The Road Less Traveled

A NEW PSYCHOLOGY OF LOVE, TRADITIONAL VALUES AND SPIRITUAL GROWTH

M. SCOTT PECK, M.D.

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To my parents,
Elizabeth and David,
whose discipline and love
gave me the eyes
to see grace

Introduction Written for the 25th Anniversary Edition of The Road Less Traveled

> Tomorrow a stranger will say with masterly good sense precisely what we have thought and felt all the time.
>
> —Ralph Waldo Emerson,
> "Self Reliance"

The most common response I have received to *The Road Less Traveled* in letters from readers has been one of gratitude for my courage, not for saying anything new, but for writing about the kind of things they had been thinking and feeling all along, but were afraid to talk about.

I am not clear about the matter of courage. A certain kind of congenital obliviousness might be a more proper term. A patient of mine during the book's early days happened to be at a cocktail party where she overheard a conversation between my mother and another elderly woman. Referring to the book, the other woman said, "You certainly must be very proud of your son, Scotty." To which my mother replied, in the sometimes tart way of the elderly, "Proud? No, not particularly. It didn't have anything to do with me. It's his mind, you see. It's a gift." I think my mother was wrong in saying that she had nothing to do with it, but I think she was accurate my authorship of *The Road* was the result of a gift—on many levels.

One part of that gift goes way back. Lily, my wife, and I had made friends with a younger man, Tom, who had grown up in the same summer colony as I. During those summers I had played with his older brothers, and his mother had known me as a child. One night a few years before *The Road* was published, Tom was

coming to have dinner with us. He was staying with his mother at the time, and the evening before he had said to her, "Mom, I'm going to have dinner tomorrow night with Scott Peck. Do you remember him?"

"Oh yes," she responded, "he was that little boy who was always talking about the kinds of things that people shouldn't talk about."

So you can see that part of the gift goes way back. And you may also understand I was something of a "stranger" within the prevailing culture of my youth.

Since I was an unknown author, *The Road* was published without fanfare. Its astonishing commercial success was a very gradual phenomenon. It did not appear on the national bestseller lists until five years after its publication in 1978—a fact for which I am extremely grateful. Had it been an overnight success I doubt very much that I would have been mature enough to handle sudden fame. In any case, it was a sleeper and what is called in the trade a "word-of-mouth book." Slowly at first, knowledge of it spread by word of mouth by several routes. One of them was Alcoholics Anonymous. Indeed, the very first fan letter I received began: "Dear Dr. Peck, you must be an alcoholic!" The writer found it difficult to imagine that I could have written such a book without having been a long-term member of AA and humbled by alcoholism.

Had *The Road* been published twenty years previously, I doubt it would have been even slightly successful. Alcoholics Anonymous did not really get off the ground until the mid-1950s (not that most of the book's readers were alcoholics). Even more important, the same was true for the practice of psychotherapy. The result was that by 1978, when *The Road* was originally published, a large number of women and men in the United States were both psychologically and spiritually sophisticated and had begun to deeply contemplate "all the kinds of things that people shouldn't talk about." They were almost literally waiting for someone to say such things out loud.

So it was that the popularity of *The Road* snowballed, and so it is

that its popularity has continued. Even toward the end of my career on the lecture circuit, I would tell my audiences: "You are not an average cross section of America. However, there are striking things that you have in common. One is the remarkable number of you who have during the course of your lives undergone—or are still undergoing—significant psychotherapy either within the Twelve Step programs or at the hands of traditional academically trained therapists. I doubt you will feel that I am violating your confidentiality when I ask all of you here who have received or are receiving such therapy to raise your hands."

Ninety-five percent of my audience would raise their hands. "Now look around," I would tell them.

"This has major implications," I would then continue. "One of them is that you are a body of people who have begun to transcend traditional culture." By transcending traditional culture I meant, among other things, that they were people who had long begun to think about the kinds of things that people shouldn't talk about. And they would agree when I elaborated on what I meant by "transcending traditional culture" and the extraordinary significance of this phenomenon.

