

LOOKING AT MYSELF

David Parrish

Looking at Myself

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Introduction

This is a book about YOU.

It involves a story about a man named John Sherman and a revolutionary discovery that opens a totally new horizon for mankind.

Nonetheless, it is a book about YOU. In fact, everything you have ever encountered is about YOU.

You don't typically think of it that way but, if you consider it, *you* are what you're interested in: *you* and *your life*.

Everything that comes into your experience is processed as it relates to you. This is not so much a matter of ego, or being in a selfish or self-centered state, it is simply the reality of the human experience. Your experience is that everything other than you is outside of you. So, life is about you. Life is the experience of you relating to everything outside of you. Everything that comes into your field of perception is therefore evaluated in terms of it being useful or not useful or irrelevant to your survival; followed by what will bring "good" or satisfying experiences and avoid "bad" or dissatisfying experiences.

So, it's you and life; you and your experience. That's what's going on. You can talk about it anyway you want and come up with all kinds of ideas about you and life. However, it comes down to what I just said.

This all started with your appearance here, with your birth. You don't remember much about it because you did not have language when it occurred. You know you showed up because you're here now, and you have a story given to you by others and then recorded by you – a story that is the story of you.

As you read this book, you will be evaluating it just as you evaluate everything that comes into your field of perception. You will compare it to everything you ever experienced. You will automatically continue to read it, as long as it shows up for you as non-threatening and useful; that is, as long as it doesn't hurt you (or more accurately, doesn't hurt the concept you have of yourself) and as long as it offers something good like satisfaction or contentment. Otherwise, you will lose interest and put it down.

Typically, the first quality that must be present is that you understand it. If you don't understand it, it appears to have no use. In addition, not understanding something seems to imply that something is wrong and somehow threatening. Please be clear that this is not a negative assessment about you. It is simply the way it is. If you get this, then you can relax a bit and continue on.

At this point, you may be asking, "What is this all about?" This book is about you; it's about the fact that you are *looking for* something. You have been living the life described above and it has not been such a

good experience, and it has become apparent to you that the more things change, the more they stay the same. Each new promising possibility ends up losing its power to bring fulfillment or satisfaction. Life itself appears to be an unpredictable, incomprehensible, constant parade of appearances that must be processed so you can survive and maintain some sense of security or contentment. So you are looking. (Some call it seeking.) You're looking for something to finally bring you satisfaction, contentment, or fulfillment, something that will last and bring an end to what has been called "human suffering."

This is what you have been looking for, and where you have been looking is in the world: in possessions, in relationships, in ways to alter your experience, in spiritual teachings and teachers, any place that offers hope for a better experience of life. The possibilities are endless and can easily occupy a lifetime — and usually do.

This is a book about a very, very simple act that brings an end to the source of this drama. An act that brings an end to the fear of life that originated not long after your arrival. This fear of the experience of being here has been founded, not just on the way life appears to be, but also on *who you consider yourself to be*. As you may recall, I distinguished *you* from *the concept you have of you*. That is, you consider yourself to be some form of identity. For example, a body, a personality, or some role, like a father, a mother, a businessperson, a teacher. So this book, and the story of the man who came upon the key (the simple act that brings

an end to the fear of life), is about *you*. It's not about your ideas or concepts about you, but about the actual experience of *you*. It's about who you are naturally, and about the experience of being that is natural to who you are: the natural human life.

You may ask, "But how do I do this?" This man, this unexpected character, John Sherman, has found the answer to this question. He didn't know he had found it until, over time, his experience revealed the obviousness of it. Since then, he has had only one thing to say to anyone who will listen: look at yourself.

In the pages that follow, I will describe my experience of coming upon John and Carla Sherman, and taking on the simple act he suggests. I will review his story and the turn of events that brought him to the recognition of this simple act, and I will share the experiences I have had since I began looking at myself. I will also discuss some of my ideas about this looking as a distinctive act that has the power to end the context of fear that has produced the insanity that pervades the world. Finally, I will report on the creation of a project to bring this simple message to humanity and have the world go sane.

The purpose of this book is to invite you to take on the act of looking at yourself and find out for yourself what life actually is.

What brought me to the looking

I am a psychologist who has worked over the last forty years in prisons and in private practice. My work with prisoners has been a unique education. It has been said that the typical life of a human being is akin to being in prison. I have seen this to be accurate, both in my own life and in the world of prisons in which I have worked. And yet, at the same time, I have met men in prison who got free and experienced a quality of life beyond what most people outside the walls have. Interestingly enough, the man who came upon the simple act that inspired this book spent most of his adult life in prison. He has described this experience as one that served him well. Given where he ended up, I can understand it.

In 2008, when I was working as a warden in a medium security prison after thirty-two years of service as a forensic psychologist and prison administrator, I came upon John Sherman's website. At the time, I was delivering a program to a select group of inmates called *The Impact Project*. This was an intensive program that utilized material from a very popular and successful human transformation course that I had participated in over the years. The program I was implementing was successful in terms of the significant changes it produced in the personalities and behaviors of the men involved. However, I was under

scrutiny by my director and the custody staff, who believed that I was misusing my role as administrator and compromising the operation of the prison. Therefore, even though I was teaching an effective living approach that prisoners found helpful, I was under a lot of stress and pressure, and I was struggling to manage my own anxiety and fear of the future.

I was perplexed at why I just could not find a way to stop my craziness, mainly in my relationships. I often surfed the Internet to keep track of new ideas being presented, especially those in the area of teachings that offered the experience of life I imagined possible. I had had many glimpses of this possibility over the years, sometimes lasting for days at a time, and had had perceptions and experiences that were consistent with what I had read about in many books. But still, like most seekers, I kept moving from teacher to teacher, and I tried many practices. While my experience of life was mostly fulfilling, I continued to be aware of a subtle background of anxiety.

When I came upon John and Carla Sherman's website, I was intrigued by the fact that this man was an ex-con who had served eighteen and a half years in the federal prison system. He appeared much different than the typical consciousness teachers around the net. His presentation was low key, and he talked in a very matter-of-fact way about the condition that pervades our experience. One thing he pointed out caught my attention: during the last 5,000 years, there have

been many teachers, traditions, and practices but only a few people have stumbled upon a state of freedom from the common psychological, emotional, and physical suffering that has been a part of the human story. I had often wondered about this. I wondered why there didn't seem to be a specific process or procedure that worked, one that gave everyone access to an experience of life that is totally fulfilling, without the anxiety, fear and apprehension that seem to be everywhere.

