

Minor revisions and addition, September 2022
August 2013
A Karmic Autobiography
by Robert McDermott

As the wandering seabird which crossing the ocean lights on some rock or islet to rest for a moment its wings, and to look back on the wilderness of waves behind, and onward to the wilderness of waters before, so stand we perched on this rock or shoal of time, arrived out of the immensity of the past and bound and road-ready to plunge into immensity again. — Ralph Waldo Emerson¹

I. THE RELATIONSHIP OF KARMA TO BIOGRAPHY

Bishop Gene Robinson, emeritus Episcopal bishop of New Hampshire, the first openly gay bishop of a mainline church in the United States, and the recipient of countless death threats from members of various Christian denominations, was the CIIS 2013 commencement speaker and recipient of a CIIS honorary doctorate. On Friday night of commencement weekend, he inspired the CIIS board, administration, and select faculty with an impromptu talk on various injustices in the United States today. On Saturday morning my wife Ellen and I had the privilege of hosting Bishop Robinson for a breakfast with five colleagues committed to the ideal of gay spirituality. I opened the discussion by asking Bishop Robinson how he would add a spiritual dimension to an academic program on human sexuality (which CIIS was creating). He replied something like: "Well, my goodness, what could be more spiritual than 'coming out'? Our very biographies are spiritual." I agree. Hence, this essay and a course, *Karma and Biography*, that I am scheduled to offer in fall 2013.

In the 1980s, while a professor of philosophy at Baruch College, CUNY, I was also director of the Life Experience Portfolio Program at the College of New Rochelle. For this process I appointed five readers of portfolios by which "returning adult" applicants to the School of New Resource could earn up to 30 college credits. The autobiographies of mothers and grandmothers, artists, construction workers, former addicts, individuals from hard families of origin, hard marriages, hard financial circumstances, told their stories not merely as a chronicle, but as an account of the parts of their life experience they had been able to render pedagogical. Each semester, committee members read perhaps a dozen 50-75 page autobiographies and assigned a number of credits, one to thirty, before we met. Then at an all-day meeting we discussed each portfolio and assigned a final number of credits. Each prospective student learned from writing his or her portfolio and our feedback (which, based on the committee discussion, I wrote and sent to each student), and the committee members learned both from the portfolios and from each other. I would like some of this same kind of learning to be realized in the course, *Karma and Biography* (which perhaps should be called "Karma and Autobiography").

¹ Robert D. Richardson Jr., *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 336.

This essay is an attempt to provide a model exploration of some of the approaches and themes that might be included in the 25-30pp essay that each student will write in this course. (At 38 pages, this essay is about ten pages over the limit because I have lived longer than any of the students in this course.) The first half of this essay discusses the relationship between karma and biography, including my understanding of karma, prebirth, and rebirth based mostly on Sri Aurobindo, Tibetan Buddhism, and anthroposophy. It also includes comments to the effect that I think karma is a spiritual reality that deeply, and rather mysteriously, influences but does not control our behavior. "Everything is karma" (or karmic) means that everything influences karma and karma in turn influences everything that follows but karma is not a lock or script. It assumes freedom, more or less depending on the wakefulness of the person.

The second half chronicles my own biography in four subsections, each devoted to a quarter of my life. This autobiographical chronicle is an attempt to sort relationships, influences, and events which seem to me karmically significant, as though I had a vision, perhaps in light, of the meanings that have survived. I have not had a near death experience, but I want to report as though I had, as though I really could distinguish the enduring relationships from the superficial, the experiences that were heavily shaped by and will continue to shape the total course of my life experience. The whole of a life issues from and creates karma, so that there are no non-karmic parts, nor are the parts completely determined. Which experiences and relationships will I be led to favor, and whether or not favored, which ones should I cultivate or avoid? In my mind this entire project, theory and examples, presupposes freedom and growth. The individuals I admire most, and wish to emulate, are the ones who improve the "given" by a free commitment to a deeper and larger task. Gandhi, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King, Jr., Thomas Merton, Wingari Maatthai, Joanna Macy, come immediately to mind.

What some people refer to as their "spiritual journey" in my case is not a success story, nor even particularly a journey. I think of it as a series of related commitments, attempts, successes and failures, and mostly in between. The "karmic" and spiritual focus is my attempt to give an extra meaning, or the real if rather hidden meaning, to a life which is really rather ordinary when compared to the life of a genius, such as Einstein, Jung, or Robert J. Oppenheimer, or someone in the eye of the historical needle, such as Martin Luther King, or Rachel Carson. Of course, even without this karmic dimension my life is important to me and to my family and friends. With it, my life can enter into a deeper relationship, one with karmic companions—a concept that seems to me especially felicitous. Several years ago, I wrote a related essay, "Lineage and Legacy: An Intellectual Memoir" that evolved from Brian Swimme's request that I write an autobiographical essay for a volume of essays by our department faculty. We did not follow through on the volume, but I did finish and post the essay on the PCC website.²

This essay is my attempt to identify those events and relationships that have been karmically defining or influential; other events and relationships count but not decisively.

² Robert McDermott, "Lineage and Legacy: My Intellectual Journey" (August 2011). CIIS/PCC/Faculty/robertmcdermott/publications.

At this stage of inquiry and writing, my theoretical understanding and my examples are mutually dependent, or co-arising. As my understanding of karma as a phenomenon, or a spiritual fact, improves, it helps me find examples, and as I do so, my understanding of the reality of karma deepens.

As I understand karma, it does not require close or enduring proximity to an event or person; it can be at a distance, fleeting, and impersonal. On the other side, a very huge public event could be karmically insignificant. In this essay I am focusing only on karmically significant influences, including a dozen individuals who have been both friends and karmically important: Thomas Berry, Harry Buck (executive director of the American Academy of Religion), Patrick Hill (provost of Evergreen State College), Elizabeth McCormack (former president of Manhattanville and associate of Laurance Rockefeller), and Stewart Easton (an anthroposophical author), and Mikhail Zakin (chair of Fine Arts at Sarah Lawrence and founder/director of the Old Church Cultural Center where Ellen taught pottery). More recently I want to add Debashish Banerji and Will Keepin. There are also some individuals with whom I was not a close friend, e.g., Haridas Chaudhuri, Laurence Rockefeller, Owen Barfield, but who are nevertheless karmically significant in my life.

Assigning a specifically karmic influence is not easy work: it requires more discernment than I have been able to bring to it. Some friendships, of course—e.g., my three brothers, the late Patrick Hill, several department colleagues, and a group of anthroposophists, with all of whom I have significant work in common—are all easy to identify. In 1922 I need to add that in the past two years five of my closest anthroposophical friends have died: Patti Smith, Gertrude Hughes, David Gershan, Gene Gollogly, and Christopher Bamford. Other relationships seem to me more difficult to interpret from a karmic perspective. Quite simply, some relationships that seem important in some specific respects might be karmically insignificant, or they might have a potential karmic significance to be realized a decade or two later—or a lifetime later! I try to keep in mind that despite the wide range of importance among friends and events, every relationship, every event, illness, pleasure, skill that is part of my life will have some karmic effect. From the perspective of karma, all of my friends, colleagues, and situations rush in.

Among karmically influential institutions I would name my childhood house and neighborhood (neither of which were special to me but surely were influential), mid-town Manhattan (which was very special!), Queens College, Manhattanville College (also very special), Boston University philosophy department, *Cross Currents*, Matagiri, The Sri Aurobindo Ashram and Auroville, the New York Branch of the Anthroposophical Society (president for five years), the Rudolf Steiner Institute (president for twelve years), Anthroposophic Press/Steinerbooks (board member for five years), Sunbridge College and Rudolf College (board chair of each for seven years), International Transpersonal Association (board member for five years), Sophia Project (board chair for 13 years, my favorite institution), CIIS (president for nine years and professor for the past 21 years, my intellectual home), and Esalen, where I have spent more than 20 memorable weeks since 1987 and which I served as a member of the Esalen corporation.

On the other side, there are individuals for whom I have been a karmic influence (so I have been told), with whom I have not been friends, surely some whom I have forgotten or perhaps have never known. By teaching, lecturing, and writing, I have been a karmic influence without being aware of it. There is at least one person who has had a huge influence on me and Ellen, and on our friend Mikhail Zakin, namely, the person who owns land next to our house in Truro and who sued us for eight years over the boundary between our properties. I have to wonder whether this person has an old karmic relationship, perhaps rooted in a past life, to me, to Ellen, or to our friend (who died in 2012 at age 92). I do not know what this relationship might be; I certainly wish I did!

