

Loneliness and innocence: A Kierkegaardian reflection on the paradox of self-realization

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Abstract. In this paper, I explore loneliness as a primordial call to find accord with the self that, as Kierkegaard claims, is born of spirit. I put Kierkegaard's Anti-Climacian formula, "the more consciousness, the more self," to work by examining lamentation over loss of the innocent days of youth as symptomatic of primordial loneliness. In loneliness, I argue, we confound loss of naivete (a developmental change) with loss of innocence (a spiritual failing). While each person is fated to lose naivete, no person loses innocence by developmental necessity. Each person loses innocence by his or her own hand in freedom.

"And the sea, like a wise man, is sufficient unto itself."

Søren Kierkegaard lived a solitary life. He lived a mere 42 years – alone. His immense authorship, most of which unfolded in an intense six year period (1842–1848), was dedicated to the solitary individual, in a word to his unknown reader, if indeed such a reader existed. This strange, uncanny man, though he had a friend or two, truly lived alone, not simply in inwardness, as we all must, but in the total character of his life. He wrote without a known audience, as if he had to call out, with the greatest faith, to one not yet come or one alive but unknown to him. He occupied no public forum of consequence, had no family of his own, and did not know the delights of evenings spent in intimacy with a loved one or in Socratic-style discussion with friends during the ripe years of his adulthood. It is not far-fetched to say that Kierkegaard, the man, was his authorship and his authorship sired who he became as a grown man, a rich embodiment of spirit that once graced the earthly realm and left its mark. The frail Kierkegaard, weak in physical vitality, undertook a strenuous life act. He left behind all the comforts of culture and family, approbation and acceptance in order to become one single thing: a solitary individual who bore witness to the demise of Christianity and testified to its ideal in a manner that pierced through the vast distance of inwardness to anyone

who might hear and for the sake of those who wish to rescue themselves for right living.

Everyone who reads Kierkegaard must sooner or later be startled by the pure, solitary nature of his voice. And yet loneliness is not one of the main themes to which we turn to his work for instruction. Nor is it a leading word in his corpus. We associate his authorship with its elaborated themes: despair, anxiety, poetic existence, the sins of lowliness and highness, pride and cowardliness, the pervasive reality of double-mindedness, and their counterpoise in works of love and purity of heart. And yet the implicit waters within which the explicit elaboration of his philosophy emerges remain those of solitude, the solitary nature of human existence and vocation.

Much in Kierkegaard's authorship testifies to the difference between loneliness and solitude, and could, thus, instruct us. Two aspects stand out in particular: the theory of indirect communication and the authorship understood as a work of love.¹ And yet it is to the model of self-realization developed in *The Sickness Unto Death* that I wish to turn in taking up the ordeal we know as loneliness.² I focus thus on Anti-Climacus's core premise, "the more consciousness, the more self."³ There is a direct correlation between degree of consciousness and degree of spiritual possibility. The inverse aspect of this law of human existence is that degree of resistance to a gain in consciousness does not escape the life of spirit but rather enters into a willful and ultimately demonic refusal to grow in spirit. The more aware we become, the more intensive our responsibility to live well; but the more we refuse a potentially new order of awareness, the deeper we fall into a sickness of spirit. Loneliness is such a disease. One primary expression of loneliness voices the complaint that we are all doomed to lose the innocence of our youth as we come of age. Although it does not begin as an illness that has festered and become grave, loneliness can, like despair, grow aggravated to the point that one's entire disposition toward life journey announces itself as one, long and bitter complaint of self-pity, a bottomless negativity that kills off all trust in self and life and others. It is, I think, a worthy aim to explore whether life dooms us to lose innocence and the radiant purity of youthfulness. Is it true, as worldly "wisdom" claims, that youthfulness must end and the gloomy shadow of loneliness ascend only to becloud the length of our days?

1. The Paradox of self-realization

In *The Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard presents us with a radical and paradoxical view of the self.⁴ The whole force of Kierkegaard's

understanding of self-realization as paradoxical conveys, indirectly, that loneliness – far from being caused by an outer circumstance or depicting an episodic, inner state of mind – *reflects a deep, metaphysical yearning to live true to the self in life*. Living true to self is, in Kierkegaard's understanding, a singular and rigorous task, a yoke laid upon us by God. What, then, does it mean that realizing the self is a venture profoundly paradoxical in kind? It means that we must choose to become the self in freedom but we are denied the power, by our own agency, to create and engender the self. What a paradoxical fix we are in; what a narrow pass! For choose we must, will to be oneself we must, and yet by this willingness alone the self does not arise. This, then, is our uncanny task: to consent in faith – *in absolute trust* – to the birth of the self that is born of spirit. Yet consent is not agency since the self arises, as spirit, in and by itself. The self arises as gift.

The first condition for such consent is to apprehend that all I typically call myself is not, radically understood, the self. We are not automatically singular selves simply by virtue of being born into a psyche and body, endowed with reason, will, and agency. Typically, we identify that conglomeration of physical impulses and psychological tendencies as if it were the true “self.” But such a psychological and merely historically embedded concept of self fails to capture the ordeal we face in meeting the task to live true to self in life. In simple terms, this is the ordeal that to be born physically is not to come alive spiritually. Physical development can never, by its own momentum, catapult me into the land of spirit. This truth could not be more personal; our very selfhood cannot be realized simply by fashioning ourselves into successful worldly subjects, not even moral subjects who strive to live for rational ideals. That is why Kierkegaard differentiates spirit, the self as a positive or realized unity, from physical-psychical being, a negative or unrealized unity of temperament and disposition (SUD, 14).

