

The Turning

Martin Buber (1878–1965), author of I and Thou, among other books, is one of the most significant Jewish theologians and philosophers of the twentieth century. Born in Vienna, he taught for many years at the University of Frankfurt before fleeing Germany in 1938 and taking up a professorship at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Buber's philosophy was influenced by his study of Hasidism, a mystically tinged Jewish movement emerging in the eighteenth century. Here I focus on the Jewish notion of the "turning" to explore the prisoners' experiences of self-transformation.

Where Art Thou?

"How are we to understand that God, the all-knowing, said to Adam: 'Where art thou?' . . . Adam hides himself to avoid rendering accounts, to escape responsibility for his way of living. Every man hides for this purpose, for every man is Adam and finds himself in Adam's situation. To escape responsibility for his life, he turns existence into a system of hideouts. And in thus hiding again and again "from the face of God," he enmeshes himself more and more deeply in perversity. . . . This question ["Where art thou?"] is designed to awaken man and destroy his system of hideouts; it is to show man to what pass he has come and to awake in him the great will to get out of it. (Martin Buber, *The Way of Man According to the Teaching of Hasidism*, 9–12)

Charles: I think it's two moments in my life I can say that I have really asked myself where I'm at. The first time was in '79. I went into the city jail for assault. I had a lot of friends that was in there and I couldn't understand why the dudes was so *content* in jail. I thought, "Man, I don't want none of this shit. I want to go home, live my life."

When I got out I just wanted to get away from the hustling world because I'd actually seen what prison was like. I had a few dollars put away, and I started working in my uncle's shoe repair shop. But we got in an argument and I broke off. By a year and a half later, I found myself in a lot of illegal drug activities.

The next time I asked myself where I was, was Supermax. My mother visited me, she was jobless, and all three of her sons was in prison. She was going through some real emotional changes. She says, "What do y'all want out of life? You're the oldest, what do *you* want? How long are you going to continue drugs? Does that money mean that much to you? And do you realize what you be putting me through?"

When I went back to my cell, that's when I said, "Dang, Charley, where are you at in your life?" I was reading the Bible and the Koran and doing some real soul-searching. "What if a man gained the whole world and lose his soul, what can he give in exchange for it?" And I said, "Dang—*nothing*." That's where I found myself. Right there.

Donald: I never asked myself "Where art thou?" from a religious perspective. But since I've been incarcerated, questions do come up all the time. Questions like "Are you being responsible? Why don't you want to be? How would that person feel? Is it worth doing?" I think that, for me, anytime a question is raised it helps me grow. Because when I just acted upon my feelings it caused a lot of devastation to family, friends, and myself. If I were to get in a fight and act on my feelings, more than likely somebody would get seriously hurt. But if I was to raise the question "Should I continue this thing or let it go?" usually I'll do the right thing.

But growing up in my neighborhood there weren't questions, there were *answers*, like "If that happens, then you got to do this." I wasn't raised to stop and think.

Tony: I find myself a lot of times asking "What the hell am I doing here?" When I answer that question, in comes responsibility. I have to realize, it's 'cause you did something you had no business doing, or if you did it, you had no business getting caught. Then I think, "Okay, that being the case, what am I going to do to get out of here?" I ask myself that, and that's why I try to surround myself as best I can with positive things—like going to this class, one of the highlights of my week.

John: When I started to do this soul-searching thing I noticed how I had a lot of wants that weren't really necessary. When I first came in here, every time there was a function I was supposed to be there. Every time there was a clothing package, I was supposed to get brand new clothes. Then one time I couldn't get a package, and I felt I'd been cheated until I started to think, "Man, get real with yourself. You're in the penitentiary, you've been here for a long time. You're a *burden* on a lot of people out there."

Drew: The term penitentiary has within it the term penitent. At least in theory, it's a time in which people look within, undergo rigorous self-examination, and come to a sense of penance for what they've done. But in actual fact, does prison serve as a time for this, or more of an occasion to focus on the faults of others?

John: I think when guys are in their cells at night everybody goes through their self-examination. But I don't think everybody comes out saying "There's a great number of things I did wrong that put me in this position." A lot of guys come out still trying to rationalize how they got here. "If I had did it *this* way, or if I had did it *that* way, it might have not been like this."

Tony: The first three to six months, especially for somebody who's never been in jail, is probably the most crucial time in saying how you're going to do your bit. You may not be able to handle that introspection. Some dudes zap out. They finally realize where they are and just about everybody in this jail, with a few exceptions, has all the time in the world, and they can't handle it mentally.

But if you can take it, and get away from the rationalization, you realize that no matter what the circumstances, at least seventy percent of my being here was *me*. You got to accept that. Then you can start to try and change it.

