The Intimacy of Consciousness Exploration and Transpersonal Psychotherapy:

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Edited by

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PROLOGUE

RAINER PERVÖLTZ

Perhaps you have also had this experience: you wake up in the morning and feel lost. You search for the causes for your feelings and you might find a whole host of things. You can tell yourself that once again it happened; that you drank and ate too much the night before with your friends. Or snippets of memory begin to surface; there were those hazy dreams you had before the break of day, still in the darkness of the night, and you know that you woke up briefly, disturbed and without comprehension for the outlandish scenes that surely seemed not at all related to you...

Or it comes to your mind how often at this time of day, just after waking, you feel haunted by your troubles and sorrows, even by fears. And as always, you ponder and feel bemused, and try, here too, to find reasons why this is happening. The internal clock offers itself as an explanation, the naked crack of dawn, or the ugly thought that you could be more depressed than you try to delude yourself you are during the routine of your day. At a pinch, the sparsely entertained unlikelihood reemerges that your house may be located in an inauspicious energy field – damaging earth rays, imprudent architecture with regard to the cardinal points...

What remains – despite all your attempted explanations – is the feeling and the subjective fact that you seem to feel lost.

So what, you may say to yourself, at least you noticed. How many people are walking around and have lost themselves so basically that they don't even realize it anymore. It is such a great fear in the world, and so infinitely widespread are all the pain-provoking mechanical life-forms we adapted to as children. You can read about it everywhere. There is much lament about nothing being connected anymore; everything being specialized and cut off, scattered and particular; each individual living his or her separate life, alone and ultimately lonely.

Such thoughts – you notice – are not a good start, not any kind of basis on which to go into the new day with an appropriate amount of openness. They are gray and cloudy leftovers from the night, and what matters now

is not to unduly feed this cloudiness but to pay attention to how to change it into a more bearable and fruitful attitude. Of course, you don’t want to have to tell yourself that you made attempts to repress these uncomfortable early morning feelings, or even tinkered with the idea of simply tossing out the disturbing malaise. However, at this point, it might be good to stay in a certain remote aloofness and run through the habitual processes of your morning routines – which you anyway believe to be necessary to get you into a state of functional efficiency. Nothing advocates the conviction, as you secretly know, that after this routine (brushing your teeth, showering, eating breakfast, listening to the news) you will have returned to yourself. But you will have accepted the state of inner absence to such an extent that it won’t make a difference anymore. You'll approach the challenges of your day now and will master them without any great difficulty.

A totally different perspective would appear if you were so shocked at the loss of your true being that before starting any of your daily automatisms, you used all means imaginable to find yourself again. Perhaps – you might hastily want to modify – this would presume a material framework you do not possess: a certain availability of time principally warranted by a reasonable money flow; no children screaming for security or lemonade; no colleagues waiting for you, no students, bosses or patients… At the same time, you may recognize that such pragmatic thoughts seem to be adequate and understandable but they might also be the best trick of your mind to prevent you from truly coming back to yourself.

As in all of us, there works in you an ancient and long-outdated system that you have learned and which specializes in protecting you from too much change and – more importantly – from your true being. It is infinitely pedantic in its attentions to make sure that you do not shine too brightly or for too long. It utilizes everything that promises that in the end, you get lost to yourself again.

One can’t say that this system is evil. It only clings, based on your previous experiences, to the narrow perspective that it would be better to keep you away from yourself. It does not recognize nor accept the feeling of being profoundly and truly at home in yourself. The opposite, in fact; it considers this state to be risky and dangerous, and stubbornly refers again and again to those previous experiences in which you shone and received humiliation and rejection for it. So, it puts everything on the line to make sure these early pains will never be repeated.

Unfortunately, one cannot say that this old system is substantially led by intelligence. A kind of higher law seems to decree that any pain you are

trying to avoid is especially unavoidable. An entity inside of you has assumed command and persistently drags this very pain back into the light and actualizes it – probably with the stubborn intent to spoil and embitter your addiction for avoidance to such an extent that eventually you will turn *towards* instead of *away from* it.

At the very least, it requires a great joy and a fiery passion that enable you to kindle deep inside your heart the desire to come home. At any rate, a strong inner turmoil is necessary because all that is mechanical, all that is repetitive, is made up of such stringent authority that every timid attempt to break free from the routine is suppressed before it can even germinate. This suppression doesn't need great efforts at persuasion. At every first opportunity, you yourself are all too happy to reactivate your, let's say, slightly whacky logic that helps you to stick to your conservative domestic policies. Whacky in the sense that, for years now, this logic has appeared reasonable to you, even though you still have not found your way home. And, unfortunately, you have to admit to yourself that this is why joy is seldom experienced, and much more often, feelings of great suffering wake you up and help you recognize your sad inner segregation. Why don't you understand these bleak morning hours as your souls cheerful, friendly attempts to go against the obstinate wackiness?

It is a fact, certainly regrettable, but you have to be *disturbed*. You need *disturbance* in your life so you can remember that you are not at home within yourself. Most of us are easy-going when there is nothing that annoys or irritates us. Quite often though, you have set off to look for what you seemed to have lost. You know this search and you have tried many ways to sense again in yourself the one thing you believe you have lost. And, as already mentioned, it is unfortunate but the search turns out to be more intensive and forward-pressing when you feel hopeless, desperate and helpless. A position of hopelessness, which disturbs and impedes your habitual life, brings you, if you allow it, closer to the consciousness of your inner separateness and can help you remember who you really are.

