

The Attack

Franklin Merrell-Wolff
December 23, 1972

This tape is not for public use, but is intended simply as a record of an experience which I have had between October 11 and the present date, which is unique in my own experience and may be of importance for others. I am placing as accurate a report of this upon the tape, since it may be of more than personal interest and may contribute material that is of general interest. I shall in this case give background material which may be pertinent or may not be pertinent since the question of what is of value or importance here is not always clear. There may be material given that is relevant to this experience and other material that is not relevant, but it will be left to the discretion of the auditor as to which is of importance.

On October 11, Gertrude, my wife, Lillian Reed, and myself, left in the car to go to Phoenix, Arizona. We proceeded by way of Death Valley, going through Furnace Creek, and up the Furnace Creek Canyon through Death Valley Junction, Shoshone, Baker, over to Searchlight, and from there to Bullhead City on the Colorado River for the first night. The next morning we left, passed through Kingman and on down 93 to Wickenburg. Part of the time I drove; part of the time my wife drove. From Wickenburg I took over the wheel. I found in the car that there was a tendency to tramp, and it took severe concentration to feel secure against this tendency of the front steering of the car to move in one direction or the other sideways unexpectedly. This involved rather heavy concentration in the driving. In fact, this particular problem continued, more or less, throughout the remainder of the trip, posing a more difficult driving problem than usual. Although, in Phoenix, we found that there was a worn out steering shock absorber which was replaced but was not at first effective.

In Phoenix, I faced the usual situation. We were guests of our normal friends. I did give a tape there which was inspired by a letter, a very profound letter, written by one known as Jim Mugridge.¹ There was a presentation of a very difficult problem to which I gave attention. This was a problem of a non-philosophic sort, which lay in the field of vital concerns. It was a very difficult problem, and this problem made demands upon my consciousness, in part, and evidently in unconscious dimensions.

There was a further trip from Phoenix to Tucson, and there for two nights we remained with a friend who had recently had the loss of her husband of many years. There was a presentation of a tape here, and I was inspired, as it were, or impressed to give an initial formulation of a conception of yogic practice which later I called the yoga of total commitment, and which remains to be formulated. Effort was put forth in this, but this was effort of a very superior, positive sort.

¹ See the audio recordings, "Various Philosophical Considerations," parts 1 and 2.

The return was made to Phoenix. During the later period in Phoenix, there were various consultations, a considerable two hour conversation between myself and a professor of philosophy which was very delightful. But on the last day before we left Phoenix, for some reason I felt a moderate attack of what we have known as “psychical fatigue.” What the causes of this fatigue were is a question which remains to be determined, and that is why I’ve given this background material.

Now, a word as to what is meant by psychical fatigue. It is not, apparently, a common experience, and therefore there seems to be a tendency to regard it as something which does not exist. Actually, however, it is an experience with which I have long been familiar, and there are others who have originated the term who have had the same experience. I may describe it as well as is possible to do so, for here there are real difficulties of formulation. It is easily distinguished from physical fatigue and even from purely mental fatigue that comes from protracted mental effort or extremely severe concentrated mental effort which produces a condition that has sometimes been called “brain fag.” But this which I call psychical fatigue is to be distinguished from both of these other forms. For instance, physical fatigue is relieved by rest rather readily; one feels at once comfortable resting. Mental fatigue, in the sense of brain fag, can be relieved by diverting the mind to something of light interest, something that is amusing or interesting in a light way. Psychical fatigue, if that is what it is—and bear in mind this is only a name for it; it is not intended as a definition for it, but it ties in with effort that is over and beyond the purely intellectual effort or physical effort that causes the other two forms of fatigue. It may be connected, even, with a conscious use of will in a more than usually intense degree.

