

From *Talk to Her*, interviews by Kristine McKenna, 2004

... Wisdom is nondenominational and can be discovered in unexpected quarters if you're open to finding it. In 1993 a series of coincidences placed me on a path I never anticipated for myself that led to such a person. A friend of mine named Marc Sirinsky, whom I hold in very high esteem, began studying to be a rabbi and spoke often of his teacher with a respect bordering on awe. Mark is an extremely deep person, and I figured anybody capable of engaging him to the degree this teacher did was someone I had to meet. So I tracked him down.

His name is Jonathan Omer-Man, and he's a British-born rabbi who opened "Metivta: A Center for Contemplative Judaism," in West Los Angeles in 1991. The first thing I liked about Omer-Man is his dry sense of humor. He's an urbane, educated man able to speak knowledgably about music, literature and visual art, and he carries himself with the reserve characteristic of the British. He's resolutely skeptical about the touchy-feely manifestations of the new age movement, yet he's an intensely emotional, intuitive instructor with an unorthodox approach to teaching that places him on the fringes of the mainstream Jewish community.

All it took was a single sentence of text for his weekly Torah portion class to spin off into a penetrating discussion about something that may or may not relate to the weekly portion, but always seemed satisfying and important. He punctuated his lectures with quotations from a far-flung cast of characters that included Rumi, the Dalai Lama, Picasso and Thomas Pynchon, among many others, and his holistic approach to religious study served as a subtle illumination of the fact that at their best, art, culture, and spirituality share the common purpose of elevating the human soul. He led his students through Dante's "Inferno" in a class called Spiritual Poetry, taught Jewish meditation, hosted a seminar on William Blake's "Jerusalem," and gave spectacularly original teachings on the Jewish High Holidays. The subject of two books by Rodger Kamenetz – "The Jew in the Lotus," published in 1994, and "Stalking Elijah," in 1997 – he's a quietly remarkable man.

Born Derek Orlans in Portsmouth, England in 1934, Omer-Man discovered his childhood was over when he was sent to an anti-Semitic boarding school at the age of eight. A miserable adolescence ensued, and in 1955 he moved to Israel where he settled on a kibbutz. His life changed dramatically when he contracted polio late in 1956; two years of convalescence followed, and he never regained the use of his legs. As physical labor was no longer an option for him, his kibbutz sent him to train to be a teacher at Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Subsequently he returned, and began studying Jewish mysticism and the Kabbalah. Omer-Man found these classes exciting but overly intellectual, and he subsequently sought out teachers in Jerusalem's old haredi neighborhood, Meah Shearim. The teachings of Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav became a beacon to him, and at that point he seemed to be moving in the direction of orthodox Judaism. There was, however, a rigidity in the Orthodox community he found restricting and he refrained from putting roots down there either.

In 1981 Omer-Man moved from Israel to L.A. at the invitation of the Los Angeles Jewish community, and became a kind of minister at large for the spiritually alienated. In 1987 he was ordained as a rabbi, but he never aspired to be a pulpit rabbi and was already laying the groundwork for "Metivta"; the Center was finally up and running four years later, and absorbed most of his time and energy during the '90s. In 1997 Omer-Man began splitting his time between northern and southern California, and was on and off planes every week in order to fulfill his teaching commitments. A series of health scares brought that regimen to a halt in 2000, at which point he stepped down as director of Metivta.

I visited Omer-Man at the house in the Berkeley Hills he shares with his wife of four years, Nan Gefen. He's reduced his teaching schedule considerably, and devotes much of his time these days to mastering classical Arabic and studying Islam. "I spent much of my life in the Middle East, yet learned very little about this wondrously rich culture, and it's time to correct that; it's also thrilling to discover the places where it overlaps with that part of the Jewish tradition that I love so much," he enthuses. Omer-Man really should be writing books, but the idea doesn't seem to interest him; his ideas and insights should be preserved, however, and this is why I interviewed him.

What's your earliest memory?

