I Killed Socrates

Michael Eigen

“I killed Socrates.”

I woke up this morning with these words on the tip of sleep.

Did they wake me up? Will they wake me up? Can I be woken up at all?

How can I be of service to the dreamer, a dreaming me dreaming a waking dream? I don’t remember being asleep when it dawned on me that I killed Socrates. I’m sure I was not asleep. Yet an electric charge carrying deep conviction jolted me awake. I realized I must spend the day’s best time letting in this new fact. Now that I know I killed Socrates, there is no going back.

Is killing Socrates my life’s mission? I’m not so sure. But I think I should try to find out why I killed him this time.

“All men are mortal. Socrates is a man. Therefore, Socrates is mortal.” A syllogism from freshman year in college. Do you believe it? What basis does it have in fact? Is Socrates really mortal? It seems a little unbelievable, something one must find out for oneself.
As part of my scientific investigation, I sneaked up on Socrates just before dawn and strangled him, gripping his neck from behind. I dared not see him and could not bear the thought of him seeing me at the moment of murder, just before death. I repeatedly stabbed him in the back and beat him with sticks and stones. When he was down I kicked his body mercilessly. Then did the whole thing over again, and again, until I convinced myself that nothing was left other than a lifeless body. I killed him until no doubt about his mortality remained. Murder as a solution to radical doubt. Proof death is real, an irreducible fact, deeper, more final than doubt. But is it?

I hadn’t taken two steps from his body before it hit me that Socrates is immortal. His ideas never die. His thinking, Plato’s thinking, play an essential role in the way we think, permanently impact how we think, what we think about, play a role in structuring thought for hundreds and thousands of years. No mind is unmarked by Plato, no mind unscathed by an Idea of the Good. Those who run from it or degrade it are broken by it. Is anything more powerful?

Yet it is, after all, the figure of Socrates that most attracts me. Is that my peculiarity? Like water, I run through Plato backwards to the source. How odd a thing to say, given that Plato is the source, the author,
the creator of Socrates. Such a convincing creator that we deeply feel that Socrates is the true author.

How to fathom that Socrates is a fiction? Or perhaps a fact Plato draws from, a man who lived, a teacher, who like a Totem and Taboo father, grows more compelling through death, through the fact that we the sons murder him?

Is it that Socrates the man, the thinker, the personality enabled Plato to become the seeker and thinker he could be, precisely because the impact of mind to mind is not confined to the literal touch of bodies? Socrates' mind and the way he approached mind released Plato's will to think. Or is it that Socrates as an imaginary nucleus egged Plato on, mental fire that doesn't stop burning?

Let me confess I am turned on by Socrates. It is Socrates I love, Socrates I'm drawn to. It is Socrates, not Plato, who is alive in me today. Alive after I killed him. More alive the more I kill him.

I am grateful to Socrates for surviving my acts of murder, so grateful I can cry.

I am also grateful, a lesser gratitude, to Plato for giving me Socrates. Although I admit this begrudgingly, without Plato, there would be no Socrates for me to love. Without Plato, there would not be this
Socrates, the one he vividly creates. It is, of course, a measure of Plato’s amazing triumph that I love Socrates more than him, that Socrates truly matters more, that it is not Plato I love at all, but Socrates who claims my being.

I know Plato matters more to the history of thought but I feel Socrates matters more to the history of life. Socrates is part of the history of imaginal being, a history of inner fire. A wondrous fire my tiny spark of being participates in. Who are we that a creation of one man’s imaginative daring touches lives of others over thousands of years?

For a time (is it still that time?) putting Plato down was a fad. His thought forms free and freeze us. We fight them, move through them, liquefy and burn them. We try to escape. Some of us almost get away or claim to, make end runs, see through them and try to begin somewhere else. Some throw stones, denigrate them. It is important to bring out shortcomings, circumscribe false directions, reset the compass.

At the same time, I savor Socrates, his being, his realness. Perhaps more than his thinking, the questions Plato puts in his mouth and ideas that arise, is his being. What most touches my essence is an affective attitude, a hunger for truth, an insatiable need. His dedicated insatiability
and persistence strikes a great sound within which once sounded never stops.

