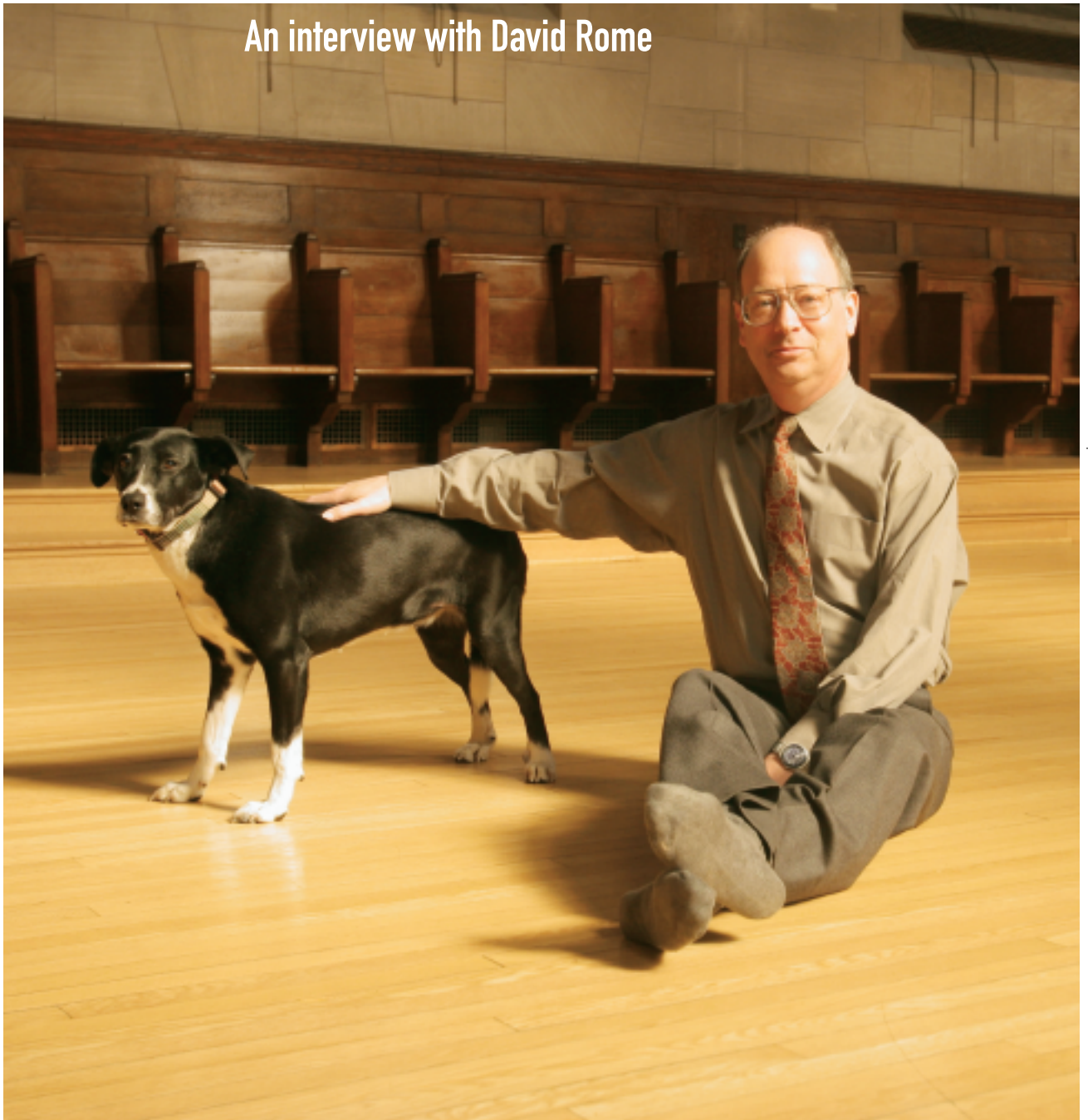


DEEP LISTENING AS **LOVE**

An interview with David Rome





After smiling and shaking hands in the foyer of the Garrison Institute, David Rome let quiet descend for a beat. He is a senior fellow at Garrison Institute, headquartered at a former Capuchin monastery on the Hudson River about an hour north of Manhattan, and I assumed he would start right in telling me something about the place or its mission to seek the intersection between contemplation and action. Instead, he seemed to wait and observe, as if something more interesting than words might arise in the stillness.

A Jewish retreat was underway, but Rome, who is not only Jewish but the heir to Schocken Books, publisher of great Jewish authors including Kafka, Buber, Scholem, and Wiesel, had not just been practicing mindfulness meditation with the assembled rabbis. The quiet in him came from his own search for what is real. As we settled into his upstairs office and talked, it became clear how intentionally and radically the gentle, thoughtful Rome seeks to move beyond traditional forms.

