

As I consider the prospect of teaching, I realize how much I miss college, being a student. There was always a schedule. A map to follow, a plan and a goal. Rules. Places to be. A community. Not to mention the excitement of learning, the constant exploration and discovery.

It wasn't always easy. Every day was a challenge. Classes, papers, complicated texts, the concepts we were expected to master. Professor Russell, my philosophy teacher and mentor, made me think critically, made me question everything I thought I knew. What the textbooks said. What my parents told me. What everyone accepted as fact.

Russell was tall and lean, not in an obviously athletic way, but sturdy and erect, like a tree, and he sometimes pulled his longish brown hair into a ponytail. He almost always wore a corduroy sport coat and a skinny tie, as if he was mocking the dress code for faculty at our pretentious little college with these thrift-store finds.

One day in my Intro to Philosophy class he asked us: "If I say I know something, does that mean the thing I say I know is true?"

Blank faces were the norm in that class. If the other kids were like me, they'd never been asked to really think before. I wanted to shake my head, but because no one else was moving, I held still.

"If the thing is demonstrably false," Russell persisted, "then it isn't true, and how can it then be said to be known?" He paused, greeted with more silence. "Aren't all statements subject to doubt on some level? If a statement might not be true, how can I say I know it? In essence, then, nothing can be known. Put another way, my certainty that a statement is true does not, logically, make it so."

A prankster in the back row called out, “Will this be on the final?” Laughter erupted, and Professor Russell smiled.

“You can bet on it,” he said.

I may believe something to be true because it’s what I have been taught. But if I am not certain that the thing is true, this is an acknowledgment that the thing may be false. And if I acknowledge that the thing may be false—a story my father has told me, for example, or my Sunday school teacher, or a memory—I cannot be said to know it.

Bottom line: Belief is not knowledge; truth lies somewhere beyond belief.

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One of the neighborhood kids when I was growing up was convinced he was adopted. Jimmy’s worry could have been the result of seeds planted by an older sister, which is a bit of torture siblings have always employed, but as a casual observer, a ten-year-old at that, I thought there was good reason to believe it. He had blond hair, the parents were both dark; his eyes were blue, theirs were brown; they both had prominent noses, but Jimmy’s was petite, or at least unobtrusive; they both loved music, but Jimmy was tone deaf. He didn’t fit. It made sense that he was adopted.

No such doubts for me. Although as a boy I had little in common with my father in the way of hobbies or interests (I didn’t enjoy golf or bowling, and those were pretty much the only things that got my father out of the house besides work), my brother Q and I both looked like

him. Q, especially, had the same square jaw and ears that were small and high on his head. My features, though still angular, were slightly watered-down versions, as if the gene pool had been diluted some by the time I came around, but the resemblance was plain enough in my eyes and hair, the sharp nose.

Those familial likenesses aside, however, there's one physical trait that's all my own: I have only four toes on each foot. I possess my full complement of fingers and, as far as I know, the requisite number of bones, muscles, organs, and brain cells, but the little toe on each side is nothing more than a nub, a useless protuberance, perpetually red, like an enormous, angry zit. One of the clearest memories I have of my childhood is my father's insistence that I wear something on my feet while in his presence—socks, shoes, slippers. I didn't understand why, when Q and Sally-Ann were both allowed to run barefoot inside and out, but to mollify my father I would comply, or avoid him altogether.

When I was three or four, I realized what the problem was. I had learned to count, and at the swimming club we belonged to I noticed Q's feet.

“One, two, three, four, five,” I said, pointing at each toe, probably the upper limit for me at the time. And then I looked at my own foot. “One, two, three, four.” I looked back at Q's foot and then at my own, counting again. I looked at Sally-Ann's feet and counted. I counted my mother's toes. Uncle Scotty's toes. And then I began to cry.

“Crybaby,” Q said. “It's just a stupid toe.”

But it wasn't the missing toes I was crying about. I had finally understood why my father hated me.

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Professor Russell asked our class, “What is consciousness?”

As usual, he was met with puzzled looks, even from those of us who had read the assigned material for the day.

“Is it separate from the body, an energy that exists apart from the corporeal self?” he asked. He’d started the class behind a podium, but now moved toward us, pacing the length of the front row while he posed his questions. “Or is consciousness merely cognitive awareness, the recognition that a thing exists? How, in that case, does consciousness relate to the thing of which it is aware? Are their existences separate? Or does one depend on the other?”

I raised my hand and Russell nodded. “I like the sense of belonging that unified consciousness implies,” I said. “If consciousness exists at all, it makes us almost immortal, doesn’t it? As long as *it* exists, we exist.”

The entire class laughed, but Russell nodded vigorously. “Absolutely,” he said. “In fact, in some religions, that’s where the idea of heaven comes from, the notion that when we die we merely move to a different realm within the universal consciousness.”

“So how do we find this consciousness?” asked a guy in the back of the room. “How do we see what’s inside it?” He was laughing as he asked the question, which encouraged more laughter from the class.

