

What Is “The True Self”?

*In this high place
it is as simple as this,
Leave everything you know behind.*

*Step toward the cold surface,
say the old prayer of rough love
and open both arms.*

*Those who come with empty hands
will stare into the lake astonished,
there, in the cold light
reflecting pure snow,*

the true shape of your own face.

DAVID WHYTE, “TILICHO LAKE”

Conservatives look for absolute truth; liberals look for something “real” and authentic. Spouses look for a marriage that will last “’til death do us part.” Believers look for a God who never fails them; scientists look for a universal theory. They are all on the same quest. We are all looking for an immortal diamond: something utterly reliable, something loyal and true, something we can always depend on, something



unforgettable and shining. There is an invitation and an offer for all of these groups from John's very short Second Letter, when he writes: "There is a truth that lives within us that will be with us forever" (2 John 2). But most of us know little about this, so we end up as St. Augustine admits in his *Confessions*: "Late have I loved you, Beauty so very ancient and so ever new. Late have I loved you! You were *within*, but I was *without*."¹

We give up eventually—or do not even try—to seek this truth and instead retreat into ourselves, as if to say, "I alone will be my reference point." It is the most common problem of individualism and egocentricity. I think they go together. We split and retreat into ourselves, but we invariably go to our ego (small self, the False Self) because that is all we know about. It is the common default position, even if it is largely unconscious. Yet it often takes over, and, depending on the severity of our "splitness," it makes all common forms of life, including marriage, lasting friendships, and most commitments, largely impossible. *But this retreat into the personal ego self is both absolutely right and terribly wrong at the same time.* In this book I hope to demonstrate what makes both of these assertions true.



We are right about going inside; otherwise we become lost in an outer and revolving hall of mirrors, as Augustine confesses above. But the question is, "Which inside?" I am using the language of the True Self and the False Self, which many have found quite helpful in talking about these very points. It is good and necessary to pull back into your True Self, but it is quite a disaster if you pull back into what is your False Self for too long (or, worse, never leave it). Both True Self and False Self will feel like your "self," so you see the confusion. One might be called true "centering," and the other is the more common "ego centering," which shows itself to be the core of the problem.

So Jesus, and most other great spiritual teachers, make it very clear that there is a self that has to be found and one that has to be let go of or even "renounced" (Mark 8:35; Matthew 10:39, 16:25; Luke 9:24; John 12:26). Buddhism allows no compromise or softening of this essential message, which is why many are attracted to its utter honesty.

That there are two selves is rather constant in the Perennial Tradition, although the language might be very different from group to group. The important issue is how we tell the difference. Those who deny a sacred source to the universe ("God") have no



way of naming something “true” and must resort to psychology, philosophy, and cultural norms alone to find something authoritative. And they are very good—as far as they go. Those of us who claim to believe in God more often than not deny that “we are already his children” (1 John 3:1) and create arbitrary hoops to jump through—at which few fully succeed if they are honest. So my moral self, which is always in flux, becomes the measure, and we have again lost any Absolute Measure. It seems *the False Self would rather have very few “wins” than let God win with everybody*. This is my sad conclusion after a lifetime of working in many churches on many continents, and it is summed up in an often murdered text by most preachers and translators: “*I am calling all of you, but so few of you allow yourselves to be chosen*” (Matthew 22:14).²

We are going to talk about the two selves in many ways. Like Socrates’s peripatetic method, we will just keep “walking around” it in this book. The search for soul has gained a bit of clarity in our time by finding words that make sense to the modern, more psychological mind. We might now call the False Self our small self or ego, and we might call the True Self our soul. When the True Self becomes clearer to you, and it will for most of you, you will have grounded your



spirituality in its first and fundamental task, and you will have hired the best counseling service possible. I love to tell people, “You have just saved yourself ten thousand dollars in unnecessary therapy!” Why? Because in finding your True Self, you will have found *an absolute reference point that is both utterly within you and utterly beyond you at the very same time*. This grounds the soul in big and reliable truth. “My deepest *me* is God!” St. Catherine of Genoa shouted as she ran through the streets of town, just as Colossians had already shouted to both Jews and pagans, “The mystery is Christ within you — your hope of Glory!” (1:27).

