

A JAMESEAN PERSONSCAPE:
THE FRINGE AS MESSAGING TO THE 'SICK SOUL'

John J. McDermott
Texas A&M University

*"I believe that no so-called philosophy of religion can begin
to be an adequate translation of what goes on in
the single private [person]."*

—William James,
"The Varieties of Religious Experience"

I

I am not going to present a traditional philosophical paper on the thought of William James. Over the past three decades such commentaries have increased, exponentially, such that his work is no longer circumscribed by wisecracks about the alleged philosophical ineptness of his pragmatism. One thinks here, among others, of the masterful interpretations of James by Gerald Myers in *William James: His Life and Thought* and David Lamberth in *William James and the Metaphysics of Experience*. Certainly one would be hard pressed to write as Margaret Knight did in 1950, in an otherwise cogent treatment of James psychology: "Consequently, though he could never fail to be stimulating, James the philosopher was at best little more than a brilliant and slightly irresponsible

amateur.”¹ I, to the contrary, take William James to have upended two millennia of classical epistemology and metaphysics. Although not heretofore designated as such, I hold that, analogous to Immanuel Kant, in radical empiricism we behold a Copernican moment. It remains to be seen whether David Lamberth is prescient in his contention that James’s metaphysics of experience “is capable theoretically of comprehending the deep, systemic insights into social processes such as those advanced in contemporary studies of gender, race, ethnicity and class, while at the same time correlating them critically to the more intimate religious and moral interest by which we as human beings are animated.”² Of this, however, I am confident: that if spiritual help is needed, whether it be secular or confessional, the writings of William James constitute a deep and nutritious reservoir for us. I read James as a pedagogical enabler, one who helps me to read my experiences, especially those which lurk on the fringe, those had as inarticulate, inchoate, vague, and yet ambient all the while. Plato held philosophy to be *therapeia*, a healing. William James wrote that philosophy bakes no bread, but it does encourage the “habit of always seeking an alternative.” In a spiritual crisis, only an alternative will *work*. Herein, as a variant of religious experience, James marries the wisdom of the noble Jewish tradition of *teshuvah* (repentance or atonement) to the thick terrain of conversion, that is, to speak to myself in a different voice, an alternative, if you will. With Heraclitus, “I searched out myself.”

And thereby—My name is John and I am an alcoholic.

II

My name is John. I was a sick soul. In keeping with the diagnosis of William James, I was a “sick soul”—more, I was an exemplar of his “divided self.” Or, put my way, the ongoing process of my selving was rent by a persistent splitting, a radical interior dislocation—in short, the suffusing of my person with an abominable loneliness.

In the chapter “The Sick Soul,” in his classic work *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James introduces us to a raft of persons, from stations high and low, famous and unsung. Each of

these affected persons is riven with a maddening, inner vapor that leaches into every cranny of that person. In the parlance of alcoholism, they were “restless, irritable and discontent.” He cites a priest, Father Gtry: “I neither perceived nor conceived any longer the existence of happiness or perfection. An abstract heaven over a naked rock. Such was my present abode for eternity.” A nineteen-year-old domestic servant commits suicide. She leaves a note telling us that “I am tired of living, so am willing to die ... Life may be sweet to some, but death to me is sweeter.” And James gives us a startling text from Goethe,

“I will say nothing,” writes Goethe in 1824, “against the course of my existence. But at bottom it has been nothing but pain and burden, and I can affirm that during the whole of my 75 years, I have not had four weeks of genuine well-being. It is but the perpetual rolling of a rock that must be raised up again forever.”

This is from the same Goethe whom James cites as a linchpin in his “Sentiment of Rationality” (1879): “The inmost nature of the reality is congenial to powers which you possess.” How these texts live together in Goethe is not for me to say, but they are synchronous in the life and thought of William James. The streaming from the darkness of the sick soul to the effervescence of pragmatism is a testament to the possibility of congeniality and the existence of “powers” to which we have potential access. This stream of experiencing is fed and is unintelligible without the vertebral strand of radically empirical sensibility.

