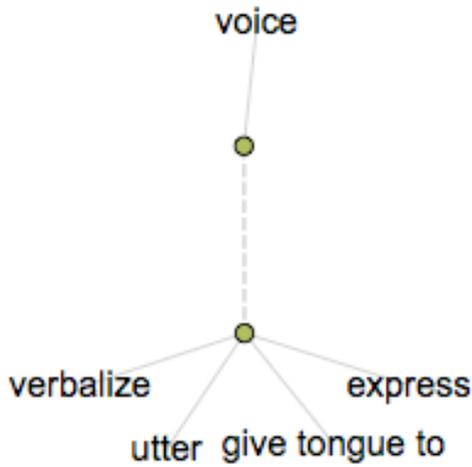


Month Five

Listening for the Voice of the Body



A Place for Images

In January of 1999, I flew out to San Francisco. I rode a bus over the Golden Gate Bridge through the rain to San Rafael, and then rode in a taxi to Santa Sabina, a retreat center that had once been a convent. My room was small and spare with a single bed and a wardrobe and a window looking out over the courtyard. When I opened the window it was raining still, a soft steady rain. The air smelled of eucalyptus. All of this just different enough from my ordinary life to make me understand that I was at the beginning of something new.

The first technique we learned at Santa Sabina was how to guide someone to conjure a healing place. The technique is deceptively simple. One person sits across from another. One is the guide and the other is the one-who-imagines. The guide invites the process of imagery to begin—she gets it started. But, unlike traditional kinds of hypnosis, or many forms of guided imagery, in *interactive* guided imagery the one-who-imagines chooses which images to summon. One person may want to go a beach in their imagination; another may be deathly afraid of the water. The one-who-imagines makes the choices about where to go. I liked this about the training very much. At its essence, interactive guided imagery offers a sense of invitation. One is free to go—or not. If one does choose to go, one chooses the place. The one-who-imagines is the one who holds the cards. This can offer a deep sense of safety, and a deep and growing trust in the process.

Imagine for a moment that I am the guide. I would tell you that you can begin, if you like, with a cleansing breath. This

is simply a deep inhalation, a pause—and then a long breath out. I'd suggest doing this twice—an inhalation, a pause, and then a long breath out. And then you can begin, very gradually, to bring your attention to your body. Your feet. Noticing what you feel there in your feet. The soles of your feet. Your toes. Noticing that, and then, if you like, inviting your feet to relax. And noticing what that feels like. . . Now your calves. Noticing what you feel there. Your thighs. Your hips. Inviting the muscles to relax. All the time noticing, paying attention. As you do so, you might begin to feel a flow of relaxation moving from your feet up into your legs, your hips, your belly, your chest. If you do, just notice it. Notice what happens as you bring your attention gradually up the body, imagining if you like that relaxation is flowing into your neck and shoulders, and down into your arms, and past your elbows, down into your hands, into the tips of your fingers, and your thumbs. Noticing the feeling in your hands, your arms, your shoulders, your neck, and up over the back of your head, your scalp, and down into your face, the small muscles around your eyes, the muscles in your jaw.

Whatever it is that begins to happen in your body, you just notice it, understanding that it doesn't really matter how deeply or how lightly you relax. In most cases, the body simply drops to a comfortable level of relaxation and begins imagining from that level of comfort. Most people end up closing their eyes, though it's not necessary, and some people manage to relax and imagine quite well with their eyes open.

When you begin to feel some sense—any sense at all—of relaxation you begin to see if this would be a good time to imagine a healing place. When you're ready you can begin to let yourself go there—a safe place, a healing place, a place where you can feel good in your skin. And when you begin to

get any sense of this place at all—anything at all—you can go ahead and begin to describe it. What do you notice?

And what else do you notice?

What else?

What color is the sky?

What about the temperature in this place?

Do you hear any sounds?

What are the smells?

And what else?

