

Chapter One

Statistics tell us, in that heartless way they have, that at the present time approximately half of all marriages in the U.S. end in divorce. As you read this, think how that impacts on you. Possibly you have already been through your own divorce or watched your parents do so, or your children. The same statistics inform us that approximately one in three adults will seek psychological counseling for personal distress, and that one in eight will spend time in residential hospitals or homes. Wherever you are, look around. If you are in a public building, a school or library, just try and imagine every eighth person in a psychiatric ward. How many people live in your building? How many are in your family? Which one of your friends is going to suffer? It's pretty sobering.

On the other side of the discussion is the fact that the U.S. currently has just over a million citizens in "Correctional Supervision" - which translates as "prison". The prison population is going up, and the rehabilitation programs are being cut, so most of these convicts will emerge (and 97% of them do hit the streets again) largely unchanged. Or, at least, unchanged for the better. Recidivism - the rate at which convicts are reincarcerated - seems to run at over 70%. One could conclude that our society, the envy of the free world, is extremely

successful at producing criminals and mental distress. Certainly we produce more of them than people with doctoral degrees.

And that is why you need this book. This one, yes, and others like it, too. We are living in very stressful times and my aim is to share with you tactics that can help in preserving your sanity. Now please don't read that as a guarantee. There can be no guarantees here simply because it is not up to me to keep you sane. It is up to you. With the help of these pages, however, I can tell you that you can begin a process that will certainly lead to a better understanding of yourself. Consider this a handbook for dealing with the problems and challenges the world will hurl at you, the sorts of things that might otherwise throw you hopelessly off balance.

Let me give you an example: about fifteen years ago, a friend was hospitalized after attempting to kill herself. When I spoke with her I asked her what the doctors had said. She replied that they had diagnosed her as manic-depressive with paranoid tendencies. She and I talked for a while and then she said to me, "But what does that mean, manic-depressive?" The label was nothing that made sense to her. It didn't make sense to me, either. Not surprisingly, it didn't help her to deal with the pain she was going through.

It was thinking about this incident that led me to one of the central thoughts that makes me write this. The doctors, in their wisdom, had labeled her in a way which made sense to them, but not to her. The only problem was that it was her mental distress that needed calming, not theirs. My own thought on this matter is that

it does not really matter if the men with initials after their names can give a diagnosis. What has to happen is that the patient has to have a language that allows him or her to understand his or her own distress, in order to move through it. The locus of understanding needs to be returned to the patient.

Another example may clarify this. I was speaking with a student one day who confided to me that three years of therapy had not helped. "It never did anything for me," he grumbled. I was hardly surprised, since the very words he used suggested that he should be passive, that everything should be done for him. It really doesn't work that way. Mental health is something we do for ourselves, and no one else can do it for us.

So why don't we do it?

I suggest it is because we have forgotten how.

What does that mean?

Put simply, most people don't know how they are because they are not sure who they are, or what they are feeling.

Even the social chit-chat of every day undermines the idea. "How are you today?" "Fine! And you?" "Fine..." We've all seen people who claim to be 'fine' as their eyelids swell with unshed tears, their hands twist tortuously, and their entire demeanor signals pain and distress. The message that we send to each other, daily, is that everything is 'fine', and if it isn't, then we have to pretend that it is. Under such circumstances, we are not encouraged to look inwards. Ours is an outward-directed society, and we tend to judge each other by what we have rather than who we are. Even therapists tend to do it: "He has a big

client base," "She has two books out." Rarely do we say that someone is happy as a first line of description.

Our estrangement from ourselves should not surprise us if we take a brief survey of our lives. When a child is born it is greeted with delight, usually, and its needs are attended to. Notice that the infant is not shy about expressing its needs. If the child is hungry, a piercing yell comes forth until the need is met. Likewise, damp diapers, heat, cold, and stomach-ache, all produce a lusty complaint, and all are met with understanding and care. When the child begins to speak there is great excitement around those first words. All this is supportive and helpful as the child comes to terms with the world. Now skip ahead a few years to say fifth grade. The experience there is far more likely to be akin to that I had at school:

"Sit down and shut up."