And what does this mean, what would you like to remember? Whatever you have learned to call it, it is always in some way or another the desire to “come home.” This desire seems to spring forth from a strange and secret knowledge that somewhere in you there is a “place” where you are at home. At home – there is no pressure, no expectations, you can let go of everything, find yourself adorable and come to peace with life. There is this freedom of *not having to.* You sit when you want to sit and you get up when you want to get up. If you are able to enjoy home, you can live your entire potential and you don't have to. You also know –

or had more or less conscious experiences of it – that when you live your life from this place, everything is different. You've experienced it, you know it is possible: activity can arise from a state of release (instead of effort), the sympathetic from the parasympathetic, success from surrender. This place within us reminds us of the Great Dream-maker, who is also you, and of the creative intelligence that effortlessly opens up all paths when you manage to let yourself go.

To say "within us" is an incomplete form of our limited language. The linguistic deficiency results from the desire to be generally understood – and the general consensus calls for a differentiation between 'inside' and 'outside.' However, for some, what is within may be as easily found in the without; they may call it 'God' or 'Oneness' or 'dreaming' or 'non-locality.' Isn't it a shame that an arbitrary instruction to establish it here or there and call it such and such only turns out, again, to be a replication of the old system that keeps you apart from yourself. From a more distant perspective, it is painful to see how we prevent each other through petty righteousness and dogmatism from returning to where all of us truly want to be. It becomes even more bitter when this knowing-better attitude not "only" occurs out of a desire for power, as in the case of some religious institutes and their representatives, but stems from a compulsive desire to tell others how they should find their way home. More bitter because it simply isn't possible in the last consequence to lead others home. One could perhaps, on the basis of some elementary "geographic" knowledge, propose to another person a couple of key itineraries (go over the hill or go through the woods) yet only they alone can know in the end where their true home resides.

We are a team of psychotherapists and spiritual teachers who founded this training institute together and believe that good therapeutic teaching is based on good relationships. How we build relationships is in principle the same in all situations. Our relationships with our partners, friends and colleagues, our relationships to trees, to water and to God – are all marked by how close we are to ourselves, how good and how often we are at home within ourselves.

For this reason, some time ago, we acknowledged the fact that the kind of relationships we have among ourselves crucially influences the quality of our teaching. And so the idea arose to meet regularly in order to get to know each other better, with a particular focus on how far we can come home within ourselves and stay this way whilst engaging with each other.* It quickly turned out that the quality of our relationship with God (or the measure of being at home within ourselves) appears the clearest in situations where, despite all the difficulties, we have the courage to get closer.

In the middle of this risky undertaking came the idea that we could write a book about the whole thing. If each one of us could open up about our own and unique 'homecoming,' putting all of our stumbling blocks and curveballs into writing, then we could perhaps fashion something out of these texts that might result in a book. And at the same time, this project impacted our team in the way of a refined ability to relate.

You are holding the result in your hands. It was a great challenge for all of its contributors. Talking about God is something very intimate and continually took us to our limits whenever we weren't quite ready to surrender our privacy. And yet we are happy now that it was so difficult. We wish you great joy while reading this, and hope it presents you with countless inspirations on your own itinerary.

*In Judith Miller's Epilogue in this book, she writes more comprehensively about this subject.

INTRODUCTION

WHERE WE ARRIVE

TOM STEININGER

A group of psychotherapists and spiritual teachers write a book about homecomings. However, they are actually a group of friends who want to explore something together: What actually *is* "home"? In the process, they create sketches of personal quests, individual searches for a "home." And in these different ways, a book about God came about.

Where do we *actually* arrive at when we "arrive"? Where have we been in the meantime? For the authors of this book, this has been a recurring theme in their working lives. As psychotherapists and spiritual teachers, they have guided people on this path for many years.

Before we began this book, we held a private meeting with all the authors. In her contribution, Judith Miller describes how this meeting led to the creation of this book: "During this encounter, the same question kept popping up: how do we become closer and more open with one another – despite our many differences of nationality, gender, personal style and culture being deciding factors?"

And then Rainer asked, "Does everyone feel at home here in this group, in our institute?" I remember saying no. "Believing that I could really feel at home here would be unrealistic," I replied. "The institute is mainly made up of Germans, and you see each other regularly – but not me. Also, I'm a Jewish American woman, and there is still some mistrust buried inside me due to the German/Jewish narrative," I admitted. I felt moved and vulnerable as I said this.

For several moments there was silence. My eyes felt moist. *What am I doing here?* I thought. And then, suddenly, several voices piped up – some were combative, some were contrite, some were empathetic. I felt as if I had laid myself bare. But it was all okay. I had been heard. And this led us to a deeper level of communication than ever before.

We discussed the meaning of "homecoming." What does it mean to each of us to "come home"? Someone said that homecoming for him

meant being with God. Others in the group agreed. Some were uncertain and thought the expression “God” shouldn’t be used. An intense discussion ensued. We all expressed deep feelings about each of our very personal journeys home.