Odd as it may sound to say that we can live out our entire time on earth without ever becoming truly singular selves, this reality constitutes the mysterious and universal plight into which we are all born. Similar to the little sea turtle whose plight it is to be born alone on the beach and left to seek its way home without parental guidance, so, too, is each one of us born alone to the task to find our way back to the font of the self. Kierkegaard places special emphasis on showing us that spirit constitutes a unique dimension in its own right. “Every human being is intended to be spirit,” Kierkegaard intones (SUD, 43), yet nothing of spirit, he quickly reminds us, automatically manifests by nature or habit (cf. SUD, 45, 50). We are born into life and we will undergo a career as physical-psychical beings, like it or not. We are further endowed with a particular

natural temperament or predilection, and, through the process of socialization, a thick set of acquired behavioral and psychological habits will be added onto this native endowment. And yet none of these developmental requirements for physical survival guarantee, in and of themselves, that I discover that the true font of the self is spirit or that I consent, in freedom, to allow spirit to transform my attitude and fund action.

Most every youth intuitively, some time in the teens, that to live true to self would be to radiate and glow, to become utterly unique and singular, the way only living spirit can. And yet, though youth may follow their natural bent when they pursue music or math or any arena area to which they natively gravitate, bent alone never suffices to give youth an answer to the question, Who am I? The self, then, is not reducible to psychic and physical bent. If youth know not how to follow that intuition with singleness of heart, adults fare no better for having abandoned the intuition. By adulthood, the process whereby one relinquishes immediate adherence to bent or inclination and prides oneself on self-fashioning reaches an advanced stage of development. One commonly held notion today is that self-realization pertains to fashioning over the early habits and behavioral patterns instilled in me by my parents. Worldly autonomy is acquired by taking over the role of being parent to myself, becoming both the fashioner and the fashioned in that I mold new habits, curb actions based on pure inclination, and establish ideals for myself worthy of emulation. But for all this, it seems, no amount of becoming “self-fashioned” in worldly terms (prudential and moral) ever saved one from mid-life crisis or the deep and painful loneliness of self-betrayal. I can be highly accomplished, happy in marriage and family and friends, and nevertheless suffer a radical breach, a felt-discord and estrangement from self, even where I actually like the so-called “self” I claim to be, the identity I so meticulously fashioned according to an image of my own liking. One can be so obviously decent and yet plagued by the anguish of that youthful intuition come back to haunt one mid-life – the shadowy intuition that one is still not living true to self.

The ordeal we face in life – to be born physically but destined for the life of spirit – touches the very heart of selfhood, and for that reason loneliness permeates the core of all our projects to become self-realized on the basis of what lies within our power: nature, bent, acquired habits and disposition, emulation of ideals. More radically understood, this ordeal pairs me down to *radical helplessness* in that all that I can will to come into existence by my own agency proves impotent to deliver me to radical harmony with self and to engender the enduring joy and equanimity that such accord yields. Kierkegaard drives home this point by showing that

one could not despair of the self, if one were its originator, creator, or inventor (SUD 14, 21).⁵ That the self is realized neither by nature nor by acquired habit nor by any combination of these, becomes painfully clear when we discover first-hand that there are two forms of despair: the despair of not willing to be oneself *and that of willing to be oneself despairingly*. The former suffers from being more dream than willingness, while the latter, having undertaken the strenuous labor of fashioning oneself into a reasonable facsimile of an ideal person, nevertheless discovers that self-accord alludes one. One has not, thus, become a singularly embodied prototype of humanity. The ordeal of self-realization, if I prove a careful student of it, levels me down to *impotence*, namely, that I cannot, by my own agency, become a radiant and true self or, by extension, the *living* incarnation of essential virtue.

2. Paradox and loneliness

Let us pause, then, and ask what this ordeal of living true to self teaches us about loneliness. First we learn this: Only because we do not begin life automatically living in accord with self, can we know loneliness as a *deep-seated or primordial yearning for the self*. It is not true, as we commonly maintain, that loneliness is the absence of companions or friends who can truly understand one, even though to have such a friend would be a most uplifting and joyous gift. One can be lonely at a party or by oneself; one can pine for the monastery or pine to get away from the monastery; one can be lonely for a child or to get free from being among children the weary day long; one can be terribly lonely in marriage or frightfully lonely for companionship. It seems that loneliness is not peculiar to any one life circumstance, is not, in fact, the effect of a circumstance, but points, at root, to something more basic, namely, one's relation to self. That is why one can take these very same circumstances – being unmarried or married, being with congregation or in the monastery – and delight inwardly in radical aloneness with self. One can delight in oneself while amidst others at a party equally as one can delight in being entirely by oneself. Similarly, having friends accompany me can exacerbate or lighten loneliness for a spell. But cure loneliness at root, circumstance never can. Contrary to ordinary talk, primordial loneliness is not a consequence of outer circumstance but rather an inward reality that qualifies how I meet and undergo any given circumstance.

Loneliness is, as we commonly intuit, missing something, but it is *missing self-accord*. It is being at odds with the true self and for that very reason at odds with others and with circumstance. It is a peculiar and

uncanny phenomenon that, as human beings, we can be physically alive and yet not present to ourselves in living. This is a uniquely human form of suffering and it qualifies the ordeal we face in life to be free and yet not to author our own self. And so it is that we can present a facade to the world or go forth based on temperament and acquired habit, but never show up and become present as a truly living self in the interactions we undertake. This sad truth gives validity to our keenly felt, youthful intuition that something decisive lies at stake in being true to self in life, though almost none among us was prepared in youth to battle through to the depth that this intuition would require us to plummet in order to heed and follow it.