The healthy inner authority of the True Self can now be balanced by a more objective outer authority of Scripture and mature Tradition. Your experience is not just your experience, in other words. That’s what tells you that you are not crazy. That God is both utterly beyond me and yet totally within me at the same time is the exquisite balance that most religion seldom achieves, in my opinion. Now the law is written on both tablets of stone (Exodus 31:18) and within your heart (Deuteronomy 29:12–14), and the old covenant has rightly morphed into the new (Jeremiah 31:31–34), just as it was already understood and lived by holy Jews. Jesus fully represents this



ideal Jewish balance. Remember, Jesus was not a “Christian”!

People who find this wholeness are balanced in general and tend to flourish, as opposed to either mere conformists or mere rebels who just take sides on everything—with no wisdom required. Think of poor Galileo Galilei who, under pressure from the church to deny that the earth moves around the sun, says quietly before he dies, “And yet it moves!” He wisely knew how to survive in a totalitarian system, and yet now he survives and thrives as the Father of Modern Science and the modern popes have exonerated him. You are both the Body of Christ and only a part of the Body of Christ at the same time. You are both the center of the world and on the edge of that same world, or as St. Bonaventure put it, “the center is now everywhere and the circumference is nowhere.”

Your personal experience of chosenness is precisely what allows you to pass on that same experience to others, say both Isaiah and Paul (Isaiah 2:1–5, 56:1–7; Romans 11:16ff.). *Outer spiritual believing* tends to say, “Only here” or “only there,” while *authentic inner knowing* tends to say, “Always and everywhere.” We start elitist and we end egalitarian. And Ken Wilber rightly adds “Always!” What we



receive freely, we give away freely (Matthew 10:8). Outer authority told us we were indeed special (that's the only way to get started), but maturing inner authority allows us to see that everyone is special and unique, although it usually takes the maturity of the second half of life to see this. Young zealots still think it's all about them.³

I promise you that the discovery of your True Self will feel like a thousand pounds of weight have fallen from your back. You will no longer have to build, protect, or promote any idealized self image. Living in the True Self is quite simply a much happier existence, even though we never live there a full twenty-four hours a day. But you henceforth have it as a place to always go back to. You have finally discovered the alternative to your False Self. You are like Jacob awakening from sleep and joining the chorus of mystics in every age. "You were here all along, and I never knew it!" he says (Genesis 28:16). He anoints the stone pillow where this happened and names it *Bethel*, or "the house of God and gate of heaven" (28:17–18).⁴ Jacob then carries the presence with him wherever he goes. What was first only there is soon everywhere. The gate of heaven is first of all in one concrete place, better if carried with you, and



best when found everywhere. That is the progression of the spiritual life.

CLUES AND EVIDENCE

Who of us has not asked, “Who am I?” “Who am I really?” “What am I all about?” “Is there any essential ‘me’ here?” It is as if we are all a big secret to ourselves and must search for clues, however obscure they may be. Yet the search never stops fascinating us, even as we grow older. (If it does, we have almost certainly stopped growing.) Any lecture or class on understanding yourself always draws great interest, even from otherwise jaded or superficial people.⁵ One sees this fascination in little children as their eyes widen if you tell them about the day they were born, or what they were like “as a kid,” or what they might “be” when they grow up. Try it, and notice how children quiet and listen with intense interest at almost anything about themselves. They gaze at you with wonder and excitement and invariably want to hear more. These messages must feel like oracles from another world to them and doorways into still-hidden secrets.

This curiosity about ourselves grows more intense in the teen and young adult years as we try on a



dozen costumes and roles, and we surely covet any recognition or praise of our most recent incarnation. We quickly grab it and try it on for size, as if to say, "This might be me!" Some never take their costume off. A too early or too successful self becomes a total life agenda, occasionally for good but more often for ill. Think of the many young athletes, musicians, and poets who become obsessed with their identity but never make it to the big time. Even if they do succeed, there are too many stories of unhappiness, being lost, and self-destruction. Our ongoing curiosity about our True Self seems to lessen if we settle into any "successful" role. We have then allowed others to define us from the outside, although we do not realize it. Or perhaps we dress ourselves up on the outside and never get back inside. When I explore the True Self in this book, I am talking about a second dressing up, which will actually feel much more like a dressing down.

