

All of us are creatures of a day; the rememberer and the remembered alike. All is ephemeral—both memory and the object of memory. The time is at hand when you will have forgotten everything; and the time is at hand when all will have forgotten you. Always reflect that soon you will be no one, and nowhere.

—Marcus Aurelius, *The Meditations*

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The Crooked Cure

Dr. Yalom, I would like a consultation. I've read your novel, When Nietzsche Wept, and wonder if you'd be willing to see a fellow writer with a writing block.

—Paul Andrews

No doubt Paul Andrews sought to pique my interest with his email. And he succeeded: I'd never turn away a fellow writer. As for the writing block, I feel blessed by not having been visited by one of those creatures and I was keen to help him tackle it. Ten days later Paul arrived for his appointment. I was startled by his appearance. For some reason I had expected a frisky, tormented, middle-aged writer, yet entering my office was a wizened old man, so stooped over that he appeared to be scrutinizing the floor. As he inched slowly through my doorway, I wondered how he had possibly made it to my office at the top of Russian Hill. Almost able to hear his joints creaking, I took his heavy battered briefcase, held his arm, and guided him to his chair.

“Thankee, thankee, young man. And how old are you?”

“Eighty years old,” I answered.

“Ahhh, to be eighty again.”

“And you? How many years do you have?”

“Eighty-four. Yes, that’s right, *eighty-four*. I know that startles you. Most folks guess I’m in my thirties.”

I took a good look at him, and for a moment our gazes locked. I felt charmed by his elfish eyes and the wisp of a smile playing on his lips. As we sat in silence for a few moments looking at one another, I imagined we basked in a glow of elder comradeship, as though we were travelers on a ship who, one cold foggy night, fell into conversation on the deck and discovered we had grown up in the same neighborhood. We instantly knew one another: our parents had suffered through the Great Depression, we had witnessed those legendary duels between DiMaggio and Ted Williams, and remembered rationing cards for butter and gasoline, and VE day, and Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath*, and Farrell’s *Studs Lonigan*. No need to speak of any of this: we shared it all, and our bond felt secure. Now it was time to get to work.

“So Paul, if we may use first names—”

He nodded. “Of course.”

“All I know about you comes from your short email. You wrote that you were a fellow writer, you’ve read my Nietzsche novel, and you have a writing block.”

“Yes, and I’m requesting a single consultation. That’s all. I’m on a fixed income and can’t afford more.”

“I’ll do what I can. Let’s start immediately and be as efficient as possible. Tell me what I should know about the block.”

“If it’s all right with you, I’ll give you some personal history.”

“That’s fine.”

“I have to go back to my grad school days. I was in philosophy at Princeton writing my doctorate on the incompatibility between Nietzsche’s ideas on determinism and his espousal of self-transformation. But I couldn’t finish. I kept getting distracted by such things as Nietzsche’s extraordinary correspondence, especially by his letters to his friends and fellow writers like Strindberg. Gradually I lost interest altogether in his philosophy and valued him more as an artist. I came to regard Nietzsche as a poet with the most powerful voice in history, a voice so majestic that it eclipsed his ideas, and soon there was nothing for me to do but to switch departments and do my doctorate in literature rather than philosophy. The years went by, my research progressed well, but I simply could not write. Finally I arrived at the position that it was only through art that an artist could be illuminated, and I abandoned the dissertation project entirely and decided instead to write a novel on Nietzsche. But the writing block was neither fooled nor deterred by my changing projects. It remained as powerful and unmovable as a granite mountain. No progress was possible. And so it has continued until this very day.”

I was stunned. Paul was eighty-four now. He must have begun working on his dissertation in his mid-twenties, *sixty years ago*. I had heard of professional students before, but sixty years? His life on hold for sixty years? No, I hoped not. It couldn’t be.

“Paul, fill me in about your life since those college days.”

“Not much to tell. Of course the university eventually decided I had stayed overtime, rang the bell, and terminated my

student status. But books were in my blood, and I never strayed far from them. I took a job as a librarian at a state university, where I stayed put until retirement trying, unsuccessfully, to write all these years. That's it. That's my life. Period."

