



## MYSTICAL DOGS

### Animals as Guides to Our Inner Lives

#### CHAPTER ONE

#### Chickie and the Path of Awakening

We were both pups when my parents got her—I about eighteen months old, she somewhat younger but older by far in wisdom and experience. She had already had a brief career in the movies, having played one of Daisy’s puppies in the Dagwood and Blondie series. But now, too old for the part, she had been given to my father in lieu of payment for a script he had turned in. He was a comedy writer for radio and occasionally movies, and excelled in writing jokes and scripts but not in collecting the fees owed him.

Her name was Chickie, and she was a wonderful mix of Welsh corgi and bearded collie. A white star blazed on her chest, and she had four white feet and a white tipped tail to complement her long black fur. Even though she was scarcely over a year old, she was already motherly and sat by my crib for hours on end, making sure that no harm would come to me. If I cried, she would be off to my mother, insisting that she come immediately. If I wanted to play, she would bring toys, hers as well as mine.

My Dad caught on that this was a special dog with high intelligence plus something else. He taught her many tricks, learned from the dog trainers at the movie studio. Lassie’s trainers gave him pointers on how to get Chickie to respond to hand signals, as well as to climb ladders, bark on cue, walk on beach balls, dance on two legs, and jump rope with a willing human. This she did readily and well, but there was more to her still—perhaps one would call it a deep sense of ethics. She seemed virtue incarnate, a Saint Francis of Assisi of dogs, who took on responsibilities of saintly cast. I thought of her as my sister and, what with all of our travels, my constant and closest friend.

Thus it was a shock when one day one of the actors in a picture my father was working on came home with him, saw Chickie, and immediately wanted to buy her. “Jack,” said the actor, “that is the greatest dog I ever saw in my life. I’ll give you fifty bucks for that dog.”

“Can’t do it, pal,” said my father. “It’s the kid’s dog.”

The actor persisted. “I’ll give you a hundred bucks for the dog. I know you need the money.” Indeed, we did, and driven by the panic of incipient poverty, the one thing he dreaded more than any thing else, my father acted in an uncharacteristic manner.

Excusing himself, he went into the kitchen to discuss this with my mother. “Certainly not!” she adamantly declared. “It’s Jeanie’s dog.”

“You’re right, Mary,” my father sheepishly agreed. “It’s just that I think I’m going to lose my job at the studio and am damned scared of not being able to bring home the bacon.”

“Well, you certainly cannot bring home the bacon by selling the child’s dog,” my mother fumed. “Anyway, if we go broke again, I’ll just do what I always do—start an acting school for children.”

A few days later the actor came back, saying, “Jack, I’ve got to have that dog on my ranch. I *want* that dog. I’ll give you 250 bucks for the dog.”

During this ordeal Chickie and I were sitting on the floor behind the couch, listening in horror. I was already making my running-away plans with her.

“Well, I sure do need the money,” said my father. “Just a minute; I’ve got to talk to my wife.”

“Mary, he’s offering 250 bucks for the dog! We can always get Jeanie a new dog at the pound!”

“No way!” said my mother.

The next day the actor returned. He had rarely known failure and was not about to start now. “Jack, I’ll give you 250 bucks and my secondhand car. I know you need a car to get around.”

“Wait a minute,” said my father. “I’m sure this time I can convince my wife.”

Upon hearing the latest offer, my mother, bless her heart, stormed out of the kitchen, stalked up to the actor, and chewed him out. “Ronald Reagan,” she railed, “how dare you try to take away my child’s dog!”

At least he knew a good dog when he saw one.

Maybe it was that threat of being parted from each other, but after that incident with the actor, Chickie and I took to having long jaunts with each other. We would be gone for hours at a time, and either my parents were too busy to notice or they trusted Chickie’s care of me. With Chickie in charge, I was given a great deal of freedom to wander in a world as miraculous as it was marvelous.