They say you don't remember your earliest memory, but I do have a few general memories of childhood. I'm the eldest in a family of three boys, and my mother was a sunny person who also had dark clouds that occasionally overcame her; I think I inherited some of her darkness, although it has largely dissipated over the years. Both my parents were liberal Jews and were the children of immigrants who'd come to England from eastern Europe. As such, they had a definite idea of where they wanted to go in life; they wanted to be English, and were concerned with upward social and economic mobility. My father was a hard working dentist and a serious person who went off to the army for five years while I was growing up. My childhood was quite fractured by the Second World War. I have vivid memories of the Blitz, and when my father left I was sent off to boarding schools which were absolutely horrible. George Orwell once said that people who go to English public schools either love the experience or hate it for the rest of their lives, and I fell into the latter category. My younger brothers didn't suffer the anti-Semitism in the public schools that I did, but for me, fear of what the bullies could and did do to me was a constant companion for many years. I was in school during a terrible time when the British were still occupying what was then called Palestine. I remember the day when two British sergeants were hanged in retaliation for the hanging of a Jewish Palestinian fighter. My fellow students gave me a very bad time.

How did growing up in an anti-Semitic environment affect you?

In different ways. I compensated for the fact that I was a member of an excluded and despised minority group by regarding myself as superior, but a more important coping mechanism was that I learned to live inside myself. British public schools in those days were a world of bullying, beating, and competitive sports; I withdrew as much as I could and developed my own inner life. It was rich, but it couldn't sustain itself indefinitely, however, because there was no input. It was like a secure little garden where all the plants were going rotten for lack of fertilizing.

How did the Holocaust mark your consciousness as a young man?

We weren't told about it and nobody spoke about it, so it didn't enter my consciousness until after I moved to Israel in 1955. The Holocaust didn't come to the fore until the time of the Eichmann trial. I'm not entirely certain why it wasn't discussed prior to that, but I think it was in part a reactive response. After a great trauma there comes a point when you have to start looking towards the future, and people were struggling to deal with the many problems faced by the state of Israel in its early years. One of the purposes of the Eichmann trial was to educate people who hadn't been through the war. We were aware of it, of course – it was impossible not to be because there were so many people with the bluish tattoos on their forearms -- but the scope of the information that came out during the trial had a very deep impact on me. The question of vulnerability, and the presence of such great evil in the world moved to the center and the foreground of our thinking at that point. Prior to the trial the question of how could the Jews of Eastern Europe have agreed to be led to the slaughter like sheep was in the air, and the Eichmann trial answered that question. It described the mechanism with which the Jews were completely demoralized, separated and beaten down before they were actually led off to be killed in many places. It's such an enormous, complex subject.

In your work as a teacher you maintained a policy of refusing to discuss the Holocaust. Why?

Because it's too big, we don't yet have the language to discuss it, and it's generated too much glib rhetoric. Sometimes we need the perspective of a hundred years to understand phenomena, and we're still at a point where all we can do is describe what happened. I'm certainly interested in the evolution of European anti-Semitism and how it culminated as it did, and I'm concerned about contemporary manifestations of anti-Semitism, but I have a great aversion to the theorists and theologians of the Holocaust. It's a subject I want to stay clear of.

In Ron Rosenbaum's book of 1998, "Explaining Hitler," he suggests that meaning was Hitler's ultimate victim because it's impossible to find coherent meaning in this episode of history. Do you agree?

I agree that Hitler was a destroyer of meaning, or at least of old meanings; but anti-Semitism preceded Hitler and it has outlasted him. He was unique in the scope, the

totality, of his demonic vision. He employed all the apparatus of a centralized state to implement his plan. He was not the first person to use the powers of the state as a force for anti-Semitism. The Czars did it. But prior to Hitler it was much more local, sporadic. Those rulers exploited anti-Semitism; they were not consumed by it. At any rate, it resulted in persecution, not in mass murder.

Can you recall the first time you sensed divine presence?