John Sherman was saying that after a decade of trying to identify exactly what had resulted in his experiencing what he called "natural human life," it finally became apparent to him: it was the simplest act imaginable. He reported that, at first, he did not know what had caused his own shift in experience, where his life appeared completely fulfilling just as it is, without the fear and anxiety that had plagued him for as long as he could remember. It was during his attempts to talk about this shift that he realized he had looked at himself.

What followed was a period of reorganization of the very structure of personality that had developed out of the fear of life. This reconstruction took time, and there were difficult and uncomfortable experiences but, in time, he noticed that the fear was gone and life appeared to him as an endless arising of wonderful, unpredictable phenomena that filled him with joy.

My first impression upon reading this and hearing him talk about it, was that it was too simple, especially when I considered all of the wisdom traditions, teachings, and practices (especially from the East) that required intense effort, devotion, study, and usually involved a guru and the transmission of esoteric wisdom teachings. It also occurred to me that this man had a history of criminal behavior, part of which involved schemes to make quick money. Should an intelligent person like me, a psychologist who had studied and practiced much of the ancient and current techniques and teachings, accept that an ex-con had come upon the actual gateway to end fear and open the way to the fulfilled experience of life sought by humanity in so many different ways?

In spite of my reactions, I could not ignore his intelligence and clarity. I also acknowledged that his comments about how few people appeared to experience this fulfilling context of life was actually the case. I saw this clearly for myself, although I was too afraid to talk about it because it seemed to me that I would be questioning a sacred cow and revealing my naïveté. Yet, it is the case, and he shared that this was one aspect of human aspiration that had troubled him for a long time.

John Sherman also said that to do this simple act, nothing is required. You don't have to believe in it. You don't have to stop believing, practicing, or doing whatever else you are doing. There is nothing to join, no guru to be devoted to, and no payment expected. He

affirmed that if you simply do this act, you will notice that it will occur to you to do it again and again, and the root cause of dis-ease in life, the fear of life, will come to an end. Then, over time, what he calls a “recovery process” will occur, and a natural experience of life, a sane relationship to life will be revealed.

So, with all of this considered, I chose to give it a try. I followed his simple direction to move the beam of my attention inward and do my best to get a glimpse of what it is like to be *me*. As time passed, I realized that this business of looking at myself was on the one hand very simple, and at the same time very complicated. I found that I was surprised and excited when what John Sherman suggested would happen, began to happen.

The experiences that followed the act of looking at myself are what motivated me to write this book.

The idea of a book

After taking the action of looking at myself, I noticed that it occurred to me to do it again, at various times and various places. Something was occurring that was different from anything I had ever experienced. Something really new was going on.

I had always struggled with my relationships with women. I have been married four times. No matter what else in my life was working, intimate relationships continued to be frustrating. After so many years of failing in this area of life I concluded that, having come from a crazy family, I was just too screwed up to expect to have my relationship work.

Several months after I started looking at myself, I had a typical upset with my wife. The familiar pattern used to go like this: she would say or do something, and I would have an angry reaction. Then, we would argue until we realized there was nothing to do but stop talking. The open conflict was followed by distancing, disappointment, frustration, anger, sadness, and depression.

On this occasion, when the reaction struck, I shared it with her and listened to her response. I understood her point of view, and what was needed to clear the air and move on. And I just did it. I did not *think* to do it, it just seemed to happen. I was surprised and confused

afterwards. Something had changed, and I had not noticed it until this situation happened. The fear that was the context of my life was no longer driving me to be defensive or aggressive. I was free to see what was happening without feeling threatened, and I was able to simply respond. This seemed so simple and did not fit my ideas of how things worked. I had spent years in therapy working on this area of my life, thinking that I needed to work through my relationship with my mother and discharge all of my emotional baggage. When I looked to see how this had come about, the only thing that I had done differently was to do the act of looking at myself.

Not long after this, a crisis occurred in my career. I was not your typical prison administrator. As a psychologist, I had many years of experience working closely with inmates and getting a good sense of their world and the inside of their lives. After years of hard work, and developing relationships with prison administrators, I had been promoted to administrator of a medium security state prison in Camden, New Jersey.

When I became an administrator, in charge of my own institution, I felt compelled to implement an intensive program based on what I had learned over three decades of work. This new program would offer an opportunity for those inmates who were interested to transform their experience of life. I set up the program and led the three-day intensive that was the initial phase of the program.

As I continued to develop the program, I encountered hostility from many custody and higher administration staff who did not believe that inmates should be provided much more than punishment and seclusion. I knew that my direct involvement with the program, and the men who participated in it, would draw negative reactions. Yet, I could not ignore this opportunity I had to make a difference. After running the program with the help of volunteers for over a year, I found myself being investigated by the Special Investigations Division and I recognized that I would be removed. Long story short, I was removed and subsequently fired for violating procedure.

During this time, I experienced tremendous stress and concern about the future. My pension was on the line, after thirty-two years of service. I had a household, and financial responsibilities to manage, and I had people who were dependent on me. The people who worked with me on the program were supportive, but I was on my own to deal with this experience.

While the situation was uncomfortable and challenging, there was something else about my experience that I could not put my finger on. I noticed that I was not as freaked out as I thought I would be, as the process of fighting for my pension went forward. Of course, there was stress and many difficult decisions about legal approaches, legal representation, paying the bills while my pension was held hostage and so on. Yet, looking back on this time, I can see that what was gone was

the background fear of life that had always been there in the form of angst. While I had concerns about the future, it did not incapacitate me or overwhelm me. I was able to see what needed to be done and do it. I ended up appearing on my own behalf before the State Ethics Committee. My case was resolved, and a memo from the chairperson went to the Pension Board suggesting that no negative action be taken on my pension. After that, I appeared on my own behalf before the State Pension Board. They were surprised that I did not have my lawyer present to do the talking. I made a statement to the board and asked that the documentation I submitted be reviewed and placed in the record. I was asked to step outside the room while the board discussed my case. Five minutes later, I was called back and told that my pension was approved without any action by the board and that I would receive two years of back pension payments.

