

# Who Would I Be Without

Based On a True Story  
of a Little Willingness

Jim McDonald

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This is a work of fiction.

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*The gift of willingness is the only thing that stands between the quiet desperation of a disingenuous life and the actualization of unexpressed potential.*

## Prologue

The back porch offered a perfect view for Nathan Vrite to watch the approaching line of black and sullen storm clouds. Wisps of white swirled aimlessly along the line in a dance of instability that fed Nathan's appetite for excitement much more than the television newscaster's threats of impending doom. He stood in the stillness, watching the dance of the white ribbons as the darkest clouds passed overhead.

The treetops rustled in the distance, and just as he wondered about the approaching brown cloud, the trees behind his garage suddenly bent flat against the roof as if pushed down by an invisible hand. His body clenched tight as the straight-line gust pushed his lean, six-foot-two, one-hundred-and-sixty-pound frame against the door. His flippancy scurried off amid the torrent of dust and debris pummeling his body with the force of a sandstorm.

He pulled the screen door open against the fierce surge and squeezed into the house, letting it slam closed behind him. He closed the inside door and walked through the kitchen toward the dining room. As quickly as it started, it was over. In the few seconds it took for Nathan to walk across the dining room, the wind had stopped—everything was still and quiet. All that remained was the soft sound of rain hitting the canvas awning over the dining room window.

He walked into the living room and noticed the smell of dirt and oil that accompanies the beginning of a summer rain. It was bright outside compared to the premature twilight of a moment ago, and as Nathan approached the front door he saw a landscape that made him think of battlefield images he had seen only in movies. Most of the trees along the street had fallen—uprooted or snapped at various heights. Branches, leaves, and debris lay strewn everywhere, and the limbs of the trees left standing drooped as if exhausted from the stress of hanging on.

Nathan stepped back into the living room and sat on the edge of the futon wondering what to do. The fear he experienced struggling to open the back door had dissipated but it left a vague emptiness he did not recognize. He knew that despite his desire to fill the void responsible for his sense of isolation, he could not go outside.

He glanced into the bedroom on his way to the kitchen and noticed the digital alarm clock on the dresser was dark. Great, the power's out, he thought as he walked to the kitchen to check the refrigerator.

"If the light doesn't come on, the power is definitely out." He said the words aloud, laughing at his need to hear his own voice. Nathan swung the door open and concluded his analysis of the situation.

“It was ten after five the last time I checked, and that was about twenty minutes or so before the storm hit, so it’s gotta be about quarter to six now,” he said while walking back through the dining room and living room to the front door. In the few minutes it took him to analyze the situation, many of his neighbors had emerged from the safety of their homes and were now walking around and talking in small groups scattered along the street. His need to go out and participate in the drama surfaced again but he remained imprisoned, isolated from life beyond his door.

The desire to be a part of the evening’s chaos surpassed Nathan’s protective reluctance, and within a few minutes he was walking from the porch toward the sidewalk. He walked about the length of two properties before the feeling of alienation—of being the only person on the street—forced him to turn back. He had to return to the safety of the house as quickly as he could. As he approached the driveway, he saw his neighbor Randy sitting on the porch of the house next door. Nathan cut across the neighbor’s front lawn and approached the porch, sensing he should not.

“What are you doing out here?” Randy asked as Nathan approached.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you told me your way of dealing with screwing up is to isolate yourself and let time clean it all up. After last night I figured we wouldn’t see you for a few days,” Randy offered.

A familiar rush of panic filled Nathan’s body as he scanned and searched his memory for anything he could find of last night. In a flash, his mind displayed images of the three of them drinking, and he saw himself sitting at their dining room table laughing and having fun.

“Yeah, so?”

“You don’t remember?” Randy said. “You were pretty bad last night. You were saying things about Kathy’s daughter, nasty things. I had to grab you by the throat and carry you out of the house. Then you kept knocking on the dining room window and crying for us to let you back in.”

Randy leaned forward to look around Nathan and said, “And here comes Kathy now.”

Nathan turned to his right and saw Kathy approaching on a kid’s bicycle that made her appear much bigger than she really was. Instinctively, Nathan turned away from the porch steps and headed to his driveway as quickly as he could without making it appear as if he was running. He headed across the driveway, up the steps and into the house, praying she would not follow him.

Inside he quickly closed the door, closed the blind on the door window, locked the door, and moved into the living room. His heart was beating hard and his mind was racing, looking for clues to help him remember. The storm and the damage no longer mattered. He reviewed in his mind what Randy told him and with each replay, his shame and humiliation grew. His brain stared out through his eyes but saw only the words

Randy spoke. The images coming in were not registering. His body was standing in his living room, but his mind was back in his neighbor's dining room.

Images of what he might have done flashed in his mind's eye. Nathan was imagining, visualizing himself doing the things Randy said, and he felt a knot in his stomach that reached up to his throat. He thought of the many times he could not remember parts of the night before, and how the next day people talked of what he had done as if he remembered. Over time, not remembering became routine for Nathan and he grew to believe it was normal.

The story grew in detail and intensity each time he played it over in his mind. He saw himself sitting at their dining room table, slurring his speech with his head swaying uncontrollably. He heard his voice saying the things he had only thought before; he imagined those private, lusty thoughts about Kathy's daughter coming out of his mouth. He envisioned Randy's hand on his throat and felt the energy in Randy's body as he forced Nathan out the back door. He pictured himself at the window outside—barely able to stand, let alone talk—pounding on the window and yelling at the glass. He easily saw these things in his mind because it was what he had become.

His mind shifted into its familiar pattern of reviewing all the terrible things he thought and did throughout his life. Each memory flashed before him in an unstoppable stream, each one feeding and supporting his worthless and loathsome self-concept. He sank to the place he knew all too well—a place below thinking and self-worth that words could never describe. It was a place of desperate seclusion only he could experience, where nothing, absolutely nothing but death could feel better. Death was not an option for Nathan, and that made it a place of no escape—unbearable and soothingly familiar.

He filled a bowl with weed from his stash, leaned back into the cushion, stroked the lighter, inhaled as deep as he could, and relaxed into his misery. A few more hits and he would feel better.

A trip to the kitchen for a bottle of beer made him realize the power was still out and it was getting dark in the house. He found a flashlight and a few candles to help him maneuver before sitting down again to unwillingly contemplate.

The stories kept coming. Images of sex fantasies with the neighbor girl filled his mind's eye along with -sporadic flashbacks of hangovers and not remembering. Fears of not having a job and images of the kitchen counter full of -empty bottles fought for his attention. Thoughts of unpaid bills and the horror of not being able to answer the phone when it rang merged with images of dirty dishes stacked in the sink. The beer and weed were not yet enough to stop his obsessive thinking, and Nathan remained on the futon reviewing his torturous, unimaginable life.

Nine or ten beers later, his mind had slowed enough to show him that everyone and everything in his life had diminished. His friends were gone because he stopped interacting with them. He was broke despite just losing his first career job that paid more

than he had ever earned in his life, and he was behind on both his car payment and rent. Everything that ever mattered was falling apart before his eyes.

Something inside Nathan relished the pain he was experiencing. It wanted more and it was in control, bringing up anything it found to feed its desire for more pain. He relived the deflation and humiliation he felt every day waking up as a failure. Every day he vowed tomorrow would be different—tomorrow he would not drink, would not get high—and every morning he awoke a failure. Tonight those images were unbearable and he felt the usual tears welling in his eyes. In his mind, the tears meant he was crying, and it did nothing for Nathan except add to his defeated sense of self-worth.

He needed to move, to get up from the futon and do something. He walked toward the bedroom thinking he would lie down, and as he turned the corner into the room he remembered this morning. The memory brought with it more pain—he could not lie down because the mattress was soaked with urine.

He went back to the futon feeling the heat of shame on his neck and face. It was so intensely hot he worried he was getting sick, and he pressed his hands against his cheeks trying to cool them down. He lay down on the futon, curled up like a baby with his hands and arms in close to his chest and his legs drawn in toward his body. He lay in that protective fetal position completely alone, abandoned by everyone and everything with tears in his eyes.

The need to move came again and Nathan swung his legs off the edge of the futon. He pushed the coffee table away with his feet as his legs swung to the floor and he rolled to his right. He ended up on his knees facing the futon. His elbows rested on the cushion. A thought to pray surfaced and filled his mind with an unusual depth and clarity. He tried to pray and quickly realized his rehearsed prayers were not available.

He raised both arms above his head and out to the sides in a sweeping motion as he leaned back as far as he could. His back arched to its limit and his head relaxed back. His chest expanded and he looked straight up into the darkness. His entire body shook as he truly prayed for the first time in his life.

“Help me, please,” he said aloud. “I can’t do this alone anymore.”



The words came from a place deep inside and unfamiliar. They filled the room in a voice that was not his own, and tears filled his eyes as his body relaxed down from kneeling to let him sit back on his feet. His arms dropped to his thighs and his head hung low in front of his shoulders.

Nathan inhaled a shaking, quivering breath. Exhaling, he felt a wave of burden leave his body that caused his chest to move inward. His body collapsed down on his knees to fill the emptiness. It was a moment frozen in time.

There was nothing left to hold onto and nothing more to fight. In that brief moment, he was gone, and all that remained was an empty shell. It was the first time Nathan truly prayed in total abandon, and relief came immediately.

His life would never be the same.

Nathan would never be the same again.

**1**

The simple pleasure of Kim's caress as she stroked the hair on Nathan's arm evoked feelings he had not known for many years. Nathan sat in the passenger seat with his arm resting on the center console as Kim steered the car with her left hand.

"Let's go for ice cream," she said with a big, seductive smile on her face.

He had experienced many changes in his life of sobriety since that day he prayed almost eleven years ago. The last few years offered glimpses of an inner peace he had never known, and Nathan was beginning to experience the internal changes his spiritual pursuits promised. He savored the physical and emotional affect her touch had on him, and to his welcome, she chose to touch him often.

"Okay," Nathan responded, ignoring the thoughts of resistance and digestion problems that flashed in his mind.

"I remember when I was a kid we used to go for ice cream. It was like the ultimate thing to do in the summer," said Kim. "It seemed like just for that time, everything was okay."

She made a turn at the next intersection and they were on course for the ice cream shop she had in mind. Nathan suddenly realized he was genuinely listening. Her quiet voice filled the interior of the car despite the road and traffic noise that came with the open windows of early June. Wait, he thought, if I'm thinking about the purity of my listening, am I really listening?