This confusion about our True Self and False Self is much of the illusion of the first half of life, although most of us do not experience the problem then.⁶ Only later in life can we perhaps join with Thomas Merton, who penned one of my favorite lines, "*If I had a message to my contemporaries it is surely this: Be anything you like, be madmen, drunks, and bastards*



of every shape and form, but at all costs avoid one thing: success. . . . If you are too obsessed with success, you will forget to live. If you have learned only how to be a success, your life has probably been wasted.”⁷

Success is hardly ever your True Self, only your early window dressing. It gives you some momentum for the journey, but it is never the real goal. You do not know that, however. In the moment, it just feels right and good and necessary—and it is. For a short while.

I remember hearing a story, reportedly true, about a young couple putting their newborn in the nursery for the night. Their four-year-old son said to them, “I want to talk to the baby!” They said, “Yes, you can talk to him from now on.” But he pressed further, saying, “I want to talk to him now and by myself.” Surprised and curious, they let the young boy into the nursery and cupped their ears to the door, wondering what he might be saying. This is what they reportedly heard their boy say to his baby brother: “Quick, tell me where you came from. Quick, tell me who made you? I am beginning to forget!” Could that be true? Have most of us forgotten? Is this what Jesus was referring to when he would often teach that we have to become like little children to “get it”?



Most spirituality has said, in one way or another, that we have all indeed begun to forget, if not fully forgotten, who we are. Universal amnesia seems to be the problem. Religion’s job is purely and simply one thing: to tell us, and keep reminding us of who we objectively are. Thus, Catholics keep eating “the Body of Christ” until they know that they *are* what they eat — a human body that is still the eternal Christ. What else would the message be? Avoiding this objective and wonderful message, many clergy have made the Eucharist into a reward for good behavior and missed the core Gospel for the sake of a small contest where they just happen to give out the merit badges. Religion’s job is to keep “re-minding” us of what we only know “in part” (1 Corinthians 13:12). This book hopes to remind you of what you know and who you are at your core — and in a way that you can’t forget. Then whatever you say or do will come from a good, deep, and spacious place. The True Self always has something good to say. The False Self babbles on, largely about itself.

Is it possible that we do know our True Self at some level? Could we all know from the beginning? Does some part of us know — with a kind of certitude — who



we really are? Is the truth hidden within us? Could human life's central task be a matter of consciously discovering and becoming who we already are and what we somehow unconsciously know? I believe so. Life is not a matter of creating a special name for ourselves, but of uncovering the name we have always had. Most Native cultures look for inherent symbols at a child's birth—and that became the child's sacred name. Maybe this is what lovers are doing for one another with their sweet nicknames.

Our True Self is surely the "treasure hidden in the field" that Jesus speaks of. It is your own chunk of the immortal diamond. He says that we should "happily be willing to sell everything to buy that field" (Matthew 13:44)—or that diamond mine! Could any one thing be that valuable that we would sell everything for it? In all the Gospels, Jesus is quoted as saying, "What will it profit you if you gain the whole world and lose your own soul?" (Matthew 16:26), and the context invariably implies he is talking about something happening in *this* world. If you find the treasure hidden in your own field, then everything else comes along with it. It is indeed the "pearl of great price" (Matthew 13:46) to continue our precious gem metaphor.



The early Christian writers tell us that this discovery of our True Self is also at the same time a discovery of God. I have far too often seen the immature and destructive results of people who claim to have found God and do not have even a minimum of self-knowledge. They try to “have” God and hold onto their false and concocted little self too. It does not work (1 John 4:20). I have also met many who appear to know themselves and do at some good levels, but not at the largest and divine level; they have to keep scrambling for private and public significance by themselves and in their mental ego. They still live in a separate and very fragile self.

Some who use the language of integral theory or “spiral dynamics” call it the “mean green” level: these are people who are just smart enough to dismiss everybody below them as stupid and everybody above them as falsely spiritual.⁸ A little bit of enlightenment is a very dangerous thing. I have seen it in myself, in many clergy, and especially in the arrogance of many academics, early feminists, and loners who can never trustfully belong to any group and seem to believe they have the only correct ideas. Their “smartness” makes them also mean or arrogant, and we intuitively know this should not be true.