It took me a while to see clearly that my personality was reconfiguring, and that there was a context for my experience of life that was not fear-based. The most incredible aspect of this is that it seemed to happen without my working it out. It just seemed natural for me to experience life not as a threat, but as an unfolding reality that was full of twists and turns, ups and downs, akin to the biggest and most exciting amusement ride imaginable.

I decided that I should go out to California to meet this guy John Sherman and find out what he was up to. There was a free annual retreat scheduled, so I registered and set up the trip.

The most striking aspect of my experience of John over the week I spent with him at this retreat was his ordinariness. He did not show up as a guru type. He did not exude the universe through his eyes and his presence. He appeared just as an ordinary human being interested in having a conversation about what he had done that had resulted in his living in the natural experience of life.

After the end of the retreat, my wife and I were invited to visit John and Carla Sherman at their home. We met for maybe an hour over tea. I forget the details of what we talked about. I think it had to do with my interest in working with John as he developed the conversation he wanted to have with people. He commented that his experience of me was that "I saw things clearly." As it turns out, this business of seeing things clearly is not something special. It is actually just the way life is seen, when the distorted, fear-based perceptions come to an end. I didn't recognize this at the time, but I think it is important to point it out now. When I left, we agreed to keep in touch and have more conversations.

I think that I emailed him after that and asked him if he would be willing to meet with a group of my friends using an Internet video

connection. He agreed and we had a meeting at a friend's house where about fifteen friends interacted with John and discussed his suggestion to take on the simple act of looking at yourself and see what happens.

I found it interesting that most of the people there appeared to be skeptical and hesitant, even though John made it clear that this act did not involve a commitment to anything, that it was free, and that it did not require changing anything, or believing anything, even believing that the act would work. At the time, I found this confusing. Why wouldn't people find this interesting and give it a try, given that nothing other than the act was required? After several more meetings, it became clear to me that this hesitation was one of the symptoms of the context of the fear of life. Given this context, people consider it "smart" to be cautious and not accept anything as it is presented. This posture of questioning anything and everything that sees everything in life as a possible trick is different from realistically looking at a proposal. It is clear to me, as I write this now, that humanity is in a state of paranoia. It brings to mind the joke that I often hear: *Just because you're paranoid, it doesn't mean no one's out to get ya.*

But what we joke about is often revealing. I recall someone talking about this aspect of our perception in the past, and saying that if Jesus Christ himself were around today talking to people, you would probably hear people say, He seems sincere, but he is a little pushy.

It became clear to John, and it is also clear to me now, that these conversations with people are the place where the future of this idea is taking shape and direction. That the interaction with people in the space of community is the home of this work, and that this work is not about individuals, it is about all of us. As John points out, we are all in this together. It is clear to me that John does not see himself as the personification of this work, as has often been the case with the so-called “masters” in the traditions. The community is the source of this work. The community forums, which have appeared on John’s website, clearly show that this is the case.

As I considered how I could work with John to develop this conversation and make this act available to more people, it occurred to me that this was finally the subject of a book I could write. Previously, I had had the impulse to write a book but, until now, I had not seen anything to say that would be different.

I presented the idea of writing a book to John and Carla. I suggested that the book be about my encountering John, and that I would speak as a psychologist. I would analyze his personality with the intention of finding out whether or not he was credible and authentic. I thought that this would be interesting to people, and it would provide an opportunity to present John’s ideas. At the same time, it would address the considerations that people might have about John, given his past criminal life.

John and Carla thought it was a good idea, and agreed to work with me on this project. They set up an online meeting room and we agreed to meet weekly. I would interact with them, and ask whatever I needed to develop my thinking around John's history and my psychological interpretations of his personality. John was very open and thought it would be interesting to review his past and discuss my thoughts about him. I often wondered whether he would react if I pushed him a bit about his outlaw past.

We met many times, and had some very interesting and stimulating conversations. As time passed, I did make comments about John's personality and developmental history and used clinical terminology such as "anti-social personality" to describe John's behavior in the past. I took an indifferent stance in my questioning and writing that purposefully challenged John's authenticity. However, no matter what I said, he just found it interesting. These conversations began to show up for me like my therapy sessions. John would review things from the past, and comment on how he experiences those things now. He was brutally honest and readily acknowledged that he had been a dirtbag and that he did not believe in anything or anyone, especially himself, for all those years. I brought up whatever I thought would be a useful area to drill into. I asked about his failures and, of course, his relationship with his mother and father, and his relationship with Carla. Rather than giving me anything juicy to write about, John

seemed to be noticing differences between the way he was before the looking and the way he is presently.

As I continued to write, I began to struggle with how I would get out of this new situation. I mean, it was clear that I could not identify anything in our interactions that suggested that John was inauthentic, or that he was not credible. But now, given that I was in the middle of experiencing the effects of having looked at myself and seeing the benefit of it, I realized that my experience of the truth of John's message was coming through in my writing. Therefore, I wondered if there was a possibility that my conclusions would be considered questionable. It might look like I was just using this approach to support John and his work.

Around this time, I noticed that there was a guy in the news making a prediction that the world was going to end. I recalled that, every so often, someone would predict the end of the world, and there would be attention given to it in the media. As the predicted date approached, there were reports that some people were selling all their belongings and preparing for the last judgment. I thought that this was all ridiculous since, if one considers this matter, it is apparent that the world has been on a slow slide toward the end for a long time. And this is not because of a prediction based on the alignment of the planets, but based on the actual, day-to-day "what is happening" in the news.

It occurred to me that it would be different and interesting if someone would come forward and predict the beginning of a new world, a world becoming sane and moving toward a future where the damage done could be reversed; a future that would ensure the welfare and well-being of everyone. I sent John an email sharing my thoughts about this. He wrote back and said that his response to reading my email was “joy.” He saw that his mission now would be to bring the looking to enough people, in a short enough period of time, so as to bring sanity to the world. When we talked more about this, I said that it would be cool if he created an event at a specific date and time. On this date, everyone around the world who had heard the suggestion to look at yourself would take a few moments to do it, all together at the same time. I shared that I remembered the Hands Across America event years ago, when people held hands and formed a line from coast to coast to promote solidarity.

