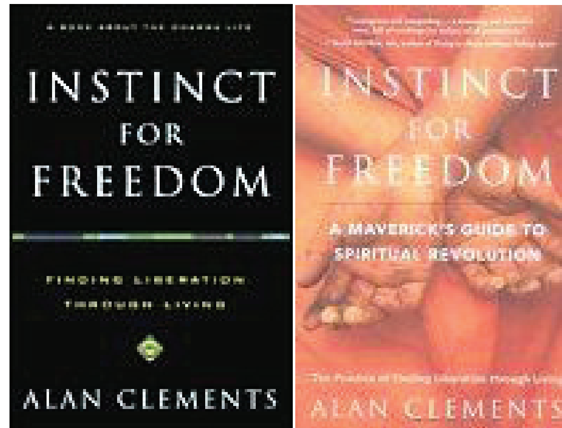
Instinct *for* Freedom

A Book About Everyday Revolution — Finding Liberation Through Living

by Alan Clements



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Let's Dance

There inevitably comes a point when the weight of holding up unnatural self-images becomes a burden. It is a time when you begin to feel the fraudulence and hypocrisy of being someone other than yourself, as clichéd as that may sound. One of the first things I learned living in conditions of tyranny — and yet one of the hardest lessons to actually practice — was to simply feel, listen, and love, in order to support those who were suffering, without being so arrogant as to try heal or fix them. To keep this truth close to my heart I would often recall to myself the story of an Aboriginal woman. When approached by a white social worker, who said, rather presumptuously, "I'm here to help you. What can I do?" the Aboriginal woman replied, "If you are here to help me, please go. But if you see that my freedom and yours are linked, then please stay and we can serve each other."

To feel the "linkage of our freedom" is perhaps the greatest lesson we must learn to ensure our survival. This point took on powerful meaning during one of my sojourns into Bosnia. It was in the Spring of 1996, several months after President Clinton had ordered NATO planes to strike Serbian positions around the city, which after only twelve days of bombing, ended three and a half years of horror and the death of 250,000 people.

On one visit to Sarajevo, I was having a glass of wine with a friend at an outdoor café in the city's main square. Marina, like many others from the former-Yugoslavia, was from a mixed ethnic-religious background. Her mother was a Croatian Catholic and her father a Serbian Orthodox.

Marina and her younger sister survived the forty-four-month siege of Sarajevo primarily by huddling with their parents in their kitchen. The kitchen was the most protected room in their two-bedroom flat, which was situated in a blown-out high-rise adjacent to "sniper alley." She and her family, as with everyone else in Sarajevo, faced many hardships, including living without electricity, running water, and heat through frigid

high-mountain winters, and surviving on porridge, grass, nettles, and flour. Marina's struggle was to intensify, however, when both of her parents were diagnosed with cancer. After three years, and without medical treatment, they passed away within a few months of each other.

On that day, Marina had invited me to accompany her to the cemetery to pay respects to her deceased parents. It was to be her first visit to the gravesite since her mother had passed away. I considered her invitation both a gift and an honor. For Marina life centered around her family, and although deceased, to be introduced to them was something sacred to her — a sign of dear friendship. I also knew that Marina's mother had been her best friend. I wanted to support her.

Mostly, I stood in the background watching my friend sanctify the space with her grace and her sensitive silence. I kept her company while she washed her parents' headstones, placed fresh flowers on their graves, lit candles, recited poetry, and otherwise sat silently in prayer.

At one point I turned away and looking out over the cemetery — a sea of tombstones and grave markers — I noticed how the cemetery was divided into three distinct sections, each divided by a different color of headstone.

When I asked Marina about it she explained how each of the three different ethnicities and religions in her country had their own area within the cemetery. White marble headstones were for Muslims, black for Catholics, and gray for Orthodox. Since the cemetery was ruled by segregation, her mother and father were buried in different sections. We acknowledged the absurdity of the situation with a sad, silent shrug.

