

Epilogue

Healing the Dream of Apocalypse: A Ritual

The bomb has been a member of my family—and also a figure in my dreams—since before I was born. My father grew up in Alamogordo, New Mexico, just south of where the first atomic weapon was tested at the Trinity site. His mother, a crusty Southern Baptist, was operating the switchboards for Ma Bell when the electromagnetic pulse snuffed out the lines of communication in the early morning of 15 July 1945.

My mother's family migrated to the northern outposts of New Spain up the Chihuahua Trail in the early 1700s—passing five miles from Trinity. In 1943, when Los Alamos, New Mexico, was only a sparkling of lights after sunset on the nearby mountains, my mother would point them out to her little cousin from a ridge at my grandfather's ranch. "That is where Santa Claus and his elves are preparing Christmas for us," she would tell him. After the war, my parents lived in Los Alamos, where my older sister was born.

Like some of my dream informants, I was one of the "Duck and Cover" generation—perfecting, alongside my elementary-school classmates, the fetal crouch under the desk, hands clasped behind my skull in anticipation of the final fire. For years after the Cuban Missile Crisis, I'd cringe with every plane that passed over my head, not knowing if it was the one that carried my death.

My psyche was so thoroughly saturated by the Bomb's shadow that by the time I was a teenager I felt it was unlikely that I'd live to be twenty. At fourteen, I became a born-again Christian and even did a brief and passionate stint as an evangelist. In my

sermons, I'd preach, inevitably, the dire necessity of giving one's heart to God because the end of the world was so obviously near. Feeling deprived of the possibility of imagining a future and of the necessity of creating a viable self that would thrive in the world, a couple of years later I moved onto the street and remained homeless for three years.

Having survived my adolescence, I was suddenly, at twenty, a father—and having no way of living in this world would no longer do. In the early eighties, while the arms race escalated to its most feverish pitch, I was initiated into the tender mercies of fathering a little girl. At the same time, through a friend who was a graduate student in science, I sought out an effective position should my fatherly responsibilities someday include taking my daughter's life after the Bomb dropped. Since I had been perched on the knowledge of my imminent death for so many years, it was a natural step for me to volunteer to work with terminally ill people. Empathy came easily. I decided to become a registered nurse.

In June of 1988, I made a pilgrimage to the Trinity site to perform a small ritual of "healing the dream." I planted Kwan Yin, the Buddhist goddess of limitless compassion, in the earth at Ground Zero.

My mother, my ten-year-old daughter Nicole and her friend Lily dropped me off at the border of the White Sands Missile Range in the late afternoon. As I unloaded my backpack, Nicole sang to me, "Shalom, Haverot, Shalom"—a Hebrew song for the one who departs on a journey or goes off to war.

I meditated in the tall grass with the little black ants and the grasshoppers until the sun set and the moon rose. I wanted to trespass under the cover of night. Then for six hours I walked alongside the north-south spine of the Sierra Oscura mountains.

The desert under the full moon was radiantly beautiful. To see an antelope walking slowly in the blue shadows or to be startled by the unearthly sounds of stray cattle, or even to come by something as mundane as a power line buzzing in the middle of nowhere—these things had terrifying presence.

My geological survey maps were all but useless, but it took little imagination to “see” the mushroom cloud burning in the night to the southwest of me. I found myself relying on this apparition and my compass to negotiate the twists and turns in the dusty roads.

Often I felt lost—in all possible senses of the word. In fact this “lostness” turned out to be an excruciating but essential part of my preparation for the ritual. By the time I got to my destination, I had been utterly reduced to what was more elemental, often what was most fearful and confused in myself.

I sat there for two hours in a swirl of unbearable vulnerability. Paranoia about the military police; a five-year-old’s sense of having trespassed—and both a fear of being caught by the “adults” and a hunger to be punished; flashes of dying a rather stupid and unnecessary death. I was aware of my complete incapacity to pull myself together or to surrender. I very seriously considered not doing what I had spent months preparing for, knowing well that to act falsely would be poison. Finally, out of this incapacity and brokenheartedness, I began with the prayer “Make use of me. I am a little child and will die a little child. I can’t pretend otherwise. I do not know how to proceed. Lead me.”