From this sprung the idea to write down these thoughts. Manuscripts were written. We sent them to each other. There was another meeting so we could work on some of these stories of homecoming as a group. Thus, a very personal book was created. Here are the stories of nine people and their journey home together.

Humans have a home. Or humans are searching for a home. All the cultures in the world have stories about this particular place that is so important to us. Since the dawn of languages, we have been asking for it. And, fundamentally, it is often a quest for God. In the myths of world cultures, this question can appear in many different shapes and forms.

China is the “Middle Kingdom.” Even this self-description says a lot about the home of the Chinese. China’s first emperor, the mythical founder of Chinese culture, the Yellow Emperor Huáng Dí, reigned on the world mountain *Kunlun*, from which he held together the earth and the sky, holding it in a harmony of above and below, with the middle containing human culture. Even today’s Communist China acknowledges the traditions of this legendary emperor and his attempts to keep the word culture in harmony on his mountain.

India is a country of rivers and streams. The *Indus*, which lent the country its name (although it flows mostly through Pakistan), has determined the flow of the land for thousands of years, along with the holy *Ganges.* These mighty rivers in South Asia find their source in the area of *Mount Kailash* in the Himalayas, the mythological mountain *Meru*, seat of the gods and protectors, the center of the universe. The *Vedas* say that the sun and the moon, the stars and the planets that decide the order of night and day, the coming and going of seasons, and also the well-being of humanity all circle around it. Modern India still sees itself as a country of *Vedas* and the gods and the stars still circle around the mountain *Meru today.*

Europe also has its myths, its ancient gods and holy mountains. But Europe is different. Our myths are different. The gods of the Greek Olympus were already gods of revolt against the old. Zeus and his cohort drove out Chronos, the Father of Zeus, and so the ancient Titans were driven from their seat of power. But even the Greek gods were toppled. The God of the Christians pushed the old Olympian gods into the shadows of the past.

Yet even the Christian God has been displaced from the altars of Europe. The Jacobites placed statues of the goddess of rationality in the churches of revolutionary France. By the time of Nietzsche, the news had spread throughout Europe that the Christian God was dead – that we had killed him.

We have continually left our old home. Europe is a culture of awakenings. We are constantly treading into new spaces. Perhaps these constant movements were prophesized in our myths, in our expulsion from Paradise. It is a story that still has a deep effect on us today. Why did we taste from the Tree of Knowledge? Why did we have to leave?

In Greek mythology, there too were discoveries and awakenings. It wasn't just the Olympian gods who overcame the ancient gods of Chronos and Gaia. The Greek heroes are also heroes that emancipated themselves from their ties to the old gods. *Odysseus*, perhaps the first modern European, overcame the magical powers of the sorceress Circe through his bright, thinking mind. The sorceress with her bewitching voice could not seduce him to his downfall. Odysseus had planned ahead, and before his ship sailed passed Circe's island, he had ordered his men to plug their ears with wax. He had himself tied to the mast so he could hear the sorceresses' song without falling to his death.

Through *Odysseus*, we began to free ourselves of the might of the gods. But in doing so, we left our old home behind. The end of ancient times was also the end of a time the gods walked the earth. The new God was different.

A personal God. Church fathers such as St Augustine demonstrated how they could connect with God in a personal dialog. But St Augustine's God stood above the world. He was not a part of it. He left the world to us. As we left the Christian God behind with the dawn of modernity, we alone were left behind. The Greek cosmos had been a place of safety.

Through modernity, we discovered a new feeling of being lost. The philosopher *Blaise Pascal* described a new awareness of life at the beginning of the 17th century: Because what is the human in nature really? It is nothing in comparison to the infinite, which is everything compared to nothing, something between nothing and everything.

So what can he do but be aware of a glimmer in the midst of things of the perpetual hopelessness of the fact that he has neither a source nor a goal?' Since *Pascal*, the cosmos has become a place in which we feel less and less at home.

But we did not stop searching for this home. The German Romantics went in search of the blue flower. According to the philosopher *Hegel*, the world spirit loses itself in humanity in order to ultimately find a future in

mankind. This is also expressed in the absurd writings of the existentialists who came to the fore in the 20th century, such as *Albert Camus*, who accompanied the absurd with a sense of longing. What did *Samuel Becket* call it? – Waiting for Godot.

The feeling of estrangement has become a part of us. And this feeling constantly spurns us to continue our search:

> I am searching for the blue flower,
> I search and yet I never find it,
> I dream that in this flower,
> My good fortune will bloom.
>
> Joseph von Eichendorff, 1975[1]

Ironically, it was *Blaise Pascal*, student of the great European thinker of Enlightenment *René Descartes*, who, upon his death, was found to have a piece of paper sewn into the lining of his coat. *Blaise Pascal's Memorial*, as it later became known, had the following text:

> The year of grace 1654, Monday, 23 November, feast of St. Clement, pope and martyr, and others in the martyrology. From about half past ten at night until about half past midnight, Fire. God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of the philosophers and of the learned. Certitude. Certitude. Feeling. Joy. Peace. God of Jesus Christ. I have departed from him, they have forsaken me, the fount of living water, My God, will you leave me? Let me not be separated from him forever.[2]

Even our most enlightened philosophers were often driven to search for a Home. This estrangement – feeling like a stranger in the world – has become a bigger theme in the 20th century. It has shaped workers' uprisings as well as romantic popular movements. The cultural catastrophes of the 20th century were catastrophes in search of a new or old home. The narrative of Europe is one of constant departures, and yet we are perhaps more driven than our forefathers and mothers in our search for a home. In the past decades, the psychotherapy movement and a new spirituality have become a part of this search.