Nathan broke the unbearable silence that surfaced when Kim paused in her talking by saying, "Ya know, I really can't eat ice cream."

Kim's expression changed immediately upon hearing his words and she shifted her position in the seat. Her fingers were still touching his forearm, but the caressing had stopped.

"Well, they have frozen yogurt," she said. "You could have that, couldn't you? It tastes just like ice cream."

Nathan considered her suggestion and quickly responded with the lighthearted playfulness in his voice he knew she loved to hear. "Oh yea, I can do that, cool."

He meant what he said and his feelings of happiness were genuine. His attention shifted back to looking at Kim and feeling her touch on his arm—back to feeling worthy and loved. The peacefulness Nathan experienced in those few minutes of silent contentment embraced him with the warmth of a mother's arms holding a newborn close to her bosom. Unfortunately, the feeling did not last long, and the silence became unbearable.

“How much farther?” he asked, stirring Kim’s emotions as if a child in the back seat had asked the inevitable are-we-there-yet question.

“It’s right there.” Kim pointed to a small building on the corner of the next intersection surrounded by lush green grass. There were a few picnic tables on the lawn and benches lined the side of the building that faced the parking lot.

Taking it in like a child seeing a new place for the first time, Nathan let himself see the view around him. The ice cream parlor was the only building in sight. Open fields of grass not yet drained of their deep springtime green surrounded him and he felt the depth of its beauty in his core. Kim made the left and right turns required to get them in the parking lot while Nathan stuffed the feelings away to ensure that Kim would not think he was weak. She parked the car and as they walked across the parking lot, the thought of sharing an ice cream had a sudden air of romance. His body tingled at the thought of romance—sex.

“I just love the ice cream here,” Kim said as they walked toward the window. Nathan took her hand in his. He felt her warmth run up his arm and through his body as it did every time he held her hand with interlocked fingers.

“I wonder what the flavor of the month is,” she said as they stopped to read the signs and posters displaying the variety of selections available.

“What do you mean, flavor of the month?” he asked.

“Every month they have at least one special flavor that they don’t regularly offer, and I almost always get that. It’s w o n d e r f u l.” Her voice rose on the “won” and dropped as she pronounced the rest of the word with a slow and drawn-out passion. He knew what she meant—he just wanted to hear the sensual voice that came whenever Kim talked about something she loved.

“What if you don’t like it?” Nathan asked. He felt conflicted as he spoke the words and sensed something in him wanted to diminish her experience.

“Well, I love the anticipation and mystery around not knowing if I will like it.”

Her approach was foreign to Nathan. He could not comprehend having any thrill at all around trying something new, and his mind took over in an attempt to rescue him from the confusion arising inside. He heard his own voice telling him, That’s nuts. Why would I try something and risk not liking it? Then I have to get something else and pay twice. The voice was always there and today it searched for anything it could find to ensure Kim’s experience was not too wonderful.

They approached the window and Nathan stood behind her with his hands on her hips reading the selections and wondering how to order without looking or sounding foolish. He moved closer to her, put his hands around her waist, and interlocked his fingers in front of her belly. Kim leaned back against his chest just the way he liked and they stood together, deciding what to order.

Unlike her, the flavor did not matter to Nathan. Being with her took priority and the

ice cream came a distant second to the way he felt holding her in his arms. They could have been cleaning out sewers for all he cared. He was with her, touching her, talking to her and looking at her. Occasionally she gazed past his eyes and into his soul—a gaze he never let himself receive until she took a risk and asked him one day why he never looked into her eyes. She taught him to cherish the depth of such a gaze despite his discomfort with sustained eye contact, and today Nathan noticed it felt as natural as the sunshine.

“Can I help you?” the girl in the window asked.

“Ooooooh,” Kim said, bending down to peer in the window. “I’ll have the Mango Banana. It sounds wonderful.”

“Cone or cup?” the young girl asked.

“Cone, large.”

A sense of envy came to Nathan when he considered Kim’s child-like passion and self-indulgence. She slid to the right so Nathan could lean down and place his order. The order window was quite low, and Nathan felt a flash of resentment toward the architect who did not consider tall people in his design.

“Just a regular cone please, vanilla,” he said.

The girl disappeared from the window leaving the two of them standing arm in arm with Kim’s shoulder tucked perfectly under his. Suddenly, as if unexpected, two perfect ice cream cones appeared at the end of two arms sticking out from the window. The cones came neatly wrapped in a napkin with ice cream piled high in round, rough balls.

“Look how be-a-u-tiful.” Kim stretched out the “eau” in beautiful as if it was an entire sentence.

They stepped aside from the window as Kim lifted her cone to her mouth and began enjoying the payoff. Nathan watched her take that first lick and quickly settled into the experience. He wanted to watch her, really watch as she took the first few licks. What is it about this that moves her so deeply? he thought. What am I missing? Why is this not a big deal for me? He watched in amazement and thought, She’s eating an ice cream cone and there is absolutely nothing else in her world.

For an instant Nathan realized this was a rare moment of actually seeing another person without concern for himself. He had no idea how the vision or the feeling came, but he knew it felt wonderful. His attention drifted away from Kim and went inward as he struggled for a way to hold on to the feeling. He wanted to file it away so he could pull it up again anytime he wanted to relive the experience.

Kim noticed Nathan’s deep attention to her. “What are you doing?” she said.

Her question startled him. She caught him looking into her world the way she taught him only a few days before; he froze in panic, searching for an answer.

Nathan’s eyes glowed with authentic appreciation as he said, “Watching you.”

“What do you mean?” Kim responded. “Why?”

“I don’t know. I was watching how much you’re into it. I’m really taken by how much you get into eating it.”

“Oh my gosh, it’s so wonderful,” she said, turning the cone horizontal and taking another lick. “Are you going to eat yours?” Kim said as she reached out to wipe a drip off Nathan’s cone. “It’s melting.”

Nathan had not taken a lick yet, and the melting ice cream was running down the cone almost to his fingers. He realized he had been staring at her and ignoring his cone when he mumbled, “Oh, yeah” and finally took a first lick.

They strolled to a bench in the shade of the building and sat down next to each other. As they sat, Nathan alternated his gaze between the grassy field and Kim. He noticed his inability to stop looking at her and forced himself to look away occasionally. An expressive, child-like smile filled his face and the feelings of love and contentment touched him at the core every time she offered him a lick, gesturing toward his mouth with her cone. Twice he leaned in and took a lick when she was not offering and Nathan assumed she loved that just as much as he did.

“Can we talk a little more about what we were talking about on the phone last night?” Kim said.

“Okay.”

“We were talking about honesty and being honest with ourselves, do you remember?”

“Yea, I remember,” Nathan said. “And you were asking about the bible.”

“Yea, I don’t know that much about it, but I think I want to. I do know that when I think about being completely honest, there is something I feel inside.”

Nathan waited and did not comment, suspecting Kim had more to say.

“I’m processing,” Kim said in an effort to explain her silence. “It feels so good to think about living that way.”

“Well, for me,” Nathan decided it was time to say a few things. “Remember we were talking about living honestly and what the bible had to say about that, right? Well, I am beginning to think that’s what the bible means when it says Adam and Eve were naked.” Nathan paused to make sure it was okay to continue. He chose to go on when Kim did not comment.

“Keep in mind I am no expert on the bible and I haven’t read it all, but I have studied some and was brought up Catholic. So, anyway, I always thought it meant they had no clothes on, but for me I think it really means they were pure in their innocence. They were completely open, with nothing to hide, invulnerable because they had no fear, no insecurities and no idea of self-concept or trust. They could just be, exactly as they were, one in their openness.”

Kim remained silent, processing Nathan’s words for a few seconds before offering her next thought.

“I want that, Nathan. I want to live that way,” she said, looking directly into his

eyes and completely unaware of the ice cream running down her cone. “Thinking about it feels so wonderful. Do you think it’s even possible? Can people be that honest and completely open?” She looked away from Nathan and stared into the distance before her. She whispered, “Oh, I want that so much.”

“Yea, me too,” Nathan replied. “I don’t know if it is possible. I do know I want it. With all I’ve done over the years I want it more and more as it seems to get closer. I’m not there yet, but it does seem possible now. I do know I at least want to be with people willing to explore it with me and if I’m going to be in a primary relationship, I want it to be with someone willing to step into the fire and look, and journey with me. I want us to be able to challenge and support each other in trying to be as open and honest as we can. I’m starting to see that for me, there is nothing that’s more important, whether I do it with someone or alone.”

*Awareness Log*

*I read A Return to Love early in my sobriety and I remember it said something like; everything is based in fear or love.*

*Something about that seemed true to me the first time I read it. For years I said it often, as if I knew what it meant.*

## 2

“Hello Nathan,” Miranda said as she bent down to sit on the couch across from him. “So, what’s happening today?”

“I was remembering back to the day I asked Justin if he knew anyone I could talk to and he told me about you. I had just gotten fired from my job, remember?”

Miranda smiled and nodded while organizing the papers in what Nathan assumed was his file.

Nathan met Justin in an AA meeting he attended regularly during his first few months of sobriety. Justin had that spark of life people in recovery spoke of, and Nathan was drawn to him immediately. They became friends—as much as two guarded and frightened men could—but eventually drifted apart shortly after Nathan began his counseling with Miranda.

“That was four years after I got sober. I was doing everything people told me to do—praying, working the AA program, everything. It feels like it was just yesterday, but I remember I was always frustrated at work. People were doing things wrong and no one was asking me how to do things the right way, blah, blah, blah. I remember we were coming upstairs from a meeting and the thought hit me that maybe the problem wasn’t everybody else, maybe the problem was me. While everything in my life outside was changing, I was still the same and having the same problems.”

“Yes, you’ve come a long way in the last six years.”

“The stuff I’ve been reading is teaching me about our thoughts and feelings. I’m beginning to see I spend a lot of time thinking about the past and feeling guilty, sad, and disappointed. Even now I am thinking about the past, but that single thought that maybe the problem was me—or more accurately the willingness I had to listen to it—well, that changed my entire path.” Nathan paused in reflection. “Where did that come from, that willingness?”

“I don’t know, Nathan,” Miranda said after waiting to be sure Nathan was finished. “I think it just comes when it is time. As you have seen in our work together, sometimes it is helpful to look at the past. It can give insight into the present.” She laid his folder on the cushion next to her leg, and said, “So, speaking of the present, if you’re ready, why don’t we get started?”

