

CHAPTER II



Across the Great Divide

Rejoining Soul and Role

*As once the wingèd energy of delight
carried you over childhood's dark abysses,
now beyond your own life build the great
arch of unimagined bridges.*

—RAINER MARIA RILKE¹

A Child's Secret Life

The instinct to protect ourselves by living divided lives emerges when we are young, as we start to see the gaps between life's bright promise and its shadowy realities. But as children, we are able to deal with those "dark abysses" by sailing across them on the "wingèd energy of delight" that is every child's birthright gift.

This energy comes from the soul—the core of pure being that children are so intimate with—that is, as the poet Rumi says, "here for its own joy."² The remarkable resilience youngsters often reveal, even in the face of great hardship, comes from this place called the soul. And the soul animates the "secret lives" that many of us led as children, in an effort to shield our vulnerable selfhood from the threats of the world.

My own secret life started in the fifth or sixth grade. At school, where I wanted to fit in, people saw me as outgoing and self-assured. I made friends easily, knew how to get a laugh, often had my hand up in class, and was elected president of one thing and another more often than FDR. Though I could not dribble a basketball downcourt without tripping over myself, my clumsiness served me well, making me less threatening to other boys and evoking the maternal instinct in girls.

But no one knew how anxious my public role made me. After school, I did not hang out with friends; I hid out in my bedroom. With the door shut tight against the world, I read stories, built model airplanes, or immersed myself in the fantasy realm of radio serial adventures. My room was a monastic cell where I could be the self with whom I felt most at home—the introspective and imaginative self so unlike the extrovert I played with such anxiety at school.

The details of this story are mine alone, but at bottom it is the story of most people I know. As we cross the rising terrain between infancy and adolescence—still close enough to our origins to be in touch with inner truth but aware of the mounting pressure to play someone else "out there"—the true self starts to feel threatened. We deal with the threat by developing a child's version of the divided life, commuting daily between the public world of role and the hidden world of soul.

The secret lives of children have inspired some splendid literature, of course. In C. S. Lewis's classic *Chronicles of Narnia*, we read about a magic wardrobe through which young Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy pass from their humdrum existence in the English countryside into a parallel universe of light and shadow, of mystery and moral demand, confronting the daunting and bracing challenges of the inner journey.³ I have never doubted the truth of the Narnia tales: that magic wardrobe was in my bedroom, too!

But when we turn from literature to life, this charming feature of childhood soon disappears, to be replaced by an adult pathology. As the outer world becomes more demanding—and today it presses in on children at an obscenely early age—we stop going to our rooms, shutting the door, walking into the wardrobe, and entering the world of the soul. And the closer we get to adulthood, the more we stifle the imagination that journey requires. Why? Because imagining other possibilities for our lives would remind us of the painful gap between who we most truly are and the role we play in the so-called real world.

As we become more obsessed with succeeding, or at least surviving, in that world, we lose touch with our souls and disappear into our roles. The child with a harmless after-school secret becomes the masked and armored adult—at considerable cost to self, to others, and to the world at large. It is a cost that can be itemized in ways well known to many of us:

- We sense that something is missing in our lives and search the world for it, not understanding that what is missing is us.
- We feel fraudulent, even invisible, because we are not in the world as who we really are.
- The light that is within us cannot illuminate the world's darkness.
- The darkness that is within us cannot be illuminated by the world's light.
- We project our inner darkness on others, making "enemies" of them and making the world a more dangerous place.
- Our inauthenticity and projections make real relationships impossible, leading to loneliness.
- Our contributions to the world—especially through the work we do—are tainted by duplicity and deprived of the life-giving energies of true self.

Those are not exactly the marks of a life well lived. But they are not uncommon among us, in part because the dividedness that creates them comes highly recommended by popular culture. "Don't wear your heart on your sleeve" and "Hold your cards close to your vest" are just two examples of how we are told from an early age that "masked and armored" is the safe and sane way to live.

But our culture has it backward. The truth is that the more dividedness we perceive in each other, the less safe and sane we feel. Every day—as we interact with family, friends, acquaintances, and strangers—we ask ourselves if "what we see is what we get." And all those other people are asking the same about us! Being cautious about the degree of congruence between outer appearance and inner reality is one of our species' most ancient ways of seeking safety in a perilous world.

"Is this person the same on the inside as he or she seems to be on the outside?" Children ask this about their parents, students about their teachers, employees about their supervisors, patients

about their physicians, and citizens about their political leaders. When the answer is yes, we relax, believing that we are in the presence of integrity and feeling secure enough to invest ourselves in the relationship and all that surrounds it.

But when the answer is no, we go on high alert. Not knowing who or what we are dealing with and feeling unsafe, we hunker down in a psychological foxhole and withhold the investment of our energy, commitment, and gifts. Students refuse to take the risks involved in learning, employees do not put their hearts into their work, patients cannot partner with physicians in their own healing, and citizens disengage from the political process. The perceived incongruity of inner and outer—the inauthenticity that we sense in others, or they in us—constantly undermines our morale, our relationships, and our capacity for good work.

So "masked and armored," it turns out, is *not* the safe and sane way to live. If our roles were more deeply informed by the truth that is in our souls, the general level of sanity and safety would rise dramatically. A teacher who shares his or her identity with students is more effective than one who lobbs factoids at them from behind a wall. A supervisor who leads from personal authenticity gets better work out of people than one who leads from a script. A doctor who invests selfhood in his or her practice is a better healer than one who treats patients at arm's length. A politician who brings personal integrity into leadership helps us reclaim the popular trust that distinguishes true democracy from its cheap imitations.

