

The Naked Eye

Boy Wonder

BY MARK MATOUSEK

*The "inner child" has become a cliché.
But there is a childlike innocence we all need
to draw us closer to life's mysteries.*

A FRIEND OF MINE TOLD ME A dream today: She was in a room in a skyscraper watching babies being thrown out of windows, falling into a puddle of water on the ground. She watched herself as a child being tossed high in the air while her mother screamed, "Smile, why don't you!" Before the baby hit the ground, my friend woke up.

She wept as she told me this, knowing her nightmare was my soul's, too. Both of us were damaged children, thrown out of our parents' hearts. Both of us had taken many years to crawl from our puddles, grow frog legs, stand on dry land. Now it made us sad to remember the pain of being small and raw, and the childhood place we'd run away from, as fast as our feet would carry us.

Strange that it was today. Shortly before she arrived, my friend Andrew and I had finished a chapter on "The Divine Child" for a book we're writing together. For days we'd been considering the mystical assertion that, as Heraclitus said, "the kingdom is the child's." From Rumi to Buddha, Christ to Ramakrishna, this message had been echoed by the greatest sages of every sacred culture: Contrary to what the ego believes, it's the child-mind—not the yogi, magus, priest, or martyr—that holds the keys to enlightenment. "When we transcend ourselves and become . . . so simple that the bare Supreme love can lay hold of us," said the German mystic Ruysbroeck, "then we cease [and] die in God. In this death we become the hidden children of God, and find a new life within us."

I listened to these words, remembering my shame. I once believed that it was too late for me, that in the process of saving my life I had long ago abandoned the child. When my little boy fretted, whined, or balked, I did what men are supposed to do: crushed him into submission. Finally, after so many muzzlings, I didn't believe that I could revive him.

Nor, for many years, did I want to. I denied that the boy was relevant to someone in his 30s, facing grown-up issues of life and death, faith and work, love and conscience. I denied that I was scared of the boy, and that my aversion was crippling my relationship to a spiritual teacher. I brushed away, with both hands, the grief



of my resistance, and when words like "wonder" and "innocence" were used, I thought stoically of spilled milk.

Mockery helped to soak it up. When friends began finding their "inner children" in the '80s, I sneeringly told them to call their inner shrink. When they learned to crawl around with pacifiers between their teeth, I warned them to dump their teddy bears before we hauled them off to a bin. My jealousy was transparent, of course, to everyone but me. The truth was, I coveted their fatuousness, the love affair they seemed to be having with a magical part of themselves. I envied their talk of returning without a hint of damage to their place of origin. "Come out and play!" they squalled at me, eyes lit up like Shirley Temple's.

They didn't know that I had tried; that

once, during a healing circle, I had called out to the boy in me. I had hoped that he'd survived somewhere, happy, trusting, and intact, but what I found was a grisly surprise. A mental door cracked open, and from behind it a shriveled thing stared at me with bulging eyes, bloated belly, spidery legs like a famine victim's. I asked this boy to come out where I could see him, but all he did was stand there blinking, then melted back into darkness.

I took this as an omen to let the child rest in peace. Now here were the greatest mystics in history contradicting that conclusion, saying the last thing I wanted to hear: that until the child smiled at me, I couldn't move a step toward God. The child was the secret door; he was the visionary and devotee, happy *not* to know, drawn simply to mystery. He was shameless, humble, naked, fearless, and eager to be lifted; he was the only power strong enough to end the ego's dominion.

This claim may sound idealistic; certainly, it's open to misinterpretation. Cynics question whether mystics are recommending juvenility and selfishness, a return to the Edenic crib. Of course they're not. The childlike state they describe has nothing to do with faux naiveté or skipping off to some celestial Disneyland. It is not an invitation to shirk responsibility or sacrifice wisdom gained through long, hard years of growing up. What the mystics call for is something stranger and more subtle, a paradoxical double view. We're asked to find, in the free play of the illumined Mind, ourselves as wise children, eyes unclouded by memory or conclusion, capable of perceiving life in its contradictory splendor. We're asked to cultivate an educated innocence, an abandon bordered by absolute scruples, an un-self-consciousness that is also consummately self-aware.

My friend Andrew put it this way: "The triumph of experience is to regain a
(continued on page 63)

The Naked Eye

(continued from page 64)

consciousness of innocence, to enter into that childlike domain with adult consciousness, aware of time and death and heartbreak, but also aware of what the Sufis call the eternal springtime, the childlike freshness of the heart of every second." Nisargadatta Maharaj, one of the greatest (and least sentimental) masters of modern times, said a year before his death, "I am now 74 years old, and yet I feel that I am an infant. The child which is you, even now, is your real Self. Go back to that state of pure being. . . ." This state of divine childhood is represented by the Hindus as Krishna, by Confucians as the blissful one who can "turn the universe on his finger like a toy."

