



Sidebar D: **Childhood Spirituality**

Mark Jefferson gave a long sidebar on the general Integral Center view of childhood spirituality. Some of it was over my head, but here's the general outlines (from Kim's notes with my commentary). All I kept thinking was, I'm 20 years old, almost 21, and I don't remember ever having a childhood mystical experience, because... Wait a minute, that's not quite true. There was

"Mr. Jefferson?" a student called out. "I wonder if you could comment on the lead article in a recent issue of *JTP*. I know that you and many of your colleagues believe that Transpersonal Psychology is dead, and that...."

"We're not happy about that, incidentally," Jefferson interrupted. "It's just empirically the case that the Left-Hand psychologies—subjective and intersubjective—humanistic, existential, transpersonal, introspective, interpretive, you name it—have been all but eliminated from serious, mainstream, academic discourse by either a flatland postmodernism or a scientific materialism, particularly cognitive neuroscience—in other words, the fashionable Right-Hand approaches have all but eliminated most Left-Hand approaches. *JTP*, for example, has an individual circulation of around 900 people; with its publication of 'A New Birth in Freedom,' it appears to have aligned itself with the green meme and a type of boomeritis new paradigm, so we suspect its influence will continue to decline. For those interested, I recommend you look at Joan Hazelton's commentary on boomeritis in its transpersonal form (see especially Seminar 8 for its theoretical contours, and **Sidebar H**: Boomeritis Buddhism, for Joan's little diatribe)."

Jefferson paused, looked around the audience. “As I said, we’re not happy about the decline of any of the Left-Hand psychologies—humanistic, existential, interpretive, introspective—but it’s an uncontested trend. We believe that only an integral psychology—one that explicitly includes the Right-Hand approaches along with the Left-Hand approaches (which is what an ‘all-quadrant, all-level’ model attempts)—can reverse that trend and rescue interior psychologies by including them with a coherent account of their inextricable ties with exterior approaches.” [See Appendix A—‘The Death of Psychology and the Birth of the Integral’—in ‘A Summary of My Psychological Model,’ posted on this site.]

The student, somewhat angry, seemed momentarily sidetracked, then continued. “Right, well, I was going to say..., the lead article in the recent *JTP* is called ‘Childhood Spirituality,’ by Michael Piechowski. It purports to represent the view of the author of *Integral Psychology*, who is one of your colleagues here at IC, but as far as I can tell, it presents almost the opposite of his actual view. Could you comment on this?”

Jefferson grimaced momentarily, then grinned. “Okay, son. This is not my idea of fun, but I will use the occasion to try to summarize the general IC view on childhood spirituality. “Let’s get the unpleasant stuff out of the way immediately. Piechowski makes several claims about the model presented in *Integral Psychology* and its view of childhood spirituality. All of his claims, as you say, are almost the opposite of what that book actually says. For example, Piechowski claims that *Integral Psychology* says that children cannot have any spiritual or mystical experiences. He says this in no uncertain terms: *Integral Psychology* ‘argued that...young children cannot have mystical experiences.’ Actually, that book makes it very clear that ALL of the four great types of mystical experiences—gross unity (nature mysticism), subtle unity (deity mysticism), causal unity (formless mysticism), and nondual unity (integral mysticism)—CAN OCCUR AT ANY STAGE OF DEVELOPMENT, including those of bardo, prenatal, perinatal, infancy, and childhood. The reason is that all four of those experiences are variations on the four great states of consciousness: waking, dreaming, sleeping, and nondual ever-present awareness, all

four of which are present in humans even in the prenatal period, and certainly in infancy and childhood.

“*Integral Psychology* is extremely clear on that point. As only one quote from that book: ‘The importance of these three or four natural states is that every human being, at no matter what stage or structure or level of development, *has available the general spectrum of consciousness*—ego to soul to spirit—at least as temporary states, for the simple reason that all humans wake, dream, and sleep. In a *peak experience* (a temporary altered state), a person can briefly experience, while awake, any of the natural states of psychic, subtle, causal, or nondual awareness, and these often result in direct *spiritual experiences*. *Peak experiences can occur to individuals at almost any stage of development*. The notion, then, that spiritual and transpersonal states are available only at the higher stages of development is quite incorrect’ (emphasis in the original).

