**Just One Look**

**Experience the power of human consciousness to free itself of the fear of life**



*This essay was first published online and as an ebook on September 10, 2011.
It was revised and updated on March 22, 2013.*

**A proposal from John Sherman**

I have something to propose to you that I believe to be of great importance to the future of humanity and to the lives of each and every human being. I think that if we can make a community effort to spread the news of this simple act of inward looking as far and wide as possible, it has the potential to save us all from the looming consequences of the self-destructive madness that has so far informed our entire history. But first I need to tell you the story of how it has happened that I should be here like this in the first place, speaking of such extreme matters and making this extraordinary proposal to you.

None of what follows is of any importance whatsoever to the power of the looking to bring satisfaction to your own life.

If you've seen enough already and just want to join us, click here to go to the [I'M IN form.](http://www.justonelook.org/just-one-look-2.html#imin)

**My so-called enlightenment**

Eighteen years ago, while serving time in a federal prison in Colorado, I came upon and fell in love with a family of ancient wisdom teachings. I followed as best as I could what I understood from those teachings and quite quickly, within six months or so, there appeared in me the continuous experience of reality as a vast, clear openness, unobstructed by ignorance, requiring nothing, lacking nothing. Beauty and wonder abounded. I wrote to someone during that time that the stones sang silent arias of Being for me. I had found actual enlightenment and liberation from all the misery of human life.

After about a year and a half of this, a yearning for things that I wanted and didn't have, along with a growing disaffection with things I didn't want but couldn't get rid of, and an array of long-standing psychological disabilities and reactive behaviors, it all began to take center stage again and quickly brought my so-called enlightenment to an abrupt end, leaving behind the continuous experience of loss, torment, craving, and despair. It was again as it had always been.

I blamed it on myself, of course. I believed it was my own doing, my own fault. I had wanted what I should not have wanted; I had thought the wrong thing; I had understood wrongly the wondrous teachings that had brought me so much bliss. Maybe I was an irredeemably flawed and broken person, bad seed, and so forth. This was certainly the most likely explanation. I really was a bad person. My entire life up to then had been one despicable, inexcusable act after another, wrapped in a chain of lies, deceptions, and denial.

By the time the spiritual melodrama came and went, I had been in prison for fifteen and a half years. In 1978, I had been convicted and sentenced to thirty years in federal prison for bank robberies, property destruction, gunfights and escapes over several years in the seventies. I was put on the FBI's Ten Most Wanted list after escaping at gunpoint a second time, this time from a federal prison in California in 1979. I was finally captured in 1981. I would remain in prison until 1998, when I was released to a half-way house on parole.

**Trying to find the act**

My life before the seventies had been even uglier. I had lived all my life as a petty grifter and con man. I had been a failed gambler, a credit card hustler, a womanizer and an all-around scumbag. The idiotic politically motivated violence I embarked on in 1977 was a step up for me. All things considered, there could not have been a less likely candidate for enlightenment than me.

But maybe it was not entirely my fault; maybe it was just in the nature of human life to be broken and spoiled, to be endured in quiet desperation from birth to death. Maybe there was nothing to be done about any of it. Maybe that was just the price of being human.

Maybe the gorgeous religious and spiritual teachings are themselves just part of the swirl of madness that seems to be the basic nature of human consciousness. Life is suffering, as they say; original sin, maybe. And so forth. Either way, the end is always the same: loss, torment, craving, and despair.

Sitting in my cell in a federal prison, in the aftermath of my self-inflicted fall from grace, neurotically wallowing in self-pity and despair, I decided that I had to know. I had to know once and for all whether there was even a shred of truth in all the stories and dreams of redemption, forgiveness, salvation, liberation, realization, fulfillment and eternal love that humanity has dreamed throughout the ages. Despite everything, I wanted desperately to believe that there was some underlying principle of fundamental goodness that breathed hope into what seemed otherwise to be a cold, unconscious, dark and heartless, insentient universe. I strongly suspected my lifelong yearning for understanding and deliverance had been nothing but part of a pretense that such liberation was possible, and that I had defended that pretense with a cowardly refusal to look directly at the hallucination itself. But now I had come to the point where I had to know, one way or the other. It felt as if I would die if I did not know whether there was any hope.

