

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



The People Of The Lie

M. Scott Peck

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About the Author

A graduate of both Harvard University and Case Western Reserve, Dr M. Scott Peck served in the Army Medical Corps from 1963 to 1972 and had a private practice in psychiatry from 1972 to 1983. He then devoted much of his time and financial resources to the work of the Foundation for Community Encouragement, a non-profit organisation which he and his wife, Lily, helped found in 1984. Dr M. Scott Peck died in 2005.

ALSO BY M. SCOTT PECK

The Road Less Travelled

What Return Can I Make?

(With Marilyn von Waldner and Patricia Kay)
(Republished with Marilyn von Waldner as *Gifts for the Journey*)

The Different Drum

A Bed by the Window

The Friendly Snowflake

(Illustrated by Christopher Peck)

A World Waiting to be Born

Meditations from the Road

Further Along the Road Less Travelled

In Search of Stones

(Illustrated by Christopher Peck)

In Heaven as on Earth

Denial of the Soul

The Road Less Travelled and Beyond

Golf and the Spirit

PEOPLE OF THE LIE

The Hope for Healing Human Evil

M. Scott Peck, M.D.



arrow books

For Lily
*who serves so many ways,
only one of which has been
to wrestle with demons*

Handle with Care

THIS IS A dangerous book.

I have written it because I believe it is needed. I believe its over-all effect will be healing.

But I have also written it with trepidation. It has potential for harm. It will cause some readers pain. Worse, some may misuse its information to harm others.

I have inquired of several preliminary readers whose judgment and integrity I particularly respect: 'Do you think this book about human evil is itself evil?' Their answer was no. One, however, added, 'Some of us in the Church have a saying that even the Virgin Mary can be used for sexual fantasy.'

While this crude but pithy response is realistic, I do not find it greatly reassuring. I apologize to my readers and to the public for the harm this book may cause, and I plead with you to handle it with care.

One meaning of care is love. Be gentle and loving with yourself if you find what is written causing you pain. And please be gentle and loving with those neighbours you may come to understand as evil. Be careful—full of care.

Evil people are easy to hate. But remember Saint Augustine's advice to hate the sin but love the sinner.¹ Remember when you recognize an evil person that truly, 'There but for the grace of God go I.'

In labelling certain human beings as evil, I am making an obviously severely critical value judgment. My Lord said, 'Judge not, that ye be not judged.' By this statement—so often quoted out of context—Jesus did not mean we

should never judge our neighbour. For he went on to say, 'Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye.'² What he meant was that we should judge others only with great care, and that such carefulness begins with self-judgment.

We cannot begin to hope to heal human evil until we are able to look at it directly. It is not a pleasant sight. Many observed that my previous book, *The Road Less Travelled*,³ was a nice book. This is not a nice book. It is about our dark side, and in large part about the very darkest members of our human community—those I frankly judge to be evil. They are not nice people. But the judgment needs to be made. It is the principal thesis of this work that these specific people—as well as human evil in general—need to be studied scientifically. Not in the abstract. Not just philosophically. But scientifically. And to do that we must be willing to make judgments. The dangers of such judgments will be elaborated at the beginning of the concluding section of the book. But I ask you for the present to bear in mind that such judgments cannot be made safely unless we begin by judging and healing ourselves. The battle to heal human evil always begins at home. And self-purification will always be our greatest weapon.

This book has been most difficult to write for many reasons. Preeminent among them is that it has always been a book in process. I have not learned about human evil; I am learning. In fact, I am just beginning to learn. One chapter is entitled 'Toward a Psychology of Evil' precisely because we do not yet have a body of scientific knowledge about evil sufficient to be dignified by calling it a psychology. So let me add another note of caution: Do not regard anything written here as the last word. Indeed, the purpose of the book is to lead us to dissatisfaction with our current state of ignorance of the subject.

I referred earlier to Jesus as my Lord. After many years of vague identification with Buddhist and Islamic mysticism, I ultimately made a firm Christian commitment—signified by my non-denominational baptism on the ninth of March 1980, at the age of forty-three—long after I had begun working on this book. In a manuscript he sent me an author once apologized for his ‘Christian bias’. I make no such apology. I would hardly have committed myself to something I regarded as a bias. Nor do I desire to disguise my Christian outlook. In fact, I couldn’t. My commitment to Christianity is the most important thing in my life and is, I hope, pervasive and total.

