

Becoming Vulnerable to Grace

by Bart Marshall

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After fooling around with spiritual matters for some 37 years, a conclusive experience occurred last August that finally settled things. My questions vanished and the spiritual search came to an end. During those 37 years I read a lot of books and turned over a lot of rocks, but three teachers stand out.

I met Richard Rose 15 years ago and from then on his teachings became the foundation of my spiritual search. About ten years ago I was blown away by Nisargadatta's book, *I Am That*, and it became my "bible." Five years ago I started reading Douglas Harding and dabbling with his experiments, then last year attended a workshop with him in England. On the plane ride home from that workshop the experience occurred. Only it was not an experience. It was a *non-experience* experience. There was no one there to have an experience.

So if I wasn't there how come I have memories of it and can talk about it? I don't know. It's just one more aspect of the mystery. And it's all mystery. Anything that's not mystery is misunderstood. As soon as I think I know anything, I've strayed into error.

The months since then have felt like a period of assimilation, integration, deepening--maybe that never stops. I've done a lot of writing and thinking about it, trying to find ways to make it understandable to my own mind and of talking about it semi-coherently to others.

I pretty much started from scratch on this. For the first few days afterwards I literally couldn't put two words together on the subject. The experience does not bring with it the capacity to communicate. That has to be worked out afterwards, which is what I seem to be doing now. So tonight I thought I'd quickly go over some of the things I've been thinking about these last six or eight months, then open it up for questions.

The experience itself, in my case, occurred as a series of three-part episodes over several hours and was at times punctuated by almost unbearable joy and unworthiness, accompanied by considerable weeping. (Fortunately, no one sat nearby.) But these aspects are not important and are unique to the individual. What is realized, however, is universal.

So what *is* realized? The first question a person is likely to ask--or should ask--of someone who claims to have had a spiritual realization is "What did you realize?" I've been working on my short answer. Here's the current version:

In August 2004 something happened that corrected a basic mistake in perception I'd lived with all my life. Prior to this occurrence I thought I was an individual consciousness experiencing an infinitely large, infinitely old, external universe of real objects. What I discovered, however, is that the consciousness I mistakenly perceived as belonging to an individual (Me), is in actuality God consciousness, the One consciousness, and that Me, the universe and everything in it are vague, ephemeral thought-forms appearing in and out of emptiness in a timeless, spaceless Now.

It was a shattering revelation, but at the same time so obvious and self-evident I realized I'd known all along. I became un-fooled. A case of mistaken identity--very close to home--was resolved. There is *only* God consciousness. Here, where I am, there is consciousness. Therefore, I am That.

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Letter to Douglas Harding

I know Douglas Harding did not cause my experience any more than I did. The personage of Douglas is no more real than the personage of Bart--or of any other object or entity in creation. But afterwards I was overwhelmed with such immense gratitude it had to find expression. I wrote him a letter. Initially, I intended it for his eyes only, but later began to share it with friends who asked about what happened to me on the plane. It seemed to have a positive effect and I began to see that the letter may have some objective value so I include it here:

Dear Douglas,

This is a thank you letter--the most heartfelt thank you letter I am capable of writing--but I know before starting it will fall as far short as an arrow aimed at the moon. Words cannot touch how I feel.

As you may remember, my main question for you last week went something like this: "How can this headlessness, this seeing with the single eye, be all there is to it? I have experienced what you describe, but it leaves me with no certainty. Accounts of self-realization--both from famous teachers and personal friends--contain a decisive event, a date and time when everything changed. This has not happened for me." You seemed to look through me. "You have it already," you said. "It's who you are--you can't get it wrong! Trust it. Live from it." I was not convinced. Later I made this note:

If this is it, then where is the fire of conviction, the great release of the burden, the absence of questions like this one?

As we said our goodbyes, your last word to me was, "Simplify!" It rang in my ears. Later in my room I was ambushed by a great heaving cry. I felt like a wretch--to be given so much and always ask more. That night I gave myself a good talking to--with some degree of success, I suppose. The last note I made was an admonition to:

Stop looking and See. Stop searching and Be. There is only this view, here, now--nothing else. What is there to look for or find? What else is needed? What is it you think you want? There will never be a time there is more than this. Recognizing This as All ends the search.

I turned out the light, determined to get my mind right, to stop whining, to live from what I've seen to be true and hope for the best.

The next morning was glorious. The Cathedral shone gold as I waited for my taxi. The driver was so friendly he continued our conversation long after I'd paid the fare. On the train I had no sense of time, of duration. Every so often I'd wonder if I'd missed my station--even though I knew I'd not slept or even closed my eyes. Everything was poignant, moving. I made one note:

Young girl with pink hood sleeps with her head against the window, a strand of hair across her face. Pushing a cart up the aisle the refreshment lady says to passengers, "Sorry, my love... Thank you, my love..." An unshakable quiet overtakes me.