A still further and chilling limning of personal despair is found in James’s discussion, in *Varieties*, of the spiritual diremption of Tolstoy’s inner life. Tolstoy writes, in his *Confession*, that “One can live only so long as one is intoxicated, drunk with life; but when one grows sober one cannot fail to see that it is all a stupid cheat. What is truest about it is that there is nothing even funny or silly in it; it is cruel and stupid, purely and simply.” William James understands Tolstoy to mean that “Life had been enchanting, it was now flat sober, more than sober, dead.” My understanding of this dire situation is that we no longer care for and about the things we care

for and about. For Tolstoy, those who have lived before him, especially the scientists, have found nothing. “And not only this,” Tolstoy writes, “but that they have recognized that the very thing which was leading me to despair—the meaningless absurdity of life—is the only incontestable knowledge accessible to man.” Here, we are at the bottom and James, covertly, in *Varieties*, knows this bottom to have been a dwelling place for him as well.

Perhaps we can glean the full import of the experience of the sick soul if we state it theologically. In a textually legitimate paraphrase of Jonathan Edwards, it would be better for us to be born and damned than not to be born at all. For, by being born, we enhance the glory of God by our dependence on him. Place that over against James’s citation from a patient in a French asylum: “O God! what a misfortune to be born! Born like a mushroom, doubtless between an evening and a morning.”

When I was drifting and then plummeting to my bottom, I would look at the grazing cows with envy. Free of despair, I would say of them. In his remarks on despair as experienced by John Bunyan, James writes: “Envy of the placid beasts seems to be a very widespread affection in this type of sadness.” How did he know that?

III

In Irish, a distinction is made between problem and trouble. The first, even if dire, with work and John Dewey’s “creative intelligence” can be resolved. With trouble, there is no way out, without punishment. The difference between my announcement that I *was* a sick soul and that I *am* an alcoholic is instructive here. In the sick soul, the persons introduced by James are suffering without any quarter. He does not discuss relief until the subsequent chapters on conversion. And the major characteristic of conversion is the appearance, the happening of a power transcendent—from beyond the personal locale of the malaise, the fright, the despair. He holds that the healing of the divided self comes “in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities.” He does say that this access to

a higher power is “what conversion signifies in general terms, *whether or not* we believe that a direct divine operation is needed to bring such a moral change about” (my emphasis). Then, in writing of the case of Stephen H. Bradley, he tells us that “possibilities of character lay disposed in a series of layers or shells, of whose existence we have no premonitory knowledge.” One thinks here of James’s contention that there are “possibilities extant” not yet in our present sight.

Returning here to a diagnosis of one kind of sick soul, the clinical low-bottom alcoholic, the received wisdom anoints and judges that person as hopeless, clearly having trouble rather than a problem. Remarkably, in three pages of the Big Book of *Alcoholics Anonymous*, William James, Carl Jung, and Bill Wilson, the founder of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), gather together to delineate both the hopelessness and the thin, desperate hope that what we have here can become a problem, with the chance, ever so slight, of having a way out.

A certain American business man had ability, good sense, and high character. For years he had floundered from one sanitarium to another. He had consulted the best known American psychiatrists. Then he had gone to Europe, placing himself in the care of a celebrated physician (the psychiatrist, Dr. Jung) who prescribed for him. Though experience had made him skeptical, he finished his treatment with unusual confidence. His physical and mental condition were unusually good. Above all, he believed he had acquired such a profound knowledge of the inner workings of his mind and its hidden springs that relapse was unthinkable. Nevertheless, he was drunk in a short time. More baffling still, he could give himself no satisfactory explanation for his fall.

So he returned to this doctor, whom he admired, and asked him point-blank why he could not recover. He wished above all things to regain self-control. He seemed quite rational and well-balanced with respect to other problems. Yet he had no control whatever over alcohol. Why was this?

He begged the doctor to tell him the whole truth, and he got it. In the doctor’s judgment he was utterly hopeless; he could never regain his position in society and he would have to place

himself under lock and key or hire a bodyguard if he expected to live long. That was a great physician's opinion...

The doctor said: "You have the mind of a chronic alcoholic. I have never seen one single case recover, where that state of mind existed to the extent that it does in you." Our friend felt as though the gates of hell had closed on him with a clang.

He said to the doctor, "Is there no exception?"