A few have called me a prophet. I can accept such a seemingly grandiose title only because many have pointed out that a prophet is not someone who can see the future, but merely someone who can read the signs of the times. *The Road* was a success primarily because it was a book for its time; its audience made it a success.

My naive fantasy when *The Road* first came out twenty-five years ago was that it would be reviewed in newspapers throughout the nation. The reality was that, by pure grace, it received a single review . . . but what a review! For a significant part of the success of the book I must give credit to Phyllis Theroux. Phyllie, a very fine author in her own right, was also a book reviewer at the time and accidentally happened to discover an advance copy among a pile of books in the office of the book editor of *The Washington Post.* After scanning the table of contents she took it home with her, returning two days later to demand she be allowed to review

it. Almost reluctantly the editor agreed, whereupon Phyllie set out, in her own words, "to deliberately craft a review that would make the book a bestseller." And so she did. Within a week of her review *The Road* was on the Washington, D.C., bestseller list, years before it would get on any national list. It was just enough, however, to get the book started.

I am grateful to Phyllis for another reason. As the book grew in popularity, wanting to assure that I would have the humility to keep my feet on the ground, she told me, "It's not your book, you know."

Immediately I understood what she meant. In no way do either of us mean that *The Road* was the literal word of God or otherwise "channeled" material. I did the writing, and there are a number of places in the book where I wish I had chosen better words or phrases. It is not perfect, and I am wholly responsible for its flaws. Nonetheless, perhaps because it was needed, despite its flaws, there is no question in my mind that as I wrote the book in the solitude of my cramped little office I had help. I really cannot explain that help, but the experience of it is hardly unique. Indeed, such help is the ultimate subject of the book itself.

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Preface

The ideas herein presented stem, for the most part, from my day-to-day clinical work with patients as they struggled to avoid or to gain ever greater levels of maturity. Consequently, this book contains portions of many actual case histories. Confidentiality is essential to psychiatric practice, and all case descriptions, therefore, have been altered in name and in other particulars so as to preserve the anonymity of my patients without distorting the essential reality of our experience with each other.

There may, however, be some distortion by virtue of the brevity of the case presentations. Psychotherapy is seldom a brief process, but since I have, of necessity, focused on the highlights of a case, the reader may be left with the impression that the process is one of drama and clarity. The drama is real and clarity may eventually be achieved, but it should be remembered that in the interest of readability, accounts of the lengthy periods of confusion and frustration inherent in most therapy have been omitted from these case descriptions.

I would also like to apologize for continually referring to God in the traditionally masculine image, but I have done so in the interest of simplicity rather than from any rigidly held concept as to gender.

As a psychiatrist, I feel it is important to mention at the outset two assumptions that underlie this book. One is that I make no distinction between the mind and the spirit, and therefore no distinction between the process of achieving spiritual growth and achieving mental growth. They are one and the same.

The other assumption is that this process is a complex, arduous and lifelong task. Psychotherapy, if it is to provide substantial assistance to the process of mental and spiritual growth, is not a quick or simple procedure. I do not belong to any particular school of psychiatry or psychotherapy; I am not simply a Freudian or Jungian or Adlerian or behaviorist or gestaltist. I do not believe there are any single easy answers. I believe that brief forms of psychotherapy may be helpful and are not to be decried, but the help they provide is inevitably superficial.

The journey of spiritual growth is a long one. I would like to thank those of my patients who have given me the privilege of accompanying them for major portions of their journey. For their journey has also been mine, and much of what is presented here is what we have learned together. I would also like to thank many of my teachers and colleagues. Principal among them is my wife, Lily. She has been so giving that it is hardly possible to distinguish her wisdom as a spouse, parent, psychotherapist, and person from my own.

SECTION I

Discipline

Problems and Pain

Life is difficult.