“Sure, that’s fine.” Nathan smiled at her ability to get him focused. He also recognized that his thinking about the past was a delaying maneuver designed to protect him from the risks of being in the present moment with Miranda.

“So, check inside; what are you feeling?”

Nathan scanned his mind and body the way Miranda was teaching him. “I feel tense in my chest,” he said. “Also, I’m aware of my stomach. It’s like there’s something there but I can’t pinpoint it.”

“Okay,” Miranda said. “What comes to mind when you focus on your chest?”

Nathan centered his attention on the tightness and a thought came immediately.

“I’m not sure about how Kim feels about me.”

“Okay, what do you mean?”

“We’ve only actually been dating three weeks now,” the answer came immediately, “and two weeks ago she met my friend Price. A group of us were planning a get together dinner and Price asked me who was coming. For days he kept asking me about this chick—that’s his word, not mine—I told him was coming that I met a few years ago. He kept asking me about her. One day he said something I thought was offensive so I stopped him and told him directly that I was fond of Kim and I was seeing her. He still pursued her anyway.”

“How do you know that is what’s going on?” said Miranda.

“What kind of question is that?” Nathan said. “She left with him. I stood there talking with some of the other people and watched her walk to his car.” Nathan’s chest tightened and his breathing stopped as he finished the sentence.

“And we breathe,” Miranda said.

“She said it was nothing. She said that she just wanted to talk with him. Well I told myself I had to accept it because we really were only dating. We aren’t exclusive, but it doesn’t feel right.”

“So Nathan, how do you feel?” Miranda said. Nathan knew she was trying to take him out of thinking and into experiencing.

“I feel like she really doesn’t want to be with me the way she says.” Nathan said, holding back what he thought might have been tears had he been willing to release his emotions.

“Okay, that’s a thought, not a feeling. How do you feel when you have that thought that she doesn’t want to be with you?”

Nathan waited before he responded. “I don’t know,” he said, waiting and trying to find a feeling. “Everything is blank now. I can’t even remember what you asked me.”

“Okay, let’s take a minute and breathe. Just relax. We can come back to that later.”

Nathan could not remain in the silence and said, “I mean I’m not judging her, or him for that matter. I know she can do what she wants.”

“Do you think you judge people?” Miranda interrupted.

“No. In fact, I go to great lengths to try not to judge people and I’ve been working on that since I got sober. So, no, I don’t think I judge people.”

“Really?” Miranda continued. “You weren’t judging a minute ago when I asked you if you really knew what was going on with Price and Kim.”

“No. I think I felt a little defensive, but that’s it.”

“Oh, Nathan,” Miranda said in a soft and motherly voice. “When I asked the question, you responded by saying, what kind of question is that, and you leaned to one side and looked at me with a furrowed brow. You looked like a teenager full of anger and unsure as to why. Your entire response dismissed my question. You don’t see that as judgment?”

Nathan stared out the window, processing what Miranda said.

“You’re right,” he said, still looking out the window, “I never saw that before.” His shame succumbed to the desire for truth and Nathan let the awareness live inside him.

“I tell myself I’m no better than everyone else and that I accept people as they are when I really don’t.” Nathan tried to grasp the depth of his delusion. His eyes focused on the tree outside the window but he was not seeing it at all. He watched images flash in his mind showing him what he had not seen until now. His shame erupted in the form of self-judgment as tears welled in his eyes and he whispered, “I judge people all the time.”

*Awareness Log*

*The story of the two monks is staying with me.*

*Two monks walking along a dirt road come upon a young woman who cannot cross the road because the mud would ruin her silk dress. One of the monks picks the woman up and carries her across the road. They walk on in silence for five hours before the other monk can no longer contain himself.*

*“Why did you pick that woman up like that? We monks aren’t supposed to do things like that,” the monk says and the other replies, “I put the woman down five hours ago, are you still carrying her?”*

*I wrote that on several pieces of paper and hung them up around the house and in my car. It is so powerful in reminding about what is happening now versus what I am thinking about that happened in the past—I LOVE IT.*

**3**

Nathan and Kim had taken to spending long afternoons by the lake, sitting on a blanket and holding each other under a big oak tree. Today he lay on his back while Kim sat on his stomach leaning comfortably against his thighs. His feelings shifted the moment he looked up and saw her gaze passing through his eyes and into his soul. Her looking stirred deep emotions in Nathan today and a rush of adrenalin filled his body as he saw his immediate future flash before him.

“What’s wrong?” said Kim.

“Nothing,” Nathan replied, resting his hands on her thighs. He fought to hold back the words he felt pushing from inside but was unable to contain them for very long. His body relaxed the moment he accepted his destiny and he let the words out.

“I’m in love with you.” Tears blurred her image but the words continued. “I didn’t ask for it, I didn’t even think I wanted it, but there it is. I am in love with you, Kimberly Reynolds.”

Kim did not respond. She looked at him with a soft smile as if to say, I hear you, and it sounds and feels both wonderful and deeply frightening.

In the seconds that followed, Nathan watched as his learned protectors melted away. He felt himself changing in profound ways and the simple awareness that he was opening up to her and to himself frightened him. It was not enough to stop the process, however, as he lay with Kim sitting on top of him and watched the wall he built around his essence lose all of its rigidity. It fell softly away like a mound of sand on the ocean shore, and his body relaxed in its evolving freedom.

“Can you shift a bit, or change your position for me?” he asked, lifting his hips slightly.

“Oh yeah, sorry,” she said as she rolled off his belly and into a position lying next to him on her stomach. Nathan stayed on his back and continued attending his internal state as she vanished from his field of view. A sensation of lightness—similar to what he felt the day he prayed so many years ago—filled his body as the wall faded further away, leaving him exposed and vulnerable on a level Nathan found disconcerting.

A lifetime of interactions flashed in his mind’s eye displaying the intellectual and psychological mechanisms he used to remain safe in a cold and unloving world. What do I need protection from, he wondered.

If they see who I really am—his response came immediately—what I am really like inside, they will leave. A surge of thoughts flowed in a microsecond and Nathan allowed them all.

The image I learned to display...  
Strong, compassionate, loving... emotionally attractive...  
False picture...  
I knew it all along, but not like this...  
I was phony...  
I couldn't change.  
I couldn't reach the part of me that wanted it to stop.  
It's so clear...

He was the observer in these moments of clarity, completely detached from the cleansing happening within. He felt vulnerable and exposed like never before. It induced a sense of power and strength that until now Nathan believed could only come from the image he portrayed—never from the open vulnerability he was witnessing in this moment. That vulnerability felt surreal to Nathan in its confidence, and he was sure that nothing in this world could harm him in this place of self-truth and diminished fortification. The sensation conflicted with everything he had ever learned, and yet it fostered the deepest sense of peace.

He watched the images flow from left to right with willing anticipation as if passing before him in a glorious parade of exile. He saw the evading tactics designed to look and sound intimate that dominated his interactions. He also sensed their lack of intimacy compared to the vulnerability he was experiencing in this moment.

Oh, his mind slowed, this is love...

The thought came as a “felt sense” within his awareness, and it brought with it a sublime state he never imagined -possible.

The entire experience was instantaneous for Nathan as he rediscovered the purity and innocence he learned long ago to block from his awareness. His glimpse of the peace that surfaces when there is nothing to obscure it ended abruptly as thinking took over and directed his attention to memories heavy with thinking, planning, and worrying.

Nathan gasped in awe with the felt sense that told him in a still and quiet voice, “The wall is the thinking, planning, and worrying.”

That's what this is all about, Nathan thought. The obsessive thinking and planning is what keeps me from truly seeing others and joining with them. My mind activity blocks my essence from being with, or even seeing the essence of another. The time and energy I spend managing everyone's story of me is what prevents me from -experiencing the peace I just felt.

The clarity of this particular awareness frightened Nathan enough to force him to separate from it and bring his attention back to the external, tangible world.

Okay, he thought, still lying on the blanket, good.

He waited in fearful silence for something to hold his attention. After what seemed like an eternity, he felt the words, “You have released a burden that you've befriended for

many years.”

He realized in that moment of clarity that there was nothing he needed to do—nothing he needed to be and nothing he needed to add to himself when he was with her. He knew he would no longer manage her image of him and he felt a deep sense of gratitude for his experience of freeing innocence. Tears welled in Nathan’s eyes as he lay on the blanket, appreciating the awareness that she was his teacher.

Kim had no idea of Nathan’s awakening from the dream of fear as she lay next to him that day. Yet Nathan somehow understood that she had everything, and nothing at all to do with it.

## 4

A month had passed since the evening Nathan and Kim romantically committed to being exclusive, and two months since the day by the lake when he watched his managed self crumble away. This morning he was feeling nothing but the joy of love as he drove to the gym for a quick workout. He pulled into the parking lot and with a deep sense of happiness, sat in the car reliving the passion he shared with her the night before last. He watched as his mind reviewed the evening and he let himself feel the feelings of love that filled his body every time he thought of her.

The thought came to give Kim a call before heading into the gym and Nathan honored that thought. It was Sunday morning and since they weren't together last night because she had to work, the desire to hear her voice was strong.

Nathan knew she liked it when he called in the morning. Kim had expressed many times how much she loved hearing his voice first thing in the morning and the thought of giving her that today touched him deeply. He dialed the phone as he gathered the stuff for his workout, climbed out of the car and heard the phone connect.

"Hello," the voice on the other end said.

Nathan's heart rate jumped instantly upon hearing Price's voice and he instinctively closed the phone in panicked reaction. His body froze straight and rigid, fragile as glass. His heart was pounding and his body filled with internal shaking as a thousand stories and images flashed in his mind.

He's there, with her, he thought as it became harder to breath and stand. Images of her lying next to him in the bed Nathan had shared with her so many times before, flashed in Nathan's mind. Panic consumed his body and his knees buckled as he fell to the asphalt.

I can't breathe.

My entire body is shaking.

I can't breathe—gasping for air.

Stand up.

Walk to the car—get to the car, now. Go.

Nathan made it to the car. He closed the door and gripped the steering wheel in a white-knuckled grip that would have hurt had he not been filled with so much emotion he didn't notice his hands.

Breathe, he told himself. I can't breathe.

Breathe.

Heart pounding. It hurts. Chest pain.