Tray: When I came to prison, the first three to five years, I didn't do a whole lot of self-examination. It was everybody else's fault that I was in prison. Being poverty-stricken made me break laws. But then I went over to Supermax for assaulting an officer. The officer went home for six-months paid and I stayed on lock-up two years. But I said, "Damn, if I'm so sharp, why do I always find myself in these messed-up situations?" And then I started thinking about every time I got in trouble. It was always because I wanted to be the center of attention and in doing that I acted impulsively. Accepting that first truth about myself was hard but then it gets easier and easier as you go.

But I think you can go a whole lifetime without looking at yourself, 'cause there's dudes in here that came in the same time I did, same charges, same conditions, and they haven't grown.

John: A lot of guys are into escapism. You'll be shocked how guys have all kind of schemes, work details, everything, not to go in their cell. Then if they do lock that door, they go to sleep or turn on the TV and radio so there's no self-examination.

And sometimes your loved ones can try to do things to make the situation comfortable. Everything you ask for they'll try to get, a radio, a TV, whatever's coming down the pipeline, food packages, clothing, money for commissary, anything. But in the long run they're not really helping you. You make the penitentiary a comfortable existence and it keeps you from doing the self-examination.

That looking at yourself can be a real gut-wrenching experience. Because some of us—not all—have done things to our family. "What loved ones? If you did something to them, man, there ain't no loved ones there for you." A lot of guys just want to keep from focusing on that because,

as Tony was saying, they lose it. Their minds just snap and they're somewhere else now, in the Twilight Zone.

Tray: I sat on that South Wing for two years and over on Supremax for two more years, and I saw people messing with that self-examination and they went cold-blooded crazy. "Fourth floor, call Sigmund Freud in!" and then they were gone. The dude was gone.

Wayne: When I began to examine myself, I realized the reason I kept making the same mistakes over and over is 'cause I kept measuring myself by myself. So every time I did something wrong, I could justify it. But when I became a Christian I had a standard to go by—the Bible. I began to measure myself according to that, grow in accordance to my reading and learning.

Drew: What faults in yourself did you all find in most need of correction?

Tray: My greatest fault was I didn't value independent thought. Other people's thought became more important than my own—you know, the church's, the street institutions, the schools'. Hanging out with my homies, I would try to conform. That's where all my trouble came from.

Jack: One of my greatest shortcomings was a fear of failure.

Drew: Could you explain?

Jack: Okay. My family used to stay on me about going to school. And I kept throwing excuses back at them: "Why should I get a degree? I won't get a chance to use it. Look, I got life plus. I'm never going home." But they kept hammering away. And the bottom line, you know, was I was afraid of failing. It eventually came to a point where I had no more excuses to give. So in order to shut them up, get them off my back, I went to school. And as a result I graduated with honors. Two degrees. And I found out that the only way to combat that fear of failure is with knowledge. You've got to try.

Tray: Jack had the fear of failure, but I've always been afraid of success. You know, when I was on the street, in my line of work, success ended up with you getting two of them in the head, shot by your homie sitting in the back seat while you're driving. That's what success represented. So I always played it slow. I wanted to be *second* in command 'cause the first always got two in the back of the head.

If I wasn't afraid of success, I'd have competed in the educational arena and all that. You don't have to be no braniac to know that in America, in order to get ahead you have to play around in academia. But me being afraid of success, I said I'm going to hang around the hood and just be mediocre.

John: Shortcuts are my biggest problem. I always thought that I could figure a way around something. You know, society says you have to do it this way, but "Naw, not for me. I got another way." That was my downfall.

Tony: I have to go along with John on that one. My id was running wild when I was on the street. I want what I want and I want it now. If there's six steps, then I'm going to take it in three. 'Cause I want it yesterday.

There's one good thing about jail: the operative phrase is "hurry up and wait." You could be sending out to the street for something positive or negative—you still going to wait. So you've got no choice but to slow down. Hopefully, in the course of that slowing down you get back on the phone and say, "What I just told you to send, don't send it because that's going to get me into a world of trouble."

But out there on the streets you didn't take the time until you saw that red bubble gum machine in your rearview mirror. Then *it's too late*.

Drew: I'm wondering whether being in prison makes it easier or harder to go through this process of self-examination and self-mastery. I hear some people saying it's easier because you're forced into it by circumstances.

John: I think it's harder. You have thousands of nights of just sitting in here trying to figure out *what is your problem?* Thousands. And what makes it tougher is we have no way to say, "Am I actually figuring this thing out or am I night-tripping?" [laughed] Seriously. Because people in the street can think things out, try it the next day, get a response. For us, we don't have any way unless somebody like you comes in. The only thing we have to bounce it off is each other, and that's not bouncing anything. Because all of us are what the world calls "failures." So how are we going to bounce it off each other? You ask somebody if one and one is two, and he don't know either.