“Contrary to everything the book says, Piechowski then claims that *Integral Psychology* asserts that children cannot have spiritual and transpersonal states. This is *very weird*.” Jefferson paced the stage, grinning and grimaces at turns.

“Piechowski later tries to qualify this blatant misrepresentation with a subtler misrepresentation: *Integral Psychology*, he asserts, claims that children can have spiritual experiences but that they are only those ‘representing the lower levels of spiritual development.’ That, at best, is a half-truth. As we just saw, children can have peak experiences of all four the great mystical states, *lowest to highest*. But when it comes to those *aspects* of spirituality that show *development*, then yes, there is often room for improvement in children’s spirituality, as the word ‘development’ implies—and as *Piechowski’s own evidence demonstrates (see below)*. But that doesn’t negate the authenticity of the experiences themselves.

“What *Integral Psychology* did was several things: first of all, it gave five common definitions of spirituality; it suggested that all five of them are important and need to be included in any integral model of spirituality—all five of them represent different aspects of

spirituality, as it were. It then pointed out that by two of the definitions of spirituality, there is little if any childhood spirituality; but by three definitions of spirituality, there are indeed various types of childhood spirituality. The book then offered a model that included all five of those aspects. Piechowski seized on one of the five definitions and then condemned the book as a whole for not including the others. Good grief.

“So let us try it this way, my friends. Since Piechowski did not report what the book said, let me just summarize its major points vis a vis childhood spirituality. The fact is, the various examples of childhood spirituality offered by Piechowski’s article actually *support* the integral model in every major respect, which is what makes his critique so weird.”

Jefferson laughed easily, continued pacing the stage.

“The model presented in *Integral Psychology* tries to balance several conflicting claims, all of which have considerable supporting evidence for them. You can see this in the book’s discussion of the five major aspects of spirituality. (Incidentally, there is a short summary of that book called ‘A Summary of My Psychological Model’ [posted on this site], which you might find helpful. Joan Hazelton also gives an in-depth commentary on transpersonal and spiritual states in the early stages of development—see **Sidebar G: States and Stages.**)

“For our purposes, we can focus on two of the most important of the five aspects of spirituality: namely, *states* of consciousness and *stages* of consciousness.

“To begin with, the integral model—as I mentioned above—maintains that the four great *states* of consciousness—which are the basis of four major types of mysticism or spiritual experiences—can be experienced at virtually ANY *stage* of development, prenatal to adulthood to bardo (or the near-death and afterlife states). Thus, a child can have an *authentic experience* of any of the great mystical states—gross, subtle, causal, or nondual. (Technical point: the intersection of the gross and subtle we call the ‘psychic,’ so we prefer to call the four great mystical states psychic, subtle, causal, and nondual. Joan Hazelton discusses these important points in her lecture on states and stages [see **Sidebar G.**])

“Would you like to see examples of all four of those mystical experiences in children? Look no further than Piechowski’s article, which gives excellent examples of all four of them. He then inexplicably claims that the model in *Integral Psychology* denies all four of them, whereas to date it is the only coherent model that can fully accommodate them.” Jefferson shook his head and continued pacing the stage.

“In any event, in order to support the model offered in *Integral Psychology*, we are looking for examples, in children, of altered states or peak experiences of nature mysticism (gross unity), deity mysticism (subtle unity), formless mysticism (causal unity), and nondual mysticism (integral). Let’s take them in that order, since Piechowski is kind enough to give us evidence of all four.

“Here, from Piechowski’s article, is a terrific example of nature mysticism, or oneness with entire gross realm, experienced by a 4-year old girl:

I found myself standing at the beach, alone. The sea touched the sky. Breathing with the waves, I entered their rhythm. Suddenly there was a channeling of energy: the sun, the wind, the sea were going right through me. A door opened, and I became the sun, the wind, and the sea. There was no “I” anymore. “I” had merged with everything else. All sensory perceptions had become one. Sound, smell, taste, touch, shape—all melted into a brilliant light. The pulsing energy went right through me, and I was part of this energy.

“That’s really beautiful, isn’t it? Okay, here’s a good example of a subtle-realm experience. Remember that where *nature mysticism* tends to deal with the world that can be seen with the senses, *subtle mysticism* deals with realms, states, or ‘worlds’ that cannot be seen with the empirical senses and are not normally found in nature—they are ‘trans-natural’ in that sense, often involving God or some type of Deity form(s), dakinis, subtle lights and energies, dream and visionary states, and so on.