John liked the idea and said that he would make this event part of the movement forward. Soon after that, he told me that he had come up with the name of the project. He called it the Just One Look project. After some research, he had found out how many people it would take to create a critical mass that would carry the suggestion of the act to all of humanity. This really psyched him up because he saw that, given the technology we now have, it is actually possible to communicate with enough people to reach a critical mass in a relatively short period of

time. Our attention began to turn toward this project and the organization needed to bring it into existence.

Just One Look, the project

As the book took a back seat to the newly created Just One Look project, our conversations turned to what it was going to take to bring it into existence and produce the outcome we desired. To take on the goal of reaching the ears of ten percent of the world population within three to five years was a tall order given that we had no clear plan as to exactly how we were going to do it.

Our meetings became conversations to begin to distinguish what it would take. It was clear that it would require an organization much larger than John and Carla, who had been the whole of the RiverGanga Foundation until then. It was clear that it would take a core organization of committed people, willing to take on many of the tasks that occupied most of John and Carla's time. It was clear that time and money were the first two areas that we needed to work on. I found it interesting that these two areas of life are of central interest and key to success for all of us. As we discussed these areas in our weekly meetings, a process emerged in which our relationship to time and money came into consideration and review. I could see John and Carla looking at their experience of time and money. I did my best to participate in this interaction in a useful way. What started to reveal itself was the importance of the conversation, not just the conversation

between us, but also the conversation that was developing in a community of people who were engaged in the recovery process that occurs after the act of looking. It became evident that conversation was the place in which the expression of the natural life showed up, and the field in which the way forward would reveal itself.

John had already said that it was clear to him that he had learned how to talk about what he wanted to communicate through listening to people in his conversations with them. He was looking for the kind of conversation where anyone, regardless of their beliefs, background, position, etc., could hear the suggestion to do this simple act and hear it clearly enough so that they would just do it. It occurred to me that life is a conversation. John often says, when talking about the mind and what shows up in the mind, that the mind is our life. I looked at this for myself, because this wasn't clear to me. When I looked, it was evident to me that life shows up in the constant conceptualization of experience that is occurring as a conversation, and that this conversation occurs in a context, either a context of fear or a context of wonder and joy. I was actually aware of this. I just had not recognized it as my own life.

As our meetings continued, John talked about the need for an organizing committee. He said that a guy named Bill was interested in donating his time to work on organizing volunteers. Bill joined the conversation soon after that, and we continued forward as an organizing committee. The development of the community forum on

the website became an area of interest and a place that John and Carla's energy moved toward. As of this writing, the process continues. I wonder what it will be like to read this at some point in the future, when all of this has played out. What a wonderful experience it is to engage with the unknown.

The looking and what follows

Before continuing, I think it is important to make a few things clear. What I have to say about this act of looking at yourself in terms of my perceptions, ideas, understandings, theories, etc., is just that: what I say about it. I don't claim what I say to be the truth. In fact, as far as I can tell, unless you experience this act and what follows for yourself, you can only imagine what I am speaking of. As Alan Watts once said, "If you eat the menu, you are not eating the food."¹

Actually, nothing can be said about the experience of who we are. And yet, all we have is language with which to exchange ideas. The important difference with this act of looking at yourself is that it goes beyond ideas and concepts. It is an action that is in the realm of experience. It is clear to me that this simple act is all that is necessary to fulfill the promise of being human, but whether this is the case or not is something you must find out for yourself. You must only rely on yourself when it comes down to it. This is the only way.

¹ Watts, Alan, *Does It Matter? Essays on Man's Relation to Materiality* (Vintage Books, 1971.)

What is it?

Now I am going to turn away from talking about my relationship to John and Carla, and make use of your attention in a more important way. The story, like a country and western song, is what we are so used to being involved with and living with. It can be interesting and useful to a certain extent, but it is still just a story.

What actually makes a difference? What really matters? What do you really want? Let's take a look at what you have been looking for. Let's take a look at looking at yourself.

This is a simple, direct method of experiencing the stark reality of you that brings about the end to the fear of life, and results in the experience of natural life. The experience of life is the ever-moving, ever-changing energetic play of form appearing in perception. Beyond the linear grasp of the mind, the experience of life is complete and fulfilled. It is all-inclusive: it includes the appearance of all internal and external phenomena and is itself life. Incomprehensible and mysterious, life is the precious gift, the birthright of appearing in human form. When the fear of life that occurred at birth departs, as a result of the direct experience of your actual nature through the act of looking at yourself, the apparatus or persona formed by the context of fear transforms itself. Once that process occurs, the direct experience of life is

possible. Rather than this being a special state, it becomes evident that it is just the ordinary or natural experience of human existence.

The discovery of this simple and direct method is a radical and revolutionary event.

Until now, all of the teachings and practices throughout the ages have failed to provide an actual method for experiencing natural life that will work for anyone who hears of it and performs it.

The act of looking at yourself means that, for the first time in human history, the experience of life that has been limited to the sages and saints is available to all human beings.

The act of looking at yourself is not a spiritual practice, and it is not mystical. It does not produce an immediate change in your experience. It is actually what is occurring all the time, as the action of looking at all that arises. This looking need not be understood; it is as incomprehensible as its source. All that is needed is to notice your ability to direct attention at will, and take the action of directing it fully to the sense, the experience, the feeling of *what it feels like to be you*. Just to make contact with it for a moment, to get a brief glimpse of it, regardless of what thoughts occur before, during, or after the act is performed.

Thoughts are commentary and interpretation of experiences. Thoughts are always based on the past, and are in the realm of conceptualization. They are concepts about experience, not experience. The experience of looking at yourself cannot be understood in thought. That which is being looked at does not appear in thought, and cannot be conceptualized. Only by the effects of having taken the act can it be known. In time, when the looking does its work, the fear departs along with the effects of the fear, and you become self-evident, not in concepts or ideas, not as a belief, but just as you — always here, always looking, never moving, having no qualities, no form.

The act of looking at yourself is the actual gateway to having the experience of life that we have been seeking. And this is where this simple act of looking at yourself departs from the past. This is what is different about what John Sherman is talking about. It is the case, I have found in my own experience, that this act of looking is the act that ends the fear of life and ignites the fire that burns down the neurotic personality that seems to be us. John is telling us that there is no need to keep listening to people talk about what it is like to be free, hoping that it will rub off on us eventually. There is no need to practice anything. John is telling us that he has discovered the single, simple act that is the key to the kingdom. From the other side of it, after the looking has done its job, it is obvious that this is not a spiritual matter. This is what it is, nothing more and nothing less.