"Yes," replied the doctor, "there is. Exceptions to cases such as yours have been occurring since early times. Here and there, once in a while, alcoholics have had what are called vital spiritual experiences. To me these occurrences are phenomena. They appear to be in the nature of huge emotional displacements and rearrangements. Ideas, emotions, and attitudes which were once the guiding forces of the lives of these men are suddenly cast to one side, and a completely new set of conceptions and motives begin to dominate them. [Jung takes this from William James.] In fact, I have been trying to produce some such emotional rearrangement within you. With many individuals the methods which I employed are successful, but I have never been successful with an alcoholic of your description."³

The Book then invokes *The Varieties of Religious Experience* by William James, stressing the many ways in which the alcoholic sick soul can have this "spiritual experience" and discover God. And it is here that we have the origin of the contentious, conflicted presence of the higher power in most recovery literature, especially Alcoholics Anonymous. (Parenthetically, this contention generated the line in Step 3, "God as we understood Him," the *sotto voce*, "a power greater than ourselves," and a further reference to William James's position that the "spiritual experience" could be of the "educational variety.")

Forebodingly, John the alcoholic does not believe in a higher power, nor do many other recovering alcoholics. For many, this is a permanent obstacle to recovery. Consequently, it was assumed that my trouble was indeed irresolute. Not so fast. Returning to James on the sick soul, at the end of the chapter he shares a document detailing a vastation experience laced with extreme morbidity and imagined terror. And the correspondent claims that he would have "grown

really insane” had he not clung to scriptural texts like “The eternal God is my refuge.” We know this document to be autobiographical. We also know that although this event was episodic and not permanently suffusing, James remained depressed for a year subsequent and, on February 1, 1870, tells us that he “about touched bottom.” On April 30, 1870, in a diary entry he announces a turn: “I will go a step further with my will, not only act with it, but believe as well. . . .” This turn does not involve a higher power and yet it was to be the decisive thread that knit together all of James’s work for the next forty years. James’s belief in what he later, famously, calls the “Will to Believe” is a philosophical bootstrap move. But this contention will enable him to set out with the mission that “Life shall [be built in] doing and suffering and creating.”⁴⁴ From that “way” of William James, I took a “way” out of my trouble, from which I was told over and over again, there was no way out. And, along his waying, he introduces me to a series of insights helpful to my waying. To that Jamesian pedagogy, I now turn.

IV

Contrary to conversion experiences of the sick soul, the secular clinical low-bottom alcoholic allegedly has no way out, that is, no cure, no Valhalla, no coming into the clearing, once and for all. The best one can do is remission. The Book tells us that we are offered a daily reprieve. Our sobriety depends on our “fit spiritual condition,” which is a way of saying that we must be vigilant, acutely aware of our vulnerabilities, and must stay in close contact with the community of recovering alcoholics as a “power greater than ourselves.” Quite simply and directly, we must be fed.

A turn is not a spinning top. It needs nutrition. From whence comes that, if I am secular, a philosophical naturalist, one who lives only *sub specie temporis*? As a sick soul of the alcoholic variety, all dangers are heightened. As a student of William James, personal possibilities are vast and enlivened, as when he tells us, in “The Will to Believe” (1897), that “the deepest thing in our nature is this *Binnenleben*, this dumb region of the heart in which we dwell alone

with our willingnesses and unwillingnesses, our faiths and fears.” For practicing alcoholics, “dwelling alone” had no such possibilities, for we faced only “finished facts,” as James would say, all dolorous and threatening. I give you a version from the AA book of an alcoholic sick soul:

For most normal folks, drinking means conviviality, companionship and colorful imagination. It means release from care, boredom and worry. It is joyous intimacy with friends and a feeling that life is good. But not so with us in those last days of heavy drinking. The old pleasures were gone. They were but memories. Never could we recapture the great moments of the past. There was an insistent yearning to enjoy life as we once did and a heartbreaking obsession that some new miracle of control would enable us to do it. There was always one more attempt—and one more failure.

The less people tolerated us, the more we withdrew from society, from life itself. As we became subjects of King Alcohol, shivering denizens of his mad realm, the chilling vapor that is loneliness settled down. It thickened, ever becoming blacker. Some of us sought out sordid places, hoping to find understanding companionship and approval. Momentarily we did—then would come oblivion and the awful awakening to face the hideous Four Horsemen—Terror, Bewilderment, Frustration, Despair. Unhappy drinkers who read this page will understand!