Socrates is depicted as homely, even ugly, yet his passion and beauty of spirit ignite kindred passions in others through the ages. For Socrates, intellectual drive commingles with grace, irony, humor, love. He bites and draws blood but it is a bite we long for. Yet I killed him. And I am not the only killer. My ancient Athenian peers - we are all peers – began this murder and we continue it.

It is difficult to admit that murder is part of the transmission of thought, that murder structures mind and soul to this day, that murder makes mind more alive. At the same time, thought survives murder, enriched by it. Not only thought forms and thought seeds survive. So do attitudes, feeling dispositions. We have an enduring attraction to what survives death, to what survives murder. Somewhere in this melange is a burning hope that we survive ourselves. Perhaps Socrates shows us this is possible, or at least whets our appetite for a brand of life that withstands us.

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Questions of a spreading I arise. When I say I, I don’t mean only my I but all I’s. All I’s everywhere. I killed Socrates means all I’s killed Socrates. And go on killing him. Something like being a universal Christ killer.

I am tempted to call the spreading I part of psycho-logic, mad logic, or in an age of innocence possibly a kind of baby logic, in a demonic age, demon logic. For convenience, I will stick with psycho-logic or mad logic and mean by it something boundless.

I am aware that boundless may be something spiritual and by using the notation mad or psycho I am putting a slant on what I wish to convey. This is correctable, but for now let’s ride with the deformation.

A spreading I. In this case, my I spreading. A necessary conclusion I come to is that I am responsible for the death of every human being. I caused death. I brought death into the world. This may seem a rather extreme extension of universal guilt. But it is a clear and distinct idea, apodictic. Once conceived, it is self-evident.

There are many analogues. Oedipus’s sin becomes a national sin. In the Bible, a house may fall ill as a result of sin and land may become ill as well. Sin spreads. Something rotten in the state of Denmark goes through the body politic, the social body. Sin often spreads from top to bottom, not as is popularly conceived from bottom up. The sins of royalty,
governing and judicial bodies, owners of media, power nodes of society set the tone. Look what the Bush group did to the spirit of our age in service of rapacious boundlessness. Yes, predatory currents precede them, but they add their own wounding signature to soaring national guilt.

There is such a thing as denied or deferred guilt, displaced guilt. Leaders disown guilt for their atrocities and look elsewhere for guilty parties. They blame others for what they themselves have done or will do. They cultivate insensitivity to results of their actions and often succeed in feeling justified (a perverse use of the idea of justice). Denial of guilt spreads too. Guilt and denial of guilt constitute a pairing, Siamese twins. As W. R. Bion (2005, p. 91) wrote in a related context: “They are not really separable, but one is the extreme of the other, as if they were polarized.”

There is a psycho or mad dimension to thinking-feeling that is there at all times. And one way it works is spreading boundlessness, boundless spread. Deniers are not free of boundless spread. They smear others with the denied element or some substitution for it. One paints the world with feelings in semi-blind ways.

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Here I am in the Garden of Eden once again. And what do I do? I bring death into the world. In this myth of beginnings, evil, sin and death are attributed to human causality. Not to any human, but me and you. We did it. I am Adam, Eve and serpent and so are you. Here our I’s are indistinguishable even though they have different profiles: variants of 1, *a plural 1*.

Our system spontaneously gravitates towards an I (mine, yours, someone else’s) as a causal organizer. My fault, your fault, our fault. We try to fend off a sense of helplessness in face of forces we don’t control. By claiming guilt or causal efficacy for terrifying facts like mortality, we try to control the uncontrollable and make terror go away. The possibility that we are guilty in relative ways spreads into absolutist thinking.

We have thought forms that tell us we can live forever if we are good enough and act in certain ways or have certain beliefs. We can undo death. We make death live and can make death die. This sounds like a crushing responsibility, part of boundless spread.

The fact that we create stories that tell us death is our fault tells us something about our minds in its I-centric aspect. The fact that all humanity shares blame does not get me off the hook. Guilt causality spreads both ways, individual ↔ group. I brought death into the world,
but so did you. I as multiple: death owes it’s life to us. There is a social context to the link between causality and death. Adam, Eve and the serpent all conspire, all play a role. Freud tells us that different parts of a dream are parts of the I. A bit of profound wisdom, but is it the whole truth?

Surely, the universe sends messages in dreams. I is not the only character. Life is an important character, life expressing itself about life and creating life, including dream life. Did I cause dreaming or did life processes bring both dream and myself into existence, with or without my help?