This brings me to the second vital lesson that finds support in Kierkegaard's perspective, even though he never articulated loneliness in its most primordial significance.⁶ Because the second form of despair teaches us that no habitual momentum sustains accord with self, we must understand that loneliness is at base *a call* and not simply a psychic vacuity. It is a call to live true to the deep or "theological" self (SUD 79).⁷ We must, then, regard loneliness as mid-way between friend and foe, and for this reason it has two aspects. First, it is *a call*, a signal to take up the task to win accord with self. It recalls us home. Second, it can, sadly, flower into that distorted fruit of *psychic self-isolation*.

Because it manifests primordially as a deep call, we should not fear loneliness, though we should never precisely befriend it. We should give it due respect and heed it as a marvelous warning, a precious gift that guides us from within. I cannot say by what mechanism the little sea turtle makes its way home, but we are surely not left bereft without an inward signal that assists us, even as every human child must journey to spirit alone, for whatever other guidance a parent can give, no mortal parent leads one by the hand along this path. Whether I heed loneliness's warning, I alone decide. And yet it is a warning that I am falling away from self and I should heed rather than frightfully flee loneliness into a flurry of outer activity, as if being with others or overwork can automatically cure loneliness. Worse, whenever we do not heed this warning call, we unwittingly befriend loneliness, we bed down with it and make of it a constant companion, even as we find ways to suppress consciousness of it. We sink into pity over how hard life is for us, we bemoan our lot or fixate on how someone wronged us; and then loneliness transmutes into an abominable psychic reality. At an extreme it becomes a form of radical isolation, a terrifying self-enclosure in pain that leaves one unable to touch or be touched by anything, even though one wanders among others.⁸

With these preliminaries, we can come to understand that loneliness is or can be a great teacher, even though it is destined to be eclipsed by spiritual joy. Loneliness teaches us that *radical trust* in self does not come

ready-made but will require a profound struggle to be won in life. It teaches that self-betrayal runs deeper than we ordinarily think precisely because it is easier to manufacture an identity than it is to risk a leap of faith in the true self. Loneliness teaches us this because loneliness is the shadow of self-betrayal (or its unfolding prospect).⁹ One can succeed without risking a performance that is deeply rooted in one's living truth. One can betray oneself over and over again, even when, by all worldly standards, the performance was a superb hit.

Accord with self must be won dynamically in the very moment of performance. No amount of skill or preparation or habit by which I carry forward performance guarantees that I risk becoming at one with the living font of spirit in the act. A much more radical trust than dependency upon skill and confidence, a radical leap of faith in living spirit, is required if one is to eclipse the shadow of loneliness that haunts one's successes equally as one's failures with that nagging sense of self-betrayal. And this is because the self born of spirit, in that it arises from an infinite source, cannot be known or predicted in advance of its manifestation. It is not true, as many philosophers claim, that what terrifies us at base is the horror of peering into the groundless abyss over which human existence hangs. To the contrary, it is the radiant wildness and unpredictability of spirit that terrifies us. Spirit cannot be reduced to any image or concept; it cannot be known once and for all by memory and thus anticipated, for even a genuine remembrance of its past manifestation does not contain the inexhaustible wealth that can flow forth from that font. The living self is no static datum. The font of the self gives rise to original acts that are not governed by habit, memory, concept, image or the weight of past history. Self-discovery and trust in self are, then, terrifying, because the self cannot be controlled. Nor, if we understood, need it be controlled, for if action could not be funded by a source deeper than all we ordinarily package up into an idea of self, then unconditional acts of any and every kind would be denied us.¹⁰ We could not radiate!

3. Consciousness and loneliness

We can deepen our understanding of the paradoxical nature of self-realization if we turn to Kierkegaard's formula "the more consciousness, the more self." This formula governs Kierkegaard's view that all things *essential to our well-being* are qualities and not quantities. As such, they must be won dynamically in life because they are never given by nature or acquired merely developmentally. By essential, I mean qualities like true living, inward repose, freedom from loneliness, and all spiritual virtues,

such as graciousness, forgiveness, hopefulness, humility, unconditional love, and even radical trust. Loneliness teaches us that we must add youthfulness and innocence to this list, for mid-life crisis is nothing other than the intuition that we could radiate youthful innocence of heart come back to haunt us.

All things that qualify our existence essentially imbue our lives with something enduring, something of the eternal: a joy that is not the mere and fleeting opposite of sorrow, a love that does not cease when it is transgressed against, a judiciousness that knows no selfishness, a youthfulness that is not bound to age. In realizing such essential qualities, we become edified into spiritually vibrant and awake people, people who have been made willing – not reluctantly or begrudgingly but with the totality of our being – to bear hard times well equally as times of ease. When Kierkegaard claims that spiritual awakening must be ventured in freedom, he means, quite seriously, that physical survival does not, in itself, deliver us to any essential and sustaining qualification of our mode of existence. It is our task to win such an essential qualification, to undergo a radical transformation in our whole manner of living, in our comportment, our perspective and understanding. The entire way we bear up under what happens to us in life must become qualified by spirit if we are to live well, for only upon awakening to spirit can the quality of my embodiment become graced. Without venturing spiritual edification, I risk sinking ever more deeply into the quagmire of a lonely and estranged existence that must shipwreck finally on bitterness and negativity, if not demonic willfulness.