What is clear to me is that this is the discovery we have been waiting for. If we are all the same as human beings in this life, then we all have the same birthright and we all have the same potential to be free and fully alive. This potential is fulfilled when we look at the truth of who we are. Just to look, not to see, since there is really nothing to see. To look in the direction of the source is to be the source, looking at itself. This is the fulfillment of being human: to be who we are and to be aware that life itself offers the appearance of separation, so that we can look at *everything*.

The lightness of being that follows the process of recovery from the effects of the fear of life is characteristic of the experience of natural life that ensues. The recovery process can be uncomfortable. I liken it to the process that a caterpillar goes through before transforming into a butterfly, with the added reflective awareness that we have as human beings. As the form of the caterpillar departs, there is concern as to what will come next. Is it nothing, is it death, or is it something beyond anything we could ever know as a caterpillar? Or is it the experience of being a butterfly, the freedom of flying?

How do I do it?

For most people, the initial question “What is it?” is followed by “How do I do it?”

This is a reasonable question. In the normal course of events, we have learned that being given instructions and learning the specific actions or steps necessary to accomplish something makes sense. What we don't notice about any process is that we are actually being told *what* to do, rather than *how* to do it. That is because no one knows how we do anything. You do it the same way you breathe, or the same way you beat your heart. Your response may be, I don't beat my heart, or I don't know what makes my heart beat. Yes, these things just appear to happen. But we do think we know how we do many things, when all we really know is what we appear to do and then what happens.

As John Sherman often says, “I cannot tell you how to do this.” He cannot tell us how to do it because no one knows how we do anything, and that's beside the point anyway. Trying to be helpful, John tells people *what* to do. He gives simple directions that involve noticing your ability to move your attention at will and then moving that attention to look at yourself. He talks about turning attention inward, toward the source attention appears to come from.

I have found that it may be useful to just notice that you have the ability to direct your attention, and then create the intention to look at yourself without any specific direction, and then just look. It has been my experience, especially after doing the looking for a while, that it doesn't matter if I look in a specific direction. I have noticed that I am everywhere and nowhere. How cool is that?

Also, I think it is useful to understand that *looking* is not *seeing* in terms of what we are doing here. The act of looking as it is used here is looking to look, not looking to see. Looking this way is very powerful. When we are just looking, rather than looking to see, what appears is different from what has shown up for us in the past. What happens is that our perception becomes an open field.

Don't be concerned if you don't get anything I say, or what anyone else says. In these kinds of conversations, understanding is actually not so important. This is just "what is so" and, as one of my teachers said, it is also "so what?" The only thing that really matters is that you take a look at yourself. The rest will take care of itself. As John Sherman points out, after you take a look, the only thing that is certain is that everything will turn out perfectly in the end.

What happens after I look?

After you look, what happens is what John Sherman calls a “recovery period.” He reports that this recovery is different for each person and is dependent on the unique structure of personality that has been constructed based on the context of the fear of life that was triggered some time very early in life. John reports that, when he went through it, he did not know what was happening. He actually did not know that he had looked at himself until many years later. During his recovery period, he did not know he was in recovery. He reports that he experienced psychological and emotional agony for several years without any support or guidance. During that period, he thought his suffering might be the result of his turning his back on everything that is considered sacred in life. It was only after the recovery slowed down and the fog lifted that he began to recognize what had occurred. Even then, he spent many years trying to sort it out and free himself of the constraints of the spiritual viewpoint. Clarity of expression developed over time in his conversations with people, as he attempted to talk about what he saw to be the case.

Given the experiences I had during my recovery, I am grateful to have had the support and guidance provided by John and the community of people who have embarked on this course of action. I

think that John and I have something in common, which resulted in our recovery being difficult and taking several years. In my case, what set me up for a difficult recovery was the extent I was willing to go to after the fear of life struck in order to compensate for my vulnerability. I developed a complex psychological system to escape the threat and give me a strong position from which to manage life. My stance or the pretense I took on to manage and control the fear of life was to be a professional in the realm of human behavior: a psychologist, someone who is considered an expert in the field. I earned a license to practice as a professional so that I had proof that I had my shit together. Today I often comment that if you want the perfect place to hide in life, become a psychologist. I don't say this to say that all psychologists are frauds. Of course, I don't know. I am sure that there are many psychologists that are actually very authentic and helpful to people.

I think that I did good work with many people out of a sincere interest to be effective and useful. I put myself in intensive therapy for years to address my craziness and keep it out of my relationships with my clients. Still, when it came to the recovery period from the fear of life, even after many years of work in therapy and my participation in a wide array of teachings and practices from the wisdom traditions, I was still holding onto an identity. The most challenging aspect of my recovery was having my attention consistently taken over by thoughts

that stimulated the underlying fear and anxiety, bringing up disturbing past events and raising concerns about the future.

This is a typical form of anxiety that I think most people experience, but it intensified after doing the looking. Eventually it became clear that I was thinking about thinking, and having experiences that were aspects of the recovery – without recognizing them for what they were. It seemed like everything from the past that troubled me got stirred up and manifested, especially in disturbing dreams. During waking hours, the intensity of these constant troubling ruminations grew like a storm evolving into a tornado. I had no context for what was happening and I experienced it as a kind of coming apart at the seams. This was when the support provided by John and the community of people who were in this process proved so valuable. Just to be reminded that this is a process that will do no harm and will pass in time was very reassuring.

As time passed and the disturbance calmed down, it became easier to be consistently aware that I was experiencing residual aspects of the structure of personality that had developed from the context of the fear of life. Eventually, when these neurotic impulses arose in thoughts, images, or sensations, they had lost all validity or the power to compel me to follow them. Thus, they departed, not long after they appeared. I especially noticed changes in my relationship to my wife. In the past, impulses and reactions would ramp up into acting out anger and

aggression. There was a period when this happened when I was in a kind of limbo. I experienced reactive thoughts and feelings, but did not express them or act on them. I just looked at them. This was difficult for my wife because I would spend days in silence. Although I was not being aggressive in anyway, I could not find a way to express where I was. I had this strong sense to simply allow the process, experience what was there and trust that everything would turn out right.

