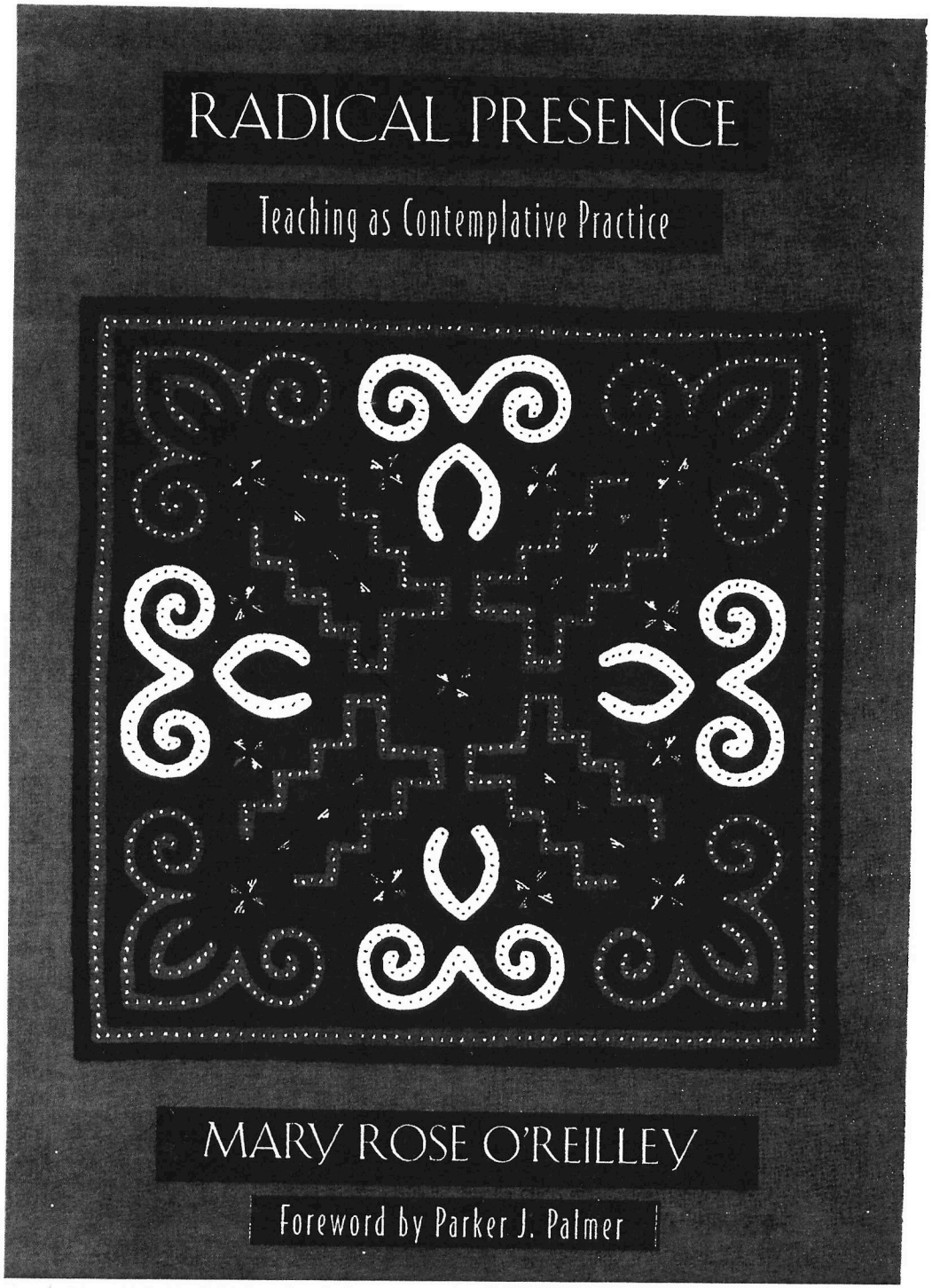

6

Dissonance

NOW I WANT TO RETURN TO THE PARADOX TOUCHED ON EARLIER: silent attention helps us to grow, but good advice, intervention, and challenge also nudge us out of difficulties and help us to revise the most intractable life or essay.