What, then, catalyzes such spiritual awakening? Every shift in consciousness occasions awakening, and life itself works hard to deliver such shifts in consciousness. But here we must take care on two points. First, “consciousness” means something precise in Kierkegaard’s vocabulary: to become conscious means, for Kierkegaard, to become *aware that one is a self before God* or that there is something of the eternal possible for one, namely spirit. What a gain in awareness means for Kierkegaard differs at heart from how we think today of a gain in consciousness.¹¹ Noteworthy is that Kierkegaard emphatically does not use the notion of a gain in consciousness to refer *merely* to a shift from a naive to a knowing view of the world. To lose worldly naivete does entail a departure from a previous level of consciousness and a gain in an increasingly differentiated view of the world and of one’s position in that world. Such a worldly shift in consciousness may enable one to adopt a critical and reflective relation to social and historical processes. Yet it does not deliver one to the life of inwardness or the life of spiritual awareness.

That is why Kierkegaard claims that despair has not become “declared,” i.e., aware of its true root, until it recognizes that it is inwardly generated and not a simple effect of outer conditions, as we typically assume when we babble away that some life event caused us to despair (SUD 19–21). Strictly understood, *The Sickness Unto Death* refers a gain in self-consciousness to an inward axis, an axis of the intensive rather than the extensive. Along this axis of intensity, one awakens. One becomes ever more sharply aware that the true task of self-becoming entails giving up all worldly standards; one realizes that something far more essential than worldly gain is at stake in the game of life. Such an awareness arises on pain of shedding, not worldly naivete per se, but self-naivete. Kierkegaard rigorously distinguishes qualitative or spiritual transformation from quantitative or developmental change, so we should beware not to conflate “consciousness-raising” insofar as it promotes mere developmental change with spiritual awakening and growth.

These comments bring me to the second matter on which to exercise care. Even if we distinguish a development in worldly consciousness from a gain in spiritual awareness, every shift in consciousness *occasions* spiritual awakening. But an occasion is never a cause. A shift in consciousness can only *occasion* but not directly cause one to awaken and choose to live in accord with self. Qualitatively understood, the formula “the more consciousness, the more self” is dialectical in that it points to two, deeply united sides of the same reality. This means, first, that the condition for choosing ever more purely and decisively to trust in the deep self is that I grow ever more sharply aware that this is the task: to choose accord with the self no matter how much worldly pressure arises with newfound changes in worldly consciousness. Nevertheless, it also means that I can fail not simply from ignorance but even with increased awareness of the true task.

A shift in consciousness, in so far as it catalyzes a potential gain in the awareness that I exist before God, simultaneously occasions both a deeper, more rigorous choice for renewed spiritual growth and a more conscious and vigorous form of rebellion. We could say, it equally occasions annulling loneliness when it sounds its signal, as discovering first-hand what it means to indulge loneliness with greater intensity of self-convolution. Heightened awareness of spirit enables greater intensity in both the uplifting direction and the direction of plummeting to a new low. Awakening to what is essentially at stake in the game of life lifts the veil over all that slumbered beneath my previous level of consciousness. Much could lie in slumber: the fact that I have been lonely though I was unaware of it; the habituated ways I indulge self-pity and ingratiate myself in loneliness; and even my unacknowledged capacity to choose

demonically to punish myself and others, including God, by refusing to give up loneliness.

Spiritual awareness spans the heights and depths of inward life and it takes a special courage and strength, edified stepwise, to bear this increased awareness without indulging the negative prospect of the more intensive forms of self-betrayal that it occasions. Here we find a second genuine reason why we are terrified to awaken, and not some vague and unexamined anxiety before the abyss. For we do not begin with trust in ourselves ready-made. And it will take single-hearted trust to bear the increased intensity laid upon us by a gain in spiritual awareness, both the intensity of greater harmony we could enjoy and the intensity of temptation we must renounce. Ordinarily, we lack trust that the harmony will so outweigh anxiety that it will prove infinitely more bearable than the known, especially since the known involves loneliness and despair. It takes a leap of faith in self to make that discovery, to have one's emotions and beliefs turned around and set straight. Rarely do we allow loneliness to teach us that all things enduring constitute our only true wants, so fickle and unstable do we begin in relation to the self, the very self that is born of spirit.

4. Loneliness and innocence

Let us now put Kierkegaard's formula, "the more consciousness, the more self," to work by examining how even an ordinary, developmental gain in consciousness avails one of a possible gain in self-awareness and spiritual growth. Let us ponder the difference between innocence and naivete. It is not uncommon, in mid-life, to look back upon one's days of youth and voice the lamentation that one lost one's innocence when one came of age and had to discover that the world is a place full of compromised people and compromising situations. When, as adults, we see young women on the dance floor, we further lament that they, too, have lost their innocence, but then we sadly accept that this *must* be so, just as it was for us. Yet this lamentation *confounds naivete with innocence*. And then it proceeds to pawn off its own confusion on youth as prudential wisdom rather than the voice of self-betrayal, the voice of one who prematurely threw away belief that it is possible to embody radiant purity of heart in life.