The dream of the Garden of Eden overcomes us. A message it sends is that deep down we feel we caused death. The spreading I spreads guilt via a causal nexus, imaginary or real. The dream of Eden tells us that we use guilt as an emotional organizer, an inner organizing principle similar to Kant’s time, space and causality. Guilt as a basic organizer of experience.

We try to rid ourselves of guilt and stain. Cleanse ourselves, clean up our act. But what needs to be cleaned can’t be wiped out of our nature. We may wipe ourselves out instead.

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As I meditate on boundless guilt, a reversal begins. The syllogism, after all, says “All men are mortal.” I previously took it as meaning “If all men are mortal and Socrates is a man, then Socrates is mortal.” If – a matter not settled.

But what if indeed all men are mortal? No ifs, ands, buts. We all die and fear what much evidence points to, that death is final. No life for me after death. I don’t have to reach a definitive conclusion in order for the syllogism to carry me along on this alternate, seemingly more objective path. All men are mortal.

Let’s take this, for the moment, as an objective statement, a statement of what is, things as they are. The straightforward objectivity of such a statement frees me from my burden of guilt over the fact of death. For if all men are mortal and that’s just the way things are, a fact of life, there is the distinct possibility, even likelihood, that I am not the sole or main or even co-creator of death. Death has nothing at all to do with what I do or will. It just is. I am part of a life system in which death is.

What a relief!

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As is often the case, a double attitude exists. It’s not so easy to believe in death and not so easy not to. On the one hand, subjective
spread; on the other, objective discrimination. The former tends towards boundlessness, the later towards limits. In terms of I-sensation: boundless I and circumscribed I. In terms of guilt linked to causality: I caused it, you caused it: some I is to blame and maybe all I’s.

A variant: we did it; no, it happens. It’s natural; no, it can be superceded.

Death has a way of insinuating itself into beginnings. Two trees in the garden loom with special significance, life and knowledge, ubiquitous doubleness, as if they are separable. After the first couple ate of the tree of knowledge and knew good and evil, God makes haste to get them out of the garden before they eat of the tree of life and live forever. Conundrum: Why on earth didn’t He take precaution to seal or hide the tree of life earlier? Is it that Adam and Eve wouldn’t think of eating from it because it wasn’t forbidden? Wouldn’t a tree of life exert special attraction? Or is it that eating from the tree of knowledge opens death, sin as death and literal death. And with death anxiety, one seeks life eternal.

In the center of the garden looms death awaiting discovery in life’s pulse. A spiritual Punch and Judy show. You know the bad thing is going to happen, only you don’t know when. The garden narrative makes you
feel it could have been otherwise and makes you feel it couldn’t. It makes you feel there is something in the middle of this wondrous place that causes pain, something that doesn’t have to be there but is there and has to be there.

It would be jejune to say the cause of pain is the tangle of attitudes the story portrays: comminglings of permissions-prohibitions, interest, curiosity, envy, pride, titillation, yearning, hunger, hope, desire – affective attitudes all mixed up. Garden as cauldron of seething excitations, expectations, attitudes. The narrative puts tracers on tendencies and tries to disentangle some of them.

God created the universe and its parts and said repeatedly, “It is good.” Adam and Eve ate of its parts and saw evil as well as good. Did they see more than God? Experience more? Was God protecting them from seeing too much too soon, more than was good for them? Was God protecting them from feeling ashamed?

Wise people say Adam and Eve had incomplete views. To see life as evil is shortsighted. God does all for the good of our souls. Were Adam and Even like children who call something bad because it pains them? They disobeyed God and felt shame. Going against God’s wishes pained
them? Individuality pained them? Difference pained them? God gave them a chance to be ashamed.

We do not know what evil they knew. They saw something they did not see before or entered a way of seeing previously unavailable. Evil emerges as something new. A form of knowledge – a new form of knowledge. A direct knowing, direct seeing. They saw something: evil itself. And it was not separable from themselves: psychic as well as physical nakedness.

The psychic load we carry quickly gets to be too much. The emergence of psychic being, wondrous as it is, is more than we can bear. Coming into life takes us deep into the impossible. And all that is possible seems delicate and immense.

