

# Evolutionize Your Life

## Session 4 Experiential Exercises

### “Mastering Our Interpretive (often self-deceptive) Instincts”

Honoring our neocortex’s zeal for meaning, morality, and making sense

by Michael Dowd

#### EXERCISE 4a

#### Noticing, Not Thinking: Paying Attention to 2+ Stimuli at Same Time

“Coming into right relationship with reality” is the secular equivalent of “getting right with God.” But it’s sometimes difficult to be guided by what is *real* when we are distracted by our ceaselessly chattering “Monkey Mind” (our neocortex). How can we develop a habit of periodically silencing the thinking / interpreting / judging / assessing part of our brain so as to pay attention to the still small voice of what’s Real? *The following exercise is an elegant means for quieting the rational, verbal part of the brain and thereby facilitating a state of joy and peace. It will help you develop the habit of distinguishing thinking from noticing.* It doesn’t require years of dedicated practice to begin to achieve stunning results. Even if you have never meditated before, this exercise will help you develop a habit of attending to what’s actually, physically real within and around you at any given moment.

John Selby, in his acclaimed meditation guide, [Seven Masters, One Path](#), speaks of a simple and effective practice used in retreat centers across the world, as well as in hospitals and research centers where the healthful aspects of meditation are studied. The practice requires no more than this: **notice two or more sensory stimuli at the same time and maintain that attention.**

For example, you might choose to sit comfortably and close your eyes, and then begin to notice your **breathing**, slowly, gently — in . . . out . . . in . . . out. After a few cycles of this, and before your mind begins to wander, also notice and pay attention to any **sounds** you can hear. Remarkably, if you pay attention to **both breath and sound at the same time**, there is no room in your conscious awareness to think about anything else.

BEGIN: I invite you to close your eyes and sample this technique before reading on. It is very soothing.

You can repeat this exercise **with eyes open, even while walking**. You just need to soften your gaze so that you see everything ahead of you—broadly, with no focus on anything in particular. Notice how much you can see without shifting your eyes or moving your head. Now also pay attention to anything you can **feel or smell or hear**. It really doesn’t matter what the two sensory stimuli are, so long as you focus your attention simultaneously on both. Effortlessly, the verbal, rational, assessing part of the brain is calmed. Monkey Mind relaxes, and our awareness fills with the eternal present moment.

## Re-Storying Your Past

### Background: **Words Create Worlds**

*“As language-using organisms, we participate in the evolution of the Universe most fruitfully through interpretation. We understand the world by drawing pictures, telling stories, conversing. These are our special contributions to existence. It is our immense good fortune and grave responsibility to sing the songs of the Cosmos.” — EDWIN DOBB*

Few things can enrich our relationships to reality and increase our joy in life more than an **evolutionary view of human language**. Scientists tell us that what separates humanity from the rest of the animal kingdom is not so much our genetic makeup. Nearly 99 percent of our DNA is identical to that of chimpanzees and bonobos, and more than half of our coding genes are indistinguishable from a worm’s. Rather, it is **symbolic language** that sets us apart.

At some point in the not-so-distant past, our ancestors began using words as meaningful symbols. Whether this shift occurred rapidly some 50,000 to 100,000 years ago, as most scientists surmise, or more gradually—perhaps over hundreds of thousands or even millions of years—matters little. What is undisputed is the understanding that at some point in the last two million years we humans added symbolic language to the sounds and gestures born of our primate heritage. Moreover, we then began **thinking in words**.

We are still guided by our senses, experiences, and feelings, as other animals always have been. Even today, gestures and body language dance a conversation in parallel to the movement of our lips and tongue. Try talking with your arms riveted to your sides, and then try to keep your head and eyebrows from moving as well! Over the millennia we have increasingly been guided, individually and collectively, by words. Without the tool of symbolic language, what would remain of our beliefs and stories about how and why the world is as it is, where everything came from, what happens when we die, and what purposes we should devote ourselves to beyond the instinctual drives we inherited from our animal ancestors? Without the tool of symbolic language, how could answers to any of those questions pass from one generation to the next?