I think that my own quandary over guiding students reflects a problem that has vexed me in many areas of endeavor. It has to do with moving, often uncomfortably, between the analytical and intuitive aspects of life. As a young mother, I used to feel this dissonance keenly at the change of seasons. In summer, I would sink into "child mind," wandering around to the rhythms of our toddlers. Space and time seemed to expand; the garden went on forever, the picnic's conclusion defined only by darkness falling. Autumn came with its painful dislocation; fifty minutes meant fifty minutes precisely, and a new wave of students would rush in, unforgiving as the tide, if you didn't snap your briefcase and move along. In the midst of this transition, outlining a syllabus always gave me a stomachache. How could one predict and define the likely motion of fifty freshmen up and down the terrain of poetry or the expository essay? Every day's movement between home and school presented a little microcosmic struggle between these colliding worlds: between a mother's open, present mode of being and the analytical demands of my job.

You don't have to be a mother to experience this conflict: being a poet versus being a teacher strains me even more. African American and Hispanic colleagues have given me both comic and heartrending insights into the dissonance between the neighborhood of origin and the professional world. Contending elements in the self, however we may define them—intuitive/analytical, multi-racial, gay/straight, female/male—give us pain, present us with quandaries, expand our consciousness, prevent boredom, and nudge us toward living a more integrated life. Internal

division, however painful, forces us to refigure the world. Our inner "diversity issues" challenge our colleagues as well, because they have to deal with us and expand their own definitions of what's real.

What's called "reality" may simply incarnate some dominant cultural myth. Someone who doesn't share the myth is in for periodic jolts. For example, I recently attended a preterm workshop on student counselling in which the facilitators presented as objective data what is in fact a version of the American white male quest story: the job of the freshman student, they told us, is to separate from the family and individuate. Well, yes and no. What if we were to define our job as *nurturing* the student's relationship to family and neighborhood, mediating the differences between university and home life? Might that not avoid some of the alienation students feel, that, indeed, most humans feel as they try to bridge their professional lives and the life that came before that?

In order for any of us as individuals to critique the cultural myths that oppress us—and I include white males in this community of suffering—we are called to an elemental act of mediation. We have to have a few conversations with the pain in our gut; we have to know the world outside and the world within, value both and give both their due. For anyone enduring the pain of dissonance, this is a brave act of integration and a generous contribution to the community. Too often we either submit and surrender our souls to the social consensus, or withdraw in passive narcissism.

My own internal divisions are less painful than those suffered by colleagues I learn from every day: "intuitive" is not exactly a marginalized minority. Still, the struggle between my oceanic instincts and my analytical training defines the way I put together the world. It gives me trouble. Trying to mediate among the clamoring members of my inner committee, I've learned to avoid the word *versus*. But you can't do that with an eraser or a keystroke. Being in poet-mind (receptive, undefended, connected) can make you *prey* in a classroom of sophomores unless you have allowed yourself to be so healed (as one of my teachers said of Francis of Assisi) that you can talk to the birds. Besides, I love the analytical side of my work, its naming of parts. All of us long to create an inner world big enough to comprehend our whole selves.

How are we to do that? A hint of an answer came to me during my recent stay at Thich N'hat Hanh's monastery, Plum Village, in France. I carried with me a question, though I did not know I was carrying it—I had not quite phrased it to myself. But I must have been carrying it, because everything at Plum Village contrived to confront me with answers to it. The question was: How can I honor both the intuitive and analytical aspects of my

mind, silencing neither? I have learned now to call that a *koan*. In the Buddhist tradition, a koan is a sort of resonating question that a master gives a student to help that student advance in spiritual understanding or come to enlightenment. In a certain sense, koans are unanswerable; they are intended to lead the student beyond a range of comfortable cognitive strategies.

