

Following is an interview with Ernest Becker conducted by Sam Keen just a matter of months before Becker's death on March 6, 1974. The setting is a Vancouver, Canada hospital room, where Becker was dying of colon cancer. A very rough transcript was made by clerical personnel at *Psychology Today* magazine, where a lengthy excerpt of this interview was published as "A Conversation with Ernest Becker." *Psychology Today* April:71-80. This entire interview was edited anew by Daniel Liechty, rendering it *verbatim* as much as possible, based on the original transcriptions and on the available audio recordings.

## CONVERSATION WITH ERNEST BECKER

### First Session

KEEN: Recording an interview with ERNEST BECKER. So it's a test of your theory?

BECKER: It's a test of everything I've written about death. How does one die? And I've got a chance of showing how one dies. The attitude one takes. Whether one does it in a dignified manly, way—what kind of thoughts one surrounds it with, how one accepts his death.

KEEN: Hold on just one minute.

BECKER: So, let's assume you're catching *in extremis* with this. That's the way it goes. I don't know exactly what you want to talk about. What do you want to hear from me? What kind of thing do you want me to elaborate? What kind of thing do you want my opinions on? Where do you think my work fits? That kind of thing?

KEEN: Well, I would like several things. I would like ... first of all, this can be what you want it to be. Let me tell you some of the things on my agenda. I would like some kind of story from you about your life, about how it develops so we can see your work in terms of your life and your own interest and things of that kind. And I would like to hear about the things that you haven't done that you would like to do. Sol [Kort, Becker's colleague at Simon Fraser University] said you had some works that you hadn't finished and otherwise, what you would like to say.

BECKER: Yeah, well okay. That's easy enough for me to do really. As far as my work is concerned, I think the major thrust of my work is to go frankly in the direction of the merger of science and religious perspectives. In a kind of subversive way I want to deliver science over to religion. And show that they have the same subject matter. I want to show if you got an accurate scientific picture of the human condition, if man held up a mirror to himself of his condition on earth, what it meant to be a man, this would coincide exactly with religious understanding of human nature. Something, by the way, that [Paul] Tillich was working on all his life, you know. That he was hoping for. And he didn't achieve it, of course, because he was working from the direction of theology and the problem is to work from the direction of science. And it's based on the work of very many people and it's not... many people have contributed to it. And I think this is the reason my work is now of interest really mainly to theologians. Gregory Baum, Herbert Richardson, people like that. It's the direction that Norman O. Brown states very explicitly in *Life Against Death*. Before he went off into his later very poeticized attempts to sum up the whole reality, which I don't think someone can do or should do. I think this is the frank option of my work. If I had anything that I would rub my hands in glee in quiet hours and say, "hee tee hee, this is what I've pulled off," I think I have pulled off a delivering of the science of man over to a merger with theology.

KEEN: Just in the sense that if psychologically you go through the character armor and the buildup of character that you come to a point where you realize that in Schleiermacher's sense that man is ultimately dependent? Absolutely contingent, in that sense?

BECKER: Yeah. The sense really, that the thing that has grown out of Freud and the thing that has grown out of the whole movement of modern psychology is that man is fundamentally a creature. And that everything that we know about him—character, armor, culture—is fundamentally a denial of creatureliness. Which is the identical thing that theology says, isn't it? And it seems to me that this is a datum of far-reaching importance. The problem has been how to get out in the open fire of false elaborations—sexuality and so on. That the fundamental fact is animality and creatureliness. This was done really a long time ago by two thinkers that are very much neglected in this life. And one of them is Otto Rank. And Lifton is now, as you know, pulling together a picture of man as attempting to be

immortal and attempting to transcend himself, which is very much Rankian. Although I think he gives too cursory a credit to Rank and makes it seem as though it's his own.

KEEN: Also very much in Calvin, man is an idol-making factory.

