

Prologue:

As I lie here, nearer life's end than its beginning, looking out upon the beauty of the Bush River just off the Chesapeake Bay, its borders crowded with trees iridescently bejeweled in the rust, copper and gold leaves of fall, I wonder what you will think of what I have to say. I am writing this book to walk the walk and not just talk the talk of what I've been feeling and thinking. I'm writing it for all of you: my children, nieces, and nephews, and their children and, as importantly, for any strangers, yet my brothers and sisters in humanity, that happen upon this text and recognize it for what it is – a story of the human condition. I write to encourage you to take responsibility for your happiness. If there are two eye-popping things I've discovered in my wending journey as a man and as a psychotherapist, it's that it takes great courage to be happy and that each of us is as happy as we can stand.

Years ago, my eldest daughter Keeley gave me a book of questions for parents to fill out to better express who they were for posterity. Although the idea of the book held great appeal, the structure did not. I didn't care if people knew what my favorite color was: Green. It would not have conveyed the sense of me. Then, some years later, my son, Chandler, asked me what I thought it [life] was about. His work and home life were going well and with the resulting prosperity he was wondering, "Is this it?" I answered something along the lines of "It's about the pursuit of happiness." But my explanation was not well-thought-out nor compelling to either of us. Nonetheless, it was true. I just had to build the case for it.

When I started writing this book, I soon realized that I was responding to these two challenges, each of which had been stirring within me for years: "Who am I?" and "What's it all about?" However, along the way the writing became something else, something more important. This story, *Hatching Charlie*, is a story of the human condition. It details my experiences from the Gathering Darkness of my early years,

marked by feelings of loneliness, isolation, inferiority and confusion, to a growing sense of fulfillment and hard-earned wisdom in my maturity.

Lastly, I realized that my struggles continue to this day and, to my surprise, that this is a good thing. It is the struggle itself that fosters a continuing sense of adventure and discovery, depth, and texture to living, both within ourselves and with our important others. Where I would have felt the struggle as a burden years earlier, I now understand it as life itself, a catalyst of self-discovery and self-expression, of ongoing aliveness and, for the most part, I would not have it any other way.

So I will tell it all, the journey that has been my life: the uncertainty, the low self-esteem, the egotism, the mistakes made and then made again, the lessons learned and then forgotten, the failures and the successes, the joys and heartbreaks. Along the way, I hope to convey the key ingredient to a personally meaningful life: striving to embrace *all* your thoughts and *all* your feelings, and *then* to think about them. For me, this is an essential ingredient in the pursuit of happiness, but it is not easy.

In fact, the psyche recoils from such activity. It uses all kinds of tricks to distance us from distress and anxiety, but the psyche is not a surgical instrument. It does not cut out and eliminate single undesired thoughts or feelings. It functions globally, repressing the capacity to think and feel in general. Repression is not a local anesthetic but a wide-ranging one. It numbs not only the capacity to feel painful feelings, such as shame, sadness, or anxiety, but the capacity to feel in general, including positive feelings, such as the joy and happiness one might feel from a beautiful sunset or a tender kiss.

But that is not the worst side effect of rejecting our troubling feelings. There is a second even greater problem with the reliance on repression. Where do these feelings go? Certainly, they are pushed from consciousness into unconsciousness, but that doesn't mean they are gone or not felt. Rather, what begins as a slow gathering of darkness, ignored over time and ever growing as more negative thoughts and feelings accumulate

within, turns into an increasingly ominous mountain range of storm clouds. These, in turn, stir and threaten to break through the repressive barriers in vague feelings of depression and anxiety, or general feelings of emptiness and isolation, and somatic complaints. In this world, cut off from the light of consciousness and spring-fed tributaries of openness to the world, the growing darkness starts to feed upon itself.

And that's the least of it. This self-devouring world travels with us wherever we go. This ostrich-like strategy for dealing with life dooms us. For, at the end of the day, there is no running from the repressed feelings; there isn't even any hiding. They only clamor ever more insistently to be heard. After all, why wouldn't they? They are part of us; messages from us to us, alarm bells ringing in the night.

Of course, feeling all our feelings and thinking our thoughts is not always a happy business, but why it should be? Life and relationship *can* be scary and depressing.

Confronting distressing thoughts and feelings does not always lead to the semblance of a neat and tidy life, valued by so many. But it does lead to being a more fully self-accepting human being, with all the messiness that this entails. Despite how tarnished we human beings can be, I would suggest that being human, like it or not, is our greatest gift.