I arrived early at the airport and enjoyed watching people, catching bits of overheard conversation. There was no sense of "waiting." On board, the flight was half empty and no one sat nearby. I looked forward to the solitude. I took out *The Science of the 1st Person* and opened it. Reading failed to happen. Words and letters produced no meaning. Out the window, magnificent cloud formations appeared. I searched for my questions and doubts. I couldn't find them. The process of getting my mind right seemed complete. I was convinced I could live from here without further certainty. I made this note:

The next step, if there is one, is learning to trust it, this seeing of the single eye. The eye of the one living thing. The eye of the One. Live it.

At some point after that note, something happened. The first of what was to be a series of occurrences took place. I can't say what it was. I didn't seem to be present for it, yet there was no interruption of normal bodily awareness as far as I know--no break in the visual stream reporting my surroundings, for instance. Coming out of it I discovered I was weeping. A great quiet followed. This pattern repeated maybe eight or ten times over the next several hours. Between episodes I took the following notes:

What's different now? I trust It. I trust it absolutely. This in no way bestows a mantle of enlightenment--in NO WAY. I am in no way different. Only now I know where I am. I am the stillpoint of Now at the center of the universe, the portal through which Nothing becomes Everything. This is happening here, now, where I sit--at the moment, in the seat of an airplane.

I am filled by the world. Literally.

God has dealt gently with me. No agony of death, no pain of realization. He has overwhelmed me with gifts and blessings until I crumble to dust under the weight of them. How can I deserve this? How can anyone? There is no way. NO WAY to learn enough, to become a good enough person, an earnest enough seeker to deserve this. It is a gift you cannot earn or ever deserve--and yet it is given.

I can't stop crying. Wave upon wave. What about Bart? Is he gone? Such quiet. Even these few thoughts are thin and distant, like faint echoes of thought. Attention is not drawn to them. To be empty is complete fulfillment.

The emptiness is here, right where I am. It is not an experience of emptiness being had by a non-empty being. There is only emptiness. Why is this not terrifying? Because inexplicably and impossibly it is emptiness that weaves the world.

All the thinking about and talking about and writing about I have done has no place here. There is nothing to be said about it. There is no way to know anything about it. No explanation of it. No reason for it to be. It is. That's all that can be said.

Where is the I to say, "I am that I am"? It is. I is not.

It is not vast. Everything is contained Here. But Here bends from this seat to the clouds in a flick of the Eye.

It is closer than close. It is inside itself.

Physically, this seems to take place in the chest and stomach. The chest is hollow and bursting. The remembered phrase "heart cave" floats past. In the stomach, energy.

I imagined the Void, the Absolute, to be a distance from me, as if it could be traveled to like a foreign country or distant star. It is nearer than near. It is in the center of my chest and it encompasses the known and unknown universe. There is nothing it does not contain. In the place you feel a heart, it is there. This is not a metaphor or an attempt at poetry. It is there, that close, all of it. There beats the pulse of Creation.

Your Eye is the only eye. This is true for everyone. How is this possible? It's not. And yet, there it is.

The Void is crystal clear. There is no distance between the seer and what is seen. No distance. None.

There is only one place you can aim your finger and point at nothing. One place in the entire universe. No matter where you point out, things are visible at the tip of your finger. Foot, chair, house, tree, cloud, sky, star. Things with color and form and explanations.

Nothing and Everything coexist in the same space in the same moment--Now. How can this be explained? No way. Why try? Even if it could, what's the point? The information is not good for anything. I don't even want to know how.

Nothing is the very stuff of Being. The very substance of Creation, of Everything. Nothing is what Everything is made of. This is not a metaphor. It can be witnessed.

Each time I think the crying is over, the whatever-this-is is over, a new wave hits. Between episodes it is very quiet inside. A stewardess comes by with coffee. I take pictures of clouds.

Any understanding I thought I had is gone. Not wrong, really, and maybe even somewhat correct as far as the mind is capable. But now, This. It's not the same thing at all. No understanding is possible.

A few months ago a friend offered her thoughts on what blocked me spiritually. "You need someone to be kind to you," she said. It has come to pass. Never have I felt such kindness as I did in your presence, Douglas. Your words when we met ("I feel I've known you for a very long time...") and when we parted ("My dear, dear friend...") had more impact than a hundred spiritual tomes. Thank you, Douglas--for your kindness, your wisdom, your life of relentless giving. But most of all, thank you for This. This!

Thank you, thank you, my dear, dear friend.