This is a great truth, one of the greatest truths.* It is a great truth because once we truly see this truth, we transcend it. Once we truly know that life is difficult—once we truly understand and accept it—then life is no longer difficult. Because once it is accepted, the fact that life is difficult no longer matters.

Most do not fully see this truth that life is difficult. Instead they moan more or less incessantly, noisily or subtly, about the enormity of their problems, their burdens, and their difficulties as if life were generally easy, as if life *should* be easy. They voice their belief, noisily or subtly, that their difficulties represent a unique kind of affliction that should not be and that has somehow been especially visited upon them, or else upon their families, their tribe, their class, their nation, their race or even their species, and not upon others. I know about this moaning because I have done my share.

Life is a series of problems. Do we want to moan about them or solve them? Do we want to teach our children to solve them?

Discipline is the basic set of tools we require to solve life's problems. Without discipline we can solve nothing. With only

* The first of the "Four Noble Truths" which Buddha taught was "Life is suffering."

some discipline we can solve only some problems. With total discipline we can solve all problems.

What makes life difficult is that the process of confronting and solving problems is a painful one. Problems, depending upon their nature, evoke in us frustration or grief or sadness or loneliness or guilt or regret or anger or fear or anxiety or anguish or despair. These are uncomfortable feelings, often very uncomfortable, often as painful as any kind of physical pain, sometimes equaling the very worst kind of physical pain. Indeed, it is *because* of the pain that events or conflicts engender in us all that we call them problems. And since life poses an endless series of problems, life is always difficult and is full of pain as well as joy.

Yet it is in this whole process of meeting and solving problems that life has its meaning. Problems are the cutting edge that distinguishes between success and failure. Problems call forth our courage and our wisdom; indeed, they create our courage and our wisdom. It is only because of problems that we grow mentally and spiritually. When we desire to encourage the growth of the human spirit, we challenge and encourage the human capacity to solve problems, just as in school we deliberately set problems for our children to solve. It is through the pain of confronting and resolving problems that we learn. As Benjamin Franklin said, "Those things that hurt, instruct." It is for this reason that wise people learn not to dread but actually to welcome problems and actually to welcome the pain of problems.

Most of us are not so wise. Fearing the pain involved, almost all of us, to a greater or lesser degree, attempt to avoid problems. We procrastinate, hoping that they will go away. We ignore them, forget them, pretend they do not exist. We even take drugs to assist us in ignoring them, so that by deadening ourselves to the pain we can forget the problems that cause the pain. We attempt to skirt around problems rather than meet them head on. We attempt to get out of them rather than suffer through them.

This tendency to avoid problems and the emotional suffer-

ing inherent in them is the primary basis of all human mental illness. Since most of us have this tendency to a greater or lesser degree, most of us are mentally ill to a greater or lesser degree, lacking complete mental health. Some of us will go to quite extraordinary lengths to avoid our problems and the suffering they cause, proceeding far afield from all that is clearly good and sensible in order to try to find an easy way out, building the most elaborate fantasies in which to live, sometimes to the total exclusion of reality. In the succinctly elegant words of Carl Jung, "Neurosis is always a substitute for legitimate suffering."*

But the substitute itself ultimately becomes more painful than the legitimate suffering it was designed to avoid. The neurosis itself becomes the biggest problem. True to form, many will then attempt to avoid this pain and this problem in turn, building layer upon layer of neurosis. Fortunately, however, some possess the courage to face their neuroses and begin—usually with the help of psychotherapy—to learn how to experience legitimate suffering. In any case, when we avoid the legitimate suffering that results from dealing with problems, we also avoid the growth that problems demand from us. It is for this reason that in chronic mental illness we stop growing, we become stuck. And without healing, the human spirit begins to shrivel.