Koanic understanding demands *presence*, which Thich N'hat Hanh calls simply "washing dishes to wash dishes." Similarly, we could teach simply to teach. If we are well and truly present, no doubt we will say what students need to hear. Every year, no matter how long I have been teaching, I panic the week before Labor Day: I do not remember how to do the job; I have chosen the wrong books; perhaps students have changed and I will not be able to speak their language. My friend Peter always has to talk me down: "They get what they need, they hear what will help them most, now calm down and just *turn up*!"

Everything at Plum Village, especially the spiritual direction, was oriented to mindfulness and to the practical consequence of mindfulness: transformation. Before going there, I assumed that there was more to be learned than "stopping, breathing, and smiling" (Thich N'hat Hanh's formula at its most elemental)—for I had practiced this Buddhist discipline for many years, excluding the smile, which does not come sincerely to the face of a Northern prairie child. Rather, there was excruciating concentration on stopping, breathing, and smiling. Graduate school of Mindfulness.

My spiritual director in the monastery was a German engineer named Karl, a robust man in his sixties, who liked to give advice and gave it with utmost clarity. There was nothing contemplative about our conversations; he was *training* me. In particular, he was schooling me in the management of irritation. Other sojourners were working on grief or depression; I was merely cold, hungry, and mad at my roommates. At Plum Village I often felt like an oyster dumped onto a particularly sandy bank. Everything irritated my tender skin—the food, the cold, the hierarchy, and most of all other people. The advantage of spending a month at a place like Plum Village is that you can hear the dharma in a sort of laboratory environment, constantly thrown back on the difficulties of practicing it. Spiritual direction consisted of practical help in applying the practice to daily annoyances: shrieking attacks from a Vietnamese sister who was convinced I had stolen her gardening shears, vexation of a roommate who wanted the light on all night.

"Valerie really pushes my buttons," I might tell Karl.

"The important thing is to remember that they're *your* buttons. They don't exist out there on some cosmic control panel. Therefore your irritation is based merely on an idea of how things should be. A relative idea. You are

producing the feeling from an underlying perception that skews your judgment. You have to get at the underlying idea."

"How do I do that?"

"It's very delicate and intelligent work. You have to wait. When I'm angry, I find at the roots of it some old hurt, some pride, some mistaken idea. That is the important aspect of practice. That is the transforming element."

Problems, for the Mahayana Buddhist, are not in the phenomenal world but in our minds. Our mental constructions determine whether we are happy or sad or angry. "It is just an *idea* that something should be this way or that way," Karl told me again and again. Even the idea of order, or my favorite, the idea of justice, especially justice to me. (Lights out!)

I did not loosen my hold on these "notions" without struggle.

"Some ideas are the foundation of civilization. Some are bad, some are good," I would tell Karl. Since he is German, I did not bring up the case of Hitler, but no doubt he has heard the name.

"True," said Karl, "but if the goal is to change society, as Thich N'hat Hanh worked hard to do in the Vietnam war days, we do not have to get angry to do it. In fact, anger makes us less productive."

This was a new thought for me, a quiet person who sometimes needs a shock of adrenaline to propel me out of serene rumination. Yet I know that when I get angry other people harden in their positions; anger tends to prolong debate, promote walkouts and foment counterrevolution—all of which steal time from the main agenda. Karl gave me a provocative image of his gentle art of social change: "You observe that something is wrong and you calmly put it right. It is as though you peer at a flower arrangement and reach out to adjust a branch." Karl smiled and leaned across the low table between our zafus to touch an imaginary flower. "With no more emotion than *that*."

"You can guarantee nothing," Thich N'hat Hanh said in his next dharma talk. "Only dwelling in the present can make us free. We have to look into our suffering, our craving. And when we see its face we will smile: *you cannot make me your prisoner any more.* We have to ask our companions and our teachers to cast light on our aggravation. Peace is every step."

Because we ask our teachers to cast light on our aggravation, there is no such thing as nondirective counselling in the Buddhist tradition. There is no confusion about how one should behave sexually, what constitutes a good diet, etc. At the same time, there is no judgment made about failure. The community is guided by a body of "Precepts," similar to the Judeo-Christian Commandments, but they are best understood as "suggestions" or "pillars of wisdom." It's understood that we will fall short of them. Punishment comes

not from God or the teacher but from reality. If you steal or covet you will disturb your peace.

