

The Old House, 1982

I was sitting in the office of a family therapist (I'll call him John) listening to Paula pour out the seemingly endless litany of the failures and disappointments of a marriage that sounded like a night with Macbeth. As she droned on, I lost interest and began a pleasant drift into more engaging mental landscapes. Professional that he was, John immediately picked up on my disengagement from the conversation and directed a series of questions in my direction, inquiries that seemed somewhat incongruous at that moment but became perfectly clear later.

I answered his seemingly off-the-general-subject interrogatives as completely and honestly as I could. He was the therapist; I would let him have his version of fun. My suspicions were aroused when he asked if I wanted my marriage to Paula to continue. When I didn't answer, he asked even more bluntly if I even cared about her. I told him that I wasn't certain. He responded by inquiring into my recent sleep patterns and then asked if I were subject to hallucinations.

Hallucinations? What did that have to do with marriage counseling? In the time-tested way of the therapist, he didn't deign to answer my questions, but kept grilling me along various lines, which, frankly, made me edgy and uncomfortable.

The general trend of the next few sessions was in the same vein, things proceeding apace until John calmly informed us that he would continue working with me while Paula would counsel with another therapist. No preliminary discussions, no asking of approval, not even the slightest hint. It seemed more like an imperious command delivered in a conversational tone. Paula said nothing before she rose and left the room. Certain there was much more to this than met the casual eye, I waited for shoe number two to drop. I didn't have long to wait.

The marriage counseling had, it seemed, been nothing but a mask behind which lurked an evaluation of my mental health. I was, by turns, angry then humiliated and I spared no verbiage in telling him so. Attempting to stoke my psyche with silky words of understanding, he assured me of his pristine intentions and promised that if, after a frank explanation of the situation I chose to terminate our professional relationship, he would have no objections, as though he could have raised any that would have kept me returning.

John revealed that Paula's mother, who was his student at the time, had rendered her expert opinion that my mental health was in serious jeopardy and needed professional evaluation. Yes, the entire charade of marriage counseling had turned out to be nothing more than the proverbial crock of steer manure. Not surprising when one's mother-in-law is involved. Call it karma, call it poetic justice, call it a victory for the man in the white hat, but dear Mom's interference boomeranged on her. Not only did John find no evidence of mental illness, but he now seriously questioned his student's patient evaluation skills. Did not someone once say that as you sow, so shall you reap? If they didn't, they should have.

The next day found me with remnants of anger and a feeling of having had my trust violated. Needing a cooling off session, I headed for my mountain, considering the fact I had been less

than completely candid with John concerning my experiences with inner consciousness, much less frankly admitting my own doubts about my sanity.

I set to work clearing my meditation rock of overhanging branches and enjoying the early morning atmosphere as the last vestiges of night lost their daily tussle with the Sun and a faint band of blue appeared in the far distance.

Feeling the onset of a good day, I smiled as I watched a half-foot long lizard doing its early morning set of small push-ups, hopefully finishing his calisthenics before he noticed me and darted off into the protective little jungle of old tumbleweeds and thick shrubbery.

I took my place on the rock, assuming a lotus posture and just entering into meditation when without warning my consciousness was blanketed in darkness. That I was no longer on the mountain was the only certainty, that and the fact that some kind of form was taking shape in front of me. I jumped off the rock and walked towards it, but the darkness prevented me from getting a clear look.

As I continued forward I was able to see a ray of light some distance away. No sky, no moon, nothing but that ray of light, which became my destination. As I drew nearer, the light transformed into a two-story house, an old wooden structure that I estimated to be about a hundred years old, judging by the general condition of the place and the architecture.

Although my intuition was ringing very loud alarm bells warning against even approaching the house, a much higher and deeper aspect of consciousness insisted that I enter. I expected Charon would accompany me on this sort of excursion but he was nowhere to be seen, heard, or felt. Knowing I had to face whatever lay ahead on my own, I gathered strength as I walked up the old broken wooden steps. The porch was painted yellow, what paint remained being faded and peeling. The terrible old remnants of a porch swing, hanging like a corpse on the gallows, gave out a repetitive creak whose near inaudibility in no way diminished the nerve-shredding undercurrent it lent the entire Bates motel-type scene. There was no yard, no fence, no gutted old farm truck, or any of the other accoutrements one expects to see in such surroundings. Just the house surrounded by nearly impenetrable blackness.

The first stair broke apart beneath my weight, enforcing a definitely ginger approach to the front door or, rather, the yawning aperture where the door, completely removed from its hinges, once solidly stood. I pushed the gnarly wooden thing aside and entered the house. There were no lighting fixtures that I could see, no candles, nor any other obvious source of the soft light that glowed within, seemingly from the structure itself. Somehow I knew that the light was an integral feature of the essential mystery of the house.