Breathe.

His entire body was shaking now in uncontrollable convulsions.

I can't control it. What's happening?

Scream.

He screamed from so deep and with so much force it hurt his ears from the reverberation inside the closed car.

Start the car. Get out of here, he told himself.

Home, get home.

Images of Kim and Price sitting up in bed with the sheets strewn, passing the phone between them, filled Nathan's vision.

"Lying!" he screamed.

"Why! Why, why, why!" The words came with rushes of rage fueled by the images.

Nathan tried to scream again but the force behind it was too powerful for his vocal cords, and all that came out was a long and drawn-out noise, raspy and airy.

He made it home and in the side door, all the while shaking. He dropped his keys on the floor, struggled through the kitchen, and fell to the floor at the edge of the living room. His body was convulsing uncontrollably as he curled up in the corner against the edge of the couch.

Shaking and rocking, crying, balling and screaming with each exhale, Nathan watched the images flash in his mind. They grew in clarity, speed, and intensity as he envisioned Kim and Price together.

An hour had passed and he remained on the floor, unable to move, watching the images and random thoughts fill his mind.

I am afraid now. That thought held his attention and he asked, Is this going to stop?

I can't see.

I think I'm hyperventilating. I'm going to pass out.

I feel sick.

Vomit came up from his stomach and mixed with the snot, drool, and tears. The burning mixture poured through his hands and onto the floor and he was still unable to move.

The thoughts that had been racing through his mind suddenly stopped, and Nathan experienced a moment of mental clarity in seeing the only thought that remained—this is about a lot more than just my relationship with Kim. The words consumed his total attention as the awareness caused his body to pause as well. In the few seconds it took for Nathan to see the inspiration, everything stopped and he was calm.

"Oh, wow," he whispered, "this is about a lot more..." A deep sense of gratitude emerged inside Nathan when he accepted the potential of this one awareness. That potential for healing flashed in his mind in a millisecond. While Nathan recognized its significance, the gratitude and clarity were not enough to divert his unconscious loyalty to suffering. His wounded ego overpowered the gift of self he had just witnessed, and the

painful thoughts emerged victorious.

Nathan unwillingly returned to thinking as if that single gift of wisdom had never surfaced. He had no choice in the matter, and he spent another hour on the floor shaking and crying before he found the willingness to call his friend Mary. It took another hour for Mary to arrive and comfort him. She helped him to let the emotions live by staying with him. Nathan gradually recovered enough from the paralyzing experience with his sense of rejection and abandonment to feel safe again in the space Mary provided. She stayed with him, and her open compassion freed Nathan to realize he would survive the day.

*Awareness Log*

*I was hurting the other day, thinking about Kim. I wanted it to stop.*

*When I slowed down and looked inside, I noticed that my mind was pulling up memories of the wonderful moments I had with her and I was holding onto them, reliving them over and over.*

*So I asked, why am I hurting and crying if I'm reliving all the good stuff?*

*I didn't see it at first, but after a few minutes I saw that while I was replaying the loving memories, in the background I was telling myself, "See, you will never have that again."*

## 5

“So, who am I with today? What are you feeling as we begin our time together?” Miranda said as she reached the top of the steps and entered the room.

Nathan was sitting with his back to the stairway and did not respond. Miranda stepped in front of him to sit on the couch and saw Nathan crying for the first time since he began coming to her almost eight years ago.

“Ah, someone I haven’t seen before,” Miranda said in a soft and compassionate voice. She sat down, organized herself so she was comfortable, looked Nathan directly in the eyes, and said with a soft smile, “Hello, Nathan, it’s so wonderful to finally meet you.”

Nathan’s tears erupted in release upon hearing her words. Miranda remained silent, allowing Nathan’s emotions the space they so desperately needed. As the emotions passed and his tears slowed, Miranda encouraged Nathan to share with her what had happened. His story about the day of the phone call and his terrifying reaction took the entire hour. Nathan would have to wait another week for any help in figuring out what was going on.



“So, who am I with today, what are you feeling as we begin our time together?” Miranda said as she reached the top of the steps and entered the room.

Nathan sat with his back to the stairway and waited for her to reach the couch before he responded.

“I’m done with this,” he said. “I can’t do it any more. I don’t have the strength to continue with this emotional dance I’m doing with her. Next time I see her, I’m going to end it completely. It’s been two weeks since the phone call, we have been talking, but I can’t do it, it’s too hard. I’m out.”

Miranda listened and encouraged Nathan to slow down before continuing. Nathan vented more of his frustration and rebellious drive. When he was empty of everything he planned to say, Miranda supported him in his honesty and offered a perspective Nathan had not considered.

“Nathan,” she said softly, “this may be an opportunity for you to experience love in a way you never have before. Are you interested at all in exploring that?”

“I hate this,” Nathan said. “I hate feeling like this and I’ve felt this way so much. It sucks and I really don’t want it anymore.” Tears welled in Nathan’s eyes and Miranda asked again if he was interested.

“Okay,” he said reluctantly after realizing her statement interested him on many levels.

“Can you love the person in front of you when they are in front of you, and nothing more?” she said, not expecting a response. “Acceptance and self-love are the only things I know of that free a person to let another be exactly as they are. It is through this process you are doing with Kim that you might begin to learn what acceptance and self-love are for you.”

Nathan reflected on what he thought love was. He recalled the feelings he experienced when Kim did not conform to his rules, and images of all his past relationships flashed in his mind. He waited and processed Miranda’s words, hoping he would make a connection.

“Ah,” he said slowly, speaking each word as it appeared in his mind. “My rules about what love should be create a box that no woman, or person, could ever fit into.”

“Maybe,” Miranda said, “that is for you to discover. However, please know that I am not saying you should ignore or deny your feelings. They are real for you and they are genuine.

This may be a time of opportunity for you to learn more about yourself, maybe learn to trust your feelings a bit more as well and let them guide you.”

The awareness shifted Nathan’s attention away from Kim and onto himself. He was straining to go where Miranda was leading him. The old beliefs he held onto so tightly limited his ability to make the giant leap she was suggesting.

“Kim is giving you so many gifts through this. It can be so wonderful for you. Are you willing to see if you can experience love differently for a while?”

Their session ended and Nathan returned to work confident he would not end the relationship, and ready to explore love as much as he was able.



*Awareness Log*

*Today I remembered I was at Justin and Janet's house a few days after the phone call and I picked an Animal Medicine card from the middle of the deck—Dog.*

*“Dog medicine asks you to look at how readily your sense of loyalty is countermanded by your need for approval...” That was me!!!*

*It said it was time to stop cowering with fear and to begin to tackle the adversaries of my confidence.*

*Why did this memory come today? It was exactly what I needed to know at the time—so cool. I cried at the last sentence. “Become like Dog—your own best friend.”*

## 6

Oh, this is not right, Nathan thought as he pulled into the hotel parking lot.

I can't do this.

I am not staying here, not in this place.

What have I done?

Disappointment reigned as he realized there would be no hotel building, no beautiful lobby, no room service or sauna. Instead, just a few simple, one-story adobe rooms built in a semi-circle around a small outdoor pool. He turned the ignition off and sat in the car waiting for his deflated ego to accept dirt as the entranceway to what would be his home for the next six nights. He lit a cigarette and took a deep and soothing drag. The smoke went into his lungs without the coughing resistance he experienced at the airport when the Arizona heat was still new to his system.

Okay, this is it, he told himself. I am here, I have to stay and I have to do this. I said I was going to do this for me and I am not going to let this place take that away from me. So what if it's not what I expected. At least it's hot, and that's better than the late September cold back home.

He grabbed his bags from the trunk and walked to the door thinking, This is okay, I can stay here a while. Bending down to find the keypad on the door just below the wooden knob, he entered the code the woman gave him over the phone and the door release clicked. A rush of cool air passed by his legs as he pushed the door open. The air felt fresh and cool compared to the stagnant heat outside.

What, no carpeting?

This sucks.

He watched as he heard the words in his head. The slate tile floor was uninviting and the room felt cold with its clay or mud walls—Nathan was not sure what to call them. There was a binder on the small kitchen table with a note on the cover welcoming him. After throwing his bags on the bed, Nathan noticed a song playing in his head. “Sign, sign, everywhere a sign. Do this, don't do that, can't you read the sign.” The lyrics repeated in the background of his thinking as he leafed through the pages of information, rules, and instructions.



Morning thoughts that scurry to organize life and obscure the mysterious peace of sleep sprang into action the moment Nathan awoke.

Monday, awake, wow, energized.

Arizona.

Hotel.

Cold.

Workshop—Be afraid.

Alarm clock—what time is it?

Now what?

Get up.

Tile floor—cold.

The morning was simple—get up, shower and dress, out the door with plenty of time to look around and locate the facility.

He pulled out of the driveway, turned left onto the road and saw the town for the first time in the light of day. Wow, this is a dumpy little town, he thought. It looks kinda slummy. There's no traffic, where are all the people? It's seven o'clock on a Monday morning and there's no one on the roads. This place is a dump.

The thoughts and judgments flowed one after another in rapid-fire succession as he drove past the Circle K and out of town, trying to ignore his disappointment.

Six miles or so out of town, he turned right onto the dirt road leading to his destination. A quick left turn into the parking lot caused the car to slide on the dirt before gripping the asphalt of the main drive as Nathan noticed this place had a sign hanging across the entrance just like the hotel. It must be a western thing, he thought, and the song from last night returned to occupy his tentative and frightened mind—sign, sign, every where a sign, do this don't do that, can't you read the sign?

The signs posted along the parking lot explained clearly that he was to go to the building directly in front of him on the other side of the parking lot. The building was separate from the rest of the campus up the hill, and Nathan immediately decided he and the people in his workshop were outcasts. Typical, he thought. Everything I do is just short of being fully in. I really wanted to be a part of this place, this process, and instead I am in a group separated from everyone else, an outsider looking in. I won't get used to this, not here.

He walked into the lobby with the thoughts still in his head, and for the first time since he left Erie he felt comfortable and welcome. The lobby had two large-cushioned chairs and a couch of the same style positioned in a manner Nathan found inviting. He concluded the round stone table in the center provided the perfect footrest and quickly abandoned his analysis to stand a moment in the silence. He took a few deep breaths and noticed he was beginning to feel calm despite the nagging sense of fear he now realized was always with him.