My home is *Linz*, one of the bigger Austrian cities, directly on the River Donau. In the north is the picturesque Muehlviertel, which leads to the heights of the *Boehmer Forest. Adalbert Stifter* first captured this out-of-the-way, insular landscape 150 years ago in his novels.

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[1] Joseph von Eichendorff, poem: *Die Blaue Blume* [The blue flower] Rasch, 1975.
[2] Romano Guardini, 1935/1966, On faith and reason in *Blaise Pascal's Memorial.*

The south offers a view across the foothills of the Alps, all the way to the peaks of the Austrian limestone Alps. My family home lies on a hill in the city, and on a clear day, you can see both of these views to the north and south.

One of the first paths that I was allowed to go on by myself as a child was the way down the mountain into town, to the kindergarten. Halfway down this path, what fascinated me was the great gate to the *Maerzenkeller*: big gates that led directly to the middle of the mountain. The *Maerzenkeller* was a big wine and beer cellar in the city. Only decades later would I learn that these gates were originally built to house an air raid shelter during the war. Back then, nobody told me that the cellar that I saw on my way to the kindergarten had been built by prisoners of war in the 1940s, that the *Maerzenkeller* in the middle of Linz was once an external camp to the *Mauthausen* concentration camp.

On this hill, there is a striking settlement of vast social housing for the workers and employees of the Austrian national railway. These houses became a part of my childhood. Their almost pastoral farm-like architecture, with their big shared gardens, shaped my idea of what home was.

The long laundry lines that dominated the gardens don't exist anymore but my memories of them is a constant reminder of my childhood. These big settlements were known to us children under one name, which at the time we used quite nonchalantly, not understanding the connotations. They were the *Hitlerbauten,* Hitler buildings that were constructed in Linz during the war to provide housing for the workers in the arms industry.

Near our house, a path led down the hill to the Linz train station, and then on to town. This path led from a suburb of Linz, the village of *Leonding.* Every morning, traffic would flow from Leonding to Linz. And in the evening, the commuters would flow back. A hundred years ago, most would have traveled this way on foot. One was a small boy who walked to school every day from Leonding to town – this student was *Adolf Hitler*. His journey passed almost direct by my childhood home. He probably took this path when he visited Linz's music theater at least once a week to see productions of his beloved Wagner operas. I knew none of this as a child, but it is still a part of what I recognize to be my childhood home.

Our church in Linz was different. Built in the 1960s, the church nave was made from modern concrete, and the thirty-meter-tall altar picture was my introduction to modern art. Back then, I enjoyed going to mass. This partly had to do with the difficult family circumstances at home. Every Sunday, when I would leave my parents and siblings in order to attend ten o'clock mass in God's modern house, there was something different

between us. I couldn't put my finger on what it was, and it never lasted long, but because of this Other that I met in that modern church, it became to me a place of trust. Even today, whenever I visit a church, it is a kind of arrival. An arrival in my childhood but also an arrival in an unknown dimension that I met back then for the first time. These places would become very important to me.

One of these places was a mountain. The *Krippenstein* is located in the Austrian *Salzkammergut.* It was my first encounter with high mountains. Every year before Easter, my family would drive to the *Krippenstein* to spend a week there skiing. Since the 1950s, you could actually go up the *Krippenstein*. There, not far from its peak at a height of 2000 meters and amidst boulders, ice and snow, sat a mountain hotel. On a clear day, you could look all the way down in the *Trauntal* far below. Everything you could see from up there was part of the mountain range. If you floated in a cable car up the *Krippenstein* mountain, you could see a little peak just after a vast rock face, which I always looked forward to as a child. Once you had crossed over this little peak, the valley would suddenly disappear from below you. The river, the streets, the villages and the sometimes already green fields would disappear in an instant. Afterwards – the cable car would be far beyond the line of trees – there would be nothing but the white of the snow and the clouds, the rough gray rocks and, if the weather was good, a shining sun and a deep blue sky. In the distance, you could see the other peaks of the *Dachstein* mountain range, and in the middle was the glacier highland. Every time we went up in the cable car, we would leave our populated world behind and come to a place that lay somewhere between heaven and earth.

The first trip up the mountain to the hotel at the beginning of each season was always especially impressive; it was as if a curtain to another world, almost forgotten, was suddenly pulled aside and you remembered how much you really felt at home here. And then, for a whole week, this commute between two worlds would ensue: if you were good at skiing, you could manage at least ten trips down the high mountain into the valley. At the bottom was the road with the car park, the cars, and not far from there was the next village. Above it was the sky, rocks, ice and snow. If you went skiing down into the valley, there was this one bend in the path that would lead to a glimpse of the rivers and lakes below. And if you took the cable car upwards, there was this little peak. After that, there was just the lonely mountain range.