"Speak only when you are spoken to."

And at my grandparents' home the dictum was the old Victorian idea: "Children should be seen and not heard."

I am not being deliberately insensitive to the education system here when I suggest that most students expect to have teachers talk at them for large portions of the time. What could be a better example than the undergraduate at a major university who walks into a class of five hundred other students in a lecture hall? Or the visiting professor whose prepared speech is seen on closed circuit television?

Again and again the message is: sit down and shut up.

I would contend that for many people thinking is something that takes place during discussion, as they talk. Sometimes it is only as one begins to express one's ideas that one knows exactly what they are. How many times have we found ourselves in a discussion saying words to the effect that, "What I really meant to say is...?" Discussion can bring clarity, an exchange of ideas, a change of viewpoint. It does not occur if we sit down and shut up.

And that is, incidentally, exactly what I've been doing to you, here in this book. I've been filling the page with words, forcing you to be passive. See how easy it is to slip into that mode? Comfortable, too. When I have presented this information before groups in a class-room setting, it has always astonished me how easily those people slipped into being passive, listening, taking a few notes, being slightly bored. And yet the real materials of the class or seminar, the core of our reason for being there is they, themselves. We're all so used to not speaking our thoughts that we sometimes don't even know what they are any more.

What we have to do now is ask ourselves a few questions about who we are. Take a piece of paper, or write directly in this book. Take the time you need, and answer the questions in as many different ways as you can. For example, **who am I?** can be answered as:

I am a ...male/female

I am a ...student/teacher/accountant

I am ... 20/60/45 years old

I am ... ambitious/timid/lonely.

And so on.

Do about ten of these.

When you have done that, try answering the question in its negative form.

I am not...

Write about a dozen of these.

Now take a look at your answers. Do you need to add anything? Go ahead. Add it. When you are finished look at the order in which you wrote your comments. Could you put beside each one a number, starting with 1, showing which is the most important to you? Take a look at the whole list. What does it tell you about you? Did you put your job as a higher priority than your personal connections? An example would be:

I am a Company Director (1)

I am a mother (2)

If, as in this example, your job rates more highly than your family commitments, what does that say about the balance in your life? Are there any tensions attached to this? I would imagine there would be plenty. The order in which your preferences occur

is neither better nor worse than anyone else's, but it is yours, and deserves to be looked at.

Did you find as you went down the list that you became more personal or less so? Many people find they mention the less acknowledged part of themselves later, so "aspiring poet" may appear way down the list, although this is something the individual may value more highly than an activity that takes more time such as "P.T.A. Board Member". What are the items on your list that fit this category? What did you forget to mention? Why?

One man I worked with forgot to mention he was married since, he said, it was "just a fact of life, like my height or weight". It was a fascinating commentary upon his personal life, and later on as we worked together more fully, he began to see that his oversight pointed to an area of growing potential conflict, since his wife felt entirely abandoned by him. Another person, a woman, mentioned in her list, "I am beautiful, inside." Since she was extremely obese, the comment was both hopeful (she valued her spiritual qualities) and evasive of the fact that she was a compulsive eater, which she preferred to overlook.

In the list that begins, 'I am not' we can expect to see some comments about the more precise nature of the psyche. Sometimes people are not very kind to themselves here. "I am not easy to live with," wrote one woman, "I am not as mean as people think I am," wrote another. In each case the comment cries out to be examined further. If you feel you are not easy to live with, then it probably needs to be talked about, written about, looked at.

And this is where you have to work. Write about it. It can be in a journal or on an old envelope, but keep it safe, for later reference. Talk about it to others, certainly. But write about it, you must.