Where is the garden now? The kingdom of heaven is in us. Where inside us? Through the center of the pain.

To be gardeners is a gentle beginning. Yet I sense Hamlet’s presence breathing in the wings. An agitated breathing. Hamlet in the Garden? I look more closely. I glimpse his form standing with hands on two trees, one on life, one knowledge, like Samson, awaiting a moment of strength. A strength made not of knowing or physical might but of piercing perception. He does not speak yet, not much, but words are
gathering. They will pour out of an invisible serpent’s bite that does not heal. The same serpent who roamed the garden before Adam and Eve, making waves, looking for company.

The same serpent who made time go faster by dreaming Hamlet as an imaginary companion. Adam and Eve, actual people, came as quite a disappointment. Until he realized that they were part of a story too.

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In an interview, Ingmar Bergmann said he did not believe in guilt. He felt that guilt distracts one from the real pain one causes others, real suffering one inflicts.

One quickly imagines he is also speaking of his own suffering. If the center of one’s being suffers, it is difficult not to communicate this to others. We are permeable. Feelings spread.

But he means more. His behavior towards a son was gratuitously cruel, as if his son became a special pocket for cruelty to lodge. Nothing a son in one’s charge deserves. Bergmann says he was a bad father and communicates inevitability, given his own nature. He is unapologetic. It is part of the mystery of who he is, something that happens, partly connected with pain from his own childhood and his own parents. Suffering whose beginnings cannot be exhausted.
Does he take responsibility for something he cannot help? Does he take responsibility for who he is? He neither owns nor disowns it. He lives it - what part he can live. Cruelty as part of the mystery of being. His form of witness is to turn cruelty into profound art, sharing inevitable suffering on the screen. His movies bear witness to suffering existence. They show, not explain. They share inmost pain many of us instantaneously recognize. It is as if he can do no more. This kind of showing is precisely the sharing he can do. For this, we are grateful.

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A person who consults me comes in. I’m eating a pear. We look at each other and I become conscious that I’m destroying the tissues of the pear. The pear is a living thing. Not animate like you or I perhaps. But real enough with life of its own, which I am killing.

I tell the person I’m with (let’s call her Sea, by which I also mean see) that I’m a murderer and she is watching me destroy life. We kill to live, there’s no way around it, even if we’re vegetarians. She it witnessing a murder. I go on detailing the ripping of the tissues of the pear with my teeth, the chewing, swallowing. It is a slow, juicy destruction. I well understand hunger strikes, anorexia, the refusal to kill, the refusal to live at the expense of others.
I can do what a certain religious impulse suggests: thank the pear for its self-giving, honor its precious contribution to my well being. I may even convince myself the pear is participating in a willing sacrifice through which it sanctifies itself. I get to an uneatable part of the rind and stem, all that’s left of its visible form. The main part of its holiness is now inside me.

Sea is distraught, possibly teary, or perhaps I’m misreading her. I do feel something though, something intense, compact, positive. As if a dense radioactive pellet of self inside Sea shines, a new discovery, a new self-feeling of a sort. She draws herself close around a small dark strength. I could be wrong. It all takes places very quickly, these micro-perceptions. What is most wondrous in this work is most elusive, scarcely felt perturbations in a darkish background.

Sea deals with chronic psychic overload. She discovered her father’s hanging body when she was a child. Her mother’s next husband, a good man who Sea loved, was mutilated by work machinery in her middle childhood. Her mother’s third husband, cold and mean, survived.

Sea survived many therapies and was a prescient mental health worker herself. She was lucky to find work her trauma world fit. By helping others, she spent her life helping herself. Going through this ghastly bit of
history was nothing new. Why was it in the room now? What was it asking this afternoon?

She grew up with farm animals but could not get used to their slaughter. Images of slit throats and beheaded creatures subliminally tortured her. She developed fear of going near certain animals, a fear she tried to hide. No one would understand. They’d make fun of her, play it down, question its basis, make it unreal. What, after all, could they do with dread? An incommunicable stream of death ran through childhood and permeated her aloneness. She could not express it to herself or others in ways that made “acceptable” sense. Where does horror with no place go?

I was listening carefully, feeling carefully. Therapy as home for horror. Some people need to be in therapy all their lives as it’s the only place their horror is comfortable.