“All you have to do is travel and keep your eyes open,” Russell said. “That’s the key to the locked door of consciousness.”

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The dream has come to me from time to time over the years, and now it's back. The face I see in the dream is indistinct, more shadow than snapshot, and I don't know who it is. Sometimes I think it must be my grandmother, who, when she lived with us, occasionally came into my bedroom at night to check on me, to convince herself that I was still breathing. The face could be hers. But now, because of the note I found, because of that picture I saw at Dad's, I have an idea that the face belongs to Uncle Scotty. The nose, the chin. The soft eyes. Is it Scotty's face in the dream? Or maybe it isn't a dream at all. A memory?

Uncle Scotty owned a tiny car. A Corvair? Kharman Ghia? I was too young to distinguish. Whatever it was, it had been my grandfather's, passed to Scotty when the old man's stroke confined him to bed. Or Uncle Scotty had saved for it, working summers at the country club, as a caddie, or a lifeguard, or...I have all those memories, stories I was told, different versions of the same story. They can't all be true.

He comes back to me in bursts, like film clips. We went for rides in that car, radio blasting rock and roll, coasting down steep Southern Indiana hills, long straightaways where Uncle Scotty's hands flew free, raised in surrender to gravity, laughter howling behind us like exhaust. Is this my memory? Or my imagination? It seems so vivid, more than a movie playing in my head. I can feel the wind in my eyes, hear the laughter, smell the newmown hay.

He was athletic, I think. Musical. I remember a thin voice, singing along with the radio. I remember a guitar he played for us sometimes. And I remember delicate fingers that spread like a spider's legs, as light to the touch.

Touch? I remember his touch. On my leg. My arm. My back. Is it Scotty's touch I remember? Is that the dream?

Then he went away. He was gone. The car, the music, the laughter. Gone.

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After our classroom discussion of consciousness, I visited Professor Russell in his office, wanting to know more. He pointed to the chair across from his desk. I sat and my gaze took in the towering bookshelf behind him. Hegel, Schopenhauer, Ayer, all the philosophers we were reading in our classes. Kant, Hume, Husserl.

“Did you have a question, Ollie?”

I laughed, because for a moment I'd forgotten why I'd come, and I was startled to hear him speak my name. But now I looked at him.

“Right. I was wondering, is it possible to alter consciousness?” I asked.

“That depends on what you mean.” He fiddled with the knot of his skinny tie, and I thought my question had made him nervous.

“I guess what I want to know is, does consciousness include awareness of the past?”

There was that dream I'd had all my life, the memory that didn't make sense. Had something happened to me? Who belonged to that face? “Like, is there a way to recover lost memories?”

“Maybe,” he said. We'd wandered far from the point he'd made in class and he was clearly hesitant to continue.

“How?” It wasn’t like me to be pushy, but I needed to know.

He twisted in his chair, slowly—reluctantly, I thought—and pulled a book from the shelf behind him, sliding it across the desk to me: *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind* by Shunryu Suzuki. I knew something about Buddhism, of course. I’d read *Siddhartha* in high school, like everyone else, and my comparative religions class had covered the basics of the different branches, Hinayana, Mahayana, and various schools within them, like Zen, and... That’s about all I remembered.

“Meditation?” I asked, doubtful. “Isn’t that just sitting and thinking?”

He laughed. “Not exactly, Ollie. More like not thinking.”

Puzzled, I nudged the book back toward him.

“There isn’t another way?”

His eyes were burning through me, and I wondered what nerve I’d struck. Had I broken some rule of student-teacher etiquette?

Just then, commotion broke out in the hall outside his office, a couple of boisterous students, what sounded like an argument, playful shouting, but it showed no signs of abating. He got up, closed the door, and returned to his seat.

“There might be other ways,” he said.

Was I supposed to understand what he was talking about without him saying the words? Because I didn’t. My face must have given me away.

“There are,” he began, looking over his shoulder as if to be sure we were still alone, “pharmaceutical options.”

“You mean drugs?” I asked.

Keep your voice down, his expression begged. “Drugs?” I repeated, almost whispering.

He shrugged, as if giving in to the inevitable, now that the topic had been broached. Still, I could see that he weighed how much to tell me.

“Psilocybin, LSD, peyote,” he said. He turned back to his bookshelf and pulled down another volume, this one worn and dog-eared: *The Teachings of Don Juan* by Carlos Castaneda.

I’d heard of Castaneda but hadn’t seen his books. I opened it, flipped through the dog-eared pages, and began reading about a drug-induced trance. Now I understood his hesitancy. I looked at Professor Russell, probably with a mix of shock and admiration.

“Does it work?” I asked.

He reached across the desk, took back both the books, and shelved them. He returned his burning gaze to me and said, “Yes.”

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I sit on the floor of my bedroom in Mom’s house and I close my eyes, recalling what Professor Russell taught me about meditation. I want to summon the face from the dream, but all I can see is young Scotty from the photograph. Tall and handsome, grinning.

Was it Scotty in the dream? Was it Scotty who came to me in the night?