Fifteen years ago when I began writing books, I had high hopes that someday I would be “discovered” and that “my message” would thereby reach millions of people and change the world for the better.

That ambition began to disintegrate soon after, when after years of labor The Ascent of Humanity found no takers in the publishing world. So I self-published, still hoping that word-of-mouth would propel it to best-seller status. That would show all those publishers! I remember looking at the sales numbers in August 2007 – its fifth month, about the time it should have been gaining momentum. Total sales that month: five copies. Around the same time I was evicted from my apartment (having pinned all my hopes and income on the book) and spent the next half year living temporarily in other people’s houses, children in tow.

It was a painful yet beautiful clarifying experience that asked me, “Why are you doing this work? Is it because you hope to become a celebrated intellectual? Or do you really care about serving the healing of the world?” The experience of failure revealed my secret hopes and motivations.

I had to admit there was some of both motivations, self and service. OK, well, a lot of both. I realized I had to let go of the first motive, or it would occlude the second. Around that time I had a vision of a spiritual being that came to me and said, “Charles, is it really your wish that the work you do fulfill its potential and exercise its right role in the evolution of all things?”

“Yes,” I said, “that is my wish.”

“OK then,” said the being. “I can make that happen, but you will have to pay a price. The price is that you will never be recognized for your role. The story you are speaking will change the world, but you will never get credit for it. You will never get wealth, fame, or prestige. Do you agree to pay that price?”

I tried to worm my way out of it, but the being was unyielding. If it was going to be either-or, how could I live with myself knowing in my heart of hearts I’d betrayed my purpose? So I consented to its offer.

Of course, time would tell that it wasn’t actually either-or. What was important in that clarifying moment was that I declare my ultimate loyalty. Once that happened, recognition and prestige might or might not come as a byproduct, but it wouldn’t be the goal. After all, the work I do isn’t “my” work. These are ideas whose time has come and
they need capable scribes. Our true wages in life consist of the satisfaction we get from a job well done. Aside from that, well, the rain falls on the just and unjust alike.

That was part one of the disintegration of my ambition. The first part was the disintegration of personal ambition. The second part was the disintegration of the ambition to do big things to change the world. I began to understand that our concepts of big impact versus small impact are part of what needs to be healed. Our culture validates and celebrates those who are out there with big platforms speaking to millions of people, while ignoring those who do humble, quiet work, taking care of just one sick person, one child, or one small place on this earth.

When I meet one of these people, I know that their impact doesn’t depend on their kind action going viral on the internet and reaching millions of people. Even if no one ever knows and no one ever thanks them for taking in that old woman with dementia and sacrificing a normal life to care for her, that choice sends ripples outward through the fabric of causality. On a five hundred or five thousand year timescale, the impact is no smaller than anything a President does.

Certain choices feel significant to us, unreasonably. The heart calls us to actions that the mind cannot justify in the face of global problems. The logic of bigness can drag us into feelings of irrelevance, leading us to project importance onto the people we see on our screens. But knowing how much harm has been done by those very people in the name of bettering the world, I became wary of playing that game.

The calculating mind thinks that just helping one person has a smaller impact on the world than helping a thousand. It wants to scale up, to get big. That is not necessary in a different causal logic, the logic that knows, “God sees everything,” or the logic of morphic resonance that knows that any change that happens in one place creates a field that allows the same kind of change to happen elsewhere. Acts of kindness strengthen the field of kindness, acts of love strengthen the field of love, acts of hate strengthen the field of hate.

Nor is scaling up necessary when we trust that the tasks life sets before us are part of a larger tapestry, woven by an intelligence that puts us in exactly the right place at the right time.

I attended a funeral recently for a central Pennsylvania farmer, Roy Brubaker, among several hundred mourners. One of the testimonials came from a young farmer who said something like this: “Roy is the one who taught me what success really is. Success is having the capacity to always be there for your neighbors. Any time someone called with a problem, Roy would put down what he was doing and be right over to help.”

This farmer had been Roy’s intern. When he went into business for himself and became Roy’s competitor, Roy helped him along with advice and material aid, and even announced his new competitor’s farm share program to his own mailing list. At the end of his speech, the young farmer said, “I used to think Roy was able to help so many people because he was a successful farmer who had it made. But now I think he was probably more like me, with fifty vegetable crops all crying for attention and a million things to do. He was there for people anyway.”

Roy didn’t wait until he had it made to start being generous.

This is the kind of person that holds the world together. On a practical level, they are the
reason society hangs together despite its pervasive injustice, poverty, trauma, and so on. They also anchor the field of love that helps the rest of us serve our purpose rather than our personal ambition.

As I run into more such people and hear their stories, I realize that I don’t need to worry about the size of my audience or about reaching “people of influence.” My job is just to do my work with as much love and sincerity as I can. I can trust that the right people will read it. I am awed and humbled by people like Roy whom I meet in my travels and in my community. They live in service, in love, with great faith and courage, and unlike me they don’t have thousands of people telling them how important their work is. In fact, quite often the system and culture we live in discourages them, telling them that they are foolish, naïve, irresponsible, impractical, and giving them little financial reward. How many times have you been told a life dedicated to beauty or nurture or healing is unrealistic? Maybe after everything on your farm is all ship-shape, maybe after you are personally secure with a solid career and secure investments, maybe then you can afford a little generosity. So I admire people who are generous first, generous with their precious lives. They are my teachers. They are the ones who have eroded my ambition to make it big – even with the excuse of serving the cause.