One day, when I was about 7, I was outside playing happily in the late afternoon. I looked toward the sun. Clouds were slowly floating across it, and the rays beaming out from behind them were glorious. I became utterly entranced with the whole vision. I had the intense feeling that God was somehow speaking to me through this scene. At that instant, I just knew that God was in everything and everything was a part of God. I felt awed by the whole experience, but never told anyone about it.

“Causal-realm spirituality tends to have two major ‘themes,’ if we can call them that. The basic theme is an ‘experience’ of pure formlessness—Emptiness, the Void, the limitless Ground, the vast Unmanifest expanse.... Sometimes this is experienced as the formless Witness or pure Self that transcends all and is detached from all, although it reflects whatever arises with equanimity. But in any event, the basic tone of causal mysticism is that of vast Emptiness prior to any manifest world at all. This is from a girl who was 8 or 9 at the time:

During time alone in my room, I would often ‘tumble back’ into another reality—focusing on what was here before the universe or anything else existed. I would tumble further and further into this secure void, relishing the feeling of quiet detachment, almost floating. I never told anyone of these episodes. Somehow I knew that my tumbling was not an ordinary thought process but a special experience that occurred only when I was alone for a while. I never actually thought about space, time, or the universe’s creation. My tumbling back experiences were much stronger and involved richer sensations than mere thinking.

“Nondual or integral mysticism is much, much rarer than any of the three previous types, simply because it includes all three. Also, it is often mistaken for type #1 or gross-realm unity, because it involves a oneness with nature—but it *also* involves a oneness with subtle and causal, which nature mysticism, by definition, does not. Nondual mystical experiences usually begin with a strong experience of formlessness (type #3) that eventually spills into all experienced worlds, spills into infinity, so that there is a *radical union of Emptiness and all Form*. I have found only a handful of believable childhood experiences of this, but enough to convince me that it can happen in extremely gifted children. Piechowski gives one example that verges on the shift from formless Emptiness to Nondual:

I was playing alone in bushes around our house on a summer afternoon. I first noticed that I could think about anything I wanted, and no one knew what it was. As I conjured up memories to think about, I realized that I could go back only a short distance in time before I found myself beyond all memories and facing a total blankness.

As I faced the blankness in my mind’s eye, I gradually became aware that my identity transcended all these memories: that *‘I’ had no form or name, no history*, and filled this blankness or emptiness as an immensity extending to infinity. This awesome feeling lasted for several minutes, and then I became aware of myself as a little boy peering out of the bushes.

“Okay, my friends, that’s the first part of the integral model: namely, that these three or four great *states* (psychic, subtle, causal, nondual) can be experienced at virtually any *stage* of development, because individuals at every stage wake, dream, and sleep. And thus individuals at virtually any stage of development can have a peak experience of nature mysticism, deity mysticism, formless mysticism, or nondual. Piechowski’s article, which claims integral psychology denies this, actually gives excellent supporting evidence for it.

“Now here’s the second part we are discussing, and this is where it gets really interesting—and this is where poor Piechowski gets completely confused.” Jefferson laughed good-naturedly and took several light skips across the stage.

“Although individuals can have a peak experience of these four great states at any stage of their development, they will tend to *interpret* those experiences through the lenses of the stages that they have thus far developed. In a sense it’s paradoxical, because what we are saying is that you can have a fully authentic *state* experience, but it can only be *expressed* through the *stages* of development that you actually have. Joan Hazelton gives an extensive explanation of this in her lecture on States and Stages, so you might check that if you’re interested [see **Sidebar G**].

“The point is simply that most childhood spiritual experiences, in addition to being experiences of authentic states, become subjected to the parameters of their present stage of development. What does that actually mean? At least three things.

“First, it means that most childhood spiritual experiences will tend to be temporary experiences, because development has not occurred to the point where these direct experiences can be continued in an unbroken fashion. This does not dilute their authenticity, it only means that they are passing, not permanent. Indeed, *every one of the experiences reported by Piechowski are temporary*—they only occur, as one person put it, ‘for a few minutes.’