Although this was uncomfortable for both of us, it was clear to me that, in the space of silence, a powerful process was occurring. Who we were for each other and the issues and concerns that existed between us were being processed simply by allowing the experience of it, without trying to force any kind of resolution or conclusion through talking about it.

I was amazed that in the middle of this, I was experiencing life as exciting and I felt very alive. I noticed that I was enjoying many ordinary things around me. I would sit on my deck for long periods of time and just look at the trees and listen to the sounds of the birds, in profound awe and wonder. I noticed that my wife was engaging in new activities. She was setting up activities that she enjoyed, and actively working on career goals.

There are still things in process, but there is something new and different around the issue of control in our relationship. In the past,

because of fear, there was a need to be in control and to regain control when there was an upset, conflict or disagreement. With the passing of the fear, it became okay to let things be in process, and to let each other be where we were with our differences. And to allow the relationship to be alive, ever changing, involving the risk of vulnerability. Just as in life at large, there are times when a relationship is wonderful and times when it is difficult. In both cases, it is also authentic and surprising in all its turns and movements.

As a psychologist, I have worked with many people over the years who were struggling with conflict, discord, and issues around fidelity. With my own issues, it was confusing for me at times, but I always applied what I had learned to be the correct approach to working on relationships, which was to support and encourage people to communicate and work through their problems, so that they could feel better and get along. I see now that this strategy comes out of the context of fear and has to do with avoiding pain and trying to be in control. One thing that I have seen to be sacred in relationships is predictability. People want to be able to predict the future, especially in relationships where their heart is on the line. This is where the promises and commitments made in marriage play an important role for most people, even though the majority of marriages fail. I think the threat to predictability is why people get so upset when there is discord in their relationships and become aggressive, hostile, and defensive. This

response is driven by the fear of losing control and the fear of abandonment or betrayal. I found that when the fear of life began to depart, I was no longer driven to have control or have certainty about the future. It is not that I don't care if my wife betrays me or leaves me. I am sure this would be a very uncomfortable experience, but it no longer takes up most of my attention or energy. One of the things I actually love most about her is that she is not bound to me. As the fear departed from my life, what has become more apparent is the freedom to experience the free fall that life actually is.

I know that relationship is an area that can be very difficult for people, especially when the act of looking has taken place and the process of recovery is occurring. It is also the case that many people are in relationships where one person is involved in the looking and, for whatever reason, the other person is not. Often, our partners are simply not inclined or interested in these matters. When this is the case, it is useful to be aware of the impact of the process on your partner and to be as considerate and compassionate as possible. While my wife is not inclined to engage in these matters, she is respectful of my interest and activities. She indicates that she sees the value of what is offered, but feels that she has her own approach to life and has no need to engage with anything in particular, and I respect her point of view. We have talked about the looking and its results, and I believe she has engaged in looking at herself on her own terms and she has experienced a recovery

process. At least what I have noticed indicates that. In the end, it really doesn't matter, because I think sanity is contagious. When one person calms down and has space for their partner and the relationship, the other seems to follow.

When I was just naturally letting what was happening happen, everything began to clear up. I almost said when *I* got to the place where I was letting everything happen, but it is evident to me now that this was not something I did, it was just what happened. The idea that I was doing anything was a mistaken perception. This is a pivotal aspect of the shift that occurs when the fear of life departs. When I attend to my experiences, rather than only to the thoughts about my experiences, it is evident that I am not doing anything at all. And it is evident that I am what is happening, and it is just happening. Rather than there being a *me* that is separate from life and trying to survive in life, there is a shift to a sense of no separation. There is no life that I am separate from that is threatening me. What is really cool about this is that, while there is nothing left to realize, nothing has really changed. The difference is that life now appears in a context of freedom, what J. Krishnamurti called the "freedom from the known."² The mystery and wonder of life appear as the fulfillment of the human experience.

² Krishnamurti, Jiddu, *Freedom from the Known* (San Francisco, CA: Harper, 1975)

Changes in energy

The experience of the recovery period is very different for each person. It need not be difficult or take time, however most people who have reported being aware of this process indicate it takes some time and involves difficulties.

One difficulty for me during this time has been the changes in energy. Often, as the neurotic fear departs along with the consistent stress and tension that coincides with it, a transition occurs in which energy is freed up in the body. When this occurs, there is a period of adjustment. In my case, I found that I was never tired and did not sleep more than a few hours a day for weeks at a time. I had a sense that this was an aspect of the recovery, so I was not troubled by it. However, there were times when I was concerned about having responsibilities and obligations that would require me to be alert during the day. To my surprise, my functioning was not affected and at certain points, my body would naturally sleep and rest. I did some research and found that this energy transition is very common when consciousness is shifting to a more open, less constricted state.

It is important to be aware of the recovery process as it is occurring, so as not to become overly concerned if there are uncomfortable and unusual experiences. It is most important to

recognize that these experiences will not harm you and they do pass in time.

It makes a huge difference during this period to be in communication with others who are also experiencing the recovery process. The best place to do this is the online community forum created by John and Carla Sherman on their website www.justonelook.org. It is also very useful to participate in the weekly and monthly online meetings where John provides support, interacts with participants, and answers questions. I imagine that when this discovery is recognized by a critical mass of humanity, there will be many forms of support available in many other places.

One of the most beautiful aspects of this new discovery is that it brings forth the reality that all human beings everywhere have the same potential to make contact with the natural experience of life. It is not exclusive, nor does it involve any special teaching or practice. It does not matter what religion or beliefs one has. It does not matter what circumstances one finds oneself in, or what one's past has been. There is no hierarchy in this movement: there is no leader to follow or be devoted to. The form of its existence is community, which is comprised by people who have done the looking and discovered the natural experience of being human, which is sanity. In this community, we are all leaders, leading our own lives and participating in creating a world that works for everyone, with no one left out. The exact form of this

new future is yet to be seen, however what is predictable, if the world goes sane, is that insane behaviors will come to an end. War, unnecessary starvation, destruction of the planet, and the seeming inability for people to maintain workable relationships will come to an end. What will then become possible is a world in which people work together to have life work for everyone.

What is the difference?