My earliest experiences of it, as far as I can remember, occurred in connection with platform work when dealing with a totally new audience. In the case of such totally new audiences when giving lectures, I have had the experience of finding a certain degree of hostility in the audience, but more commonly, an attitude which might be called that of a question mark attitude; all in all, a non-supporting attitude. The impact of such attitudes upon the audience, I have found, can produce difficulty in formulation, and in order to continue formulation, extraordinary effort of will is required. Later, when one has audiences that repeat, there is an increase of interest and of support from individuals that are sympathetic and in such cases formulation becomes much easier and requires much less effort of will. The blocking effect of an audience which may be in part hostile, and certainly in large degree in an attitude of questioning—what has this fellow got—produces a strain such that even the completion of a sentence that has been started may disappear from one’s mind, and great willed effort in the mind is required to overcome it. This can produce, then, this condition which I, along with others, have called psychical fatigue.

Now, the terminology may possibly be less correct than it might be. On that I will not make a decision; but I can describe in a degree the peculiarity of this kind of fatigue. There is a sense which I might call rawness, an edginess, something that gives way very slowly to rest. Although the best cure lies in sleep, it renders sleep difficult. The effort here is something more than that of intellection, and it does seem to be connected with more than ordinary conscious, willed effort. But that is not, probably, the whole of the story; unconscious effort may very well be an important factor in this case.

There is another circumstantial factor which so far I have failed to mention. While this trip, both going and coming, is in an area that normally is very dry, on this occasion there had been an extraordinary amount of rain. There had been flooding very recently at Death Valley Junction. We had rain in Phoenix, later in Tucson, and land that normally was dry was, upon our return, looked like a swamp with water covering ground for miles without number. Then later when leaving we had heavy rain at Gray Mountain, involving snow at Flagstaff and probable snow on the route we had intended to take through Jacob Lake. We returned, therefore, by 89 Alternate through Page and through Knabb, Zion Park, ultimately going through Cedar City, and spending the night at Caliente, Nevada, where there was rain again. So the area was most unusually damp; an area that normally is very dry. This has a bearing upon another part of the total experience.

Ever since the trip to Alaska in 1964, I have been subject to what seems to be attacks of viral pneumonia, at any rate the experience fits the description of viral pneumonia as given in the encyclopedia. It is something which starts with spasmodic coughing which is not productive in the beginning, combined apparently with little or no fever, but with night sweats. Later the coughing becomes productive and the healing of the condition is by what apparently is called in medical literature, lysis, namely, a slow tapering off. This, ever since the trip in 1964, tends to recur on protracted trips, and so far as I can see may be induced by unusual exposure to meteorological variations. At any rate, that is my suggestion. I've had this on nearly every protracted trip since. A state of this kind was produced upon the present trip so that I had an attack of this which apparently is viral pneumonia. We left Phoenix on the 24th of October and arrived home on the 28th, and I was enjoying, if you can call it that, a fairly strong attack of this non-productive coughing.

Now, there was, however, another factor involved in it, and this becomes the important feature in the whole experience, the one which we are now trying to investigate. I had had the experience of these coughing attacks sufficiently frequent to be quite familiar with them and to be able to take them more or less in my stride. After returning home on the 28th of October, there developed a feature that was completely foreign to all my previous experience. I found myself developing a certain distaste, even a kind of fear, of darkness, and of lying in a horizontal position, and a certain fear of going to sleep. This I had never known before. Through all of this, the intellectual mind apparently was perfectly clear and registering the state. But something that lay below that, as though it were belonging to a lesser part of the nature, was developing a quality akin to that of panic. There seemed to be something connected with the breath that was not quite right. And finally, after the night on the 5th when I lay with head propped up in a semi-vertical position, virtually unable to sleep, there was the impulse to run away from something. Quite irrational—I recognized it as such—but still the impulse was there in the nature, and I had the impression that I wasn't getting air enough, and I had the inclination to go to a lower altitude, which we did do on the 5th and took a room in a motel for 4 days. The idea that this gave partial relief, but very soon the condition returned with the result that I felt the suggestion of getting oxygen, which was secured; and by the use of oxygen throughout nearly the whole of November, there was a partial alleviation of the conditions which through that month ensued.