Speaking aloud about the experience of an imagined place can further deepen the sense of imagining. I learned this first in San Rafael. It surprised me a bit at the time, though now, in retrospect, it makes more sense. Speaking aloud the details of an imagined place tends to lead to an amplification of the details, an elaboration, and this, in turn, deepens the experience. Writing can also do this. In particular, writing can be a way to deepen imagery when you are working without a guide. You can close your eyes to imagine. And then you can open your eyes and begin to make notes. Often, as you begin to write, the writing itself will call up more details. Thus, it can both amplify the experience of the imagination, and it can also help to imprint the experience upon one's memory. This is similar to the way that writing a dream in the early morning can facilitate remembering. We often think, in the aftermath of a dream, particularly a powerful dream, that we couldn't possibly forget it. But if we don't write it down, so often we do forget. It vanishes like smoke.

Details

What place begins to emerge?

What details do you notice in this place?

This could be a place you've been before.

(A woman whose mother has recently died imagines the back yard at her childhood home. She can smell it, she says. Cherry blossoms and grape leaves and cedar. A grassy smell. There are peonies, she says. And her mother is there. They are drinking coffee together.)

Or a place you've never been but simply imagine.

(A woman whose father has died imagines that she waits for him on the shore. He comes toward her in a blue sailboat with a white sail and they take off together across the water and they talk and talk and she gets to ask him all the questions she's been wanting to ask him.)

What place do you begin to imagine?

What do you notice about this place?

What else?

And now that you've found this place, what would you most like to have happen here?

Choices

Once a place has been imagined, a number of things can happen there. It's one of the most important elements of the process—this sense of possibility.

What would you like to do now?

And then what?

And then?

One option is to invite an image to come for the body—or an image for a symptom that the body is experiencing.

Another option is to imagine an inner advisor—a kind of mentor or companion.

Can you imagine someone like this coming?

And then?

And what do you notice next?

And then what?

Immersion

I made two trips to California to train in imagery and both were extraordinary. As someone who has lived most of my life in the Midwestern United States, and then in the Southeast, I found Northern California breathtaking. The very air seemed different there—clearer, even intoxicating. After it rained you could walk out under the trees and there would be the smell of eucalyptus, and this added to the sense I began to have that this something I was experiencing in San Rafael was in the air itself.

I remember a writing teacher once saying that you can learn more in a writing workshop from other people's stories than you may ever be able to learn from your own. In San Rafael I learned an enormous amount from the others who were training with me. I was present as Native American elders were summoned, and Aslan, the lion from the Narnia books. I watched as a woman stepped inside the hollow of a giant redwood—and the tree spoke to her. Ancestors appeared. Sailboats. Lakes.

I wish I had taken better notes. I wish I could offer here a better sense of what it felt like to be immersed in those images.

When I returned from California I began to offer imagery work to those patients who seemed ready. These were often patients who were suffering from serious illness or who were especially adventurous—or, in most cases, both. They became my teachers. Andrew and Deanna were two such teachers. I offer a part of their imagery stories here in the interest of offering an experience of immersion in imagery—a sense of

what it looks like and feels like when it's working well. My intention here is to offer a couple blueprints of what is possible with healing imagery. And to use these blueprints to explore how imagery can give a voice—and language—to that for which it may be especially hard to find words. Fortunately, this time around, I took careful notes.

We Were Just Waiting for a Signal

Andrew's Imagery

Andrew was a tall, gentle man, fifty-five years old, entirely well, active, a geologist, a tennis player, a husband, a father of three sons, and then one summer he began to have abdominal pain. He lost weight. Not a lot, but enough so that he went to his doctor. Eventually he was referred for a colonoscopy. The colonoscopy revealed a tumor—cancerous. He went into the hospital for surgery. He seemed so well it was hard to believe he would not have the self-limiting kind of colon cancer, the good kind, a tumor that could simply be resected, and that would be the end of it.

Instead, the surgeon found that the cancer had spread to the liver—large tumors—taking up a full 85% of the liver. Andrew's prognosis became grave. I knew he and his family, though not well, because we both attended the local Quaker meeting. His wife, Sue Ann, had learned about some of the work I was beginning to do. At her suggestion, Andrew agreed to see me to explore the possibilities in healing imagery. The first time I met with him was in the hospital just after his surgery.