This lamentation voices an abysmal loneliness, and yet it rests upon a profound and disturbing misapprehension. It bespeaks its total lack of understanding that life – as an occasion and not a cause – holds no power to strip me of something essential. Everyone is destined to lose naivete,

this much is true. But no one is destined to lose innocence. No, if we lose innocence, then it is lost by our own hand. Nothing could be sadder than to throw away something essential to our well-being in life and not even apprehend that one threw it away needlessly and could actually win it back. If I missed the prospect of spiritual awakening during my adolescence, then the essential matter I lost was not youth's naivete. Loss of naivete, in that it enables me to survive in the world, is no essential loss but rather a gain to which we can easily reconcile ourselves. What haunts me is what I truly lost: the promise of an essential understanding that alone would have enabled me, not simply to survive, but to live well—to meet life with a transformed bearing, enlivened in spirit and graced with a new perspective that would have carried me forward in self-accord and thus *without regret, without lamentation* for days gone by.

Naivete and innocence refer to two divergent axes of existence, the developmental and spiritual. One will inevitably be catapulted out of naivete by life each time that one is required to develop a new order of consciousness about the world and oneself.¹² Yet innocence must be understood as an essential or spiritual quality. It does not refer to a previous state of consciousness or to a developmental phase of life out of which we must evolve. It is a quality of living that is neither automatically gained nor automatically lost with the development of a new order of consciousness. It is gained in freedom, as Kierkegaard would say, on condition that I allow a shift in consciousness to jolt me into the awareness that an essential possibility lies at stake for me in every circumstance, no matter what worldly meaning that circumstance holds. Innocence, then, avails itself to me as an essential possibility. As such, it bears the mark of the eternal. It avails itself not as an historical or worldly possibility. It descends as a possible quality of embodied understanding in the here and now or, as we say, from on high.¹³

Every shift in consciousness, whether delivered by a developmental change or through evolving life events, delivers a shock. This shock potentially jolts us into awakening to the deadly sobering truth that, if we are to fare well in life, our embodiment must become qualified by spiritual gains. But if I do not let this jolt do its work to engender seriousness and right focus in me, then I can gain the whole wide world and yet diminish terribly in spirit. I can grow lonely and dull and muddle through life uncomprehending, forever nostalgic for what I lost, yet without comprehending what was lost or how it became lost. If I stumble, like most people, over adolescent loss of naivete, and this stumble sleeps dormant in my preconscious, occasionally rising up to haunt me as lonely nostalgia for the glory days of my youth, then I should pause and face loneliness earnestly until it imparts the hidden truth to me, that life did not snatch

away my innocence when it stole my naivete from me. This I lose by my own hand and not, as I imagine, in some long lost past, but now. Now is the time when I am failing to let life jolt me into awakening.

What, then, is the narrow pass, the solitary path that I must venture alone, like the little sea turtle? It is the task to lose what I once knew only *accidentally*, in the immediacy of my youth, in order to make a true gain by winning it consciously as an *essential qualification* of my existing. Youth live close and yet far from spirit, according to Kierkegaard's dialectical formula, "the more consciousness, the more self." Youth exhibit an uncanny way of resting close to spirit when they show no offense at the unexpected revelation of true spiritedness in another person, yet this lack of offense is due in part to the simple fact that youth have not yet been tested. It is required of each of us that we awaken. We must pass from the first, sleeping immediacy of youth to what Kierkegaard calls the second, wakeful immediacy of faith. That passage opens up only because there is no necessary commensurability between developmental aims and spiritual ends. I awaken to spirit upon shedding spiritual naivete, not worldly naivete. Here I mean things like the naive albeit heroic belief that the world will prize me for spiritual growth and the benighted view that life circumstance causes loneliness. Above all, I mean the naive but *presumptuous* belief that the qualities I exhibit in youth will always remain with me as if they were stable endowments of nature and character. The deep shock in awakening lies not in finding that the world can be evil. It stems rather from the more profound discovery that I don't "have" or "possess" innocence by nature (whether first or acquired) any more than youthfulness or compassion.

Youth do exhibit features like vibrant physical energy that age funds; yet the great hallmark that we prize in youthfulness, namely, adaptability to the new, refracts a spiritual quality, a promise. Yet even this uncanny availability to spirit that one sometimes finds in youth is known by youth only *accidentally*, that is, *preconsciously*. In youth, we lack altogether the conscious wherewithal to choose openness to spirit. Thus, one may exhibit youthfulness in youth, but to win youthfulness of spirit as an enduring quality of one's attitude and comportment is a matter that age alone cannot secure. Aging necessarily brings the new order of consciousness that marks off adulthood, and with this change life presses me onto the brink of danger. For what I once thought I "had" as a stable feature of my being, namely, youthful receptivity and adaptability to the new, I must discover I enjoyed at best accidentally without knowing how, but certainly not as a conscious gain won on pain of choice. I must be tested to see whether I am willing to gain youthfulness as a defining

quality of my entire bodily and psychic orientation. So, too, with all essential qualities and virtues.

Look, then, at what danger increased consciousness brings! Look at young women on the dance floor as they come of age and desire, more than anything, a good marriage. Suppose they are a group of shy young women and not the flamboyant types who parade their stuff about. Still, what do we see? Are they shining jewels of non-artifice or are they clothed too soon in *self-consciousness*? Ordinarily we praise the acquisition of self-consciousness in young women as a mark of maturity. Prudential wisdom numbs and blinds us, so we fail to be shocked by this new acquisition. For, spiritually understood, becoming *self-consciously* related to one's power as a woman to make oneself desirable is no happy gain, but instead *a terrible, terrible fall*.