Academics use the term *symbolic language* to mean simply this: For our kind of intelligence, **metaphors are not optional**. As Immanuel Kant in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and countless others since him have pointed out, words as symbols are inescapably metaphorical. They do not directly represent things in the world, or the world itself; rather, they do so indirectly—often by referring to another concept or symbol (in which case the word becomes a metaphor twice removed from the object of reference). A spoken word induces the mind of a listener to associate a particular sound with a specific memory, internal picture, or another word. As Terrence Deacon suggests in [The Symbolic Species](#), it is precisely the nonrepresentational nature of words that distinguishes human speech from other forms of animal communication.

One can appreciate the metaphorical quality of language by recalling that whenever we seek to understand something new we do so by analogy. We say, “*This is like that,*” and the *that* may itself be a metaphorical expression so long in use that we expect the listener to effortlessly know what we mean. “A clam shell opens like a laptop computer” is something we might say to a child during a walk on the beach. But when lap-tops were newly invented (I recall we hyphenated the word back then; it was born of two words before it became one), we might have explained our new purchase in the reverse: “A lap-top computer opens like a clamshell.” Indeed, we Mac users called a previous generation of round-edged laptops, “clamshells.”

Humans swim not just in a sea of language; we swim in a sea of metaphorical language. As George Lakoff and Mark Johnson note in their acclaimed [Metaphors We Live By](#), “Metaphors are not mere poetical or rhetorical embellishments, but are a part of everyday speech that affects the ways in which we perceive, think, and act. Reality itself is defined by metaphor, and **as metaphors vary from culture to culture, so do the realities they define.**”

Yes, **words create worlds**. Nonetheless, there is a real world out there, a huge and magnificent world outside our skulls—a world, moreover, from which we arose. Our preconceptions do, of course, affect how we perceive that world; so the practice of science involves a system of **checks and balances** within a community of perceivers (and their instruments) to ensure that, collectively, we are not deceived. Science is by no means perfect in this regard; assumptions do affect perception, and it may take decades for the errors to come to light, and decades more for the errors to be corrected in the main stream of science. But science (*global* collective intelligence) is, if anything, **self-correcting**. And therein lies another of its great gifts to religion. To quote Alfred North Whitehead, an early 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher, “Religion will not regain its old power until it faces change in the same spirit as does science.”

### Background: **Day and Night Language**

*“I can hear the sizzle of a new-born star and know that anything of meaning, of fierce magic is emerging here. I am witness to flexible eternity, the evolving past, and I know I will live forever—as dust or breath in the face of stars, in the shifting pattern of winds.” — JOY HARJO*

It is vital to remind ourselves, from time to time, of two complementary sides of the one coin of our experience. On one side is the realm of what’s so: the facts, the **objectively real**, that which is publicly and measurably true. Let’s call this side of reality our *day experience*. We talk or write about it using **day language**—that is, normal everyday discourse. The other side of our experiential coin I call *night experience*. It is communicated through **night language**, by way of grand metaphors, poetry, and vibrant images. Our attention is focused on, What does it mean? This side of our experience is **subjectively real**, like a nighttime dream, though not objectively real. Night language is personally or culturally meaningful. It nourishes us with spectacular images of **emotional truth**.

The language we use really does make a difference. Our choice of metaphor will shade our experience of reality, or its portrayal, in a particular way. Moreover, we will always make events mean *something*. Indeed, even if we say something is meaningless, we’re making it mean nothing. **Humans swim in a sea of meaning no less than fish swim in water**. We cannot avoid it. Problems arise when we fail to distinguish the factual, *objectively* real from the meaningful, *subjectively* real—when we mistake our interpretations for what’s so. The two are not the same. Facts are delimited; interpretations are manifold.