Because Andrew was a geologist, I suspected he might first appreciate a scientific explanation of imagery and mind-body medicine. I talked to him about peptides—molecules of information that travel throughout the body and communicate via receptors with the nervous system, the endocrine system, and the immune system. And how this last, the immune system, is thought to play a role in the body's effort to mount a response to cancer cells. I told him about early studies which suggested that guided imagery could

create measurable effects in immune cells. I told him about a book, *Molecules of Emotion* by Candace Pert, in which she asserts that when the molecules are allowed to flow unimpeded, the body can then begin to enter into a balanced or homeostatic state which is conducive to healing. I tried to explain what might be conducive to this flow. How it was like a state the body could sometimes get to in meditation. Or like when you're sitting in the quiet in Friends Meeting—those times when the quiet is especially deep. I explained that relaxation and imagery could be another way of getting there. I talked and talked—I remember a sense of some urgency. Then, mercifully, I stopped talking.

"It's like a quartz crystal," he said.

"Tell me."

So he told me—about the structure of a quartz crystal—how it's made up of only silicon and oxygen atoms and how they come together to form repeating tetrahedrons—a pattern. "There's beauty in it," he said. "Order."

Andrew was lying in a hospital bed, an IV dripping into his arm. He'd recently been told about these massive tumors. That he could summon an image of order here, in the midst of the chaos his life had been dropped into, seemed nothing short of astonishing. At the same time, it made perfect sense given his background. It was the beginning of something.

The next time I met with him was at his home. His wife, Sue Ann, met me at the door. She offered me a cup of tea and I accepted. Andrew settled into a recliner in the family room.

A copy of Candace Pert's *Molecules of Emotion* lay on the table next to him. He told me he'd read several chapters. "I buy it," he said. "What she's saying. Let's get started."

So we did. I began by leading Andrew through a relaxation of his body, starting at his feet and moving upward into his abdomen, his chest, his shoulders, down his arms, and up his neck and head, down into the muscles of his face. As he began to relax he tipped back in his recliner and closed his eyes. I invited him to imagine a flight of stairs. I suggested to him that there were ten steps and that I would begin with the number ten and then slowly count backward from ten as he moved down the steps. Ten. Down the first step. Nine. Down the next step. Eight. Seven. I invited him to imagine that at the bottom of the steps he would come to a place. Six. Five. A healing place. Four. A place he had been to before or perhaps a place that he had never been. Three. Two. A place that would be a good place to do healing work. One. Let yourself imagine this healing place, I told him, and when you begin to get any sense of it at all, just tell me what you notice.

He began to describe what he was imagining. *The Sargasso Sea. . . it's phosphorescent. . . it's night. . .I'm on the deck of the boat. . .*

It's night, I repeated. The Sargasso Sea. Phosphorescent. What else do you notice?

The lapping of the water. . . against the boat. . . and jellyfish. . .in the water. . . phosphorescent. . . No tensions here. No aggressions. It's relaxing. . . there's just the daily routine of scientific chores. . .making notes. . . the sailors. . . they're from Newfoundland. . . very simple. . . they like their mugs of

brew. . . they like their work. It's satisfying. . . none of the daily hassles here. . . sunrise and sunsets. . . nothing between you and the sun and the moon. . .

I waited. Is there anything else?

There's this vision of the horizon. . . 360 degrees. . . all the way around. . . nothing but water and sky. . . no obstruction.

I suggested he let himself just absorb that, take all of that in. Then I asked if there was anything he'd like to do in this place.

Just be here for a bit.

I suggested he take as long as he liked. And to simply let me know when he was ready to come back.

He seemed to drift, and for a few moments it seemed as if I drifted with him. I was aware, in the way I had been in California, of a palpable shift, a different sensation in my body, when images are summoned. After a few minutes he said was ready to return. I asked him if there was something he'd like to bring back with him from this place, so that he could remember it.

It's so soothing here. . . comfortable. I can close my eyes and think about it here. . . when I feel worried. . . I can remember all the life that was in the ocean. . . seaweed. . . jellyfish. . . flying fish. . .