You can say, "Well I'm no longer a drug user or an alcoholic." But, why, 'cause there ain't none around? That's a big difference from being in an environment where it's damn near walking up to your door and trying to turn the key.

Tony: And even if you—that word that I hate so much—"rehabilitate" yourself, you can't prove it 'cause they ain't gonna let you go out there and try it. They keep you here forever and ever and ever.

Can You Turn?

Turning is capable of renewing a man from within and changing his position in God's world, so that he who turns is seen standing above the perfect zaddik, who does not know the abyss of sin. But turning means here something much greater than repentance and acts of penance; it means that by a reversal of his whole being, a man who had been lost in the maze of self-

ishness, where he had always set himself as his goal, finds a way to God, that is, a way to the fulfillment of the particular task for which he, this particular man, has been destined by God. (Buber, *The Way of Man According to the Teaching of Hasidism*, 32)

Drew: There's a big move in the country toward stiffer prison sentences, "three strikes and you're out." A discussion is going on, where one very powerful voice says, "People don't change, lock 'em up and throw away the key." The other voice says, "Wait a second. People *can* change if they have it within them and have a system that facilitates change."

Jack: I was reading an article in the paper last week by a senator about the crime bill. He was saying that before you do away with parole for three-time losers, you have to give the first- and second-time offenders an opportunity to rehabilitate themselves. Because now they sit around and vegetate. When you put them back on the street what can you expect them to do but the same thing they did before they came to jail? If you give them the opportunity to get an education, a skill or trade, and they still continue to mess up, *then* give them the no-parole. But you have to have that rehabilitation process working. Here in this state, they don't have it, don't have it at all.

Tray: I listen to how they're getting all tough on crime and I can really understand society's point of view. But a lot of that stuff is also starting to make me angry. I come up here when I was sixteen, and at twenty-seven I'm not the same person. But I know I'll never get the opportunity to practice that, to test that, as John was saying.

I look at the fifteen-year-old kids who're coming into prison now, paying a debt they never owed. The son inherits the sins of the father. They were born into poverty with no parents to teach them self-discipline and hard work, so then they do something real stupid, and hurt somebody. They get a lot of time. Then some philanthropist like yourself comes here and teaches them good things and they embrace them. It might take them nine or ten years but they embrace it. But they never get the chance to use it. It never gets beyond this perimeter. And then they turn cold again because people like you leave. His grandmother gets to dying, his sisters get to dying, and all the things that kept him warm for so long, they suddenly turn cold again. And once it's gone it ain't coming back.

Drew: I want to talk on behalf of "society." A lot of people are looking at the recidivism rate in prisons. They come to the conclusion: somebody in a prison environment can be clean from drugs, pursuing a degree, seem like a different person, but we don't always know. You can understand their suspicion. You've voiced it too.

But then, there's the possibility of the genuine "turning" that Buber describes. Can you accomplish this while you're still in prison?

H.B.: You better, 'cause there's a difference between *leaving* prison and *getting out* of prison. When you leave prison, you're subject to come back if you have all these imagined possibilities about what it's going to be like and discover that reality has stuck a pin in your balloon. The next thing you know you're going back to the same crowd, but still telling yourself bullshit about "I'm smarter than that, so it's not going to happen." It happens, and maybe worse than the time before. That's when you only *leave* prison.

But when you *get out* of prison, you get out before you leave. Prison really had nothing to do with your decision to change. You just happened to be there when you woke up one day and got sick and tired of what you saw in the mirror. You say, "Wait a minute, you ain't so hot, you ain't shit. You want to be nothing for the rest of your life?" And it helps to have a good upbringing; come from a solid family, because especially if there was a strong male figure you have a powerful sense of integrity, of what's right and what's wrong. Perhaps, at least, you've been in touch with your potential. Everybody's got potential to change for the better. You just happen to be in prison when you decide to change.

Sure you can con a parole board or other people—especially people who love you 'cause they want to believe you're going to succeed. But you can't con yourself. If you do you pay dearly for it. It ain't worth it 'cause it's bullshit.

One time P— said, "H.B., you finally got out of prison, didn't you?" And I'm saying to myself, "What the fuck she talking about?" But now I understand. If you can *get out*, you can stay out with no problem. But if you just *leave* prison, nine times out of ten your ass is coming back.

Getting Out of Prison

"There's a difference between *leaving* prison and *getting out* of prison." H.B.'s distinction struck in my mind, and it began to organize my vision of this whole project. After all, many of the lifers I worked with might never leave prison. People asked me, "Why waste your time on this crowd?" But H.B. supplied the answer. Even if certain men weren't leaving, they could still *get out*. And this book would aid and abet that escape. As Tony said about our first article together: "You can have my body but you can't keep my words." Prisoners' words could circulate in the greater world where their speaker might never follow.