Now, there was precipitated a condition quite other than the attack of what seemed to be viral pneumonia, and here we come into a problem of formulation that has

the same difficulty as that applying to mystical states of consciousness. Whereas an authentic, positive mystical state of consciousness has a quality of almost inconceivable exaltation, this was a development of consciousness in the opposite direction where one had the feeling of being near something like a desolation or a great confusion; on the whole an unspeakably horrible experience. I cannot actually communicate the immediate *quale* of this consciousness and it is in that respect akin to a positive mystical experience. And incidentally, William James, in his discussion of these states of consciousness in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, does refer to this negative form. I could suggest by a figure the quality, although this, it must be remembered, is not a literal description; but imagine that one was walking on a tight rope over a pit which had the character of desolation and confusion. If one failed to keep his balance, he was threatened with a fall into that pit. It seemed as though it were something akin to a most horrible kind of death. It was terrifying. The lesser part of the nature seemed often in a kind of panic. It felt suffocated in the motel room, would rush out at times to get into the fresh air to get away from this suffocation. There was a very definite dread of darkness, dread of confinement, an impulse to strike out, an impulse to run. All of which was recognized by the intellectual mind as something happening in the lesser nature, and the intellectual mind was able to control the impulses. There was no striking out; there was no running away, but the impulse was there.

In *Pathways Through to Space*, I have delineated the isolation of three aspects of the total being which I called the *child*, the *intellectual man*, and the *real being*. It is as though this lower nature, the child, was in that state of panic, and the intellectual mind, so far as its judgment was concerned, seemed to be able to evaluate the situation and to effect control in the behavior of the child allowing, however, a certain release, like leaving a room and going out and then returning, but the state in the lower consciousness was there nonetheless—panic and dread: a dread of darkness; of anything negative; a dread of lying in a horizontal position; a dread of sleep, where the mind could no longer be in control. Actually, sleep was very badly broken and was limited in quantity, extremely limited during this period. We remained at the lower altitude for about 4 days, when I felt the greater freedom of our household would be much better. So we took oxygen with us and returned home. And during all of this period and throughout the month of November, I was using oxygen frequently. And this point is important, the oxygen was an aid; it was not a cure. What its function was is not clear to me.

A figure has come to mind with which I may more clearly suggest the state which I have called one of desolation. I have on the occasion of one of the trips to Alaska, had the experience of passing through a forested area which had recently suffered fire. The trees that stood there were all dead and black, all other forms of life were destroyed, and the ground was covered with ashes. In experiencing this condition, which was completely lifeless, I had a psychical impact which in a degree suggests what is meant by desolation, and perhaps by using this figure, I can suggest it to others. In that burned forest—nothing alive, the trees were black, the ground covered with ashes—there was none of the milk of human kindness there or of more than human kindness. There was no sweetness, no beauty, no value of any sort in a positive sense, but only desolation—a sense of real death.

Now, the suggested death here is very different from that of ordinary death, which we may conceive of as not the opposite of life but rather as the opposite of birth and one

of the aspects of life itself, which may be viewed as continuing in a curve, which we call the sine curve, oscillating above and below the x -axis in a way that is perfectly symmetrical; the birth and death being represented by the points of intersection of the sine curve with the x -axis. Here, then, birth and death are movements in states of consciousness not actual beginnings or actual terminations. The death sense, however, connected with the burned forest was like the destruction of life itself. That, I think, may suggest something of the meaning of the word desolation, and something of the experience through which I passed. It was unspeakably horrible. There was something like the feeling of facing, not ordinary death, but real death. This may not be the fact; I'm reporting the feeling, the subjective sense, which is by no means an effort to say that this subjective sense is the reality. It may be the reality or it may not; but it will give perhaps some suggestion of the sheer horror of the state; and it had no connection with the rather simple condition of a viral pneumonia with which I had had experience on several other occasions when there was nothing of this sort.

There is another person who, though at a distance, was nonetheless highly cognizant of what was transpiring. I shall not identify this person by the personal name, but shall call this person X . This person comes into the picture in a strong way; however, for the moment I shall complete the record as I experienced it. Later, certain correlations will be made with knowledge and action connected with X .