You can remember, I said. I repeated his own words. The ocean. The seaweed. The flying fish. After he returned—opening his eyes and returning to the room—I learned that

this boat was one where he'd actually spent time, years ago, when he was a graduate student doing research, for months, on the Sargasso Sea.

A few days later Andrew's brother visited from Oregon. Andrew found photos that he'd taken from his time on the Sargasso Sea, and his brother took two of them and got them framed. Andrew set the pictures on a shelf in their family room where he could see them. The next week when I visited he told me that he often looked at the photos. "The place is becoming more and more powerful," he told me. "The ocean reflecting the sky and both of them filled with life."

On this visit, my second visit to his house, he told me he wanted to summon an image for his tumors. We talked for a few minutes about how he saw his tumors—what he saw in his mind. "They're light gray," he said, "with indistinct boundaries. Like alga cultures in a petri dish." He closed his eyes.

I should stop feeding them.

I repeated his words and asked if he knew how he could do that.

I'm not sure yet.

I suspected that he needed to imagine some sort of strategy. We'd spoken earlier about him trying to imagine not only his tumor but also his healing system. I asked him if now would be a good time to do this. He nodded. The first image that came to him for the healing system was, not surprisingly, that of cells in the immune system—white cells. He began to describe what he was seeing.

They look like Pac-Men. They've never had to deal with anything like this before. They're crashing into each other.

Something was beginning to happen here. I had a fleeting sense of it at the time, and then it became more apparent in hindsight. He was beginning to see the world from the cells' point of view. He could imagine their inexperience—the way they had never dealt before with anything of this magnitude. And their sense of being overwhelmed by it. He was beginning to experience empathy for his own cells—and thus for his own body.

Earlier, before he'd closed his eyes, he'd told me that one thing he wanted to do was to find some way to talk to his white cells, encourage them.

"Would now be a good time to talk to your white cells?" I asked him.

He nodded. *I'm telling them they have to work as a team, not panic.*

We both waited.

"You want them to be encouraged," I said. "Work as a team. Is there anything they would like to say back?"

They're saying if they could just see themselves doing some good it would help. They can see the cancer growing. They're eating each other. They want to make excuses for this. I understand that.

"Tell them you understand," I said.

This redirecting of conversation is something I'd learned in my imagery training—a redirecting of the conversation so that a person begins to practice talking *to* the body rather than *about* the body. It's an apparently simple, even subtle, shift, but it's also a potentially powerful one. It's a way of subtly shifting authority—shifting authorship. It's a way of showing respect for the body. Over and over, one remembers to draw it back into the conversation.

A minute passed, perhaps a little more.

I'm telling them I understand. And that all the rest of me is behind them, all of my body.

I watched and waited. (Sometimes it's hard to remember to watch and wait and not speak, but this was one of the other things I'd learned in my training, and it's turned out to be significant—the silence and the waiting. This can give images enough time and space so that the next thing can happen.)

The next thing that happened, after another few minutes passed, was that Andrew smiled. It was a quite wonderful smile, radiant. There had been, prior to this moment, a certain pressure—an understandable anxiety—particularly when he spoke of the cancer growing, the white cells eating each other as if in confusion. But now it was as if a shift had occurred. He began to tell me about this shift.

They're starting to eat the cancer—at the edge. Their mouths are down now. They're organized. . . yes. . . when one gets tired and full another one comes in. They're doing good, but they need more reinforcements. . . all right. . . now that they're being productive I can sense more coming. . . they're streaming in. . . like down a pneumatic tube. . . they're

serious. They seem to understand now, what needs to be done. . . yes. . . I'm going to tell my bones how healthy they are and how many more of these they can make.

At this point, and without any prompting, he spontaneously imagined going into his bone marrow—and the marrow white cells speaking to him.

We were just waiting for a signal. That's what they're telling me. They were just waiting. They thought they were all alone—the white cells—and they panicked. I can see that we need to talk more often."