Therefore let us inculcate in ourselves and in our children the means of achieving mental and spiritual health. By this I mean let us teach ourselves and our children the necessity for suffering and the value thereof, the need to face problems directly and to experience the pain involved. I have stated that discipline is the basic set of tools we require to solve life's problems. It will become clear that these tools are techniques of suffering, means by which we experience the pain of problems in such a way as to work them through and solve them

* *Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, Bollingen Ser., No. 20, 2d ed. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1973), trans. R. F. C. Hull, Vol II, *Psychology and Religion: West and East*, 75.

successfully, learning and growing in the process. When we teach ourselves and our children discipline, we are teaching them and ourselves how to suffer and also how to grow.

What are these tools, these techniques of suffering, these means of experiencing the pain of problems constructively that I call discipline? There are four: delaying of gratification, acceptance of responsibility, dedication to truth, and balancing. As will be evident, these are not complex tools whose application demands extensive training. To the contrary, they are simple tools, and almost all children are adept in their use by the age of ten. Yet presidents and kings will often forget to use them, to their own downfall. The problem lies not in the complexity of these tools but in the will to use them. For they are tools with which pain is confronted rather than avoided, and if one seeks to avoid legitimate suffering, then one will avoid the use of these tools. Therefore, after analyzing each of these tools, we shall in the next section examine the will to use them, which is love.

Delaying Gratification

Not too long ago a thirty-year-old financial analyst was complaining to me over a period of months about her tendency to procrastinate in her job. We had worked through her feelings about her employers and how they related to feelings about authority in general, and to her parents specifically. We had examined her attitudes toward work and success and how these related to her marriage, her sexual identity, her desire to compete with her husband, and her fears of such competition. Yet despite all this standard and painstaking psychoanalytic work, she continued to procrastin-

ate as much as ever. Finally, one day, we dared to look at the obvious. "Do you like cake?" I asked her. She replied that she did. "Which part of the cake do you like better," I went on, "the cake or the frosting?" "Oh, the frosting!" she responded enthusiastically. "And how do you eat a piece of cake?" I inquired, feeling that I must be the most inane psychiatrist that ever lived. "I eat the frosting first, of course," she replied. From her cake-eating habits we went on to examine her work habits, and, as was to be expected, discovered that on any given day she would devote the first hour to the more gratifying half of her work and the remaining six hours getting around to the objectionable remainder. I suggested that if she were to force herself to accomplish the unpleasant part of her job during the first hour, she would then be free to enjoy the other six. It seemed to me, I said, that one hour of pain followed by six of pleasure was preferable to one hour of pleasure followed by six of pain. She agreed, and, being basically a person of strong will, she no longer procrastinates.

Delaying gratification is a process of scheduling the pain and pleasure of life in such a way as to enhance the pleasure by meeting and experiencing the pain first and getting it over with. It is the only decent way to live.

This tool or process of scheduling is learned by most children quite early in life, sometimes as early as age five. For instance, occasionally a five-year-old when playing a game with a companion will suggest that the companion take first turn, so that the child might enjoy his or her turn later. At age six children may start eating their cake first and the frosting last. Throughout grammar school this early capacity to delay gratification is daily exercised, particularly through the performance of homework. By the age of twelve some children are already able to sit down on occasion without any parental prompting and complete their homework before they watch television. By the age of fifteen or sixteen such behavior is expected of the adolescent and is considered normal.

It becomes clear to their educators at this age, however, that a substantial number of adolescents fall far short of this

norm. While many have a well-developed capacity to delay gratification, some fifteen- or sixteen-year-olds seem to have hardly developed this capacity at all; indeed, some seem even to lack the capacity entirely. These are the problem students. Despite average or better intelligence, their grades are poor simply because they do not work. They skip classes or skip school entirely on the whim of the moment. They are impulsive, and their impulsiveness spills over into their social life as well. They get into frequent fights, they become involved with drugs, they begin to get in trouble with the police. Play now, pay later, is their motto. So the psychologists and psychotherapists are called in. But most of the time it seems too late. These adolescents are resentful of any attempt to intervene in their life style of impulsiveness, and even when this resentment can be overcome by warmth and friendliness and a nonjudgmental attitude on the part of the therapist, their impulsiveness is often so severe that it precludes their participation in the process of psychotherapy in any meaningful way. They miss their appointments. They avoid all important and painful issues. So usually the attempt at intervention fails, and these children drop out of school, only to continue a pattern of failure that frequently lands them in disastrous marriages, in accidents, in psychiatric hospitals or in jail.