But I am concerned that this outlook will, when most apparent, unnecessarily bias some readers. So I ask you to be careful in this respect also. Great evil has been committed throughout the centuries—and is still being committed—by nominal Christians, often in the name of Christ. The visible Christian Church is necessary, even saving, but obviously faulty, and I *do* apologize for its sins as well as my own.

Crusades and inquisitions have nothing to do with Christ. War, torture, and persecution have nothing to do with Christ. Arrogance and revenge have nothing to do with Christ. When he gave his one recorded sermon, the first words out of Jesus’ mouth were, ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit.’ Not the arrogant. And as he was dying he asked that his murderers be forgiven.

In a letter to her sister, Saint Theresa of Lysieux wrote, ‘If you are willing to serenely bear the trial of being displeasing to yourself, then you will be for Jesus a pleasant place of shelter.’⁴ To define a ‘true Christian’ is a risky business. But if I had to, my definition would be that a true Christian is anyone who is ‘for Jesus a pleasant place of shelter.’ There are hundreds of thousands who go to Christian churches every Sunday who are not the least bit willing to be displeasing to themselves, serenely or

otherwise, and who are not, therefore, for Jesus a pleasant place of shelter. Conversely, there are millions of Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, Jews, atheists, and agnostics who are willing to bear that trial. There is nothing in this work that should offend the latter. Much may offend the former.

I feel compelled to make another ‘nonapology’. Many readers are likely to be concerned about my use of masculine pronouns in relation to God. I think I both understand and appreciate their concern. It is a matter to which I have given much thought. I have generally been a strong supporter of the women’s movement and action that is reasonable to combat sexist language. But first of all, God is not neuter. He is exploding with life and love—even sexuality of a sort. So ‘It’ is not appropriate. Certainly I consider God androgynous. He is as gentle and tender and nurturing and maternal as any woman could ever be. Nonetheless, culturally determined though it may be, I subjectively experience His reality as more masculine than feminine. While He nurtures us, He also desires to penetrate us, and while we more often than not flee from His love like a reluctant virgin, He chases after us with a vigour in the hunt that we most typically associate with males. As C. S. Lewis put it, in relation to God we are all female.⁵ Moreover, whatever our gender or conscious theology, it is our duty—our obligation—in response to His love to attempt to give birth, like Mary, to Christ in ourselves and in others.

I shall, however, break with tradition and use the neuter for Satan. While I know Satan to be lustful to penetrate us, I have not in the least experienced this desire as sexual or creative—only hateful and destructive. It is hard to determine the sex of a snake.

I have made multiple alterations of detail in every one of the many case histories given in this book. The cornerstones of both psychotherapy and science are honesty and accuracy. Nonetheless, values often compete,

and the preservation of confidentiality takes precedence in this book over the full or accurate disclosure of irrelevant detail. The purist, therefore, may distrust my 'data'. On the other hand, if you think you recognize one of my specific patients in this book, you will be wrong. You will, however, probably recognize many people who conform to the personality patterns I will describe. That will be because the many alterations of case-history details have not, in my judgment, significantly distorted the reality of the human dynamics involved. And this book has been written because of the commonality of such dynamics, as well as their need to be more clearly perceived and understood by us human beings.

The length of the list of people to be thanked for their support of this work makes such listing impractical, but the following deserve special mention: my faithful secretary, Anne Pratt, who without benefit of word processor, cooperatively typed the seemingly endless manuscript versions and revisions over the course of five years; my children, Belinda, Julia, and Christopher, who have suffered from their father's workaholism; those of my colleagues who have affirmed me through their courage to also face the terrible reality of human evil, particularly my wife, Lily, to whom this work is dedicated, and my dear 'atheist' friend, Richard Slone; my editor, Erwin Glikes, who encouraged me so greatly by his belief in the need for the book; all the brave patients who have submitted to my fumbling ministrations and have thereby been my teachers; and, finally, two great modern students of human evil and mentors for me, Erich Fromm and Malachi Martin.