BECKER: Yeah, yeah. And of course in Luther. And interestingly enough I think in the Frankfurt School of Sociology, in [Max] Horkheimer. As a matter of fact, I see my work really now largely as an extenuation of Horkheimer's work and the Frankfurt School. Horkheimer you know as in the beautiful essay on Schopenhauer that he wrote for the [Herbert] Marcuse festschrift edited by Kurt Wolff, called "Schopenhauer Today." Frankly comes out for Schopenhauer over Hegel and calls him the relevant philosopher for today. And this seems to me really powerful and challenging. It's not a new statement, it's not a fresh idea. It's the development of the Frankfurt School, it's all the Frankfurt School, that man is a willful creature and, as Horkheimer says, abandoned on the planet. There is a beautiful phrase there in which he calls for mankind to form itself into communities of the abandoned. Which to me is a very beautiful idea and one that I wanted to develop. Very much wanted to develop in terms of implications of the scientific view of creatureliness. And then you get into the whole problem of evil, and this again is another thing I think has to be wrapped up and one of the things unfortunately I won't be able to finish is a book on the nature of evil. I wrote a book on the structure of evil but it was much beside the point. I didn't talk about evil at all in that book. What I was working on when I got sick was a book on the nature of social evil, showing that in fact, and this is what Rank did so beautifully, and Wilhelm Reich also in that magnificent chapter on animality in his book, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, a very neglected piece of work in which it is possible to show that all humanly caused evil is based on man's attempt to deny his creatureliness, to overcome his insignificance. All the missiles, all the bombs, all the airplanes, the entire structure, all human edifices are attempts to defy eternity by proclaiming that one is not a creature. That one is something special. And all scapegoating, of course, has that as a mechanism, so someone says "the enemy is just dirt, just inanimate, cheap." All human degradation is based on the fact that the person tries to show that he and who he is degrading is less than human or is more than human. This is what is meant by Miller's beautiful phrase, "everyone needs his Jew." Everyone needs somebody to help him see that he is not a creature. Someone he can pick on. Someone he can humiliate. And I think this is an immense datum, really, the idea of the dynamic of evil as due fundamentally to the denial of creatureliness. Obviously the idea is that if you accept creatureliness, you no longer have to protest that you are something special. It is a very difficult idea, of course, because man needs to be a hero. You know, one of the themes that I have been writing about, one of the themes present in the work of Rank and James and so many people is that man is here, the peculiar characteristic of man is that, in fact, he's an animal that has to do something about his ephemerality. He wants to really try and pull through; he wants to beat disease; he wants to beat death. This is his distinctive challenge. And when it comes to being heroic, it lies in that realm. The idea of overcoming, of standing out, of saying, "You see, I've made a contribution to life. I've advanced life, I've beat death, I've made the world pure." Rank put it very beautifully in one idea when he said that the fundamental dynamic of evil is the attempt to make the world other than it is. What it cannot be, a place free from accident, a place free from impurity, a place free from death. The popularity of cults like Nazism stemmed precisely from the fact that they recognized that people wanted this heroic role. This is the "good side" of Nazism, you might say, in quotes. You see that, in fact, people never thrive as well as when they feel they are bringing purity and goodness into the world and overcoming limitation and accident.

KEEN: Do you think that any of the political crises that we are in now in the States is due to the lack of recognition of heroic patterns? In the sense in which there was a rebirth of the heroic image with the Kennedys and then with Nixon you have the birth of heroism.

BECKER: Well, America is very much looking for heroism, isn't it.

KEEN: It always has been.

BECKER: It doesn't know how to express it. I think it has been one of the tragedies of America that it hasn't been able to express heroism. And it plunged into very unheroic wars. The last heroic war was WWII, which was really a comment against evil, wasn't it? It was very plain that you were fighting evil, you were fighting death, the limitation of life. And the thing that made Vietnam such a fiasco was that it was obviously not a just war, not a fight against evil. And it's a terrible problem. I don't pretend to solve it or say anything even toward it. How does one, what does it mean to be a hero, how does one live a heroic life? But society has to contrive some way to allow its citizens to

feel heroic. This is one of the great challenges of the 20th century. And to do so in ways that are nondestructive—a nondestructive heroism. William James saw this very clearly. How do you get constructive heroics? And sometimes you get it in glimpses, you get it in little pieces. You get it in the CCC's of the mid-30s, you get it in comradeships of just wars, you get it in civil rights campaigns where, for a while, people can feel as though they are bringing a certain amount of purity and justice into the world. But how do you contrive to get people to feel that its society is set up on a heroic order without grinding up some other society as a scapegoat like the Nazis did.

KEEN: Well, in terms of your understanding of society, it seems almost a Catch-22. It seems almost structurally impossible because the mass of people are living in terms of character armor which prevents them from the realization that life must be heroic and that their heroic models are always unconscious models. Isn't the idea of heroism almost by definition an elite idea? I think [Joseph] Campbell talks about how it's not everybody who makes the hero's journey. But I take it that you use it in a broader sense.

BECKER: In the sense that one marks one's passage on earth by leaving behind something that heightens life and testifies to the worthwhileness of his existence. So that making a beautiful cabinet can be heroic. I mean one can say, "I'm a first-class cabinet maker. I introduced beauty into the world in this form." Or for the average man, I think being a provider is heroic enough. This whole idea they make fun of in stories and plays where the old folks are saying, "Well, I've always provided for you. I've always fed you." Well, that's his heroics, isn't it? That in the face of everything, he's fed his family and pulled them through the hard times.

