CHAPTER 1

Poppy's Story

Every object rightly seen unlocks a quality of the soul.
—Ralph Waldo Emerson

Poppy, my grandfather, was a short, bald man with a round belly that I could never quite reach around when I hugged him. His tough, stoic nature was reflected in his workman's frame, powerful arms, and rough hands. He wore thick, black-rimmed glasses that sat prominently atop his oversized nose. Pop gave off a gruff, understated fierceness, which I recognized as more appearance than reality. Still, most people kept a safe distance from him—though it may have been the smelly, Dutch Master cigars he smoked continuously. He was pragmatic, said what was necessary and did what was necessary, no more, no less. He worked hard driving a big tanker truck during the week, delivering heating oil to apartment buildings in the Bronx. On the weekends, which I mostly spent with him, he worked around his house. There was always a project to do, and I followed on his heels like a puppy, trying with great enthusiasm to help. My main contribution, I quickly discovered, was getting in the way, and according to Pop, I had natural talent.

My grandfather regularly amazed me with his near magical ability to fix things—a broken toy, a stalled engine, a squeaky staircase. One time he did something that permanently changed the way I see the world. It was a Friday during summer, and a neighbor came over to borrow an extension cord. Mr. Tinnen was part of the maintenance staff at a nearby retirement community. He looked weary and upset, explaining that in the previous night's rain, the old auditorium building had leaked again, as it had for three years. Everyone was fed up. They had tried all manner of solutions—plastic tarps, caulk, cement, even a new roof. The demonic drip reappeared again and again. The damnedest thing was the leak often came in different locations or sometimes not at all. No one could figure it out and many experts had tried. My grandfather responded immediately. He told Mr. Tinnen that although he wouldn't guarantee anything, he expected he could find the leak. He didn't brag, but spoke matter-of-factly and with a sense of sureness that led me to believe he knew something no one else did. Finally, the three of us climbed into Mr. Tinnen's red Ford pickup and headed over to the auditorium. This was the equivalent of Gary Cooper in *High Noon* or Houdini saying he could get out of the straight jacket underwater.

Sitting in the front seat between the two men, I wondered how Poppy would do it and whether Mr. Tinnen was as excited as I was. I felt a low-voltage current pulse through my body. When we arrived at the site the maintenance crew was cleaning up water and preparing for another storm. Mr. Tinnen introduced my grandfather. Immediately there was a feeling of resistance. The head of the crew insisted that the leak could not be found and seemed irritated that my grandfather—a nonexpert—would even try. My grandfather simply asked Mr. Tinnen to show him the site of the leak.

We walked inside the building to the offices behind the auditorium. It was a mess: The ceiling was wet and the carpet was

soaked, as was a side chair by the receptionist's desk. A pungent smell of mildew struck my nostrils and I winced. Poppy looked at every detail intensely, especially the length of one overhead beam. To me, he was Superman, using his X-ray vision to see inside the ceiling and walls. He asked the receptionist all sorts of questions about the leak—when and where and how much and at what time and is it always the same? He questioned Mr. Tinnen as well.

We went up and carefully checked the roof and gutters. Lastly, we took a slow walk around the perimeter of the auditorium. Pop asked Mr. Tinnen to bring a ladder and a long garden hose with a spray nozzle. I was fascinated, but hearing each succeeding person say that the leak could not be found I was admittedly inclined in their direction.

We took the ladder up to a second story balcony. Mr. Tinnen threw the end of the garden hose up. I leaned over the wrought iron railing to catch it. My grandfather called down to Mr. Tinnen to turn on the water and come up. Then he told Mr. Tinnen to stand on the ladder and spray the face of the wall just under the roof line. Mr. Tinnen immediately protested. This was ridiculous. The leak could not be in this spot. First off, it was on the side-face of the building, not the roof, and it was on the opposite side of the building from where the offices were—too far for a leak to travel. Plus, this was the particular spot that Mr. Tinnen and others had passed by, time and again, and assured themselves could not be the entry point for the leak. "This can't be the spot," said Mr. Tinnen. "Maybe not," Pop answered, "but I think it's here or one other place." Mr. Tinnen shook his head and then gave in.

My grandfather told him to stand on the ladder and spray a particular place until he was told to stop, adding he could count on about fifteen minutes. Downstairs, where the leak had last come out, Pop and I, now brothers in battle, sat down, side by side, in two worn red leather armchairs, and we waited for the

mysterious leak to appear. I was beside myself with anticipation. Pop sat with remarkable calm. It didn't seem to matter to him whether it leaked or not, which I couldn't understand.