Rome crossed the threshold from the ordinary if richly intellectual world of his ancestors into the world of Buddhist meditation in the summer of 1971. After Harvard and the Peace Corps, he happened to experience meditation at Samye-ling, a center in Scotland founded by the late, great Tibetan Buddhist teacher Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. “I knew there was something there that felt right.” In 1974, Rome moved to Boulder, Colorado, and became Trungpa’s private secretary for nine years, even taking down the poetry Trungpa spontaneously dictated, and working with him to edit it.

In 1983, after the death of his mother, Rome moved to New York City to take charge of his family’s publishing company. When the family sold Schocken to Random House in 1987, Rome moved to Trungpa headquarters in Nova Scotia, and finally back to New York and to Garrison, where he researches, writes, and teaches. But this isn’t a quest narrative in which the hero returns to the Western world with the treasure of meditation. About ten years ago, Rome developed a practice called “deep listening,” with the aim of leaving behind the great ideas, symbols, and myths of an earlier age—although he affirms that these can inspire us. He believes it is only by a forward movement into “felt sense” that we can recover the perception of being real—and reconnect with a deep empathy for ourselves and others that can genuinely be called love.

TRACY COCHRAN

PARABOLA: Do you still consider yourself a Buddhist?

DAVID ROME: The Trungpa community, which is now called Shambhala, has remained my home sangha. But twelve years ago, I saw the book *FOCUSING* by the philosopher and psychologist Eugene

then return, usually to the breathing. In focusing, you bring most of your awareness to the torso region. There is a first step called clearing a space in which you notice whatever the body might be holding in this moment. Some of that might be purely physical but then there is this whole other realm which Eugene



Gendlin in a used book store. Three or four times in my life, I've had this experience where a book falls into my hands and becomes seminal in the next phase of my life. What was so extraordinary to me about the practice of focusing is that it brought the contemplative mind to working with one's feelings, one's challenges, one's issues in a very disciplined way.

P: What is focusing?

DR: You become still, you bring the attention to the body, you become the observer or witness. In mindfulness practice you simply notice what arises and

Gendlin called the "felt sense," which is body experience, knowing about your life in a bodily way.

P: Is it working with sensation?

DR: It's more than a physical sensation or an emotion. Sometimes, it gets expressed in metaphors—having butterflies. Yet, even when it is subtle and elusive, it is the source of meaning and texture in our lives.

P: About ten years ago, you developed "deep listening," which grounds this focusing practice in Buddhist mindfulness meditation. In Buddhist terms, is

the aim of deep listening to be with bodily perception before separate thoughts and emotions arise?

DR: Buddhism speaks of “body, speech, and mind.” Body awareness has to do with sensory awareness. Speech has to do with both thinking and emotions, and that’s where focusing works, between thinking and feeling. Mind in this case is the practice of mindfulness.

These felt senses are there all the time but for most people they are below the radar. Occasionally they break through in a dramatic way, as I said. You can have a broken heart, a chill can go up your spine. But most of the time they are very subtle and we don’t notice them.

P: Is cultivating this capacity the same as the work of being present?

DR: I think there’s an important difference. In Buddhism, there is an ultimate reality that is unchanging. Within that, there is relative reality or what we experience as conditioned reality and that is regarded as unavoidable but of lesser significance. Ultimately Buddhism talks about nirvana and samsara as one, so they are united. But in focusing there is a real emphasis on the individual and on novelty. It is an experience of the unfolding of life, which again and again brings into being novelty that has never existed before.

Focusing isn’t interested in the emptiness aspect but in the manifestation itself and in the relatedness, the relationship. Gendlin begins from a premise he calls “interaction first,” meaning roughly that life process precedes all entities or objects. What we are is an ongoing interaction with our environment; we are a

process that forms together with its environment. This is true from an evolutionary perspective as well as for any individual life.

P: So interaction is where meaning resides?

DR: Yes, although it is not uniquely human. It is true of all life, even vegetable life.

P: Some people can be very observant and sensitive, to their own state and to others, but this seems to be a faculty that falls between the cracks.

DR: I think that’s a good way to put it, it falls between the cracks. The cracks are in the continuity of the conceptual mind. Working with felt sense is really about widening the cracks and going to another level of experiencing. The conceptual or discursive mind has the quality of generating its own momentum, going from one thought to the next and the next. There is nothing necessarily wrong with that except that if it becomes continuous and solid, then you are no longer in touch with your source, with the core of your being and of your purpose or meaning. You get in touch only when there is a crisis.