Now and then a serious drinker, being dry at the moment says, “I don’t miss it at all. Feel better. Work better. Having a better time.” As ex-problem drinkers, we smile at such a sally. We know our friend is like a boy whistling in the dark to keep up his spirits. He fools himself. Inwardly he would give anything to take half a dozen drinks and get away with them. He will presently try the old game again, for he isn’t happy about his sobriety. He cannot picture life without alcohol. Some day he will be unable to imagine life either with alcohol or without it. Then he will know loneliness such as few do. He will be at the jumping-off place. He will wish for the end.⁵

And the *end*, he will do, directly by suicide, indirectly by death from alcohol poison, or covertly by alcoholically induced accident. This text, without missing a beat, could have been included among those that James selects for the sick soul. There are hundreds more of these stories, these accounts of “living” at the bottom, a living death so to speak.

As I detailed earlier, we know that James spent time in the darkness. We know, as well, that he announced a turn that was to become a way out for him, namely, a self-propelling act of the will, which he said “to be sure *can’t* be optimistic” but can “posit,” that is, shift the site by which we carry on. Herein, we have the “relocation” of the inner life discussed in the sick soul and the rearrangement he discussed in “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings,” whereby “our self is riven and its narrow interests fly to pieces, then a new centre and a new perspective must be found.” So too, is this the centerpiece of Jung’s counsel to his hopeless hapless alcoholic patient, namely, the need for “a huge emotional displacement” under the press of a vital spiritual experience. For me, this is the turn called for in the AA Big Book chapter “How It Works”: “We stood at the *turning* point” (my emphasis).

All of this is comparatively well known by students of William James and especially by reflective, long-suffering recovering low-bottom alcoholics. It is also well known that the program of Alcoholics Anonymous provides us with a “way” out of the darkness, subsequent to the turn as made by “our innermost self.” What is less well known, however, is that the philosophical ruminations of occasional contentions in the work of William James are also a way out of the darkness. Further, this way of James does *not* entail the necessity of certitude, the assumption of or the need for ultimate intelligibility. Nor must one have a transcendent source of power to credential either one’s beliefs or one’s actions. Rather, “by their fruits ye shall know them,” and the proof is in the pudding. Not that James rules these desiderata out of court, for pluralist that he is, more than one way of a way is a player. He does, however, hold that none of these finalities is sufficiently grounded,

experientially, and that they all can be, and indeed have been, obstacles to human flourishing.

We have a number of paths to take on the thought of William James that would be salutatory for amelioration of the alcoholic sick soul. We could, for example, track his concern for blindness, which in this situation I do not register as moral blindness but rather as experiential blindness. The correlate here for the alcoholic sick soul is a double denial; the first, that something is awry with me, and the second is my denial by deflection of the messages given to me, both as warnings and for the possibility of help. We could also probe his many writings on the human will, especially his contention that our will can be an actor, a knowing actor, and not simply a carrier of orders from our minds, which for the alcoholic sick soul are relatively deranged. The issue at stake here is that the alcoholic sick soul has no will power, for the grip of addiction strips us of the capacity to act in a traditional manner, that is, changing, stopping, starting fresh. The incontinence of our will as discussed by Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, perceptive as that may be, does not face up to the shocking contention of the Big Book, that “self-knowledge avails us nothing.” Self-deception as a metaphor or as a phenomenon does not show up in James, as such. Subtly, however, it is a Jamesian message, for he holds that nothing is so until the consequences show their hand. No practicing alcoholic wants to hear that. Yet, no issue is more paramount in the early stages of recovery, for as we “survey the wreckage of our past,” the AA phrase, we are utterly astonished and chagrined at the harm we have caused and at the looming chasm between our “self-knowledge” and our actions. William James teaches us that if the relationship between knowing and action is characterized by a flaccid will, be that due to madness, despair, or addiction, then we are cut off from possibility, from chance and from recovery. For a practicing alcoholic this is not a welcome lesson, for he or she cannot face the consequences when the upshot of that is to make the turn, *now*.

We could also track James’s voluntarism through his many discussions on the powers and energies of men. At first glance, the significance of these writings for the alcoholic sick soul is

immediate, for the first half of the first step in AA reads, “We admitted we were powerless over alcohol.” James is fascinated with personal energy and with a rending of the nature of willpower. I read these essays as compensatory to his congenital and epigenetic neurasthenic self working here, as well as the behavioral strand in James’s stream. Not only were Freud and Jung his descendents, but so too were John Watson, pioneer of behaviorism, and B. F. Skinner. There is work to be done here, but I choose another path in the writings of William James.