Daily, at about 5 pm, the last cable car would glide up to the hotel then would shut down for the night, and we, along with the small group of hotel guests, would be trapped at the top of the mountain – sometimes during

snowstorms, sometimes in the mellow glow of the evening sun. The world "down there" had been locked away. For breakfast – just before the first cable car – my family would sit in the dining room by the big windows. In front of us, if the sun was out, we could see the glistening glacier landscape of the *Dachsteinmassiv*. Breakfast in the mountains. It was a view that would not leave me for the rest of my life.

Many years later, as an adult, I had an experience during a long meditation retreat that led me to better understand what these childhood experiences really meant to me. After days of deepest silence, I was moved to realize that I had discovered something inside me that I hadn't felt since my childhood in the mountains.

It is most likely our spiritual experiences that are the true homecoming yet *Ingo Jahrsetz* writes at the very beginning of his essay in this book: "My home – I was born in 1943, in Breslau/Silesia. My mother gave birth in the Breslau local hospital; she was terrified, and so were the nurses who helped her give birth. As I then spied the so-called 'light of day,' it was really just a lamp that gave of no more than a weak glow." In reading his words, I am getting to know him as a person. I suddenly grow very close to him.

I felt the same when I read the surprising words of *Regina Hess*: "At around 8:30 am, I heard my friend, who was running towards my hut at the beach, shouting: "Run, run, Regina!" When I stepped out of the hut, all I could see was a huge black wall of water. Within moments, the monstrous wave struck and was I tumbling under water." Regina was in Thailand in 2004 with her friend when the tsunami hit the Southeast Asian country. This moment, in which she was gripped by the black wave, opened a connection between us that I will never forget.

And when *Stefan Dressler* writes about failure as a form of homecoming, that too changed my understanding of what it means to arrive: "All of these moments of great failure (of breaking taboos, of accepting a part of me I had always rejected, struggling with my demons, the identification with the demon principle), which are necessary for a hero/heroine, are inner processes of death and rebirth. In these moments of death, I am showing my true vulnerability, I am accepting the risk, accepting the fear. In these moments, my stubbornness relents, gives up control. These moments are not simply mental decisions, they really do occur. They are moments of submission and of devotion."

Where do we arrive – even us modern Europeans – when we arrive home? This is a book about God. But it is also about a God that saw Breslau in 1943, a God that went to the Linz opera with a young *Hitler*, a

God that swept himself up into a gigantic tsunami, and an arrival that we can only experience through failure.

Our modern world is multi-faceted and complex. Where do we want to arrive when we arrive at home here? Arriving is always associated with a feeling of ease. This is more than a naïve desire. The ease of it shows that we have lost something. In this way, seemingly "simple" people become our teachers.

Last year, some Indian friends invited me to the mountains of the southern Himalayas. For over twenty years, they have been running a school project in the mountain villages north of the town *Mussoorie*, and this project has changed not only the villages but also my friends. Some of these villages still have no road access, and it was my friends who opened the first schools in the region. Thinking back to their first expectations when they began this project makes them laugh today.

Even though they managed to bring education to thousands of children, my friends mainly talk about how these villages and their inhabitants have become their teachers. These villages have been around for thousands of years. Until recent times, their isolated valleys were their entire world. Their lives were shaped by the rhythm of the seasons, by the morning rain, and the many festivals of the Indian gods, who are just at home in the valleys and mountain ridges as the humans and animals. Many gods of the *Mahabharata*, the old Indian epic, live in these mountains, just as they did thousands of years ago. Every morning at dawn, the bells ring and the daily morning chant can be heard in the tiny mountain temple. In this part of India, the fate of the traveler lies in the goodwill and the blessing of the gods. Odysseus has not yet arrived in these mountains, but *Brahman* is here. Most of the time, he dances in the form of Shiva through the forests. My friends, these no-longer young intellectuals from *Delhi* and *Mumbai*, have found something they call Home amongst these people in the mountains.

Where do we arrive when we come home? Is it in moments of deep spiritual experiences? The house of our parents? The snow of the mountains that lets us realize how beautiful the planet is that we call home?

The authors of this book tell their own stories, and yet it is also a communal narrative. We meet each other as readers and writers in the midst of this fragile and complex world.

Perhaps this is the true Homecoming – in the midst of life.

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CHAPTER ONE

COMING HOME

INGO B. JAHRSETZ

Abstract: All human beings want to be happy. “To come home”, “to be myself” – these words speak about this deep human desire. We long for an overcoming of suffering. How this can happen is the teaching of all spiritual traditions. To support people to be happy and filled with life is the central theme of modern psychotherapy. This chapter tells the personal story of the author’s homecoming. For him it is less a path and more a process of discovery and revelation of the sacred throughout his life and in very different situations.

Keywords: Coming home, human desire, life, overcoming suffering, spiritual traditions

Coming Home

Coming home – these words describe something that is perfectly ordinary and yet at the same time it is one of our deepest desires. Many people are at home during the night but not during the day.

They go to work – does this mean that they are not at home when they are at work? Many look forward to coming home afterwards, but not all. Some are very lonely. Being at home and being lonely – somehow this does not fit together.

During the 80s and 90s, my life was in a great state of upheaval. There were many disagreements in our little suburban house in a city in northern Germany. Being at home on the weekend was much more stressful for me than my time spent at work during the week. I was at home during the weekends. But was I at home there?