Nathan returned to analyzing the simple building and quickly determined it consisted of two hallways leading away from the lobby area. The hallways were angled, forming a

“V” with the lobby at the point where they converged. The rooms and offices lined the outsides of the halls, and there was one large room in the center of the V, accessible from both halls. Nathan walked down the left hall and stepped into the center room, where he found a man writing on the chalkboard. The man stood with his back to Nathan and turned to face Nathan as he stepped just inside the door.

“Hello,” the man said with a hesitation as if he did not know what to say next. “Who are you?” A big smile filled the bottom half of his mouth showing Nathan more teeth than he needed to see.

“Nathan, my name is Nathan.”

“Well, Nathan, are you here for the Survivor’s Workshop?”

“Yes, yes I am.” A twinge of fear rushed through Nathan’s body as he responded.

“Well, you’re a bit early. We will start at eight thirty. Feel free to hang around and relax. My name is Joseph. I am one of the facilitators for your group. I’m happy to meet you, Nathan,” he said, extending his hand to shake.

Nathan responded by shaking the man’s hand. “Am I the only one, the only one here?” he said.

Laughing, Joseph said, “No, no. You’re not the only one. We wouldn’t do the session with only one. There will be about thirty all together. You are the only one I have seen so far this morning, but like I said, it’s a bit early.”

“Okay, I guess I’m going to look around a while, try to relax maybe,” Nathan said.

“There ya go,” Joseph’s smile relaxed. “Good idea. Feel free to take a walk out back. There is a smoking gazebo behind the building if you smoke. Otherwise, go ahead and wander. The only thing is, don’t go up to the campus just yet. You will be allowed up there later but we like for workshop participants not to go up until they have heard some of the guidelines and such, okay?”

“Sounds good. I guess I’ll see you in a bit?”

“Yes, you will. Figure about eight-thirty. So try to be in the room a little before that,” he said, turning to face the chalkboard.

Nathan did as Joseph suggested and headed out the back door to the smoking area.

A smoke, yes, I need a smoke. “Cool,” he whispered aloud as he saw the gazebo through the glass of the back door.

The smoking area consisted of the gazebo and a picnic table behind it. Both were about one hundred feet from the building, and Nathan took in the surroundings as he walked along the cement sidewalk. The cement walkways stood out to him as he looked around and decided there was too much concrete for his liking—concrete walkways, concrete parking lots, and concrete buildings. He saw that the gazebo sat on a concrete slab as well, and he argued internally with all of it as he stepped into the shade offered by the small circular structure.

He sat down on one of the plastic patio chairs scattered around and lit a cigarette. He

took a deep inhale and leaned back in the chair as he exhaled. This is nice, he thought, quiet, peaceful, I like this. Finally, it's quiet.

Thoughts flashed in his mind. They came and went, each one passing quickly or overlapping the previous. Nathan took a moment to appreciate his developing ability to see them and his learning that he was the observer. He recalled the day four years ago when he first experienced himself as the awareness behind all the thinking. He smiled when he heard the voice from the CD repeating in his head, "You are the awareness that is aware there is thinking."

He was jolted from his internal world when he saw a man and woman approaching on the concrete path.

"Sure is hot out here today," the man said, stepping into the shade of the gazebo.

"Yes it is," Nathan replied, a bit angry that others had intruded on his peace.

"Are you here for the workshop?" the man asked while preparing to light a cigarette.

"Yes, I am. Not sure if I really want to be, but yes."

"Oh, I know what you mean," the woman said as she took the cigarette from the man and used it to light hers. "I have done a few of these and I always get afraid and nervous. He doesn't," she claimed, tilting her head in the man's direction. "He loves it and always comes back for more."

Nathan smiled as he listened to her and watched as he made up all kinds of stories in his mind about how much they both needed to be here. "Have you done this workshop—"

"No, not this one," she interrupted before Nathan could finish his question. "We came here last year for a couple's workshop but that's all we've done so far. It was wonderful and Rianne facilitated it. She is so amazing. It was just so powerful having her lead the group."

Nathan's defenses went up immediately upon hearing the woman mention the owner of the facility. She has a pretty low opinion of herself, he heard himself think, if she has to name-drop like that. His mind scrambled to find something, anything that would bring her down to his level.

I don't like her now, his self-inflation continued.

She thinks she's something special.

Because she worked with the owner.

So what, she's nothing special.

His thoughts turned to Rianne. She probably can't even lead a group very well.

I'll bet she is so full of herself.

I wouldn't be able to spend five minutes in a workshop with her.

"Well," the man said, turning to the woman with his cigarette hanging from his lips, "it's getting to be time to start, we probably should head in."

The man put his smoke in the sand-filled canister by the entrance to the gazebo as they both turned and headed for the building.

Quick, take a few more hits...

Hurry, just suck it in fast and blow it out.

Go, go, go.

Okay, move. Get down the path and to the room.

I don't want to be late, or worse yet, last.

Get in there... find a comfortable seat.

Hurry.

Nathan made his way down the hall and stepped through the door for the second time today. Now the room was full of people. Only a few seats remained empty and Nathan felt a slight surge of panic as he stood in the doorway trying to figure out what to do, how to be.

He decided those sitting quietly were afraid and those talking across the room had one up on him. He figured the talkers knew each other and that somehow gave them an advantage over him. He made his way to a seat amidst a group of quiet people and settled into the hard plastic chair as much as his long legs would allow. Nathan sat with his eyes fixed on the front of the room, avoiding eye contact with anyone, and waited impatiently for the session to end.

## 7

“...And that is why you have never felt right in your own skin.” Joseph pinched and pulled the skin on his left hand in a gesture designed to emphasize his point.

It was three-thirty and the first day of the workshop was nearing its end. Joseph talked the entire day about Nathan’s life as if it were his own. Tears filled Nathan’s eyes as the deepest feelings of “coming home” he ever experienced replaced his self-loathing of earlier in the day. He was hearing many of the answers he unconsciously sought for so many years and he knew it.

Everyone grew quiet and still within the first five minutes of Joseph’s presentation, and the mood remained that way for the entire day. Nathan realized early in the day he was not the only one moved so deeply by what Joseph was saying when he glanced around the room and saw others crying and sobbing along with him. Joseph spent the day explaining the model of Developmental Immaturity this facility embraced, and upon learning it, Nathan wanted to know more.

Nathan let his attention drift away from the front of the room and began flipping through the folder of information he received at the start of the session. He glanced down at the overview page and read the words he had written at the top only a few hours ago.

**CHILDHOOD TRAUMA creates IMMATURITY—both drive  
UNMANAGEABILITY and all three create PROBLEMS WITH BEING  
INTIMATE.**

He replayed Joseph’s words in his head. “There is a process of development that occurs in children when they are in a less-than-nurturing environment. It is very important you understand that for this model, we consider anything less than nurturing as abusive. We are not here to debate the factors defining these terms—that is not important relative to our work for the week.”

Nathan realized he could not recall Joseph’s exact words and allowed himself to continue reviewing the presentation in his own words.

“Based on those definitions, and for the purposes of this workshop, we can just accept that everyone experiences some level of abuse in their childhood, be it physical, emotional, intellectual, or whatever.”

Nathan understood that Joseph was establishing a foundation around which they would base their work for the week. He believed he needed to understand it before he could feel safe enough to do what he was there to experience. Everyone in the room suffers from some form of addiction, Nathan thought, and Joseph introduced us to the

thread of common bond we needed to feel safe together despite our grandiose distinctiveness.

I've heard this all before, he thought, many times since I got sober, but these words put it in a form that makes it clear somehow. He turned the page and reviewed the notes he wrote on the back in an attempt to relive the joy he felt when he heard the clearest, most direct explanation of his experience that he had ever known, a few hours ago.

**Some aspect of the child's needs are not met— nurturing, spontaneity, etc. (at some point EVERYONE experiences this to some degree).**

**Where alcoholism or some other addiction exists within the family, the disease demands an unusual amount of attention from the parents and family.**

**Child develops methods of getting those needs met or coping.**

**Child develops ways to protect itself from the feelings of loss, abandonment, and neglect they naturally experience in such situations.**

**Child learns to parent self with childlike techniques—indulgence, self-criticism, neglect, isolation, comparing to find self-worth, etc.**

**Adolescence—self-parenting with childlike techniques no longer works in the outside world (age when this occurs varies).**

**Adolescent feels alien in the world—does not know what that is or why—experience of self and others does not parallel that of peers.**

**Alienation with self and others expands to all aspects of life—self-parenting adds to alienation.**

**Addictions develop to mask feelings of alienation—to help us not feel, or at the very least, to lessen the feelings of isolation and separation.**

**Addictions lead to relational problems—inability to connect with self or anyone on core level.**

**Lack of depth in relations due to addictions further alienates.**

**Eventually the desire to remain the same becomes more painful than the risk to grow.**

**That is what brought me to this room.**

...And that is why you never felt right in your own skin. Nathan heard Joseph saying those powerful words again in his head. The tears came as he pinched the skin on his own hand, remembering the revelation shown to him a few minutes earlier.

Developmental Immaturity—Nathan repeated the words again. This describes my experiences perfectly, he thought. It's so simple. I told myself everyone felt the way I did and it was normal. I really thought everyone felt this way. Even now, I usually see myself as immature compared to the people around me, especially after meetings at work. I started smoking when I was eleven or twelve...

He returned his attention to Joseph and let his obsessive thinking fade to the background. Five other counselors had come in and were standing in a line across the front of the room facing the group. Nathan experienced another brief moment of panic that passed once he realized he had not missed anything important.

“Okay, as I told you this morning, you will be in small groups for the remainder of the week. We are now going to announce the groups and the counselor for each. When your name is called, please, if you are willing, stand up so others in your group can make a visual connection. Once that's done we are finished for the day. We will get started tomorrow morning in your small group rooms at eight-thirty.”

Nathan felt panic in anticipation of who would be in his group. That energy shifted while Joseph asked if there were any questions and moved on to announcing the groups. When Joseph called Nathan's group, Nathan willingly stood in the depths of his fear.

**8**

Nathan's small group room was down the right hall of the V. He concluded it was the counselor's office as he stepped into the room and saw her sitting at a desk in the far corner. Five cushioned chairs with armrests lined the wall to his right and the desk faced the wall opposite the door. The counselor sat facing the row of chairs with her left arm resting on the desk.

"Hi," she said, standing up to shake Nathan's hand in greeting. "I'm Debbie."