As Marina turned back and faced her mother's grave I was propelled inward by a memory from a few days earlier. I was driving back to Sarajevo from Srebrenica, the town where several thousand Bosnian Muslims were slaughtered. My friend Marcia Jacobs, who had since left her job at the UN and was now working for the International Rescue Committee, accompanied me. After hours driving through bombed-out villages, we stopped by the side of the road to take a break. In a nearby field some men were digging. We walked over and found a mass grave — a pit of putrefying human flesh. It was heart-wrenching and frightening. We gasped from the stench.

But this wasn't anything new, I reflected. The human world is fraught with murderous expressions of ethnocentricity, xenophobia, and nationalism. The twentieth century has been witness to obscene brutality. Stalin. The Holocaust. Hiroshima. The genocides in Timor and Rwanda. Pinochet's terror in Chile. Pol Pot's sea of cracked skulls in Cambodia. The death squads of Guatemala. Saddam Hussein's massacre of the Kurds. The crushing of democracy in Burma and Tiananmen Square. The hanging of Ken Saro-Wiwa in Nigeria. In the name of what? Truth? Freedom? Nationalism? Globalization? Christ? Allah? Oil? God?

I came back to the present with my eyes focused on the grave. Protruding from the ground, I noticed an exposed hand with a ring on one of the fingers, glistening in the sunlight. I stared at the ring for a long time. There was no way of telling whether it was a man or woman, but the ring spoke about a kind of marriage — a bond of love — not just to another, but to God, to life and liberation beyond racism, tribalism, and all lethal fantasies. It symbolized a marriage to the world, to the Dharma — the journey of liberation from fear and illusion — and to a deep discovery of whatever principles govern this terrifying and beautiful existence, which is so sick, so mysterious, and so gorgeous, too. For me the ring also symbolized, as any good marriage would, a radical commitment to know the heart — oneself — as much as humanly possible.

At that moment, I realized that no matter what I knew or how free I assumed myself to be, I had a hell of a lot more room for wisdom to grow. I asked if it were even possible to rectify the archetypal split of good and evil in one's own heart. Could I transcend love and hatred, right and wrong, this world and nirvana?

Standing before a mass grave made the notion of spiritual transcendence seem preposterous and inhuman. The Dharma — finding liberation through living — was a means to embody our humanness, not to nullify it. It was here that a major shift in my Dharma understanding occurred: entering my humanness with a respect for the indivisibility of freedom was infinitely more important than pursuing the projected perfection of transcending duality and coming to the so-called end of my own personal suffering. Yet it had been these latter goals that had been principally driving me for the previous twenty-five years of spiritual life.

The realization stayed with me throughout the night, seeping in much more deeply than any meditative insight I had ever known. The following day I absorbed it even more thoroughly. I had been accompanying a doctor friend of mine on her rounds, visiting patients in a clinic on the outskirts of Sarajevo. Many of them were still speechless from their traumas. Others cried uncontrollably. One young boy was lying on his bed squeezing a small teddy bear, curled up, motionless. He was no more than nine years old. A woman sat next to him and dabbed at his tears with a handkerchief. She would then dab her own tears. My friend raised the sheet covering the boy's lower body. He had no legs. She then covered his lower body again, kissed him on the cheek, and said something in Bosnian to the woman, who I assumed was his mother. The situation was too much. I excused myself and walked outside. What would it take, I asked myself, for us to use our hands not to harm each other, but to touch each other kindly — to rub each other's backs, and hold each other's hands? What type of consciousness was needed to turn off the killing machine, and reawaken the soul to its natural beauty? Was this an idealistic dream?

As I thought more about it I recalled a conference in southern California where I had been invited to lead insight meditation back in 1989. The conference was on Buddhism and Psychotherapy and was headlined by the Dalai Lama of Tibet, who had just received the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts to end the Chinese occupation of his country — and bring light to one of this century's greatest tragedies.

At one point in the conference the Dalai Lama told a story of a fellow Buddhist monk in his homeland whom he greatly admired. The Dalai Lama explained that this monk, known as the "Weeper," was given his name because he was so attuned to the suffering of others that he often wept. The Dalai Lama was deeply inspired by the Weeper's highly developed compassion.