"Tell me more. Your family? The people in your life?"

Paul seemed impatient and spat his words out quickly: "No siblings. Married twice. Divorced twice. Mercifully short marriages. No children, thank God."

This is getting very odd, I thought. So affable at first, Paul now seems intent on giving me as little information as possible. What's going on?

I persevered. "Your plan was to write a novel about Nietzsche, and your email mentioned that you had read my novel *When Nietzsche Wept*. Can you say some more about that?"

"I don't understand your question."

"What feelings did you have about my novel?"

"A bit slow-going at first, but it gathered steam. Despite the stilted language and the stylized, improbable dialogue, it was, overall, not an unengrossing read."

"No, no, what I meant was your reaction to that novel appearing while you, yourself, were striving to write a novel about Nietzsche. Some feelings about that must have arisen."

Paul shook his head as though he did not wish to be bothered with that question. Not knowing what else to do, I continued on.

"Tell me, how did you get to me? Was my novel the reason you selected me for a consultation?"

"Well, whatever the reason, we're here now."

Things grow stranger by the minute, I thought. But if I were to offer him a useful consultation, I absolutely had to learn more about him. I turned to “old reliable,” a question that never fails to provide heaps of information: “I need to know more about you, Paul. I believe it would help our work today if you’d take me through, in detail, a typical twenty-four-hour day in your life. Pick a day earlier this week, and let’s start with your waking in the morning.” I almost always ask this question in a consultation, as it provides invaluable information about so many areas of the patient’s life—sleep, dreams, eating and work patterns—but most of all I learn how the patient’s life is peopled.

Failing to share my investigative enthusiasm, Paul merely shook his head slightly as though to brush my question away. “There’s something more important for us to discuss. For many years I had a long correspondence with my dissertation director, Professor Claude Mueller. You know his work?”

“Well, I’m familiar with his biography of Nietzsche. It’s quite wonderful.”

“Good. Very good. I’m exceptionally glad you think that,” Paul said, as he reached into his briefcase and extracted a ponderous binder. “Well, I’ve brought that correspondence with me, and I’d like you to read it.”

“When? You mean *now*?”

“Yes, there is nothing more important that we could do in this consultation.”

I looked at my watch. “But we have only this one session, and reading this would take an hour or two, and it is so much more important that we—”

“Dr. Yalom, trust me, I know what I’m asking. Make a start. Please.”

I was flummoxed. *What to do? He is absolutely determined. I’ve reminded him of our time constraints, and he is fully aware he has only this one meeting. On the other hand, perhaps Paul knows what he is doing. Perhaps he believes that this correspondence would supply all the information about him that I need. Yes, yes, the more I think about it, the more certain I am: this must be it.*

“Paul, I gather you’re saying that this correspondence provides the necessary information about you?”

“If that assumption is necessary for you to read it, then the answer is yes.”

Most unusual. An intimate dialogue is my profession, my home territory. It’s where I am always comfortable and yet in this dialogue everything feels askew, out of joint. Maybe I should stop trying so hard and just go with the flow. After all, it’s his hour. He’s paying for my time. I felt a bit dizzy but acquiesced and held out my hand to accept the manuscript he proffered.

As Paul passed me the massive three-ring binder, he told me the correspondence extended over forty-five years and ended with Professor Mueller’s death in 2002. I began by flipping the pages to familiarize myself with the project. Much care had gone into this binder. It seemed that Paul had saved, indexed, and dated everything that passed between them, both short casual notes and long discursive letters. Professor Mueller’s letters were neatly typed with his small, exquisitely fashioned closing signature, while Paul’s letters—both the early carbon copies and the later photocopies—ended simply with the letter P.

Paul nodded toward me. “Please start.”

I read the first several letters and saw that this was a most urbane and engaging correspondence. Though Professor Mueller obviously had great respect for Paul, he chided him for his infatuation with wordplay. In the very first letter he said, “I see that you’re in love with words, Mr. Andrews. You enjoy waltzing with them. But words are just the notes. It’s the ideas that form the melody. It’s the *ideas* that give our life structure.”