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[1](#) Saint Augustine, *The City of God*, ed. Bourke (Image Books, 1958 ed.), p. 304.

[2](#) Matthew 7:1-5.

[3](#) Arrow books, 1990

[4](#) *Collected Letters of St. Thérèse of Lisieux*, trans. F. J. Sheed (Sheed and Ward, 1949), p. 303.

[5](#) *That Hideous Strength*, Macmillan (Paperback Edition, New York, 1965), p. 316.

The Man Who Made a Pact with the Devil

GEORGE HAD ALWAYS been a carefree person—or so he thought—until that afternoon in early October. It is true that he had the usual concerns of a salesman, a husband and father of three, and the owner of a house with a roof that occasionally leaked and a lawn that always needed mowing. It is also true that he was an unusually neat and orderly person who tended to worry more than most if the lawn got a little high or the house paint a little chipped. And it is true that in the evenings, just as the sun was setting, he always experienced a strange mixture of sadness and dread. George did not like sunset time. But that lasted only a few minutes. Sometimes when he was busy selling or when the sky was grey, he did not notice the sunset time at all.

George was a topnotch salesman, a natural. Handsome, articulate, with an easy manner and a gift for storytelling, he had taken over the southeastern states territory like a meteor. He sold plastic container lids, the kind that snap easily over coffee cans. It was a competitive market. George's company was one of five national manufacturers of such products. Within two years of taking over the territory from a man who was no slouch himself, George, with his genius for orderliness, had tripled the sales. At thirty-four he was making close to sixty thousand dollars a year in salary and commissions without even having to work very hard. He had made it.

The trouble started in Montreal. The company suggested that he go there for a plastics manufacturers' convention. Since it was autumn, and neither he nor his wife, Gloria, had seen the fall foliage of the north, he decided to take her with him. They enjoyed it. The convention was just another convention, but the foliage was exquisite, the restaurants were excellent, and Gloria was in a reasonably good mood. On their last afternoon in Montreal they went to see the cathedral. Not because they were religious; Gloria was a lukewarm Protestant at best, and he, having endured a fanatically religious mother, had a distinct antipathy to churches. Still it was one of the sights and they were sight-seeing. He found it gloomy and uninteresting and was happy when Gloria had had enough of it. As they were walking out toward the sunlight he spied a small contribution box near the massive door. He stopped in indecision. On the one hand he had no genuine desire to give a penny to this or any church. On the other, he felt a small unreasonable fear that he might be jeopardizing the stability of his life if he didn't. The fear embarrassed him; he was a rational man. But then it occurred to him that it would be quite rational to make a small contribution, just as it is rational to pay an admission price to a museum or an amusement park. He decided to give the change in his pocket if it was not a large amount. It wasn't. He counted fifty-five cents in small coins and dumped them in the box.

That was the moment when that first thought hit him. It struck him like a blow, an actual punch, totally unexpected, dazing him, confusing him. It was more than a thought. It was as if the words were suddenly written out in his mind: 'YOU ARE GOING TO DIE AT 55.'

George reached into his pocket for his wallet. Most of his cash was in traveller's cheques. But he had a five and two one-dollar bills. He tore them from his wallet and stuffed them into the box. Then he took Gloria by the arm and almost shoved her through the doorway. She asked him

what was wrong. He told her he was suddenly feeling ill and wanted to return to their hotel. He did not remember walking down the cathedral steps or hailing a taxi. It was only when he was back in their hotel room, lying in bed vaguely pretending to be sick, that his panic began to subside.

By the next day, as they were flying back to their home in North Carolina, George was feeling peaceful and confident. The incident was forgotten.

Two weeks later, driving on a sales trip in Kentucky, George came to a sign announcing a curve in the road and a forty-five-mile-an-hour speed limit. As he passed the sign another thought came to him, etched in his mind as before in large sharply hewn letters: 'YOU WILL DIE AT 45.'

George felt uneasy the remainder of the day. This time, however, he was able to consider his experience a little more objectively. Both thoughts had to do with numbers. Numbers were just numbers, nothing else, little abstracts without meaning. If they had meaning, why would they change? First 55, now 45. If they were consistent, then he might have something to worry about. But they were just numbers without significance. By the next day he was his old self again.