The other way of talking about it is that being in touch with the felt sense is a way of cultivating intuition. Intuition is normally something that just happens, but you can also set the stage for it. You can invite intuitive knowing. You have to be very patient and friendly to yourself and to what is going on in you. That is a kind of love. I’ve heard it called “caring feeling presence.”

P: The “deep listening” you evolved must make the boundaries between yourself and others start to become very permeable. The discursive mind can be such an isolating and separating force.

DR: Each individual is unique and we can’t really know what the other is experiencing, although we can support each other to know what our own experience is. So there is more empathy, which again is a form of love, opening a space for another.

P: This is a way to become more loving?

DR: Very much. It is like meditation in the sense that you begin with yourself. You have to have self-empathy. Then you can be more open and sensitive to others, less judgmental, more curious, more appreciative. An important aspect of love, as opposed to desire, is appreciating rather than wanting or needing.

P: Does it become easier to access our common deeper human experience? Or is it all just novelty all the way down?

DR: That’s a great question. I don’t have an answer for it. Since I’ve discovered focusing and the philosophy that goes with it, I see things less in Jungian and archetypal terms because there is such an emphasis on unique and fresh experience, on the individual in the moment. But also because it’s a way of getting in touch with the *source* of symbols and the *source* of myths.

P: The sense before the symbols?

DR: Yes, and the whole point, in a way, is to make fresh symbols directly from

your own experience.

P: How do we share that experience?

DR: That is what this process is all about. We don’t just get in touch with the felt sense. We invite it to become clearer. One reason I call this practice “deep listening” is that focusing is not a very good name—you actually start with something that is very unclear and vague.

P: Focusing suggests a laser-like attention.

DR: And it’s the opposite: a very relaxed and spacious sense.

P: Unfocusing.

DR: It’s unfocusing so that the felt sense is invited to come into focus. Then you use descriptive words or images to try to describe the quality of the felt sense. For example, I might say the sensation is like a warm ball in the center of my chest and I might check back and say that it’s shifting, it’s radiating energy. In this process, which Gendlin calls resonating, the felt sense does become clearer as it responds to descriptions and says yes, that’s a fit or no, that’s not a fit. It becomes more vivid, more present. Beyond that resonating step there is a step called asking, at which you can actually begin to have a dialogue with the felt sense, as if it were its own person or an inner child. You raise a question from your conventional self and then, instead of thinking about it, you just let the space be open and see if that sparks anything from the felt sense. That’s where you really get new information, new learning,

new wisdom.

P: So the aim of deep listening is to cultivate a sense of interconnection or compassion?

DR: I see it as a way of being real. Many people have written that we have lost our humanity. Deep listening is a way of reconnecting with our inner life and of becoming more available to others at a deeper level. Most of our conversation is a mutual conspiracy to keep us on the surface. We also tend to fall into the same patterns, becoming angry or depressed over and over again. Focusing is a way to get to the essence of how I might respond and also of developing empathy, of becoming gentle in oneself. In Western culture, there tends to be a very strong critical voice judging and labeling us as stupid or ugly or incompetent. It's a basic impulse in most people.

P: When I listen to you, I almost feel a little bit of hope that there might be a new way to communicate, beyond the old ideological divides.

DR: Yes, you can definitely go beyond ideology, beyond any fixed conceptual system.

P: Some people, like Trungpa, seem to know innately how to do it. He had such an extraordinary way of reaching people.

DR: I think that was the essence of his genius. He had a different name for it. He called it "first thought." But what he meant by that I'm pretty sure is the felt sense because it comes before the articulated thought. He was very much in

touch with that. It is characteristic of artists, good artists, and what an artist is really doing is training that capability. Trungpa Rinpoche was a wonderful artist in many different media.

P: He had such a gift for overturning concepts and judgments.

DR: Yes, his description for meditation was making friends with yourself, welcoming whatever arises.

P: What has deep listening taught you about love?

DR: A lot has been learned in recent years about the process of attunement between infant and primary caregiver. If there is good attunement, then the child will develop secure attachment and bring that into its own relationships. One way I think of love is as attunement and, as I said earlier, as appreciation, which for a new mother is instinctive. There is a tremendous quality of appreciation, every baby is beautiful. Love is a deepening appreciation for what is.

P: Is mother's love the paradigm?

DR: In Buddhism, the paradigm for compassion is the mother's love. But traditional Buddhist meditation wasn't equipped to deal with the Western psyche, the critical voice, and the tremendous sense of individualism that we have. On the other side, focusing is not designed to work with the problem of ego attachment at the level that Buddhism can. People can be good at focusing and still be self-involved.

P: How amazing to live from our real experience. ||