I gave this matter a great deal of thought, and came to the conclusion that I had to find an act that I could do with my own mind that would, even if it failed to save me, at least wash away the last vestiges of hope in me and let me get on with my life.

I could see that the best chance of finding such an act was within the very wisdom teachings that had already betrayed me. I could see that therein could be found the accounts of our best efforts in these matters — in the wisdom teachings and in certain of the religious teachings. I thought that if these teachings were approached not as keys to salvation, but as the records of all the research that gone before in our so far unsuccessful quest to find salvation, it might be possible to look more closely and critically at those best efforts and maybe find a clue. Perhaps there, looking at things as a researcher rather than as a seeker and supplicant, I would be able to find some hint of the best direction to look for what I wanted. I could see that it had to be something that any human being should be able to do; something that had nothing to do with understanding, merit or any other thing. It had to be something that would settle the matter once and for all as to whether human life was worth living. And I fully expected to find that it was not.

**The results**

To make a long story short, I settled on an act and began to try with all my heart to do it. There would be no point in recounting here all the false tries, wrong turnings, distractions and false results I managed to create along the way, but in the end, the act I found brought me home, safe and sane, naturally free, and quietly in love with my own life as a human being.

It took me a while to notice that something had changed. I began to sense that the need to find something wrong in my mind and try to fix it was weakening, and that my interest was naturally falling, with neither resistance nor clinging, on the things that were happening in my life. Not that everything was peaches and cream. Far from it. Early on, there were times of dramatic neurotic wretchedness and fear. But those came and went, and left no residue behind. Now I see that those times were part of the natural course of a feverish recovery from a kind of psychological autoimmune disease that I call the fear of life. And before too long, within a couple of years maybe, the fever broke.

Within five years of the moment I had sat down on my bunk in that prison cell determined to rid myself of hope, my relationship with my life had settled into sanity — as if ordinary sanity was really all it had ever wanted. Life is now, as it has always been, literally awe-inspiring. Life is difficult to make sense of, impossible to predict, filled with problems and solutions looking for their mates, shot through with the colors of pain, pleasure, and moments of exhilarating terror, and always, always beautiful beyond expression.

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In June of 1999, great good luck struck, and Carla married me. For the last twelve and a half years, Carla and I have worked together looking for a way to tell others of what I have found.

Telling others what I had discovered turned out to be much harder than I imagined it would be. I knew what had happened, I knew what it felt like to do what I had done, and I was living its results, but I couldn't for the life of me find a way to say anything about either the act or its result clearly enough to be heard.

The act itself requires nothing but the doing of it. It requires no new understanding and no abandonment of existing understanding; no new belief and no abandonment of old belief; no mind reform, no purity of purpose, no special postures or mental preparation, no direct transmission of any kind. It costs nothing. It takes almost no time, and it can be done literally anywhere, at any time, by anybody — with no preparation at all. Because of this, I believed that if I could say it clearly enough, anyone hearing it would certainly try to do it. And I knew, from my own experience, that anyone who tried it would not fail.

**Our life mission**

It seemed that the act itself was too simple, and my understanding of things far too complicated to speak about it cleanly and directly. The harder I tried, the more it seemed that I just was not up to the task, but the harder I tried to abandon the task, the more clear it became that that too was impossible. Again, I'll spare you the details, you know yourself that life pretty much just takes its own way, with little regard for our opinions in the matter.

