

JEFF

THE DEEPEST ACCEPTANCE
Radical Awakening in Ordinary Life

FOSTER



sounds true

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Author's Note

It seems to me that all our problems, all our suffering and conflicts, both personal and global, stem from one basic problem: our ignorance of who we really are. We have forgotten our inseparability from life, and so we have started to fear it, and out of that fear we have gone to war with it in various ways. We have gone to war with our thoughts, our feelings, our emotions, our bodies, with the present moment itself. In our efforts to protect ourselves from pain, from fear, from sadness, from discomfort, from failure, from the parts of life we have been conditioned to believe are bad or negative or dark or dangerous, we have stopped being truly alive.

The armor we wear to protect ourselves from a full experience of life is called the separate self. But our armor does not really protect us—it just keeps us comfortably numb.

Spiritual awakening—realizing that you are not who you think you are—is the answer to this basic problem of humanity. These days there are many books available on this topic, and it seems that more people than ever are discovering ancient teachings that used to only be available to a select few. But there is a trap here. Spirituality can easily become just another layer in our armor. Rather than

facilitating our opening up to life, it can shut us off even more. Spiritual concepts and clichés like “There is no self” or “This is not my body” or “Duality is just an illusion” can simply be new beliefs to cling to, new ways of avoiding life and pushing the world away, which result in more suffering, for us and for those we love.

The spiritual awakening I talk about in this book is not about protecting yourself more; it’s about realizing that who you really are does not need protection, that who you really are is so open and free and loving and deeply accepting that it allows all of life into itself. Life cannot hurt you, because you *are* life. So the present moment is not an enemy to be feared, but a dear friend to be embraced. Yes, true spirituality does not strengthen your armor against life—it destroys it.

Spiritual awakening is actually very simple. It is the timeless recognition of who you really are, the consciousness prior to form. But actually *living* that recognition in day-to-day life, not forgetting or losing it or letting it go to your head—that’s where the real adventure of life begins. And that’s where many people seem to struggle—spiritual seekers and spiritual teachers alike.

It’s one thing to know *who you really are* when life is easy and things are going well for you. It’s another thing to remember this in the heat of the moment, when things fall apart, when life gets messy and your dreams turn to dust. In the midst of physical and emotional pain, addictions, relationship conflicts, and worldly and spiritual failure, often we can feel less awakened and more separate from life, from each other,

and from who we really are, than ever. Our happy dreams of our enlightenment can quickly evaporate, and acceptance can seem a million miles away.

We can see the messiness and beauty of day-to-day human existence as something to be avoided, transcended, or even obliterated, *or* we can see it for what it really is: a secret and constant invitation to wake up *now*, even if we believe we already woke up yesterday. Life, in its infinite compassion, won't let us rest on our laurels.

If my earlier books were *descriptions* of spiritual awakening, this book addresses far more important questions: *How* can that awakening be lived day-to-day? *How* can we accept the present moment even when the present moment seems totally unacceptable to us? Is "*How* can we accept the present moment?" even the right question? Are we actually *separate* from the present moment in the first place?

I teach one thing and one thing only: *a deep and fearless acceptance of whatever comes your way*. This is not passive surrender or cold detachment, but an intelligent and creative emergence into the mystery of the moment. This book comes after many years of listening and speaking to thousands of people on the spiritual path—hearing their concerns, answering their challenging questions, meeting them in their pain and grief and daily struggles and fears, and gently pointing them not to a future enlightenment, but to a deep and unconditional acceptance within their present-moment experience, the deep acceptance that they are in their essence.

Welcome to ordinary life, dear explorer—the final frontier of spiritual awakening. May you boldly go where no one has gone before!

With love from yourself,
Jeff Foster

The Wholeness of Life

*The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking
new landscapes, but in having new eyes.*

MARCEL PROUST

The wrinkles on your elderly father's hands. The cry of a newborn baby. A sculpture in an art gallery. A certain combination of notes in a piece of music. A dewdrop on a blade of grass. A momentary look on a stranger's face, suddenly and unexpectedly melting your heart. Wholeness suddenly piercing through separation.