If it were easy to track one's karma, and more dramatically, one's prebirth and rebirth, the great minds and souls of our time would do so. Instead, such research is still a minor paradigm. F. W. H. Myers, *Human Survival of Bodily Death* (1903)³ makes a case for the afterlife and Ian Stevenson's *Twenty One Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation* (1974),⁴ and *Reincarnation and Biology* (1997)⁵ traces birthmarks and deformities of a living person to a person who in death had left similar marks on their body. These works, while important, seem to reinforce the conviction of individuals previously committed to rebirth and seem to have little impact on the culture at large.

Helena Blavatsky (HPB), Rudolf Steiner, Sri Aurobindo, and His Holiness the Dalai Lama, all contribute knowledge to this topic but the following major twentieth century religious teachers generally ignore karma, prebirth, and rebirth: William James, Henri Bergson, Rudolf Otto, Mahatma Gandhi, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Thomas Merton, C. G. Jung, Martin Buber, D. T. Suzuki, Huston Smith, Thomas Berry,⁶ and Thich Nhat Hanh. James and Bergson were both president of the Society for Psychical Research but in the end were unable to affirm survival of personal consciousness.⁷

In his "Address of the President before the Society for Psychical Research (1896)," James made a compelling case for "one white crow," one individual who might bring information from the other side of death:

³ F. W. H. Myers, *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death* (NY: University Books, 1961) (1903).

⁴ Ian Stevenson, *Twenty One Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation*, 2nd ed., rev., enl. (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1974). First edition: American Society for Psychical Research, 1966.

⁵ Ian Stevenson, *Where Reincarnation and Biology Intersect* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1997).

⁶ I recall from a discussion with Thomas in the late 1970s his polite but definite expression of disinterest when I tried to explain Steiner's ideas on rebirth.

⁷ While William James was president of the American Society for Psychical Research he accepted the irresponsible report of Richard Hodgson against the integrity of H. B. Blavatsky. One hundred years later the *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* completely recanted its false report on HPB but in the intervening years the charge of fraud stuck to Blavatsky's name. See Vernon Harrison, *H. P. Blavatsky and the SPR: An Examination of the Hodgson Report of 1885* (Pasadena, CA: Theosophical University Press, 1997).

If you will let me use the language of the professional logic-shop, a universal law can be made untrue by a particular instance. If you wish to upset the law that all crows are black, you mustn't seek to show that no crows are; it is enough if you prove one single crow to be white. My own white crow is Mrs. Piper.⁸

But thirteen years later, in "The Confidences of a 'Psychical Researcher,'" a famous essay written the year before he died, James, ever the pluralist and open-ended thinker, offered a very cautious summation of the meticulous work that he and the Society for Psychical Research had conducted for a generation:

For twenty-five years I have been in touch with the literature of psychical research and have had acquaintance with numerous 'researchers.' I have also spent a good many hours (though far fewer than I ought to have spent) in witnessing (or trying to witness) phenomena. Yet I am theoretically no 'further' than I was at the beginning; and I confess that at times I have been tempted to believe that the creator has eternally intended this department of nature to remain baffling, to prompt our curiosities and hopes and suspicions all in equal measure, so that although ghosts, and clairvoyances, and raps and messages from spirits, are always seeming to exist and can never be fully explained away, they also can never be susceptible to full collaboration.⁹

As William James, like the rest of us, was not a white crow, it is too bad that he did not know of Rudolf Steiner (surely the whitest of white crows) and His Holiness the Dalai Lama (whose "whiteliness" is acclaimed by the entire world outside of the People's Republic of China).

Fifty years later, C. G. Jung, the greatest 20th century psychologist after James and Freud, wrote cautiously in his autobiography, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*:

We lack concrete proof that anything of us is preserved for eternity. At most we can say that there is some probability that something of our psyche continues beyond physical death.¹⁰

I would not blame a person for thinking that if James and Jung, two of the deepest divers into the unconscious, do not know whether there is survival of personal consciousness, what chance do we have?

⁸ William James, "Address of the President before the Society for Psychical Research (1896)," in *Essays in Psychical Research*. Introduction, Robert McDermott. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986, 131.

⁹ William James, "Confidences of a 'Psychical Researcher,'" *Ibid.*, 362.

¹⁰ C. G. Jung, *Memories, Dream, Reflections*. Recorded and edited, Aniela Jaffe. Trans. Richard and Clara Winston (NY: Random House/Pantheon Books, 1961.

One development that has permeated popular culture is the so-called Near-Death Experience (NDE) literature.¹¹ The first volume on this phenomenon, *Life After Death*, by Raymond Moody, sold 14 million copies. Unfortunately, the latest such volume, *Proof of Heaven*, which has sold two million copies, appears to have been exposed as a fraud.¹²

In his *The Problem of Rebirth*,¹³ oddly titled as it is not a problem but rather a profound worldview, Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950), the foremost spiritual philosopher and spiritual teacher of 20th century India, offers a trenchant defense of karma and rebirth. Perhaps more importantly, their indissolubility: for Aurobindo, karma is the instrument of the divine for advancing (divinizing) the consciousness of individuals and civilizations. Karma requires that individuals return repeatedly to take up where they left off at the end of a previous birth, and thereby to draw from and contribute to the total evolutionary arc.

One of the most prominent features of Aurobindo's defense includes a strong—we might say inaccurate and intemperate—critique of both the Advaita (non-dual) Vedanta and Buddhism. He rejects the philosophy of Shankara (8th century), the dominant metaphysical worldview of Hinduism because, he says, its monism—all is Brahman, but "one reality without a second"—essentially denies individuality and history. He similarly rejects Buddhism because, in his view, Buddha and Buddhism deny the reality of the individual self which for Aurobindo is the carrier of the evolution of consciousness (in adherence to the will of the divine—which Buddhism also allegedly denies). Aurobindo's understanding of Buddhism is arguably fair concerning early (Theravada) Buddhism but less so of Mahayana Buddhism (with which neither he nor Steiner was familiar).

Irrespective of Aurobindo's critique of Advaita Vedanta and (Theravada) Buddhism, his *Problem of Rebirth*, which presupposes familiarity with his major works, especially *The Essays on the Gita*, *Synthesis of Yoga*, *The Life Divine*, and *Savitri*, argues effectively that each human life is potentially a contribution to the realization of divine consciousness in history. This is the essential meaning of his oft-quoted statement: "All life is a secret yoga."¹⁴ Of course not all souls make a positive contribution to the evolution of consciousness: some souls will return in a deficient state, desperately needing to, but likely unable to, benefit by the advances of consciousness made possible by individuals able to express the divine will.

¹¹ See Raymond Moody, *Life After Death* and similar books by Kenneth Ring and Elizabeth Kubler-Ross.

¹² See Luke Dittrich, "The Prophet," *Esquire*, August 2013, p. 89ff. The research of Sam Parnia is more promising. See: *What Happens When We Die* (2006) and *Erasing Death: The Science That is Rewriting the Boundaries Between Life and Death* (2013).

¹³ Sri Aurobindo, *The Problem of Rebirth* (Pondicherry, India: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press, 2005) (1952)

¹⁴ Robert McDermott, *The Essential Aurobindo* (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne Press, 1987), p. 165, from Sri Aurobindo, *The Synthesis of Yoga* (Pondicherry, India: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press, 1972ff), 591.

My commitment to anthroposophy (which will be evident throughout this essay) does not exclude a devotion to His Holiness the Dalai Lama as well as to the Tibetan Buddhist tradition which produced him and which he advances so inspiringly. Rather, Steiner and anthroposophy support and encourage my relationship to world religions and major philosophies.¹⁵ Steiner lectured extensively on great souls both historical and contemporary. I wish he had lived to appreciate Gandhi and Sri Aurobindo, His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh, Thomas Merton and Teilhard de Chardin, Wingari Maathai and Joanna Macy. He would have referred to them as Michaelic, a term he used for individuals who embody the ideals of individual integrity, warriors against the forces of evil, and devoted to the evolution of humanity. In his view, great souls, increasingly since the 15th century in the West, exemplify his characterization of anthroposophy as "a path of knowledge to lead the spiritual in the individual to the spiritual in the universe." Surely, His Holiness is such a preeminent example of precisely this relationship: a free, unique, creative individual in intimate positive relationship with Buddha, religious leaders, national destinies, and the Earth.

