

September 10, 1985

Person A.

I guess I feel very inadequate right now, but I also realize that this is part of the situation, part of the message.

I believe in my heart what I have read in the Course of Miracles, that we create the reality around us. I cannot understand this intellectually, but in some sense I believe it and try to live according to this principle.

Yet recent experiences have made it increasingly difficult to maintain this perspective. It has to do specifically with my service on the homicide grand jury. I have simply been appalled at the kind of violence which surrounds us, and at the conditions under which so many people lead their lives. What does it mean when someone kills another person for \$200.00?

At one time I decided that the way to protect myself was to withdraw. I sought safety in isolation. I know now that that is not a solution, but still, in the course of this grand jury service, I find that I cannot sleep at night, that I am frequently tired, that I lose my temper easily, that I am always exhausted, and that I am haunted by an unspecified feeling of anxiety. I seem to be without resources to cope. I guess I am saying I need help.

Person B.

What Person A has said summons up a great variety of recent experiences in my own life of a similar sort. I do not think I can put any particularly coherent focus on all this, but the similarities are quite arresting, at least to me.

The first of these associations has to do with the matter of criminal justice itself. In the American Friends Service Committee we can ride along with a certain comfortable view of criminal justice issues—usually the unspoken assumptions are that people in jail are the innocent victims of a repressive justice system, or that, even if they have committed crimes, this is the fault of the social order which has induced criminality in them, or somehow given them little choice in the matter.

Then, if an Executive Committee member becomes an assistant District Attorney, or another is the victim of a violent crime (in our case, it was rape), one can sense that attitudes change when confronted with a new reality.

A second theme which the comment raises has to do with the issues of withdrawal and engagement in spiritual life. I often think that any spiritual group, even our little circle here, is in some sense an attempt to withdraw so as to generate support for the creation of an alternative reality, a reality superior to the one by which we are surrounded, a reality (or a consciousness) which is constantly eroded as a result of the impacts upon it of a world fallen very far from right ordering, a reality which therefore needs constant shoring up. It is, in a sense, an exercise in self-brainwashing.

But at what point does such a withdrawal become a mere fantasy?

Person A's comments raise the question of what responsibility we have for our own moods, whether we are the perpetrators of a desperate crime, or the person thrust into a situation where we witness the crime and its effects. Why do some persons in certain circumstances turn criminal, while others in quite similar circumstances become pillars of the community? Why do some people seeing evil turn into Mother Theresa's, while others become depressed or withdrawn?

I spoke in meeting a few weeks ago about the paradoxical experience I had in coming home from travels in a developing country. Abroad, I found everyone in an incredible scramble just to stay alive, and doing so with what was on the whole a remarkable good cheer; upon returning home I found that a casual acquaintance who had two houses and a retirement income of \$58,000 per year, and apparently good physical health, nevertheless fell into a despondency that led him to take his own life while I was gone.

A few days later, after I shared this in meeting, I received a letter from my former colleague, Walter Martin, who, for the last seven years, has had what is known as Lou Gehrig's disease. For a long time now the only way he has been able to communicate has been by punching a keyboard with his nose. Lately, he has not the strength to do that, so they have put an array of letters on the wall and piece together his messages by following his eyes as he looks. Via this method and with help, he wrote to me that although his body gets weaker and weaker his spirits are better than ever. He has written yet another article for the British Quaker journal, The Friend, and also has shared concerns via a letter with Prime Minister Botha of the Republic of South Africa.

Yet, I came home from my trip to Mexico with a case of dysentery, and found that although medical assistance was readily available to me, and a curative process speedily inaugurated, for the duration of the symptoms my mood turned very black, even though I had just been visiting people many of whom live their entire lives thus infected.

In the building of which I am part owner we employ as a maintenance worker a young man who is a Cambodian refugee, a survivor of the Khmer Rouge. When he was about twelve years old they killed his father and his sister, took him away from his family, and made him work for twelve hours a day up to his chest in water in rice paddies. During this period he daily saw people being shot if he uttered so much as one cross word. Yet today he is the most cheerful and upbeat person you would ever want to meet, although I have seen him weep when the conversation turns to events in Cambodia.

I am not sure exactly what all this means, but I am certain that the questions which Person A has raised are very valuable ones and deserve our deep and prayerful contemplation over a period of time. What responsibility do we have for our own moods? Are we helpless, or are we only helpless if we believe we are helpless? How do we, as the Course in Miracles suggests, create our own realities?

Person C.

(A third person spoke of our not being alone with this problem, but of having the companionship of an infinite spiritual source).