“I plead guilty,” retorted Paul in the ensuing letter. “I don’t ingest and metabolize words, I love to dance with them. I greatly hope to be always guilty of this offense.” A few letters later, despite the roles and the half century dividing them, they had dropped formal titles of Mister and Professor and used their first names, Paul and Claude.

In another letter, my eye fell on a statement written by Paul: “I never fail to perplex my companions.” So I had company. Paul continued, “Hence, I shall always embrace solitude. I know I make the error of assuming that others share my passion for great words. I know I inflict my passions onto them. You can only imagine how all creatures flee and scatter when I approach them.” *That sounds important*, I thought. “*Embracing solitude*” is a nice cosmetic touch and puts a poetic spin on it, but I imagine he is a very lonely old man.

And then, a couple of letters later, I had an “aha” moment when I came upon a passage that possibly offered the key to understanding this entire surreal consultation. Paul wrote, “So you see, Claude, what is there left for me but to look for the nimblest and noblest mind I can find. I need a mind likely to appreciate my sensibilities, my love of poetry, a mind incisive and bold enough to join me in dialogue. Do any of my words

quicken your pulse, Claude? I need a light-footed partner for this dance. Would you do me the honor?"

A thunderclap of understanding burst in my mind. *Now I knew why Paul insisted I read the correspondence. It's so obvious. How had I missed it? Professor Mueller died twelve years ago, and Paul is now trolling for another dance partner! That's where my novel about Nietzsche comes in! No wonder I've been so confused. I thought I was interviewing him, whereas, in reality, he is interviewing me. That must be what is going on.*

I looked at the ceiling for a moment, wondering how to express this clarifying insight, when Paul interrupted my reverie by pointing to his watch and remarking, "Please, Dr. Yalom, our time passes. Please continue reading." I followed his wishes. The letters were compelling, and I gladly dived back into them.

In the first dozen letters there seemed a clear student-teacher relationship. Claude often suggested assignments, for example: "Paul, I'd like you to write a piece on comparing Nietzsche's misogyny with Strindberg's misogyny." I assumed Paul completed such assignments but saw no further mention of them in the correspondence. They must have discussed his assignments face to face. But gradually, halfway through the year, the teacher-student roles began to dissolve. There was little mention of assignments, and, at times, it was difficult to discern who was the teacher and who the pupil. Claude submitted several of his own poems seeking Paul's commentary, and Paul's responses were anything but deferential as he urged Claude to turn off his intellect and pay attention to his inner rush of feelings. Claude, on the other hand, critiqued Paul's poems for having passion but no intelligible content.

Their relationship grew more intimate and more intense with each exchange of letters. I wondered if I held in my hands the ashes of the great love, perhaps the only love, of Paul's life. *Maybe Paul is suffering from chronic unresolved grief. Yes, yes—certainly that's it. That's what he's trying to tell me by asking me to read these letters to and from the dead.*

As time went on I entertained one hypothesis after another, but in the end none offered the full explanation I sought. The more I read, the more my questions multiplied. Why had Paul come to see me? He labeled a writing block as his major problem, yet why did he show no interest whatsoever in exploring his writing block? Why did he refuse to give me details of his life? And why this singular insistence that I spend all our time together reading these letters of long ago? We needed to make sense of it. I resolved to broach all these issues with Paul before we parted.

Then I saw an exchange of letters that gave me pause. "Paul, your excessive glorification of sheer experience is veering in a dangerous direction. I must remind you, once again, of Socrates's admonition that the unexamined life is not worth living."

Good going, Claude! I silently rooted. *My point exactly. I identify entirely with your pressing Paul to examine his life.*

But Paul retorted sharply in his next letter, "Given the choice between living and examining, I'll choose living any day. I eschew the malady of explanation and urge you to do likewise. The drive to explain is an epidemic in modern thought and its major carriers are contemporary therapists: every shrink I have ever seen suffers from this malady, and it is

addictive and contagious. Explanation is an illusion, a mirage, a construct, a soothing lullaby. Explanation has no existence. Let's call it by its proper name, a coward's defense against the white-knuckled, knee-knocking terror of the precariousness, indifference and capriciousness of sheer existence." I read this passage a second and third time and felt destabilized. My resolve to posit any of the ideas fermenting in my mind wavered. I knew that there was zero chance that Paul would accept *my* invitation to dance.