For me, help for the way out by the sick soul, alcoholic or otherwise, is his bequest of radical empiricism, broadly construed, begun at least as early as his essay “On Some Omissions of Introspective Psychology” in 1884, continuing through the chapter “The Stream of Thought” in *The Principles of Psychology* in 1890, his remarks in the preface to *The Will to Believe, and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* in 1897, the essays of 1904–1906, and a final statement in the preface to *The Meaning of Truth*, 1909. Other instances abound.

The irreducible kernel of James’s radical empiricism is, first: we are going to discuss our experiences and only our experiences (as of today, that means under consideration are the experiencings of six billion human beings); second, it is a fact (in the New York City jargon of my childhood—this is true fact), a fact “that relations between things, conjunctive as well as disjunctive, hold together from next to next by relations that are themselves parts of experience” (preface, *The Meaning of Truth*). We have here an equivalently affective experience of “and” and “cold,” of “but” and “hot.” The “generalized conclusion” is that our stream of experience is concatenatedly “knit from within” and does not need an “extraneous trans-empirical connective support,” from any source no matter how benighted. Riding beneath this description of radical empiricism are his assumptions that we are interest-bearing organisms, welcoming, rejecting, and choosing from the interminable eventing that cascades over us, around us, under us, and through us. Crucial, also, is his view that consciousness has a fringe as well as a focus.

This Jamesian personscape provides us with a rich deposit from the making of a philosophical anthropology. Today, I reach for but one fallout, one upshot, one message: can I find help here for the recovering of a sick soul, in particular, the alcoholic sick soul? Yes, indeed!

The experience of despair is a constant presence in James's reportage of the sick soul. Certainly despair is undergone by the low-bottom alcoholic, but the nomenclature is tellingly different, namely, we experience unyielding, systemic loneliness. In the book of AA, "loneliness," "alone," and "lonely" are the most frequent diagnostic words. If you begin an AA meeting with fifteen recovering alcoholics of variant length of sobriety, age, gender, race, class, occupation, profession, whatever, and say, "Let us discuss loneliness," invariably you will witness an outpouring of admission that loneliness was unbearable, a loneliness known "as few do." What does the radical empiricism of William James have to do with our plight? Much! Loneliness is disconnection. I reach but I do not touch. With Heraclitus, the Logos speaks but I do not hear. Febrile texture turns to straw. The world of experience turns shabby and I, myself, become shabby. Contrary to the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins (in "God's Grandeur"), there is no "freshness deep down things." There is no freshness, no deep, nowhere, no how. My world is stripped of contours, edges, rivulets, bypasses, signings, and, above all, horizons. I am locked up inside my sick soul, my addiction and I experience the utter hopelessness as earlier expressed by Leo Tolstoy, a Jamesian sick soul.

Entering into the process of recovering—assuming here a turn, a Jamesian willingness, not a conversion—I need to be fed, quick and very slow. The quick "is bringing possibility back into life." James tells us that we experience separateness to the end. Forget about temporal finality. But he also tells us that separateness, disconnection, is a continuous transition. This means that my loneliness, stark and searing as it may be, is continuous with the flow of my experiencing and is potentially open to messages from whomever, whatever, wherever, especially those from the fringe of the speaking stream. To be a sick soul, to be a drunk, an alcoholic,

an addict, a thief cannot be captured by a label. And it cannot be diagnosed as a personal state, a type, an object, a subject, or any other nomination that reflects a “block universe,” a “brickbat plan of construction,” so deplored by William James, in *Principles of Psychology*. To be a sick soul is a process. We are souls who are sickening, such that the spiritual nutrition needed to sustain a turning is blocked, from our seeing, our hearing, our touching, our feeling. We find ourselves in an encapsulating vortex. Spiritual inanition is our lot, our trap.

Yet, all may not be lost. James has counseled us that separateness, loneliness, is a continuous transition. Continuous with what? we ask. With the fringe, with the more, with the “fact” that “there can *be* no difference anywhere that doesn’t *make* a difference elsewhere.” Surely, our explicit situation is dreadful. We must turn to the implicitness both awash and hidden in everything, everywhere. In “A World of Pure Experience” in *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, James writes: “Our fields of experience have no more definite boundaries than have our fields of view. Both are fringed forever by a *more* that continuously develops, and that continuously supersedes them as life proceeds.”