Behind our house was a large wooded area where Chickie and I began what I have come to think of as our travels in awakening. Two hours with Chickie in the woods yielded an incredible range of learnings. Chickie was more nose than eyes, and I quite the other way around. But together we investigated the endless treasures of forest and meadow. I remember crawling on four legs in order to follow more closely her interests and discoveries. As she sniffed out deer scat, mice holes, squirrel trails, and bug routes, she would occasionally turn around and check with me to see if I saw them too.

Chickie taught me to be alert to both the seen and the unseen, the heard and the unheard. A whisper of wings would turn her head and mine would follow, waiting for the flutter that would finally announce to my human-hindered head, “Bird on the wing!” Chickie would lift her nose, her tail would signal attention, and we would be off and running to follow the adventures of the air—entrancing molecules luring us to destinies both savory and dangerous. Once it was to a camper’s discarded remnants of fried chicken, but once, too, it was to meet up with the snarling fury of a bobcat. Chickie barked, and I, knowing that human words were useless, barked too. Our defiant duet seemed to work, for the bemused cat slunk off, never to be seen again.

Chickie gave me metaphors for my later life’s work, especially when it came to digging. Paws scratching away at apparently nothing soon revealed dark secrets hidden in the earth—old bones, ancient feathers, and things so mysterious as to be beyond human knowing. Years later I would probe and dig into the soil of the human subconscious with something like Chickie’s fervor to find there the bones of old myths, the feathers of essence, and the great mysterious matrix that still sustains and lures the human quest.

Those early years with Chickie were a whole education in looking, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching—the feast and lore of the senses. For many years now I have been helping schools in the United States and many other countries to improve education by making it sensory rich, hands on, art centered. When asked who my mentors have been—John Dewey? Maria Montessori? The Carnegie Institute?—I can only reply in truth, “Chickie.”

Chickie and I traveled in others ways as well. In fact, we crossed the Mississippi river by train many times before I could spell it. “There it goes, Jeanie-pot!” my father would bleat with excitement. “There goes the Mississippi, the father of waters. Quick, look out your window while you can still see it.”

“I’ve seen it,” I’d say, my eye affixed firmly to my comic book.

“Whaddya mean, you’ve seen it? The greatest river in the world! The crossroads of American history—La Salle, Showboat, the Louisiana Purchase, Huckleberry Finn! And you say you’ve seen it.”

“But Daddy, we just passed over it going the other way a couple of weeks ago.”

“Yeah . . . well, that show in New York didn’t pan out too well. We’ll give California another try. I think I

can get back with Bob Hope, and if not, Fibber McGee and Molly could always find room in their closet for me, and if not them, I could always try . . .” Two days later he was writing for Amos and Andy, and if he was lucky, we were set in one place for thirteen weeks—maybe.

For years Chickie served as the center for calm and a kind of spiritual tranquillity in our life of constant change brought about through my Dad’s work as well as his penchant for eccentric adventures. Even though I went to something like twenty different schools all over the country before I was twelve, I would always come home to Chickie, who regarded all of life as delightful and who maintained a saintly comportment and stability in the face of any whimsy we humans could invent.

People sometimes ask me how I can keep myself in reasonable mental and physical health even though I sometimes travel up to a quarter of a million miles a year and have a life of ridiculous complexity. In reflection I realize that Chickie’s influence continues, to wit: Stay centered in eternity regardless of how much chaos is happening in time; look upon all people and events as opportunities for furthering life and its promise; and greet everyone as a potential awakened one—God in hiding, or dog in drag!

In addition to taking care of us Chickie also taught me my best lessons in ethics and responsibility. She seemed to have little self-interest. Many of her actions were clearly for others. She was empathy personified, whether in consoling with me when I was upset or in the way she would listen to humans as they railed against their supposed fate. Her answer was simply to be there, to place her head upon their knee and look at them sweetly in the eye, her gaze unblinking and never wavering. However, if their blue mood went on too long, she would try to entertain them, bringing over something to throw or, if that did not work, amusing them with one of her dancing tricks.