In clouds, sitting and watching clouds float by. I was a dreamy kid and there's no shortage of clouds in England, especially in the summer. In looking at them I sensed a different dimension of reality. Of course, I couldn't name it then. My first explicit experience of the divine that I could name as such was when I was studying for my bar mitzvah. Prior to that God didn't exist for me as a meaningful concept, in part because everyday at school I heard Christian prayers and I couldn't relate to their basic assumptions. We didn't know whether there was a God, but we were quite certain that Jesus was not his son. One year I was taken out of boarding school -- the year of my bar mitzvah -- and the rabbi who instructed me became an important character in my life. He offered a completely opposite model to the teachers at school. He was a gentle man, with a softness about his being. With him I felt something as I studied. Suddenly there was something coming through the letters -- not necessarily from the words of the text, but light flowing from the letters themselves. I remember weeping with joy because I felt a deep recognition of something I knew was manifestly true and was important for me.

What happened in the years following your bar mitzvah and prior to your move to Israel at the age of 21?

For several years I was a poor student at school -- so bad that I had to repeat the tenth grade. Then things got better and I went to medical school for three years, primarily to satisfy my parents' expectations. I didn't particularly want to be a doctor if I was anything less than the brilliant brain surgeon who was publicly thanked by Winston Churchill for saving his niece's life. Actually, that's not entirely true, or it's not the whole story. I had some kind of breakdown while I was at school. I lost all sense of direction and didn't like the other students, and I finally left England and never returned, except for short visits.

That was almost fifty years ago; it's strange that people still describe me as British, despite the fact that I have three citizenships; British, Israeli and U.S.

In reflecting on your move to Israel, you've said "when I went to Israel I discovered redemption through land." What did you mean by that?

It was as if the private drama I'd carried within me for years was suddenly a shared drama. Physical labor and contact with the soil of that land brought new dimensions of meaning into my life, and I felt part of a new, more integrated reality. It was a return to my people and to an ancestral home, and I sensed that intensely from the moment I disembarked from the boat. I was very happy, complete in a way. But at the same time, there was a nagging reality that wouldn't go away, and that was the question of the native Palestinians. I had no solutions as to how the problem should be addressed, I was just aware of it. We were living quite close to the border, and knew there were refugees on the other side. But there the matter ended.

Did many Israelis feel guilt about displacing them?

Guilt is too strong a term. Israel was very fragile and its survival wasn't guaranteed. There wasn't guilt, but there was an increasing awareness of responsibility which grew very slowly. It started emerging much more in the late '60s and '70s.

How did falling ill in Israel change you?

It got polio 18 months after I arrived and basically the entire context of my life changed once again. One day I was an agricultural laborer, a part-time cowboy working on a kibbutz in the upper Galilee, and the next day I was flat on my back in bed for six months, and in hospital for a year. On one level it gave me a sharply focused sense of purpose; to be rehabilitated as completely as possible; and at another level I was learning to come to terms with the fact that I would remain disabled for the rest of my life. It also gave me a great deal of time in which to read. I got through all the Russian classics in that year and there was always a pile of books on my bedside table. It made me very self-centered in a way, in that for two years I focused almost entirely on myself.

Your previous comment regarding your feelings about a career in medicine suggests that as a young man you had a hungry ego and needed to do something heroic. The possibilities for heroism changed dramatically with your illness; were you aware of that at the time?

That's very perceptive. I would never have described the person I was before I became ill as in quest of the heroic, but it's true that as a young man I tried to identify with the aggressors and be 'like them.' Not that I aspired to be a macho bully, but I did want to be someone with some power over his own life. The illness gave me a sense of my own soul work, and yet that period was completely non-religious. That came back slowly, at different stages, mostly through subtle signs and experiences. But there also a few powerful brief. Occasionally you meet people who open a door for you and say 'this is your path.' Religion returned to me through those subtle signs, as well through literature. English poetry, Hebrew short stories, Thomas Merton, Hebrew mystical literature, Sufi and Buddhist texts – the list of writings that were important to me is long, and literature gave me a new vocabulary to understand the inner life. I was particularly moved by Dostoyevsky, and his willingness to explore the complexity of the religious soul, with all its quirks. However, I had no entry point into the Jewish world then, because during the late '50s in Israel, religion seemed to me to be controlled by a narrow, power hungry orthodoxy obsessed with politics. I never found it attractive.