The awareness of conflict within the human mind has been with us for a long time. In Cherokee lore, it is captured in the tale of the Chieftain telling his grandson the story of the two wolves. "Within me, two wolves are constantly at war with one another. One is the Evil Wolf that feeds on anger, envy, sorrow, greed, arrogance, self-pity, resentment, inferiority, false pride, superiority, and ego. The second is the Good Wolf that feeds on joy, love, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. You have these two wolves in you. Everyone has them." The grandson considers this then asks, "Which one wins?" The grandfather responds, "Whichever one you feed."

Cherokee Indians are not alone in speaking to the dark side of the human condition. The psychoanalyst Carl Jung called it the shadow and warned that one either swallows (reconciles) his shadow or is swallowed by it. Psychoanalyst Melanie Klein, who pioneered the analysis of children, noted that the feelings of love, hate, jealousy, greed, lust, envy and so on are all part of human experience and cannot be eliminated but must be integrated by the individual. Freud spoke of the Id as that part of the psyche that houses a person's primitive, base impulses. Fairbairn posited the existence of an anti-libidinal ego, which houses all repressed negative experiences, forming an internal world of sadistic and hostile relationships that can take us over if not taken into account.

Whatever the theory, the point is that from the earliest age, while the human brain is in the nascence of its development, there is an ongoing gathering of darkness. Whatever we choose to call it, the Evil Wolf, the shadow, the Id, the anti-libidinal ego, it's real. And if we deal with it through denial, it will trouble us in ever more profound ways throughout our lives, radically interfering with our becoming whole people and damaging our capacity for happiness. The amazing point to know is that if you reject the troubling side of yourself, if you don't deal with it head on, it will interfere with your capacity for happiness no matter how successful you become in the external world. The Evil Wolf, unfronted, never stops biting.

Erik Erikson warns that not dealing with these issues leads to the experience of stagnation in middle age and despair and bitterness beyond. If you do deal with these human conflicts, he assures a life of integrity, generativity, and fulfillment. In other words, the struggle between conflicting aspects of being human lasts throughout life—it is not a one and done thing. However, how well we meet this ongoing challenge directly determines the degree to which we may live happily, versus living replete with anxiety, depression, and despair.

William Faulkner once said, “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.” This insight references one of the major characteristics of the unconscious—that it is timeless. In the unconscious, everything is *now*: There is no past, present or future. It is the *Interminable Now*. The good news is that in consciousness there is a past, present, and future. Thus, making things conscious allows us the opportunity to put our pasts behind us and move on.

None of this is to suggest that insight is the be all and end all: Even if necessary, it is not sufficient. Not only must the insight be felt as opposed to just intellectualized, but other strategies can and usually must be brought to bear to struggle successfully against habituated forms of feeling and thinking that date from childhood. Yoga, meditation, and mindfulness are effective tools to help us stop feeding the Evil Wolf and start feeding the Good one. In using every means at hand, and there are many, we lessen the power of the shadow world to over-shadow the present and foreshadow the future, all the while never making the mistake of denying its existence within us.

The title of my book, *Hatching Charlie*, is intended to represent this ongoing struggle. My story is the description of birth, but one that is ongoing—a lifetime of trying to break out of shells that constricted me. Hatching Charlie is the story of my struggling in the darkness, confusion and despair that characterized much of my early years and, in truth, continue to cast a pall, albeit a much fainter one, to this day.

The verb “hatching” also speaks to the importance of aggression, the inner work of pecking away at what confines us, a refusal to accept the world as if we’re passive objects rather than active subjects. I don’t care how you do it, hatching is not always well organized—watch any chick fighting its way out of its shell to the outside world. Hatching can be quite random, but nevertheless, with persistence, leads to the end goal, the creating of an opening in the shell to access the freedom and the privilege of owning one’s life. You will notice acts of aggression throughout this book, both mine and others,

and as horrid as these can sometimes be it is important to keep this potential motivation in mind. As the psychoanalyst Winnicott noted, delinquency is often a sign of hope that things can change.

Before we begin, I would like you to understand that this is *my* version of events. Perception and memory are notoriously malleable and unreliable. Parts of my story will meet with agreement with those who have lived them alongside me; parts will not. Each of us lives a life of illusion as the protagonist in his own often too-polished and too-edited personal play. I have no qualms with this. We can each have our truth. The important thing is to leave room for the truths of others.