The experience of the desolation occurred during the period of the viral coughing—the viral pneumonia coughing. But, whereas my previous experiences of this coughing was that it gradually disappeared over a long time, perhaps on the order of a month or 6 weeks in which it gradually declined in intensity, there was in this case a sudden and swift termination of it and I entered into a state of no coughing whatsoever for a period of some days, then coughing occasionally as was perfectly normal within my own experience for several years.

But after this point, another condition was induced. I felt, as it were, that a force was working extraneously to produce a dissolution or shattering of my psychic integrity involving the breakup of the mind, particularly including memory. The impression was that there was an extraneous force that sought to produce a disintegration of the mind so that the recall from memory would disappear and the organization of thought become impossible. Immediately it appeared to me that this could involve a loss of knowing my own identity in the empiric sense since that identity is very closely connected with the continuity of memory recall. Also, I felt that it involved the breakup of mental organization if this pressure were successful and that the threat was a condition that might be called madness if it were carried out successfully. Opposed to this, both autonomously and consciously, my will was set to hold that organization intact; and for day after day, it seemed as though it were a contest between two wills: an extraneous will working to produce a complete mental disorganization, and my own will, both autonomously and consciously, working to hold that organization intact. This continued for several days. The nights were dreaded for the reason that the condition of darkness is negative as compared to light. There was dread of the horizontal position, and particularly dread of sleep, since during sleep period the mental effort could not be maintained. There was some relief through the use of oxygen, but no cure. This continued for days like a sort of

slugging match between will and will until finally the pressure toward a disintegration of the mental organization began to diminish and ultimately became minor.

Now, I could use a figure to suggest the stages through which I then moved. The condition of a heavy pressure disintegrative in its sense might be likened to the passage through a tropical jungle: a state of darkness and dankness. And as it lessened it would seem as though such a jungle, as is the case in some parts of South America, involved interspaces which were of the nature of a savanna, and when passing through such a savanna, I would feel relatively normal. It was as though I came out of a clouded state where one moved in something like a deep smog, and then as though I was normal again for a brief period, then back into jungle, and into another savanna space. This continued up to and through the 2nd of July, then something suddenly happened.² On the morning of the 3rd, I found myself productive for the first time.

Now, I must make a reference to something here that belongs to the experience of 1936. As I reported in *Pathways* and again in *The Philosophy of Consciousness Without an Object*, there seemed to be somewhere, not necessarily in the brain or anything physical, not in any place I can definitely identify in space, but somewhere in the background of consciousness, something akin to a butterfly valve. When turned off my consciousness was in the ordinary state moving in the ordinary domain, the domain of our common discourse, the domain with which our education is concerned; but when the butterfly valve was turned into the active phase, it is as though a descent came down that belonged to another domain, a descent in the vertical sense, a quality that has been of supreme importance in connection with all of my formulations. From this descent has come the answers to problems that I could not resolve with ordinary resources. This has been a continuing fact ever since 1936, but for the first time it was shut off during this experience which I have here reported, and constituted one of the grimmest aspects of the whole experience. But on the morning of the 3rd of December, this butterfly valve was activated and I felt an impulse to produce. This was Sunday; I had planned for the day a certain tape, the third, on the subject of the Tri-Kaya, but I felt that I had a charge that could be formulated. I did, therefore, produce an extemporaneous, impromptu formulation of my own philosophy so that an abstract of it for the first time was produced before an audience and before the microphones, so that this abstract was contained within the limits of 1 hour.³ Since that time, the condition has remained broken. I have no more felt the pressure of a disintegrative sort. I have, however, felt an accentuation of psychical fatigue which seems to vary. At times I am out of it and at times back in it, but the sense of desolation, the sense of pressure to effect a disintegration in the mind, has vanished and has not returned during a period of twenty days. This is significant when we tie it in with certain events that took place at a distance.

² Wolff evidently meant to say, “. . . through the 2nd of December.”

³ See the audio recording, “On My Philosophy: Extemporaneous Statement.”