It was after 5 p.m. now; everyone had gone home, and the office was quiet. Minutes passed like long summer days. The whole thing was a mystery, and I was starting to get bored. I exhaled a great breath, sighed and sat and waited. Ten minutes passed and not a sign of water. We waited a bit longer, and then I suggested we might check that other spot he had in mind. "Not yet," Pop said. His two words struck my gut with blunt force; I understood that I should sit quietly and not ask further project-management questions. As my grandfather traced the ceiling line with his eyes, I began to wonder whether I might miss *Star Trek* because of this stupid leak, which couldn't be found anyway. We were deep into summer reruns and a particularly good episode was on that night. I envisioned a crew from the Enterprise beaming into the office with scanners and phasers, positive that either Scotty or Mr. Spock would find the leak while Captain Kirk and I went off on a real adventure.

The plock, plock, plock of dripping water interrupted my daydream. I looked up and saw what was now a steady stream of it, running along the big beam and spilling into a small puddle by the secretary's desk. My grandfather was talking to me, but I wasn't hearing him. "Butch, grab the trash can and put it under the water." I did and then ran up to tell Mr. Tinnen—with great pride—that we had found the leak. Mr. Tinnen was dumbfounded. It was as though he had just learned that the flat world is actually round. I could feel his sheer disbelief as he repeated this realization in his mind,

"Round . . .? How could it be round?"

To me, it was a great and astonishing magic trick, and now my grandfather was inviting Mr. Tinnen downstairs to see how it was done. He pointed to the exposed beam, "Look," he said. "The ceiling appears to be one continuous plane, but it isn't. That

exposed beam dividing the ceiling down its center is pitched; it's on a downward slope. The ceiling is actually different heights on either side, but the beam disguises that fact." He led us into an adjoining storage room and pointed out that the ceiling joists ran perpendicular to the exposed beam out in the office, and, in fact, passed through the office ceiling and connected with that main beam. Mr. Tinnen didn't get it, and neither did I.

"In other words," my grandfather said, "the ceiling is higher over there on the far side of the building. Hidden from view, up inside the ceiling, there are wooden joists spanning from wall to wall. If water entered the building from the west over on the far side and traveled inside the ceiling, it would flow along the wooden joist's natural downward slope, eventually reaching the main beam in the center of the room. And, then, because the main beam continues on a downward slope, the water would make a left turn and run down hill along its path until it ran out of forward momentum. Then, lacking further forward movement, gravity would pull the water down to the floor. Water is entering the building and flowing downhill in logical sequence until it runs out of forward movement and then it leaks onto the floor. That's it—end of story."

Mr. Tinnen was more relaxed now, even happy, but it sounded too simple, too obvious to be true. My grandfather led us both upstairs to the balcony and continued with his explanation, "The new roof and gutters told me that the leak was most likely not coming from there. That leaves the sides of the building. For rain to enter the side of a building it would have to be blown in with force. If it drizzles, it won't leak, but if it pours and the wind blows, then it will leak. How badly would depend upon how strong the wind blew and how much rain there was. Last night we had a powerful storm from the west. The ceiling joists run west to east, which means water blown in would gather on a joist and flow downhill as I described before. When I checked the western wall here on the balcony, I discovered a number of

cracks in the stucco just up from where the leak occurred. In our experiment, you sprayed water on the crack, letting in a steady trickle. This water flowed down the joist to its end, where it met the main beam. The water dribbled onto the main beam, which allowed the flow to continue, then traveled down that beam's slope before leaking onto the floor. Fill those cracks and any like them and your leak is solved."

Mr. Tinnen thanked my grandfather all the way home, lacing his gratitude with an equal measure of incredulity: "I can't believe it," he repeated, "I just can't believe it." I, on the other hand, believed it surely and completely, and I determined at that moment to learn to see everything the way my grandfather had seen that leak.

Finding the leak

Human beings have complex lives. We form innumerable relationships, from the most intimate to distant acquaintances. We fill our days at work or school. We create careers. We have pets and hobbies. We have children and grandchildren. Time passes and we age. We develop wellness problems—some physical, others emotional. Along the way, and many times, our perspective changes, our beliefs change, and what we want changes. At seventeen, we long for some boy or girl to love us. At thirty, we want something else. At fifty, it changes again—as it does at sixty-five. As we make our journey, we consistently move toward what we want. Sometimes it's a relationship, other times a car or a particular job. Time passes, we age, we build relationships, we move toward what we want; sometimes we get it, sometimes not. This is the ebb and flow of life.