Could you describe one of the chance encounters that played a role in your spiritual development?

There was a man I met in Jerusalem who had the most wonderfully acute perception of reality. He was an illiterate person who had never read books or newspapers, but he could see people and events. He was a carpenter and he knew where to put the hammer and how to shave the wood -- he was incredibly present. There was another man I met on one of my first visits to the United States when I started coming here on lecture tours. He was a Native American who seemed to know how to be in the space that he occupied. During our brief encounter I asked him a barrage of questions and he said to me quite firmly, 'stop talking and just look.' That stayed with me in a powerful way.

Have you had pivotal episodes of shattering insight along your spiritual path, or has it been more of a long, slow slog?

It's been both. Wonderful insight means nothing unless there's been a slog beforehand and afterwards, but yes, there have been powerful moments of discovering new coordinates of existence. And having experienced one of those moments, you continue on the same path but you understand it in a completely different way. There is danger in having those dazzling moments -- you can get hooked on the high and devote yourself to getting the next one -- but one should really regard them as anchoring points. Real life takes place between the high points, and focusing on them too much impoverishes the totality of one's life.

Were Jewish esoteric traditions suppressed in Israel while you were living there in the '50s and '60s?

I don't think that they were suppressed, but they were certainly beyond my horizon. You look over there and see a group of people dressed in black wearing hats, but you have no idea what's going on in their minds. Israel's always been a place for people on spiritual journeys going in different directions, however, and I succeeded in carving out a different path for myself. My sense of quest was growing extremely strong when almost by chance I discovered the world of Kabbalah. I was working as chief editor of general scholarship at a publishing house that was producing the Encyclopaedia Judaica, and one day my boss took me aside and said, 'we've got a cash flow problem and we're closing your division. Would you mind being the revising editor of the Encyclopaedia Judaica?' What that job boiled down to was reading every page of the encyclopedia the day before it was printed, and it was then that I discovered Kabbalah. I went on to study with Gershom Scholem's students and subsequently edited a couple of his books. Scholem was a great scholar with tremendous ambivalence towards traditional observance, and he was a creative genius who changed the world he inherited. As a person, he was a magisterial man with a remarkable scope of knowledge and zero tolerance for error. He helped me see the place of mysticism in Judaism, and understand the nature of Jewish mysticism. Through him, I realized I wasn't just a solitary pilgrim and that I was on a well-walked path that others before me had taken. The introduction to Jewish mysticism he gave me was an academic one, and after a

while I needed to experience this quest for the divine in a less intellectual way. Nevertheless, this academic foundation helped me a great deal in sifting the essential from the inessential, and it provided me with a first set of tools to grapple with the big questions I was wrestling with – exile and alienation, spiritual yearning for wholeness, redemption, and the essentially untainted nature of the human soul.

That view of the human soul has parallels with Buddhism's notion of Buddha nature, which refers to the enlightened self that resides dormant within us all. Are the concepts the same?

I wouldn't use that language, but belief in an untarnished essence is central to Jewish practice. The first words of a religious Jew's morning prayers affirm the untarnished essence that is the human soul. Part of our work is to chip away the accretions that prevent us from experiencing that reality at its most essential level. Those accretions often take the form of false selves that surround us like husks and impair our ability to see the underlying presence of the divine in the world. Spiritual work could be described as the effort to maintain contact with essential being.

In a piece on Scholem written by Cynthia Ozick and published in the New Yorker in the fall of 2002, Ozick says: 'Jewish mysticism was untouchable because it was far out of the mainstream of Judaism, excluded by Rabbinic consensus. Normative Judaism saw itself as given over to moral rationalism: to codes of ethics, including the primacy of charity, and a coherent set of personal and societal practices; to the illuminations of midrash, the charms of ethical lore – but mythologies and esoteric mysteries were cast out. The Zohar, a mystical treatise, was grudgingly admitted for study, but only in maturity, lest it dazzle the student into irrationality. For normative Judaism, ripe sobriety was all.' Do you agree?