When my little brother was born, it was under Chickie’s tutelage that I came to take care of him. I remember when he was very young, he managed to bang together some orange crates in the shape of a rocket. For weeks he had been telling us that he was going back home to where he came from up among the stars. One day, Chickie came madly running toward me, barking in distress and pulling me by my dress to our bedroom. I raced after her and found my little brother balancing in the open window in his “rocket.” He waved happily at me saying, “Bye, bye. I go up home now.” I grabbed his little body and pulled him back as the rocket fell eleven floors to the street.

Entering into another realm, that of the spiritual epiphany, Chickie accompanied me on the most important experience of my entire lifetime. It turned out to be my key experience in awakening. I have described it in other books, but not from the perspective of Chickie’s critical role in it. It happened in my sixth year. I had been sent to Catholic school in Brooklyn, New York. My father had been tossed off the Bob Hope show for an excess of high spirits, and we were broke and living with my mother’s Sicilian parents in the Italian section of that noble if bad-mouthed borough.

Theologically precocious, and buttressed with questions designed by my agnostic comedy-writing father, I would assail the little nun who taught our first grade with queries that seemed logical to me but blasphemous to her. “Sister Theresa, when Ezekiel saw the wheel, was he drunk?” Or “Sister Theresa, I counted my ribs and I counted Joey Mangiabella’s ribs, and we have the same number of ribs, and so do all the other boys and girls. See? (At that moment, on cue, all the children in the class lifted up their undershirts to prove the point.) “So if God took a rib out of Adam to make Eve like you said, how come . . .?”

Then there were the Jesus questions. “Sister Theresa, how do you know that Jesus wasn’t walking on rocks below the surface when he seemed to be walking on the water?” And “Sister Theresa, when Jesus rose, was that because God filled him full of helium?”

Then there was the day of the question that tipped her dogma as well as her dignity. It had to do with Jesus’ natural functions and whether he ever had to go to the toilet. Her response had her looking like a black and

white penguin in a state of hopping rage. She jumped on a stool, tacked up a large sheet of heavy cardboard and in large India-ink letters wrote:

### JEAN HOUSTON'S YEARS IN PURGATORY

All further theological questions of an original bent met with the little nun *X*-ing in more years for me to endure in purgatory, and each *X* stood for a hundred thousand years! By the last day of the first grade I had accumulated something like 300 million years in purgatory to my credit. Spiritually bereft, I told my father about the debacle and he, finding it very funny, took me off immediately to see the motion picture *The Song of Bernadette*. This famous movie is renowned for its scenes of Saint Bernadette's vision of the holy Madonna in the grotto at Lourdes, which thereafter became a famous place for healing. Unfortunately, during the holiest of scenes, with Mother Mary appearing in luminous white in the grotto before the praying Bernadette, my father burst into long, whinnying, uncontrolled laughter. It turned out that he had known the starlet playing the role of Mary and found the incongruity between her Hollywood life and the role she was playing hilarious. Leaving the theatre finally in a state of mortal embarrassment, I pulled away from my still laughing father in order to get quickly to my house in order to emulate Bernadette's remarkable vision.

My destination was a guest room with a very long closet that looked a lot like a grotto. There were no clothes in the closet for Chickie had commandeered it as a nest for her new eight puppies. I explained my need to Chickie, feeling that she would not mind my moving her pups, being as she would want me to open a space for the greatest mama of them all to show up. When she protested mildly, I further explained that I didn't want the Holy Mother to step on her pups. After that, Chickie watched my actions with interest.

Kneeling in the now cleared Brooklyn "grotto," I prayed to the Madonna to show up in the closet as she had for Bernadette at Lourdes. I began by closing my eyes and counting slowly to 10, while promising to give up candy for two weeks if she would only show up. I opened my eyes to encounter the Madonna Chickie lovingly carrying one of pups back into the "grotto." I kept on counting to ever higher numbers, promising all manner of food sacrifices—mostly my favorite Sicilian delicacies like chicken with lemon and garlic sauce—but my revelation was only to be more and more puppies back in the closet. Finally I counted to a very high number, 167, and having given up all calories, I told the Holy Mother that I could not think of anything else to give up, so would she *please, please, please* show up as I really wanted to see her. This time I was sure that she would make it. I opened my eyes, and there was Chickie contentedly licking all eight of her puppies.