Carla and I decided that since this was the life we had, this was the life we would live with all our heart. The practical purpose of our life together had become to find a way to communicate directly and clearly to anyone who would listen exactly what had to be done to be finished once and for all with the fear and self-hatred that spoils human life. We would find a way for me to speak of this act and its outcome, so that anyone could understand and accomplish the act, and recognize the results as they unfolded.

For us this meant to continue speaking with people, and allowing them and the conversation itself to teach me how to say what I wanted to say. This is a profoundly human act, and it seems obvious now that it could only find voice in human conversation rather than in solitary reflection. Now this simple act has found voice, and its power is beginning to reveal itself more broadly, as word of it begins to spread and new people begin to tell us about their own attempts at doing it and their experience of recovery.

**What to do**

I've told you how unskillful I was in my effort to find this for myself, how I flailed about stupidly looking for the thing to do, and then flailed about helplessly trying to find a way to pass it on. There's no reason for you to have to go through any of that. I give it all to you here — free of charge, no strings attached.

**Step 1: Learn to Move the Beam of Your Attention at Will**

* To begin, just relax for a moment, and notice the obvious fact that you have the power to move your attention at will.
* As you read this, move your attention away from the text for a moment, and direct it instead to the feel of your breathing.
* Notice the feel of your chest and belly expanding and contracting, and then bring it back here to this page.
* Do that a couple of times so that you become familiar with what I mean by "moving the beam of your attention at will."

That action of moving attention at will, as you just did, is all that's needed to accomplish what I am asking you to do. The more you practice this simple act, the more you'll become familiar with how it feels to do it. And the more familiar you become with the feel of it, the more skillful and direct you will be in the effort to move the beam of attention where it must go.

**Step 2: Turn the Beam of Your Attention Inward**

Now, use that skill to actually turn the beam of attention inward. Try to make a direct, unmediated contact with what it actually feels like to be you, just plain and simple you.
When I say you, I don’t mean the thoughts that pass through you, nor the emotions that play in you, nor the sensations that rise and fall within you, just you. You are that which is always here, look at that. Everything else comes and goes in you. You already know what you are, and what it feels like to be you, and you will surely recognize yourself when you see yourself in this way.

There is no need to try and stay there, resting in your self or any such thing. All it takes is the length of a heartbeat, so brief that you will hardly notice it. It really is that simple.

Repeat this as often as it occurs to you to do so.

There is no step three.

I call this action ‘looking at yourself.’ If you will do just that, the day will come soon when all your disaffection with life will begin to depart, and with it the perception of your life as a problem to be solved, a threat to be destroyed, or the hiding place of some secret treasure that might bring you fulfillment and satisfaction at some future time.

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If you haven't already, try it now, and I guarantee that you will in the end find yourself at home in your life, safe and sane and content with it all. It may take a while before the full import of what has happened becomes clear to you, but I promise that you will be satisfied with the progress of things as they unfold, even though that satisfaction may seem strange to you.

**Now what...?**

As the fog clears, you might come to see, as many of us have, that the idea of individual, solitary human beings realizing for themselves alone the full and complete promise of human life is just wacky. Humanity turns out not to be a basketful of individual human beings, but a single creature living many individual lives. Turns out that the boundaries separating those individual lives from the life experience of all the other lives are extremely porous. They cannot hold away the sea of misery that is the preponderant experience of the overwhelming majority of us. They leak. You may find, as many of us have, that this heightened awareness of human suffering and discontent, although it no longer has the power to ruin your experience of your own life, soon becomes tiresome — like a loop from a bad song stuck in your mind.

This empathetic experience of the misery of others is called compassion, and it often arises automatically in the human mind that has lost its own layers of protective structures and neurotic reactive behaviors.

And this compassion, when seen for what it is, requires us to make a choice: we can do nothing and live with the minor irritation that comes from the misery of others; we can head for the hills, literally or metaphorically put some distance between us and the suffering others; or we can try to end the misery of all by bringing the actual solution to all of humanity.