The source of the Tibetan teaching of prebirth and rebirth dates to the enormous, authoritative text by the 8th century Tibetan lama, Padma Sambhava. The Dalai Lama, Sogyal Rinpoche, and Robert A. F. Thurman are among the prominent commentators of this text in the last decade. Although this text is known in the West as "The Tibetan Book of the Dead," the more proper translation, as Thurman explains, would be the subtitle of his translation: "The Tibetan Book of the Dead: Liberation through Understanding in the Between."¹⁶ This readable translation leaves little doubt that "the between" for all of us who have spent our lives half asleep and attached to self and other illusions, will very likely be a horrific experience that will land us in another disastrous incarnation. Because of his spiritual training and depth, and preeminence in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, the Dalai Lama's comments on the text of Padma Sambhava carry extra authority. As I read these sources, it seems that the Tibetan tradition boasts vast accumulation, over many centuries by many fabulous lamas and rinpoches, of experience of the "between" (also call the Bardo). But this same tradition seems also to have a serious theoretical challenge, namely, its idea of the self as illusory yet accumulating karma and carrying it from life to life.¹⁷ Obviously, the Dalai Lama himself is a self, and quite a high self, or there would be no meaning to his being the Fourteenth.

Improving the understanding of karma, prebirth, and rebirth in the modern West was one of the missions that his Master gave to Rudolf Steiner at age eighteen.¹⁸ Steiner's

¹⁵See Steiner's lecture,in And Mario Betti

¹⁶ Robert A. F. Thurman, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead: Liberation through Understanding in the Between* (NY: Bantam Books, 1994).

¹⁷ Anyone wishing to avoid this tragically typical horrendous fate would do well to read and heed the advice in Anyen Rinpoche, *Dying with Confidence: A Tibetan Buddhist Guide to Preparing for Death* (Boston: Wisdom, 2010).

¹⁸ Rudolf Steiner, *Autobiography—Chapters in the Course of My Life: 1861-1907*. Collected Works, v. 28 (Great Barrington, MA: Steinerbooks, 2005), 29-31.

research on karma and rebirth is one of the two commitments (along with the founding of the General Anthroposophical Society¹⁹) that Steiner pursued on his own initiative (without being asked by someone else). He was extremely eager to bring these concepts to Western thought and culture. He wrote his closest colleague, and personal physician, Ita Wegman, M.D., a description of lives that he claimed to have shared with her.²⁰ My attempt to attend to karma is based almost entirely on my reading of Rudolf Steiner, though I must admit that some of the examples in Steiner's lectures, particularly in *Manifestations of Karma*, seem to me too deterministic. I prefer to speak of tendencies or attractions rather than causes.

To cite an example that lives in recent American experience, I believe that there is simply too much indeterminacy (whether freedom or chaos) for those, and only those, "whose time was up," to have died in that conflagration. I cannot accept the idea that those who stopped for coffee on the way to their office that morning were not karmically intended to die whereas all of the tourists who visited the World Trade Center that day were intended to die.

I will take up the influence of Rudolf Steiner and anthroposophy toward the end of this essay, but even the following section on my own biography will probably, if subtly, evidence Steiner's influence.

II. REFLECTIONS ON MY KARMA AND BIOGRAPHY

Birth to Twenty-five

I was born in New York City on August 5, 1939, approximately 7:30 am. I mention the date, time, and place because half the students who will read this essay will proceed to research my astrological (natal) chart. I was not surprised that on the morning of my interview at CIIS in April 1990 I was asked repeatedly for my date, time, and place of birth. Prior to moving to CIIS, I of course knew that my natal chart showed me to be a Leo. I had my chart read by a woman in Greenwich Village in the early 1970s. In the Aurobindo communities to which I belonged from 1970 to 1976, my leonine status was considered privileged because it is close to Sri Aurobindo's birthday on August 15. I did not know about transits until Rick read my chart (for several hours) in the early 1990s, before he came to CIIS. Rick Tarnas read my chart again for my sixtieth birthday—as did Cathy Coleman and Brian Grey. I am very conscious of the prominence in my chart of Venus, Saturn, Mars, Mercury, and Uranus. I am more conscious of my stubborn sanguine and choleric temperaments, and my almost total lack of melancholia and phlegma. I have spent a major part of my waking life trying to listen, think, speak, and act less quickly. Contrary to the popular conception of sanguine—moving lightly and

¹⁹ See Christoph Lindenberg, *Rudolf Steiner: A Biography* (Great Barrington, MA: Steinerbooks, 2012), pp. 666-82.

²⁰ T. H. Meyer, *Rudolf Steiner's The Core Mission: The Birth and Development of Spiritual-Scientific Karma Research* (Forest Row, UK: Temple Lodge, 2010).

quickly, starting without finishing projects—however, I have had one wife, one profession, lived in only two cities, and have worked full-time for only three institutions.

Surely some facts at birth are inescapably karmic: parents, date and location, gender, language, class, religion, extended family, and certain inherent capabilities waiting to be developed. In my case, white, working class, Irish New York Catholic could not but be influential and presumably appropriate for my karmic tasks. I tried to describe some of these relationships and influences in my essay, "Lineage and Legacy." My mother was pious all of her life; my father was moral, an observant Roman Catholic but his religion was his family and work. He frequently said: "Love and work will save us." In retrospect I think it is clear that, following my father, I have aspired to morality, loyalty, and work; following my mother I have been inclined to conversation, affection, friendship, religion, and beauty. Following my father, I am Saturnian, following my mother I am driven by and drawn to Venus. Following my mother, I am a Platonist, following my father I am an Aristotelian. Following both I have been devoted to my family.

My oldest brother John was extremely dramatic and academically brilliant; he was often at odds with my (practical) father and adored by my (romantic) mother. My two sisters, Mary and Ann, who not insignificantly came after him, were in the opposite situation. I have a professional as well as a fraternal relationship with all three brothers whereas my sisters did not pursue academic careers. My slightly older brother, Joe, who is universally loved, did ABD in political science at The New School, founded and directed the School of New Resources at the College of New Rochelle, and then founded and is president of The Coalition for Worker Education. The sixth child, Ray, my third brother, also beloved of all who know him, is a professor of anthropology and education at Stanford. Two brothers born after me died in infancy, one when I was two, and one when I was four. Following each of these deaths my mother was extremely depressed. I believe that she prayed to her deceased babies for many years after.

Fitting in this mix was certainly a karmic challenge. Although I was restless in elementary school (and everywhere else), I was too scared of the nuns, and in high school of the brothers, to misbehave. I was not a particularly successful student because I could not read very well. I never finished an exam or a book on time. It was not until I was writing my dissertation that I learned that I had seriously faulty stereopsis.

What I have written above can be considered the major threads and the enduring influences of my early life, presumably all karmically significant. There are other factors in my childhood, adolescence and life before marriage and a career as a professor, both of which began at age 25, which I (mostly) prize but seem to be karmically less significant—not entirely non-karmic but less karmically significant. Some of these factors have remained vivid, others have passed without a memory or interest—probably the same.

My closest friend by far from age three to thirteen was Chuck Spitaliere, one of my closest friends today. Chuck and I played basketball and stickball many hours of

every week with no need to keep score. Another friend took me to Jones Beach with his parents several nights a week throughout the summer. My summers age 14 to 19 were spent at a camp in the Catskills. The first summer I washed dishes and rode horses, to the point where I was riding bareback in a bathing suit. (Forty years later, when I mounted a horse in Crestone, CO, after a Lindisfarne Conference, the pain was unbearable.) At age 15 I was responsible for a cabin of eight boys, all age ten. Three meals a day and bedtime were definitely a challenge. Eight weeks on a lake surrounded by mountains exercised on me a deep love of nature, especially lake swimming and canoeing.

I attended an academically inferior all-boys Catholic high school on West 61st Street and 10th Avenue, in a building on a street replaced by Lincoln Center. Many of the teachers, Irish Christian brothers and laymen, were anti-intellectual; a few were sadistic. My memories of age 13 to 17 are mostly my social life with a group of very enjoyable teenagers, all cool (or so we thought), dancing, sports, innocent romance. I had an enjoyable afterschool and Saturday job for a Fifth Avenue haberdashery. I delivered custom made shirts and expensive ties to apartments on Fifth and Park Avenues, and more than once to Rockefeller Center offices where, thirty-five years later, I would meet Laurence Rockefeller in the famed Suite 5600 of 30 Rockefeller Center.