"Oh Chickie," I sighed and reached out to pat her, whereupon she bestowed on me a kindly lick and a compassionate look as if I were her ninth puppy. At that moment came a vague spiritual forewarning, as if I had prayed for the Madonna and seen her in one of her many forms in Chickie, the all wise, all loving mother, and her care for her pups. But still I yearned for the movie version and did not yet recognize the truth of what I had been given. And so Herself offered me another chance. In a dreamy, unspecified state I went over to the window seat and looked over at the fig tree blooming in our yard. And suddenly it all happened—the most important awakening state of my entire life.

As I have written, "I must in my innocence have unwittingly tapped into the appropriate spiritual doorway, for suddenly the key turned and the door to the universe opened. Nothing changed in my outward perceptions. There were no visions, no sprays of golden light, certainly no appearances by the Virgin Mary. The world remained as it had been. Yet everything around me, including myself, moved into meaning."<sup>1</sup>

Only in reflection have I come to realize how much of what I then felt and knew had been prepared for me by Chickie and her guidance in the ways of awakening. All those rambles that we had taken together were now one ramble, all the smells and sights of nature to which she had introduced me were present along with the fig tree

blooming in the yard, Chickie herself and her pups in the closet, the plane in the sky, the sky itself, and even my idea of the Madonna. All had become part of a single unity, a glorious symphonic resonance in which every part of the universe was a part of and illuminated every other part, and I knew that in some way it all worked together and it was very good.

My mind had awakened to a consciousness that spanned centuries and was on intimate terms with the universe. Just as Chickie had taught me, everything was interesting and important: deer scat, old leaves, spilled milk, my Mary Jane shoes, the fig tree, the smell of glue on the back of the gold paper stars I had just pasted on the wall paper, the stars themselves, my grandfather Prospero Todaro's huge stomach, the Atcheson, Topeka, and Santa Fe railroad, Uncle Henry (the black porter who took care of me on the train across the country), the little boy fishing in the lake who waved to me on the train when I was crossing Kansas, the chipped paint on the ceiling, my nana's special stuffed artichokes, my father's typewriter, the silky ears of corn in a Texas cornfield, my Dick and Jane reader, and all the music that ever was—all were in a state of resonance and of the most immense and ecstatic kinship.

I was in a universe of friendship and fellow feeling, a companionable universe filled with interwoven Presence and the dance of life. This state seemed to go on forever, but it was actually only about two seconds, for the plane had moved only slightly across the sky. I had entered into timelessness, the domain in which eternity was the only reality and a few seconds could seem like forever.

Somewhere downstairs I heard the door slam, and my father entered the house laughing. Instantly, the whole universe joined in. Great roars of hilarity sounded from sun to sun. Field mice tittered, and so did angels and rainbows. Even Chickie seemed to be chuckling. Laughter leavened every atom and every star until I saw a universe inspirited and spiraled by joy, not unlike the one I read of years later in the *Divine Comedy* when Dante described his great vision in paradise: "*D'el Riso d'el Universo*" (the joy that spins the universe). This was a knowledge of the way everything worked. It worked through love and joy and the utter interpenetration and union of everything with the All That Is. And the Madonna—Chickie—was at the center of it all.

In this direct knowledge lay what I later learned was the mystical experience. This experience is not something to be kept sacrosanct in esoteric cupboards. It is coded into our bodies, brimming in our minds, and knocking on the doors of our souls. It is our natural birthright, and naturally it is most available when we are still children. As a child it charged me and changed me and probably gave me the impetus to do the things I later did. It showed me the many faces of God, and for weeks afterward I went around seeing this face in every creature, plant, and person—even in Sister Theresa, who was somewhat bothered by my beaming approval of her inner self.