As we make this journey, we try to make sense of life's enormous complexity. We talk to friends who think and see things as we do. Some settle on a religious perspective, others on one that is social or political; some focus on work or money, others on science, sports, or art; and for many, the focus of their lives

is simply the struggle to survive. Years pass, we grow older and, as we do, we move toward what we believe in; sometimes we achieve it, sometimes not. This, too, is the ebb and flow of life.

As we make our journey, we may notice patterns in our lives, perhaps persisting over many years or even an entire lifetime. These patterns lead to natural questions: why can't I find the right partner, the one who will love and satisfy me? Why doesn't my partner see me or value me the way I want? Why can't I find my place in the world? Why can't I find my right job or be properly recognized by others? Why do I become angry over small things? Why do I let people overpower me? Why am I struggling financially? Why don't I feel supported or protected? And why do I keep so much of myself hidden from others? We all have many private questions about this great journey we're on.

But modern life is busy. We have to be at work or at school; we have to pick up the kids and take them to soccer; we have to meet so and so at this place; we have to make dinner, answer email, help with homework, and then watch the latest episode of our favorite show. We have so much to do and too little time for any of it, so our deeper life questions have to wait; mostly they go unasked, unexplored and, ultimately, unanswered. Yet their impact lives with us continuously, not only in our outer lives but also in our closest relationships, and mostly in our own hearts.

Then it happens: a twist of fate, an illness, a broken relationship, a loss of something or someone valuable and important to us. We stop, if only temporarily, to consider the meaning of life. We take time out and view things from this new and serious perspective. We feel the need to understand: we see a therapist; we take a workshop; we talk to a spiritual counselor; we sit quietly alone; we volunteer to help those less fortunate; and we take up some kind of **Inner Work**. We reach out to family and friends with a new measure of authenticity and vulnerability. We are searching for greater meaning and purpose beyond the living of everyday life.

Sooner or later, we all end up looking at our lives the way Mr. Tinnen looked at the auditorium. Here was a big, complex building leaking water from the outside in, causing all kinds of collateral damage. When this moment comes we realize that our own auditorium—that is, our lives—have been leaking a long time; we see that our relationships to others and to ourselves are not working. We recognize our own dissatisfaction, and it scares, saddens and even overwhelms us.

At this point, like Mr. Tinnen, we seek help. We hire professionals to assist us; we reach out to family or friends; we try to make logical changes in our behavior or attitudes. Typically, in the end, our personal leaks persist. We still can't seem to find just the right partner; we still aren't getting what we want from our current partner; we don't understand why this dissatisfaction keeps repeating itself; we only know it does, and we are left feeling discouraged or depressed at the sadness of it all. Some feel ashamed to have let it go on for so long. But standing before us, perhaps clearer than ever, is our leaky auditorium. We ask ourselves: how can we ever find the source of our leak? Where do we even start? How can we come to some genuine understanding when it all seems so big, so complex, so overwhelming?

The method in this book is about attaining greater consciousness and personal clarity. To accomplish this, we will learn to perceive the leaks in our lives—those things we believe are not working with others or ourselves—in the same way that my grandfather perceived the leak in the auditorium. He began from a simple premise: it is impossible *not* to find the leak. A leak must enter from a specific place, it must exit from a specific place, and these two locations must be connected. So, with this premise as his foundation, my grandfather demonstrated how to start, which is with openness and receptivity. There must be a willingness to look, and the looking should be undertaken with respect, care, and thoroughness. First, see the problem—which is what my grandfather taught me—and take the time to see things clear-

ly before taking further action. He had quietly observed and let the auditorium show *him* the origin of the leak.

My grandfather was also a skilled craftsman who could envision the auditorium as a whole with an inner structure of joists and beams covered by an outer surface of ceilings and walls. He understood that both the inner and outer components were connected and must be seen as a whole. My grandfather perceived the problem in a way that allowed him to see the problem clearly and to solve it efficiently. Bear in mind this was a problem that numerous experts had tried to resolve, including engineers, builders, and other professionals. Although this problem had received a great investment of time and thousands of dollars, my grandfather resolved the issue in under an hour because he actually saw the problem and then considered it patiently and methodically.

