinded as we are, there are moments that artificial glare is blocked and we can sense the shadow of a looming possibility, something that feels resolutely true and good, a way to turn to take us further out through the maze. For me, along the way, there were signs, moments of grace when I could have moved away from the soft, true light, but I stayed, focused on it, and heeded it, deciding to follow it into what I hoped was a truer light. Those decisions were, most likely, illusory decisions; if anything, sensing those shadows was grace, and heeding those shadows was grace as well.