As splendid as this sounds, many of us find this surrender terribly difficult. In our effort to master, we've trashed the minor. In our effort to rely on ourselves—instead of some corrupt theology—we've lost the art of dependence. This spiritual rebellion against authority, while empowering in the short term, may also cut us off from the source and leak the poetry from our hearts. "You shall above all things be glad and young," warned E.E. Cummings, "for if you're young, whatever's living, it will become you / and if you're glad, whatever's living will yourself become." We may forget the example of Ramakrishna, crying out to the Divine Mother to strip him of everything so he could be her son, or Meister Eckhart's promise that "late in the night of the mystic experience is born the Divine Child inside the brain."

I say this now as if I knew it at the time. In fact, the process was long and slow and finally burst, as these things do, just when hope had given out. Two years ago, on retreat in Germany, I arrived in the village where my teacher, Mother Meera, lives; I was determined to learn why I was so stuck. I had to know why I couldn't pray and couldn't even fully love a saint who'd taken me under her wing. Arriving in Thalheim nearly panicked, I ran up the stairs of her house and asked—no, demanded—whether she was really my master or not. "No," she said, smiling gently, "I'm your mother."

I fumed and felt like an idiot. What exactly did she mean? I figured it out the next day, not in words, but in a vision.

The afternoon was gray and silent. I was writing in my room under Mother's

quarters when I slipped, against my will, into spontaneous meditation. In my mind's eye, I saw Mother Meera enter the room, come close to me, and rest her forehead against my brow. When her red *tika*—the dot on her forehead—touched my skin, I sank into a deep bliss, as if my head were cleaving open, filling with warmth and honey. Mother whispered in my ear, "Remember that I love you," then told me to watch carefully.

I was overwhelmed the next minute by the horror film of my own childhood, nightmare images speeding together. There was my mother in the tub, banging her head against the tile. There was my older sister's suicide, my father's disappearance, my nephew dead in his crib, my younger sister on drugs, myself after a day in kindergarten, *in flagrante delicto*. Behind these pictures, and dozens more, coursed three icy streams of thought: the howling cry for mother love; the rage at my entrapment in grief; and my resolve, as hard as nails, not to be caught in that place again.

I waited for an hour, seized by this vision. Then suddenly, it stopped. The room was completely still except for the sound of Mother Meera's footsteps overhead. I'd gotten my answer, seen my shadow: too obvious, almost, to be believed. As long as I identified with that horror story—as long as I persisted in associating the child with the victim—I could never embrace a divine master, never surrender. I realized, with startling vividness, why I was so afraid of God, starving for love but strangled shut, like the Buddhist ghosts enclosed in hell, with pinhead mouths and swollen bellies.

These ghosts were kin to the boy I'd seen inside; my friend's dream brought him back to me, but also showed me how I'd changed. Once, I wouldn't have wept with her; I wouldn't have known that we were the same. I wouldn't have remembered another story, found earlier that same day among the mystics. In it, the unenlightened man is likened to a sobbing infant resting in its mother's lap. One day, the infant stops screaming, settles down, and gazes up into the eyes of the One who holds it. The child blinks, as my boy blinked, but doesn't sink back into darkness. Instead, he stares up, rapt in wonder.

Contributing editor Mark Matousek is the author (with Andrew Harvey) of *Dialogues with a Modern Mystic*, to be published in June by Quest Books, and an upcoming memoir.

Circle

From the beginning, the seasons have brought forth spontaneous celebrations among the peoples of the earth . . . celebrations that resulted in deep personal and societal healing.

SPRING

"Passages of the Mystical Journey: A Vision Quest"
March 26-April 3, Superstition
Wilderness Area, Arizona

"Awakening the Love"
April 27-May 1
San Juan Islands, Washington

SUMMER

"All One Tribe"
with ARTHUR HULL
of the Village Music Circles
June 15-19
Feathered Pipe Ranch, Montana

"The Passage into Adulthood"
Sanctioning and Honoring This
Most Important Life Transition
August 13-20
Seeley Lake, Montana
Open to young people 15-18

TRAINING PROGRAM

"The Art and Practice of Creating and Sustaining Sacred Space"
October 8-16
Seeley Lake, Montana



The Sacred Circle

For more information on these and other programs contact:
Dr. SUSAN RANGITSCH
400 Cote Lane, Missoula, MT 59802
(406) 542-2383