

## In and through

*“In the deeps are the violence and terror of which psychology has warned us. But if you ride these monsters down, if you drop with them farther over the world’s rim. You find what our sciences cannot locate or name, the substrate, the ocean or matrix or ether which buoys the rest, which gives goodness its power for good, and evil its power for evil, the unified field: our complex and inexplicable caring for each other, and for our life together here. This is given. It is not learned.”*

Annie Dillard offers a powerful image of the inner journey and tells us what might happen if we were to take it. But why would anybody want to take a journey of that sort, with its multiple difficulties and dangers? Everything in us cries out against it - which is why we externalize everything. It is so much easier to deal with the external world, to spend our lives manipulating material and institutions and other people instead of dealing with our own souls. We like to talk about the outer world as if it were infinitely complex and demanding, but it is a cakewalk compared to the labyrinth of our inner lives!

Here is a small story from my life about why one might want to take the inner journey. In my early forties, I decided to go on the program called Outward Bound. I was on the edge of my first depression, a fact I knew only dimly at the time, and I thought Outward Bound might be a place to shake up my life and learn some things I needed to know.

I chose the weeklong course at Hurricane Island, off the coast of Maine. I should have known from that name what was in store for me; next time I will sign up for the course at Happy Gardens or Pleasant Valley! Though it was a week of great teaching, deep community, and genuine growth, it was also a week of fear and loathing.

In the middle of that week, I faced the challenge I feared most. One of our instructors backed me up to the edge of a cliff 110 feet above solid ground. He tied a very thin rope to my waist – a rope that looked ill-kempt to me and seemed to be starting to unravel – and told me to start “rappelling” down that cliff.

“Do what?” I said.

“Just go!” the instructor explained, in typical Outward Bound fashion.

So I went – and immediately slammed into a ledge, some four feet down from the edge of the cliff, with bone-jarring, brain jarring force.

The instructor looked down at me: “I don’t think you’ve quite got it.”

“Right,” said I, being in no position to disagree. “So what am I supposed to do?”

“The only way to do this,” he said, “is to lean back as far as you can. You have to get your body at right angles to the cliff so that your weight will be on your feet. It’s counterintuitive, but it’s the only way that works.”

I knew that he was wrong, of course, I knew that the trick was to hug the mountain, to stay as close to the rock face as I could. So I tried it again, my way – and slammed into the next ledge, another four feet down.

“You still don’t have it,” the instructor said helpfully.

“OK”, I said, “tell me again what I am supposed to do.”

“Lean way back,” said he, “and take the next step.”

The next step was a very big one, but I took it – and, wonder of wonders, it worked. I leaned back into empty space, eyes fixed on the heavens in prayer, made tiny moves with my feet, and started descending down the rock face, gaining confidence with every step.

I was about halfway down when the second instructor called up from below; “Paker, I think you’d better stop and see what’s just below your feet.” I lowered my eyes very slowly – to as not to shift my weight – and saw that I was approaching a deep hole in the face of the rock.

To get down, I would have to get around that hole, which meant I could not maintain the straight line of descent I had started to get comfortable with. I would need to change course and swing myself around that hole, to the left or to the right. I knew for a certainty that attempting to do so would lead directly to my death – so I froze, paralyzed with fear.

The second instructor let me hang there, trembling, in silence, for what seemed like a very long time. Finally, she shouted up these helpful words: “Parker, is anything wrong?”

To this day, I do not know where my words came from, though I have twelve witnesses to the fact that I spoke them. In a high, squeaky voice, I said, “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Then,” said the second instructor, “it’s time you learned the Outward Bound motto.”

“Oh, keen,” I thought. “I’m about to die, and she’s going to give me a motto!”

But then she shouted ten words I hope never to forget, words whose impact and meaning I can still feel:

“If you can’t get out of it, get into it!”

I had long believed in the concept of “the word become flesh,” but until that moment, I had not experienced it. My teacher spoke words so compelling that they bypassed my mind, went into my flesh, and animated my legs and feet. No helicopter would come to rescue me; the instructor on the cliff would not pull me up with the rope; there was no parachute in my backpack to float me to the ground. There was no way out of my dilemma except to get into it – so my feet started to move, and in a few minutes I made it safely down.

Why would anyone want to embark on the daunting inner journey about which Annie Dillard writes? Because there is no way out of one’s inner life. So one had better get into it. On the inward and downward spiritual journey, the only way out is in and through.

*From “Let your life speak” by Parker Palmer*