Building on a distinction introduced in Chapter 4 of my book, [Thank God for Evolution](#), between public and private revelation, we can now say this: **Private revelation** is grounded in subjective experience and is expressed in traditional, or religious, night language. **Public revelation** is grounded in objective experience; it is measurable and verifiable, and is expressed in day language. (Those familiar with Ken Wilber’s four-quadrant model will recognize day language as referring to the right-hand quadrants, and night language as referring to those on the left. Other authors and educational organizations, such as [Landmark Education Corporation](#), also assist people in gaining valuable and empowering skill in distinguishing these realms.) To clarify these distinctions, it may be helpful to imagine a continuum:

Measurable <i>Objective</i> <b>Day language</b>	<i>Subjective</i> Twilight language	Non-measurable <i>Highly subjective</i> <b>Night language</b>
<i>A. Event (facts)</i>	<i>B. Story</i>	<i>C. Meaning (metaphors)</i>
Wide agreement (Public revelation) <i>Reason</i>	Some agreement	Strong disagreement (Private revelation) <i>Reverence</i>

Whenever we think or talk about an event, there is always (A) what happened, (B) the story about what happened, and (C) the meaning we make out of the story of what happened. “What happened” refers to the uninterpreted, measurable, objective facts—the raw data. “The story about what happened” is the **narrative context we consciously or unconsciously weave** to connect the dots. Central to *story* are the cause-and-effect linkages we effortlessly fashion from a stream of undifferentiated data. As language-using animals, we create stories as instinctually as we seek food when we’re hungry. “The meaning we make out of what happened” is even more subjective and non-measurable. It’s all the things we tell ourselves, and others if they have the patience to listen to us, about how we (usually unconsciously) **interpret the story** of what happened—that is, what we make the story mean about us, about others, about the world.

A source of anguish at all levels of society (manifesting as conflict between individuals, between religions, among nations) is the consistent and near universal tendency to confuse B and C with A. We assume that what actually happened is not only our *story* about what happened, but also what we make that story mean. No! What is true is never our story, nor our interpretations, but only the actual, objective, measurable facts. **The further we move from day language into night language, the greater the disagreements.**

We cannot solve the problems posed by night language disagreements by jettisoning that face of reality. *We need both day and night language in order to have a meaningful experience of life. The important thing is to get the order right.* If we **first seek clarity on the measurable facts**—which is the very mission of science—the twilight language and night language stories and expressions of meaning that derive from those facts can enrich our lives and support cooperation across ethnic and religious differences. Basing (or reinterpreting) all our twilight and night expressions on a solid foundation of factual, public revelation is our best chance for achieving harmonious relationships at all levels.

My formal training for becoming a United Church of Christ minister culminated in an ordination paper that I wrote and then presented to a gathering of ministers and lay leaders. Titled, “[A Great Story Perspective on the UCC Statement of Faith](#)”, my talk stimulated a host of comments and queries. A widely respected minister posed a question I shall never forget. “Michael,” he began, “I’m impressed with your presentation and with the evolutionary theology that you’ve shared with us. However, there’s a little boy who lives in me, and that little boy wants to know: Where is Emory?”

Emory Wallace, a well-known and beloved retired minister, had for nearly three years guided me through my ministerial training. He died suddenly, at the age of 85, just a few weeks before my ordination hearing.

“Where is Emory?” My mind went blank. I knew I needed to say *something*—after all, this was my ordination hearing—so I just opened my mouth and started speaking, trusting the words to come. My response went something like this:

Where is Emory? In order to answer that question I have to use both *day language*—the language of rational, everyday discourse—and *night language*—the language of dreams, myth, and poetry. Both languages are vital and necessary, just as are both waking and dreaming states of consciousness. Like all mammals, if we are deprived of a chance to dream, we die. Sleep is not enough; we must be permitted to dream.

We, of course, know that day experience and night experience are different. For example, if you were to ask me what I did for lunch today, and I told you that I turned myself into a crow and flew over to the neighborhood farm and goofed around with the cows for a little bit, then I flew to Dairy Queen and ordered a milkshake—and if I told you all that with a straight face—you might counsel me to visit a psychiatrist. However, if you had asked me to share a recent dream and I told the same story, you might be curious as to the meaning of that dream—but you wouldn't think me delusional.