The two encounters with a True God and a True Self are largely experienced simultaneously and grow in parallel fashion. If I can do nothing more in this book than demonstrate why and how this is the case, I will have achieved the best purpose here.

One of Jesus' most revealing one-liners is, "Rejoice only that your name is written in heaven!" (Luke 10:20).⁹ If we could fully trust this, it would change our whole life agenda. This discovery will not create overstated or presumptuous individualists, as religion usually fears, but instead makes all posturing and pretending largely unnecessary. Our core anxiety that we are not good enough is resolved from the beginning, and we can stop all our climbing, contending, criticizing, and competing. All "accessorizing" of any small, fragile self henceforth shows itself to be a massive waste of time and energy. Costume jewelry is just that, a small part of an already unnecessary costume.

Most of Christian history has largely put the cart of *requirements* before the "horsepower" itself, thinking that loads of carts, or "I have the best cart," will eventually produce the horse. It never does. *The horsepower is precisely our experience of primal union with God.* Find God, the primary source, and the spring water will forever keep flowing (Ezekiel 47:1–12; John 7:38)





naturally. Once you know that, the problem of inferiority, unworthiness, or low self-esteem is resolved from the beginning and at the core. You can then spend your time much more positively, marching in the “triumphal parade” (2 Corinthians 2:14), as Paul so playfully calls it.

You see, the horse does all the work. Your work is of another kind: to stay calmly and happily on the road and not get back into the harness. St. Teresa of Avila used a similar metaphor when she described how you can either keep digging the channel or find the actual spring and let it just flow toward you, in you, and from you. Her entire mystical theology is about finding that Inner Flow and not wasting time digging trenches.



SOUL, OUR INHERENT IDENTITY

My studied conviction is that our inherent identity is what almost all the world religions and philosophies have essentially meant by *soul*. We still have many different definitions for *soul*, which reveals the insight of the original Greek word, where *psyche* (soul) literally meant butterfly. Soul and the True Self have always been hard to pin down; they are elusive and subtle like butterflies. Our inability to see the True Self clearly is





like our inability to see air: it is everywhere and so it is nowhere. Thus, learning to pay positive attention is the secret formula of almost all mature religion.¹⁰ Any ideological, angry, or fear-based process will only reinforce the False Self. The ego always has an opportunistic agenda. The soul has no agenda whatsoever except to see what is — *as it is* — and let it teach you. Like a butterfly, it alights, tastes, and then moves forward.

Let me try to capture this butterfly soul in its essence: *your soul is who you are in God and who God is in you*. You can never really lose your soul; you can only fail to realize it, which is indeed the greatest of losses: to have it but not have it (Matthew 16:26). Your essence, your exact “thisness,” will never appear again in another incarnation. As Oscar Wilde said, “Be yourself; everyone else is already taken.” Your True Self and your soul come from the Manufacturer — “hidden inside the box,” as the commercials say.

As you are probably beginning to notice, I seem to equate the soul with the True Self and yet they are also a bit different. In some ways they are interchangeable in the sense of revealing that “eternal” part of you, the part of you that knows the truth. But I must also say that the True Self is probably larger than the





soul, because *it includes Spirit and embodiment too*. Both reveal to us the immortal diamond that God has planted within us, and they often operate as one.

You (and every other created thing) begins with a divine DNA, an inner destiny as it were, an absolute core that knows the truth about you, a blueprint tucked away in the cellar of your being, an *imago Dei* that begs to be allowed, to be fulfilled, and to show itself. As it says in Romans (5.5), “It is the Holy Spirit poured into your heart, and it has been given to you.”

Your True Self is what makes you, you. It is like the Risen Presence that “comes up and walks by your side” while you are on the road to any Emmaus (Luke 24:15). It is the Christ Mystery that appears and grabs each of us now and then on our journey until we finally “make our home” there (John 15:4) and anoint (literally “christen”) the stone of that place (Genesis 28:18) as a place to return to. This is surely the fullest meaning of the Sabbath rest.