A week passed. As George drove into the outskirts of a small village a sign announced that he was entering Upton, North Carolina. The third thought came: 'YOU WILL BE MURDERED BY A MAN NAMED UPTON.' George began to be seriously worried. Two days later, driving past an old abandoned railroad station, the words flashed again: 'THE ROOF OF THAT BUILDING WILL COLLAPSE WITH YOU INSIDE, KILLING YOU.'

Thereafter the thoughts came almost every day, always when he was driving, working his territory. George started dreading the mornings on which he faced business trips. He was preoccupied when he was working, and he lost his sense of humour. Food ceased to taste good. It was difficult

to get to sleep at night. But it was all still bearable until the morning he drove across the Roanoke River. Immediately afterward he had the thought: THAT'S THE LAST TIME YOU'LL EVER CROSS THAT BRIDGE.

George considered telling Gloria about his thoughts. Would she think he was crazy? He couldn't bring himself to do it. But lying in bed that night with Gloria snoring softly beside him, he hated her for having peace of mind while he wrestled with his dilemma. The bridge across the Roanoke was one of his most travelled routes. To avoid it he would have to go several hundred miles out of his way each month or else drop several clients. Goddamn it, it was absurd. He couldn't let his life be dictated by mere thoughts, mere figments of a perverse imagination. There was not the slightest shred of evidence that these thoughts represented any kind of reality. On the other hand, how could he know they weren't real? That's it—he could prove they weren't real. If he were to go over the Roanoke Bridge again and not die, it would prove the thought to be false. But if the thought were true ...

At one o'clock in the morning George reached the decision to risk his life. Better to die than live tormented in this way. He dressed silently in the darkness and slipped out of the house. Seventy-three miles back to the Roanoke Bridge. He drove very carefully. When the bridge finally loomed up before him in the night, there was such a tightness in his chest he could hardly breathe. But he went ahead. Over the bridge. Two miles down the road. Then he turned around and drove back across the bridge toward home. He'd made it. He'd proved the thought was wrong! Silly, ridiculous thought. He began to whistle. By the time he let himself back into the house at dawn he was ecstatic. He felt well for the first time in two months. There was no more fear.

Until three nights later. Returning home in the afternoon from another day's trip, he passed a deep excavation at the

side of the road near Fayetteville. BEFORE IT IS FILLED, YOUR CAR WILL DRIVE STRAIGHT INTO THAT EXCAVATION AND YOU WILL BE KILLED. At first George almost laughed about this latest thought. The thoughts were just thoughts; hadn't he proved it? Yet that night he could not get to sleep once again. It was true he had proven the thought about the Roanoke Bridge to be false. But that did not necessarily mean this new thought about the excavation was false. This one just might be the real one. Couldn't it be that the Roanoke Bridge thought was designed to lull him into a false sense of security? That he really was destined to drive into the excavation? The more he considered it, the more anxious he became. Sleep was impossible.

Perhaps if he went back to the site of the excavation, it would make him feel better, just as it had when he went back to the bridge. Admittedly, the idea didn't make much sense; even if he did return to the excavation and make the trip back successfully, he still might slip up and drive into it at a later date, as forecast. Yet he was so anxious it was perhaps worth the try. Once more George dressed in the middle of the night and slipped out of the house. He felt like a fool. Almost to his surprise, however, after he had reached Fayetteville and stopped at the edge of the excavation and started the return trip home, he did feel better—markedly better. His confidence came back. He had the feeling that he was again master of his destiny. He fell asleep as soon as he was home. For a few hours he had some peace.

The pattern of George's illness now became more fixed and devastating. Every day or two on the road he would have a new thought about his death. Following the thought his anxiety would rise to a point at which it was no longer bearable. At that point he would feel compelled to drive back to the spot where he had experienced the thought.

Once he had done this, he felt fine again until the next day and the next thought. Then the cycle would start over.

George stood it for six more weeks. Every other night he was driving around the Carolina countryside. He slept less and less. He lost fifteen pounds. He dreaded going on the road, facing his job. His work performance slipped. A few customers were beginning to complain. He was irritable with his children. Finally, one evening in February, he broke down. Weeping in exasperation, he told Gloria of his torment. Gloria knew of me from a friend. She called me the next morning, and that afternoon I saw George for the first time.