So in order to respond to your question, 'Where is Emory?' I have to answer in two ways. First, in the day language of common discourse, I will say, 'Emory's physical body is being consumed by bacteria. Eventually, only his skeleton and teeth will remain. His genes, contributions, and memory will live on through his family and through the countless people that he touched in person and through his writings—and that includes most of us.

But, you see, if I stop there—if that's all I say—then I've told only half the story. In order to address the nonmaterial, meaningful dimensions of reality I must continue and say something like: 'Emory is at the right hand of God the Father, worshipping and giving glory with all the saints.' Or I could say, 'Emory is being held and nurtured by God the Mother.' Or I could use a Tibetan symbol system and say, 'Emory has entered the bardo realm.' Any or all of these would also be truthful—true within the accepted logic and understanding of mythic night language.

My response was well received in that meeting of twenty years ago, and it has shaped my theology ever since. Recently, I blended the core of that distinction into my Great Story talks and workshops. I am sure that my understanding of day and night language—language of reason and language of reverence—will continue to evolve and thus inform my preaching, my teaching, and my personal relationship with the fullness of Reality.

### *“Read me a nighttime book, Mommy”*

After one of my church programs in which I presented the *day language* vs. *night language* distinction, a woman who was trained as a scientist told me this story: “When my daughter was young, I would read her bed-time stories. I remember trying to read her a book of nonfiction one night. But she protested, saying, ‘That’s a daytime book. Read me a nighttime book, Mommy.’”

*“The most beautiful and most profound emotion we can experience is the sensation of the mystical. It is the power of all true science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer stand, rapt in awe, is as good as dead. That deeply emotional conviction of the presence of a superior reasoning power, which is revealed in the incomprehensible Universe, forms my idea of God.”*

— Albert Einstein

## EXERCISE 4b: Re-Storying Your Past

Few things impact our experience of the world and the quality of our life more directly and profoundly than **our habits of meaning-making and self-talk**. Why? Because we experience the world through **the filter of our interpretations**. The meaning we make of an event, the story we tell ourselves about it, is generally far more consequential over the long run than the experience itself. The good news is that habits of self-talk and meaning-making are just that: habits. They are not hardwired. They can be changed.

Nothing is more corrosive to our own wellbeing and relationships than **blaming others**. This is true for everyone. The following two self-talk exercises use the insights of evolution to help us fulfill this directive. They will assist you in letting go of blame, while growing in faith, trust, and humility.

**BEGIN: Pick a mildly challenging memory** (you can work up to a major trauma later). It can be something that happened long ago or that occurred recently. Now imagine, and journal if you care to, three very different ways of interpreting this event mythically (be playful and dramatic, exaggerate, make it big and obviously silly):

First interpret this experience **from the stance of a victim**, as if you really had nothing to do with it—it was someone else's fault entirely. Make sure that you describe the experience as much worse than you have ever described it before (to yourself or others). Get into the gory details; don't bypass anything.

When you think you have finished, notice the judgmental and victim-like thoughts and feelings that naturally arise. Notice how your chest and belly and neck and extremities feel, and your breathing too, when you interpret an event as though anyone but you is to blame—someone else is obviously bad, wrong, stupid, or malicious. Maybe even move around the room feeling this way. Encourage any shoulder-slumping victim to transform into the persona of vengeful victim. You may need to begin by willing angry movements, and then perhaps they will begin to come on their own, creating their own little dance of vengeance. Yes, indulge in it! Encourage your **Furry Li'l Mammal** to feel as angry and self-righteous as it can, all the while encouraging your **Lizard Legacy** (your innate bodily control) to be influenced by the rush of hormones. "I hate my enemy! Grrrrrrrr!"

Before proceeding to the next interpretive stance, you will need to **shake off the emotion** and bodily sensations wrapped up in the victim stance. So flop your arms aimlessly and roll your head. Whoosh out some breath again, and again. Perhaps do some aerobic dance or exercise. Sing with abandon! Do something, anything, to free your mind and body from the grip of self-righteous blame.