"Madonna, Madonna, show up, show up!" I had shouted. And of course the Madonna had showed up, present in Chickie with her unconditional love and care for her pups and for me. Kneeling in front of her and her altar of puppies, I had asked for everything and *everything* is just what I got. And even today, whenever I see a statue of Mary I can not help but be reminded of Chickie's boundless love, the ultimate Madonna bringing the puppies back into the closet, bringing them back into the manger.

As it happened, Chickie lived for a very long time (something like 140 years of dog time), suffering little but one very original and mystical neurosis. As soon as she boarded a train and for about an hour or two afterward, she got the stigmata: all four paws would begin to bleed like the hands and feet of some medieval saint. The vet could never figure out why this would happen, so we all accepted my mother's Catholic interpretation of it as being a sign of God's favor. Certainly, by her actions and saintly comportment, Chickie belonged among the circle of the blessed, so it seemed very reasonable that, along with Saint Francis of Assisi, she should be so honored.

Chickie lived with us until around my ninth year. Then one day, my father took her by the leash and told

me to say good-bye to her at the elevator door of our apartment building. He informed me that he was going to give her to a friend who had a farm in Connecticut.

“Why, Daddy? Why would you give her away? She’s my sister. You can’t just go and give away my sister and best friend!”

“You kids are not taking her out for walks enough, and she will be happier on the farm.”

And with that my dear Chickie left my life forever. To this day I have never understood why my father took her away. In retrospect, however, I realize that at that time he was starting to leave us in order to marry another, and perhaps getting rid of Chickie was one of his first acts of detachment.

When I was seventeen, my mother rented a summer house for us on Green Farms Road near Westport, Connecticut. Daily, my brother and I would take long bike rides along Green Farms Road. I always felt that somewhere on that road was something that I had lost, and if only I could find it, I would be restored to grace again.

Several times that summer my father came up to visit us. After each visit, he’d leave to “visit a friend who has a farm further up on Green Farms Road.” Just before my Dad died in 1986 he told me that he also had been visiting Chickie, who even at that time was living very happily on that farm. He never told me that she was just up the road, but something in my soul must have known she was there, since I felt so called to journey up and down that road on my bike. That she was very happy on the farm I have no doubt for she lived to be more than twenty years old.

Chickie was only the first of the remarkable dogs I have known and loved who have revealed to me, through their oneness with nature, facets of the mystical path. Unsullied in their essence and with a natural attunement to the Source, they have a purity that makes them wonderful companions as well as guides for our path back to wholeness.

Chickie was the means for me to understand on the most primal levels the nature of “awakening,” the initial stage on the mystical journey. Under her innocent tutelage, I experienced that place where the field of our being shifts and the deepest coding of our life emerges, an unlooked for act of grace. In her presence something in me woke up, rising through all my parts and seeming to reconstitute the whole. My senses become more acute, gaining something that our animals just naturally experience—the air flooded with information, the land infinitely interesting and full of continuous surprises to engage the eye, enthrall the nose, astonish the ear. All flowers become friends, humble bread tastes of manna from heaven, and every thing and every one seem lit from within—a kingdom of God in the midst of what we once thought of as ordinary reality.

Long after Chickie was gone, I found words to describe the experiences I had shared with her in the poetic succinctness of poet and mystic William Blake: “To see a World in a Grain of Sand, / And a Heaven in a Wild Flower, / Hold Infinity in the palm of your Hand, / And Eternity in an Hour.”<sup>2</sup> Blake also said, “If the doors of perception were cleansed, / Everything would appear as it is, Infinite . . .”<sup>3</sup>

Awakening can have the most tremendous effect for good on the life of those who experience it, as it had on me after my own revelation, making them wonderfully creative and useful. They seem to live at a higher level, with insight and ideas from some larger expanse of mind, to the betterment of their fellows and community. Yet few arbiters of reality recognize the place where these awakened ones dwell, or dare name it. Whether awakening begins in surprise as a gift from God or from grace or from evolution or from a peculiar synchronicity between nature’s elements and one’s own state of receptivity or from a wonderful dog, one feels powerfully affected by the sheer unexpected glory of it all.