I explained to George that he was suffering from a classical obsessive-compulsive neurosis; that the 'thoughts' that bothered him were what we psychiatrists called obsessions, and that the need to return to the scene of the 'thought' was a compulsion. 'You're right!' he exclaimed. 'It is a compulsion. I don't want to go back to where I have these thoughts. I know it's silly. I want to just forget about it and go to sleep. But I can't. It's like something is forcing me to think about it and forcing me to get up at night and go back. I can't help myself. I'm compelled to go back. You know, that's the worst part of it. If it were just these thoughts, I think I could stand it, but it's this compulsion to go back that's killing me, that's robbing me of my sleep, that's driving me nuts as I spend hours debating in my mind: 'Should I or shouldn't I go back?' My compulsions are even worse than—what do you call them?—my obsessions. They're what's driving me crazy.' Here George paused, looking at me anxiously. 'Do you think I'm going crazy?'

'No,' I replied. 'You're still very much a stranger to me, but on the surface of things I don't see any sign that you are going crazy or that you have anything worse than a severe neurosis.'

'You mean other people have these same kinds of "thoughts" and compulsions?' George asked eagerly. 'Other people who aren't crazy?'

'That's correct,' I answered. 'Their obsessions may not be about dying and their compulsions may be something else. But the pattern of unwanted thoughts and the taking of undesired actions is just the same.' I went on to recount to George a few of the more common obsessions from which people might suffer. I told him, for instance, of people who have great difficulty in leaving their homes for vacations because they keep worrying whether they really did remember to lock the front door and keep having to return to check it. 'I've done that!' George exclaimed. 'I've even had to check three or four times to see whether I'd left the stove on. That's great. You mean, I'm just like everybody else?'

'No, George, you're not like everybody else,' I said. 'While many people—often very successful people—suffer mildly from their need to be safe and certain, they're not up all night being driven around by their compulsions. You have a major neurosis that is crippling your life. It's a curable neurosis, but the cure—psychoanalytic psychotherapy—is going to be quite difficult and will take a long time. You're not going crazy, but I do think you have a major problem, and I think if you don't get extensive treatment, you're likely to continue to be crippled.'

Three days later when George returned to see me for the second time, he was a different man. During our first session he had been weepy as he told me of his agony and almost pathetically eager for reassurance. Now he radiated confidence and aplomb. Indeed, he had a manner of casual *savoir-faire*, which we were later to identify as his 'Joe Cool' appearance. I attempted to learn more about the circumstances of his life, but there was little to grab hold of.

'I don't really have anything that's bothering me, Dr Peck, except these little obsessions and compulsions, and I haven't had any of those since I saw you last. Oh, I admit I have concerns, but that's different from real worries. I mean I'm concerned about whether we ought to paint the house this summer or wait until next. But that's a concern, not a worry. We have plenty of money in the bank. And I'm concerned about how the children are doing in school. Deborah, our oldest, who's thirteen, is probably going to need braces. George junior—he's eleven—doesn't get very good grades. He's not retarded or anything, just more interested in sports. And Christopher, who's six, he's just starting school. He's got the neatest disposition. I guess you could say he's the apple of my eye. I must admit that in my heart I favour him a bit more than the other two, but I make an effort not to show it, and I think I succeed—so that's not a problem. We're a stable family. Good marriage. Oh, Gloria has her moods. Occasionally I even think she's downright bitchy, but I guess all women are like that. Their periods, you know, and that sort of thing.

'Our sex life? Oh, that's fine. No problem there. Except, of course, when Gloria's in a bitchy mood, and then neither of us feels like it—but that's par for the course, isn't it?

'My childhood? Well, I can't say it was really always happy. When I was nine my father had a nervous breakdown. He had to be hospitalized at the state hospital. Schizophrenia, I guess they called it. I suppose that's the reason I was worried last time you might think I was going crazy. I must admit it was a load off my mind when you told me I wasn't. You see, my father never came out of it. Oh, he came home a few times on passes from the hospital, but they never worked out. Yes, I guess he was pretty crazy at times, but I really don't remember very much about it. I can remember having to visit him in the hospital. That I hated. It used to embarrass me to death. And it was such a creepy place. By the middle of high school I refused to visit him

anymore, and he died when I was in college. Yes, he died young. A blessing, I would say.