**NEXT:** Take that same mildly challenging memory, but now **interpret it as a victor**, as if this event were exactly what you needed to help usher you into greatness. Imagine that it was no one's fault; it just happened. Allow yourself to feel **compassion** for yourself and whoever else was involved. What might have been going on inside each of you before and after this experience? Allow yourself to feel **tenderhearted and even grateful** for this event and what you've learned from it. How interesting that it turned out, in a strange but real way, as a **blessing in disguise**. How amazing that you could not have seen this before! Stay with this mythic possibility in your imagination and notice what feelings and thoughts naturally arise.

Notice how your chest and stomach and neck and extremities feel, and your breathing too, when you interpret an event as though it was an experience of God/Reality/the Universe conspiring on your behalf—though you can hardly be blamed for not having recognized this great good fortune in the moment.

Again, if you are moved to get up and move: move! Move like a victor, like a champion! Move with gratitude and appreciation and confidence. Move with the easy flow of one who is entirely right with the world, who can accomplish anything! Sing, shout. Proclaim the great news! “I am on my way!”

Okay, use your breath and move your body again in ways that will release the effects of this emotional state. Return to neutral. Take your time.

FINALLY: Take the same memory and **interpret it comically**, as though this event had been orchestrated by God, or the gods, as a practical joke—and you and everybody else involved were mere pawns. Imagine that this episode exposes something ironic or funny or just plain ridiculous about human nature or the nature of the Universe. Thinking back on the experience from this perspective, you now can't help but **smile, even laugh**. Allow yourself to feel lighthearted about the episode, and appreciative of what it taught you about yourself, about others, about life. Notice what thoughts and feelings naturally bubble up when you imagine this event, without judgment, as if a **cosmic trickster** or comedian were just having a good time at everyone's expense. Notice how your chest, belly, neck, and extremities feel, and what your breathing is like, when you interpret an event as though it was obviously an experience of life's **absurdity** or goofiness. Do move around on this one: allow the divine comedy to penetrate your being. Begin by intentionally moving in comical, slapstick ways, and soon they may generate on their own. Intentionally erupt in a hearty laugh—and see if it carries on its own. If you can, keep laughing until you are laughing uncontrollably—until your sides hurt or the tears are flowing.

Okay . . . shake it out. Rest. Perhaps on another day, revisit this threefold exercise, but take on a more challenging memory. Patiently build up **your self-talk / interpretation muscles** before you attempt to work with the really biggest hurts of your past. Perhaps enlist a friend to undertake this exercise with you.

Coach each other as if you were movie directors coaching actors. If you really take this on, I promise, it may be one of the most spiritually transformative exercises you'll ever do.

OUTCOME: The goal here is not just to know, but to actually experience that **you can use your imaginative Monkey Mind to fashion an interpretation of your choice of any memory**. More, you can do this well enough so that any emotion you choose will spontaneously emerge from the depths of your **Furry Li'l Mammal** and then continue to run on its own. Experience how you can direct the **Lizard Legacy** control over body movement well enough that the movement itself will feed back on the feelings of your Furry Li'l Mammal, amplifying them such that the body moves even more. Know, too, that it is your **higher purpose of self-healing** that makes any of this possible. It's your higher purpose that directs your **Monkey Mind** to weave an interpretation couched as victim, victor, or pawn such that your Furry Li'l Mammal will be lured into believing it is true, thus generating the intended emotion. It is your Higher Porpoise that calls your Lizard Legacy into play and then steps back when the fur and scales start flying, as **emotional mammal and embodied lizard drive one another into a frenzy** through positive feedback.