I don't know that I can relate well enough a sense of how real this dialogue felt—and how spontaneous. Andrew was relaying to me, with little prompting, a dialogue between his conscious self and his body. Not a monologue—Andrew telling his body what it should do, what it must do. (Any adolescent could instruct us in just how much a lengthy monologue of shoulds is heard and appreciated.) Not a monologue then. Not an attempt to exert power *over* the body. But a dialogue. Andrew letting the body know what he wanted, what he needed, and the body responding in turn. The body talking back. The body beginning to express its own needs and desires. Andrew listening to those needs and desires. And, in the process—this perhaps as important as anything else—the body beginning to recognize that it was not alone.

When the Body Finds Language

There's a moment in healing, not always, but often enough to be worth mentioning—a moment when the body comes alive through language and begins to take on human characteristics. When poets make things come alive in this way it's called personification. Trees beckon. The wind whispers. But the body? Personification of the body? It seems a little strange if you start to think about it. As if the body weren't already alive?

Is the body alive?

At times we talk about the body like it's a machine. The heart is a pump. The kidney is a filter. The liver is malfunctioning. But then again, at other times, personification for the body finds its way into ordinary language. Stomachs grumble. Pain screams. Bones knit. One of my favorite examples of personification came out of one of the writing workshops at Cancer Services when Lydia wrote about her tailbone.

Though she'd been treated for breast cancer and had recently completed treatment, she'd begun to realize that cancer was not her most nagging problem. Here, she writes in response to an invitation to imagine healing.

Healing feels like freedom. Freedom to drive a long distance for a vacation without a second thought. Freedom to sit through a movie, engrossed in the movie, not reminded that my tailbone is talking to me. Freedom is a tailbone that minds its own business and just lets me damn well sit on it!

Lydia has a good sense of humor, a nice thing to be blessed with if you're also going to have an aching tailbone. But I think what I found especially funny—the thing that made me laugh aloud—was that I was recognizing something true, something I've noticed in myself. So often, when it gets down to it, what we want from the body is that it will simply mind its own business and do as instructed. Walk fast. Swim far. Put in a day's work without a headache or neck strain. Be sat upon without protest. Lose weight. Stop grumbling.

And so often the body seems to have its own agenda—an agenda at odds with what we want from it, at odds sometimes with what the doctor wants from it, at odds with what our boss wants, or our coach, our parents, spouse, children.

The body protests. It defies us. At other times the body simply seems to be in trouble. It has needs, even urgent needs, though it may be having trouble articulating them. Sometimes a leap occurs when we recognize this. The body is alive. Oh. The body has needs. . .

It's strange. Because in one sense, to speak of the body like this—as alive and separate—may seem like it would increase our own distance from the body. Like it would make the mind and body become even more separate. But here's the strangeness. I've noticed that those who begin to speak of the body in this way—as separate and alive—often become more in tune with the body rather than less. It's as if the separation between body and mind is already there, and has been there, in this culture at least, ever since Descartes or whoever else declared or discovered it so. To find language for this separation is simply, I suspect, to be honest about

the divide, and then, in turn, make the effort to call out across it.

That's what I see happen when a person finds his or her way to personification. It's as if they stand at the edge of the chasm. They call across. Or, sometimes, they beckon toward the body. They lean forward a little. They whisper. *Oh, Sweetie, what is it? What do you need?*

And then sometimes, though not in every case, the body finds language to respond—and the person is able to hear it.

Imagery can facilitate this language.

It can be so difficult, especially at times of stress and discomfort, to establish reliable communication with the body—to listen to the body and to get the body in turn to listen. We have, in certain circles, gotten the idea that it should be simple—this communication with the body—a simple matter of will and effort. But it's not really. Ordinary language, for instance, is likely to be ineffective. "Now body, haven't we already talked about this, you are to stop feeling this pain, this anxiety, this whatever. And right now. Are you listening to what I'm saying? I want you to just stop. Stop!" This is rarely effective. In fact, it's just about as effective as shouting at a body, or a child, or a spouse, at times of increased anxiety—"RELAX!"