William James is not telling us that our abject loneliness should reach out for a “more,” a relational buzz. No. He is telling us that our loneliness has its own “more.” To have this “more,” look to the edge, follow the relational transitions, however spare, however pale. This is the “slow.” More than likely, nutrition, even if ever so slight, will show its hand. He continues:

...Experience itself, taken at large, can grow by its edges. That one moment of it proliferates into the next by transitions which, whether conjunctive or disjunctive, continue the experiential tissue, cannot, I contend, be denied. Life is in the transitions as much as in the terms connected; often, indeed, it seems to be there more emphatically, as if our spurts and sallies forward were the real firing-line of the battle, were like the thin line of flame advancing across the dry autumnal field which the farmer proceeds to burn. In this line we live prospectively as well as retrospectively.

The second promise given to recovering alcoholics is that “we will not regret the past nor wish to shut the door on it.” All of our experiencings speak, not only to us but within the stream itself. And how is that possible? Because, *mirabile dictu*, our experiences are “cognitive of one another,” for the “knowledge of sensible realities thus comes to life inside the tissue of experience.” Loneliness is cut, for we are not spectators looking out at a vast abyss, so characteristic of the sick soul. Rather, we are participants in the “knowledge of sensibilities,” as “*made*; and made by relations that unroll themselves in time.” However halting, sparse, bare, this ongoing relational manifold is at the beginning of recovery; it is nonetheless, a Jamesian “perch” in the rush of sensorial makings and unmakings. Following James, this knowledge is not knowledge “about,” as in the conceptual or formulaic, notably characterized by distance between self and world. Rather, for James we speak here of knowledge by “acquaintance,” by direct experience, prehensive, hand over hand. And our loneliness is further ameliorated by the rush of hunches, hints, and surprises as these relations speak to each other, and slowly, richly, speak to us. Contrary to common wisdom, I do not think that in recovering, the amelioration of systemic loneliness occurs in a flash, a burning bush as it were. Rather, it “works if you work it.” But if James is on to something, as I think he is, then the will to believe in possibility can unlock that “frozen sea” so terrifyingly depicted in his chapter on the sick soul.

I do not speak here about “smelling the roses” (although I can be testy about that oft-cited quick fix for a deadly malaise). No, I point here to pedagogy found initially in the *Periphyseon* of Johannes Scotus Erigena and subsequently in the tradition of the *vestigia dei* as found in the medieval Franciscans, the Victorines, Bonaventure, and on into Jonathan Edwards’s *Images or Shadows of Divine Things*, Horace Bushnell, Ralph Waldo Emerson on Nature, and the radically empirical metaphysics and pedagogy of William James. (The capstone of this tradition is found in the first three chapters of John Dewey’s *Art as Experience*.) Only semi-canonical, this tradition embraces a pedagogy of nutrition, one in

which all counts, everything speaks, and although loneliness can never be absolutely abrogated, we become able to connect it to flourishing.

The turn toward recovering is less than an act of faith, but it is more than an act of hope. Absorbing the message of a famous torch song, perhaps we can say that recovering is “taking a chance on love.”

V

I leave you with the following peroration. Twenty-five years ago in 1985, I was drinking heavily, as they say. While in classic denial as to my bonafide practicing alcoholism, I wrote the following paragraphs in an essay, “Experience Grows by Its Edges”:

Being in the world is not a cakewalk. Our surroundings, personal, natural, and social are fraught with potential deception, actual invasion, and an omnipresent indifference. To make a world as distinctively ours by the making of relations is too often a rarity. The other-directedness made famous by David Riesman and his colleagues in *The Lonely Crowd* can be raised to the status of an ontological category. In ideal terms, a person comes to consciousness and begins to work out one’s place, one’s version, and one’s taste for this or that. Yet we now know that the burgeoning self is fraught with personal freight: genetic, familial, linguistic, bodily, climatic, ethnic, gender, racial, and even the subtleties of gait, weight and smile. As I see it, the fundamental challenge is to convert the personal weaknesses into strengths and to drive our strengths into the teeth of a personally neutral but relatively pregnant world. The ancient philosophers, especially the Stoics and the Epicureans, offered sage advice on how to be in the world without getting maced. Taken overall, their warnings focused on the dangers of excess, indolence, and self-aggrandizement. This was and is wise counsel. The intervening 2,000 years, however, have bequeathed a far more sophisticated environment as a setting for the construction of a personal world. The dangers, the traps, and the obstacles are more subtle, more extensive, and more seductive than they were in antiquity.