I share an image: “You must have felt through your childhood like a chicken with its head cut off.” I meant to convey what her feelings felt like. Running amok, headless, separated, severed. A head that refuses to die, a body that does not die. They go through the years together, mutilated, nerves twitching, nameless, placeless, disoriented. A brutal stream of death keeps one’s being on edge.
Sea responds immediately. For the moment the image fits. I won’t say it exactly brings relief, but something like relief: contact with the unsayable, a point of contact with herself. Not that that image had always been there, but something reverberates, a sensed truth about one’s condition. It’s not for nothing phrases like this are a common part of language. They express and track states we tend not to know what to do with. So often, perhaps all we can do is note that they exist. To do more takes away from them, mars them. They so much want respect from us and need caring regard. Odd to say about something so internal: they want us to let them in, at least a bit, a bit more. They want us to let our insides in.

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Socrates spoke of a chicken when he was dying, a debt he owed. He instructed his students to tell his wife to return a chicken to the rightful party.

Socrates’ death, as narrated by Plato, must rank as one of the great deaths of all time. He did not leave as a chicken without a head. To meet death as he did, to not be chicken (again, vernacular instructs us about our states), constitutes more than a model. It is a tribute to life.

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To temporarily conclude this little reverie, I’d like to say a few words about three forms that guilt can take: (1) functional; (2) mystic; (3) transcendent. The names are a bit arbitrary but not entirely.

1) *Function.* Guilt, along with shame and fear, plays an important role in regulating social relations. It functions as a kind of warning when going too far in one or another direction. It tells one to draw back and reassess the situation. It is part of social sensing, a kind of inner compass that says, go this way, that way, too much, too little. It helps contain and regulate injury.

A kind of *wheel barrel model* (an image I believe I read in Solomon Asch, *Social Psychology*) is relevant here. Picture two people having to move a load in a wheel barrel from here to there, across ruts and between obstacles, each person gripping one arm of the barrel. A lot of spontaneous, implicit, mutual sensing must go on to keep the barrel upright and on the way. You might say guilt, shame and fear play such a role in social relations. They are part of inner sensing, related to our own aloneness and responsibility and, at the same time, part of the tissue of living experience with others.

It is a sensing that applies to being with oneself, living with oneself. Shall I do this, that, be this that, go this way, that way. It touches what
kind of person I wish to be or can be or am. It helps set direction, chart a course.

Similarly, it is part of the self-corrective movement of social activity from family to nation, including world relations. For there is – or should be – something that can be called national guilt, shame, fear (the last often part of prudence).

Guilt, shame, and fear may lead to self-reflection, corrective vision, and re-modeling of one’s picture of life, including reassessments of the contexts in which one exists.

2. Mystic. Guilt, on occasion, propels one to places not normally reached by functional guilt embedded in cooperative, affiliative behavior. Mystical guilt tends to be more intensely individual. Its personal intensity leads to a radically transformational experience of one’s own psychic space. Although functional guilt is part of its background, mystical guilt can lead to such radical self-questioning that the structure of social existence and life itself is placed in doubt, interrogated, found guilty.

Although many inner or outer circumstances can trigger it, mystic guilt is often propelled by excruciating realization of one’s own
destructiveness and agony over the fact that destructiveness is built into life.

One would like to be a life form that does not cause pain and one’s heart cries out, “Why, God, did you make me this way, one who must kill to live?” Or merely, one who must injure to live. For no one avoids injuring others or oneself. Anorexia or other forms of potential and actual suicide become understandable in terms of the wish not to be a killer. Anorexia as critical protest against and refusal in face of the way life is structured: one must destroy even to eat. Anorexia as moral critique of existence.

There is mystical guilt that can border on certain forms of psychospiritual anorexia. Fasts of the spirit, as well as physical fasts. Nevertheless, no amount of self-purging can eliminate the propensity to injure or be injured by one’s own or another’s intentions, bearing, cruelty, acts. We may try to protect others from ourselves or ourselves from others and possibly succeed in diminishing the sum of injury. But we will never be destruction free.

However, the fact that we will not succeed in ever becoming the kind of persons we would like to be does not free us from facing this defeat. A dangerous sense of defeat runs through our nature. It may never be totally exhumed but it must be met. That is, we must meet our
inner defeat as part of meeting ourselves, part of our lifelong introduction to ourselves.