On graduation from high school, for reasons that were not clear to me at the time, nor since, I went to a Paulist Fathers pre-seminary college for two years. I enjoyed the community life, the discipline and especially what I considered to be the high purpose, and two priests I admired, but I clearly was not in the right place. I cannot explain why I stayed a second year; it was not due to family pressure. Remarkably, my five siblings and I had total freedom to choose the schools we attended. In the fall I entered Queens College, started a delightful romance, enjoyed my part-time jobs (mostly in New York City public school gyms), and felt that life had begun again after a curious (but neither painful nor controversial) hiatus. I suspect was the real (karmic) purpose of those two years was for me to befriend the brilliant, inspiring, beloved Patrick Hill. Patrick could sing Irish songs for five hours without repeating one. I still feel the profound loss of Patrick's death five years ago. Patrick and I attended Queens College and Boston University together, two institutions that seemed to us entirely positive. He had no interest in either Sri Aurobindo or Rudolf Steiner, but we shared the influence of my brother John and Thomas Berry, *Cross Currents*,²¹ Dewey, Buber, Teilhard, and John and Robert Kennedy. Along with Patrick I appreciated Martin Luther King, Jr. but it was not until teaching King's writings in the last decade that I came to appreciate adequately the miracle of his courage, insights, and global significance; he gets better every year.

I founded and edited *Triangle*, a Queens College annual journal for Catholic and Jewish thought sponsored by the Newman Club and Hillel. Two years later Patrick edited the third issue of *Triangle*. Before I graduated from Queens College I applied to five graduate schools in five fields: philosophy, religious studies, theology, American studies,

²¹ My first publications were in *Cross Currents*, editors of which—Joseph Cunneen, William Birmingham, and Eugene Fontinell—became friends as well as collaborators.

and liberal arts. I attended Emory partly to study with Charles Hartshorne, which I did, but he then left and so did I, for Boston University where I belonged. Karma.

The Second Quarter

As everyone who knows me is well aware, perhaps the deepest karmic relationship of my life is my 58-year marriage (following a seven year friendship) with Ellen Dineen. Thomas Berry officiated at our wedding and baptized our two children, Darren (b. 1967) and Deirdre (b. 1970). Ellen brought constant fidelity to me and to our families and friends as well as an enthusiasm for jazz, art, literature, gardening, cooking, clothing, conversation, and, of course, romance. For the three years before my romance with Ellen, I was in a serious relationship with another woman who left me one week after we arrived at Boston University to study for doctorates. I never saw her again. As this was not my decision, and as it ended so suddenly with a brief note, it took some time for me to see, thanks to the joy of my relationship with Ellen, the karmic rightness of this ending. I hope Arlene had as positive a marriage as I have had, thanks curiously to her, and very obviously to my unfailingly loving wife. My marriage to Ellen is certainly one part of my life for which karma has been an obvious fact.

Equally obvious as karmic facts are our two children and four grandchildren. Our son Darren was born when I was 27, while I was teaching full time, plus serving as part-time dean, and finishing a doctorate at Boston University. Fortunately, Ellen, who was born to be a mother, beautifully cared for Darren, for me, and three years later for our daughter Deirdre. Once I moved to Baruch, however, I had only one job and a lot of time at home for family life. Beginning in 1972 we lived in the affluent town of Rye, NY, across from a beautiful beach on Long Island Sound. It was pretty close to perfect. Darren and Deirdre went to Rye public schools. Darren went on to Amherst, Columbia Journalism, and the Wall Street Journal until he joined the Brunswick Group after 17 years at the Journal. Darren made an ideal marriage to Julia (a therapist for the deaf) with whom he is raising two exciting daughters, Benna (10) and Kate (8).

Deirdre was unhappy at Rye High School, we moved to Columbia Teachers College for academic year 1985-86. Ellen studied for a masters and worked as the nursery-kindergarten teacher at the Rudolf Steiner School (on 79th Street off Fifth Avenue) while Deirdre attended the Rudolf Steiner High School. Deirdre's time to flourish came when she did a fifth year at the Sacramento Waldorf School, followed by Hampshire College, a UCSF MA, and a career as a nurse practitioner. Deirdre, too, has an excellent marriage (to Jan, an engineer) with whom she is raising two delightful children, Liam (8) and Neve (5). Ellen and I both experience the deepest possible relationship to our children, their spouses, and our four grandchildren. This part of my life has always seemed to me karmically right, if anything is, and truly a joy.

I can confidently say that through all the nearly sixty years of my marriage my family has been my first commitment—spiritually, socially, financially. Although I spoke a vow at our wedding on Thanksgiving Day, 1964, in front of Thomas Berry and about 200 family members and friends, I subsequently decided, probably due to the influence of

existentialism, that I do not believe in vows. I think it is not possible or responsible to make a commitment for a lifetime. I have never considered ending my marriage to Ellen, but not because of a vow; rather because every day our marriage seems to me right. Not the least of the reasons (in addition to an abiding karmic sense that we were meant for each other), quite simply, Ellen is kind; she is never vindictive or selfish. She is always generous to me, to relatives, friends, and colleagues. Which doesn't mean that our marriage has been easy. We are often frustrated by our different temperaments: I want big pictures, Ellen wants details. I go too fast and am too confident. In ways that I find annoying, Ellen is cautious and meticulous. Of course, these very qualities sometimes save me from self-induced disasters. We are well used to the conflict between our temperaments, and are maybe making some progress dealing with them. Karma.

I have observed many marriages that are not right, and for which divorce was surely better. The challenges that Ellen and I have confronted—in addition to pace and different interests, Ellen's craniotomy, two strokes, and breast cancer—have always seemed to me somehow ours. The grace with which Ellen has dealt with five major surgeries has clearly indicated to me she has accepted these as part of her karma, and therefore indirectly but no less certainly I accepted them as part of mine. Similarly, raising our children seemed to me exactly what I should be doing. Although I was not as "on board" as Ellen in the first two years of our children's lives, I was totally on board once they each reached age two or three. I was intensely devoted to our children thereafter, a responsibility I thoroughly enjoyed—and still do, now with grandchildren. It has always seemed to me that caring for children, whether or not one's own, is the most sacred of obligations and, fortunately, the most rewarding.

Not all of our activities, or even commitments, seemed to me then, or seem now, especially meaningful, and perhaps not part of my central karmic task. I spent hours at dinner with relatives and neighbors with whom I did not share interests and purposes. I spent hours every weekend as Ellen's garden-boy unable or unwilling to enter into the joy of gardening flowers and vegetables. I spent countless hours repairing our house—shingling the roof, putting in skylights, fixing broken pipes. Maybe all of that and more was intended and right. Maybe, as I often hear said (and do not believe) everything is positive just as it is. My Daoism, which, admittedly, is not as deeply entrenched as my Confucianism, involves insight and discipline, and does not accept the passive bail-out, "everything happens for the best." (I can hardly control my disapproval at each annual faculty staff orientation sitting beneath a sign that announces: "Everyone who needs to be here is here." No: some faculty were not meeting their responsibility; they could have and should have been there.)

Non-meeting, non-meaning, seems to me not the best. It would have been better, and perhaps best, had I entered into gardening, or reading more novels or playing more games, or taken more pleasure in four-hour dinners, and other activities that Ellen cultivated. When I responded to an amazing psychic that I visited in the early 1980s that I was not interested in doing some work that he recommended, he replied that I had avoided that same work in my previous life. Karma.

My oldest brother John's influence is due not least because like him I studied philosophy, including American philosophy, his enthusiasm for which influenced me very directly.²² Interestingly, probably in ways that are subject to many interpretations, my entire (karmic) orientation is in favor of religion and spirituality, both of which he has opposed since his mid-twenties, and ever more passionately in later years. My other siblings ranged from indifferent to explicitly hostile to the Catholic Church, the only religious tradition of which they have any experience. I read myself out of the Catholic Church in college, but I did not at all lose interest in religion or spirituality.