❧ Becoming Whole Adults ❧

The divided life may be endemic, but wholeness is always a choice. Once I have seen my dividedness, do I continue to live a contradiction—or do I try to bring my inner and outer worlds back into harmony?

"Being whole" is a self-evident good, so the answer would seem to be clear. And yet, as we all know, it is not. Time after time we choose against wholeness by slipping into a familiar pattern of evasion:

- First comes denial: surely what I have seen about myself cannot be true!
- Next comes equivocation: the inner voice speaks softly, and truth is a subtle, slippery thing, so how can I be sure of what my soul is saying?
- Next comes fear: if I let that inner voice dictate the shape of my life, what price might I have to pay in a world that sometimes punishes authenticity?
- Next comes cowardice: the divided life may be destructive, but at least I know the territory, while what lies beyond it is *terra incognita*.
- Then comes avarice: in some situations, I am rewarded for being willing to stifle my soul.

This pattern of self-evasion is powerful and persistent. But here is a real-world story about someone who found the courage to break out of it and embrace his own truth.

It happened at a retreat I facilitated for some twenty elected and appointed officials from Washington, D.C. All of them had gone into government animated by an ethic of public service, all were experiencing painful conflicts between their values and power politics, and all sought support for the journey toward living "divided no more."

One participant had worked for a decade in the U.S. Department of Agriculture, after farming for twenty-five years in northeastern Iowa. On his desk at that moment was a proposal related to the preservation of midwestern topsoil, which is being

depleted at a rapid rate by agribusiness practices that value short-term profits over the well-being of the earth. His "farmer's heart," he kept saying, knew how the proposal should be handled. But his political instincts warned him that following his heart would result in serious trouble, not least with his immediate superior.

On the last morning of our gathering, the man from Agriculture, looking bleary-eyed, told us that it had become clear to him during a sleepless night that he needed to return to his office and follow his farmer's heart.

After a thoughtful silence, someone asked him, "How will you deal with your boss, given his opposition to what you intend to do?"

"It won't be easy," replied this farmer-turned-bureaucrat. "But during this retreat, I've remembered something important: I don't report to my boss. I report to the land."

Because this story is true, I cannot give it a fairy-tale ending. I do not know if this man returned to work and did exactly what he said he would do; his resolve may well have weakened by the time he got back home. And even if he held firm, the topsoil of midwestern farmlands has yet to be saved; the policy process is too complex to be redirected by one person's moment of truth. The man from Agriculture went on a pilgrimage into the wilderness of the human heart, and I cannot claim that his pilgrimage solved his or the topsoil's problems, any more than my pilgrimage to the Boundary Waters solves my problems or the world's.

But this I *can* claim: every time we get in touch with the truth source we carry within, there is net moral gain for all concerned. Even if we fail to follow its guidance fully, we are nudged a bit further in that direction. And the next time we are conflicted between inner truth and outer reality, it becomes harder to forget or deny that we have an inner teacher who wants to lay a claim on our lives.

As that awareness grows within us, we join in the potential for personal and social change that, in the words of Vaclav

Havel—architect of the Velvet Revolution, former president of Czechoslovakia, and seeker of political integrity—is “hidden throughout the whole of society.” This potential, Havel writes, is found in “everyone who is living within the lie and who may be struck at any moment . . . by the force of truth.”⁴

The divided life is a wounded life, and the soul keeps calling us to heal the wound. Ignore that call, and we find ourselves trying to numb our pain with an anesthetic of choice, be it substance abuse, overwork, consumerism, or mindless media noise. Such anesthetics are easy to come by in a society that wants to keep us divided *and* unaware of our pain—for the divided life that is pathological for individuals can serve social systems well, especially when it comes to those functions that are morally dubious.

When the man from Agriculture distances himself from his soul, it is easier for his department to report to the agribusiness lobby instead of the land. But when he, or any of us, rejoins soul and role, the institutions in which we work find it just a little bit harder to ransack another ecosystem to satisfy corporate greed or to lay off another ten thousand working poor to maximize the profits of the rich or to pass another welfare “reform” that leaves single mothers and their children worse off than they were.

Of course, if the man from Agriculture began “reporting to the land,” he may well have become a less desirable employee in his superior’s eyes. He may have been told to get back in line or else lose his power or even his job: institutions have been known to punish people for living integral lives.

No one wants to suffer the penalties that come from living divided no more. But there can be no greater suffering than living a lifelong lie. As we move closer to the truth that lives within us—aware that in the end what will matter most is knowing that we stayed true to ourselves—institutions start losing their sway over our lives.

This does not mean we must abandon institutions. In fact, when we live by the soul’s imperatives, we gain the courage to serve institutions more faithfully, to help them resist their tendency to default on their own missions. If the man from Agriculture acted on his “farmer’s heart,” he did not renege on his institutional obligations but embraced them more fully, helping to call his department back to its higher purpose.

It is not easy work, rejoining soul and role. The poet Rilke—who wrote about childhood’s “winged energy of delight” in the stanza at the start of this chapter—writes about the demands of adulthood in the final stanza of the same poem:

*Take your practiced powers and stretch them out
until they span the chasm between two
contradictions. . . . For the god
wants to know himself in you.*⁵

Living integral lives as adults is far more daunting than recovering our childhood capacity to commute between two worlds. As adults, we must achieve a complex integration that spans the contradictions between inner and outer reality, that supports both personal integrity and the common good. No, it is not easy work. But as Rilke suggests, by doing it, we offer what is sacred within us to the life of the world.

False Community

How does the divided self become whole? “How to do it” questions are commonplace in our pragmatic culture, and so are the mechanistic answers they often evoke: “Here is a ten-step program you can pursue in the privacy of your own home—or on the flight