I proceeded deeper into the bowels of the place, passing under a large proscenium arch that led me into a library. Everywhere I turned in this room were books, stacks of them, by the thousands, all bound in a label-less black material and every one of them filled with utterly blank pages. The hardwood floor was cracked, heavily scratched, and even had plants growing up through some of the gaping holes that had been rudely punched into it by...what?

Hearing a noise behind me, I loudly inquired if anyone was there, my question being answered by nothing but a continuation of the eerie silence. I went back into the hallway and threw a glance in each direction, but saw no one. I went on to explore the living room. A dusty old fireplace, rotted couch, moldy pictures decorated the cracked, broken walls. And one unusual appointment, an old area rug adorned with a six-pointed star, perhaps meant as an occult symbol.

The next stop on my trek was the second floor. Just as I'd climbed the stairs a strong wind suddenly whipped the outside of the aging home. I looked out a window and finally saw the moon and stars, shining with surprising brightness in contrast with the pitch black that had greeted me upon arrival. The staircase was in the final stages of corrosion, retaining just enough cohesion to allow me to climb them. All the windows were streaked with dirt and broken, the jagged edges gleaming with a certain obscene artistry. There were family portraits on the staircase; not hung on the wall parallel to the stairs but actually resting on the stairs themselves, perhaps having been removed from their decades-old perches by the same presence I thought I had felt downstairs.

My examination of the first bedroom yielded little result. The door was rusted almost completely shut. I could barely open it and just as I managed to push it open a few inches, the entire house seemed to respond to my efforts with a deep, sorrowful sigh which, while it echoed all around me also seemed to come from deeply within my own being.

The hallway had pools of darkness at the corners that strongly hinted of stretching into infinity. I lost count of the number of doors I tried. I found most locked; those that opened presented nothing extraordinary. As my search progressed, the force of the wind intensified, the house being rocked to and fro as though the earth beneath it were in the throes of some violent, visceral convulsion.

Just as I nervously laughed to myself that I was meandering through a good old-fashioned haunted house, one of the hallway doors shuddered under the force of an immense blow, being torn off its hinges and hurled with incredible force down the hall. Coinciding with this was the appearance of a huge creature of some sort, outlined in the darkness and looming before me as something so hideous not even the most slavish H.P. Lovecraft aficionado would permit it to haunt their most horrendous nightmares.

He had crashed through the wall, the plaster melting before him, perhaps burned by the same fire that smoldered in his eyes, portals through which poured a hatred such as I had never before experienced.

Even in the dimness of the hallway I could see its malefic body was covered with festering sores, each one a face, unutterably horrible, with vile tongues emerging from them. The limbs, the torso, all were covered with these indescribably nightmarish faces. But even more perverse, more soul-chilling, was the monster's own face, a composite of other faces, a crazy quilt whose every section was torn from a face more terrifying the next, the entire spectacle adding up to a visage that could only have been created in the dankest, vilest pit of hell. I detected no stench emanating from these bleeding, oozing sores, nor was any necessary. The sight alone engendered such stark horror that no sensory assaults could possibly enhance the effect.

As this mind-numbing creature began tearing up the floor with its claws, I could see that the dozens, hundreds of face-sores were spewing forth blood-curdling screams, devilish laughter, as they conversed with one another, speaking together of who could possibly begin to imagine what?

Where could I go, what could I do? Completely unconsciously, out of a sheer sense of self-preservation, I began backing away from this monster, whose original great height and mass seemed to grow larger, dwarfing the hallway itself. It came after me, its paws crushing beneath them whatever lay in its path. Nearly upon me, this thing lifted its arms and its horrible mouth let forth a cry that was beyond anyone's powers of description.

I fell to my knees, now well past anything that could be called terror. Its red eyes seemed to bore holes in me as it spoke. "Do you not know who I am? Do you not recognize me?" In response to my negative reply, it instructed me to look closely at the faces. I squinted and peered closely at the malevolent countenances covering this creature's hide and instantly I knew the truth, who's these countless identities were.

This creature was a composite of the infinitude of "I's" within me. And was, in its entirety, my own soul looking at me. Every corner of my consciousness that had ever been subjected to real or imaginary hatred, despising, dejection; all the ugliness, soreness, sin, and what have you that ever had or ever would exist within me had taken this malignant form to rise up within the old house of my consciousness and force me to confront its hideousness.

Fear turned to acceptance, my emotions went out to this thing. I embraced it, told it I loved it, and then it was gone.

I found myself back on the front steps of the house, sans creature. Surrounded by a deep quietude, I was then back on the rock seated calmly and comfortably in the familiar lotus posture. The warmth of the sun and caress of the wind were reassuring as I realized the day was over.

The creature and I had been one and the same. When I accepted its ugliness, guilt, shame, loved its horrific appearance, embraced its distorted form, loved it for who and what it was, I had engaged in the deepest possible self-healing. An initiation, perhaps, for the process is ever-going, the liberation and evolution continue, as they do for us all.