“Of course, the memory of these experiences often lasts a lifetime, and so do some of the positive effects, but rarely the actual states themselves. Most of the respondents say things like, ‘More than thirty years later I recall these episodes with great fondness.’ Episodes is right; they come, they go. When Piechowski reports that these experiences are almost always temporary, passing, altered states, he implies that he is being open and honest, but when *Integral Psychology* reports the same thing, Piechowski says this is being dismissive and pejorative. Hmmm...” Jefferson again laughed good-naturedly, dancing along the edge of the stage.

“I myself have not yet seen a credible example—and, as far as I can tell, neither Piechowski nor any of the research he quotes gives an example—of a child being installed in direct cosmic consciousness for 24 hours a day, which is one of the common characteristics of Nondual mysticism when it shifts from a temporary state to a permanent trait—which appears to happen only in adult development (and which Charles Alexander and his research team called ‘subject permanence’; see *One Taste*). So the first point, uncontested by Piechowski, is that most of these childhood experiences themselves are temporary, even if their effects might be lasting. This is one of the main points that the *Integral Psychology* model makes—and Piechowski confirms.

“Second, this means that, no matter how truly authentic the childhood spiritual experience can be, *further development will usually increase the depth of the spiritual experience*. Piechowski excoriates *Integral Psychology* for making this claim, but once again his own evidence, brandished with much fanfare, dramatically proves our point. As he reports: ‘For 13% of the respondents, their childhood experience was more powerful than later adult experiences; for 17%, childhood and adult experiences were about equal; and for the large majority (70%) their adult experiences grew in strength over the childhood ones.’

“So in 70% of the cases, further development *deepened* the spiritual experience. The integral model accounts for this by pointing out that, although authentic *state* experiences are available at any stage, as the *stages* themselves continue to develop—moving generally from egocentric to ethnocentric to worldcentric—then (1) the authentic spiritual *states* have more room to expand and resonate, because the various *means of expression*—that is, the *stages* of cognitive, affective, moral, and so on—are expanding in their capacity to communicate and resonate these states; and (2) as development continues, these temporary states can therefore increasingly become permanent traits (i.e., continuously accessible stages of consciousness). Everything in the Piechowski article supports all of these claims.

“Any questions?”

“You said there were three items implied by the state/stage integration. You only gave two,” Kim spoke up in a loud voice.

“Oh, right. The third is..., what was the third? Oh yes, it’s related to the second. Namely, even though the childhood experiences of these three or four great states are *authentic state experiences*, they will be molded by the stages that are present. This means that often—not always, because there are of course exceptions to every rule—but often this means that the childhood experiences have a distinctly monological tone to them. For example, you find few childhood experiences giving rise to intensely dialogical or moral goals—e.g., you find few children spontaneously coming up with a bodhisattva vow, or vowing to make it their lifetime goal to liberate all sentient beings by helping them achieve these wonderful spiritual experiences—there are very few dialogical, postconventional, worldcentric morality impulses in children. Moral impulses, yes, but postconventional moral impulses, not too many. Almost all of Piechowski’s examples are monological; so are Armstrong’s. In fact, in the entire literature on childhood spirituality, there’s not more than a handful of those that aren’t, again showing that extremely gifted children can develop quite quickly and remarkably, but for the most part, that aspect is not experienced by most children because the appropriate stages of development and means of expression have not matured. The integral model simply takes that into account and thus gives a more rounded, balanced picture.

“Let me add one more nuance. Of great interest, naturally, is the small percentage of cases (13%) where the childhood experience is more powerful than the adulthood, since in 70% of the cases it’s the other way around. But there is also the generally reported fact that, in many cases, spiritual experiences can tend to taper off after childhood or adolescence. None of these cases contradict the primary claim that only in adulthood, with advanced development, can these four great states become permanent traits or stages; but it does point to an all-too-common fact: people in adulthood often abandon an interest in, and experience of, the Sacred. Why?

“The integral model suggests several reasons, which naturally vary from person to person. One is that, as the various developmental stages unfold, all sorts of repressions, dissociations, and alienations can set in at those stages. Piechowski ridicules this idea, but his discussion shows that he understands it about as well as he understands the rest of the integral model.” Jefferson laughed easily, looked out at the audience. “All it really means is that some people, as they grew older, become callous, closed, shut down. And spirituality is often one of the casualties, yes?”

“May I ask just a few short follow-up questions?” the student who started this discussion called out.

“Why sure, son, fire away.”