Why is this? Why do a majority develop a capacity to delay gratification while a substantial minority fail, often irretrievably, to develop this capacity. The answer is not absolutely, scientifically known. The role of genetic factors is unclear. The variables cannot be sufficiently controlled for scientific proof. But most of the signs rather clearly point to the quality of parenting as the determinant.

The Sins of the Father

It is not that the homes of these unself-disciplined children are lacking in parental discipline of a sort. More often than not these children are punished frequently and severely throughout their childhood—slapped, punched, kicked, beaten and whipped by their parents for even minor infractions. But this discipline is meaningless. Because it is undisciplined discipline.

One reason that it is meaningless is that the parents themselves are unself-disciplined, and therefore serve as undisciplined role models for their children. They are the "Do as I say, not as I do" parents. They may frequently get drunk in front of their children. They may fight with each other in front of the children without restraint, dignity or rationality. They may be slovenly. They make promises they don't keep. Their own lives are frequently and obviously in disorder and disarray, and their attempts to order the lives of their children seem therefore to make little sense to these children. If father beats up mother regularly, what sense does it make to a boy when his mother beats him up because he beat up his sister? Does it make sense when he's told that he must learn to control his temper? Since we do not have the benefit of comparison when we are young, our parents are godlike figures to our childish eyes. When parents do things a certain way, it seems to the young child the way to do them, the way they should be done. If a child sees his parents day in and day out behaving with self-discipline, restraint, dignity and a capacity to order their own lives, then the child will come to feel in the deepest fibers of his being that this is the way to live. If a

child sees his parents day in and day out living without self-restraint or self-discipline, then he will come in the deepest fibers of being to believe that that is the way to live.

Yet even more important than role modeling is love. For even in chaotic and disordered homes genuine love is occasionally present, and from such homes may come self-disciplined children. And not infrequently parents who are professional people—doctors, lawyers, club women and philanthropists—who lead lives of strict orderliness and decorum but yet lack love, send children into the world who are as undisciplined and destructive and disorganized as any child from an impoverished and chaotic home.

Ultimately love is everything. The mystery of love will be examined in later portions of this work. Yet, for the sake of coherency, it may be helpful to make a brief but limited mention of it and its relationship to discipline at this point.

When we love something it is of value to us, and when something is of value to us we spend time with it, time enjoying it and time taking care of it. Observe a teenager in love with his car and note the time he will spend admiring it, polishing it, repairing it, tuning it. Or an older person with a beloved rose garden, and the time spent pruning and mulching and fertilizing and studying it. So it is when we love children; we spend time admiring them and caring for them. We give them our time.

Good discipline requires time. When we have no time to give our children, or no time that we are willing to give, we don't even observe them closely enough to become aware of when their need for our disciplinary assistance is expressed subtly. If their need for discipline is so gross as to impinge upon our consciousness, we may still ignore the need on the grounds that it's easier to let them have their own way—"I just don't have the energy to deal with them today." Or, finally, if we are impelled into action by their misdeeds and our irritation, we will impose discipline, often brutally, out of anger rather than deliberation, without examining the

problem or even taking the time to consider which form of discipline is the most appropriate to that particular problem.

The parents who devote time to their children even when it is not demanded by glaring misdeeds will perceive in them subtle needs for discipline, to which they will respond with gentle urging or reprimand or structure or praise, administered with thoughtfulness and care. They will observe how their children eat cake, how they study, when they tell subtle falsehoods, when they run away from problems rather than face them. They will take the time to make these minor corrections and adjustments, listening to their children, responding to them, tightening a little here, loosening a little there, giving them little lectures, little stories, little hugs and kisses, little admonishments, little pats on the back.