Now taking a few steps back, what have we been doing? First of all, I placed you, the reader, in a submissive position by bombarding you with facts. I did this deliberately, because that is what a reader expects, for the most part, and it is certainly what groups that assemble together for self-exploration need, at least at first. In the group setting, as I give my opening statements, the participants in the group have their first chance to look at each other, size each other up, and size me up, as well. How threatening is this going to be, they ask themselves? The more I talk, the more they relax, confident that the center of emphasis is not themselves. For a moment they can all forget that what brought them to the room was the need to look inward, at themselves, that most daunting of all tasks.

When I draw attention to my ruse, it is not to negate the value of the information that has gone before. Quite to the contrary. My intention is merely to remind the participants of the real reason that brought us all there. The effect of this approach can be very satisfactory, for the individuals each know in their unconscious exactly why they are all there, and when reminded, tend to focus very sharply indeed on the activity at hand. You also, as reader, know why you picked up this book. You know you have work you need to do on yourself, but it is work

after all, and it's always pleasurable to pretend it's not urgent, isn't it? I for one am no stranger to the delights of procrastination.

Once the mind is focused it is always a good idea to ask the most basic of questions, since they are often the most important. The question **who am I?** and the response, **I am...** tends to lead the participant into a discovery of the social roles he or she fulfills, often unwillingly. Every answer can convey a drama. For instance, one woman wrote: "I am nursemaid to my sick mother (unpaid)". Behind the statement one can immediately sense the feeling of being undervalued, "(unpaid)", as well as the issues of time, work and money that were involved, all of which seemed to indicate that a sense of dutiful love was crushing her. Talking about it with the group she wept at her dilemma, expressing her pain openly for the first time.

The reader working alone may not be able to experience that group sharing in the same way, which is why the writing of the emerging feelings can be so valuable. Since it is literally a sharing of one's self with one's self, it is an opportunity to meet oneself.

In the group setting, I have always found this exercise a remarkable way for group members to introduce themselves. The usual formal statements that I encourage group members to make round the room when we start tend to go like this:

"Hi, I'm Bill and I want to learn about myself."

After the exercise, however, all group members have a much more powerful sense of who Bill is, even if they forgot what his

name was immediately after he originally spoke. In this way a group is able to make the acquaintance of its individual members, and also identify, without delay, some of the major issues that the individuals may be facing. This is vital, since I have participated in some groups that have spent several weeks failing to admit that there were any compelling reasons for gathering, and that has merely led to raised tensions and diminished expectations. Finally, the exercise lets group members know which others in the group have similar problems and concerns. This is important since those people will be the future gold-mines of information and insight for all. The person who really knows what child abuse is will be the person who was its victim. That person will be able to share wisdom with other victims, and in turn, reassure them that they are not alone. Knowing one is not alone is, in itself, empowering, quite apart from the added bonus of being able to share perceptions, and compare doubts and fears.

At the most basic level, such an exercise publicly acknowledges and reminds the individuals of the work to be done, and that it is ready to be tackled.

The reader, at this stage, may feel at a disadvantage with no group to fall back on. Don't despair. You may want to select someone with whom you can work together. It can even be done by writing to each other, so miles of distance are no problem. I have even come across students of mine who have worked in this way on e-mail. In many ways that can be a highly satisfactory way of working, although I believe each person should keep a copy of what

he or she writes, for future reference. After all, our memories are fickle, and writing down what we think, or committing our ideas to tape, can be a valuable record. If you are reading this and feel the references to groups to be irksome, please consider for a moment why I have put them there. They are a form of feedback, telling you what you may expect, and letting you know that this is no sham. We are dealing with real pain and distress here.

Remember, sharing with a group may be exhilarating, terrifying, and cathartic, but the same effect can be achieved by the individual reader, you, writing about these things. As I wrote at the start, it is not vitally important that others understand you. Human beings are so complex that complete understanding is never really possible. What is important is that you begin to understand yourself. Until you do, you are like a person wandering around with a blindfold. Since you do not know which direction you need to go in, no one direction is any more important than any other.