“Piechowski quotes *Integral Psychology* as saying that ‘people who say that children are in touch with spiritual realities have difficulty producing credible and coherent examples.’ Is that right, and if so, doesn’t that show that *Integral Psychology* denied any sort of childhood spirituality?”

Jefferson laughed. “Piechowski is quoting the book when it is referring to ONE of the FIVE definitions or aspects of spirituality, namely, frontal attitude, which refers to a developmental line that, by definition, is limited and poorly developed in childhood, which is why there is no evidence for it reported by Piechowski or by anybody else. But that aspect does not refer to the other aspects that can be authentically present in childhood and that we discussed above. Next?”

“Here’s the oddest part,” the same student said. “Piechowski states that one of the few models that can account for childhood spirituality is Armstrong’s model and that the integral psychology model cannot. Yet *Integral Psychology* explicitly *endorses* the Armstrong model for this aspect of spirituality. What’s going on?”

Jefferson laughed. “Good question, son. But it’s even odder. The Armstrong model involves what we call the ‘trailing clouds of glory.’ One of my colleagues actually presented that model in a book called *The Atman Project*. Armstrong arrived at the notion

independently, and we're more than glad to share the credit because he did a terrific job of elucidating it, but at the very least any informed critic would realize that we definitely subscribe to that idea. I won't go further into the 'trailing clouds of glory' idea, but it is extensively discussed in *The Eye of Spirit* and summarized in *Integral Psychology*.

"Anyway, let's just notice that Piechowski's article and all the examples that he gives actually confirm the tenets of the model presented in *Integral Psychology*. That neither the author of the article nor the editor of *JTP* is familiar with the integral model is a bit disappointing. At the same time, I'm afraid I would have to emphasize that Piechowski's article only covers ONE of the five major aspects of spirituality, so as an article on childhood spirituality, it is woefully inadequate and even distorting, and it needs to be supplemented with the other aspects of the integral model in order to present a more comprehensive picture of childhood spirituality. Anyway, more questions?" Jefferson smiled warmly, looked around the audience.

"But that is really problematic!" Kim yelled out, which jolted me with alarm, even panic.

"Jesus, Kim, what are you doing? Don't make any trouble, *please*."

"Why does that happen?"

"What happen?" Jefferson squinted into the audience.

"Charles—Dr. Morin—says that the theorists at Integral Center are often having their works misrepresented by critics, and you just gave a classic example: all the assertions that article makes about the integral model are either totally wrong or half wrong. How do you account for that? Why does that happen? And why do you let them get away with it?"

My eyes shot wide open, my jaw headed south. "Jesus, Kim, what on earth are you doing? Would you listen to yourself?"

"Wowie," Jefferson laughed. "Okay, ma'am, let's start with this one," Jefferson grinned. "Why is the integral model so often misrepresented? That's your question, or one of them? Yes, well, I think there are several reasons. Reason number one, and by the far the

biggest, is the sheer volume of the material. It's just too much. The guy who wrote *Integral Psychology* wrote 20 other books; if you don't read pretty much all of them—some of them at least twice—I guarantee that you will misrepresent many of the central issues. Also, the nutcase who wrote SES hides a lot of his more sophisticated stuff in hundreds of pages of endnotes—hell, I haven't even read all of them. Toss in the works of other integral thinkers, from Mike Murphy to Roger Walsh to Allan Combs to Frances Vaughan to Sean Hargens to Fred Kofman to Karin Swann... well, toss in the works of the thousands of friends and members of Integral Center, and you've got your work cut out for you. Most of our critics read one or two books, and they get so excited by the ideas—in both a positive and negative sense—that they feel compelled to respond, and so they often write up these elaborate critiques, not realizing that many of their objections have been answered in other books. It's very frustrating for the critics, and of course it's frustrating for us.”

I leaned over to Kim. “Okay, that was nice, you've got something to whisper in Charley's ear, now hush, would you?”

“That's it? That's the main reason? I thought you would come up with some sort of disgusting pathology on the part of the walnut-brained, whiney-assed weasels that criticize positions without understanding them first.”

“*Kim!*” I begged. “Please, a little more sensitivity! Have you no tolerance at all?”

“I actually went to the Los Angeles Museum of Tolerance, but I got in a fight.”

“Why doesn't that surprise me?”

“Good grief, ma'am,” Jefferson laughed. “Hey... is that you, Kim?”