What is the difference between this and all of the other practices, beliefs, spiritual traditions and teachings, philosophical teachings, psychological teachings or anything else that has come along in the past?

When I have organized meetings to talk with people about this new method of experiencing natural life, people have often asked this question. The short answer to this question is: *everything*.

There is no connection between this method and anything that has come before. Consider that when John Sherman accomplished the act of looking, went through the recovery process that follows it and then found the natural living that results when the fear of life departs, he was actually trying to end any interest in seeking a solution to life. For over a year, he had experienced “enlightenment,” a state of bliss, fulfillment and absence of suffering that is supposed to bring about the end of the search. When this blissful state came to an end, he fell into a torment he had never known, and decided to take on one last challenge. He decided to prove to himself that there was no lasting state of existence that could end the misery of life, so he would then be able to go back to living life as best he could, without seeking anything at all.

Of all the teachers he had learned about, Ramana Maharshi seemed different. Ramana came upon the natural state of existence without any intention or preparation when he was a teenager. John reports that in studying this man's books, he sensed that Ramana was trying to tell us something. He was trying to give us an act that would work and allow us to experience natural life. Around this time, John recalled a specific time when he was a young boy, and he had just walked out of a cowboy movie matinee in a hot summer afternoon in New Jersey. He remembered exactly how it felt to walk out of the cool theater into the hot sun, and then he realized that how it felt to be him as a child was exactly how it felt to be him now. Without recognizing it at the time, this was, as best as he can tell, when he first looked at himself. It took years for it to become clear for him that this had happened and that he had undergone a process of recovery that eventually freed him of his lifelong angst and the neurotic conditioning that had sprung from it.

John does not attribute any part of this outcome to previous spiritual teachings and practices. In fact, it took many years for him to free himself of the context of understanding and the vernacular from religious and spiritual teachings, and be able to speak about his experience in simple, clear terms. This is not to say that his contact and relationship with all of the traditions, teachings, and practices were of no value to him. He often comments on how beautiful these traditions

are and how valuable they have been in providing people with comfort and a sense of possibility for all as human beings. John refers to spiritual seekers as “heroes,” because they do not give up on life and continue to pursue an experience of life that will fulfill what they imagine possible.

To say that this method is not related to what came before does not imply that John believes himself to be the only one to have had the experience of natural life. Upon review, it appears clear that while many have stumbled onto this experience, the key to the experience, the act of looking at yourself, has been missed. It also appears that the fear of life as the barrier to the natural experience of life has been overlooked, possibly because all of the teachings, practices, and beliefs have occurred within this same context of fear. In fact, many of the teachings and practices are clearly intended to transcend life, or somehow escape life, as if life were inherently the problem and something to avoid, escape from or control. In this context, death appears as a paradox. On the one hand, death ends the suffering of life and, on the other hand, it confronts us with the fear we have been living with all along – the fear of the known and the fear of the unknown.

After the looking does its job and the fear of life departs, reality reveals itself clearly and it becomes apparent that there is no need to consider human experience as a spiritual matter. It is simply human experience. And it becomes just as clear that life is not the problem. It is

simply the experience of living and, when it ends, nothing happens. And nothing happening is not scary. In fact, it is what is happening all the time: it is you and me, and it is all that exists.

When this suggestion of the act of looking at yourself is recognized for what it is, it becomes obvious that it is all actually very simple, so simple that it has been overlooked.

Recently, when considering natural life, it occurred to me that the states that we experience when we identify with thoughts, emotions, points of view, etc., are unnatural in the sense that identities that are taken on to manage the fear of life overshadow the natural experience of living. When the fear of life goes, one is free of the need to be an identity, and yet also free to identify and be an identity to function in the world.

The already-is-the-case aspect

As the experience of recovery has progressed in me, the veil of perception has continued to lift. Much like the curtain being pulled back in the Wizard of Oz, what had previously appeared to be magical, mystical, religious, spiritual and beyond the ordinary, was revealed to be nothing more than simply “what is so.” Life is ordinary in the sense that it is always present, always the case, yet extraordinary in its mystery and endless array of appearances and movements.

Whatever or whoever we are is here now, so the idea of doing anything to be who we are is itself an expression of delusion. Seeking, trying to find an answer, trying to get an experience of who we actually are, considering it a spiritual matter, all this effort leads us away from the truth and perpetuates suffering. *Thinking* that the experience of who we actually are or the experience of a natural life is something other than the experience we are *already having* is searching for fool’s gold.

I am reminded of a statement I read many years ago in one of my favorite books by Alan Watts. When I read an outline that began chapter five in his book *The Supreme Identity*, I was struck with confusion and spent many years reflecting on what I had read. He is speaking in a spiritual context and he is pointing, as many teachings do, to the difficulty of experiencing a natural life through practices or actions

intended to bring about a realization of that which is already complete and fully realized. He says:

Realization of the Supreme Identity is found, not through seeking it as remote and obscure, but in accepting the truth that nothing is more obvious and self-evident.³

With all due respect for Watts, one of the great interpreters of Eastern traditions for the Western audience, I think his pointing out the futility of trying to realize what is referred to as the “Supreme Identity” is accurate, but his conclusion that “accepting that nothing is more obvious and self-evident” does not produce a realization. It may produce an intellectual understanding or conceptual recognition and may provide a temporary pleasurable state, however, this is not the natural experience in that it does not last and is inconsistent with the reality of our actual nature.

My experience is that the idea of “realization” is an indication that one is going down the wrong road. The idea that the actual nature of the human creature is a “Supreme Identity” is further misleading.

What I see to be the case, after having had the experience of looking at myself and having been through a good part of the recovery period, is that there is nothing to realize, and therefore no effort to

³ Watts, Alan, *The Supreme Identity* (Vintage Books, 1972), 165

realize is necessary. It is evident that all the methods devised to achieve this realization have not produced the experience sought after, even though multitudes continue to practice such methods and live with some explanation as to why these practices have not fulfilled on their promise.