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**The results**

To make a long story short, I settled on an act and began to try with all my heart to do it. There would be no point in recounting here all the false tries, wrong turnings, distractions and false results I managed to create along the way, but in the end, the act I found brought me home, safe and sane, naturally free, and quietly in love with my own life as a human being.

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**Just One Look (Part 2)**

[Back to Part 1](http://www.justonelook.org/just-one-look-new.html)

**A new possibility for humanity**

Now, probably for the first time in the history of humanity, there is a credible possibility that our collective insanity will actually push us over the edge into an irreversible descent toward the extinction of human beings altogether. This is not an exaggeration for effect, this is the literal truth. Just look around and see for yourself the self-destructive madness beginning to show through everything, everywhere, in every venue, all the time.

Of course, it is true that those of us alive today, especially the older ones, like me, will doubtless live out their lives largely unaffected by the slide downward, and those, like me, from whom the fear has gone will die contented, and untroubled by the darkening outlook for the species. Of course, it's also true that there is no experience remotely as wonderful as the experience of watching another human being go sane.

Now, the discovery of a solution that is simple enough to be engaged in by all human beings has actually opened up a new possibility. This simple act, if done by enough of us, will most likely not only reverse the slide toward extinction, but will usher in a new age of sanity and common sense in which all human beings will be allowed to thrive and flourish in ways we cannot imagine.

Now, we choose to try to stop the misery and save the human species. We are certainly far from being the first ones in our history to have made this choice, but the solution we propose is so simple, and the means available to bring it to the world are so powerful and accessible to all, that we firmly believe that we have the chance to be the last.

**What can we do?**

First, let me review the seven assumptions and one fact that form the premise of what we propose:

1. The cause of all disaffection from life and all psychological misery in human beings is the fear of life.
2. Anyone who hears clearly the idea of this simple act will pretty much automatically try it at once.
3. Anyone who actually tries this act just once will succeed, and will inevitably return to it again and again, until they settle into sanity.
4. Anyone who looks directly with their mind's eye at their self, at the feeling of 'me' that is ever present within, will snuff out the fear of life once and for all.
5. It is well documented that if the outlook of ten percent of any group of humans changes, it will cause the outlook of all in the group to change. (See [Scientists discover tipping point for the spread of ideas.](http://phys.org/news/2011-07-minority-scientists-ideas.html))
6. Assuming this theory is true, and since there are just short of seven billion human beings alive today, we need only to bring this idea of looking at yourself to the minds of 700 million of us to trigger a tipping point. And in time, this will drive us all sane and reverse our headlong rush to self-destruction.
7. For the first time in the history of humanity, we actually have at our disposal the technologies whereby we can bring this idea to 700 million of us. All that is required is the will and the means to do so.

The one fact is that the overwhelming majority of human beings live in the experience of psychological misery and live their lives as an incessant search for relief from the sense that something is wrong, something needs to be done or undone, gotten or gotten rid of.

**Experience the power of human consciousness to free itself of the fear of life**

This community — you, Carla and I, and all the thousands of people who have now experienced the power of the act of looking at yourself — has plenty of compassion and fellow-feeling to provide the energy needed to fuel this project and all that's needed to bring it home.

Having seen this, we have taken as the sole goal of this community, of our work, and of the foundation that manages and supports it, a campaign to exponentially expand the reach of the act of looking inward at yourself, and bring us closer and closer to the goal of having every human just hear of the act.

[The first **Just One Look** worldwide event](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8-wfQYXmq3g) took place on January 13, 2013. All over the world, everyone who tried the looking stoppped whatever they were doing for just a moment and looked at themselves.

This first live broadcast will be followed by a series of live broadcasts throughout the year.

[Sign up for our newsletter to receive up-to-date information about the broadcasts.](http://www.justonelook.org/jolnews/index.html)

We truly are all in this together. We can do this, and we can do it ourselves, as a community of ordinary human beings, without the need for saviors or heroes to rescue us from ourselves.