I stood up and paced out the four directions after the manner of the Mescalero Apache who used to come out to this land for vision quests before ranchers appropriated it in the late 1800s. Coyotes began howling shortly before dawn, first to the east of me and then to the west. I performed the ritual in a whispered voice. It was unexpectedly and exquisitely intimate in a way that I could never have anticipated.

In my original draft of the ritual, I succumbed to the temptation of answering the pathos of apocalypse with an apocalyptic gesture—I planned a ritual act of burning the scriptures of apocalypse (the tenth chapter of the Book of Revelation) at Ground Zero. My wife rather sensibly suggested that, instead of trying to meet the Manhattan Project by replicating its grandiosity, perhaps tenderness and humility might bear the proper attitude of healing in such a dark period of history.

The more I studied dreams of nuclear war and the nationalistic psychoses of the twentieth century, the more adamantly came the imperative: don't make enemies. Rather, face with honesty the enemy within oneself and the enemy maker also—for these are the ones who clutch to the necessity of the Bomb. So, at the core of my rewritten ritual, I called the "enemy" to the warmth of the hearth. I made a small fire of twigs in the hole in which I would bury Kwan Yin, and I prayed:

Here, where the nuclear fire first burned, I make a hearth of a handful of twigs. To this fire I call all whom I have feared and despised and felt superior toward; those people of my own dark dreams and those of my waking life whom I have felt wounded or betrayed by: I invite you here without demand but with an open heart so that I might look upon your face and speak with you. I may not be able to forgive and let go.

I know that such things cannot be forced—but I desire to do so and will pray for the courage to do so. When I am lost and my heart is numb, I will try to remember this prayer—because it has always been true that each of you, in your own way, has been my most insistent and generous and difficult teacher. I hope that between now and the unknown time of my death I learn to cherish and carry to fruition at least a fragment of what you have shown me. I know that this is the way of lovingkindness about which I am so naïve.

The confusions of this world that would rely upon the Bomb and risk the life of everything that lives to be “protected” from the “enemy”—these confusions are very intimately my own as well. If making these vows at this place where a vast nightmare was born can be at all helpful for sentient beings, I pray that it be so. At least, may this be helpful for my own suffering and toward those whom my life touches.

As the twigs burned to cinders, I addressed my enemies, one by one, informally. I recounted memories trying to find the thread of empathy toward the personal dilemmas and pain that had led them to be harsh or unconscious with me. I searched my own heart for the ways I had contributed to the circumstances in which I came to feel betrayed—and I requested the enemies’ forgiveness. I reflected upon concrete gestures of reconciliation that might be appropriate—a phone call or letter, a meeting, a confession, an anonymous gift—or composting what I didn’t know how to heal back into my spiritual practice as something to reflect on, grieve, perhaps understand and accept.

When I finished, the sky was reddening with dawn. I buried Kwan Yin and kissed the earth. I knew I had to hurry north because my water supply was low, and it promised to be a hot day. I also knew that the sun meant I was suddenly visible and ran a greater risk of being arrested.

Around nine o'clock, a bevy of jets flew over and began dropping bombs. They would circle around every fifteen minutes or so. When they ejected their payload just ahead of me, I huddled in the clumps of yucca and chamisa, covering my ears, and then ran toward the clouds of dust and the north boundary of the bombing range before they returned for another round. After a couple of hours I was exhausted, shaken up but "home free." This bombing ordeal was the unexpected completion of my ritual. Whatever had eluded me at Trinity about the fragility and preciousness of life in this insane century became fully clear.

Sometimes one is momentarily blessed with the ability to truly listen to what this planet, in her great distress, asks us to offer toward the healing of this madness.

The ritual at Trinity stands as a turning point in my life. To recognize that the enemy has a face no less human than my own—this koan I have returned to again and again in order to realize self-acceptance and kindness toward others.