Life is rich with mystery.

I was recently talking to a friend of mine who had just given birth. My friend is a scientist, a "rational thinker," and an atheist, with no interest in spirituality or religion or anything that cannot be proved through "peer-reviewed research," as she calls it. She believes that life is all about working hard, providing for your family, saving for old age, and eventually retiring and enjoying "the good life" before you die.

And yet, as she talked about her experience of her daughter's birth, her words were not those of an atheist; they were religious words, spiritual words, words pregnant with awe and wonder and the overwhelming miracle of creation. She talked

about the miracle of life itself—the mystery of birth and of death, the cosmic riddle that permeates all things. She told me that as she held her newborn daughter for the first time, all self-centered thoughts fell away, past and future dissolved, and suddenly there was only this—only life itself, present, alive, mysterious. There was only this precious moment, here and now, and nothing more.

She told me how she wept with gratitude upon seeing her daughter's tiny little fingers for the first time—how delicate they were, how fragile. She told me how amazed she was that something so mysterious and *alive* could have emerged from her, how something could have come out of nothing, how life could produce life out of itself, how the same life that was present at the Big Bang is somehow also here, in the form of this tiny, pink creature. She was suddenly consumed with an unconditional love—for her daughter, for all babies and mothers everywhere, for all existence. It was a love she had no words for. All peer-reviewed research crumbled in the face of the incomprehensible vastness of present-moment experience.

My friend, the scientist, the rational thinker, the skeptic, had temporarily become a nondual mystic, and she didn't even know it. For a moment, she had touched the wholeness of life, the wordless mystery that permeates all creation. For a moment, she had *fallen in love* with existence; the separation between her and life had fallen away, to reveal a love with no name.

I have met many people over the years who have become interested in spirituality because of certain strange,

inexplicable, incomprehensible experiences or realizations they'd had, often out of the blue—experiences that were later hard to put into words and harder still to communicate to their friends and families.

Artists talk about the self falling away when they are absorbed in painting. Musicians tell of how, while absorbed in their music, there is *only* the music, and they, as a separate entity, vanish into it, as if they've been absorbed by life. They are not playing the music—they *are* the music, playing itself. Athletes talk about getting into the flow or entering the zone, a place where running or riding or jumping happens effortlessly, and the body functions perfectly even though they no longer experience the body as their own. Actors talk about disappearing into their characters, about losing themselves in a role, about how when they are really acting, there's nobody there acting. When they are later congratulated on their performance and asked how they managed to achieve it, they have to admit that they *really don't know*.

Or you're walking through the park, and suddenly there's no *you* walking—there is only the wind on your face, the rustle of leaves, the laughing of children, and the barking of dogs. You disappear, and you become everything—or everything disappears, and you become nothing. Words simply don't do it justice.

Sometimes the stories are less dramatic. You're washing the dishes, and suddenly the glistening soap bubbles become the most fascinating things in the universe—indeed, the soap bubbles *become* the universe in that moment. And

all your problems, your fears, your anxieties, your desperate search for a better life, for fame, for glory, for love, for enlightenment, fade away. Everything is deeply okay again—cosmically okay. Even though your life situation hasn't changed—there are still bills to pay, children to feed, work to do, pain to feel—your relationship to it all has suddenly transformed. In an instant, you're no longer a separate individual struggling to find wholeness. There is *only* wholeness. You're back in the womb of life—a womb you never really left. And yet, ordinary life is still present, and you continue to function in the world effortlessly.

Science has a hard time explaining these experiences—or nonexperiences or whatever you want to call them—for they take us beyond the world of cause and effect, subject and object, observer and observed, absolute and relative, inside and outside, even time and space. They are hard to prove or demonstrate logically, scientifically, philosophically. But to those who experience them, they are more real than anything. Call them awakenings or peak experiences or simply raw encounters with life as it is. It doesn't really matter what you call them, because in the end, the words always come later.