To gain sexual consciousness is not synonymous with falling prey to a self-conscious relation to self. When self-conscious, one loses whatever naturalness accompanied youth; one acquires an artificial relationship to embodiment and a manipulative relation to self-presentation. A split emerges between embodiment and consciousness, a flaw that obstructs jewel-like radiance. All those sympathetic young women, if they are sincere, suffer the deep-felt plight of wanting to be naturally and innocently radiant while caught for three hours dancing in a painful self-consciousness they know not how to eclipse. Young women and men suffer terribly under the weight of their newly won consciousness but not because sexual awareness proves the decisive test. The matter is more inwardly dialectical than worldly wisdom has it. The true trial centers not on how to adjust to and employ this new sexual consciousness. The question is, rather: Can one bear this sexual consciousness in such a way that one wins through to radical self-accord? How one embodies consciousness lies at stake: Can one gain sexual awareness, even consciousness of oneself as objectified by the world, and nevertheless win an innocent or a non-artificial way of being at ease in oneself? The unease of losing first immediacy or naive repose in self will not abate simply by making an adjustment to the initial discomfort and learning to command this newfound sexual awareness in the interest of worldly aims. For the anxiety uncovers a spiritual ordeal and not merely a psychological difficulty. One has to gain second immediacy; one has to win self-accord through a free and deliberate choice to trust in self.¹⁴

To dance wholly awarely and yet without self-conscious intent is to radiate grace and beauty. It is to shine. The ordeal, I repeat, is this: Can a young woman come under the worldly gaze – become conscious of her position as an “object” of desire – and yet not fall prey to a manipulative relation to self-presentation? Can she renounce the tendency to appraise

herself like an object of value and according to worldly standards? The difficulty is precisely that any young woman might confuse spiritual trial with a worldly exam. I can, like most young women, struggle to adjust to loss of naivete by accepting the worldly perspective because every gain in consciousness strengthens my ability to operate strategically in the world. To become conscious of oneself as sexually desirable proves a great boost in the worldly mating game. If I become conscious that I am perceived by young men as attractive, then I gain the power to negotiate the dating game and secure a marital future. And the less naive I become about my rivals, even when I call them friends, the more advantage I acquire in advancing myself competitively.

The dating game brings with it specific worldly pressures to adopt such a strategic and manipulative self-relation. But these pressures are not the decisive weight that bears down upon me. Hidden within these pressures lies the graver temptation to believe, quite misguidedly, that passing the worldly test will secure my dignity. Although this felt-gain in consciousness may yield an enhanced power to commandeer one's prospects and may even enable one to acquire a fresh sense of confidence, it by no means guarantees that one will win the battle to live in accord with oneself. One can win the skirmish in the dating game, while falling asleep to the decisive battle to live without self-conscious artifice, to stand on one's integrity and hope, against all odds, that the beloved might see the virtue in it.

Indeed, there is nothing more typical than to pass the worldly test but fail oneself. Most everyone who gains sexual consciousness adds onto that worldly gain a second, seeming gain, the gain of a self-conscious relation to self that, in truth, marks a decisive loss. Typically, when one becomes conscious of the reality that one is valued by others in sexual terms, one simultaneously though unnecessarily objectifies oneself in the same terms. Such a self-conscious posture (to be sharply distinguished from the deeper self-awareness of oneself as qualified by spirit) bases itself upon the dawning and acute tendency to set a conscious value on some personality trait and put it objectively on display. And yet does not a grave confusion pervade the worldly success of prizing oneself as an object, the confusion as to whether one has passed the test? For to gain sexual consciousness but lose self-accord means that one does *not* truly find a way to bear worldly pressures well. One is not well; one has not become true at heart.

Certainly one can learn to face worldly pressures without collapsing under anxiety into silliness or hysteria. One can learn to control anxiety and appear seemingly "gracious" and "natural," rather than vampy and obvious or silly and hysterical. But such conscious self-fashioning yields no authentic capacity to bear the new order of consciousness freely, that is

to say, graciously. At best, such developmental adjustments yield gains in degree of comfort but deliver no radical transformation of one's total self-relation. One may gain a degree of psychic control, yet one cannot cut dramatically through worldly pressure and put anxiety (self-consciousness) to rest. One enjoys true freedom only upon winning a simple, naked way to be oneself without control and without any trace of self-conscious projection of one's "treasure." We should beware that what prudential worldly wisdom calls sexual maturity rests, spiritually understood, upon self-betrayal. To throw away my innocence – even if I gain the beloved and receive the addition of a great boost in self-confidence – is already to be underway in self-betrayal. It is to suffer the horrid contradiction of being appraised by the beloved as a great treasure even though, deep in inwardness, I know that I have become a fake jewel.

5. Loneliness or youthfulness, which shall I choose?

We venture forth in youth armed with that one beautiful conviction that to live true to self is a great thing, but ill prepared to discover the lonely truth that essential things can be lost in life, and not just once.¹⁵ Often parents think we are not ready for the world because we are naive. Yet far more crucial than loss of naivete is the true battle to win purity of heart. We could, if we are not careful, inadvertently and almost without notice, toss away innocence with the flick of a hand only to find ourselves one sad day become like those forlorn adults we neither respect nor understand. In youth, I can hardly fathom how any adult could become so broken and dejected as all the lonely hearts of the world. I move forward certain that I will seize life by the horns and win, so little prepared am I to battle for the essential in life and not merely to succeed.