As a counter as well as a complement to John's worldview, beginning at age 14 I had the direct influence, inspiration, and friendship of Thomas Berry. I studied Asian religions and Sanskrit with him, and he introduced me to the thought of Mircea Eliade and Eric Voegelin. I did not follow his interest in Native Americans in the 60s just as I did not follow his interest in ecology in the 70s. Two mistakes, or so I think now. At the time, of course, I just wasn't interested; I was interested in other pursuits. In 1975, Thomas essentially gave me his Fulbright to the Open University in England. Along with the influence of my parents, the influence of my brother John and Thomas Berry have been two of the deepest: John's influence continues through my work in American philosophy (recently on Josiah Royce) and Thomas' influence through his work on ecology. In preparation for a course on Teilhard and Thomas that I co-taught last year with Brian Swimme I read all of Thomas' collected work. To my surprise, I finished that course much closer to the thought of Teilhard than to the thought of Thomas, mostly because in Thomas' ecological writings Christ is almost completely absent. I have made some progress studying, and plan to continue studying, religion and ecology as advanced first by Thomas and in the next generation by Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, Elizabeth Allison, and Elizabeth McAnally.

Within days of defending my dissertation on the philosophy of Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan at Boston University, spring 1969, I received notice of being awarded a two-year grant to study Indian civilization during the following summer at Syracuse University and summer 1970 in New Delhi. In the Syracuse University library, I discovered the writings of Sri Aurobindo and resolved to write on his two careers, his radical political activism against British rule of India (1893-1909) and his career as a mystic yogic philosopher in Pondicherry, South India (1910-50). After six weeks of study in New Delhi in August 1970, I went to the Sri Aurobindo Ashram and Auroville in Southeast India. I was scheduled for a private meeting (darshan) with the Mother of the Ashram (the former Mira Richard) on my birthday, but I was told by her secretary that she cancelled in order to enter a battle with psychic forces. I was present when she gave a public darshan on Sri Aurobindo's birthday, August 15. Devotees around seemed transported in ecstasy but I felt nothing. When Bob Thurman introduced me to His Holiness the Dalai Lama, I definitely felt something. Karma.

²² See his editions of the works of William James, Josiah Royce, and John Dewey, as well as a collection of his essays: *The Drama of Possibility: Experience as Philosophy of Culture*. Ed., Douglas R. Anderson (NY: Fordham University Press, 2007).

On the way home from Pondicherry, August 1970, I met with Haridas and Bina Chaudhuri and visited the California Institute of Asian Studies that they had founded four years previous. The meeting had the strongest stamp of karma; I somehow (how?) was convinced that he and I would work together, and we did: in 1972 we edited and contributed essays to a special issue of *International Philosophical Quarterly* (IPQ).²³ It was tragic (however karmically intended it might have been) for the future of CIAS/CIIS and for Sri Aurobindo scholarship in the United States that Haridas died of a heart attack in 1975. Eight years later I was offered the opportunity to succeed him as president of CIAS but I did not accept. When was offered the presidency again in 1990, with the help of Elizabeth McCormack and Laurance Rockefeller, I was able to accept. Everything to do with Haridas and Bina, and my being appointed president of CIIS, seems to me to have the strongest possible karmic significance. On assuming the presidency full time in February 1991 I wrote an essay for the Institute newsletter that I entitled "Autobiographical Reflections as a Schooling in Karma."

I did not accept the teaching position that Haridas offered me in 1970. As our son was three years old and Ellen was expecting our daughter, I needed a real salary. Further, I was heading for tenure at Manhattanville College, an institution I admired and enjoyed. The students had been to excellent high schools and enjoyed learning. They also had values: many volunteered for the Catholic Worker and protested the Vietnam War. I was a dean of a class of 350 students, most of whom I knew. I was also faculty advisor to SDS (Students for a Democratic Society). At a national SDS meeting in Kansas, 1969, I observed sadly that the leaders of SDS hated learning, including Plato, Shakespeare, and history. I have ever since been fascinated by the double-edged sword of "concerned" professors, the term by which those of us who opposed the Vietnam War referred to ourselves. I continue to approve "concerned" against injustice but "concerned" sometimes includes commitments by professors that I do not respect and that lead me to prefer less "concerned," more dispassionate, scholarship.

In 1971 I left Manhattanville where I had taught philosophy for seven years, where I had thrived and to which I have ever since been grateful. I also thrived at and was grateful to my next school, Baruch College, CUNY, where I taught for twenty years, was chair of the Philosophy Department for twelve years and chair of the Religion and Culture program for six years. I was well paid, promoted, granted tenure, awarded teacher of the year, and other honors. Yet during my entire tenure at Baruch I had a sense (an intuition, more than a desire) that I was not to stay there permanently. The same psychic I visited in 1978 referred to my position at Baruch as a "sinecure." This is an over-statement but I did have many commitments outside of Baruch: I served as secretary of the American Academy of Religion, secretary of the Society for Asian and Comparative Philosophy, president of the New York Center for Anthroposophy, and president of the Rudolf Steiner Institute. I delivered more than fifty lectures at the New York Open Center and edited five books. I also attended the Columbia University

²³ See Robert McDermott, "Sri Aurobindo: An Integrated Theory of Individual and Historical Transformation," pp. 168-80, and Haridas Chaudhuri, "The Supermind in Sri Aurobindo's Philosophy," pp. 181-92, *IPQ*, XII, 2, June 1972.

Oriental Seminar directed by Wm Theodore de Bary. My close academic friends included Jim Carse, acclaimed professor of religion at NYU, and Douglas Sloan, professor of history and religion at Columbia Teachers College. With such a rich academic and social life I had no reason to be unhappy at Baruch but I sensed that something would move me, and it certainly did. Karma.

Sometimes a karmic connection resurfaces. In 1972 William Irwin Thompson and I were guests on Lex Hixon's radio program, *In the Spirit*, to discuss Auroville, where we had both recently visited. In 1976, after I returned from the Open University where I had begun to study Rudolf Steiner, I was invited by Bill Thompson to teach a course on Sri Aurobindo and Rudolf Steiner at Lindisfarne, which was then in Manhattan, a few blocks from my office at Baruch. Then I did not see Bill again until 1993 when Laurance Rockefeller offered to finance Bill's salary if I could appoint him to CIIS, which I did. Soon after Bill invited me to join Lindisfarne Association, a remarkable group of very well known, highly creative and influential individuals, all invited by Bill, who meet for a week each summer. Wendell Berry, Mary Catherine Bateson, Wes Jackson, Amory Lovins, David Orr, Lynn Margolis, and Jane Hirshfield are only a few of the impressive colleagues I came to know through Lindisfarne. Karma.

Thanks to Ellen's work in clay, we both became very close friends of Mikhail Zakin, a nationally known potter. After an impossibly difficult childhood, Mikhail became an inspiring teacher of music, clay, culture, cooking, and all aspects of life. Without a college education she served as chair of the Fine Arts Department at Sarah Lawrence College. She founded and directed the Old Church Cultural Center and School of Art in Closter, New Jersey. We bought a house together in Truro, Cape Cod. Quite simply, Mikhail was an amazing person, tremendously important to me and to our children, and of course especially to Ellen.

Another equally obvious spiritual-karmic influence has been a group of individual anthroposophists, almost all close friends for more than thirty years. I believe that my relationship to all these friends, some but not all of whom know each other, is profoundly karmic. I am as close to most of these friends, with whom I talk and exchange emails regularly, as I am to my PCC colleagues. Due to our shared devotion to Rudolf Steiner and anthroposophy, our friendship began and continues at a very deep level. Furthermore, my friendships with colleagues who are not anthroposophists are also influenced by their life tasks and worldviews. I find it easy and enjoyable to support the work of individuals with a moral compass and a spiritual awareness.²⁴ This deeper kind of friendship seems to me important to notice. I can most confidently ascribe the deepest karmic significance to Carol Cole with whom I have collaborated as founding chair of the board of the Sophia Project that she founded and has directed for thirteen years. During our five decades together almost all of Ellen's friends have been my friends. Of my twenty closest friends today more than half are women. Patricia Kenney-Schliebe, a member of the Sophia Board, has been a friend since high school.

²⁴ By contrast, in the 1990s I found it difficult to deal with individuals who supported George W. Bush (or the gang of four—W, Cheney, Rummie, and Wolfie).

My devotion to Rudolf Steiner and anthroposophy has been my spiritual base and the center from which I engage the world. This is in keeping with Steiner's characterization of anthroposophy as "a path of knowledge (warm, living thinking) to lead the spiritual in the individual to the spiritual in the universe."²⁵ All of my academic work has at least a slight tincture of anthroposophy, and some, as in this essay and course, a thorough coloration.