‘But I don’t think any of that really disturbed me. My sister, who was two years younger, and I got plenty of attention. Mom was with us all the time. She was a good mother. She’s a bit religious, overly so for my taste. She was always dragging us to churches, which I also hated. But that’s the only thing I can fault her for, and besides that stopped as soon as I went to college. We weren’t well off financially, but there was always enough to get by. My grandparents had some money, you see, and they helped us out a lot—my mother’s parents. I never knew my father’s parents. Anyway, we were really close to my grandparents. For a while, when my father was first in the hospital, we even lived with them. I especially loved my grandmother.

‘That reminds me, I remembered something after our last meeting. Talking about compulsions brought it back to my mind that I also had a compulsion when I was around thirteen. I don’t know how it started, but I got this feeling that my grandmother would die unless I touched a certain rock each day. It wasn’t a big deal. The rock was on my way home from school, so all I had to do was just remember to touch it. It was a problem only on the weekends. Then I had to find time each day to do it. Anyway, I grew out of it after a year or so. I don’t know how. I just naturally grew out of it, like it was a phase or something.

‘It makes me think I’m also going to grow out of these obsessions and compulsions I’ve been having recently. I told you, I haven’t had a single one since I saw you. I think maybe it’s over. Possibly all I needed was the little talk we had earlier in the week. I’m most grateful to you for it. You can’t imagine what a reassurance it was for me to know that I wasn’t going crazy and that other people have the same kind of funny thoughts. I think that reassurance has probably done the trick. I doubt that I need this—what do you call it?—psychoanalysis. I agree, it may be too early to

tell, but it seems to me a very long and expensive procedure for something I'm likely to grow out of by myself. So I'd rather not make another appointment. Let's just see what happens. If my obsessions or compulsions come back, then I'll go ahead with it, but for the moment, I'd like to let it ride.'

I mildly attempted to remonstrate with George. I told him it seemed to me that nothing substantial had changed in his existence. I suspected that his symptoms would shortly recur in some form or other. I said I could understand his desire to wait and see what happened, however, and that I would be happy to see him again whenever he wanted. He had made up his mind and clearly was not going to enter therapy as long as he was feeling comfortable. There was no point in fighting about it. The only reasonable course for me was to sit back and wait.

I did not have to wait long.

Two days later George called me, frantic. 'You were right, Dr Peck, the thoughts have come back. Yesterday as I was driving back from a sales meeting, a few miles after I'd rounded a sharp curve, I suddenly had the thought: YOU HIT AND KILLED A HITCHHIKER STANDING AT THE SIDE OF THE ROAD AS YOU DROVE AROUND THAT CURVE. I knew it was just one of my crazy thoughts. If I had really hit someone, I would have felt a bump or heard a thump. But I couldn't get the thought out of my mind. I kept envisioning the body lying in the gutter at the side of the road. I kept thinking he might not be dead and might need help. I kept worrying I would be accused of being a hit-and-run driver. Finally, just before I got home, I couldn't stand it any longer. So I turned around and drove fifty miles all the way back to that curve. Of course there was no body there, no sign of an accident, no blood in the grass. So I felt better. But I can't go on like this. I guess you're right. I guess I do need this psychoanalysis.'

So George resumed therapy, and continued in it because his obsessions and compulsions continued. Over the next three months while he was seeing me twice a week he had many more of his thoughts. Most were about his own death, but some were about being the cause of someone's else's death or being accused of some crime. And each time, after a longer or shorter period of obsessing about it, George would finally give in and return to the scene where the thought had first occurred to obtain relief. His agony continued.

During these first three months in therapy I gradually learned that George had a great deal more to worry about than just his symptoms. His sex life, which he had told me was fine, proved abysmal. Gloria and he had intercourse once every six weeks, and then as an almost violent, quick animalistic act when both of them were drunk. Gloria's 'bitchy moods' turned out to last for weeks. I met with her and found her to be significantly depressed, filled with hatred toward George, whom she described as a 'weak, snivelling slob'. George in turn slowly began to express an enormous amount of resentment toward Gloria, whom he saw as a self-centred, totally unsupportive and unloving woman. He was completely alienated from his two older children, Deborah and George junior. He felt that Gloria had been responsible for turning them against him. In the whole family, Christopher was the only one with whom he had a relationship, and he recognized that he was probably spoiling the boy 'to keep him out of Gloria's clutches.'