The next topic that I'd like to deal with is **Naming**. Naming can be very important, since often our most frightening experiences are those which we cannot name. Hollywood has cashed in on this for decades. They Came From Outer Space, by its very indefiniteness, thrilled audiences in the 1950s. Who or what is 'they' and what is 'outer space' anyway? Other horror movie titles include The Thing, Alien 1,2, and 3, It, and even Samuel Beckett used the same idea for The Unnameable.

I'll give another example. If I'm driving along and my car starts to make unpleasant noises from under the hood, I worry. If I don't know what it is, I worry more. When I go to my mechanic and he says: "It's the hydraulic valve lifters," I know immediately that he knows what it is, and that it can be remedied if only I give him enough money. If, however, he shakes his head and tells me he has no idea what it is, he's never heard a sound like that before, and that it sounds serious, then my anxiety soars. I may lose sleep, even. In each case the final cost may be exactly the same, but in the second instance the uncertainty gives my fears a chance to make my life even more difficult.

Or let's take a more personal example. I feel ill and I go to the doctor. If he tells me I have 'flu and I should go to bed and take fluids, then I do as he says. I don't feel any better, and I don't have any medication, but after all, it's only 'flu and I'll have to get through it. If he looks at me and says he can't find anything wrong with me, then I'm likely to worry. My symptoms have not changed, but my mind imagines all sorts of dire things, and before I know it, I'm worried about cancer or worse. The fact that there is no label for me to feel secure with is what keeps me, and anyone else for that matter, anxious. To return to Hollywood, there's no logical reason why They Came From Outer Space should not be a hilarious comedy, involving delightful, intelligent extra-terrestrials who only want to make the world a better place to live in. If you ever see the movie, of course, you'll see that this is not quite the case.

Naming, then, helps us control information and feel secure with it. We quantify quality in the process. This is an essential aspect of therapy, since therapists often work with things that are not easy to categorize at first. Nightmares and dreams have many contradictory aspects, and only after a considerable number of dreams have been shared by client and therapist can one hope to come to any deep understanding of their meaning or significance. Yet nightmares can wake us, screaming, though we barely recall them, and dreams can haunt us for years as we try to puzzle them out. Part of the therapeutic process, in my view, has to be the naming of the event that gives rise to the fears and behaviors that are often the acting out of what the individual is afraid to acknowledge. An example may help here. I worked with one young man who had very wealthy parents who were also somewhat distant. Every Christmas and birthday they would give him a very expensive present. These he would immediately break, lose or smash, often 'accidentally'. When he 'accidentally' smashed the motorcycle they had given him one year, he was lucky to escape with only minor injuries. The next action was that he would then go and steal exactly the same item that had been destroyed. When we met he had an impressive juvenile criminal record, because he always seemed to get caught whenever he stole something. What he was acting out, in this way, was the fact that he wanted the things he was given, but he did not want his parents to give him these things. What he wanted from them was human love, attention, and recognition, not lavish gifts. The only way he could get attention, however, was by getting into

trouble. That merely gave him negative attention, but what the heck, it was better than nothing, right? It was only when he was able to articulate the feeling that he both loved and resented his parents, that he needed and hated them, that he was able to stop the behavior. It was a long struggle to bring him to that 'naming' process.

Here, then, is a naming exercise you can do now. First, write your name.

Now, write your name as you would on a check.

Follow that with the signature you would use on a job application.

Below that sign your name as it would appear on a letter to your parents, or your older relatives.

Now, write your name as you would write it on a note to a loved one, or a friend your own age, or your best friend from college, say.

Now write it as you would to the significant other person in your life.

Now write out your full name any way you wish.

Take the last name and make it into a picture

Take as much time as you want. In group work, people have often spent twenty minutes or more on a drawing of this sort and the results have always been full of meanings, rich in detail.