The scriptural rhetorical question, Lord, what must I do to be saved? can be reinvoked by our children and our students as follows: What shall I do to make a world which is personally mine, although it inheres, coheres, borrows and lends to others who are making a world personally their own? Couched more indirectly, this is the question that our children and our students ask us. The initial response is obvious. Make relations! Build, relate, and then reflect. Reflect, relate, and then build. Seek novelty, leave no stone unturned. Fasten on colors, shapes, textures, sounds, odors, and sights. Above all, never close down. The only acceptable denouement is death. Until then all signs are go, that is, make relations until the maker is unmade. Still, in the making of relations, dangers lurk.⁶

I then detailed the perils which lurk as a threat to our making relations, namely, relation starvation, relation saturation, relation seduction, relation repression, and relation amputation. Four years later, I was locked up in an addiction treatment center because I was suicidal and dying, imminently, of alcohol poisoning. Not only was I unable to make relations, doing, making of any kind was “impossible.” Note that word, impossible. And, I had fallen prey to all of the perils I articulated in the essay. In fact, truth be told, I was a Jamesian very sick soul, living barely, and at that, living only a second-hand life. I was not taken by those messages couched in the bland rhetoric of the higher power, nor was I taken by the suffocating omnipresence of moral and cultural expectations, to straighten up. The first increased my second-handedness and the second seemed to come from egregious moral self-righteousness. Fortunately, I had not forgotten the pedagogy of William James. I clung to his affirmation of the possibility of possibility. After all, did not James tell me that “nothing has been concluded” and that possibilities were extant, not yet in our present sight? And did he not warn me that these messagings from the fringe could not be packaged conceptually, for they will go limp? So, too, did he say that such messagings were averse to clarity, even though they be intelligible and meaningful. William James’s mantra, “ever not quite” but “so,” became my own.

Walt Whitman has it best, in “Song of Myself”:

The press of my foot to the earth springs a hundred affections,
They scorn the best I can do to relate them.

Although at deep odds with each other, these profound messages of Whitman hold together, *en passant*, in a Jamesian radically empirical personscape. On behalf of that *coincidentia oppositorum*, I try to live my life, while recovering from the sickness of my soul.⁷

NOTES

John J. McDermott delivered these words as the William James Lecture on Religious Experience at Harvard Divinity School on May 6, 2010. In archetypal McDermott fashion, he included his phone number with the published version of the lecture, along with an invitation to call him if any of those who read it wanted to have a conversation. It was published in *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* vol. 39 (Summer/Autumn 2011). We are grateful to the *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* for granting us permission to reprint it in this issue. While we have formatted the article, we have not altered its contents.

¹ *William James: A Selection from His Writings on Psychology*, edited with a commentary by Margaret Knight (Penguin Books, 1950).

² David C. Lamberth, *William James and the Metaphysics of Experience* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 7.

³ *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 4th ed. (2001), chapter 2, “There Is a Solution,” 26–27. The excerpts from *Alcoholics Anonymous* are reprinted with permission of Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc. (“AAWS”). Permission to reprint these excerpts does not mean that AAWS has reviewed or approved the contents of this publication, or that AAWS necessarily agrees with the views expressed herein. A.A. is a program of recovery from alcoholism *only*—use of these excerpts in connection with programs and activities which are patterned after A.A., but which address other problems, or in any other non-A.A. context, does not imply otherwise. [These permissions appeared in the original article.]

⁴ *Writings of William James*, ed. John J. McDermott (University of Chicago Press, 1977 [1967]), xxviii.

⁵ *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 4th ed. (2001), chapter 11, “A Vision for You,” 151–152.

⁶ “Experience Grows by Its Edges: A Phenomenology of Relations in an American Philosophical Vein,” in John J. McDermott, *Streams of Experience: Reflections on the History and Philosophy of American Culture* (The University of Massachusetts Press, 1986), 151–152.

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