Nathan took a few steps into the middle of the room and reached out to shake her hand. "Nathan," he said, "Nathan Vrite."

He decided on the middle chair and quickly sat down as the others came into the room one at a time. Nathan watched them hesitate as they entered the room, confronted with the immediate decision of which seat would be theirs for the week. He enjoyed observing their unsuccessful efforts to appear relaxed and secure.

"Well," Debbie said with a smile, "here we are. My name is Debbie and I will be your facilitator for the rest of the week..."

Nathan went to work sizing her up as she spoke. She remained seated, reclining in the chair with her feet barely reaching the floor. He decided she was about five-foot-eight and slightly overweight for that height. Her brown, shoulder-length hair caught his attention because it was exactly that, just plain brown, and these days highlights and colors were the rage. He noticed that he liked her simplicity and let himself believe his story that she was a down-to-earth, old-fashioned woman with ideas and attitudes similar to his. He figured she was probably somewhere around her late twenties or early thirties but admitted he was no good when it came to guessing age.

Debbie executed what Nathan concluded was the usual, formatted welcome and laid the ground rules for the day. He was growing tired of hearing the rules when she asked the members to introduce themselves. He did not hear much of what the others before him said because he was busy rehearsing his own, profound and perfect introduction. His heartbeat increased and his chest tightened in anticipation of meeting his need to let them know how advanced and well-adjusted he was. He knew the right introduction would do the trick.

Okay, that didn't come out the way I imagined it, he thought to himself when he finished. Shit, I sounded like a snob. Now they are going to think I'm arrogant or selfish. Damn it... the self-berating thoughts came.

Debbie spent an hour going over a few additional concepts not addressed in yesterday's classroom session. When she concluded the lecture, she explained they would be moving into the debriefing phase of the workshop. She gave them fifteen minutes for a

break and everyone headed outside. The time passed quickly for Nathan and he hurried to smoke as many cigarettes as he could before heading back to the room.



“Welcome back.” Debbie said, assuming her leadership role as if she had done it a thousand times before. “Before we start, does anyone have any questions?”

In the few seconds that passed while Debbie stood in the center of the room and waited for the group members to decide if they had any questions, Nathan went to work in his head picking apart her poor group-leadership skills. Okay, he thought, she doesn’t know the basics of clear communication. Asking the way she just did requires a yes or no answer. People aren’t sure how to respond because on some level they know she is not really asking for a yes or a no. If she ever paid attention to what she was doing, she would have realized this. The right way to do it is to ask, “What questions do you have?” Now that is a well-structured and clear question the participants can comfortably process.

No one spoke and Nathan felt better having lowered her down a notch in his mind.

“As I explained before the break, in the Debriefing, I will work with each of you, one at a time while the others just listen. I have your information and the questionnaire you completed. Using those, I will walk you through your story—your history. Actually, you will talk and I will listen for the most part. This is your opportunity to talk about your life...”

Nathan drifted off, thinking about his life and the questionnaire. There were many questions about his childhood, he thought. Stuff I had never thought about before.

What my friends thought of me at different ages.

How many friends did I have at different ages.

What was my first memory?

“...So often we talk to ourselves about our lives and never really say much out loud.” Nathan’s attention returned to -Debbie who was still talking. “There is something very therapeutic in hearing our stories out loud. Something about actually saying it rather than thinking it that makes it more real for us and that can be very healthy. And Nathan, you are going to go first.”

Fear, anxiety, embarrassment, and just about every other possible sensation surged through his body the moment he heard his name. His muscles tightened and his hands gripped the arms of the chair as he waited to hear what she would say next.

Debbie nodded softly at Nathan. “Are you okay with that?” she said, raising her eyebrows.

“Sure,” Nathan responded. “I’m a little anxious about it, though.”

“It’s fine, Nathan. You can relax. We’ll go slow. Really, there’s nothing to worry about.”

Upon hearing that and seeing the look of what he labeled camaraderie in her eyes, his body began to relax. It helped to tell himself she chose him because of his experience with this type of work and because of his past in AA and therapy. He told himself she wanted him to show the others it would be safe.

“So, Nathan,” Debbie began, flipping through the pages of what he assumed was his questionnaire, “Why don’t we start with what brings you here? Tell me about why you came to this workshop.”

Wow, Nathan thought, there’s so much. How do I keep this short? He waited a few seconds for the story to develop in his mind and began with whatever came out of his mouth.

“Well, just about a year ago I got into a relationship...”

Nathan told the story of his experiences with Kim and the awareness that followed the thought that his reaction was about more than just the relationship.

“I’m forty-two years old and I can’t remember ever crying, but that day I bawled like a baby for over three hours. It’s been almost a year and I’m still crying. Not so much about that day, or even her, but crying about everything and anything, just crying. When it comes, it takes me over. My friends keep telling me to let it happen and to let myself feel whatever I’m feeling.

“For a long time, I was afraid I would never stop, but it has lessened in the last few months. What a gift that experience was to me. It set loose so much emotion I had been holding my whole life. It has been so wonderful.”

Nathan paused again to figure out what to say next and to see if Debbie, who was flipping through his questionnaire, had any questions. She did not look up from the pages and Nathan decided that meant he should continue.

“I enmeshed with her completely. We stayed together and we are still going back and forth now. Sometimes it hurts really bad and yet I keep going back. I read in a book somewhere about a way to communicate where we would meet, just the two of us, and share with each other. They were the most powerful experiences of my life. We sat, facing each other, no touching, and shared something risky about ourselves with the other. It was so cool. When one of us shared, the other was not aloud to analyze or comment. All we said was, ‘Thank you for sharing that with me.’

“So,” Nathan paused again to gather his thoughts.

“Let’s see. Oh yea, my therapist left town around that time also. Anyway, I found another therapist, William, and in our first session, I talked for about five minutes about all this, and he told me about Love Addiction. I had never heard of that before so I got a book written by Pia Mellody called Facing Love Addiction—it was so amazing. Everything in the book was exactly my life. I had to stop highlighting because I was highlighting everything. It explained why I would stay in a painful relationship and endure the suffering, just so I could get a little nugget of love and nurturing. It just made

so much sense to me.

“Oh, I read somewhere, it might have been in her book about some men who experience a ‘triple whammy.’ I was an adult child of an alcoholic, for one. I was in my early forties, and that’s when many men begin a change and are looking for meaning and stuff which can be difficult in its own way. And it was the first time in my life that I was able to be open and vulnerable with a woman and I got slammed. William and I have talked about me being on shaky ground and staying alert to depression because of all this, and so far he feels I don’t need medication. I agree and I like that. I will work through it.

“Anyway, over the last year I have been really looking at myself, my relationships, everything, trying to find peace and trying to learn as much as I can. I’ve been reading lots of books and practicing meditation and some other stuff to help me see it is safe for me to be honest with myself about who I am and about my past. I really love the stuff I’m learning and all I read or listen to now is stuff like Eckhart Tolle, Byron Katie and two books by a guy I can’t remember called *The Four Agreements* and *The Mastery of Love*.”

Nathan paused, realizing he had gotten off track.

“When I was learning about love addiction, a friend told me about this place. She said it was the safest and most nurturing place she had ever been. It took a few weeks before I was able to call, and the next thing I knew, I was here.”

Nathan stopped. He told himself he had said enough and sat in the silence, looking at Debbie who was still flipping through the pages of his questionnaire.

“So,” Debbie finally stopped flipping the pages and looked up at Nathan, “how did you end up in this workshop and not the Love Addiction one?”

“Well, when I called to register, the woman on the phone asked me some questions about my life and childhood and she suggested this one. I have been in a place of following whatever comes in my path lately and so I followed. It sounded right and it must be because enrolling and everything fell right into place. Within an hour, I enrolled, had a hotel room and rental car, and booked first-class seats on a flight out here. It just fell together with no effort at all.”

Nathan paused to consider what to talk about next when Debbie offered some guidance.

“When did you get sober?” she asked.

“Twelve years ago.”

“Is there anything you want to say about that?”

“No,” Nathan replied, “not so much. Maybe just that I can look back now over the years and see progress. I couldn’t see it while it was happening. Yet when I look back at how I was—the way I acted and thought just after getting sober—and compare it to how I feel today, I can see a big difference. I had so many walls up to protect myself, or at least I thought it protected me, but I still felt so bad inside. I continue to do everything that seems

to help. I work the twelve-step program of AA in my life and I seek out anything that I can learn or experience around spirituality and being present in the moment. It's all helped a lot. Gosh—"

Nathan reflected a moment, reviewing his progress. "I still have lots of stuff that bugs me. I recognized some of the walls and barriers that I use, but it's so hard sometimes, now that I can see them. I sense a part of me that wants to be able to love and express my true feelings, and most of the time I just can't do it. The times I do let the walls down are so deeply intimate. I want to experience that all the time. When I get in the way, which happens a lot still, I beat myself up inside. The inner conflict is tough. I have had glimpses of being secure and loved, and I want more."

He paused again and saw that Debbie was back to flipping through the pages, so he decided to say a little more.

"I'm learning to hear my inner voice, and even right now it is telling me to stay open to this. The other part of me, the old thought patterns I listened to for most of my adult life, is telling me I don't want to be here. I'm pretty scared, but rather than reacting to the fear I'm choosing to be here, trying to trust my inner sense that this will be good for me."

"Yes," Debbie said, still looking at the pages and not at Nathan, "you are here. And how do you know when it is your inner voice and not the fear?"

"I'm not really sure. It's like there's this subtle difference in how I hear it. Instead of hearing it along with all the other thoughts and chatter going on, this comes when I slow down. It is more like a felt sense than an actual thought. Like it doesn't come from my brain but more like I feel it and then my brain puts it into words. It's hard to describe. I think of it as the Voice for God, or maybe the Holy Spirit. Maybe it's my Catholic upbringing, I don't know, but it definitely comes from somewhere other than me and I sense it, I don't think it."

Nathan stopped and waited for Debbie to acknowledge that he answered her question. Thoughts that he was talking too much and needed to stop rushed in to fill the void the second he stopped talking.

"So, Nathan, what brings you to this workshop?" Debbie asked again, implying he did not answer her question.

Irritation filled Nathan's body. He shifted in his chair, leaned to his right side and said, "What do you mean?"

"Well, you've told me lots of great stuff, but those things are not why you're here, in this workshop." Debbie paused and looked directly at Nathan for the first time since he began talking. "I want to know why you are here."