What this exercise shows is the many different facets of our personality. Look at those signatures. Each one is you, but each is a different aspect of yourself, in a different context. The more exuberant you are, the more variation there is likely to be between the formal signature for a job interview, and the informal squiggle that many use as short-hand to loved ones. Those people who have minimal variation in the signatures may wish to ask why this is? Is it a desire to conform? A desire to avoid attention? The signature to one's parents or relatives can say a certain amount about the relationship involved, and that would be a fruitful area on which to base further discussions. Some people have nicknames that only exist in the family, and that make them feel slightly embarrassed when openly acknowledged. Those who do not have a healthy relationship with parents or relatives may tend

to put that restraint, or constraint, into the signature, the size of the writing, and so on. Smaller, generally, indicates a more shy and retiring nature.

The same applies to the signature-picture. Large and energetic indicates an expansive nature. Small and confined indicates a lack of confidence. But more than this is what is drawn. This can be an important basis for further discussion. A young woman whose family had recently relocated drew a house around her signature, symbolizing for her the importance of a stable home to her identity. Naturally the permutations are almost endless. Look at your own signature-picture. It is you, as much as looking in a mirror is you. True, you probably didn't choose your name (few of us do), but each time you write it, you convey a vital aspect of yourself. Why do I say that? Consider, for a moment, how different our signatures all are. When we sign a check or a contract our signature is what authenticates the statement. It's as personal as our fingerprints. If they weren't different, we can be sure that the banks would long ago have thought of a better way of keeping our money safe. Forgers go to a vast amount of trouble to attempt to duplicate signatures, and the work is not easy. Certainly if you have ever attempted to copy someone else's signature you'll appreciate that. These aspects of ourselves are distinctly ours. Graphologists and other handwriting experts are highly paid. Some will read your character and your future from your handwriting. Since this book is not concerned with graphology, I don't intend to spend much time on it except to say that it takes as axiomatic the fact that

one's handwriting reflects one's selfhood. Do you remember in grade school practicing suitable signatures? I did, and Chris Baldwin who sat next to me spent hours perfecting his sense of his self-image in the squiggles he called his signature. In each, he was, effectively, drawing an abstract picture of himself.

Here are some examples for your to consider. I have used my own signature since, obviously, people I have worked with do not want to be discussed by name in this book as that would violate confidentiality.

Allan Hunter

Allan

Allan G. Hunter



What can one say about my signatures, here? The first thing is that they are all a good size, positioned firmly on the center of the page, if a little too far up. That's me all over - I leave a little too much time or space for many events (in this case the 'event' is the picture) that I'm looking forward to. Conversely, I never allow enough time and space for things I don't like to do. I'm the original person who hopes to do 14 errands in 15 minutes, but if I have a dinner party, I'll plan days ahead. The snake, bounding along, mirrors my eagerness to get on with these exercises and get to know people. It indicates both my excitement (since I usually do the exercise at the start of a group's series of sessions) and my future need, in group work, to be super-sensitive to all around me. As the Bible tells us, the serpent was 'the subtlest creature of all the field" -- and that's what I feel I have to be, sometimes, in order to understand individuals.

I stress this example because any response to any exercise will have at least two values. The first is what is being felt now, and the second is what the deeper concerns are one might have about who one is. In group work I am a little sneaky, since I've done the exercises before, so I feel a bit like a snake, I suppose, because I have that unfair advantage. That is the deep value. The surface value is merely eager anticipation, as seen in the bounding forward movement. At another level, I have to say that personally, I feel the movement of the snake has a great deal

to do with my sense that this is an exciting time in my life and that I am moving rapidly forward in many ways.

So here is a brief synopsis of the analysis of these drawings. The drawing will exist on three levels. The first level is 'here and now'. The drawing's actual look will depend on how the drawer is feeling right as he or she draws. If he or she has a headache, indigestion, or is bored, the drawing will mirror that, certainly. This could lead to important questions, also. If the person has a headache, is it because of a bad day? What caused the day to be stressful? ... And so on.

The second level is the content of the drawing, rather than the execution of it. What does the drawing show? One man produced sketches of a figure with a sword stabbing horses. Clearly the violent, possibly sexual, nature of the drawing begged for further questions about what seemed to be the man's simmering anger. Others have drawn sketches of hills with walkers or skiers, showing scenes of pleasure and relaxation, in which the content indicated memories of happy times and a longing for them to return once again.