Imagery, though, offers something different. The possibility of a genuine conversation. It's like meeting someone who speaks a different language, and then, rather than just continuing to speak one's own language, ever louder and more insistently, it's being willing at some point to make the effort to learn the other's language.

Be still.
Listen to the stones of the wall.
Be silent, they try
to speak your

name.
Listen
to the living walls.

Who are you?
Who
are you? Whose
silence are you?

from "In Silence" by Thomas Merton

Be still.
Listen to the murmuring of your body.
Be silent, it's trying
to tell you its

name.
Listen
to the living cells.

Who are you?
Who
are you? What
do you know
that I don't yet
know?

Hanging Out With Answers

Spiky Ball's Story

Deanna was one of my youngest patients. She was, during the time that I saw her, a college student, an extremely bright young woman with an excellent sense of humor and a rather serious case of fibromyalgia—one with several associated symptoms, and one that had already resulted in a number of hospitalizations. One morning, not long after I'd returned from my first trip to San Rafael, she asked about my trip and then got to the point. "Maybe you can take what you're learning in California and help me with this."

A challenge? In any case, it got my attention. She was ready. And so we began. The first image that came to Deanna was an image for a safe place—a room painted in deep colors—forest green and dark purple. We talked for a bit about what could happen in this room. Deanna liked the idea of inviting an inner advisor to accompany her. Almost immediately, another image appeared—a fuzzy and pulsating sphere of light that she thought might be an advisor. "I'm worried though," she said. "It doesn't have any hands. I'm not sure how it's going to communicate."

I suggested she simply wait and see what might happen. Deanna and I agreed that if the image wanted to communicate it would, in time, probably find a way to do so.

The next week Deanna came in and announced she had a beef with her inner advisor. She'd asked it to reveal more of itself, and she'd had a dream about her dog. "My dog eats paper," she said. "He is not going to be my inner advisor."

"All right," I said, after I'd finished laughing. "Fair enough."

She said she wanted to try again—to invite another inner advisor image. A good idea. We talked a bit. I reminded her about an inner advisor being an image that is usually thought of as both wise and loving. (You want an inner advisor to know things *and* care about you. Cold, angry mentors tend not to work so well.) I talked about how it was often hard though to predict what form an advisor might take. How for some people that might look like the Buddha, or Jesus, Gandalf, a wise grandmother, a ball of white light, but for someone else it might take on the form of a tree, or a squirrel, or a rock. We talked about how an inner advisor could take on a thousand different forms, and about the possibility of welcoming whatever it was that might be trying to come. (Although she of course had the final say and did not have to accept any advisors who ate paper.)

Something began to happen. A third image emerged. This time it announced itself first as a physical sensation—what's sometimes called a kinesthetic image. It happened as we were talking. She began having this unexpected and uncomfortable feeling—it seemed at first simply an interruption. I asked her to describe what she was experiencing. A shakiness in her throat, she said. Also in the back of her head and in her neck and across the top of her shoulders.

"It pisses me off," she said. "I wish I could understand it better. It's like there's an essence at the bottom of it."

I wasn't at all sure that this image that was coming was an image for an inner advisor. But something was happening. I

asked her to see if an image would come for this—for this essence at the bottom.

"It's trembling," she said. "It's about to explode."

The potential for explosion concerned me a bit. I'd witnessed a near-explosion in an imagery session in California and I didn't feel it had been a good thing for the person who experienced it. This was one of the more important lessons I'd learned in California—a respect for the power of the images. I knew better than to take images—or the emotions they were capable of stirring—lightly. I wanted to proceed with caution. Thus, I proposed a deal. I suggested that Deanna ask this thing that was trembling not to explode. But, in return, we would offer it something. If it would agree to reveal itself to us slowly and carefully then we would agree to attend to it. We would pay attention.

She was silent for a few moments. "It's grumbling," she said. "But it agreed. Actually, I'm kind of surprised it agreed."

She seemed relieved. And I certainly was. It felt as if some tension had been released. Something had passed. She told me she was going to have it—this it—go now to the room—the purple and green room that she had imagined before as a safe place.