But it was not just the book itself that had liberatory power. Of equal concern to me was the process whereby it came into being. In our readings, discussions, friendships, the men were constructing their release from prison—that prison of mind and spirit that preceded any literal incarceration. Inner prison could be as impenetrable as any Alcatraz. You're poor, you're black. You've got a parent missing-in-action, and your school's a battle zone. Each one is a brick in the prison wall. So, too, the limiting messages that colonize the mind: "You're stupid, ugly, you'll never amount to nothing." Brick by brick. And some bricks the men had to take personal responsibility for laying. They had chosen to embrace criminality, hatred, self-pity, quick-fixes, and lies upon lies. For one man it was, "Hey, I'm not gonna wait for my crumb from the table. I'm gonna grab what I want now." For another, it was, "Fuck my parents. Fuck the Man. No one's telling me what to do." Each decision must have felt like a breaking free, yet each plastered into place another brick.

But if these men were locked in inner jail, they also sought release. Martin Buber writes about the continued possibility of the turning. No "three strikes and you're out" in the human soul. I was witnessing this in my class. Those who had once so rejected school (that had so failed them) were ravenous for knowledge. Denizens of a narrow street, they were now world travelers of the mind. Hated whiteness?—let me now hear what he has to say. Despised my own black skin?—let me learn of its beauty. Talked

with my trigger finger?—let me educate my mouth. They were dismantling, brick by brick, that inner prison.

And so was I. I have already described my sentence. The death of my mother, father, brother, I interpreted as the result of my crimes. Subconsciously, I housed a skillful inner prosecutor who set about establishing a motive. Hadn't I longed to beat out, no, obliterate, my brother; to be free of my smothering mother even through death; and to escape my father in his last, descending days?

Motive established, next came the *modus operandi*. In each case hadn't I abandoned those in need? When my mother lay sick with breast cancer I'd trooped off to start college. Upon graduating, oblivious to my father's deepening depression, I was off again to the West Coast. When he jumped from an eighth-story window, I was not there to catch him. But the worst betrayal, it felt to me, was of my brother. Shortly before his death I'd returned to Yale summer session to study organic chemistry in preparation for medical school. This was a step to fulfilling my parents' dream, to winning out once and for all against Scott. And win I did. That line in Scott's suicide note seemed to document my guilt—"I think I was smarter, more talented, more agile and intrinsically more charming than you, but you have developed into a fuller person, and have even exceeded my smarts and talents with your determination while I let my mind and body rot with drugs, depression, and inactivity." I heard my victory leaving Scott defeated, despairing—then dead.

So spoke the inner prosecutor, and the inner jury had little trouble reaching its verdict. Guilty. The sentence was embodied in my obsessive symptoms. No death penalty here, but I would serve out my days in inner prison, without possibility of parole. No joy, no unconflicted success, no more dangerous leave-takings or happy beginnings. Wherever I went, I was to drag dead bodies behind me, like the chains weighing down Marley's ghost. I dared not attempt to break free: this might be punishable by death.

So I too became a lifer. But damn it, I too was determined to get out—that is, surmount my obsessive guilt. Like the convicts with whom I worked, I struggled assiduously to have my case reopened. They contacted legal experts; I prayed, reflected, talked with my shrink.

And it worked. I was granted retrial. I remember the day. I had been invited to speak on the mind-body relationship at Salisbury State College, on Maryland's Eastern Shore. Afterwards I was walking through a grassy meadow, the air redolent with the salt of the Chesapeake Bay. I found myself thinking about the past again, and an unaccustomed rage started growing within. "Wait a second," I thought. "That whole inner trial was a sham. False evidence was introduced. There was no competent defense. I didn't kill anybody, I was framed."

I found myself playing out an imagined retrial, this time with a good attorney—me again. Piece by piece, I dismantled the supposed "evidence"

of murder I had subconsciously accepted. My mother had clearly died of cancer. No jury in its right mind could pin that one on me. Any "bad" thoughts and wishes I might have had were immaterial to her demise. My brother and father, now that might seem more problematic. They were clearly the victims of violent crime. But not mine. I had done my best to be loving and present to both of them and, frankly, I had done a pretty good job. Admittedly, I hadn't seen their suicides coming nor prevented them. But how could I have? I was neither omniscient nor omnipotent. I was just a kid at the time. Nor was my brother's last letter the accusation I had interpreted it to be. I asked the jury to listen again: "You have developed into a fuller person, and have even exceeded my smarts and talents with your determination while I let my mind and body rot with drugs, depression, and inactivity." Isn't this a testimony to Scott's respect for me? To his love for me, since he addressed his last words to me? And to the fact that he takes responsibility for his own death, releasing me from all blame? It's there in black and white.

I waited nervously to hear the jury's verdict in my mind. It came swift and certain: "We find the defendant, Drew Leder, *not guilty*." I was exultant. It might seem that the judgment would be no great surprise. After all, I was not only the defense lawyer, but every jury member as well. But in another way I *was* surprised. To win such a reversal after all these years was an exhilarating shock.