My grandfather did not possess extraordinary skills or magical powers; what he had was an effective method for attaining clarity and solving problems where others didn't, and this proved to be the difference between reaching a permanent resolution or not.

Identity theory

The foundation of this book rests on one fundamental concept: **Identity**. Identity is the unseen, organizing principle that imparts form to all that we experience. It is like the die in an extrusion process, such as a cookie press. The amorphous dough represents the energy that animates life; the die (the cookie shape) at the end of the press is our personal identity. As the amorphous dough passes through, it becomes the form of the die at the end of the press. In this way, some of us become stars, others half-moons, others hearts, all arising from the same formless dough. It is identity's function to impart form by acting as the die for the energy that animates life. Change the die, even slightly, adjust one tip of the star or one edge of the half moon, and the

cookie's shape will be different, must be different. Change your identity even slightly and your life and relationships, which are the outward expression of your identity, similarly will transform. They have no choice, for all life must obey the law of identity.

Yet, if a shift in identity brings about true personal transformation, the question then becomes, what must we do to change our identity?

Let's go back to where we all started: childhood. Growing up, most children collided with their parents over differing beliefs, and these collisions had the effect of changing a child's identity. Parents believed one thing; children believed another; the result was a painful collision. These collisions occurred countless times as we grew up. It is the natural course of things, as children rely on parents for everything from food and care to love and protection. A child's entire sense of safety and well-being comes from his or her parents, so when collisions occur, children eventually bow to their parent's greater strength and authority, because children ultimately fear their parent's disapproval and dread the potential rejection that follows. Our personal fear of disapproval and rejection form the foundation of our deepest, most abiding fears, and **Parent-Child Collisions** are their place of origin.

What exactly did our parents disapprove of? The answer to this enormously important question is not as straightforward as one might imagine, because the answer has more to do with how we perceived our parents than with what they actually said or did to us. Every child recognizes his or her parent's disapproval of specific behaviors or particular attitudes. We expected disapproval if we behaved in a certain way, said certain things, or simply were who they believed we shouldn't be. Receiving a parent's disapproval was painful, upsetting, and sometimes frightening. We learned to avoid this nastiness by hiding parts of ourselves. We learned at an early age to hide our true thoughts, our genuine feelings, but, more importantly, we learned who we should not be in front of our parents and what we should never ask of them.

What we hid were our deepest **Emotional Longings**. The things that would make us feel cared for and loved in the deepest, truest sense are what we surrendered in order to survive childhood. We believed our parents either could not or would not give these to us, so rather than ask, we simply hid them. We did not want to risk the pain of disapproval and rejection. Perhaps our father was harsh, so we learned not to ask him for gentleness and love. Perhaps our mother was an alcoholic, so we learned not to ask her for care and support. Perhaps our parents could not see or hear us, so we learned to withdraw quietly and never ask to be seen or heard. Perhaps our parents were gentle and loving but inadequate providers, so we learned never to ask for support because we did not want to hurt them. The list of unfulfilled emotional longings is long and deep. Every human being has them, but we keep them privately and secretly in the depths of our heart.

So we grow up and leave home to enter adulthood, but unbeknownst to us our unfulfilled longings and our **Childhood Beliefs About Disapproval** come with us. Through parent-child collisions, our identity changes on deep levels, though we don't yet realize how. We think we're leaving home to start a new, independent life. We believe we're moving away from what hurt us to find what we didn't get while growing up, but life is not so simple because life is based on identity. It doesn't matter what we think we might want or what we believe we should do, because we all create lives and relationships from the blueprints of our own identity. This is inescapable. Those blueprints were first formed in childhood with our parents and influenced greatly by the thousands of parent-child collisions.

Until we find a way to recognize and deal directly with our unfulfilled emotional longings, we will spend the rest of our lives avoiding them, not asking for them, and not acting on them, because we still fear disapproval and rejection for doing so. Not asking for what we deeply desire is how we block ourselves

from getting the partner we want or getting what we want from the partner we already have. Allowing our fear of disapproval to control us by hiding our deepest emotional longings is the norm in relationships, and the direct result for most is ongoing dissatisfaction, feeling unseen, and misunderstood. This causes emotional disconnection in our primary relationships, especially with ourselves, which leads to additional problems, such as physical illness, emotional imbalance, economic struggles, and seemingly endless career or life obstacles—all of which represent the leaks in our personal lives.