"All right," I said. That sounded good.

It's interesting to me now to recognize how instinctively she was doing something healing. She was taking an image with a potential for explosion and she was bringing it to a contained place of safety. Yes. Good. This was one of those moments when my role as a guide seemed very clear. I was only to

intervene if I thought a person might be in some danger. And I needed simply to assent when a person was doing something that made good healing sense.

It's also interesting that as Deanna brought this image to safety she began to see it more clearly. "It looks kind of like an instrument of torture with spikes around it," she said.

This was beginning to sound to me more and more like it could be an image for her illness. And a bit of a treacherous image as well. But if inviting this image to come had been a risk, then the risk seemed now to have passed.

"It's going into the room where the sphere of light is," she said. "It's settling in."

"Good," I said. "Yes. I'm glad."

I once dreamed, back when I was practicing medicine, that with every patient who came to see me I received a large Lego set. The idea, as I remember it, was the possibility of bringing a number of Lego sets together and, by doing so, contributing to the building of a new and elaborate structure, not unlike the giant model of the Statue of Liberty that used to show up with some frequency in my son's old Lego magazines.

Each person brings something to the model. And I think that one thing Deanna brought (at least one thing I was able to recognize during the time I worked with her) has to do with this importance of welcoming—with greeting whatever it is that arises in the body and then inviting it in, however reluctant we may be to do so. *Yes, you, even you, though you look for all the world like an instrument of torture. Yes, you.*

You've been banging on the door forever. Come on in and we'll give this a chance, we'll see what happens. Come on. Yes, I'm serious about this. Come on in.

What happened after Deanna let *it* in? Well, first she got it all settled into its niche in the green and purple room. And then it came out of its room.

This happened some days later. She was somewhere out in the world (I can't remember where now) and the same physical sensation emerged—the pain and shakiness. But now she knew its name—IT—and she asked IT to go back to its room. And it did!

"I can't believe," she said, "that it listened to me."

I think the image listened to her because she treated it with respect. She made a request. She didn't try to obliterate it. She didn't ask it to self-destruct. She didn't scold it or punish it or humiliate it. Rather, she asked of this image something very simple, and something, it turned out, which it was willing to do—go to a safe place with deep and beautiful colors. This rather like asking a fretful child to go wait in her room for a bit rather than lashing out at her. And Deanna was making this request of the image accompanied by a promise, the same kind of promise that children, in fact, almost universally respond to quite positively. She was promising to pay attention.

What happened next?

The image emerged again. It emerged this time at a revealing moment. Deanna was with a young woman about her own age who had multiple sclerosis, someone Deanna

described as a rock. A stoic. A trooper. This trooper triggered in Deanna the sensation of shakiness—which she recognized as the image. IT. After being with the woman, Deanna found herself flooded with questions. Am I a wimp for paying attention to my illness? Am I supposed to be a trooper like her? (She has multiple sclerosis, for God's sake.) Am I supposed to try to ignore the pain? Ignore my body? Just carry on?

The next week Deanna told me the image had a new name. Spiky Ball. (I loved that he had a name now.) When she shared these questions that had emerged we both agreed these might be good questions to ask Spiky Ball. Deanna initiated a conversation.

Is it okay to be different? Is it okay not to be a trooper?

A pause.

Deep down I know that it is.

Another pause.

Yes. Spiky Ball likes that. He likes it that I know that. He's going back to his room.

Another pause.

Maybe he has something good to offer.

I feel like I should draw a light bulb here, place blinking lights. For me, this was a moment of illumination. The difficult image—the instrument of torture—the image for

the illness—might, if welcomed—it might just have something good to offer.

(But, and I don't think I can stress this strongly enough, an alliance like this can never be imposed. I would never casually suggest to someone that an illness has an up side, or that an illness could be a teacher, particularly at a moment when that illness is causing suffering. I would never do that. Pain hurts. To tell someone that their pain holds hidden benefit is too easy, too glib, even presumptuous, like telling someone whose child has died that all of this is God's will, or that the child has gone to a better place. I do not presume to fathom any god's will. I can't know what a particular illness, or loss, might hold for another person. I can, at times, have hunches, guesses. But I can't know. Each person has to make their own way—their own way to finding meaning, their own way to constructing narrative. What I can do—what we can all do at times for each other—is to help hold a narrative, and honor it, once it begins to emerge.)