“Hi, Mark.”

“I thought that was you. Okay, then, what the heck. Let me make very clear what I am talking about here. There is something we could call ‘straight criticism,’ and it goes like this: Dr. Whatnot's article says A, B, and C, and we will offer evidence that some or all of those items are wrong. Okay? That's one form of criticism, a simple straightforward criticism. Then there is something called ‘interpretive criticism,’ which goes like this: Dr.

Whatnot's article explicitly says A, B, and C; but we believe that what he is *really* saying or *implicitly* saying is X, Y, and Z—and X, Y, and Z are very problematic, even wrong, perhaps even morally rotten. Is that clear, Kim?"

"Yes, straight criticism simply criticizes what the person said; interpretive criticism criticizes what their position seems to imply."

"That's right. Both of them are valid forms of criticism, but both of them require that the critics show that they can accurately state the person's real position in the first place. If they cannot accurately state A, B, and C—in a way that the author himself would agree with—then the rest of their criticism—straight or interpretive—can be ignored. Is that also clear?"

"Crystal."

"So, just to make you happy, I would say that the critics who fail to first accurately state A, B, and C, before they criticize them, might be incompetent, they might be lazy, they might be playing 'king of the hill'—who knows?"

"Can't you think of any more reasons?"

I gaped at her. "Kim, what are you doing?!"

"Oh, well, the last genuine reason—and certainly one of the most important—that critics might disagree with us is that they are right and we are wrong!" He laughed and slapped his thigh. "And we're wrong often enough, I assure you."

"Care to elaborate on the incompetence charge?" Kim yelled out.

Jefferson took a deep breath. "Oh, Kim, good grief. Integral studies have a hard time getting a hearing for many reasons. One of the most common is that any sort of systematic thinking threatens some people, and understandably so. Systematic constructions can indeed be marginalizing, oppressive, stultifying—representing an attempt to lasso the Mystery and Emptiness of existence and saddle it with conceptual boxes. Not good, obviously." Jefferson rubbed his eyes, turned back toward the podium.

“But on the other hand, we are always faced with two basic options in how we approach philosophy: we can assume that the universe is holistic, or we can assume that it is broken, fragmented, disrupted. It hangs together, or it hangs separately. You’ll notice that Paul Ray’s research showed that the vast majority of even the green-meme Cultural Creatives believe that the universe is an undivided Wholeness. And there is much truth to that Wholeness, I believe.

“But not absolute truth. That is, the integral model that we have proposed has two basic ‘parts,’ if you will, corresponding to the ‘two truths’ of many of the great wisdom traditions: namely, there is relative truth, and there is ultimate or nondual truth. The relative truth applies to the manifest, finite realm—things like: water is composed of oxygen and hydrogen, the earth rotates around the sun, somebody called Tolstoy wrote something called *War and Peace*, and so on. Those relative truths can be decided by techniques in the relative realm—empirical science, for example, or hermeneutics.

“But then there is ultimate or nondual truth, and here it gets much trickier. Because ultimate truth is *not* a proposition about Reality—it is NOT a statement like, ‘There is one ultimate Truth’; nor is it a statement like, ‘There are a multitude of irreducible, pluralistic truths.’ It is NOT a statement like, ‘Reality is a seamless whole of inseparable relationships.’ In fact, ultimate reality is NOT One, it is not Many; it is not Whole, it is not pluralistic; it is not holistic, it is not analytic. All of those ideas make sense only in terms of their opposites, but ultimate reality is nondual—it is ‘not two, not one.’

“Ultimate reality is not an idea, philosophy, experience, proposition, technique, or perspective. It is rather a profound realization, in the deepest seat of consciousness, that opens one to a direct *identity* with that ultimate nondual Estate, a Reality that in itself can therefore *never* be seen as an object and hence remains purest Mystery shining in the Cloud of Unknowing. WHAT is seen, known, and realized cannot be stated other than that—it cannot be put into words unless one has had the realization itself. It can be shown, not said. It can be danced, not spoken. It can be felt, not seen. It is an infinite atmosphere, not a

finite object. This is why, if we must call it something, we call it Emptiness. Or Mystery. Or the Groundless Ground. Or the Unqualifiable. But we do NOT call it ‘one truth,’ or ‘absolute truth,’ or anything like that at all—because all of those are merely dualistic words.”