What we think of as nature mysticism often occurs with such surprise. You are watching the ocean come in, and suddenly you are on every shore, in every ocean, and within every shining drop. And why not? If we are

part of the One Reality, as mystics tell us and as many physicists confirm, we are ubiquitous through this universe and in touch with all its parts and particulars. It just takes the shift in consciousness that awakening awakens to experience this absolutely.

In my childhood, Chickie was my William Blake, providing in his own being the key to an experience that showed me that everything was interrelated in an organic universe founded on truth and beauty and a pattern that connected everything with everything else. Early on, I was able to see that all this was part of a holy perfection and was utterly serving of the good. With Chickie as spiritual guide, I also experienced timelessness and entered that state in which the categories of time are strained by the tensions of eternity. I came to realize that what we call normal time is just the veneer of infinite time. Great eternity surrounds us and indwells us, and we come to think of past, present, and future as merely special laws within its much larger laws. I discovered then that we are citizens in a much larger universe and that we are able to enter into this kingdom of the larger order here and now.

In its everyday form, awakening is experienced as mindfulness—being present and awake to the sights and sounds and particulars of our daily lives. We go off of robot and become alert to the splendor of existence, be it seen in a sunset or a rose, an old man’s craggy face, the eyes of an animal, or the side of a mountain. We become awake to the nuances of emotion that pass between ourselves and others. And we respond in turn with a fuller expression to the other’s need or question. We move beyond that half-asleep state called ordinary waking consciousness.

And when we do, reality changes. We find ourselves in a world so startling in its vividness, so alive and resplendent in all its parts that we wonder at what planet we have arrived. We realize that we have lived as dim and diminished versions of ourselves, and vow to do so no longer. Chickie was my conduit to this larger reality. With her guidance I came awake to a world once known, long forgotten but held in trust by dogs for their human charges should they agree to follow their lead.

However it comes, awakening is the greatest experience of remembering who and what we really are, why we are here, and how it all fits together. Waking up has never been more important than at the beginning of the new millennium because, as of this moment, the species we call human is on a collision course with global cataclysm. Awakening brings with it answers, solutions, new ways of seeing and doing and being, and, best of all, the impetus to follow through and bring these answers into our particular world and time. Solutions to our current dilemmas are coded in what we might call symbolically the Mind of the Maker, the Warehouse of God. In states of consciousness such as those awakening stimulates, the bandwidth increases and, with it, the capacity to access this greater realm of knowledge and creativity.

Strange as it seems, we can do this. Judging from the accounts of so many who have had an awakening experience, such access is always there—it is part of our innate human equipment. These experiences are fundamental to the human condition; they are part of our inheritance, the deeper givens of our existence. They are probably coded into our mind/brain system and are our call back to our “spiritual home place.”

The opportunity for us today is how to take this natural ability and make it normal, an ordinary-extraordinary part of our regular experience. How can we engage in everyday applied awakening? The story of Chickie gives us some important clues. Chickie was ever curious, always looking, sniffing, digging, and rolling in the continuous revelation of nature, discovering its sumptuous wonders and sharing them with me. For us this means to go forth and do likewise. It means that we halt our automatic responses to things, cease living a posthumous existence.

One celebrated way of doing this is the “stop” or “gathering mindfulness” technique, in which one is able to wake up to the realities both within oneself and without. To begin, walk around the room, but then take a few seconds to stop and become conscious of everything you are doing, seeing, hearing, and feeling—in other words,

allowing the moment to become charged with presence. Suddenly the world ceases to be just background noises and becomes a richness, and your brain/mind system ceases to be on automatic as you reorganize your perceptions into mindfulness.