I am often asked how I came to anthroposophy. The story is worth telling because it shouts karma. Ellen was taking a pottery course at Greenwich House in Manhattan with Mikhail Zakin. At the end of the class, I saw Mikhail showing photos of living forms reproduced in *Sensitive Chaos* by Theodore Schwenk,²⁶ a book that had been recommended to her by her life-long friend, M. C. Richards, author of the 60s classic, *Centering in Pottery, Poetry, and the Person*.²⁷ In order for me to purchase the book for Ellen's birthday, Mikhail directed me to 211 Madison Avenue, at 35th Street. I often had occasion to pass "211," the library and bookstore of the Anthroposophical Society. It was on my walk from Grand Central Station to my office at 26th Street and Park Avenue, and my first two books²⁸ were published by E. P. Dutton and Schocken Books, both at 210 Madison Avenue, but I always avoided "211" across the street because it looked too weird, kind of a "Joe sent me" place.

Once inside the library and bookstore of 211 Madison I found 200 books by an author whose name was entirely new to me. A few years before I had published an essay review of commentaries on the Bhagavad Gita, and here were two books on the Gita unknown to me (this was before Google search). I purchased and read Steiner's *Occult Significance of the Bhagavad Gita* and *The Bhagavad Gita and the Epistles of Paul*. (In 2009 I edited *The Bhagavad Gita and the West*, containing these two volumes with my 85 page introduction.) During the academic year 1975-76, while on a Fulbright to the Open University (thanks to Thomas Berry), I had the chance to read Steiner extensively and attend lectures at Rudolf Steiner House in London. For my Open University work I wrote a small book on Gandhi and Sri Aurobindo and wrote the script for the *Avatar: Concept and Example*, a BBC video on Krishna and Sri Aurobindo, but my spiritual compass was already pointing me to Steiner and anthroposophy. Karma.

²⁵ Robert McDermott, ed., intro., *The New Essential Steiner* (Great Barrington, MA: Steinerbooks, 2009), pp. 9-10.

²⁶ Theodore Schwenk, *Sensitive Chaos: The Creation of Flowing Forms in Water and Air* (London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 2005) (1965)

²⁷ M. C. Richards, *Centering in Pottery, Poetry, and the Person*. Foreword, Matthew Fox (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1989). See also M. C. Richards on Waldorf education: *Toward Wholeness: Rudolf Steiner Education in America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1980).

²⁸ Robert McDermott, *Radhakrishnan* (NY: E. P. Dutton, 1970), and *The Essential Aurobindo* (NY: Schocken, 1974).

Unlike the exclusivism of Christianity, particularly the Irish Roman Catholicism on which I was raised, anthroposophy is embracing of the texts, teachers, and practices of the world religions. My informed and reverent relationship to Krishna and Sri Aurobindo, as well as to Buddha, Thich Nanh Hanh, and His Holiness the Dalai Lama, are part of my life as an anthroposophist. Steiner delivered fourteen lectures on Krishna and the Bhagavad Gita, and carefully researched the positive relationship between Buddha and Christ.²⁹ Once I began to think inside anthroposophy I felt at home spiritually because I have been able to bring with me the great texts and teachers with whom I already had developed a relationship. More importantly, I was able to bring to them Steiner's perspective, especially on the evolution of consciousness.

Although neither a Hindu nor a Buddhist, I try to practice the three yogas of the Gita (spiritual thinking, selfless action, and love) and the Three Jewels of Buddhism (the teacher, teaching and practice, and the community). Steiner's three disciplines, which he refers to as thinking, feeling, and willing, are essentially the same as the yogas of the Gita. In my practice, I revere Rudolf Steiner (whom I regard as the preeminent initiate of the age), I study his teaching and practice the discipline he recommends, and I try to serve the communities (not only anthroposophical communities) to which I belong.

I believe that as I was born to be married to Ellen and with her raise two children (and be enchanted by four grandchildren), and be a professor of philosophy and religion, and serve as president of CIIS, I was born to be an anthroposophist. In karmic terms it makes sense to me that I started life as a Catholic, left it in favor of many religious and spiritual ideals, and since age 35 have been nourished by anthroposophy. I am grateful that Ellen led me to Grace Cathedral, but the Episcopal Communion, of which I am an active member, is a supplement to my anthroposophy. If the Grace Cathedral community were not an important and admirable part of my life with Ellen, I would be more active in the Christian Community, the Church that Rudolf Steiner essentially gave to Lutheran priests³⁰ as a way of renewing the Christian seven sacraments.

In the early 1980s I went to a psychic, Vincent Ragone, who casually commented that I would publish *The Essential Steiner* with Harper and Row. At first I was astonished that he could know that I had just weeks before submitted a proposal for *The Essential Steiner* to a new friend who was an editor at Seabury. I replied to Vincent that my editor friend had recently phoned to say that I would be receiving a contract in a few weeks. After the conversation with Vincent, my friend phoned again to say that Seabury had discovered that Harper had contracted with a highly accomplished anthroposophist for a Steiner anthology. At first I concluded that Vincent had fused my proposal to Seabury with the Harper volume, which was presumably forthcoming. With the help of Jacob (Jerry) Needleman, I was able to contact the vice president of Harper who explained that the Steiner anthology was not making progress and asked if I had a proposal. A week

²⁹ See Robert McDermott, ed., intro., *According to Luke: The Gospel of Compassion and Love Revealed* (Great Barrington, MA: Steinerbooks, 2001).

³⁰ See Alfred Heidenreich, *Growing Point: The Story of the Foundaton of the Movement for Religious Renewal, The Christian Community* (London: The Christian Community Press, 1965).

later I received a contract from Harper for *The Essential Steiner*. I definitely do not understand precognition. I often quote Whitehead's comment that there are no future facts, but there do seem to be examples of individuals who can see and genuinely know what has not yet happened in linear time. Clearly, there are "white crows" of precognition.

In 1983, in my role as president of the Rudolf Steiner [summer] institute, I invited Owen Barfield to teach a course on one of his books. He agreed. The Institute that summer was held at Wilson College, where I was able to bring it thanks to my years of collaboration with Harry Buck. But then Owen wrote to say that at 85 he was really too old to teach, that I should teach the course. In the end, I co-taught with Owen Barfield a course on books by Owen Barfield, one of the most admirable as well as most learned and wise individuals it has been my privilege to experience. In 1995 he wrote a letter to me celebrating CIIS which I think he would not mind my quoting:

Dear Robert,

It was good of you to remember me. I was impressed by both the articles you enclosed with your letter, your own and Richard Tarnas's, and glad to have had the opportunity of reading them. They confirm the impression I have had for some time (on admittedly slender evidence, as I am not really in touch) that the C.I.I.S. is one of the very few positive signs that there may be some hope of a paradigm shift being accomplished by our civilization in time to avert a total catastrophe. (February 17, 1994)

It is amazing to me that I knew him. Blessed be Karma.

Steiner seems often to be viewed as a German philosopher who just happens to have started Waldorf Schools and Biodynamic agriculture. Or, he might be viewed as someone with visions of angels and devils, and wild ideas about rebirth. In my view, Steiner is a high initiate—one sent by the spiritual world with a wide and deep mission, a kind of Western avatar—who was wise, selfless, and incomparably productive. Jung comes close to Steiner's productivity, but Steiner worked in the four or five disciplines in which Jung worked plus he contributed to systematic philosophy, evolution of consciousness, cosmology, architecture, mystery dramas, economics, social theory, education, and agriculture. He was astonishingly clairvoyant, he delivered 6,000 lectures, he was patient and kind, and at the end of his life he established an esoteric and exoteric organization to advance esoteric research. For me, Rudolf Steiner is the teacher, the first jewel.

The second jewel is dharma: teaching and practice. Although I have been studying books by and about Steiner for more than 35 years, and practicing anthroposophy in many different ways, I still feel that I am at the beginning. But the essential criterion for success in anthroposophical practice is faithful effort. Practicing anthroposophy is essentially a life-long process of transformation of one's thinking, feeling, and willing, the three yogas of the Gita, except that Steiner formulated these transformative disciplines precisely for modern Western practitioners. Consequently,

thinking, as Steiner explains, needs to take account of the loss of participation characteristic of Western consciousness, steadily for many centuries, and severely since the 15th century in the West. The practices Steiner recommends are aimed at the development of warm, will-filled, original thinking.