I don't think there is such a thing as 'Normative Judaism.' The term seems to imply that there's a right way and that certain people own it; that's not true. It depends on where you live and whom you ask. There have always been Jews who followed a traditional mystical path, but their wisdom was inaccessible to people who considered themselves to be mainstream. There never has been rabbinic consensus, just our group and theirs. An entire generation of Jews turned to Hinduism and Buddhism, and other avenues of

spirituality, because there was something they needed from Judaism that it wasn't providing; it was there, but it wasn't accessible.

Kabbalah presents a conception of God as ain sof, "about which nothing can be said." This feels like a slamming door to anyone struggling to learn. What's the appropriate response to a concept such as this?

That phrase alludes to the need to acknowledge that there is mystery that the human nervous system cannot grasp, that is forever incomprehensible. God is here in this room, in my yard, in my relationships, in people, but God isn't something you can put into your database. You can know and experience the divine, sometimes in the most intimate ways, but you can never comprehend it intellectually. People want to talk about the nature of God, but even the concept of God can be an obstacle; the word itself is no more than a symbol or a doorway to an unending corridor. This isn't to suggest that there's nothing at the end, just that it's simply impossible for the mind to encompass something of this magnitude. To even approach a glimmering of understanding of it, the mind must cease being active. The mystery of God is impossible to penetrate because God is infinite and the human mind is finite. It's like expecting a frog to understand physics.

Does God ever disappoint you?

I don't understand God in that way at all. If I were to believe in a God that disappoints I'd probably be an atheist. My understanding of the divine has little to do with a historical God that lives within causality, and the question why did God let this happen makes no sense to my experience of the world. As for being pissed off at the world, yes, sometimes I am, but I don't blame God, whoever God is. I don't think God is something that can be blamed.

Having spent years in Kabbalistic study, has that system come to completely permeate your view of reality?

No. I hope my view of reality is fluid and expanding; moreover, I moved away from Kabbalah several years ago and began studying Hasidism, which is primarily concerned

with the drama of the human soul. Kabbalah focuses on the soul of the world, and the spiritual drama of the cosmos, of creation, good and evil, and the nature of God. In my understanding, Hasidism focuses on one's work as a human being here and now, and on reaching a place where we can know – not understand -- the divine. To which personally I add, living a life of service. Service has always been a major part of my understanding of this work.

Is the Kabbalistic cosmology a place you can go to?

It's a place I've been to. In some ways the kabbalistic cosmology is like learning to drive, and at a certain point you just know how to drive. You know the vehicle and the road and don't think about it too much. The kabbalistic cosmology is a way of re-conceptualizing the world, and for me it was a corridor I had to pass through in order to discover that it was just a re-conceptualizing and there were places beyond it. I spend very little time now with Kabbalah and feel quite averse to the way it's been popularized.

Why has it become so popular?

On one level I think that it's just a fad that will go away, but it also has to do with the fact that other sources of comprehensive meaning that worked for people for decades no longer work. I'm referring to things like socialism and the idea of progress, which was an orienting factor in many people's lives that seems to have evaporated.

What was the last nail in the coffin of the notion of progress?

There have been so many nails! For some people it was the Holocaust or the assassination of Kennedy, but for me it was an increasing awareness of the cyclical nature of existence. Things aren't getting progressively better, rather, there are cycles of birth, maturity, and decline. This isn't to suggest I don't fight for progress. I'm fairly politically active and I believe in trying to make the world a better place, but I try not to identify with the outcome of this struggle. Things might well get worse.

Taking the long view of human history, is there any evidence that we're evolving in terms of consciousness?

It depends on what you mean by consciousness. I believe that Claude Levi-Strauss said that the highest level of human consciousness occurred in the New Stone Age; one could certainly make the case that in Europe during the 15th and 16th centuries we moved from a sense of wonder in creation and saw it as a place to explore, to exploit. We became more centered on ourselves as individuals. The Inquisition, along with other reactionary forces, tried to stop this move towards humanism and to deny the significance of the individual. Paradoxically, although individualism is one manifestation of the evolution of humanity, it incurs a terrible price in that it can lead us to forget the commonality and oneness of all beings.