Existence is rich with mystery and wonder, and sometimes, without warning, light can shine through the cracks in the separate self. For a few brief moments, there is the cosmic suggestion that life is somehow infinitely *more* than what it appears to be. The most ordinary of things can easily turn extraordinary, making us wonder if, perhaps, the

extraordinary is hidden *in* the ordinary always, just waiting to be discovered.

Yes, perhaps the ordinary things of life—broken old chairs, bicycle tires, sunlight reflecting on broken glass, a smile from a loved one, the cry of a newborn baby—are actually not ordinary at all. Perhaps hidden in their ordinariness is something extraordinary. Perhaps all of those things we take for granted are actually divine, sacred, infinitely precious expressions of a wholeness, a Oneness that cannot be expressed in thought or language.

And perhaps this wholeness is not “out there,” somewhere else or in the future, waiting to be uncovered. Perhaps we don’t need to go to the farthest reaches of the universe to find it. Perhaps it is not in the heavens or hidden away in the deepest depths of our souls. Perhaps wholeness is right here, where we already are—in *this* world, in *this* life—and perhaps we have somehow blinded ourselves to it in our obsession with our search for it.

Modern physics is now confirming what spiritual teachings throughout the ages have always been pointing to: everything is interconnected, and nothing exists separately from anything else. We have invented many words over the years to try to point to this cosmic wholeness, words like *spirit*, *nature*, *Oneness*, *Advaita*, *nonduality*, *consciousness*, *awareness*, *aliveness*, *Being*, *Source*, *Existence*, *Isness*, *Tao*, *Buddha Mind*, and *presence*. We could sit and argue for a hundred years about what the wholeness of life actually *is*, but I wonder if we’d end up arguing over words and miss what the words

are pointing to. So pick your favorite word for wholeness, because in the end it's not about the words. You call it the *Tao*. I call it *Life*. She calls it God. He calls it consciousness. Someone else calls it *nothing*, and someone else calls it *everything*. Someone else likes to keep silent about it. An artist paints pictures about it. A musician writes music about it. A physicist tries to touch it through complex calculations and mind-bending theories. A poet or philosopher juggles with words to try to reach it. A shaman gives you strange substances so you may see it for yourself. A spiritual teacher points you to it both with language and silence.

The point is, whatever *it* is will never ultimately be put into words. Thoughts and words fragment wholeness; they break up a unified reality into separate things: bodies, chairs, tables, trees, the sun, the sky, me, you. The world of thought is the world of duality, the world of *things*.

Of course, I'll be using a lot of words in this book. Words are very useful for writing and reading books! But the most important thing to remember is that *it's not about the words*. It's about the wholeness of life itself—and that comes before *all* words, even the word *wholeness*.

There is a great silence and rest that permeates all of these words, and it is this inner stillness that I speak from. This entire book is a love letter from stillness to itself—from who I really am, to who you really are.

I used to volunteer in a hospice, and I spent time with people who were in the final weeks or days or even hours of their

lives. Often the patients would confess to me that it was only at that moment, as the curtain was about to fall, that they were really opening their eyes to the performance. Only then were they starting to see how precious life is—and always had been. Many of them talked about their regrets. Regrets over not having lived life to the fullest. Regrets over not having loved enough, over having held their feelings back out of fear of rejection. Regrets over not having been more honest and open in their relationships. Regrets over working themselves until they were sick, in pursuit of a future that never came and was never going to come. If only they'd known that life had other plans in store for them, they might have opened their eyes sooner.

For some of them, it was only when *time* had been stripped away from them that they were really starting to explore life. They didn't have time to live in hopes and dreams anymore—they only had time to live. Some had taken up art; some were learning to play an instrument or sing or dance for the first time. One woman I met had finally found the courage to record her debut album. For her whole life she had hidden away, singing in the shower when she was alone, protecting herself from ridicule and rejection. But now in the last weeks of her life, when she had nothing to lose, she was singing her heart out, as if nobody were listening, as if she had already died and there was no longer anything to fear. Ridicule and rejection were no longer her enemies.

One day, I was playing chess with a female patient. We barely spoke to each other as we played. Her head was shaved,