Of course, crying all the time does not describe your stereotypical well-adjusted Buddhist. In fact, in most spiritual circles such a person would likely be evaluated as severely traumatized, in denial of some dysfunction, and very likely prescribed anti-depressants. If the condition persisted, as it did with the Weeper, it's possible the person would be committed to a psychiatric hospital and medicated even further. Yet somehow this weeping monk was an inspiration to the Dalai Lama himself.

I had always been deeply touched by this story, but in this context it took on mythic proportions. How does the human heart open to such an extent that it feels the inherent linkage of love and freedom among us all? What wisdom would awaken a deeper engagement not just with our immediate relationships but with the interrelatedness of all life? I reflected on the notion of ubuntu, a word rooted in South African culture, meaning, "A person becomes human through other persons." Archbishop Desmond Tutu describes ubuntu as the opposite of "I think, therefore I am." In other words, my humanness is inextricably bound up in yours. Such a person, he says, "does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole, and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed, or treated as if they were less than who they are." He concludes, "What dehumanizes you, inexorably dehumanizes me. And what elevates you, elevates me."

Returning to where I stood in the Sarajevo cemetery, looking out over the sea of graves, I felt a passionate yearning to call for a world-wide awakening of ubuntu — a new form of spirituality, one that was more human, more directly responsive to the suffering caused by social and political circumstances.

But what could this mean — to elevate human freedom to its highest, most creative, and universal expression? A thrill and urgency swept over me. How exciting it would be to radically humanize the Dharma, to make it much more real and accessible to human life — to life here on earth — and not an escape from it. This would require extracting ordinary wisdom from its inherited delusions, cultural containers, political manipulations, rampant superstitions, and blinding orthodoxies.

I could see my own indoctrination in religion, Buddhism, and sectarian thinking beginning to crack. And frankly, I wondered what would be left — if we all became universal warriors and transcended the "isms" that formed us. After all, the historical Buddha who supposedly attained enlightenment twenty-six centuries ago wasn't sitting under the tree in India after his attainment saying, "This part of me will teach an aspect of my enlightenment that only the Zen Buddhists will follow, while this other part of me I'll name Dzogchen, and

call it "the secret teachings" and reserve it for the most advanced of my Tibetan followers. And this part will be called vipassana, and I'll keep it for the more cerebral of my followers. Then I'll divide the rest of me in such a way that many hundreds of sects will develop, all in my name, who will disagree over the real teachings for millennia to come."

Standing in the cemetery in Sarajevo — a poignant symbol of the sorrowful consequences of propaganda, hatred, and war — I envisioned World Dharma — a metaphor for "freedom through ubuntu." Although I wanted to avoid the traps of dogmatic thinking, I had to give it a name! "World Dharma," I thought. "Here is a vision I can embrace." It's a vision rooted in a deep recognition of our inherent interrelatedness. It empowers relationships as the most sacred place for spiritual awakening, because no one becomes free in a vacuum. As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "We are tied in a single garment of destiny. What affects one directly affects everyone indirectly." This had to be the guiding wisdom of World Dharma. This meant that I no longer needed to be confined even by the motifs of spiritual and nonspiritual, Dharma and adharma, American or Tibetan, Buddhist or non-Buddhist, or any other arbitrary label that divided life and people up into neat, definable packages. As the Dalai Lama reminded us, "The color of blood was the same for all; human suffering and human freedom transcend all distinctions."

So, too, with World Dharma. It had to develop a new language for the process of liberation that transcended nations, religions, and tribes. In so doing it had to be safeguarded from becoming just another form of indoctrination. With this in mind I decided that World Dharma should not be a new spirituality so much as the means by which to establish an alternative world view. I thought it could be like the World Music movement, where autonomous musical traditions, each with there own integrity, play together, creating a new sound. World Music gives rise to something greater than the individual musicians who created it. Freedom is without logo. Like the wind, freedom doesn't belong to anyone. Nor can it be grasped or held. If you try to box it you lose it.