Jefferson’s ebony skin was softly backlit by the diffuse stage lamps; he seemed to be suspended eerily in midair, his voice falling on us all.

“However, in the finite, manifest realm—this manifest universe—the world of Form—well, then we are faced with that earlier fundamental question: do we picture this world of Form as being holistic or fragmented? You see, we do *not* face that question with the ultimate or the nondual, because Emptiness is neither One nor Many nor both nor neither—those are all words, so just throw them all away, I promise you! But in the world of Form, that is a good question: is the manifest world of Form a world of holism or world of fragments?

“Well, obviously, we at IC think that manifest world hangs together somehow. We believe that the manifest, *relative* world is a world that includes wholeness. A little more technically, we believe that the manifest, relative world is composed of holons, or whole/parts—that is, wholes that are parts of other wholes, indefinitely. For example, a whole atom is part of a whole molecule, a whole molecule is part of a whole cell, a whole cell is part of a whole organism, and so on.

“But notice: holons apply only to the relative, finite, manifest world. The world of shadows. They do not apply to ultimate truth. They don’t not apply either—remember, in the face of Mystery, silence ultimately alone will do: you simply cannot categorize, in ANY way, that which is radically Unqualifiable. You know that Mystery by being Emptiness, not by conceptualizing it, naming it, labeling it. You certainly don’t maintain that it is absolute or that it is pluralistic, and so on.

“So those are the two ‘wings’ of the integral approach: relative and ultimate. Of course, we believe that in actuality, Emptiness and Form, ultimate and relative, are nondual or ‘not two, not one’—they are truly ‘integral.’

“So that is one of the first things that our critics often miss. Because we at IC have written so much about the relative, manifest realm, some critics imagine that is our ultimate stance, but that is only our best guess about the relative world. Our ‘ultimate’ stance is Emptiness, known not by a translative integral philosophy but by a transformation in consciousness. Critics like Kaisa Puhakka are always saying, ‘These big integral schemes try to replace the Mystery of Emptiness, so let’s dance instead!’ Well, of course, let’s dance! Yet not instead of, but along side of. Surely we must do both/and, not either/or, yes? Can’t we *both* dance and theorize? The nondual approach does both, happily.”

“But why do people mistrust the integral approach to even the relative world?” Kim simply would not shut up.

“Well, as we were saying, any sort of systematic thinking threatens some people, and understandably so, because it can do just what some critics claim: box the infinite Mystery in finite tombs. But once you have that elemental realization—it’s sort of Mysticism 101—then you need to take the *next step* and get very serious about just how to understand the relative, manifest world in relative, manifest terms (in addition to abiding as the timeless Mystery of it all). And if the relative world really is holistic, then you better get very serious about constructing a holistic, integral philosophy.

“Katigiri Roshi wrote two books, the titles of which really say it all. The first book was *Returning to Silence*. In other words, returning to Mystery, returning to Emptiness. This really needs to be the *first step* in any philosophy, integral or pluralistic or materialistic. Even as we construct integral maps that attempt to honor the holistic nature of manifestation, we need always to remember that Mystery. This is why one of our IC authors, going all the way back to *The Atman Project*, wrote this as the last line of the introduction to that book: ‘What follows is the Zen dust you should shake from your sandals, and it is finally *a lie* in the face of that Mystery which only alone is.’ Every one of his books since then has a line like that—pointing out that everything that follows is a lie, or applies only to the

relative, manifest, ultimately illusory realm—and I think every one of our critics keep forgetting it!” he laughed.

“But the point: once we release into the Emptiness of it all—once we Return to Silence—then *You Have to Say Something*. That is the title of Katigiri’s second book. Obviously we return to Silence; in a certain sense, that’s the easy part. The hard part is, once you dance and deny and deconstruct away, *now you must say something positive*. You must take a stand. You must contribute something other than irony to the world. You can’t just dance the night away, you must also get serious. So what will you say? You must say something! Will it be fragmented, isolated, pluralistically torn and tortured, seared and shattered in dissolving winds that scatter all to dust? Or will it be holistic, healing, uniting, integral?

“Emptiness is neither one nor many, neither integral nor pluralistic—we already know that! We are now talking about relative truth, about how to categorize the finite, relative, manifest world in a way that (1) most accurately honors the holistic fabric of the manifest world; and (2) reminds us always that, once we have done that—and even while we are doing that—we must also Return to Silence.”