What makes the act of looking at yourself different? To summarize, it is a matter of simply directing attention, and it is distinctly different from trying to see or realize anything. Yes, my experience of looking began with the automatic process of expecting to see what I was looking at, otherwise it would be of no use to me. How would I even know I had actually looked at myself, if I did not see anything? The initial reaction to looking at myself in the ordinary state of mind is often that I did nothing. I did not see anything when I looked, so nothing happened. My experience and all of my previous understandings tell me that something did not happen, that perhaps I did it wrong, or perhaps I am fooling myself by thinking that this is anything other than trickery. Even if John Sherman believes he looked at himself and ended up in a so-called “natural life,” free of the fear of life, perhaps he is lost in his own notions about it.

In order to appreciate this directing of attention inward, and the results that occur from it, it is necessary to be clear that, in this case, looking is not seeing. Looking is just looking, just directing attention towards you, with the intention of experiencing rather than seeing. In

the case of John Sherman, what he experienced was a sense of the consistency of himself. He experienced that he was the same as he had been many years before, and that his experience of being “me” was exactly the same after many years had passed, although the physical body was much different.

This looking is a simple matter of exposing one’s attention directly to its source, the purpose of which is to bring an end to the fear of life, rather than to realize a state of being. This is a critical point. It is what is distinctive about this method, or approach, to being free of what has hindered the natural experience of being human. The context of the fear of life shaped our perceptions of life and, when this context departs, the patterns of reactions and behaviors that were a product of this context fall into disuse. One way of speaking of this is to say that a new gestalt appears, a new organized whole that is no longer distorted by the context of fear.

The context of the fear of life appeared in reaction to a traumatic event very early in life, possibly the birth trauma, prior to the acquisition of language. And it remained, as we were initiated into the world of language, where this context is pervasive in the human psyche. Until now, because of its ever-present-ness, this context has been overlooked as the cause of the distance from the experience of life that is an expression of anxiety and concern.

The teachings of the great traditions, which are beautiful conceptualizations, stories, and parables and have resulted in practices and rituals that people have dedicated their lives to, have not undone the condition of fear that has been always present underneath them. This is evident.

When this small misperception of life is presented as the cause of all the trouble, it is often dismissed as being too simple. It is easy to understand why this is so, given the extent to which human beings are in agreement about the threatening nature of life and all of the traditions, practices, and belief systems that have developed and become established as institutions beyond question.

An event

When the context of fear departs, it is evident that this human life is an event. It is a happening, akin to music or dance. Typically, we perceive our life as being thrown through a linear narrative into a future. We experience the present as the past reoccurring in modified forms, and we anxiously and apprehensively work to avoid the repetition of what has happened before, while doing whatever we can to make happen what we want to happen. The continuum of time holds us in a state of tension between two dreams. In this continuum, birth – and all other transitions that we endure as we move further in the course of life – takes us on to a point where we recognize the shift from growth to a gradual decline of energy and the dissolution of the body.

The shift in context that appears when anxiety no longer colors our perception allows life as an event to become evident. The apparent reality of time is no longer the stage for life. Life appears as life for the sake of itself, not going anywhere, not depending on a purpose, not coming from anywhere, simply a phenomenon that miraculously occurs, an endless arising of impressions and stimulating energetic vibrations. An event.

As I experienced this shift, it became evident that all there is to do is to look. Life is an event to look at. Rather than looking to see, or

looking for something, or looking for a way in or out, or looking for an answer, looking revealed itself to be the ground of being in the world. After the process of recovering the natural experience of life, I find myself looking all of the time. No matter what else I am doing, or what I am engaged in with the mind, I am always looking – looking at life occurring. I am looking at life not in a continuum of time, but always in the moment, a moment that is larger than all of time and contains time. Time is no longer a container of experience, but just another occurring aspect of life.

This looking is what is happening. It is looking. I am looking.

Final words

I could go on and on about this amazing discovery and the shift that has occurred for me. However, one thing that I have come to see is that more isn't always better. If what you have read has stimulated your interest, or resonates with your experience, then I suggest that you seriously consider joining the growing number of people who have taken on John's suggestion to look at yourself.

My intention in writing this book was to have you see the potential and possibility that this revolutionary discovery provides for us all. Today there is a growing worldwide movement of people who have done the looking and are involved in a community, providing support for each other and continuing a relationship with John, Carla, and one another, while experiencing the results of the looking.

A good place to start is to visit the www.justonelook.org website. Start by downloading John's free ebooks, which are a good introduction to the basic elements of his work. Then listen to the most recent recordings of John's meetings on his audio podcast, watch John's videos on his video podcast, participate in upcoming live online meetings with John as scheduled on the website, and check out the Just One Look project to find out about how to participate.

Also check out the [Just One Look Community Forums](#) and read about the experiences of others who have done the looking, as they continue to go through the recovery process that follows the act. The community forums are a safe place where you can share and contribute. We are surely all in this together.

Gratitude

I cannot be complete with this book without acknowledging John and Carla Sherman for the work that they are doing. They have given countless hours to me in the development of this book. They continue to be available to anyone who asks for guidance in the looking and search for support while experiencing the process of recovery and restructuring that follows. I feel a deep sense of gratitude that they have appeared in the world, and that they are willing to give all of their energy and time to us. They are an example of what is possible for us all.

About the author

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He has generously donated this book to the RiverGanga Foundation and the Just One Look project.

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Just One Look resources

Just One Look website:

<http://www.justonelook.org>

John Sherman's Audio Podcast, Video Podcast, Texts, etc:

<http://www.johnsherman.org>

Just One Look Community Center:

<http://www.riverganga.org/Community/Board/>

John Sherman Calendar of Events:

<http://www.riverganga.org/Community/Board/calendar.php>

RiverGanga Foundation website:

<http://www.riverganga.org>

Volunteer opportunities:

<http://www.justonelook.org/volunteers/join-the-jol-volunteers.html>

How you can help us

John Sherman's work is available to all, always free of charge.

The [Just One Look project](#) is a program of the RiverGanga Foundation.

[RiverGanga Foundation](#) is the non-profit organization that makes possible the work of John and Carla Sherman. The Foundation serves this purpose by using the money donated to it to purchase the equipment, services, and utilities needed to conduct that work.

The money needed to cover the costs of organizing online meetings and meetings in person, and for producing and offering all the material that is available online free of charge comes entirely from the generosity of those who have had direct experience with the looking and its results.

A small donation of just one dollar a day can go a long way in helping us cover our operating expenses. Please help us bring the act of looking at yourself to the world by making a tax-deductible donation today: <http://www.justonelook.org/donate.html>