In that we are all wired differently, perceiving, relating and reacting to the world in ways unique to each of us, my view of my upbringing differs, sometimes sharply, from those of my siblings. As Adam Phillips once wrote, "None of us get to choose our parents, but each of us gets to create them." In just such ways we each create narratives that guide our lives. As I tell my story, you will come to see that my self-perpetuating story line became the cause of great suffering. You will also come to understand that none of us are immune from such folly—not even psychotherapists who have spent much of their lives thinking about such things.

From the beginning, I was fascinated by my relationships, to myself and others. I was always trying to make sense of my world, to pin down how it worked and my place in it. I've essentially failed in this, now understanding that it was a largely impossible task. However, I have made some headway.

What you should know from the outset is this: *Everyone* has an interesting story to tell. Unfortunately, we tend to take our personal story for granted and fail to recognize how remarkable it is. Here I'm reminded of the story of three fish, two swimming one way and the third going the other. As they pass, the solo fish courteously says, "Hello.

How's the water today?" Once past the solo fish, the pair of fish look at each other, and one puts his puzzlement to words, whispering, "What's water?"

I've spent a large part of my life helping people tell their stories, discover meaning in their lives, and arrive at some answers to the question, "What's water?" In part, this occurs by fostering their autobiographical memories. Interestingly, research suggests that the ability to remember our histories is directly related to the capacity to imagine futures very different from the present. If the autobiographical memory is deficient, so too will be the capacity for such imaginings, thereby limiting the ability to bring them into being. In this circumstance, our yesterdays become our tomorrows. Tragically, this impediment to the imagination can lead to the experience of life as a stark and barren landscape in which things just happen and where we feel like passengers in our lives. In such a world, absent personal agency or responsibility, one can only be born, live and die. Who would not be anxious or depressed feeling that way?

Fortunately, remembering is not only possible but doable. Once we begin to remember, more memories come tumbling out, and the connections between the various puzzle pieces of our lives reveal themselves. Epiphanies occur, leading to a deepening understanding of our lives and how things came to pass, the highlights as well as the low.

Consequently, I would say to you, take an interest in your story and think of it as you listen to mine. Revisit your puzzlements and confusions, and try to put them into words. Words are essential. Words symbolize things, and thinking is a symbolic process. Only when you put your feelings into words can you think about them: Without words, we are deaf and dumb to ourselves.

Pay attention to how you tell your story. Are you a martyr? Are you a saint? Are you a victim? Are you an aggressor? Are you helpless or are you powerful? Are you creating your destiny or are you living life as a passive participant?" Then ask yourself: "Is this the way I want the book of my life to read? Is this the role I want to occupy? Is

this the way I want my children to remember me? Is the way I'm writing my life making it important to me?"

I have organized my story essentially into four parts. The first chapters set the table, describing events that contributed to the gathering darkness within me. These are the stories of my early years in which I am largely absorbing and reacting to what is going on around me, not sure how to think about any of it. Nevertheless, as a sentient being, I am inevitably drawing conclusions about life and relationships, and forming simple strategies, largely outside of my awareness, for how to get through it all.

The next chapters describe my pecking away in a random fashion, essentially floundering, sometimes lashing out, trying to make sense of my confusion and despair, all the while rebelling against it. I just want to find a reason, meaning, a purpose for my existence. I can't discover one, but I keep on trying.

The third part of the book tells the story of more focused Hatching, of coming to discover my self-limiting and self-defeating story lines, derived from my early experience, that I continue to perpetuate. I have now found a reason for my existence; I just need to explicate it to myself.

The last chapters detail an emerging sense of wisdom and fulfillment that derives from my unrelenting, if often ineffective, struggle toward meaning. Crazy, as I reconcile myself with my past, I laugh more and learn how to write a happier and more fulfilling last quarter of my life. I become more spontaneous and child-like, feeling a renewed basic optimism in a happy ending. I feel like I'm living proof that it is never too late to have a happy childhood—the trick is we have to give it to ourselves and we have to accept that it often won't meet the perfect, yet unreasonable, requirements of childhood.

Play along with me. Consider yourself the supervising therapist and me the patient. This book is the case presentation. I, the psychotherapist, am *your* patient. With mischievous glee, I ask, "What could be better than that?"