Every once in a while I looked up and saw Paul's eyes riveted on me, taking in my every reaction, signaling me to go on reading. But, finally, when I saw there were only ten minutes left, I closed the folder and firmly took charge.

"Paul, we've little time left, and I have several things I want to discuss with you. I'm uncomfortable because we're coming to the end of our session, and I've not really addressed the very reason you contacted me—your major complaint, your writing block."

"I never said that."

"But in your email to me you said . . . here, I have it printed out . . ." I opened my folder, but before I could locate it, Paul responded:

"I know my words: 'I would like a consultation. I've read your novel, *When Nietzsche Wept*, and wonder if you'd be willing to see a fellow writer with a writing block.'"

I looked up at him expecting a grin, but he was entirely serious. He *had* said he had a writing block but had not explicitly labeled it as the problem for which he wanted help. It was a word trap, and I fought back irritation at being tri-

fled with. “I’m accustomed to helping folks with problems. That’s what therapists do. So one can easily see why I made that assumption.”

“I understand entirely.”

“Well then, let’s make a fresh start. Tell me, how can I be of help to you?”

“Your reflections on the correspondence?”

“Can you be more explicit? It would help me frame my comments.”

“Any and every observation would be most helpful to me.”

“All right.” I opened the notebook and flipped through the pages. “As you know, I had time to read only a small portion, but overall I was captivated by it, Paul, and found it brimming with intelligence and erudition at the highest level. I was struck by the shift in roles. At first you were the student and he the teacher. But obviously you were a very special student, and within a few months this young student and this renowned professor corresponded as equals. There was no doubt he had the greatest respect for your comments and your judgments. He admired your prose, valued your critique of his work, and I can only imagine that the time and energy he gave to you must have far exceeded what he could possibly have provided the typical student. And, of course, given that the correspondence continued long after your tenure as a student, there is no doubt that you and he were immensely important to one another.”

I looked at Paul. He sat motionless, his eyes filling with tears, eagerly drinking in all that I said, obviously thirsting for yet more. Finally, finally, we had had an encounter. Finally, I had given him something. I could bear witness to an event of

extraordinary importance to Paul. I, and I alone, could testify that a great man deemed Paul Andrews to be significant. But the great man had died years ago, and Paul had now grown too frail to bear this fact alone. *He needed a witness, someone of stature*, and I had been selected to fill that role. Yes, I had no doubt of this. This explanation had the aroma of truth.

Now to convey some of these thoughts that would be of value to Paul. As I looked back on all my many insights and at the few minutes remaining to us, I was uncertain where to begin and ultimately decided to start with the most obvious: “Paul, what struck me most strongly about your correspondence was the intensity and the tenderness of the bond between you and Professor Mueller. It struck me as a deep love. His death must have been terrible for you. I wonder if that painful loss still lingers and *that* is the reason you desired a consultation. What do you think?”

Paul did not answer. Instead he held out his hand for the manuscript, and I returned it to him. He opened his briefcase, packed the binder of correspondence away, and zippered it shut.

“Am I right, Paul?”

“I desired a consultation with you because I desired it. And now I’ve had the consultation, and I obtained precisely what I wished for. You’ve been helpful, exceedingly helpful. I expected nothing less. Thank you.”

“Before you leave, Paul, one more moment, please. I’ve always found it important to understand what helps. Could you expound for a moment on what you received from me? I believe

that some greater clarification of this will serve you well in the future, and might be useful for me and my future clients.”

“Irv, I regret having to leave you with so many riddles, but I’m afraid our time is up.” He tottered as he tried to rise. I reached out and grabbed his elbow to steady him. Then he straightened himself, reached to shake my hand, and, with an invigorated gait, strode out of my office.