Your True Self has already introduced itself to you, or you would have not kept reading this book. It would all be impossible fantasy talk. “It is not because you do not know the truth that I am writing to you, but rather because you know it already,” John so beautifully puts it (1 John 2:21). You *do* know it.





John Duns Scotus (1265–1308), the Franciscan philosopher, whom I studied for four years, called each soul a unique “thisness” (*haecceity*), and he said it was to be found in every act of creation in its singularity. For him, God did not create universals, genus, and species, or anything that needed to come back again and again to get it right (reincarnation), but only specific and unique incarnations of the Eternal Mystery—each one chosen, loved, and preserved in existence as itself—*by being itself*. And this is the glory of God! As usual, Gerard Manley Hopkins, a poet deeply influenced by Scotus, says it best:



Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves—goes itself; myself it speaks and spells.
Crying: “What I do is me: for that I came.”¹¹



THE GREAT ALLOWER

In this regard, God is the Great Allowor, despite all the attempts of ego, culture, and even religion to prevent God from allowing. Show me where God does not allow. God lets women be raped and raped women



conceive, God lets tyrants succeed, and God lets me make my own mistakes again and again. He does not enforce his own commandments. God's total allowing of everything has in fact become humanity's major complaint. Conservatives so want God to smite sinners that they find every natural disaster to be a proof of just that, and then they invent some of their own smiting besides. Liberals reject God because God allows holocausts and torture and does not fit inside their seeming logic. If we were truly being honest, God is both a scandal and a supreme disappointment to most of us. We would prefer a God of domination and control to a God of allowing, as most official prayers make clear.

Both God and the True Self need only to fully be themselves and generously show themselves. Then the major work is done. The Source will always flow out, through, and toward those who want it. I would go so far as to define God as a "deep allowing" to the point of scandalous "cooperation with evil," both natural disasters and human evils. To allow yourself to be grabbed and held by such a divine wholeness is a dark and dangerous risk, and yet this is exactly what we mean by "salvation." We are allowing the Great Allower to allow us, even at our worst. We gradually



learn to share in the divine freedom and must forgive God for being far too generous. This is not my “liberal” idea; Jesus says the same thing (see Matthew 20:15), but we cannot hear it for some reason.

Once your soul comes to its True Self, it can amazingly let go and be almost anything except selfish or separate. It can also not be anything that you need it to be or others want it to be. The soul is a natural at detachment and nonaddiction. It does not cling or grasp. It has already achieved its purpose in pure being more than in any specific doing of this or that. It can daringly and dangerously say with St. Paul, “For me there are no forbidden things, but not everything does good. For me there are no forbidden things, but I am not going to let anything dominate me either” (1 Corinthians 6:12). Finally we have become a human being instead of just a human doing. This is what we are practicing when we sit quietly in prayer: we are practicing under-doing and assured failure, which radically rearranges our inner hardware after a while. Soulful people, invariably humble and honest about themselves, are also risk takers: they both know the rules and how to break the rules properly. The True Self neither postures nor pretends. As Augustine said, the redeemed soul “loves God and does what it wills,”



which is not as simple as it sounds. It comes down to this: the soul and the True Self know that “my life is not about me, but I am about life.”¹² The True Self is both very special and not special at all—in the very same moment. It has everything in general so it needs nothing in particular, as my father, St. Francis, might put it.

Most of humanity is so enchanted with its False (concocted) Self that it has largely doubted and rejected—or never known—its True Self. And so it lives in anxiety and insecurity. We have put so much time into creating it that we cannot imagine this False Self not being true—or not being “me.” Even many believers spend much of their life manicuring and manufacturing a now very “Christian” False Self, while the core self or True Self is not touched or revealed at all (Ephesians 4:24). It is largely a game of ego pretend and in the end does not work. Only the False Self wants to be the most orthodox Catholic in Philadelphia, or the best Republican in Alabama, or needs to prove its heterosexuality. The True Self, with dear Mother Mary, knows only that “the Almighty has done great things for me, and Holy is his name” (Luke 1:48).