If I wish to win earnestness where other have not, then I must battle through from the surface to the depth, from worldly consciousness to spiritual awakening. I must let life send its jolts to me but not allow these jolts merely to trigger anxious rivalry for worldly championship, only belatedly to find myself haunted by the shadow of loneliness, the shadow that keeps tight the secret that I have lived untrue. If I wish to win this battle, then I must face this vital spiritual truth: that we never "have" essential qualities beforehand, as if they are endowments of nature or developmental acquisitions that we can take for granted. All things essential – graciousness, youthfulness, radiance, truthful living – are dynamic possibilities that I must win in action in each new situation. They must be renewed and can never be taken for granted.

Still, there is hope. I need not sink into the abomination of aggravated self-isolation when loneliness recalls me home. It is possible to grow younger in spirit as one physically ages, this Kierkegaard teaches us. But the price for such a spiritual gain is real. I must awaken and discover my own capacity for self-betrayal; I must see that I, too, could so easily become broken. I must face the depths to which I can plummet in loneliness and discover my own capacity for defiance, for meanness, for hardness of heart, for crimes of neglect, for selfishness, pride, and petty tyranny. And then I will have to lay to rest what all the world encourages me to retain: the perspective that blames life events for causing my essential failures and my lonely pain over my losses. It is not life that snatches innocence and youthfulness and vibrancy away from me. Though I cannot gain back time, though I cannot undo past acts of self-betrayal or harm to others, spirit avails itself to me in each new present. The temptation to confound innocence with naivete proves a convenient but spiritually debilitating lie. It comforts us falsely, as if our key failing hides far removed in some distant past and were not “of the present,” every moment that we persist in bitter complaint.

Finally and above all, I will have to learn that every relation in life must be tested, not because I am evil or bad but because without spiritual trial I have no possibility for choosing truth over untruth, innocence over strategy, youthfulness over sinking into a shattered and lonely existence. I must grow keenly ready for the journey into intensity. In truth, we never leave naivete once and for all. In every new relation and every new situation, one starts all over again in naivete. To be young at heart is to adopt an attitude that accepts naivete as a necessary phase in venturing the new and readies one for the time life will lift the veil of naivete and test one in the quality of one's love. This attitude enables one to await, in patience, the disclosure of what one's true task will be in this relation. For every relation – whether with people or culture or place – is a divine set-up. The whole purpose of being moved, in the extensive domain, through loss of naivete is to give us the occasion to turn ever deeper into the intensive dimension of becoming grown in love and purity of heart. Again and again in life, I must learn to allow the felt-love of naive immediacy to become transformed from a love based merely on felt kinship, mutual like, or preference into one grounded radically in unconditional acts.

There is, then, only one way to bear the worldly pressures that every new order of consciousness brings – pressure to succeed, pressure to be desirable, pressure to cut the other off when she transgresses against me – and nevertheless win eternal youthfulness of heart. Only by casting deep roots, ever more intensively down into the true font of the self, can one enjoy a countervailing tension that cuts through all worldly pressures, sets

all things in perspective, and fortifies one to greet the next venture with gusto and willingness. And yet ... if I do not get a start in growing that special strength, elasticity of spirit, to meet life's trials and ordeals with a hearty willingness to risk faith in the possibility of bearing them well, then I inescapably doom myself to lose my bloom as I age rather than acquire that lively spark, that twinkle in the eye, that eternal, youthful resilience to try and try again, that, as spirit would have, makes me forever young even as outwardly and for all practical purposes, I enter the autumn of my days.

Notes

1. The whole of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous authorship indirectly testifies to what it means to make passage from loneliness (melancholic existence) to steadfastness in realizing the solitary way of love. And his model of indirect communication, upon sound examination, reveals one of the greatest mysteries, namely, that communication, when it is not the stuff of conventional babble, passes miraculously from one inwardness in solitude to another. And that model is not only theoretically elaborated but refracted in the authorship proper in that Kierkegaard's act of authoring these works lives and swims in the waters of faith in the miracle of communication. Kierkegaard did not despair of his solitary reader, rather he placed immense hope in the mystery of communication. One inwardness can communicate to another, even were it not to find immediate reception in its world or its time. See Kierkegaard's Preface and the translator's remarkable introduction to *Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing*, trans. Douglas V. Steere (New York: Harper and Row, 1956).
2. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980). Hereafter cited as SUD.
3. This is the most concise statement of the formula, found on SUD 29. More developed statements include: "the greater the degree of consciousness, the more intensive the despair" (SUD 42). Here emphasis is laid on the negative possibility, but the formula overall articulates Kierkegaard's dialectical understanding of qualitative transformation (the life of spirit) in that consciousness of the eternal constitutes a precondition for annulling the possibility of despair and thus becoming a self before God. The positive formulation becomes evident, for example, in that to lack infinite consciousness of self means, strictly understood, that one is not a self and that, though despairing, one cannot be said to be in despair for lack of this consciousness of being a self (50). Ultimately, the greater the conception of God, the more self (see 77f).
4. Although given in the voice of the pseudonym, Anti-Climacus, a pathologist of spirit, whose voice is too conceptually analytic and abstract to be Kierkegaard's own, the basic conception of the self I take to be Kierkegaard's, as it supplies a key to the entire authorship. I hold the limits of Anti-Climacus to be primarily those of tone and embodiment rather than of substance, though I think even the self born of spirit points to an order of awareness that should be distinguished from con-

sciousness. The self is a witness; its ability to witness to itself as embodied suffers no subject-object division, as self-consciousness and reflection do. Kierkegaard's vocabulary proves limited in this regard and I correct for this deficiency where possible.

