

Excerpts: The Id Paradox

Excerpt I

There are people in your life that stick with you. In the listening quiet of memory, they serve in small measure to order the chaos of life's blitzkrieg. The reasons they linger are as varied as the people themselves. Portraits of evil are as memorable as paragons of humanity—often more so. Both can give you insight into this curious thing called life that we share: with apologies to Winston Churchill, a mystery, clothed in a riddle, wrapped up in an enigma (except for those who have hewn it into some shape that gives them the comfort of certainty). These individuals may have inspired you to love, to hate, or to vomit. But you do not love for what is done for you. You love for what you do. Love is not a state of mind. It is an action.

Why I was thinking about that now—under the fearsome assault of the Rio Grande Valley sun, harvesting cantaloupes for seventy-four cents a crate, with sweat and sunscreen dripping into my eyes and stinging like a hive of yellow-jackets—is another mystery.

“Oye Licenciado, ése no. I awready esplain it to jou: when thee tallo, thee estem, comienza a separarse. Da's when thee melon ees maduro—reep.”

“Ripe.”

Luís, the *capataz*—foreman—was affectionately impatient with me. He seemed rather bemused that this gringo ex-lawyer, ex-teacher would be working alongside his fellow migrant farm workers as a day-laborer. He'd obviously been at it a long time, his rawhide skin burned a rusty, coffee-colored almost ebony. There it sat atop muscle unyielding as monks to temptation. Rivers of sweat poured down the shriveled, cracked, blood-dried mess. His manner was of another age: humility and kindness beneath a gentle teasing that gloved the fist of criticism. “Okei, okei, *raeep*. You tease me Eengleesh, I tease you melones, eh?”

“That's a deal.” I left the one he'd cautioned me against and shot a quick glance at him as I moved to pick another and place it in my crate.

“Ése si. Estás aprendiendo. Jou learning, jou learning.” The gently ironic smile cloaked beneath paternal impatience.

Late-afternoon light burned yellow-white and relentless on this citrus/melon farm just outside McAllen, Texas. It lay a desultory two hours down the Rio Grande from Aguagria, the home of my birth. The third spray of the day meant to keep the fruit from sunburn had evaporated in the time it took to recommence the harvest. I'm about to pick a melon that looks ripe then notice it hasn't started separating from the stem.

“Muy bien, Licenciado. Jou learning, man.” Luís has come up behind me, making sure I follow his instructions. I try to straighten my back, spasm-hardened with stooping. “Jou back hurt?”

“Me está matando.” Luís just laughs and goes on to check another peon's full crate.

The sun beat down like an implacable enemy, soulless and homicidal. A plea for a breeze to wick some of the heat away from my body was insolently denied. Only a dry, calid gust now and then grinds through the trachea and down to lungs on fire with resentment. Fine grit sidles into my nostrils and throat, then colludes with sweat to make a dirty brown nest around my neck. It crawls beneath my contacts, deliciously grating against my eyeballs. I try to tear them out, which only invites gnats, moisture-starved and needling, to congregate there. I'd inhaled a host of them already, tried to snort them out and only succeeded in expelling a honker of gnat-ridden snot. (I sincerely hope you don't get that particular cantaloupe.)

Excerpt II

I was about to break the lull in our conversation when he did it for me. “Doctor, you mentioned another something common to PTSD patients.”

“Yes, those truly severe cases. It’s called the *abyss* experience. Some call it the ‘Black Hole’ experience.”

“That...doesn’t sound pleasant.”

“No. No, it’s truly horrific. But I think it’ll help you to understand. It’ll give you a feel for what any victim of extreme trauma is going through. It’s central to understanding and therefore healing the disintegrated psyche.

“OK.”

“The theory is that the basic, primal self is one of pure feeling. It is separate from the rational, relatively coherent life narrative that we all ‘normally’ have. It’s described in philosophical and psychological texts, and alluded to in mythology and archetypal literature: The Odyssey, The Iliad, King Arthur, etc. It’s presented as the demonic, or the shadowy side of life.

“John Stuart Mill describes insanity as the withdrawal into the abyss. Carl Jung’s collective unconscious, at least as I understand it, is that state of being in which we’re not separate individuals, but rather one organic whole—sensing, experiencing everything as unconnected stimuli. And what happens in situations of extreme torture and abuse is experienced as the abyss: rational consciousness reverted to the primitive state of feeling and survival.

“Severe trauma experienced over a long period of time destroys—or you could say, is incompatible with—our rational, coherent, sequential story of our lives. It sends us back into the abyss, where there’s no rationality, no sense of sequence, where morality and reason cease to exist. All senses become one; all sensory input is experienced as one. There’s a feeling of not belonging to the living. We revert, as in insanity, to our most primitive selves. Or, I should say, *self*.”