We have thus become a fragile and fragmented society, even though on so many other levels we are developed and civilized, each of us begging to be no-



ticed and taken seriously by others, each hoping for our twenty minutes of fame. Ironically, we have not taken ourselves seriously or let God take us seriously if we still need to do this. Today most political and cultural fads change with the wind, today's political spin, manufactured headlines, and prime-time news that must fill up twenty-three minutes of "news." In a False Self world, there is nothing but fashion and display, and the amazing thing is that people bother to believe it or buy any of it. We are indeed slaves to Madison Avenue or "Mad Men." No wonder the Buddhists boldly call it all "emptiness."

This False Self world is sad and fragile. Yet the answer we seek is already inside each of us and largely resolved—not fashion but fact. Our True Self knows that there is no place to go or to get to. We are already at home—free and filled. That is the essence of the good news. What else would be "good news for *all* the people," which is what the angels promised the Bethlehem shepherds (Luke 2:10)? But it seems we would prefer a win-lose world, even if most lose. We are even willing to think of ourself as a loser or failure than dare to allow the Great Allower to do a win-win for what is perhaps God's only universe.



THE SPACIOUS SOUL

There is something in you that is not touched by coming and going, by up and down, by for or against, by the raucous teams of totally right or totally wrong. There is a part of you that is patient with both goodness and evil to gradually show themselves, exactly as God does. There is a part of you that does not rush to judgment. Rather, it stands vigilant and patient in the tragic gap that almost every moment offers. It is a riverbed of mercy. It is vast, silent, restful, and resourceful, and it receives and also lets go of all the comings and goings. It is *awareness itself* (as opposed to judgment itself), and awareness is not as such “thinking.” It refuses to be pulled into the emotional and mental tugs of war that most of life is—before it is forever over and gone. To look out from this untouchable silence is what we mean by contemplation. In her *Interior Castle*, St. Teresa of Avila says, “The soul is spacious, plentiful, and its amplitude is impossible to exaggerate . . . the sun here radiates to every part . . . and nothing can diminish its beauty.”¹³ This is your soul. It is God-in-you. This is your True Self.



And you know what? Your soul is much larger than you! You are just along for the ride. When you learn to live there, you live with everyone and everything else too. Any language of exclusion or superiority no longer makes sense to you. Inside your True Self, you know you are not alone, and you foundationally “belong” to God and to the universe (1 Corinthians 3:23). You no longer have to work to feel important. You *are* intrinsically important, and it has all been “done unto you” (Luke 1:38), just as it was with Mary, who made no claims of worthiness *or* unworthiness. And if God so gratuitously and graciously includes you here and now in this world, why would such a God change God’s mind in the next world? Love is the one eternal thing and takes away your foundational fear of death. This is very good stuff.

As Isaiah so poetically said to Israel, “Where is your mother’s writ of divorce? To which of my creditors have I sold you? . . . Has my hand become too short to save?” (50:1–2). Or did Jesus change his regular policy after his resurrection, and his love become exclusionary and conditional, as it never was during his lifetime? In fact, his breath, perfect Shalom, and divine forgiveness have all become the very same





thing after the Resurrection (John 20:22) and given freely to the crowd who had just totally let him down and are hiding behind locked doors. The community of saints *is* the community of sinners.

You do not create your True Self, or earn it, or work up to it by any moral or ritual behavior whatsoever. It is all and forever mercy for all of us and all the time, and there are no exceptions. You do not climb up to your True Self. You fall into it, so don’t avoid all falling. There, ironically and happily, you are finally found. And you notice your small False Self almost as a disappointing afterthought. All people have access to their True Self from their very first inhalation and exhalation, which we now know is the very sound of the sacred name Yahweh. We breathe God in and out—much more than we “know” God, understand God, or even talk to God.¹⁴

God has not been wasting our time here, and God will not be found ineffective, failing, or unfaithful toward what Divinity has created. “We may be unfaithful, but God is always faithful, for he cannot disown *his own self*” (2 Timothy 2:13).

Dionysius the Areopagite, a sixth-century mystical theologian, said that we start the spiritual path





thinking we are pulling on a chain that is attached to heaven. Only midway in the journey do we realize that the chain we thought we were pulling is instead pulling us—toward an alluring brilliance.¹⁵ We each set out trying to create our own hand-cut and hand-made diamond; but experienced pilgrims tell us that the diamond was first made by Another, and it is indeed drawing us forward into a brilliance that is now uniquely *ours*.