But I wanted more. Not just my exoneration, but the exposure and capture of the true murderer, for the new evidence introduced in court made his identity increasingly clear. It wasn't my mother, though I had often blamed family tragedy on her. Nor was it my brother or father, though they had committed violent acts. No, I thought, the true killer was . . . (Perry Mason pause)—none other than the *prosecutor*.

The obsessive illness that was prosecuting me had done the same to my family: It had filled my brother and father with self-loathing and soul-destroying guilt. It tortured them right into their graves. It was a serial killer, now hot on my trail. But I will not go gently, I will not die.

For the inmates, "getting out of prison" often began with acknowledging they did the crime, no one else to blame. For me, I had to realize the opposite, "*I didn't do it*." But just as for the prisoners, writing this book is, for me, part of getting free. I am overleaping barbed-wired walls of secrecy and shame. And this writing has helped me understand some of what brought me to the Maryland Pen to begin with. I was exploring what I had in common with these lifers—rage, violence, death, guilt, and the potential for healing and transformation. But I was also exploring what set me off from the men. They did their crimes. I didn't. They lived in prison. I visited. At the end of each teaching day, I *was able to leave*. In that experience of leaving prison, time and again, I was physically rehearsing for that soul-act that H.B. calls "getting out of prison."

Then too, the fact that I am writing this at three o'clock Christmas morning reminds me that getting out of prison, at least for me, has required divine help. I think of Psalm 107:

Some were living in gloom and darkness,
fettered in misery and irons. . . .

Then they called to Yahweh in their trouble
and he rescued them from their sufferings;
releasing them from gloom and darkness,
shattering their chains.

Let these thank Yahweh for his love,
for his marvels on behalf of men;
breaking bronze gates open,
he smashes iron bars.

Three vignettes come to mind that have demonstrated to me God's power to free the prisoner. Number one: I was meeting my ex-girlfriend for the first time a year after our breakup. We had been together some seven years, so the split was still achingly raw, bringing up the feelings of all my other deaths. But when I saw her that day in New York's Washington Square Park, what struck me most was the new life in her. She seemed much happier, more confident, at ease. Was getting away from me such a wonderful tonic? No. She said it was all due to God. But, she wasn't into proselytizing. In fact, given that we had both been atheists, or at least agnostics, she was afraid I'd think her weird. But I didn't. I had already found myself drawn to spiritual matters and I could see how she had changed.

Then a strange thing happened. She was speaking of finding God through the Twelve Steps (the first I'd really heard of this approach), when suddenly a voice boomed out from the heavens: "THIS IS THE LORD. WAKE UP!" I kid you not. My friend heard it too. We looked around stunned, then realized what had happened. A drunk lay on the ground some twenty feet from us (this was, after all, Washington Square Park) and a patrol car had pulled alongside. The officer had delivered a jocular warning over the car's loudspeaker: "THIS IS THE LORD. WAKE UP!" And the drunk reluctantly struggled to do so.

We laughed. That's when I first learned God had a sense of humor. Yet how apt the message. The whole talk with my friend was like a wake-up call, punctuated by that divine announcement. I was learning for the first time about the Twelve Steps, and witnessing evidence of their power in my friend. It was me who was being shouted awake. I was like that drunk in the dirt. After all, my life-killing obsessions were just as intractable, as inebriating, as booze to a sot. But that's why the Twelve Step program could help me.

I'm reminded of the story where Jesus is brought to a young girl who he's told has died. He took her by the hand and said to her, "Talitha cumi," which means "Little girl, get up!" and she awakens (Mark 5:39-41). On that day I heard God say "Talitha cumi" to me through the mouth of the NYPD.

A year later I began to work the Steps, that ex-girlfriend as my sponsor. Which brings me to the second vignette. Soon thereafter, though spiritually but a babe in arms, I desperately needed help with a life decision. I was wavering (or more accurately, obsessing) between two different career paths. Should I be a doctor as my father, the internist, and my mother, the Jewish mother, had pushed me toward since I was a fetus? (Okay, maybe I'm exaggerating a little.) Or should I be a philosopher, the other career path I'd been pursuing? I was simultaneously finishing medical school and my philosophy Ph.D., and it was time to actually choose and get a job. (But I'm only thirty!) However, I'd found that I simply couldn't choose. I'd make lists of the attributes of one career path, then the other, and somehow the lists would exactly cancel out. Fellow obsessives will understand. In fact, either choice seemed equally bleak. I was paralyzed by fear, and even more so by the weight of ancient parental pressures. I knew I needed spiritual help to get free.

So, what would God have me choose? I asked. The answer didn't seem hard to infer. I should, of course, be a doctor. Philosophy was a fun mental game, but medicine was where you did the Lord's work—helping the sick and suffering, literally saving lives. No getting around it, medicine was my calling, reluctant though I was to embrace it.