Today, I am often at home whether I’m at work or not. My office and my apartment are in the same house. I travel a lot for work. I mostly give seminars through which I help other people to “come home.” When I

travel, I live in seminar houses. I also feel at home in them, even when I am away from my home. Today, I usually feel at home even if I am very far away from Freiburg, my hometown. I usually feel at home when I am traveling. Yet, when I travel back to Freiburg after a journey, I am still excited to return home.

What is it, this concept of "home"? It seems to be something entirely paradoxical, something that is easy enough to comprehend but still seems to defy our true understanding.

An experience of home is something that mystics, such as Master Eckhart, often talk about. God is always within us yet we are so seldom at home.

'God' is a difficult word for me because it can so easily be just another concept among the innumerable individual, cultural and collective concepts that make up our world.

I would like to posit that in many cases, the word 'God' is used in an inflated sense because most people are driven by a desire to finally arrive home. Desire can sometimes be closely bound to addiction. The idea of encountering God and coming home to him can be used to fill the same void that alcohol or other drugs try to fill.

There is a long history of confusion and misunderstanding about God that, even today, still fuels violent clashes. Always at its heart, however, is the most important aspect of human existence: a truth that does not allow for any ambiguity.

Even today, almost 200 years later, Ludwig Feuerbach's words can still cause outrage, that religion is "opium for the masses." Some (older) readers might remember October 4, 1957, the launch of the first satellite into space and the tremor of shock around the world (the Sputnik Shock). I vividly remember the ironic unsettling tone of the newscaster's voice as he said that the (then) Soviets had shown by their launch of Sputnik that there is no God in space but only the laws of nature. This took place during the Cold War and, of course, it had great political implications.

For the collective as well as the individual, when "God" no longer fills a void, when the religious drug has lost its power, we are left to confront our fear.

Fear is very basic. It is probably our modern expression of suffering, the first of the four Noble Truths with which Buddha's first teaching in Sarnath, the Wheel of Buddhism, began.

Stephen Batchelor (1986) discovered that the Pali word 'dukha' = 'suffering' must be regarded as an incorrect translation today. The mistake stems from Victorian times and reflects the beliefs of that time. A more apt translation today would be 'fear', which is at the core of every human life.

It is the fear of human vulnerability (illness), the fear of transience (aging) and the fear of the dissolution of the self (death). The fear of insanity – a taboo in modern psychotherapy.

My Home

I was born in 1943 in Breslau, Silesia. World War II was at its peak. The Final Solution for the Jews had been decided at the Wannsee Conference and the Scholl siblings were executed for their involvement in the White Rose[1] movement in 1942. At the Casablanca Conference in 1943, the Allies decided on an unconditional surrender from Germany and Japan. At a Nazi rally, Goebbels asked, "Do you want total war?" A frenetic "Yes" was the answer from the masses. Stalingrad and the hail of bombs that annihilated so many German cities occurred in 1943.

I was born in a hospital in Breslau; my mother was terrified and so were the midwives. As I greeted the so-called 'light of the world,' I saw just an old, worn lamp that was nothing more than a weak glow.

This memory came to me through a dramatic and emotionally suffocating experience of Holotropic Breathwork. After hours of a painful struggle between life and death, unexpectedly, life succeeded. I was born, but I did not know what I was doing in the world. Of course, I knew that I should be here but I felt completely unwelcome. Every man and every woman had better things to worry about than making a newborn feel welcome.

I knew that this city was not my home, that this world was not my home. And yet, I lived. I needed many decades to understand that life, even my life, is a miracle.

In January 1945, in temperatures of -20 degrees Celsius, the entire German population of Breslau was chaotically evacuated. People were allowed to take only what they could carry. A never-ending stream of evacuees formed. Occasionally, low-flying planes shot into the crowds.

At that time, I was about one-and-a-half years old. There are estimates that only 3% of the children survived. My mother loved me very much; this is the only explanation I have for the fact that I survived.

My mother and I, my grandmother and my grandfather fled together. We were overjoyed to eventually find a train that was heading west. We lived on this train for an entire year. It became our home. It provided

[1] The White Rose was a student resistance group that acted against the Nazis. In February 1943, while handing out flyers at the University of Munich, Hans and Sophie Scholl were discovered by a caretaker and betrayed to the Gestapo.

protection from the storms and the cold. I do not know how my grandfather continually managed to find us food. Our lives on the train were, however, constantly in danger; stationary trains were always targets for bomb strikes. But childhood cannot be put on hold. There were times when I endangered everyone by simply peeing or doing other things. I know that sometimes my mother must have wished I were dead even though she loved me deeply.

Sometimes, on clear nights, my mother dared to venture outside the train with me. We could briefly escape the tight confines and the (sometimes stinking) chaos of our home, go out into freedom and fresh air that could not be destroyed by the pestilence of the waging war. My mother held me in her arms and we gazed at the moon and the stars. Their clarity, their light, the sublime reaches of the sky were a comfort and a sign of hope for us. Moon, my mother later told me, was one of my first words. Then there were the silences that seemed infinite and deep.