Although he had acknowledged from the beginning that his childhood had been less than ideal, as I pushed him to recollect it, George slowly started to realize that it had been more damaging and frightening than he liked to believe. He was able to remember, for instance, his eighth birthday, when his father killed his sister's kitten. He was sitting on his bed before breakfast, day-dreaming of the presents he might receive, when the kitten came tumbling

into the room. His father came in right after it, crazy with rage, carrying a broom. The kitten had apparently made a mess on the living room rug. As George crouched on his bed, screaming for him to stop, his father proceeded to beat the kitten to death with the broom in the corner of the bedroom. That was a year before his father finally had to go to the state hospital.

George was also able to recognize that his mother was almost as deranged as his father. One night, when he was eleven, she had kept him awake until dawn, forcing him to pray on his knees for the survival of their minister, who had had a heart attack. George had hated the minister, and hated the Pentecostal church to which his mother took him every Wednesday evening, every Friday evening, and all day Sunday, year in and year out. He remembered experiencing unrelieved embarrassment and shame as his mother would speak in tongues and writhe in ecstasy during those services, shouting 'O Jesus.' Nor was his life with his grandparents as idyllic as he had wanted to remember it. It was true that he had had a warm and tender and probably saving relationship with his grandmother, but that relationship frequently seemed in jeopardy. During the two years they lived with his grandparents—after his father was hospitalized—his grandfather beat his grandmother almost weekly. Each time George was afraid that his grandmother would be killed. Often he was fearful of leaving the house, feeling that somehow, even by his helpless presence, he might be able to prevent her murder.

These pieces of information and others, had to be pried out of George. He repeatedly complained that he did not see the point of dwelling on the seemingly unsolvable problems of his present life and remembering the painful facts of his past. 'All I want,' he said, 'is to get rid of these ideas and my compulsions. I don't see how talking about unpleasant things that are over and done with is going to

help me get rid of these symptoms.' At the same time George talked almost incessantly about his obsessions and compulsions. On each occasion of a new 'thought' he described it with extraordinary detail and seemed to relish recounting the agonies of deciding whether or not to give in to his compulsion to return. It shortly became clear to me that George was actually using his symptoms to avoid dealing with many of the realities of his life. 'One of the reasons you have these symptoms,' I explained, 'is that they act as a smoke screen. You are so busy thinking and talking about your obsessions and compulsions that you don't have the time to think about the more basic problems that are causing them. Until you are willing to stop using this smoke screen, and until you have dealt in much greater depth with your miserable marriage and your ghastly childhood, you're going to continue to be tortured by your symptoms.'

It also became clear that George was equally reluctant to face the issue of death. 'I know I'm going to die someday, but why think about it? It's morbid. Besides, nothing can be done about it. Thinking about it isn't going to change it.' I attempted, without much success, to point out to George that his attitude was almost ludicrous. 'Actually, you're thinking about death all the time,' I said. 'What do you think your obsessions and compulsions are all about, if not death? And what about your anxiety at the time of sunset? Isn't it clear to you that you hate sunsets because the sunset represents the death of the day and that reminds you of your own death? You're terrified of death. That's okay. So am I. But you're trying to avoid that terror rather than face it. Your problem is not that you think about death but the way you think about it. Until you are able to think about death — despite its terror—voluntarily, you will continue to think about it involuntarily in the form of your obsessions.' But no matter how well I phrased the issue, George seemed to be in no hurry to deal with it.

He was, however, in a vast hurry to be relieved of his symptoms. Despite the fact that he preferred talking about them to talking about death or his alienation from his wife and children, there was no doubt that George was suffering greatly from his obsessions and compulsions. He took to calling me from the road when he was experiencing them. 'Dr Peck,' he would say, 'I'm in Raleigh and I just had another one of my thoughts a couple of hours ago. I promised Gloria I'd be home for dinner. But I can't be if I go back where I had the thought. I don't know what to do. I want to go home, but I feel I have to go back. Please, Dr Peck, help me. Tell me what to do. Tell me I can't go back. Tell me I shouldn't give in to the compulsion.'