I explained that to a good friend in New York. A fellow medical student, she had been a Classics professor before deciding at age forty to recommit her life. She surely would understand the power of medicine as a calling. But her response did not confirm my choice. Though herself agnostic, she asked, "Wouldn't God want you to do something that really makes you happy?" Having dissected a cadaver together, she also knew me inside-out. "There must be enough people around who really want to be doctors. God can use them."

Riding home that day on the Long Island Railroad I pondered her unsettling words. What, after all, did God want of me? Suddenly I was struck between the eyes by a powerful realization. My image of God was none other than that of my own parents, blown up big and projected on the heavens. My certainty that God wanted me to be a doctor—wasn't this just because my parents had wanted that? Sure, I had transposed some of the lyrics, but the music was the same. My parents had wanted medicine for me because, along with its altruistic goals, it represented the most prestige, most money, most security. The top of the top. Now I was reimagining that in spiritual terms—medicine as the most sacred calling, where you relieved the most suffering, saved the most lives. But it was just my mother's voice in Olympian disguise. I really had no idea what the real God wanted.

And this insight opened up what came next. A series of ideas hit me with a magnum force that forever changed my life. First—"God wants me to be a college teacher." In a moment, I felt this message surely true. And why that? Because, I suddenly understood, that was the true longing of my heart. I had a passion for ideas that doctoring would never satisfy. I wanted to read great works, teach students, write books. I realized in that instant, maybe for the first time, that "God's will" was not some iron band imposed from without (as my mother's will had so often seemed), but one and the same with my soul's deepest yearnings. This was a joyful surprise! But what of the rescue work I had anticipated doing in medicine (psychiatry, to be precise)? I heard the answer—such work would be done through the Twelve Steps. This would be my instrument to help others who, like myself, were suffering. Unlike professional psychiatry, there would be no pretense that I was the well one, while they were the sick. No superiority or profit interest should color my work. God was cleaning all that out in order to make me more truly of service to others, and healthier within myself.

When I got off the train in Stony Brook I was in an exultant state. As I write these words now on Christmas morning I am reminded of how that day the whole world felt like Christmas. I'd been given the gift of a brand-new life. Years, no, decades of obsession about how I'd *have* to be a doctor (though I never wanted to) had been swept away on that train-ride home. I got to be who I wished, who I was. I found myself, hokey as it seems, hugging a dog, marveling at the beauty of trees, and singing over and over, "Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see."

And that brings me to a third getting-out-of-prison vignette. Years later, having found a job as a college teacher (things unfolded with ease and direction after that first day) I was well satisfied with my new career. But still miserable in life. I mean bordering on suicidal. Racked with depression and self-hatred. A nonprofit Twelve-Step-based organization I had been a part of for years had booted me out of its membership. More accurately, I had been "asked to resign." Who could blame them? I wasn't recovering, wasn't working the Steps, wasn't contributing to or supportive of the group's mission. But the problems went deeper. I now see, to my obsessive guilt. I was tearing myself to shreds, and no matter how I wrote endless inventories or prayed, I couldn't or wouldn't stop the pain. God seemed as absent as He could be. The power of death was everywhere, filling our house with its musty odor. I was stymied. When even the God-stuff doesn't seem to work, what's left? It was December, the days growing cold and short, and bringing with them a profound desolation. Then a thought occurred to me, "Why not ask for help from Jesus?"

To gauge the desperation of this maneuver you have to place yourself in the shoes of a nice Jewish boy, brought up to associate Jesus with Chris-

tianity, and hence pogroms, inquisitions, forced conversions, and TV preachers. But in reading the Bible and talking with friends, I had come to a very different impression. Jesus, I realized, wasn't a Christian, but a Jew. He was a reform Rabbi, his teachings steeped in Torah. Anyway, I wasn't primarily concerned with theological reflection just then. I was trying to save my life. And Jesus (or Yeshua, to use his Hebrew name, not the Latinized form) seemed my last hope. It was there in his name—"Yeshua" means "God saves." Another of his names, "Emmanuel," means "God is with us." I needed a saving God right there with me, as I'd met in Washington Square Park, and on the LIRR, but had so lost since. Maybe Yeshua could turn the key, open the door to my own soul. He was the repository, by many accounts, of great healing power. And he had come to make this power manifest first and foremost (by his own account) to fellow Jews. Particularly those most in dire straits—the blind, the crippled, the paralyzed. That's exactly how I felt. He was the Last Chance Motel at the end of the line.

Though it was cold December, that meant Christmas was approaching. In preparation I prayed that Yeshua be born within my heart, singing the Christmas carol based on Isaiah 9:6, "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The Mighty God, The Everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace." I needed that God-birth within.