So it is that the quality of discipline afforded by loving parents is superior to the discipline of unloving parents. But this is just the beginning. In taking the time to observe and to think about their children's needs, loving parents will frequently agonize over the decisions to be made, and will, in a very real sense, suffer along with their children. The children are not blind to this. They perceive it when their parents are willing to suffer with them, and although they may not respond with immediate gratitude, they will learn also to suffer. "If my parents are willing to suffer with me," they will tell themselves, "then suffering must not be so bad, and I should be willing to suffer with myself." This is the beginning of self-discipline.

The time and the quality of the time that their parents devote to them indicate to children the degree to which they are valued by their parents. Some basically unloving parents, in an attempt to cover up their lack of caring, make frequent professions of love to their children, repetitively and mechanically telling them how much they are valued, but not devoting significant time of high quality to them. Their children are never totally deceived by such hollow words. Consciously they may cling to them, wanting to believe that they are

loved, but unconsciously they know that their parents' words do not match up with their deeds.

On the other hand, children who are truly loved, although in moments of pique they may consciously feel or proclaim that they are being neglected, unconsciously know themselves to be valued. This knowledge is worth more than any gold. For when children know that they are valued, when they truly feel valued in the deepest parts of themselves, then they feel valuable.

The feeling of being valuable—"I am a valuable person"—is essential to mental health and is a cornerstone of self-discipline. It is a direct product of parental love. Such a conviction must be gained in childhood; it is extremely difficult to acquire it during adulthood. Conversely, when children have learned through the love of their parents to feel valuable, it is almost impossible for the vicissitudes of adulthood to destroy their spirit.

This feeling of being valuable is a cornerstone of self-discipline because when one considers oneself valuable one will take care of oneself in all ways that are necessary. Self-discipline is self-caring. For instance—since we are discussing the process of delaying gratification, of scheduling and ordering time—let us examine the matter of time. If we feel ourselves valuable, then we will feel our time to be valuable, and if we feel our time to be valuable, then we will want to use it well. The financial analyst who procrastinated did not value her time. If she had, she would not have allowed herself to spend most of her day so unhappily and unproductively. It was not without consequence for her that throughout her childhood she was "farmed out" during all school vacations to live with paid foster parents although her parents could have taken care of her perfectly well had they wanted to. They did not value her. They did not want to care for her. So she grew up feeling herself to be of little value, not worth caring for; therefore she did not care for herself. She did not feel she was worth disciplining herself. Despite the fact that she was an intelligent and competent woman she required the most elementary in-

struction in self-discipline because she lacked a realistic assessment of her own worth and the value of her own time. Once she was able to perceive her time as being valuable, it naturally followed that she wanted to organize it and protect it and make maximum use of it.

As a result of the experience of consistent parental love and caring throughout childhood, such fortunate children will enter adulthood not only with a deep internal sense of their own value but also with a deep internal sense of security. All children are terrified of abandonment, and with good reason. This fear of abandonment begins around the age of six months, as soon as the child is able to perceive itself to be an individual, separate from its parents. For with this perception of itself as an individual comes the realization that as an individual it is quite helpless, totally dependent and totally at the mercy of its parents for all forms of sustenance and means of survival. To the child, abandonment by its parents is the equivalent of death. Most parents, even when they are otherwise relatively ignorant or callous, are instinctively sensitive to their children's fear of abandonment and will therefore, day in and day out, hundreds and thousands of times, offer their children needed reassurance: "You know Mommy and Daddy aren't going to leave you behind"; "Of course Mommy and Daddy will come back to get you"; "Mommy and Daddy aren't going to forget about you." If these words are matched by deeds, month in and month out, year in and year out, by the time of adolescence the child will have lost the fear of abandonment and in its stead will have a deep inner feeling that the world is a safe place in which to be and protection will be there when it is needed. With this internal sense of the consistent safety of the world, such a child is free to delay gratification of one kind or another, secure in the knowledge that the opportunity for gratification, like home and parents, is always there, available when needed.