The third level is the action of the picture. Is this a static scene or a dynamic scene? This would tend to indicate whether the individual sees her/himself as moving forward, as developing, or as settled, fixed and unmoving. There is no hard and fast rule here - or anywhere, really - as to what this may mean of an individual, since stasis is often necessary and reassuring. However, it is worth noting that those who tend to use static images of themselves in such drawings are more likely

to be stuck in a rut, or looking for security. When working with the severely depressed, static images abounded. The implication seems to be that people suffering from depression are less likely to see themselves as capable of change, and therefore, as static.

If this all sounds rather vague, do not despair. Until you have done several exercises you will not be able to look at yourself as an outsider might and attempt to unravel the meaning of the images. It is in the cumulative effect of such work that the value lies. One picture of a badly drawn snake is not enough to give anyone much insight into who I am, for example, but it may yield sufficient clues to make some educated guesses later, when connected to other exercises.

Standing back from the exercises, you may wish to speculate about what they tell you about yourself, taking time to write down the ideas that come to you, asking questions. Remember, this section has been about the activity of **naming**, and you have been looking at your own name, considering who you are.

Naming is not always straightforward in our cultures. At confirmation, Christian children (and adults) often take a name that is supposed to be a saint's name, indicating in that way which saint's life the confirmed intends to emulate. Baptism is in itself a symbolic taking of a new, washed clean, life, and of a new name. Since many churches practice infant baptism, the chance to change or choose a new name for oneself is diminished. In the United States it is legally possible to change one's name, should one wish to do so, but in many places one's name is simply given

one. Whether it comes to be a burden later, or not, is rarely considered.

Think for the moment of the person with an unusual name or a name that carries some sort of stigma. Consider the case of the Marine Sergeant, an American, born with the surname Hitler. He resolutely refused to change it, though he served in the Second World War. At a different level, how about the man who grows up called, say John Smith IV? The familial expectation that he will fill his father's shoes would seem to be written into his name. what pressure does that put on him to conform?

Consider your own name, now, and write it down. Then complete the following phrases, in writing.

My name is _____

I like my name because _____

I don't like my name because _____

If I chose a name it would be _____

Now I think _____

Now I feel _____

The name discussion is an important one because it can shed light on one's own sense of being, of identity, and contrast it to what one's family seems to want one to be. Choosing one's own name can also be revealing. Some tribes of plains Indians have a custom of giving a tribe member three names. One is the family name, a surname; one is the birth name - a sort of christian name; and the third name is not chosen until puberty, a little like a confirmation name. The idea is that this third name should describe the specific attributes and talents of the individual. That name should be based in the person's strengths so that in a time of crisis he or she can recall that name in order to recall exactly where the character is strongest and use that energy. An example would be, perhaps "He-who-runs-fast". That would describe the person's quality and his way of doing things. In a crisis such a person would be reminded that his talent lies in moving swiftly rather than, say, in going through a slow negotiation process. The idea would be that if a person acts according to his or her talents and strengths, then that person will be authentic and act effectively. It is when we try to be who we are not that we wind up in trouble.

Looking at your replies in this last exercise, do you feel your name really reflects who you are? In my experience people rarely feel their given names to be perfectly apt. Many feel proud to have their names, the names of admired and loved relatives, and hope to live up to those names. Some people are named after Biblical characters and take great pride in that. How do you feel about your name?

It's not an idle question. One woman I worked with discovered in her thirties that she had been named after one of her father's mistresses with whom he had been having a passionate affair when his wife became pregnant. Obviously such circumstances produced mixed feelings about her name and sense of self worth, as well as emotions about her parents. And this brings us to the entire discussion of women's names which have, traditionally, been lost when the woman married. More and more women keep their names these days after marriage, but what about the surnames of any children they might have? The relaxing of traditions brings choices that may be difficult, especially if the woman marries, produces children who take the father's surname, and then divorces with some bitterness. That is just one example, but a not uncommon one.