5. In his exact formula, Anti-Climacus shows that the individual who despairs "over the earthly or over something earthly" has not yet become aware that in despair one despairs "of the eternal" and thus "over oneself" (SUD, 60–61, cf. 50f). Yet when despair becomes known as defiance, one discovers that at core one despairs "through the aid of the eternal" (67). Defiant despair, in that it consciously refuses the self born of eternity, therewith refuses God: "the self in despair wants to be master of itself or to create itself" (68). The second form of despair thus reveals that all despair is titanic pride.
6. In the rare moments when Kierkegaard speaks of loneliness, he associates it with the aesthetical mode of life as distinguished from the solitary path. See, for example, *Purity*, 49. Nevertheless, my equation of loneliness with a more primordial call remains consonant with his thought, even if it introduces a monastic sensibility not precisely his own.
7. Kierkegaard qualifies the self as "before God" (SUD, 79ff) and he defines the self as resting "transparently in the power that establishes it" (14).
8. Although I note that loneliness dons the shape of a horrid psychic reality, I do not intend to imply that it is a habituated "state of mind" or a condition that devolves upon one through outer circumstance or by inner constitution. No, I believe, with Kierkegaard, that loneliness is at root a dynamic reality, contracted in freedom and is not, like the flu, something that runs its course any more than it is a congenital disease. It can only be annulled by taking a leap of faith in the deep self (SUD 16–17). A helpful consideration for thinking about loneliness can be found in *The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation of the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*, ed. Reidar Thomte with Albert B. Anderson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980). Here Kierkegaard shows that, although we are objectively born into anxiety (or sin), we nevertheless subjectively contract and persist in anxiety in freedom. I would say the same of loneliness. Though born into it, in that spiritual awakening must be won in freedom, loneliness itself educates us to the fact that we abide in it through the failure to annul it. Hereafter cited as CA.
9. Self-realization proves a far more radical endeavor in self-trust than we ever imagined. Self-deprecation and diffidence, for example, are not, as commonly held, mere problems of ordinary confidence. One may lack confidence and self-esteem in psychological terms. But the acquisition of ordinary confidence never brings any person to overcome self-deprecation. This is what mid-life crisis teaches us, if we fail to learn it earlier. For many an accomplished woman mistakenly feels that she lacks confidence when, in point of fact, she knows herself to be quite capable of all the professional activities required of her and thus does not suffer, when she accomplishes this work, from any lack of ordinary confidence. No, the fact that she deprecates herself and leaves every performance with the nagging sense that something essential was missing points to the more radical difficulty of living true to self.
10. This is the force of Kierkegaard's equating the true self with spirit. The terror before this primitive datum, namely, that "I" as a psychological subject do not control

- spirit, leads us to regulate emotional and behavioral responses to reality. Yet in suppressing my initial reactions, often tethered to the psychological sense of self I hold, I deprive myself of the living occasion to dis-identify with my narrative of self and leap into accord with the true self. I deprive myself of the possibility of annulling that horrid worm that eats away at all my accomplishments, that fierce hunter that tracks me down and deprives me of rest: lonely distrust in self.
11. “Generally speaking, consciousness – that is, self-consciousness – is decisive with regard to self” (SUD, 29). Here “self-consciousness” means self-awareness, to become aware of the eternal in the self, whereas later I shall discuss “self-conscious” behavior in exactly the opposite way, not as the poised awareness of the true self but rather as an anxious collapse into a self-divided mode of being.
 12. It is, of course, possible to refuse a shift in consciousness in order to protect oneself from having to face the spiritual task latent therein, though clearly one can also accept a shift in worldly consciousness without consenting to spiritual awakening. Strictly speaking, loss of self-naivete is the intermediary between loss of naivete about the world and gain in awareness of the self before God. Here, too, though, one can allow loss of worldly naivete to penetrate self-consciousness only to the degree that one treats the self as a self before the world. That is, one can lose just enough naivete about oneself to become ethical in conventional terms but not enough to be measured by spirit. As great a degree of self-consciousness that such a fastidious relation to self can attain, it never decisively breaks with self-naivete until it stands before God. Only then does one see that one’s motives are utterly wanting and that one’s confusions rest upon defiance. Only then does one see the truth of one’s guilt and become no longer able to pawn off this truth as an “understandable sentiment” and all the like. Only then can one fish or cut bait with oneself. To break with self-naivete is, in truth, to adopt a radical change of attitude, never to entertain falsity in one’s heart. This transformation does not actually remove one from the ongoing reality of naivete, namely, that in every new relation one starts over in naivete. But such a newfound attitude prepares one to face every spiritual ordeal with the right focus and intent and to renounce falsity when it threatens to overtake one.
 13. See the discussion of innocence in CA, 35–38 and n. 8 above.
 14. Kierkegaard discusses the nature of being tested and advances an important distinction between being tested ethically and being put on trial spiritually in *Fear and Trembling*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 31. Cf. Hong’s important n. 2 on p. 341 and n. 14 on p. 342.
 15. Noteworthy, in this context, is that I do truly lose innocence when I fail to win it, though I do not lose it as something I once had in the past. I lose it as the essential possibility, hidden within every circumstance, that life offers me for potential realization in the present. Even though I lose it as a living possibility and not as a fixed trait I already had, I lose it as the only thing that truly mattered. I fall into a benighted operation out of self-interest. I lose truly.