But many are not so fortunate. A substantial number of children actually are abandoned by their parents during childhood, by death, by desertion, by sheer negligence, or, as in

the case of the financial analyst, by a simple lack of caring. Others, while not abandoned in fact, fail to receive from their parents the reassurance that they will not be abandoned. There are some parents, for instance, who in their desire to enforce discipline as easily and quickly as possible, will actually use the threat of abandonment, overtly or subtly, to achieve this end. The message they give to their children is: "If you don't do exactly what I want you to do I won't love you any more, and you can figure out for yourself what that might mean." It means, of course, abandonment and death. These parents sacrifice love in their need for control and domination over their children, and their reward is children who are excessively fearful of the future. So it is that these children, abandoned either psychologically or in actuality, enter adulthood lacking any deep sense that the world is a safe and protective place. To the contrary, they perceive the world as dangerous and frightening, and they are not about to forsake any gratification or security in the present for the promise of greater gratification or security in the future, since for them the future seems dubious indeed.

In summary, for children to develop the capacity to delay gratification, it is necessary for them to have self-disciplined role models, a sense of self-worth, and a degree of trust in the safety of their existence. These "possessions" are ideally acquired through the self-discipline and consistent, genuine caring of their parents; they are the most precious gifts of themselves that mothers and fathers can bequeath. When these gifts have not been proffered by one's parents, it is possible to acquire them from other sources, but in that case the process of their acquisition is invariably an uphill struggle, often of lifelong duration and often unsuccessful.

Problem-Solving and Time

Having touched upon some of the ways in which parental love or its lack may influence the development of self-discipline in general, and the capacity to delay gratification in particular, let us examine some of the more subtle yet quite devastating ways in which difficulties in delaying gratification affect the lives of most adults. For while most of us, fortunately, develop sufficient capacity to delay gratification to make it through high school or college and embark upon adulthood without landing in jail, our development nonetheless tends to be imperfect and incomplete, with the result that our ability to solve life's problems is still imperfect and incomplete.

At the age of thirty-seven I learned how to fix things. Prior to that time almost all my attempts to make minor plumbing repairs, mend toys or assemble boxed furniture according to the accompanying hieroglyphical instruction sheet ended in confusion, failure and frustration. Despite having managed to make it through medical school and support a family as a more or less successful executive and psychiatrist, I considered myself to be a mechanical idiot. I was convinced I was deficient in some gene, or by curse of nature lacking some mystical quality responsible for mechanical ability. Then one day at the end of my thirty-seventh year, while taking a spring Sunday walk, I happened upon a neighbor in the process of repairing a lawn mower. After greeting him I remarked, "Boy, I sure admire you. I've never been able to fix those kind of things or do anything like that." My neighbor, without a moment's hesitation, shot back, "That's because you don't

take the time." I resumed my walk, somehow disquieted by the gurulike simplicity, spontaneity and definitiveness of his response. "You don't suppose he could be right, do you?" I asked myself. Somehow it registered, and the next time the opportunity presented itself to make a minor repair I was able to remind myself to take my time. The parking brake was stuck on a patient's car, and she knew that there was something one could do under the dashboard to release it, but she didn't know what. I lay down on the floor below the front seat of her car. Then I took the time to make myself comfortable. Once I was comfortable, I then took the time to look at the situation. I looked for several minutes. At first all I saw was a confusing jumble of wires and tubes and rods, whose meaning I did not know. But gradually, in no hurry, I was able to focus my sight on the brake apparatus and trace its course. And then it became clear to me that there was a little latch preventing the brake from being released. I slowly studied this latch until it became clear to me that if I were to push it upward with the tip of my finger it would move easily and would release the brake. And so I did this. One single motion, one ounce of pressure from a fingertip, and the problem was solved. I was a master mechanic!