And the baby emerged, as any infant, from an orgy of blood and suffering. I'll never forget that horrendous time. But since then the process of the child's maturation has been slow but real. There's no single moment that captures it, unlike the Washington Square or LIRR stories. Yet, day by day, year by year, bones knit, muscles develop, and the infant grows into adulthood. My sense of God's saving power ever strengthens. And Yeshua, Emmanuel, helped unlock that power, and remains a conduit of grace to this day. I've since become a Quaker, but am proud to be a *Jewish* Quaker. I see no reason to convert to Christianity (Yeshua certainly never left Judaism), and I don't believe many of the theological tenets most Christians would accept. But I am nonetheless summoned to joy and gratitude this fine Christmas morning.

In such ways, and a dozen others, I've experienced God releasing this prisoner. And that brings me around to another prisoner with whom my life intertwined. "But when you *get out of prison*," H.B. had said, "you get out before you leave." No one exemplified this principle better than H.B. himself. From a two-bit addict and thief he had transformed himself into an acclaimed poet, essayist, and playwright. He had rebuilt his life on a foundation of core principles: Treat yourself and others with dignity, and demand the same back. Speak up the truth even when others remain silent. Language is our most precious gift; use it with care, caress it to life, don't let it slide into bullshit. Don't make friends too easily, but when you

find one, stand by him for life. Acts of kindness are more precious than jewels: never let them pass unnoticed.

H.B. didn't articulate these messages so much as embody them in his actions. The very way he walked, slow and erect, proclaimed "I stand before you a free man." It didn't matter that every manuscript he sent out bore a penitentiary return address. He had gotten out of his prisons: an eighth-grade education, uncontrolled rage, a heroin habit, to name but a few. At night, while others slept, he had woven a zone of freedom using writing as his loom.

I remember the day he casually told me after class, "I've got AIDS."

"You're HIV positive?" I asked.

"No. AIDS. Full-blown. But don't get upset. It's not such a big deal."

He wasn't interested in sucking on the sweet teat of sympathy. His health was just starting to fail, with night sweats, lung-thickened plugs, and the other small purgatories that wear you down and presage the hell yet to come. But H.B. wasn't buying into this AIDS shit. He continued to write late into the night no matter what the next day's toll. When he told me I felt stunned and saddened. It seemed like a cliché from a badly written play—the convict who turns his life around only to lose it to deadly disease. Years ago, H.B. said, he'd been shooting up drugs obtained from a guard and had shared a dirty needle. Although he later got off drugs it was too late.

"No. Stop the presses!" I wanted to shout. This isn't the right ending to H.B.'s last play. He's not supposed to die, emaciated and forgotten in a prison ward, a guard picking his teeth in the corner. Something had to be done. But what, I wondered? The answer came welling up from within: "Try to get him out."

Yes, but how in the world to proceed? H.B. was in the ninth year of a thirty-five-year sentence for attempted murder, *without possibility of parole*. Yet surely, given his illness, his newfound celebrity as a writer, his power as an example of "rehabilitation" (that word Tony hates), he'd be the perfect candidate for a commutation. I tracked down a lawyer savvy in such matters. He confirmed that it was a long shot but not impossible. Still, I felt stuck. I wasn't sure what to do next, paralyzed by the responsibility. What if there was some way of getting him out but I botched the effort? He'd die in jail because of me. After my family history I was leery of this rescuing-lives type of thing and the guilt attendant upon failure. Should I back away from the whole thing? But that would only bring its own guilt and failure.

So I did some serious praying. "If it's your will that H.B. get out, you'd better show me what to do." In AA, God is sometimes said to stand for Good Orderly Direction. And that's what I received that day—a series of action steps to take in appropriate flowchart order. Follow up with the lawyer. Draft a petition. Contact appropriate signees, especially those well

known or with possible influence on the governor. Etc. But it wasn't only these directions that set my mind at ease. There was also a message concerning the outcome. I found my thoughts drawn to Moses, of all people—how he stood on the mountain and surveyed the promised land but was not permitted to enter it. He died first. Why? One reason the Midrash gives is that Moses had earlier slain an Egyptian (Exodus 2:11–12). Even this man who led a whole people to freedom couldn't escape responsibility for his past. And I heard God saying, so it will be with H.B. He will see the promised land but will not enter because of the violence he has perpetrated.

I understood this to mean that my efforts to secure H.B.'s release would surely fail. Surprising as it might seem, I found this comforting. I didn't need to worry so about screwing up. No matter what I did, success was out of the question. But I still felt guided to go through with the attempt. This would allow H.B. to gaze at the promised land of freedom. He'd have hope. And even if that hope died, H.B. would still know his friends had stood by him until the end.