My ritual began a slow and painstaking purification in the realm of my dreams and my everyday life that partakes of the most difficult vulnerabilities of my heart. I have found that the enemy insists that I look at my own shadow—that I recognize that I am not who I think I am. Much of the rage and fear that come up are related to being set adrift in unknown areas of my psyche, areas I have adamantly or complacently made a point of avoiding. When I got lost at the White Sands Missile Range on my way to

Ground Zero, staggering through the night in the field of the enemy, it was his presence “everywhere” that constellated the fears and insecurities I’ve carried with me since I was a child. Not the enemy himself—whom I never met—but my own fears devoured me. In other words, the enemy I most feared, first “inner” but then, inevitably, “outer,” bore the face of my own dark twin. Reconciliation, when it happens, has been the unexpected laughter that comes when I realize I was never other than a brother to the ones I despised.

Before I had studied the dreams gathered in this book and came to understand the particulars of the apocalyptic initiation, in my ritual at Trinity I had stumbled into the geography of those dreams and the difficult cycle of separation/purification/descent, meeting the enemy in myself, seeing the light and joyous return. After separating from the world at the edge of the bombing range while my daughter sang to me, I began my rite of purification with a few hours of meditation. The bulk of the ritual—as with the bulk of the dreams I received—involved this excruciating process of being purified, stripped down. In apocalyptic dreams, this *via negativa* is often expressed in images of bereft children, in the scrambling for refuge and finding none, in the grievous knowledge that the whole world is poisoned or that the ground beneath one’s feet is crumbling. For myself, the *via negativa* required that I be reduced to the raw fears of a lost child terrified for his very life in the harsh desert.

Being stripped down this way, I was able to look at the enemy in the eye at Ground Zero with a truly tender heart and, when the sun rose over the desert, I knew that my own profound fragility was continuous with the fragility of the planet. Through facing the “enemy” in myself and then later in the form of the bombs that rained down near me as I hid behind the yuccas—and in facing the terrified animal in me that would

do anything to survive the falling bombs—I found that this recognition of fragility and vulnerability itself became the vision.

The gifts that I've tried to carry across the threshold from those fierce moments in the desert were the commitment to try not to make enemies and the desire to learn to be on intimate terms with the earth and its small particulars—this ground beneath my feet, this little animal that has left its track in the sand, this friend who sits before me.

Fidelity to the place of vision in myself and encouraging sanity wherever I find it as the world sinks into madness—the necessity, in other words, of keeping the faith I a dark time—these too are gifts I received at Trinity that I try to pass on. It is to these ends that I wrote this book with the prayer that it may be useful.

May all beings realize the heart of compassion.

*Near Trinity Site,
The Day After the June Moon Went Full*

When a swallow flies
toward the face of a cliff
its wings cut the air
with an effortless violence
And so it was
when the jets flew over,

the stunning grace as they curved
against the embankment
of the Sierra Oscura,
shuddering
along the spine of the yucca.

And beneath the roar
I also shuddered
with the dull gray beetles
that cluster
on the scat of coyotes

When the bombs began dropping
I thought, this cannot be
I thought
 El Salvador
 Afghanistan
and not long ago
a small hamlet in Vietnam
the fire, the wailing of mothers
over dead children.

There was no place to hide.

I became a dusty fetus
curled up amongst cactus
with only a small prayer
in a small voice:
“Please, if I die now
regard the life of my daughter with kindness
if she is to be fatherless
tend to her heart”

When the bombing paused
I stood up and walked hurriedly north
my back to where the mushroom cloud
first lifted poison to the sky.
The largest tiger swallowtail
I had ever seen alighted on the ragged
blue flower of a thistle.
My God, this life

And then the bombs
began dropping again
and an antelope looked up from its grazing,
held my gaze for a long moment

and ran off to where the earth still smoked

What must it think?

In 1945, two herd of antelope
scattered to these mountains
when the first nuclear bomb was
tested here.

Later that day, J. Robert Oppenheimer,
a man not unfamiliar with tenderness
found

a turtle turned on its back near
Ground Zero.

He set the turtle back on its feet.

Three weeks later, the Bomb
the Japanese would call the "Original Child"
leveled Hiroshima
and then, Nagasaki

In this world
to frighten a butterfly
will never mean very much.
To bake the underside of a slow reptile or shatter the
minds of a herd of beasts
to burn to the ground
a whole city of children
has become the ordinary labor of ordinary men

Have mercy on us.