Relax, he told himself. Don't resist this, she is helping me, it's okay. Let go of all your stories. Nathan took a deep breath and intentionally relaxed on the exhale.

"I'm not sure," Nathan said.

"Nathan," Debbie said as she set the pages down and leaned in his direction, "tell me

about your childhood.”



The entire Debriefing took about ninety minutes, and when they finished Debbie asked with a livened tone and energy, “What is your inner child’s favorite color?”

“Blue,” Nathan responded. He was not sure and blue came out as he thought about wanting to say green.

“Great.”

She picked up a piece of paper, placed it on the desk in front of her, and said, “What’s the negative message you tell yourself every day?” Debbie did not look at him and stayed facing the desk.

“That’s easy,” Nathan replied. The answer came from within his core and not from thinking as he blurted out, “I’m not good enough.”

Tears welled in his eyes hearing himself say the words. He held back the tears as much as he could while Debbie wrote something on the paper. She stood up and walked over to Nathan, placed the paper on his left thigh, and said, “This is your affirmation for the week.” She tapped it to his leg while saying, “Wear this every day, all day, and keep it upside down like this so when you look down at it you can read it.”

Nathan looked the paper taped to his leg and saw the words “I AM GOOD ENOUGH” printed in blue crayon.

The tears he held back up to this point won the battle and he cried. He did not know why, but those words touched him deeply enough that he was no longer in control. Tears trickled down his cheeks as he watched Debbie move to the other side of the room and pick up a large, blue blanket. She came back to Nathan, bunched the blanket together along its length like a rope and draped it over his shoulders so it hung down the front of him. The excess of the queen-sized comforter lumped in a pile in his lap.

“This is the blanket of fear that you carry with you every day,” she said. “Carry it around in the desert a few days and let’s see what comes up.”

“Nathan,” Debbie continued, “go over to the bookcase and pick a stuffed animal for your inner child.”

She stepped away as if to give him the time he needed. It was the first time in his adult life he felt as if someone saw him—really saw him for who he was inside and not the phony image he so proudly displayed. Until today, he had only glimpsed what she so clearly saw, and he yearned to find it.

**9**

Over the next day and a half, everyone in Nathan's group completed their Debriefing process. Nathan paid particular attention to the things Debbie gave each of them, needing to be sure they were as messed up as he was. Knowing that the pretty girl could not shower or wear makeup and the man had to carry a pillowcase full of rocks representing the weight of his anger, confirmed that they were. Each thing Debbie did made perfect sense to Nathan because he knew so much about everyone else.

"What's the hula-hoop about?" Nathan asked the group as they sat at their lunch table observing the assignments given to people in the other groups.

"Oh," Sam, the pretty girl responded, giggling slightly. "That's their personal boundary. Quite a few people have one." Everyone at the table looked at the woman coming toward them holding a hula-hoop around her waist with one hand and her lunch tray with the other. "They have trouble setting boundaries for themselves and the hula-hoop is supposed to signify and remind them that it is okay to set their own personal space limits. It's pretty cool, isn't it?"

"What about the blindfold?" the woman who came to the workshop with her husband asked, nodding toward a man standing off to the side of the room.

Again, Sam offered the answer. "They have trouble asking for help so they have to spend the week blindfolded. We aren't allowed to offer them help. They have to ask. That's why everyone is just letting him stand there and not helping him. He has to ask for help." She paused again and looked at the man. "It's kind of sad to look at," she said.

The group finished their meal in silence. They returned their trays and headed back to the smoking area outside the building to relax for the few minutes available to them before the afternoon session began. Nathan opted to go into the building because he needed to use the bathroom and anticipated the timing so that even with his digestion problems he would not be late. He finished his business and while heading out for a quick smoke, he walked passed their room and saw Debbie sitting in her chair. Without thinking, he stepped into the room and found himself talking directly to her for the first time since they met three days ago.

"Ya know," said Nathan, "this blanket keeps getting in my way."

Nathan stood in the center of the room. Debbie turned in her chair to face him and listened as he shared the awareness unfolding for him.

"Everything I try to do it's there. Getting in and out of the car, going to the bathroom, I always have to deal with the blanket."

The words stopped and Debbie said with a smile on her face, "Oh, really. And do you think the fear you carry gets in the way of your life at all?"

Nathan slowed down inside upon hearing her words. He felt an awareness that was not there a moment ago when he was trying to be sarcastically funny. Debbie continued, as if wanting to move Nathan forward in his pondering. “So from now on, whenever you catch yourself dealing with the blanket, I want you to say to yourself, ‘This fear keeps getting in my way.’”

Tears again filled his eyes and his throat tightened, preventing any words from coming out. He stood there, paralyzed by the revelation Debbie had just helped him discover.

He turned to sit in his chair and the two of them sat in silence, waiting for the others to arrive. Images and memories flashed in Nathan’s mind as he waited in silence. He had seen and heard them all before but today, right now, they felt different. In this moment he saw that each memory was propped up on a lump of fear that remained steady and solid. He sensed that fear was the foundation upon which the images rested. Never before had he seen, or known enough to consider the steady role fear played in his every thought and action. It was his first view of what lay behind the sense of alienation influencing his entire adult life.

Nathan’s attention stayed in his head as the others found their seats. Debbie introduced the next phase of their experience and despite his desire to listen, Nathan was unwilling to let go of his new awareness. He remained in his fear-searching trance for quite some time, trapped in his world of thinking. He would not return to the room until he heard Debbie say his name.

**10**

“Nathan.”

“I’m sorry, I wasn’t listening,” Nathan said.

“I kind of figured that.” Debbie said. “I said, we are going to begin the experiential phase now, and we will start with you.”

Nathan quickly scanned the room and noticed a few things were different from before they left for lunch. There were two folding chairs along the wall to his left next to the door, and to his right there was a chair next to Debbie’s desk, facing the two on the opposite wall.

“This is actually a visualization process,” Debbie explained, standing in the middle of the room facing Nathan and the others. “It is like regression in that I will take each of you back to a point in your childhood. You will visualize yourself and reconnect with the feelings and emotions you had then and were, for whatever reason, unable to allow yourself to experience. You will be able to experience those feelings now.”

Nathan’s anxiety grew with each word. He remembered experiencing the same feelings on the phone when the woman told him about this phase of the workshop.

“The process can be pretty intense, so we do everything we can to help you feel safe. Each of you has the freedom to stop at any time or move on according to your needs. If you ask to stop, I will strongly encourage you to continue and stay with it. However, if you do not wish to continue, we will stop.”

Nathan could see Debbie was very passionate about this process. She moved around the center of the room as she talked and used her arms and body to accentuate what she was saying.

“Over the years, we have learned it works best with your eyes closed. You will have the choice to do it eyes closed, or blindfolded. It is imperative that keep your eyes closed if you do not use the blindfold. If you open them, the image is lost and the process ends.”

She stopped moving, looked directly at Nathan, and said, “And, as I said, Nathan, we’re going to start with you.”

A rush of panic flooded his body. His breathing shortened and he was unable to speak. Shit, he thought. Why me? Why do I have to go first again? I don’t want to do this.

“Nathan, you can do this,” she said, smiling and gesturing with her left arm for him to come and sit in the chair next to her.

He got up, struggling to move his resisting legs, and sat in the chair. He crossed his right leg over his left and crossed his arms for protection from the vast emptiness of the open room in front of him. Don’t look at them, he thought. You can’t let them see you are

afraid. Sit here, be strong. You can do this, just don't look at them.

"Okay, Nathan," Debbie said, sitting to his right, her voice softer now than a minute ago as she leaned toward him. "First of all, will you put your feet flat on the floor and rest your arms at your side, please? We want to remain as open and grounded as possible for this, so feet on the floor is grounding and arms at your sides is open."

Nathan complied, reluctantly, still looking straight ahead.

Debbie asked if he wanted a blindfold and Nathan quickly said yes, thinking it would make it easier and reduce his shame and embarrassment.

"Come on," Debbie challenged. "You can do this with your eyes closed. Are you sure?"

"I'm afraid I will open them. An hour and a half is a long time and I don't want to ruin it."

Debbie reassured him she thought he could do it without the blindfold, and Nathan realized her reassurance worked when he heard himself saying Okay.

"Okay, Nathan, close your eyes."

Nathan slowly closed his eyes, confident he would be able to keep them closed the entire time.

"For the first part of this, I will have the others close their eyes as well, and you will all go through the same process. Then I will have the others open their eyes for the remainder of your work. The images you all find during this first part you will bring with you to your experience and I will not do the first part again with each person. Does that make sense?"

Nathan nodded a confirming yes and pictured everyone else nodding as well.

Debbie instructed the others to close their eyes and waited a second for them to settle in before she began the process.

"Picture a field of grass, or dirt or flowers, something in an open area, and see yourself standing in the middle. Now build yourself an external boundary. Maybe a fence, or a ball of light, or a wall, anything, however it appears, but let it go all the way around you. This is your external boundary. Can you see it?"

The pace of Debbie's delivery slowed and she paused often, allowing the image to develop in his mind's eye.

An image formed as the residual images and flashes of the room slowly faded away. He saw a field of freshly cut grass. The grass was lush, thick and full, and the depth of its green made it appear to Nathan as perfect. The field sloped gently away from Nathan's viewpoint and his mind's eye created the image as if he were an outside observer. Nathan saw himself in the distance, standing in the middle of the sloping hill surrounded by a white picket fence that rose to the height of his knees. The fence made a complete circle three or four feet beyond the figure standing inside. There was nothing else in the image except Nathan, the grassy sloping field, and the fence.

He could not hold the image too long as other pictures flashed in to replace it. He saw his group members sitting in their chairs and then images of his house and then a picture of a car he owned twenty years ago. Nathan struggled to hold the image of the field and as he searched for it, he heard Debbie's voice again.

"Now, create an internal boundary. Make this something that covers your entire body. Maybe a wetsuit or something, but it has to cover your entire body."

Instantly, his perspective changed and he was now inside the fence, in the body he was observing a minute ago. He looked down and saw his body covered in a thin material like the wetsuit Debbie suggested. It covered his entire body, including his feet and hands. The covering felt warm to Nathan as he stood in the field with his arms at his sides but raised slightly as if they were floating.