It is important to note that parents are not to blame; they must be themselves, and they must teach their children how to be in the world the best way they can. They are struggling with their own unfulfilled emotional longings and fears of disapproval, which they also acquired in childhood. Blame is not the point. Locating the origin of our emotional wounding is the point, and parents do represent the source of our emotional wounds, which are the deepest leaks in our identity. Disapproval is a universal and unavoidable childhood experience. All parents subject their children to it—mostly in ways they are unaware—and all children learn to dread and fear it—with greater awareness and sensitivity than parents might imagine.

Unfulfilled emotional longings fueled by fear of disapproval remain the beating heart of our wounded identities—that is, until we identify our emotional longings, own them, and act on them directly. This is how we can heal ourselves and reclaim the power that we surrendered as children to our parents. Learning exactly how to do this is the craft of life. Learned well and practiced often, this craft will teach us how to conquer our fears of disapproval so we can build a relationship of authenticity with ourselves and with others. *The Craft of Life* offers a true and effective process for profound personal transformation.

Inner work as craftsmanship

Let's stop a moment and consider the term inner work, which is the psychological and spiritual effort one makes within versus the outer effort one makes at the gym or at our job. After several decades of self-exploration, I'm convinced that inner work is a true craft. In times past, whether making furniture, baking bread, or weaving rugs, a novice would spend years with a master craftsman, learning the trade. The process was straightforward: start at the beginning, learn and practice each basic skill, and repeat over and over, until the novice could demonstrate proficiency. At this point, he became a journeyman who was on his way to becoming a master craftsman. Mr. Tinnen and I were the novices; my grandfather was the master craftsman. Even as a boy, I recognized the distance between our understanding and abilities, and his. This experience set me on a general path of devotion to craftsmanship that continues to this day.

There is a crucial place in mainstream society that craftsmanship is rarely seen and that is within our relationships. How does one go about intentionally building a conscious, satisfying, and authentic relationship? How does one go about resolving the innumerable leaks that vex us all? We have no mainstream social organizations that teach these particular skills. A person can learn the intricacies of computer programming or how to play the piano, but where does one learn the equivalent in building healthy, satisfying relationships? Parents do not intentionally teach their children how to build quality relationships; they simply model their own, which is typically fraught with all kinds of unconscious behavior and unintended results.

Living symbols

Unwinding all of this would seem to be a daunting, perhaps impossible task. Actually, this is not the case because we have **Living Symbols** as our great ally. All of the outer forms that compose our lives are what I call living symbols because they repre-

sent our inner beliefs and inner identity. Most of us experience the outer details of our lives and take them more or less at face value. Our car is what we drive. Our job is what we do to earn money. Our spouse is the person whom we married. Apart from their practical and emotional value, the outer details of our lives do not seem to have additional meaning, but nothing could be further from the truth. From the nearly unlimited possibilities that life presents, each of us chooses to wear specific clothes in a distinctive way, eat particular food, work at a specific job, make relationships with particular people, and express attitudes and values that represent who we are. The tens of thousands of details that each of us has chosen reflect our self-image and make us different from anyone else. Seeing these details as expressions of our personal beliefs is to see life as living symbols. If we took the time to note the outer details in our lives, we would begin to see a picture of a specific person along with a belief system. We would begin to see our own unique identity reflected back to us. If we penetrated into the deeper meaning of these details, we would discover the root cause of our own identity, and we would begin to understand our relationships and ourselves with great clarity.

One can trace any leak from where it exits, which is easy to find because of the puddles and water stains, and follow its trail back to its entry point. This is the craft we are about to learn. Our focus, however, will be on the leaks in our lives: the unfulfilled emotional longings in our current relationships, the cracks in our self-esteem, and the repeating dissatisfactions produced by our fear of disapproval. These particular living symbols represent our puddles and water stains. They are all clearly visible; we know them well, so we all know where our journey begins. There is a place in our lives where they first entered, which were our parent-child collisions; there is a place where they now manifest, which is in our current life and relationships, and these two points—past and present—are connected as plainly as they were

in that physical auditorium. By having the willingness to look at the outer details of our lives and our relationships in a new way, by learning about identity's inner structure and the natural laws by which it is bound, we can bring clarity to life issues that have plagued us for years. We can solve the unsolvable mysteries we gave up on long ago: our sure guide will be the living symbols around us.