I felt at home in those moments. The clearness of the sky with the light of the stars, its silence that was far more than the simple absence of noise, a silence that was undisturbed by words. There was something, an untouchable presence, beyond this daily hell.

Today, I would say that there was something the little boy back then felt, so full of reverence that to speak its name would be blasphemy. It was the God who manifested himself in the thorn bush, saying, "I am who I am."[2]

My mother and father tried very hard to build a new home for our family after the war. We eventually had a roof over our heads, and it was always comfortable and we always had enough to eat. My parents did everything possible for us children. In this way, they showed their love for us.

However, they were seldom 'in themselves' at home. How could we children then feel at home? I remember the first year after the war: depressed, harried people. We had every possible excuse to cry and scream, but there were no tears and we did not scream because we did not want to alert the neighbors. Back then, we lived in a small apartment with thin walls. Our family drama unfolded within them.

I always felt superfluous as a child. Once, I ran away from home when I was five. I wanted nothing more than to die yet the berries I ate were not poisonous. When I returned home, no one had noticed that I had run away.

It is said that the family is a steadfast fort, a home, a castle that defends you from all the evil in the world. My family life was full of expectations,

[2] The Bible. Ex 3.2

full of abuse and domestic violence. There was a thick blanket of silence over everything. There was a great lie that I only noticed when I began to lie constantly. I condemned myself into a hell of lies from which there was no escape.

Even today, after many new so-called corrective experiences, I am still skeptical of family life. My experience of family was connected to the war, the struggle for survival and a deep sense of discomfort. My mother and father wanted us to have a home as a family but I did not feel at home. It was not until much later that it became clear to me that this actually was my home.

What is 'Home'?

This is the affair with God.

The city in which we lived after the war had many old churches. Almost all of them had been hit by bombs during the war. To me, as a little boy, it appeared as if God had been destroyed. In one of these churches, the *Marienkirche*, an emergency mass took place on Sundays, in one of its undamaged sections. The whole thing was always pretty creepy: those grey-clad scared people searching for comfort in a ruin. The broken and fire-damaged bells of St. Mary lay next to the seats in the congregation.

Mass was held by different priests. I remember that one of them would scream horribly throughout his sermons (probably in the misguided attempt to rattle our paralyzed hearts). With every scream, a shock of fear would pass through my body. I was afraid to go into the church, I was afraid of the priest, whom I believed stood next to God. I always prayed that he would not scream that day.

God was almighty in his mysterious way. I was afraid of God. It was an even greater fear than my fear of being beaten by my father whenever I came home too late.

What kind of God wanted to scare me with his screams? What kind of omniscient God was he? My parents told me he could see everything: all my small sins, which I believed could grow into criminal deeds, like the bombs that exploded his churches and his cities? Then there was the silence over the crimes, the mass murder that God did not want to see, that the little boy, however, had absorbed into himself.

This God was my constant companion. Did he have anything to do with my home, was he perhaps even my home?

When I heard the stories of people who were supposedly believers, and for whom the only salvation was God, I was uncomprehending, and only

saw lies upon more lies. Today, I believe that faith in God is just another part of the great lie that enveloped everything back then, and which we almost allowed ourselves to merge into.

This lie separates us from our home, from those we love and from ourselves. The stories of God make the lies more believable. God himself had nothing to do with home.

What always drew me in were the moon and the stars at night. As a boy, I sought many paths to come closer to them. We lived in a city in which it often rained. I was often at a loss when I couldn't see the stars in the sky. Then there was the absoluteness of my father's gaze, who had lost himself in the struggle to rebuild everything that had been destroyed, and who aspired to kill my desire for the stars.

My Home is Dead

Wanting something and not wanting something replaced my desire for the open sky. For many years, I felt gripped by greed. I was under the spell of wanting or not wanting. It was the addiction to wanting to possess a home. It is common in my generation for this kind of greed to result in a prim terraced house and a suburban front garden.

The intensity of my greed saved me from losing my way. I wanted to own everything, every kind of material possession, but also a lot of things that were abstract, of the soul: a woman with perfect curves and an understanding and forgiving soul, constant sex and never-ending ecstasy, a job that didn't require effort or cause stress.

I wanted to own all those things but not the things that life offered me. It took a long time before I realized that the things I wanted could never become my home.

Even certain experiences of psychotherapeutic self-exploration, or psychedelic experiences, can bind us to this need to have and to own, even though they might seem to be enlightening at first.

I had many experiences of God. I thought I finally had 'it.' Of course, I did not.

I traveled many false paths to find my home. Sometimes it was very painful to find I had lost my way again. This always happened when I came close to fulfillment, when I had almost attained a desire. Something would always occur to show me that it was not what I wanted.

The question remains unanswered: where is my true home? Surely, it does not lie in the state of constant wanting or not wanting.

I find it very easy to understand why the Germans gravitated towards this state of wanting after the fall of the Nazi societal structures. In 1945,

most of Germany's cities were nothing but ash and rubble. People wandered about without roofs over their heads or food to sustain them.

Families were torn apart. There were lost children without parents. Criminal gangs formed amongst the ruins, all in search of something to own. The dead lay everywhere. It was a time of uncertainty; was killing heroic or was it simply criminal?

Who should live, who should die? Cain, where is your brother Abel?