Unmet inner defeat tends to exacerbate hidden areas of collapse that suck at our beings. The collapse may not be totally correctable, but it makes a difference if we try to sense it and get on working terms with it. To discover enduring areas of collapse is one thing, to collapse into collapse another.

To kill ourselves because we are killers, to starve ourselves out of existence, is a cop-out. It not only collapses collapse, it evades basic facts of our existence. We must sustain our sense of collapse as part of the working materials we are given. We are challenged to develop new relationships to unpleasant facts of our make-up.

Mystical guilt evolves, partly, as a refusal to collapse in face of guilt or in face of all we have to be guilty about. It does not give in to artificial soft-soaping, cheap I’m OK – Your OK forms of Job’s comforters. We have come upon a kind of inverse Job, a Job who feels guilty for the way life works, its appalling mercilessness, its inherent destructiveness. Not a Job who claims innocence but who embraces the full pain of existence in his very core. A Job who, far from being righteous, can not escape a basic flaw and opens the array of difficulties that being a wounding-wounded
being entails. A Job who sustains the maximum punch that guilt can deliver.

The new Job refuses or is unable to collapse any part of guilt, mediating a kind of cosmic guilt, life’s guilt over its own nature. Life guilty for itself, channeled in one’s own person. One can’t blame life for being what it is and sidestep being a fact of life oneself. One may be tempted to get out of life by ending one’s own, but that leads nowhere. An apple (rotten? poisoned? juicy?) bites into us and keeps on biting. We may not be able to stop life’s bite but refusal to make believe what’s happening isn’t happening opens new spaces. We change by our immense effort to confront what can’t be solved.

I sometimes describe this as a kind of psychic wormhole. We keep batting our heads against walls and something in our psyche opens, takes us somewhere that didn’t exist a moment before. We go in one place, come out another. A new portion of being is exposed or created. We feel differently because we are in another portion of existence.

There are stories that talk about a hole in the ground or going through a mirror or magical furniture, a wardrobe, a carpet, some point of entry to somewhere else, another existential plane. We play down this experience by calling it fantasy. Or overplay it by solidifying it into
institutional religion. Or turn it into a sideshow or con by pointing to fakirs who exploit it.

What I am trying to point to is something intensely personal. As if the psyche is perforated by its own intensity and one finds oneself in another part of vast unknown terrain without discernible forms or objects, just hints, ineffable sensings, something not liquid or solid or gaseous yet mysteriously existing, an elusive landscape or background painted with tones of light and dark.

One finds oneself far away from the immovable wall one failed to penetrate. One day soon, one might bump into that or another wall and head-banging will resume. But for the moment one is somewhere else, another place. One failed to penetrate the wall but somehow penetrated oneself. Something in the core of one’s being gave way. And like stories where one is whisked away by an unknown force, one is whisked to another state of being.

It may take years, much of a lifetime, to catch up with the discovery of such a little known or used capacity. But each time one tastes it, one feels the possibility of peace beyond understanding, bliss, happiness. One feels the thing itself. A discovery that stays fresh with use, one can never get enough of it. It adds a moving glow to existence,
good or bad. One tries to channel, dose and map it and in some significant, if tiny ways, succeeds. But it is gracious enough, kind enough, to remain unmappable.

How could one know when one started, that guilt was one of the privileged lines through which to reach it? But perhaps we might say any way that mediates this contact is privileged.

A hallmark of mystic guilt is the immense desire one conceives to cause harm no more. It is a desire that perforates one’s inmost soul and while it motivates self-struggle and the need to be a better person, it also, mysteriously, takes us to a freer place. It relates to a love described biblically as loving God with all your heart, mind, might, soul. It mobilizes all one is and can be as a gift of love.

3. Transcendent. Mystic guilt begins in pain and torment over injury one causes and leads to intense, persistent self-wrestling in determination to become a better person. A side effect is the amazing discovery of psychospiritual domains one did not know existed, a kind of amazing grace. One does not stop wanting or trying to be a better person. But the struggle is now touched with more mercy and compassion, which take the edge off of severity.
Thomas Merton somewhere wrote, “The secret of our identity is in God’s mercy.” The discovery of the mercy that pervades the psychospiritual universe is life changing, softening. It does not stop the pain or torment of guilt. One still fails in one’s care and service, one’s wish to help rather than harm. One still chokes on inescapable shortcomings, the bad apple one is. But the good one participates in uplifts life, offers purpose.