Here is the **self-healing**: You will experience the lovely rush of pent-up emotions, judgment, and guilt finally getting cleared. You will know that you do in fact have **choice** over how the actual events in your life are interpreted in your life story—what meaning you make of them. You will understand that your life story is not something that exists independently of your interpretations, and you will know that you have choice regarding how you interpret your past and present. **No memory need be repressed** in this way; just fully and artfully reinterpreted and reinvested with healing emotions, although several rounds over a period of weeks or months may be necessary to recolor your most painful memories. You may also notice other subtle or not so subtle changes. For example,

- You may have **less resentment about your past, and more forgiveness and trust** than ever before. If so, you will have discovered that forgiveness is a selfish act.
- You may feel **more compassion** for those who are still caught up in blame and who have not yet had the opportunity to see for themselves that there is another way.
- You may begin to **habitually interpret events** in the present moment in a less victim-like and more empowered way—*or not*. There is a lot to be said for **living spontaneously, fully feeling whatever emotions naturally occur**. Then, when it is time to reflect (that is, when your Furry Li'l Mammal is no longer scampering on high alert), do this tripartite exercise again—victim, victor, pawn—and feel freshly empowered to clean up whatever mess you might have contributed to.

## EXERCISE 4c

### This Is What's Real... Now What's Possible?

BEGIN: Recall the *necessity* (over billions of years) of chaos and breakdowns for catalyzing creativity, that was discussed in my secular sermon: "[Evolution and the Revival of the Human Spirit](#)". Now that you have a way of moving beyond our instinctual tendency to blame others when life's difficulties inevitably arise (Exercise 4b), you can much more easily develop the **habit** of asking,

- **What is the opportunity here?** What is possible now that wasn't before? How might this (event/experience/emotion) be a gift and blessing in disguise?

If your emotional state would make that task about as difficult as climbing Mount Everest, then try on this junior varsity set of questions:

- **When did I feel this way before?** Was it possible for me to envision a good outcome at that time? If not, did things somehow work out anyway? Can I simply **trust** that the same might be unfolding right now?

Just asking ourselves questions like these can **help us relax into life and trust** that (no matter what we're dealing with and though we may not be able to envision how in the moment), there will be a solution. There will be a time when life resumes a smooth course, and perhaps something amazing will be gained along the way.

I expect miracles to occur when variations on the two preceding sets of questions are used in community conversations **during crises or to resolve institutional or societal conflicts**.

“What’s possible now that wasn’t before?” and “What are the most inspiring and empowering ways we can think of to interpret this issue or event?” I can almost hear a new world cracking through its shell as I imagine hundreds, thousands, even millions of people asking these questions together, and then acting on what is revealed.

## EXERCISE 4d

### Getting Real (with Yourself and Another) Without Shame

Virtually all of us have an **innate propensity to shade the truth**, to engage in deception big or small, especially when we’re afraid that otherwise we would be judged harshly. And it gets worse. Evolution has quite effectively selected for skill in **self-deception**. We stand the best chance of deceiving others to our benefit if we first deceive ourselves.

Given our compelling instincts and innate tendency to **justify** ourselves (i.e., make ourselves right and others wrong), it takes courage and support from others to consistently grow in honesty. **Starting with gratitude for your instincts and compassion** for the fact that we *all* have mismatched instincts and are surrounded by supernormal stimuli makes it infinitely easier to get real about how we occur to others, and the wake we’ve left just by doing what comes naturally.

BEGIN: **Write out your strengths and growing edges**. Be as thorough as possible. List what you, and others, would consider your **assets** and your **liabilities**, your positive characteristics and your challenges. Also **inventory** your impact on all those aspects of reality for which you are responsible and the larger social and natural spheres of creativity of which you are a part. Extra credit: Ask your kids and your partner (or ex-partners!) what you’ve left out.

Next, **read your inventory aloud to someone you trust**. Most importantly: tell this person every embarrassing, shameful, arrogant, hateful, self-centered, harmful thing you’ve ever done. Confess everything. Don’t hold anything back. When something comes to mind after you’ve completed your recitation (it surely will), then tell that too. Also report all your self-righteous judgments and resentments. Be thorough and fearless in this.

Why is this practice so life changing? **When you’re keeping just one secret, or nursing just one resentment, it’s very easy to keep more**. When you’re holding on to no secrets or resentments whatsoever, however, it’s relatively easy to remain in integrity.