There was still this never-ending hatred for our Jewish brothers and sisters; the entire world hated the Germans. The Germans hated themselves and they took their vengeance out on each other. Personal quarrels were quickly settled with weapons. The war was not over after the War. History books make no mention of the dramatic increase in German suicides before and after the war. There were villages where 75% of the inhabitants committed suicide or had their friends kill them.[3]

'Heroic' feelings of guilt and shame suffocated people. It was a nightmare, a paranoid reality built on fear. The question of home mutated into a delusion of reality that ignored all answers. Was it a dream that pretended to be reality? Surely it must have been a nightmare of collective insanity.

God was broken. It was the end of the Christian Occident.

My life story made all this very clear to me. What we now experience collectively are mere attempts to emotionally and religiously repair things. We are trying to make this thing with God work again.

"Homecoming" - Marijuana

Death has always felt familiar to me; for many years, my life was overcast by a deep desire for it. In times of crisis, I contemplated bringing about my own death. The torturous possibility of killing myself followed me like a dark shadow for most of my young adult life. It reached its peak and almost became a done deal after the breakup of my first romantic relationship, which caused me extreme suffering.

Then there was marijuana. My friends surprised me with an invitation to smoke a joint with them one evening. I believed I had nothing left to lose, and I accepted.

It was a beautiful summer evening by a lake. We laughed together and felt connected. My heart opened and I felt an infinitely great love for my friends, the world and for myself. I felt that I had arrived home –

[3] David R. Beisel: Der deutsche Suizid von 1945 [The German suicide of 1945]. PDF in the Internet (undated).

surrounded by my friends and their unconditional zest for life, I felt my own heart open to cosmic love.

The spell of death had been broken, and my decision to kill myself was cast away and I never looked back. I never once toyed with the possibility of suicide again.

I understood something that evening: beneath my dance with death lay a dream, a bottomless desire for an endlessly deep relief full of peace and infinite quiet. I had rediscovered an opening in the sky that I remembered so vividly from my childhood in the yearlong home we had found on the train, deep amongst the terror of flight, and the hell of the war. Something inside me that I didn't quite recognize understood what home meant. I knew it even though I did not really understand it. I knew what it was not, and I knew what direction I should look in order to find it.

What is the Deal with Death?

I continually felt that death itself could not provide comfort. My experience of my environment showed me it was usually inadvertent, a destruction, a grisly ending to something that was not ready to end.

It was only in people who had found a sense of peace before they were dying that I could see their calm acceptance of their time to die.

Death is a sharp cut through life. When it calls us, we have nothing else to wish for or to expect. I first heard this phrase at the Esalen Institute from Sogyal Rinpoche, a Tibetan master who spent his entire life exploring the Tibetan understanding of life and death.

Back then, I was disappointed by Sogyal's words; I had expected to hear exciting stories about his, and (perhaps) my, past lives. I wanted to be comforted and cosseted with the truth regarding human death. I wanted to hear that it's not that bad after all. I hoped he would say that when this life ends, you would get a new one, perhaps in a form that fit my former visions of grandeur and happiness. He did not say anything like that. I remember a particular sentence he said: "When death comes, we have nothing more to expect and nothing more to wish for."

I know that I am not alone in my fantasies and experiences of past lives. They belong to the postmodern dogma, which cannot accept the following concept: It is over, irretrievably over. Over. But this concept is exactly what we must deal with when we talk about death. It is the only way we can fully come to terms with it.

Can We Accept Death?

'Acceptance' is a word that provokes a lot of resistance and other hostile reactions, especially in our culture. One part of the humanist school of psychotherapy, for example, is critical of transpersonal psychology, saying that acceptance promotes anything from authoritarian personality structures to brainwashing. Psychotherapy is more about dealing with aspects of life in an emancipating way instead of simply accepting them (Daecke, 2010).

Transpersonal psychology is not entirely opposed to this but there may still be misunderstanding. Accepting aspects of your life, perhaps even delving into them, has nothing to do with submitting yourself to authoritarian structures, and nor is it a depressive strategy for avoiding conflict. Acceptance means no more than trusting your own perception: to see, to taste, to feel how other people and the world appear to be in this moment. What is often forgotten is the idea that acceptance is about the individual person and his or her reactions to the world, thoughts, feelings and concepts. Acceptance is also about accepting personal, individual and collective history.

Acceptance is linked to mindfulness. This is a meditative attitude, a broad, non-judgmental attentiveness, which binds together the perceiver and the perceived. The perceiver and the perceived recognize each other as pieces floating together in the stream of life.

This attitude is created through an attentive and conscious perception. Meditation gives us the opportunity to realize how lost we are in our dreams of wanting and not wanting.

For me, meditation is a part of my life; it is a certain kind of attitude towards aspects of life.

We can change our lives through mindful perception. We thereby can become conscious of who we are not: we are not our greed, aversion or ignorance, we are not our fears or the great terror; we are not the many concepts that try to secure these negative things.

All of this is means to "accept" things the way they are. Above all, in this way, we can recognize when we are not at home.

What Does Accepting Death Mean?

A question often put to me is whether we can accept death. I do not believe that we can. We can only accept dying. Meditation can prepare us for dying. The same is true for intimate relationships. They fail when they primarily focus on wanting or not wanting. Wanting to own love is one of