Have your intense spiritual experiences tended to occur when you were alone?

Mostly, but some occurred while in the company of others. Being with people doing the same work can be a powerful experience.

Have you gone through long periods when you were unable to sense the divine?

I've gone through long periods when I didn't look for it, and that's a kind of despair. I've met people who appear to be conscious almost all the time, but most people are conscious about 10% of the time.

Has the dark side of your nature subsided over the course of your life, or have you simply learned how to manage it?

Probably a bit of both. Certainly I know how to manage it better, but it's very subtle, like a Hydra that's always changing its form. Despair, which I'd characterize as the loss of meaning, is something I do know, and when that feeling descends I wait for it to pass -- and time has shown me that it will. But I've also learned that there can be great wisdom in the place of despair, because it's there that one's false personalities grow monstrously and then can be stripped away. A tendency to be judgmental is another dark aspect of myself that I've struggled with and tried to refine into something else. My judgmental attitude towards myself and others led me into a quest for excellence that's been an important part of my life. Obviously there can be tyranny in that as well, but it's much

less damaging to myself and others. This process of metabolizing darkness and transforming it into something better is a kind of alchemical transmutation.

What's the difference between knowledge and wisdom?

Knowledge is the management of information; it's the collection and systemization of facts, skills, and understanding ways of manipulating the world. Wisdom has more to do with the ability to integrate knowledge and the sensibilities of our lives. There are kinds of wisdom, native and received. In recent years I've come to value the latter more.. Wisdom can be highly developed in some people, and it's often quite invisible. We live in a world in which it is held in very low esteem, probably because it's non-quantifiable and doesn't serve the goals of the economy or the political system.

Why do some people have the gift of faith, and others simply do not? It's not something one can choose.

I can only speak for myself in this regard, but for me, what faith I have -- which doesn't include belief in an afterlife -- is essentially a way of integrating everything that I know, excluding nothing. Anyway, I experience the divine more than I have faith or believe in it. Belief is an intellectual construct that demands some kind of definition, but experiencing the divine defies definition -- it's a kind of intimate contact. Knowledge of the divine is more easily described than defined, and that's why I prefer poetry to philosophy. Poetry permits you to perceive things sharply. And it frees you to be inconsistent and to maintain unresolved paradoxes, whereas philosophy, as far as I know, does not.

You say you don't believe in an afterlife; how can we presume to know anything about what happens after death, when existence is so fundamentally unknowable?

It isn't that I believe or don't believe, it's just that this area of concern isn't part of my understanding of the world. I don't get up in the morning and ask myself; do I believe in an afterlife? Questions like that tend to degenerate into head games. So much of religious philosophy and what people refer to as belief systems are ultimately head games that don't have much to do with the experience of the divine.

What is the purpose of religion?

Remember the story of Hansel and Gretel? In its highest form, received religion is like pebbles along a path left by the great people who went before you. I've always believed one can learn from geniuses, and following the pebbles is a way of aligning oneself with people who truly changed the way we conceptualize the world.

Everyone in life is challenged, and people respond to challenge in one of two ways: either they're embittered and hardened by the difficulties they face, or they derive wisdom from them and are deepened by them. It seems that some people simply don't have the equipment to handle what happens to them in life. Why do some people get to grow and others don't?

The word that comes to mind here is blessing. Blessing is always present, but sometimes you find yourself locked in a constellation of darker forces that block it out. But then, the blessing breaks through and reaches you, and it refreshes and heals you. In some of the most difficult times of my life I've encountered blessing, and somehow I've been open to it. I don't know what made me that way.

Does everyone have the capacity to love?

I don't like questions about everybody, but I will say that I know people who are so locked up in their false selves and the circumstances of their lives that they can't reach the joy and the beauty of loving.

With sufficient understanding of the Other, would the impulse to kill be erased?

I don't think the impulse to kill is rooted in the lack of understanding. There are many other sources – fear, the projection of one's own darker self onto the other, and economic insecurity, for instance. Economic insecurity is a powerfully destabilizing force that has a horrible effect on peoples' lives.