After a final prayer at the cemetery, Marina and I took a taxi back to the center of Sarajevo, where our attention shifted from the sacred and serene to a wild and jubilant city-wide celebration. As one of the first sunny days of spring after the Dayton Peace Accord had been reached, bringing an end to yet another winter of hell, Sarajevons were among the happiest people I had ever been around. The main city square — where we were sitting — was packed with people dressed in their finest — smoking and drinking and laughing. Rock music blasted from the cafés lining the square. People were partying without fear of being shot by snipers, hit by mortars, or killed or maimed at any moment.

Although almost every building was a bombed-out hulk of twisted metal, broken concrete, and shattered windows, couples embraced and danced romantically in the square. The juxtaposition took your breath away.

Soon after arriving Marina and I got in a lively discussion about English poetry, which she had studied in college. At one point, she shifted the conversation mid-sentence. Staring at me intensely, she said, "Tell me, after all you've done, what is really worth remembering?" Pausing, she took a long drag on her cigarette while motioning with a finger for me to wait a second before I answered. "I have one request," she continued. "No nonsense! No religion. No Buddhism. No philosophy. No psychology. No dogma. I want to know you — you deep down inside. What makes you get up every day and want to live — to give it your very best?"

She held my gaze for a second, as if trying to read my reaction, then inquired in a polite voice. "I didn't offend you, did I?" Again, before I could answer she playfully quipped. "I hope I did. Maybe I'll get the truth out of you for once." We both laughed. Previously, we had spoken about how rare it was to really have a truthful relationship in life — even between close friends. But as the humor in the moment subsided, her question began to penetrate, amplified by the context — Sarajevo, a population of 350,000, was the size of downtown Boston and was ninety percent ruins. We were at ground zero, sitting in the center of one of the darkest hells of the twentieth century.

As I contemplated an answer a group of three young men, disabled from the war, rolled into the square in their wheelchairs. Some girls at a nearby table noticed them and ran their way, shouting and throwing kisses at them. Wasting no time, they started dancing together; a couple of the girls actually sat on the guys' laps as

they twirled to the music.

Within a few minutes, several other younger kids, each with a leg missing, got up on their crutches and began twirling around like whirling dervishes — keeping beat to a rhythm that was uniquely their own.

My mind crossed all kinds of terrain. It was much easier to stay seated — strapped into a persona of my own perceived inhibition. Or my own struggle. My own shortcomings or inabilities. What was I waiting for to live — fully and without remainder? What more evidence did I need to celebrate each and every breath and not despair about what was missing? Come on, look at these guys, I told myself. Here they are without legs or paralyzed from the waist down. Nothing is stopping them from rejoicing in their freedom. They showed no contrivance. No hesitation. They had nothing to prove.

I remember flashing back to the clinic and the young boy holding his teddy bear. What's he going to do if he heals and comes out of his trance?

The point is, to live every moment as if it counts. That's right, the timeless basis of the Dharma itself — to be present, now, fully, without remainder. I turned to Marina ready to deliver my realization with passion and gusto. "When it's all said and done, what is worth remembering?" I said. "Love the one you're with? Do unto others as you would like them to do unto you? Don't play small — take risks? Don't give up, no matter how hard it gets?

"But really, when all is said and done," I continued reflectively. "What matters more than anything? To be yourself! To be human. To dance to your own beat? I don't know — to feel, to laugh, to cry more freely? In the end, I think that's all that matters. What do you think?" I asked.

With a coy smile Marina retorted, "Too much meditation. Too much thinking, as you would say."

Getting up from the table she said, "Come on, let's dance."

I think that afternoon in Sarajevo was one of my first real understandings of ubuntu, or liberation through living — a World Dharma beyond words. It was also a glimpse of the difference between wanting to "be human and authentic" and simply living — naturally free.

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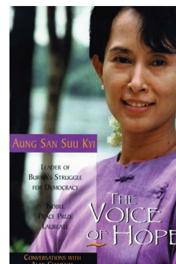

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