And so we did. Mike Bowler, who as op-ed editor for the *Baltimore Evening Sun*, had run pieces by H.B., now threw himself into gaining his release. Mike knew local politicians and friends of the governor and how to work with the governor's staff. Never mind that Governor William Schaefer almost never commuted sentences, and that when he had in the past, he had sometimes been burned. We had a strong case. We'd persuade him. An array of people participated who knew H.B. personally or through his writing. We sent the governor a letter with some twenty-five signatures, then kept the pot boiling with phone calls, individual notes, and new supporters.

Consideration proceeded with all the glacial speed characteristic of bureaucracy. As Tony said, "You could be sending out to the street for something positive or negative. You still going to wait." And so we, and H.B., waited and waited for word. Now and again our hopes would ascend—H.B.'s case has been remanded to the parole board for possible medical commutation—only to be slapped back down again: he's not sick enough to qualify. For medical release, we were told, you've got to be incapacitated and on the verge of imminent death. That way you can't really do much damage on the street. I understand the logic. But it was like a cruel jest to H.B.: "When you're emaciated, demented, and at death's door, *then* you can have your freedom."

I tried to remind myself that the whole affair was hopeless to begin with. Remember that Moses message? But I had never shared it with H.B. It seemed that our efforts were raising his hopes only to leave them dashed. Had I done him a kindness or needless cruelty?

After weeks of up-again, down-again signs and confusion, one day a definitive message came through. The governor had decided to commute.

That's right. Commute. I was stunned, elated, and exhausted all at once. H.B. was actually getting out of prison. It soon became clear there'd be a number of conditions attached; most important, for six months H.B. would be stuck on home detention (or, as he put it, under house arrest), his every move monitored electronically. So what? Home is home. We planned a party to celebrate his return, with banners, music, and a whole lot of food. The invitation said it all: *"He's Out. Let's Eat!"*

But the party, it turned out, was for more than just H.B.'s release. That same week his new play won first prize in the WMAR-TV Black Playwrights contest. He became the only person to have ever captured this award twice. The first time he'd been unable to attend his own premiere. Not this time. He was going, and going in style.

These days, with all H.B. went through since his release, it's nice to think back on that evening. The video of the prize-winning *Smooth Disappointment* was being shown to an invited audience prior to its telecast. H.B. was determined to do it up right. Maybe he was making up for the other premiere he had missed; for all those nights spent in a dingy prison cell, for a whole fucked-up life. Whatever. I remember, one, two, three stretch limos pulling up to his inner-city apartment, each white as snow, equipped with a TV, a personal bar (nonalcoholic beverages), and most of all, filled with family and friends. It was H.B.'s way of saying thanks to those who had stuck by him, and of celebrating his own freedom. Sub-sisting on SSI checks, and occasional writing sales, he didn't really have that kind of money. But this was of no concern that night. When you're not going to be around for too long, you grab the moment.

He accepted his award with customary flourish, dressed in a stylish black coat and beret. By special dispensation, he had been allowed out of home detention until 1 a.m. Violation could land his ass back in jail. As speeches went on and on, and H.B. lingered to shake hands, I remember nervously eyeing the clock. 12:15, 12:30, 12:45. I waited for that witching hour when the limos would turn into pumpkins, the drivers into white mice, and H.B. risked being thrown back in jail. But he would not be rushed. "We'll make it," he said, and he was correct. We arrived home right on the dot. Having gotten out of prison, he wasn't going back.

Changing Selves

Malcolm X went through many different identities. Born in 1925 in Omaha, Nebraska, as Malcolm Little, he joined the Black Muslims while in prison (1946-1952) for robbery. He later became the organization's national minister, preaching black separatism and nationalism until a trip to Africa and a pilgrimage to Mecca changed certain of his views. He left the organization and converted to orthodox Islam before his tragic assassination in 1965. What is your true self? How do you change identities? How do you make the new self stick? Malcolm's life raises these questions for the men.

Double Identity

For evil to bend its knees, admitting its guilt, to implore the forgiveness of God, is the hardest thing in the world. It's easy for me to see and to say that now. But then, when I was the personification of evil, I was going through it. Again, again, I would force myself back down into the praying-to-Allah posture. When finally I was able to make myself stay down—I didn't know what to say to Allah.

For the next years, I was the nearest thing to a hermit in the Norfolk Prison Colony. I never have been more busy in my life. I still marvel at how swiftly my previous life's thinking pattern slid away from me, like snow off a roof. It is as though someone else I knew of had lived by hustling and crime. I would be startled to catch myself thinking in a remote way of my earlier self as another person. (Malcolm X with Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 170)

O'Donald: The first time I got locked up I was ten. I was in training school, and I didn't know nobody and I was scared, terribly scared, but I didn't want nobody to see it. A priest came in and was telling us how we could give our life to Christ, and at night when we went back to the dorm, I stayed up and prayed. And after that I was able to go to sleep. When I woke up that night the fear was gone. It's like I had peace inside.