But one's trust in the teacher arises from sharing in the daily, disciplined practice of mindfulness. Morning and evening my teacher, Karl, sat beside me in the zendo: "Upright!" he would crow. "Like a human being!"

One day Thich N'hat Hanh talked about koans. I was not listening very well because I was (as usual) irritated and in pain from sitting upright like a human being on my zafu in the freezing zendo with only a few vegetables in my tummy. Besides, koans are not a major part of the Mahayana tradition, so I had let my mind wander. We have enough koans in daily life: that is the usual Plum Village approach to the subject. But on this occasion Thich N'hat Hanh was filling in the young monks and nuns on some highlights of Rinzai Zen. "You cannot break a koan with your mind," I heard him say. "Mind is like a train on rails; it has to go in a certain direction. Koans remove the rails. Most work of consciousness happens in an underground storehouse that mind can only fertilize like a good gardener. It is not the object of dharma discussion, but of burying, watering, caring for. We trip on a stone and suddenly we understand . . ."

This aside, tossed off and barely listened to, gave me (later, when I tripped on a stone) considerable insight into the balance of *being and doing* in both personal and professional life. Many issues arise: but suppose we were to call them *koans*? You have to make a responsible decision about your best friend's promotion; a sophomore has plagiarized her essay; the grievance committee calls you to hear a sexual harassment concern. Each student, each advisee, each colleague seems to have, at the center of his or her life, a koan of some sort, as I do, in my own inner travail. In the past, I think I've tried to break these problems with my mind, and the result has been sleepless nights, anguished committee meetings, and feelings of emptiness.

How, by contrast, to remove the rails? To let the mystery be mystery and yet to nudge it toward elucidation? Professional life does not allow us to be forever in process: committees meet, semesters end, sexual harassers damage the nets of trust that sustain us. As I review Thich N'hat Hanh's insight into the nature of koan, I believe he is saying, "Mind *alone* has not sufficient power to address the issues of life, yet mind has *some* strength." It's reasonable to fuss over something, and for me this always means a loss of sleep. And I have to prepare and photocopy, annotate, research, and color code.

But, at the same time as I am working out a conscientious analysis, I must honor the soul space of infinite potential. I must drop a query into that underground storehouse and let it grow toward the light in its own time. We have to work with our analytical minds, that is our nature, but we must not

trust in mind alone to do the work. There is a ground of knowing below the rattle of cognitive thought. At the deepest level, we have no idea what's going on, why the university is as it is, or why our colleagues and students do the things they do. In the depths of consciousness, these issues are attached to hundreds of thousands of strings. Personal pain is connected to ancient insult; the wounds of history—racism, war, homophobia, cruelty of all kinds—fester unhealed.

The part of me that's an activist does not want to hear this; it impedes my power to get things done. If I act only as an analytical problem solver, however, I make bad decisions, sometimes disastrous decisions. Professional life forces issues to quick resolution, and I must cede to this pressure much of the time, but it is essential to protect an area of inner listening where I remember that the real solutions are in some sense *pending*. Learning to hold the deep issues of life in constant suspension is not a happy process for us poor banished children of Aristotle. Is nothing ever fixed? Probably not. Probably not, but we can *attend* to them; we can be alert. Thomas Merton says somewhere that the issues of life are not problems to be solved but mysteries to be entered.

And even when you are forced to move quickly, try to resist thinking too much. Feel it out, as well. How should I do this in the enclosed spaces of professional life?

"I'm going to work on this all day tomorrow," might productively mean, "I'm going to swim fifteen laps in the pool," or "I am going down to the basement to throw pots." Koans resolve themselves by an internal process, and they are brought to light not by watching but by *not* watching. "I'm going to do this over the weekend" may mean, for me, "I'm going to a hermitage I know of in the woods to pay careful attention to the difference between how oak and aspen leaves stir in the wind."

Gestures like this seem to waste time, but in fact they make more time available to you. I don't know why this is. Perhaps it's a koan.