"Is there anything else?" I asked her.

I'm just getting this sense—over and over—everything that's happening is really okay—it's actually good—it's affirming everything—Spiky Ball is affirming everything, even tears.

Such kindness. It was as if Spiky Ball—this instrument of torture!—was, with just a modicum of attention and respect, transforming in such a way that it was now capable of kindness. And this was happening rather rapidly.

Another pause.

It's being nice, which I'm in love with.

*Spiky Ball is encouraging ease. And I just remembered—
disease is dis-ease.*

*Spiky Ball is changing. It doesn't shake anymore like it's
about to explode. It can float. It moves sort of like the ball
of light. It still has edges but they're not as shiny and
they're not as sharp. It's more like a massage ball now than
an instrument of torture.*

Spiky Ball was changing.

The next week, Deanna told me of several conversations she'd had with Spiky Ball since our last meeting. When she spoke of Spiky Ball, she sounded as if she were talking about an old friend, perhaps like one of those friends whom we've just met but soon upon meeting it's as if we've known them for a very long time. It was like that. Certainly, she knew a lot more about this Spiky Ball than I did, which seemed just how it should be.

"I realize Spiky Ball hangs out with answers," she said.

"Spiky Ball's pretty happy now," she said. "Spikes are just a part of his personality—like freckles."

She said, "I didn't know I had so many answers inside."

I ended up seeing Deanna over a period of nearly two years. During this time she went through a number of changes. Some of these were measurable changes in her body—a decrease in the titer of an autoimmune antibody that had been abnormally elevated, an improvement in a liver function test, a significant improvement in physical findings on exam

when she returned to her primary care physician. During this time she was also receiving acupuncture and massage as well as attending to nutrition and exercise, and so it's difficult to discern what caused these changes. My hunch—that all of it was working in concert—imagery and massage and Chinese medicine, nutrition and exercise. One morning in my office, she asked a question about what her body needed and she invited images to come and she got clear visual images of foods. Broccoli. Tomatoes. And the images prompted her in turn to eat those particular foods. This one particular instance when two elements—imagery and nutrition—were working in concert.

In addition to measurable physical changes, Deanna went through a kind of transformation that was more difficult to quantify. Or even to name. But then I suppose that she herself named it: "I didn't know I had so many answers inside."

Deanna discovered she had answers inside. But what she also came to discover, over a period of months, was that these answers were often mediated by the body. Her body, and the signals it sent—simple signals like hunger, pain, ease—had good counsel to offer. Her body had good counsel to offer about rest, nutrition, exercise, and also about choices in relationships and work. I worked with Deanna for nearly two years and she gradually came to realize that what her body really wanted was to be in Colorado. Just before she moved out there I had a dream in which I was a foreign language teacher and she was my student and she'd learned everything I had to teach and now she was going on to find a new teacher. This seemed fitting.

By all accounts, Deanna has done exceedingly well. The first follow-up I had with her she was home visiting her parents, making plans to spend a year in Nepal or some such place. The next time I heard from her was a postcard from Morocco. She was studying Arabic. I recently got this wonderful email from her in which I learned she's studying to be a nurse practitioner.

I often think of things we talked about and worked on and regularly depend on the inner resources you helped me unearth. Especially now that I work with patients of my own, even in a student role, I am humbled and honored to pull from my *own* experiences as a patient. And I know they can tell. Because I could tell. You helped me do the work that ultimately got me to not just accept myself, but redefine my norms and ideas of health and be much more open to my own strengths and what I can offer.

I am humbled and honored as well. I'm also waiting for her to write her book.

Be still.
Listen to the murmuring of your body.
Be silent, it's trying
to tell you its

name.
Listen
to the living cells.

Who are you?
Who
are you? What
do I know
that I don't yet
know?