Each time I would patiently explain to George that I was not going to tell him what to do, that I did not have the power to tell him what to do, that only he had the power to make his own decisions and it was not healthy for him to want me to make his decisions for him. But my response made no sense to him. Each session he would remonstrate with me. 'Dr Peck, I know if you were to tell me I can't go back anymore, I wouldn't. I'd feel so much better. I don't understand why you won't help me. All you keep saying is it's not your place to tell me what to do. But that's why I'm coming to see you—for you to help me—and you won't. I don't know why you're being so cruel. It's as if you don't even want to help me. You keep saying I've got to make up my own mind. But that's just what I can't do, don't you see? Don't you see the pain I'm in? Don't you want to help?' he would whine.

It went on, week after week. And George was visibly deteriorating. He developed diarrhea. He lost more weight and began looking more and more haggard. He became weepy much of the time. He wondered whether he shouldn't be seeing a different psychiatrist. And I myself began to doubt that I was handling the case correctly. It looked as if George might soon need to be hospitalized.

But then something suddenly seemed to change. One morning, a little less than four months after he began therapy, George came to his session whistling and obviously cheerful. I immediately commented on the change. 'Yes, I certainly am feeling well today,' George acknowledged. 'I don't really know why. I haven't had one of my thoughts or the need to go back for four whole days now. Maybe that's why. Maybe I'm beginning to see the light at the end of the tunnel.' Yet despite the fact that he was not preoccupied with his symptoms, George seemed no more eager to deal with the painful realities of his home life or his childhood. Having resumed his Joe Cool manner, he rather facetiously talked about these realities at my urging, but without any real feeling. Then just before the end of the session, out of the blue, he asked me, 'Dr Peck, do you believe in the devil?'

'That's an odd question,' I replied. 'And a very complicated one. Why do you ask?'

'Oh, no particular reason, just curious.'

'You're evading.' I confronted him. 'There must be a reason.'

'Well, I guess the only reason is that you read a lot about these weird cults that worship Satan. You know, like some of these far-out groups in San Francisco. There's a lot in the papers about them these days.'

'That's true,' I agreed. 'But what brought it to your mind? Why did you suddenly think about it this morning, right now in this particular session?'

'How should I know?' George asked. He appeared annoyed. 'It just came into my mind. You've instructed me to tell you everything that comes into my mind, so I did. All I was doing was what I'm supposed to do. It came into my mind and I told you. I don't know why it came into my mind.'

There seemed no way to proceed further. We had come to the end of the session, and the matter was dropped. The

following session George was still feeling well. He had gained a couple of pounds and no longer looked haggard. 'I had another one of my thoughts two days ago,' he reported, 'but it didn't bother me. I told myself I'm not going to let these silly thoughts bother me anymore. They obviously don't mean anything. So I'm going to die one of these days—so what? I didn't even have the desire to go back. It hardly crossed my mind. Why should I go back about something that's so silly? I think maybe I've finally got this problem licked.'

Once more, since he was again no longer obsessed with his symptoms, I attempted to help him focus more deeply on his marital problems. But his 'Joe Cool' manner was impenetrable; all his responses seemed superficial. I had an uneasy feeling. George did seem to be getting better. Ordinarily I would have been delighted, but I did not have the slightest understanding of why. Nothing in his life, or in the way he was dealing with life, had changed. Why, then, was he getting better? I pushed my uneasiness into the back of my mind.

Our next session was an evening one. George entered looking well and more 'Joe Cool' than ever. As customary, I let him begin the session. After a brief silence, rather casually and without the slightest sign of anxiety, he announced, 'I guess I have a confession to make.'

'Oh?'

'Well, you know, I've been feeling better lately, and I haven't told you why.'

'Oh?'

'You remember a couple of sessions ago I asked you if you believed in the devil? And you wanted to know why I was thinking about it? Well, I guess I wasn't quite honest with you. I do know why. But I felt silly telling you.'

'Go on.'

'I still feel a bit silly. But, you see, you haven't been helping me. You wouldn't do anything to prevent me from