The esoteric research that Steiner conducted throughout his life, and the vast esoteric, as well as exoteric and practical knowledge, that he bequeathed, all support the fundamental need of the time. Steiner offers a new, modern Western dharma: to think originally, feel deeply, and will deliberately, all in service of the divinely guided (but not determined) evolution of consciousness. This three-fold discipline is intended for the transformation of each individual life, and the whole of humanity. It has been developed in stages by Krishna, Buddha, and Christ. It has been aided by a host of other high beings including Gotama Siddhartha, the historical, physical Buddha and Jesus of Nazareth, the historical, physical Christ, as well as by the mother of Jesus, John the Evangelist, Michael the Archangel, and indirectly by the tempters, Lucifer and Ahriman.

Another way to understand and practice anthroposophy, one in relation to which I have made a serious effort, is to steer between the two tempters, Lucifer who leads us to think that we are already liberated (as in Hinduism), enlightened (as in Buddhism), or saved (as in Christianity). Lucifer is the champion of grandiosity and presumption. On the other side (of Christ) is Ahriman, the advocate of materialism and nothing-but-ism, insisting that money, sex, and power are the only realities.³¹ All of my adult life I have been involved with money, sex, and power.³²

The third jewel is the Sangha, the community. While Steiner advocated ethical individualism, completely continuous with Emerson's, he also, like Buddha, supplemented the ideal of individual effort by his commitment to the improvement of old institutions and creation of new ones. He worked literally to his death in service of institutions and organizations which would enhance the opportunity for individual and groups to glimpse the spirit. It was a deed of astonishing generosity that at the end of his life he offered to the spiritual world that his karma be joined to the Anthroposophical Society that he had just refounded. During the years that I served various anthroposophical institutions, I often thought that I could find a better use of my time but then stayed the course because of the possibility that the destiny of Rudolf Steiner, one of the truly great spiritual figures of our time, might depend on precisely these institutions so manifestly unworthy of his sacrificial life.

My service to the third jewel has not been limited to anthroposophical institutions. Serving as class dean at Manhattanville, department chair at Baruch, president of CIIS, are among my many ways of serving Sangha, institutions which make it more possible for participants to work on their transformation and realize their destiny, irrespective of

³¹ Steiner created a thirty-foot statue of Christ, whom he named the Representative of Humanity, between the figures of Lucifer and Ahriman.

³² See my "Money, Sex, and Power," PCC website.

how unconscious they might be of these. Without the Anthroposophical Society it would be difficult for an individual to find Steiner; without the visible Church it would be more difficult for individuals to awaken their souls, and to find Christ. All of these institutions are obviously imperfect—and so are the individuals who need them and complain about them. I think "spiritual but not religious" needs an upgrade to "spiritual and therefore religious."

Third Quarter

I was offered the position of president of CIIS in 1983 but Ellen and I did not want to leave NY at that time, and I thought it would be too difficult to lead an institution with inadequate resources and so much dissension. I applied in 1990 only because Bina Chaudhuri had asked Michael Murphy to urge me to do so. Because I was ambivalent about the school (deep affinity with Haridas, little appetite for chaos and controversy), I had deliberately not sought the position, neither when I applied nor at any time in the process. I recall thinking that if this is the right move (I probably said "karmically right" move), which I had to ask Ellen to make, I needed it to happen without my effort.

The meeting in July 1990 at which the CIIS board voted to offer me the position of president has often been told precisely as a karma story. I was one of two candidates with strong mutually exclusive backing. The other candidate had been president of three community colleges with no relation to the mission of the school; I was the professor deep in the mission. Because of a zoning rule, the board had to vacate the building at 9:00pm. At approximately 8:50 the board was about to vote on the two candidates with the almost certain result on his side by one vote. At that very moment a message came from the receptionist that Rina Sircar's sister had just suffered a heart attack. Her doctor, who was a board member and had announced for the administrator candidate, said he had to leave immediately. The vote was postponed. When the board met two weeks later, the doctor announced for me; I was offered the job. And by the way, Rina's sister recovered that night and was released from the hospital the next day. Karma.

It might be one of the characteristics of a karmic influence that it happens without one's effort, as with a synchronicity—a so-called non-causal coincidence (but actually causal at a deeper level) which, if one heeds it, in effect turns one's attention to an important shift of consciousness, and revelation important for the present situation. The first karmic event that happened without my doing it was the board meeting in July 1990; the second was my meeting with Laurance Rockefeller two weeks later.

Although I could not have recognized this in 1964 when Elizabeth McCormack appointed me instructor in philosophy at Manhattanville College, Elizabeth has proven to be one of the most significant influences in my life. She appointed me dean of the class of 1971 and most dramatically twenty years later introduced me to Laurance Rockefeller. That introduction in the Rockefeller office, 30 Rockefeller Center, in July, 1990, changed my life.

I had attended the Esalen Revisioning Philosophy conference in 1987 where I met Rick Tarnas, Brian Thomas Swimme, Don Hanlon Johnson, and fifteen other prominent philosophical thinkers. I have ever since referred to this conference, to which I was invited either by Michael Murphy or Huston Smith, as proof positive of karma! After the conference, Elizabeth McCormack, who was Laurance's close associate, called me to her office for a candid report on the conference which (unknown to me) Laurance had funded. One immediate result of that meeting was a three-year project that I co-directed with Arthur Zajonc and Douglas Sloan. But a more dramatic result came in July 1990 when I phoned Elizabeth to say that I had been offered the position of president of CIIS. Elizabeth's opinion of CIIS was such that she responded unhesitatingly, "well you can't take that!" When I nervously admitted to a desire to take it, and included something about my relationship with the founder, she offered to introduce me to Laurance Rockefeller.

Within minutes of meeting Mr. Rockefeller in his office (behind a wall of Monets and Matisses), he said that he was interested in the mission of the school—"body, mind, and spirit." He then asked me what I meant by "spirit." It was such a defining moment in my biography and the future of CIIS that I remember my reply exactly: "I think that the mind is behind the body and spirit is behind the mind." Three days and three meetings later Laurance offered me five million dollars for CIIS. Like a synchronicity, a truly karmic event, such as Laurance Rockefeller offering me five million dollars for a position (and a move) which I both wanted and didn't want, led me to say, as I did say to Ellen, "this is happening to me."

The conversations in Laurance Rockefeller's office that Elizabeth McCormack orchestrated led to Ellen and me moving to CIIS as president, to San Francisco, to Rick Tarnas and Brian Swimme, and to a host of intellectually compatible Bay Area's friends and colleagues. Elizabeth served on the CIIS board from 1990 to 1995 and chaired the board from 1995 past my retirement in 1999 when Joe Subbiondo succeeded me as president. Elizabeth, whose 90th birthday was hosted by Bill Moyers and the multi-generational Rockefeller family, continued as a friend to CIIS and Joe Subbiondo, and of course to Ellen and me.

In January 1991, Ellen and I left Grand Central Station on an AmTrak to Oakland, CA. Ellen faced back, to New York, and read Jill Kerr Conway's book about her coming to Smith College; I faced west reading Josiah Royce's book about California.³³ I assumed the presidency; controversies ensued immediately and did not let up for eight years. The ninth year was quiet because we (certainly not me alone) laid off about a quarter of the faculty and a quarter of the staff (including a vice president and two deans). Fortunately, I had a few friends among the faculty, especially Rick Tarnas and Brian Swimme, and among staff, especially Anne Teich, my assistant for eight years, subsequently, administrative assistant to AVP Judie Wexler, and still a close friend.

³³ See Josiah Royce, *California, from the Conquest in 1846 to the Second Vigilance Committee in San Francisco [1856]: A Study of American Character* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1886).

On arrival as president of CIIS I felt surrounded by many accomplished and well published colleagues whom I had met at Esalen and had been in reading New York. Soon after, I was able to appoint Andrew Harvey, Joan Halifax, and William Irwin Thompson, each for three years. Bob Thurman and I taught a course on Gandhi and the Dalai Lama. It was definitely an exciting time but controversy, chaos, and distrust, as well as the constant fear that WASC (the accrediting agency) would place us on probation, clouded every endeavor. It was certainly not the same institution which was subsequently for the administered by Presidents Joseph Subbiondo, Judie Wexler, and Brock Blomberg.

Rick and Brian at first, and then Sean, Elizabeth, Jake, and Matt Segall, have surely been part of my karmic destiny: they are all friends and highly influential colleagues. PCC has given me a superb education and an opportunity to study and teach as though *en famille*, which, in my experience is a very positive term. Mostly through Rick, or perhaps also through Roger Walsh and Frances Vaughan, or all three, or that I was president of CIIS, I was invited onto the board of the International Transpersonal Association, founded and directed by Stan Grof. In the early 90s I delivered talks in Killarney (in the home city of Ellen's family) and in Prague (where I spoke to 500 on "The Spiritual Mission of America"). I was also on the board of the San Francisco Zen Center—where I observed that for a non-religion, Buddhism sometimes looks a lot like what I consider religion to be.