The real tension of the exercise, however, will tend to collect around the last two items; **Now I think... Now I feel.**

In group work this has often proved to be very emotionally charged. After working through several exercises like this, asking someone how he or she feels, and getting that person to write it down, can make it seem to many that they have no option

but to tell the truth about their feelings. Yet the question is open. One could choose to reply: "now I feel hungry" or "cold", after all. The question asks us to make a choice between the purely factual and the emotionally important. Which did you choose? Often the purely factual statement indicates that the person is avoiding facing the issues, or that the person simply doesn't understand what's going on. Careful questions may be needed here. After all, not knowing can be a major psychological defense to a perceived threat. The cliché that springs to mind is of the fifth grader in the principal's office being asked why he or she did something. "I don't know," comes the reply over and over. And sometimes the child does not know in the sense that he or she is unable to give a short, concise answer such as the Principal is looking for. It is not an easy question to reply to: what do you feel, now?

With this we return to the discussion with which we started the chapter, that it is difficult to know who we are and what we are feeling, and that unless we know these things we can find ourselves confused, adrift and in despair. This has never been more important than it is today. In my grandfather's time, in Switzerland where he grew up, he knew very firmly what his family ties were, and what the townspeople of his tiny country town expected people to do. He had the choice to conform or leave. He conformed, aware that he was directly related to almost half the town, and had been through school with everyone his own age. At every turn, he knew who he was and was reminded as to who he was

expected to be. Sixty years later, I, his grandson, live in a town with no blood relatives, my parents and other relatives are all several hours plane-ride away, and the people I know here I have only been acquainted with for a few years, at most. Many of them have different religious beliefs and cultural expectations. My point is that without the outward reassurances that my grandfather had, my generation, and future generations, have to be far more assured about who we are internally. The media, through the all-pervasive television, tell us that the ideal of female attractiveness should be about 20 years old, wear a certain style of clothes, and so on. Yet, I know that this type of woman is not my ideal. For one thing she is only half my age. The television and the media do tell us who we should be as far as they are concerned - which is in order to sell us certain products, many of which we may not need. We are continuously bombarded by messages telling us not who we are (like my grandfather's townspeople) but how we are not managing to measure up to the ideal unless we purchase a certain product, move to a certain place, act a certain way ... and so on. And next season the message changes. We have, therefore, to be careful to find out who we are, or we risk becoming nothing at all.

The image that I see most often is the one I call the geek in the muscle-car. The young man has been convinced that he has to have a big, expensive, fast car, probably at vast price with a repayment plan he can barely manage, and is surprised to find he is no more attractive or successful than before. He has the outer trappings, but not the inner substance. Now, this is not to say

that the geek can never have substance. He can, and does. But he has to look within to find it, and its price may not be monetary in the same way the car payments are. There is a price to be paid. It includes honesty, determination and an investment of time.

That's what you and I, reader, are doing with this book. We're looking inside to see who exactly is inside.

In this section I've emphasized the ideas of naming, of identifying thoughts and feelings, and writing them down. Why is it important for us to write them down? Here is an answer that may help to explain this.

In conventional therapist-client relations, one of the largest issues that initially faces the client is that of trust. The fear is that if the client really says what is on his or her mind then the therapist may be appalled or hostile. This issue can take many months to resolve, during which time the client is usually in some pain. One young man I worked with took many months before he could admit that he hated his abusive father - and was then horrified at what he had said. I would suggest that he and others like him could have saved a great deal of pain and anxiety if the initial realization of that hatred could have been expressed privately, safely, on paper. As it was, he spent months acting out his distress by aggressive acts towards older male figures in his life who were not his father. This, for him, was the only way to express what he was feeling because, despite being highly articulate, he could not bring himself to talk about his

problem. Once he did so, the behavior changed rapidly. Unfortunately by that time he had a string of criminal charges against him. My contention would be that had this man had a safe way of addressing his anxieties he could have at least shortened the time span in which he was vulnerable to his delinquent behavior.