Jefferson smiled gently, moved to the edge of the stage, looked out at us all. “I submit that an integral approach does that more felicitously than any other approach, because it honors and embraces both Emptiness and Form, Mystery and Manifestation, Silence and Speech, Dancing and Discourse.

“Now of course it is very hard work attempting to outline the holistic webs of relationships that constitute the manifest world. We try to do this in as inclusive a way as possible by using ‘all quadrants, all levels, all lines, all states, all types,’ and so on, but we’re always improving on that in dialogue with responsible criticism. But those who merely take pot shots at such approaches, without themselves contributing to a further increase in holistic knowledge—well, this strikes me as not much more than intellectual cowardice in the face of a difficult task.”

Jefferson smiled. “There, Kim, I said something nasty about some of our critics. Are we happy?”

“Getting there,” Kim grinned.

“Kim, please, I beg you, let it go at that, *please*. Arguments like this make me really uncomfortable.”

“Stuff it, nancy boy. So, Mr. Jefferson, it’s really boomeritis isn’t it? These particular critics are caught in boomeritis?”

“Don’t make ‘boomeritis’ a catch-all dirty word for anybody you disagree with, Kim. It’s a very specific syndrome with very specific attributes. But it would be very odd if a few critics didn’t suffer from it, since it hits almost all of us at one time or another.”

“So...,” Kim egged him on.

“So, the reason that boomeritis reacts so negatively to holistic systems of any sort—and would react negatively to a system even if it was ultimate truth itself!—is that, yes, systems hem me in, and the call of boomeritis is that ‘Nobody tells me what to do!’ The reason that boomeritis loves pluralism is that pluralism allows the ego to embrace any belief it wants, because no view is supposed to be better or worse—and thus, under pandemic pluralism, nobody can challenge the rule of the ego and its desires, its demands, its worldviews—any dirty word you want, Kim,” he said, smiling warmly. “So boomeritis sees in pluralism a new birth in freedom—the freedom of the big fat ego to do as it likes,” he grinned.

“Hey, good one!” Kim yelled.

Jefferson smiled. “I might have to talk to Charles about you.” He paused, still chuckling. “So let’s wrap up this fun-filled excursion into critics by saying this: I personally have found most criticism to be extremely helpful. In fact, many of the models at IC have gone through at least four major phases because extensive criticism was listened to with respect and therefore incorporated. But I also find that many critics of the integral approach tend to give very either/or reasons for their disapproval. These critics seem to me, anyway,

to be bound to a rather rigid either/or mentality. They think you must either experience Emptiness, or try to present a holistic picture of the manifest world, but somehow you can't do both. They think that childhood spirituality must either be an authentic spirituality, or it has some limitations—they can't seem to allow that both of those might be true. They want reality to be either universal or pluralistic, they can't seem to get it that manifest relativity has both lots of universals and lots of pluralism and ultimate reality is neither. The integral approach is, top to bottom, a radically inclusive approach, and those who insist on either/or will therefore come at us rather fiercely.”

“So, last question. Why do you let these critics get away with it?” Kim seemed very satisfied with that one; I sat wild-eyed and agitated.

“Well frankly, we're not. After 25 years of turning the other cheek, we are getting, well, a bit cheeky about it. We've started a 'Critics Watch' section on Shambhala.com. Please feel free to submit examples if you like. We're going to do the unthinkable and hold these critics responsible for their own words. As you might say, way cool, huh?”

“Awesome!” is all she said.

I rubbed my eyes, shook my head. None of this was really making any sense to me. And one thing in particular was not computing at all.

“Kim, did you notice that they won't say the name of the person who wrote *Integral Psychology*? Or *The Eye of Spirit*? Or *The Atman Project*? Why won't they mention the author's name? They never say his name.”

“Sure they do,” Kim responded. “You're just not listening, as usual. His name is... um, let's see, I know the guy. He's a good friend of Charles. Jeez, he was one of the founders of IC. I can see him as clearly as I can see you sitting right here. What the hell is his name? It's so weird. Well, anyway, I'll think of it. Or ask Stuart Davis, he knows him really well.”

“Okay.” But that was just the last weird item in a totally weird day. Holons, holons... I wonder what it all really means? And would I ever understand it? And even if I did, would it really matter?