I am reminded of a Zen teaching story in which the Zen master is approached by a messenger from the emperor. “The emperor has heard of your teaching and wants you to come to court to be the official imperial teacher.”

The Zen master declined the invitation.

A year later the invitation was repeated. This time the master agreed to come. When asked why, he said, “When I first got the invitation, I knew I wasn’t ready because I felt the stirring of excitement. I thought this would be a great chance to spread the Dharma throughout the realm. Then I realized that this ambition, which sees one student as more important than another, disqualified me from being his teacher. I had to wait until I could see the emperor as I would any other person.”

Thanks to the humble people who hold the world together, I am learning no longer to favor the emperor over any other person. What guides me is a certain feeling of resonance, curiosity, or rightness.

Ironically, having lost my careerist ambitions, this year Oprah Winfrey invited me to tape an interview with her for (even more ironically) the show Super Soul Sunday. Five years ago my heart would have been thumping with excitement at the prospect of making it big, but now the feeling was one of curiosity and adventure. From the God’s-eye perspective, was that hour to be more important than the hour I spent with a friend in need? Or the hour you spent taking a stranger to the emergency room?

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Yet my response was an immediate yes, accompanied by feelings of wonderment that my world was intersecting with hers. You see, Oprah occupies nearly a different universe from my own countercultural fringe. Could it be, I think with leaping heart, that the gulf between our worlds is narrowing? That the ideas I serve and the consciousness I speak to are ready to penetrate the mainstream?
I think the conversation with Oprah is a marker of changing times. I was amazed that someone in her position would even take notice of my writing, since it lies quite outside any familiar discourse within the mainstream. (At least I've never seen anything in mainstream media remotely similar to my election article that attracted her attention.) Our meeting is perhaps a sign that our country's familiar, polarized social discourse is broken, and that her people - the vast and fairly mainstream audience she serves - are willing to look outside it.

By this I do not mean to diminish her extraordinary personal qualities. I experienced her as astute, perceptive, sincere, expansive, and even humble, a master of her art. But I think her reaching out reflects more than these personal qualities.

I sometimes see myself as a kind of receiving antenna for information that a certain segment of humanity is asking for. A use has been found for the weird kid in high school! On a much larger scale, Oprah is something akin to that as well: not just herself, she is an avatar of the collective mind. Deeply attuned to her audience, when she brings something into their view it is probably because she knows they are ready to see it.

During our conversation I sometimes had the feeling that she personally would have liked to geek out and dive much deeper, but that she disciplined herself to remain the antenna of her audience and stay within the format of the program, which doesn't lend itself to my usual long disquisitions. I meanwhile was trying to frame ideas for a mainstream audience that I expect isn't familiar with some of my basic operating concepts. Our conversation felt a bit awkward at times, groping for a structure, as if we were trying to furnish a very large house with a motley mix of beautiful but odd furniture. Nonetheless I think we created a habitable enough corner to welcome people into a new perspective.

In the years since my encounter with the spiritual being, I've become comfortable in the cultural fringes where my work has found its home. I have scaled back on traveling and speaking in order to spend more time with my precious loved ones and to connect with the source of knowledge in nature, silence, and intimate connections. I'm with my family at my brother's farm right now, doing farm labor part of the day and writing during the other part. The flurry of publicity that might follow the Oprah appearance (or might not - it could just be a blip on the radar) poses me with another question, the complement of the one my initial "failure" posed. If it serves the work, am I willing to sacrifice the reclusiveness I am coming to love? If it serves, am I willing to be on other programs where the host may not be as gracious as Oprah? Am I willing to be more of a public figure and deal with the attendant projections, positive and negative? Do I have the strength to remember who the real super souls are - the Roy Brubakers, the dolphin rescuers, the hospice workers, the care givers, the peace witnesses, the unpaid healers, the humble grandfathers taking a child berry-picking, the single moms struggling to hold it all together not imagining that their monumental efforts at patience have an impact on the whole world?

Let me be honest with you: if I hadn't been facing the total collapse of my success fantasies already, I probably wouldn't have accepted the spiritual being's offer. And by the way, it is an offer that is constantly renewed. Every day we are asked, "What will you serve?" I had not the strength on my own to say yes to a life of service. Nor do I now, save for the help I receive from others who hold the field, the people who humble me every day with their generosity, sincerity, and selflessness. To the extent I am effective at what I do, it is because of you.

If I am right that my Oprah appearance is a marker (however small) of the unraveling of
once-dominant worldviews, then it only happened because the emerging worldview I speak for is being held so strongly now by so many. Take it then as an encouraging sign. Whether or not it proves to be a breakthrough moment for the concepts of empathy and interbeing we discussed, it suggests that they are coming closer toward consensus reality. We will not be alone here much longer. I thank all who have held the field of knowledge I speak from, who believe my words even more than I do myself, and who therefore uphold me in the work that upholds you. That is how we transition from the Age of Separation to the age of We Need Each Other.