The vision faded again, replaced by images that shifted and changed at a speed he found frightening. Nathan's fear increased even more as he believed the thoughts condemning his inability to do this the right way. Stop, he thought. Stop fighting this. Stay with her, stay with the image. If it goes away, let it go. I know it will come back. This is just my mind resisting. It will slow down, I know it will. Just relax and let it be.

Nathan intentionally slowed his breathing and watched as everything softened. The flashes slowed and his sense of panic lessened. He felt the inner voice guiding him to listen to her voice and telling him to go where she was taking him.

"This body suit is unique..." Debbie continued.

The image returned and there he was, standing in the field inside his fence, looking down at his material-covered hands and feet.

"...because unlike most of your life, you control what comes in and what goes out of this internal boundary. So, make a door in the suit in the center of your chest with a handle only on the inside."

Nathan felt tears welling in his closed eyes at the thought of having the level of control she implied he now had. He looked at his chest in the image and saw a panel. He pictured a handle, a French doorknob, on the inside that only he controlled, just as she said.

"Okay, now you are there with your external and internal boundaries. One more thing, if your external boundary goes all the way around you like a bubble, you have to make an opening in the top to let the light of your higher power reach you. Do that now. Picture it. There you are in the field, and the loving light of your higher power is flowing down on you, all around you."

Nathan's image changed again. He was outside of the fence and behind the image, observing as before. An intense beam of light shined down on him now as he stood inside the fence. The light encased him completely and reached out beyond his body a few inches. It did not fill the circle made by the fence.

Again, the image faded and this time Nathan saw only black. Complete blackness as

he had seen so many times in therapy. All that remained for Nathan were his intentional thoughts telling himself to let it be, to look at the blankness and rest.

He took a deep breath and on the releasing exhale, the image appeared as it was before it faded. A soothing sensation of calm and warmth filled Nathan from head to toe. He sat, looking at himself and feeling completely protected by his external boundary, his internal boundary, and the total safety of his loving higher power.

Debbie reminded him to keep his eyes closed and soothingly expressed her confidence in him. She told him he was doing fine before she addressed the others, telling them they could open their eyes and that they now had their image to hold for their own process. She explained that from here on would be specific to Nathan and depending on his sense of safety, he could decide if he wanted them to have their eyes open or closed for the remainder of his process.

“Open,” Nathan said.

“Nathan, where were you in 2004?” Debbie said in a soft and gentle voice.

It sounded to him as if she was leaning in close to him now. Her voice came as a whisper in his ear. He watched as a picture materialized.

“Riding in a car with Kim,” he responded.

He told her the first image that came to mind, and he assumed that was fine because Debbie immediately said, “Okay, good. Where were you in 1999?”

“At work in my cubical working on the computer.”

“Where were you in 1992?”

A thought came to Nathan, wondering how long it had been since he started this. Another thought made him aware that the uncontrolled flashes of images had stopped. These held his attention for a second when an image from what he thought was 1992 appeared.

“Running a training class in a hotel in Phoenix.”

Each image came as soon as Debbie asked for it, and Nathan stayed with her in the process, surprised at the clarity with which they came. Nothing else existed in his world now except Debbie’s comforting voice and the images shifting with each question.

She went on through the years, taking him back in time.

“Where were you in 1985?”

“Where were you in 1979?”

Nathan responded to each year with whatever image appeared.

“Okay, Nathan, keep going back until you get to the point where you are a kid, somewhere between one and ten years old. Let me know when you get there.”

Images filled Nathan’s head like a movie reel going backward at lightning speed. Nathan was not thinking anymore. His brain was running itself and doing what he asked it to do without resistance while Nathan relived the experiences with each passing image.

The images slowed as they approached his childhood years, and there were fewer and

fewer actual pictures now. It became as if he sensed his age, or the year he was in, and then moved on. The memory flashes came as if in slow motion and eventually stopped. Nathan did not see a specific image but sensed he had gone far enough.

“Okay, I’m there.” Nathan said, breaking what seemed to him to be minutes of silence.

“So,” Debbie continued, “picture yourself standing on the sidewalk in front of your house. Do you see it?”

“Yes,” Nathan replied, seeing his childhood house in complete detail. He realized he was alert and aware and noticed he could look around at the neighborhood without losing the image. This was no longer an image in his mind; his -perspective had shifted so that Nathan was actually in the experience and he could move around freely within it.

Debbie had him describe the outside of the house, the street, and the neighborhood in some detail. She directed him to go inside and describe that for her as well. He took her through the entire house, upstairs and downstairs, describing everything. The experience became real enough for Nathan to include his sense of smell and when the odors of the house filled his senses, they evoked reminiscent feelings he identified as love, safety, and nurturing. The experience of smell shifted his energy and caused Nathan to pause. His body became quiet and still inside.

“What’s happening, Nathan?” Debbie asked.

“Nothing.” He paused.

“I can smell the inside of the house. It smells just like it did then.” He held back the tears trying to fill his eyes as he followed her voice leading him outside and into the backyard, which he described in the same detail as the inside. He was standing in the backyard when Debbie offered her next guiding question.

“Can you hear the noises from the swimming pool at the end of the street?”

Suddenly, his silent world came alive. The noise of kids playing and screaming at the public pool four houses away brought the final element needed for the experience to become Nathan’s reality. He had forgotten how much the sound spilled into his neighborhood, and it filled the background of his memory now just as it did for so many of his childhood years. His body released whatever tension remained, and he felt himself sink deeper into the chair.

Debbie saw his shift and waited a few minutes to let him fully integrate the experience.

“If we were to look for six-year-old Nattie,” she said, sensing Nathan was ready to move on, “where would he be?”

The image did not shift or change at all for Nathan as he stood in his backyard, looking at the house and driveway. “He would be at the house next door playing cars in the dirt.” His entire body knew he would be there, and Nathan pictured the area.

“Okay. How would you get there? Do you have to walk around the neighbor’s

house?” Debbie said.

“Yes, I would walk across the front lawn to their driveway. The dirt area is on the edge of the drive by their side door under two big pine trees.”

“Okay, Nathan, go ahead and head over there; let me know when you get there.” Debbie paused and waited for Nathan to tell her when he was there.

He walked up his driveway, between the houses, across their front lawn, peered around the corner of the house. There he was. Nathan saw himself as a six-year-old, sitting on the ground in the dusty dirt with his friend. They were playing with Hot Wheels cars, just as he remembered. Nathan’s breath became heavy and his mouth tightened, curling down from his efforts to hold in the emotion now surging through his body. He felt his hands tighten their grip on the arms of the chair as he stood in the neighbor’s driveway, looking at himself, and said, “I’m there.”

“Is six-year-old Nattie there?” Debbie said, needing to be sure he saw the child.

“Yes,” Nathan said. His voice was soft and airy.

“Okay then, Nathan, go ahead and move closer to him, not too close, but close enough to see him clearly.”

He walked cautiously from the corner of the house and into the shade of the trees. He got within a few feet of the boy and heard Debbie saying, “Is he in front of you now?”

“Yes, he is on the ground playing right in front of me.”

“Okay, Nathan,” Debbie said in a soft voice, as if honoring the delicate nature of this timely reunion.

“Tell him, and listen closely, I want you to say this to him, say—”

Emotion filled Nathan’s body as he considered the words she spoke next. He was working hard at holding back his tears and that took much of his attention and energy. He inhaled and repeated the words Debbie gave him in a shaky and barely perceptible voice.

“Hi, Nattie.” Tears ran down his cheeks as his chest shook from deep inside. “I’m you and I’m all grown up now.”

Nathan got the words out despite his resistance and he sat slouched in the chair doing all he could to hold his tears back. Debbie’s voice offered enough relief for him to breathe again when she asked, “What did he say?”

“Nothing,” Nathan responded. “He just kept playing and didn’t even look up at me.”

“Okay,” Debbie continued; she was not going to stop until he made contact. “Move a little closer and kneel down so you are more level with him. Not too close, though. Let me know when you are there.”

Nathan took a few steps forward, knelt down, looked at his six-year-old self from about two feet away, and said, “I’m there.”

“Tell him, and say it exactly like this: I’ve come back to protect you. I know all the feelings you are going to feel and all the things you are going to do, and I have come

back to go through them with you.”

Nathan took a breath and repeated her words exactly. This time, speaking aloud came easier and he noticed he was no longer holding back tears.

“What did he say? Debbie asked, anxious herself to hear his response.

“Nothing,” Nathan stated. “He looked up but he didn’t say anything. I know what he’s thinking though.”

“Oh really,” Debbie inquired with anticipation in her voice. “What is he thinking?”

“That’s what everybody says.”

Nathan saw his inner child sitting in the dirt and looking up at him, convinced that nothing Nathan said was going to happen.

Debbie said, “Ask him if he wants a hug.”

It took some time for Nathan to come to terms with what he knew he had to say. After what seemed like an eternity, Nathan took a deep, camouflaged breath, and on the exhale, tried to squeeze out the words he felt building inside him.

“Do you—”

The words did not come. He felt them pressing up from his core, trying to come out, but his lips would not part. He paused, took a few deep and shaking breaths, told himself he had to say it, and with all his will and might, he let the words free to fill the room.

“Do you want a hug?”

Tears filled Nathan’s eyes again and his body was shaking. His legs were bouncing uncontrollably as sweat dripped off his chin into his lap. He was on the verge of total shutdown, and his efforts to stay with the experience only strengthened his resistance.

“What did he say?” Debbie asked.

“Nothing, he stood up and came to me and—is—hugging—me.”

Nathan felt what he quickly realized was a pillow Debbie placed in front of his chest and all of his defenses vanished as he clenched it with both arms, shaking and convulsing in spasms of crying that consumed all of the silence in the room. The wave of release diminished enough within a few minutes for Nathan to hear the soft sounds of crying and sniffing. He remembered there were others with him, and hearing their sobbing offered the reassurance he needed to be able to go on.

“Ask him if he wants to go on a trip with you. He can go any way he wants, walk, drive, plane, train, whatever. Take your time and let me know when you get here.”

“Okay,” Nathan said after a few seconds, “we’re here. We are standing in the parking lot.”

“Great,” she said. “Bring him inside now, and into this room. Let me know when you get here.”

Nathan’s point of view shifted again, and he saw the room as if his eyes were open. He saw the door swing open and he watched himself and the child come into the room, still holding hands. The adult image faded away, leaving only the boy standing in the

middle of the room, when Nathan said, “Okay, he’s here.”