Actually, I don't begin to have the knowledge or the time to gain that knowledge to be able to fix most mechanical failures, given the fact that I choose to concentrate my time on nonmechanical matters. So I still usually go running to the nearest repairman. But I now know that this is a choice I make, and I am not cursed or genetically defective or otherwise incapacitated or impotent. And I know that I and anyone else who is not mentally defective can solve any problem if we are willing to take the time.

The issue is important, because many people simply do not take the time necessary to solve many of life's intellectual, social or spiritual problems, just as I did not take the time to solve mechanical problems. Before my mechanical enlightenment I would have awkwardly stuck my head under the dashboard of my patient's car, immediately yanked at a few wires

without having the foggiest idea of what I was doing, and then, when nothing constructive resulted, would have thrown up my hands and proclaimed "It's beyond me." And this is precisely the way that so many of us approach other dilemmas of day-to-day living. The aforementioned financial analyst was a basically loving and dedicated but rather helpless mother to her two young children. She was alert and concerned enough to perceive when her children were having some sort of emotional problem or when something was not working out in her child-raising. But then she inevitably took one of two courses of action with the children: either she made the very first change that came to her mind within a matter of seconds—making them eat more breakfast or sending them to bed earlier—regardless of whether such a change had anything to do with the problem, or else she came to her next therapy session with me (the repairman), despairing: "It's beyond me. What shall I do?" This woman had a perfectly keen and analytical mind, and when she didn't procrastinate, she was quite capable of solving complex problems at work. Yet when confronted with a personal problem, she behaved as if she were totally lacking in intelligence. The issue was one of time. Once she became aware of a personal problem, she felt so discomfited that she demanded an immediate solution, and she was not willing to tolerate her discomfort long enough to analyze the problem. The solution to the problem represented gratification to her, but she was unable to delay this gratification for more than a minute or two, with the result that her solutions were usually inappropriate and her family in chronic turmoil. Fortunately, through her own perseverance in therapy she was gradually able to learn how to discipline herself to take the time necessary to analyze family problems so as to develop well-thought-out and effective solutions.

We are not talking here about esoteric defects in problem-solving associated only with people who clearly manifest psychiatric disturbances. The financial analyst is everyman. Who among us can say that they unfailingly devote sufficient time to analyzing their children's problems or tensions within the

family? Who among us is so self-disciplined that he or she never says resignedly in the face of family problems, "It's beyond me"?

Actually, there is a defect in the approach to problem-solving more primitive and more destructive than impatiently inadequate attempts to find instant solutions, a defect even more ubiquitous and universal. It is the hope that problems will go away of their own accord. A thirty-year-old single salesman in group therapy in a small town began to date the recently separated wife of another group member, a banker. The salesman knew the banker to be a chronically angry man who was deeply resentful of his wife's leaving him. He knew that he was not being honest either with the group or with the banker by not confiding his relationship with the banker's wife. He also knew that it was almost inevitable that sooner or later the banker would learn about the continuing relationship. He knew that the only solution to the problem would be to confess the relationship to the group and bear the banker's anger with the group's support. But he did nothing. After three months the banker found out about the friendship, was predictably enraged, and used the incident to quit his therapy. When confronted by the group with his destructive behavior the salesman said: "I knew that talking about it would be a hassle, and I guess I felt that if I did nothing, maybe I could get away with it without the hassle. I guess I thought that if I waited long enough the problem might go away."

Problems do not go away. They must be worked through or else they remain, forever a barrier to the growth and development of the spirit.

The group made the salesman aware in no uncertain terms that his tendency to avoid problem-solving by ignoring a problem in the hope that it would go away was in itself his major problem. Four months later, in the early autumn, the salesman fulfilled a fantasy by rather suddenly quitting his sales job and starting his own furniture-repair business, which would not require him to travel. The group deplored the fact that he was putting all his eggs in one basket and also ques-