Do this “stop” exercise now for the next few minutes—simple things like picking up a glass, walking to the door, looking at your shoes. But stop before you take any action, and then do the same action or act of attention consciously, bringing full mindfulness into the act. As you become more conscious of your actions, you will become more naturally aware and alert. Your field of mindfulness will expand and you will feel yourself inhabiting your reality and not just being a bystander.

If you would start by practicing this technique for five minutes a day, then gradually increasing day by day the minutes in which you stop before performing any movement and then doing it mindfully, in a month’s time you will be well on your way to having gone off of automatic and into conscious orchestration of your life. Your senses will have expanded because, together with your continuing to journey and explore in imagination your inner sensory world, you will have done much to reweave your perceptions. And not just your perceptions. This simple technique will spill over into your relationships, memory, thinking, and feeling, as well as increasing your capacity to learn and even to create.

Life, then, is no longer a dream but a vast creative enterprise in which one can focus one’s enhanced energies and attention to partner with creation itself. Too many people go through life oblivious to most of what is around them, several times removed from reality and many times removed from any passion for the possible. Mindfulness gives passion with clarity. Most spiritual traditions consider it to be the best possible state of being. With regard to the outer world, it is a quality of heightened awareness and awakesness to life and its experiences. It can be described as becoming alert for 360 degrees. With regard to the inner world, mindfulness demands similar awareness, so that you become able to orchestrate your internal states, whether it be for creative exploration in inner realms or for meditation and prayer.

There is also the state of mindfulness that is referred to as “being conscious of being conscious,” what the mystic philosopher and consciousness teacher G. I. Gurdjieff referred to as “self-remembering.” In this state you are aware of yourself reading my words, but you are also aware of the experiences you have just explored in the last few minutes as well as the background of sensations in the room where you are sitting, your own bodily sensations, ideas that cross your mind, and your general mood—all of these held together simultaneously. You are aware of all these things, but on the front burner of your consciousness you are also aware that you are aware. I know I am asking much of you, but isn’t your life worth it?

To further awakening, devote time to explore and celebrate beauty in nature as well as in poetry, art, music, and the emerging spirit of the times, with its budding of new realities in the wake of the winter of a passing age. Gather unto yourself congenial friends—two legged as well as four legged—who share your drive toward awakening so that you keep on advancing on the path.

Immersion in beauty wherever you find it calls forth inner beauties and brings to consciousness the freshness of a world made new. Reading the rich metaphors of poetry especially can shake the mind from its stolid moorings, and you see deeper into the world and time. Perception becomes more acute, and conception as well. You wake up to what is going on around you, become empathic, know yourself as part of a seamless kinship with all living things. Thus you come to feel and care more deeply about the decay and degradation in the social and moral order. Like Chickie, you become sensitive to other people’s pain as well as joy and offer them the companionship of soul. You reverence their being and hold them as holy—gods in hiding. This helps them to awaken as well as keeping the spirit of possibility alive in yourself.

You say “Yes!” to life wherever you find it, abandon whining, and welcome and celebrate the springtide of change. Like a happy dog, greet each day with wonder and astonishment. Then grace happens, shift happens,

and the mind is prepared to receive Reality in all its many colors and textures.

Awakening further requires that you take time and space out of your usual day for a practice of spiritual connection. We know that the universe is a living system of elegant design that seems intent on providing the opportunity for learning on all levels. Access levels of consciousness on the divine wavelength, and the learning unfolds. We are built to travel the wavelength of consciousness and to enlarge it when we wish to live in a larger universe.

Better still, change perspective through meditation, reflection, or focus, and discover yourself to be the latest flower on the tree of the cosmos, ready to bloom. This requires the sun and rain of attention, a conscious dwelling in the midst of eternal fecundity. What had been there dimly as background awareness then moves to the foreground. In this state anything that you concentrate on opens up—objects, ideas, relationships, business, governance, even grand designs. We awaken to the wealth of being and the “Aha!” experiences keep on coming.

Above all, let your animals guide you. They know the way.