We all carry around rich, smelly compost from the past that impairs our attitudes and actions today. Most of us also suffer, unknowingly, from stingy judgments and smoldering embers of resentment. Yet nothing so consistently **robs us of joy as unexpressed resentments**. Living free of guilt, shame, and judgment is truly heavenly, and hugely empowering.

---

## EXERCISE 4e

### Freedom Is Responsibly & Generously Owning Your Wake

We naturally hold in high esteem those who put themselves in the shoes and experience of others and who then speak and act from that place. Similarly, we admire those who refuse to play the blame game, those who don't look elsewhere when things go wrong but always assume there's something they could have said or done differently that would have made a difference. We feel safe around compassionate people; they nurture trust and evoke in the rest of us a desire to be more like them.

Growing in compassion and responsibility, we find it easier to connect with others in loving ways. Because we have compassion for ourselves, too, we no longer need to play the victim. We become **serene and whole, spontaneously free**, and we are held in Grace. And here is where evolutionary psychology can be of great help. Of course we find it natural to blame others! Of course we shirk from taking responsibility! Of course we want justice: "I will admit to my share of the problem if only they will admit to theirs!" **There is nothing wrong with us in having those tendencies; they are part of our evolutionary heritage** and surely served our ancestors. So let's lighten up about it and get on today with what works.

BEGIN: First, **accept that you've left a wake, for good or ill**. You have said or done things and not said or done other things, and have interpreted events, in ways that have left their mark. As well, others have interpreted what you've said or done, or not said or done, in ways that now cause them to harbor good or bad feelings toward you, accurately or inaccurately. Accepting this fact as normal and natural is the foundation for **taking full responsibility for your life** and your effect on others.

SECOND: Make a **LIST of those you think you may have harmed** and those you know you have harmed, and also a list of those who may not think well of you for whatever reason.

THIRD: Select one person at a time on your list and imagine generously what you could have said or done differently for a better outcome. Write it out. (If you have difficulty with this, simply imagine what someone you admire might have said or done in your shoes). Think and feel from **inside the offended person's experience**. We're not talking about the truth here; we're talking about their perception—remembering that it is oh-so-natural to view ourselves as victims and others as transgressors. Imagine what they would say if they were asked about you.

FOURTH: Now think about **what you could say or write to that person** that would make a real, transformative difference for them. This is not about justifying your actions. It is only about **letting the aggrieved party know that you understand their response**, and that if you could go back to the situation you would do things differently. Do get support from someone you trust, someone who's been through this process, to ensure that your intended communication is as generous as possible, **free of stinginess and blame**. Don't go it alone! Role-play your intended communication and have your friend give you feedback. Or write a draft letter of apology, and have a friend review it. We will naturally be stingy rather than generous, so this will require effort on your part. We tend to apologize and then follow up with a ruinous, "But I was only trying to..." clause. Not helpful!

FIFTH: Now go ahead and do it. **Make your apology** (in writing or in real time) in a responsible, humble way. You may find it helpful to include something like, "If I could go back and do it all over, I would have . . ." and describe yourself saying or doing something that would

have left a positive wake. This process, of course, requires a great deal of intention. Someone whom you have harmed may find it painful to be confronted with your apology, as it forces them to revisit a memory they may have long ago tucked away. *This is not the time to ask for forgiveness.*

**Asking for forgiveness is not only uncharitable; it could be counterproductive.** If pressed to give you a response, emotions may compel them to respond hastily, in a way they later feel bad about.

Then they are stuck with not only a painful memory but a new memory that disturbs them. Meanwhile, hey, you've come clean; one more name crossed off your list, and you feel great! Again, the key here is to take full responsibility, standing in their shoes, imagining what it must have been like for them, and recounting your offense so thoroughly from their perspective that they feel you really do understand the magnitude of their hurt and why they hurt—and that you completely understand if they cannot forgive you. This may sound like a lot of work, and it is.

Why bother?

Because it's a stairway to heaven (in this life) and *the* key to being at peace with your death.