Can a religious tradition that condones killing be a viable path?

That's a terribly general question. Of course, the answer is no, but I'm not a total pacifist either, and I think there are times when a person has to use force. The fighters of the Warsaw ghetto rose up and said 'they're gonna kill us, but we're gonna get as many of them as we can first.' Maybe that wasn't very enlightened, but then again maybe it was. Religion sometimes uses myth as a point of entry, and these myths can be very powerful, sometimes elevating and liberating, other times enslaving and destructive. Myths should function as doorways, as pathways to light and truth, but if people get stuck in the myth then the religion that produced them is undeveloped. Many of the popular aspects of world religion today are stuck in myth, and this is something Judaism is presently struggling with.

Why is Judaism so enthralled with its own mythology and history?

Because in the beginning its mythology was one of the most insightful ways of seeing reality that anyone had come up with. It was revolutionary. But Judaism must move away from seeing God as a force in history and into the God of now if it is to flourish. Jewish identity is much too much involved in its own history.

What are the earmarks of a person with a viable spiritual practice? How can one recognize such a person?

It's a certain way of being richly in the world and involved with its bounties and its griefs, without losing sight of an essence within the world that's often lost to many of us. Someone with a spiritual grounding isn't buffeted by external events and is able to transcend the drama of their own life. We all must wrestle with false selves that obstruct the expression of the soul, and a spiritually grounded person manages to overcome those false selves without denying their existence.

Many spiritual practices advocate a monastic lifestyle that involves removing oneself from the earthly realm. Is this wrong? Do spiritually developed people have a duty to remain amidst the fray and work to improve things?

My path has never espoused the monastic tradition, though I've occasionally been drawn to it, and it certainly has its uses. Thomas Merton is one of my heroes, and he's an example of someone who needed to go to Gethsemane for an extended period before he was able to emerge and serve in the world. A religious tradition is an ecology of many niches and one of those niches involves isolation from the world -- not as a form of escapism, but because it's one of many practices that enrich the tradition.

Meditation is a central part of your practice. Do you regard meditation as a form of work?

No. It's a practice of refinement and a way of moving from the powerful to the subtle. I've always felt that there's more truth in the subtle than in the powerful, and I tend to distrust people who advocate powerful religious experience, as opposed to simply living with subtle ones. For me, meditation is a way of living with the subtle.

Leonard Cohen once made the comment, 'there's only one important achievement in life, and that's the acceptance of your lot.' Do you agree?

The acceptance of your lot is like cleaning your window. Until you do it you can't see what's on the other side. It's an absolutely necessary preparation, but the real work comes later.

Why are sexuality and spirituality so often at odds with each other? It seems most spiritual traditions have a hard time integrating these two energies.

Those energies aren't intrinsically at odds with each other, but it's true that one of the major themes in the history of civilization has been the management of sexuality. Nobody's got it right yet, either -- which isn't to say it's unmanageable. Sexuality is one of the greatest gifts given to humanity, and as to why it's such a volatile issue and we're so cautious about it, I don't think it's because of shame. It's simply because it's something extremely private.

In your work as a teacher you've often said that the purpose of spiritual study isn't to find answers; rather, the point is to refine one's questions. 'The questions get

bigger,' you've said, 'and then come the real biggies: what is the question for which my death is the answer?' How would you answer this question?

The question is less daunting now. Previously it was a great mystery that this mind and this body of mine that have done and known so much will one day disappear, but it no longer is. I'm now concerned with a different question: how do I complete my work and maintain my clarity and my path in the face of declining health and power? As I move into old age I'm entering a period of my life I've never been in before, and though I know various ways not to do it, it's basically uncharted territory. I used to be fascinated by King Lear, who seemed to do everything wrong, or at least his timing was awful, but I find myself looking to 'The Tempest's' Prospero as a better model because he knew how to relinquish power. I'm in a period of relinquishing power and reflecting on my life. The capacity to reflect is, in fact, a gathering of power, but it's power of a very different kind.