Writing, after all, can help us in obvious ways. Consider the pocket diary. I'm lost without mine. It reminds me where I should be and when, and in so doing, it removes from me a huge amount of anxiety about what I'm supposed to be doing. To say that it keeps me sane is a cliché, but in a real sense, it does so. Shopping lists work the same way. Without them I return home and discover to my intense annoyance that I've forgotten several vital items. The shopping list saves me time and exasperation, and helps to keep me calm. At night, if I have a busy day the next day, I have two options, one is to take a sleeping tablet and hope that my racing mind will slow down, the other, which works far better, is to write a "to do" list just before I roll over and sleep. It clears my mind. Another example of the beneficial effects of writing might be the letter full of raging emotions that is never sent. One can write through the anger and arrive at a calmer place. Many of these feelings might be embarrassing if spoken out loud, or even harmful. It is a poor idea, usually, to tell one's boss exactly what one thinks of him or her, but then, what does one do with those feelings? A safe place to put them would be on paper. One may feel like throttling colleagues, but it is unwise to attempt to do so; the fantasy needs to be

acknowledged and then left behind. These are all examples of the usefulness of writing in keeping us sane.

I am not suggesting that writing can supplant therapy entirely. That would be naive. What I am suggesting is that writing can be used as a powerful therapeutic tool to be applied either on its own as a mental health maintenance technique, or alongside therapeutic counseling as a way of coming to terms more efficiently with distress. One of the remarkable things about people is their ability to forget and avoid. The raging toothache disappears when the nervous patient arrives at the dentist's chair. People say things and then deny having said them, often actually believing their own denial. A client can leave a therapist's office and ten minutes later have 'forgotten' everything that was said. We forget who we were and what we did, all too rapidly. That is one reason why I enjoy photograph albums so much. I look at them and say, "Did I ever dress like that?" "Why did I have such a strange haircut?" And I marvel at the things that we all accepted as usual only a few years earlier. Photographs can remind us of what we choose to gloss over. Just similarly do diaries function. Good gracious, we say to ourselves reading a journal of some previous time, did I ever feel like that? Well, yes. We did. And often it is a very good idea to be reminded about those feelings. We cannot pretend, reading those old entries, that we never really cared for those people. By writing it down, we have proof that the feeling existed, and therefore, a greater respect for our feelings, and a deeper knowledge of who we were, and are.

A friend of mine recently came across some old 16mm movies made of him when he was 11. Curious, he set up a projector and watched them. It was, he admitted, a sobering experience. To begin with, he was able to see, first hand, what a conceited child he had been, and how he had treated his siblings. Second, he was able to see some aspects of the way his entire family responded to each other. He spent a long time thinking about this and came gradually to a better understanding of how his own family had been (rather than how he thought they had been), and how that had affected all their lives. It also made him look anew at his own children, and reassess how he acted with them. It was, he says, very moving. With the arrival of the video camera as a household item I suspect that in the future we will see many such home movies being used in therapy as a way of reappraising the past.

Children in foster homes in several London boroughs are, today, often given the chance to construct a "Book of Life", in which the child visits the major places that have made a contribution to his to her life. In this way the child care worker will take a photograph of, say, the child standing outside the hospital of birth, and at the door of the first home, the first school, and so on. The pictures are then placed in an album for the child. The effect is to reclaim time that has been forgotten and straighten out confused memories. Social workers report that the books help to give the child or young adult a stronger sense of belonging, of identity.

I mention both of these examples because the 'writing' can be achieved in many ways, not all of them involving paper and

pencils. Many people report having good success with tape recorders and video cameras for the recording of events and ideas. Personally, I believe that the most profound work of self-exploration can only be done with the help of an audience response - a friend, a counselor - and that one's most critical audience is likely to be oneself. One can best stand outside oneself in my view by reviewing one's own writing. There it is, what one had written. One cannot disregard it. In a world where it is difficult to be listened to, or acknowledged, one can at least acknowledge oneself.

This is why I call this activity therapeutic writing.