There is, however, a further step that transcends the torments of guilt with its goodness and badness and the depths of honest struggle. My first taste of it happened in a puff, a nanosecond. Something I read in a Buddhist text which I’ve not been able to locate – and in less than a micro-instant, something was added and has evolved. “Added” is not quite right for this sudden life-changing, self-changing happening. In that moment, guilt vanished. Another taste of being occurred. I can’t exactly call it guiltless, since as time continued I realized that motivating guilt still existed as a subtext in another region of being, important and life informing. But not the last word.

To be true to the new experience, I must say that I felt free of guilt. In a pop it was gone. I could scarcely believe it and looked around for it.
Stretching into the new world, I could breathe more easily. My limbs felt lighter. Oppression I hadn’t quite fully recognized lifted.

I tested the new happening by calling up bad things I did that chronically tortured me. I could see some of them working in their domains but they were dimmer. They didn’t have the same impact, the punch they used to have. The bite was gone.

At first, I was afraid to smile. I was afraid relief would vanish or be taken away if I pushed too hard. I dared not take the new space for granted and make too big a step. It may sound strange that something so freeing made me so up tight, afraid to move and spoil it. Something that allowed me to breathe freely made me afraid to breathe.

But I breathed anyway, looked around, tasted and smelled. I couldn’t believe my good luck. It was true. The guilt fell away or took less space or became less important, more a faint imprint that a crushing bulldozer, if there at all.

It was as if I had been a different person when I did the things that haunted me. A lower, other me, a me I could not help being when I did the bad things that never let go. In less than a flash, that being was superceded. I entered a new plane of being and what occurred in “lower” regions became less haunting, less relevant, lost meaning.
Now the truth is nothing goes away and terms like lower and higher are misleading. But the unexpected is added or, better than added, changes the distribution of all that makes one up. Changes the way life feels, the way life is. In an experiential instant, a new capacity emerged and I would have to get to know myself all over again. I would have to test it as well as relish it. I would have to learn about its terrain. I would have to let it teach me.

The unexpected can be traumatic or releasing. Experience teaches me that adult traumas can be worst than childhood traumas. No time of life has a monopoly on pain and injury. I have seen adults die in wake of trauma that a child could weather.

At times release comes and you see what might lead people to feel “saved”, liberated from life’s oppressive elements. In ordinary parlance, to be saved means to be saved from danger or a bad situation, as in to save a life. The word also means “savings”, money or goods one has accumulated that make one feel safer and freer materially. But it also applies to soul, to save one’s soul from grave or mortal danger, from sin and evil and its own self-oppression.

In the instant I’m trying to touch, oppression fell away and I felt a fresh freedom that made my being smile. Everything that tormented me
was gone. As religions say, I was another being. Not quite, of course, since I’m still me being another being, with a welcome difference.

A story of the Buddha comes to mind. In telling it, I’m taking liberties, telling it my way, my inner Buddha; so I hope you make allowances. There are walls one pits oneself against which, for some of us, become a matter of life and death. For Siddartha Gautama, the fact of suffering was such a wall. Suffering built into life, what people to do themselves, to each other, disasters of many kinds, natural and man made, sickness, evil, death – life’s cruelty, self’s cruelty. The Buddha sat with this unforgiving fact. Unbudgeable fact vs. unbudgeable sitter. He could not stop life from being injurious. He could not make death go away. But in sitting with unyielding facts, parts of a great wall, something happens. The wall doesn’t go away. Something inside changes.

One throws oneself against the unmovable with all one’s being and being opens. One can’t change the fact of living and dying but one can change one’s approach to it. One can become a different kind of avenue to the inevitable and unexpected. Students might ask him questions about life after death or other imponderables. He would try to refocus things back to the change of being he discovered. “I can’t answer all the questions you ask,” Buddha might say. “They’re outside the boundaries
of my discovery. Oh, I can recite establishment beliefs about whether or not death is final. But that’s not my domain of expertise. I’m a specialist in one main thing, the fact of suffering. And I’m sharing with you a way of approaching it.”

Even a taste of this change in being goes a long way, although a hunger sprouts for more.