Two friendships which emerged in connection with CIIS have transcended my years as president. John Levy, third or fourth generation San Franciscan, a former executive director of the C. G. Jung Institute, was an advisor to families with generational wealth. John invited prominent friends to a lunch that Ellen hosted almost every month. These savvy individuals, including Angeles Arrien, Frances Vaughan, Philip Moffet, Wink Franklin, and others served as informal advisors on how to manage an institution that claimed to be a family but spent a lot of energy in self-destructive activities. Because of my commitment to academic excellence, and my amazing connection to Elizabeth McCormack and Laurance Rockefeller (who gave CIIS another eight million dollars during my presidency), I was probably a good appointment, but I have to admit that I was not gifted in responding to statements or behavior that seemed to me irrational or destructive of the institution. I was also insufficiently compassionate in response to colleagues weighed down by fear. I was busy practicing karma-yoga (selfless action) when the institute probably needed someone advanced in bhakti-yoga (love).

Through John Levy I met Bob Graham who had been a successful accountant and had created a family foundation that had been doing micro-lending to Mayan women in Guatemala. Bob finished a PCC MA and also served as chair of the finance committee of the board. It was Bob who, with my encouragement, spent three weeks in our finance office, after which he reported that CIIS had no resources, owed a half million dollars, and was counting on collecting a half million in bad debts. Bob gave the first financial report that faculty and staff said they believed. It was also a financial report that gave us six months to cut one million dollars from a five-million dollar annual budget or face closure. A few weeks later, at a lunch for which Laurance Rockefeller and Elizabeth McCormack had flown from New York, Laurance Rockefeller turned to Bob and said:

"You are my barometer. Whatever you give I will match." Bob gave generously, Elizabeth gave generously, Laurance matched generously, confidence was restored, and the school was saved. An observer familiar with the concept of karma would have had to admit that it was working overtime at that lunch. Once again I was led to say, "I am not doing this; this is happening to me"—and from a higher or deeper source. Karma.

One of the great advantages of life in San Francisco, at least for someone such as myself with an abiding interest in religious community, symbols, rituals, and architecture, is Grace Cathedral, a haven, a masterpiece, and a source of inspiration. Its liturgy is beautiful and believable. The sermons are intelligent and liberal. Ellen's friendship with Lauren Artress led me to Grace. Once there, I came to know Alan Jones, the dean, with whom I drove to Frances Vaughan and Roger Walsh's home in Tiburon for monthly discussions with Ram Dass, Stan Grof, Angie Arrien, Huston Smith, and Charlie Tart. In a sweet bit of karma, at the Top of the Mark Hopkins Hotel, Alan offered Ellen the position of assistant to the dean which she held for the next eleven years. In recent years we have been friends of Mark Stanger (who led a pilgrimage to Jerusalem that we joined—four months after Ellen's second stroke), and the bishop of California, Marc Andrus and his wife Sheila.

The Fourth Quarter
Written in 2013; unchanged

Mick Jagger and Paul Simon (who went to Queens College two years after me), are both 70. My brother John, at 81, recently won a teaching award at Texas A&M and was recently appointed University Distinguished Professor. Edgar Marin, 92, Sean Kelly's primary mentor, recently delivered a stirring keynote speech to the Integral Theory conference. With these and many other examples of individuals remaining productive in their 70s and 80s, and some in the 90s, my perspective on my karma reaches to the end of this decade, until 2020, or age 80. On the other side of this consideration, our intellectual community just lost Robert Bellah. With various dimensions of aging and death in mind, particularly with increasing awareness (from previously almost no awareness at all!) that my life could end, certainly eventually and perhaps suddenly, I have begun to plan the next "five plus" years with an eye to the shrinking of opportunity, energy, and years. Here is a summary of what I like to think is a karmically-informed game plan.

I plan to continue teaching as long as I have academic energy and interests, and as long as my CIIS colleagues and students want me to. Courses I want to teach include: The Karma of America; Krishna, Buddha, and Christ; with Steven Goodman, Anthroposophical and Tibetan Perspectives on Karma and Rebirth; Modern Spiritual Masters, and if Karma and Biography will be successful, I will teach it again.

I plan to finish writing *Unique Not Alone: Steiner and Others*, a full-length book, now 80% finished, and due December 2013. On sabbatical, spring 2014, I want to write a lengthy introduction to Steiner's lectures on the Gospel of John (which my friend Fred Amrine plans to translate). Following that, I would like to edit and write a lengthy introduction to a volume of Steiner's writings on Buddha, a companion to my edition of *The Bhagavad Gita and the West* which was published in 2009.

I plan to continue tracking the ecological situation and finding ways to bring ethical (as in virtue ethics) and spiritual perspectives (especially anthroposophy) to that ominous fact of our lives. As "there is no away," there is no way to hide from this topic. Attention must be paid to the damage we have done and continue to do.

I hope to continue researching a few topics that are entirely new to me but suddenly quite compelling: wisdom (as in my essay for the volume on wisdom edited by my friend Roger Walsh³⁴); forgiveness (as in Archbishop Tutu's book, *No Future Without Forgiveness*³⁵); hope and grace (as in the late writings of Josiah Royce, who has emerged in recent years as my favorite philosopher, a champ of loyalty, individuality, hope, grace, the Logos, and the Beloved Community, a concept which he introduced).

About seven years ago Arthur Zajonc invited me to serve as a mentor in a Fetzer Institute project concerned with introducing spiritual perspectives in higher education. We met several times a year for four years, with very positive results for almost every one involved. Paul Wapner, another mentor, and I were able to organize a seminar on "Ecology, Spirituality, and Social Justice" for one week each summer for twelve colleagues, including Elizabeth Allison and Jake Sherman. We have met at Lama, near Taos, New Mexico, Upaya Zen Center, in Santa Fe, and in January 2014 we will meet as a Theory and Research Seminar at Esalen. Additionally, this project led me to a friendship with B. J. Miller, M.D., initially head of palliative care at UCSF, and for the past several years head of the San Francisco Zen Hospice.³⁶ He and I are gathering a group of colleagues to study death and afterlife. In the future the course for which I have written this essay might be called *Karma, Biography, Death, and Beyond*.

The Fourth Quarter (cont'd.)
Written September 2022

Writing nine years after the above section, it is hard to miss a mix of continuity and unexpected developments. Steinerbooks published Steiner and *Kindred Spirits* (415pp.) in 2015. I did write the introduction to Steiner's lectures on the Gospel of John and will soon finish introductions to Steiner's lectures on the Background to the Gospel of Mark and the Gospel of Mark. Debashish Banerji and I will soon finish our book entitled *Sri Aurobindo and Modern Thought*. We might also collaborate on introductions to volumes by Haridas Chaudhuri. I did not edit a book on "Steiner and Buddha" nor on "Before and Death," but I might yet. Instead, I am thinking of a book on influence of beings and forces that seem to me are causing ecological devastation.

At the end of spring semester, I retired or began "permanent sabbatical." The CIIS board and administration hosted an elegant celebration in May and the PCC community contributed tributes that Lilly Falconer (PCC program manager) edited into a handsome *Book of Memories*. I couldn't be more grateful for both gifts. (Both are posted on my website.) Ellen and I have avoided Covid. We continue to enjoy our apartment in the

³⁴ Roger Walsh, ed., *The World of Wisdom* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, forthcoming).

³⁵ Archbishop Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (NY: Random House, 1999).

³⁶ See B. J. Miller, M.D., or San Francisco Zen Hospice Project.

Richmond section of San Francisco near Golden Gate Park and Ocean Beach. Both families—the Darren, Julia, Becca, Kate family in New York and the Deirdre, Jan, Liam, and Neve family in San Francisco are a source of profound joy and pride. But then there are the deaths of five of my closest friends, all prominent anthroposophists: Patti Smith, Gertrude Hughes, Gene Gollogly, David Gershan, M.D., and Christopher Bamford. Additionally, Carol Cole and David Barlow will move to Ghent , NY, retirement community in October. I am increasingly focused on the mystery of death and afterlife. I hope to write another section of this Karmic Autobiography, perhaps when I turn eighty or for our sixtieth anniversary. As Ellen has been heard to repeat, “We’ll see.”