KEEN: Especially during the depression.

BECKER: Yeah. The heroics of the average man. It is not something that one should disparage: It's very real. And I suppose the American heroics, if you put it that way—I hadn't thought about it—I suppose the American heroics is that one has always made a good living, meaning one has always pulled his family through. And why don't they work? And what the heck is this welfare business? And the sense of satisfaction that one's life has always been good because one has always been a breadwinner?

KEEN: Self-sufficiency, too. That myth of self-sufficiency.

BECKER: Yeah. The point, you see, is that I don't think one can really be a hero in any really elevating sense without some transcendental referent like being a hero for God. I think this is the most exalted type of heroism. Being the hero for the creative powers of the universe. Feeling that one has lived to some purpose that transcends one. And this is the highest meaning of heroism for the individual. Which is why religion gives this individual the validation that nothing else gives him.

KEEN: I remember Hannah Arendt's lovely statement that the Greek *polis* was formed by people coming back from the Trojan wars because they needed a place to tell their stories. Because it was only in their stories that they were immortal.

BECKER: Yeah, that's very nice.

KEEN: The question of heroism, in the form of heroism, then, is "who is your audience? What the audience for man's actions?"

BECKER: Yeah, what is the audience for man's actions. The interesting thing about that is that you make a big contrast between primitive man and civilized man. You mention Campbell. In that primitive man, generally speaking... I don't want to get into the argument of what is primitive and what is not, whether primitives are as good as we say, and so on. But generally speaking, a primitive tribe was a heroic unit. It functioned, it lived with itself as its own audience and with the ancestral spirits as its audience. And it functioned on earth in order to guarantee the life of its members, and it was a heroic unit. It secured life, it multiplied life, it addressed itself to the dead ancestors, and said "you see how good we're doing? You see how, we're observing the shrines? You see how we are giving you food? The living nourishing the dead, keeping the continuity going?" With guardian spirits, as among the Plains Indians, each person had his divine referent that helped him to be a hero on earth. And it's in primitive life that you see this heroism. I think this accounts for a good deal of the nobility and dignity in some of these Indian faces we see in photographs. The sense that one is contributing to cosmic life.

KEEN: But there is a crucial difference that may be much harder for modern man than in primitive heroics, the heroic pattern is that you don't have to do anything new. That you repeat the archetype, a la [Mircea] Eliade. That the myth is always done as it was in the past. And that in one sense the terror of modern heroics is that in order to establish our own heroism, we have to establish something new, something that has not been done before. And therefore the constant having to break out of forms is that which I think makes modern man much more anxious, more desperate for one.

BECKER: Yeah, that's very true. Tillich, on very esoteric level, concluded that for modern man to be heroic is for him to incorporate nonbeing into himself in the form of absurdity and to overcome it. While it's stuff about an esoteric role, a really difficult one indeed, our task, our heroic task, is specifically to negate absurdity by incorporating into ourselves nonbeing.

KEEN: But you know, I've wondered about that a lot. Because it's true, but Tillich at the end of his life, [Thomas J. J.] Altizer, who talked to him right before he died, was telling me that—a lot of people told me this—that he was very much interested suddenly in the Eastern religions and he was considering another doctrine of nothing, of nonbeing, that he hadn't seen so much because incorporating nonbeing to Tillich was always incorporating anxiety and the fear of death. Whereas so much in Buddhist philosophy the nothingness is the fertile void, the full void. It was as if Tillich, in his Lutheranism, embraced only the negative aspects of nothingness and not the positive.

BECKER: Well, I don't know enough really about Buddhism. I do know, I have a feeling that there is a certain cleverness in Buddhism. Since you can't have what you want in the world, you renounce the world completely. Because you know you can't beat death, and you can't be nothing, you just sort of embrace them. You keep talking about getting off the wheel of karma as your goal in, in a sense tongue-in-cheek, hoping you'll get back on again. This is in fact the way people live, isn't it? I think Buddhism is a beautiful doctrine in that sense, but it's never had that appeal to me. Somehow it lacks of a reference, lacks of an explanation of why we're here. Why did all these eggs hatch on this planet, given that we are creatures? I think that Western man is much more interested in whys and causes. Here we are all eggs, right, placental eggs? And we hatch on the planet and our main life's task becomes to deny that we're eggs, to insist that we're something more. And we want to overcome this condition of egghood, we want to protest that we're here for some higher reasons and we've been trying to find out what these reasons are. There's no answer but the reason must still be there. And it seems to me that Buddhism doesn't come to grips with that, doesn't answer that question. Why we're here, why do eggs hatch, why are eggs hatching on this planet in the form of embryos? And this seems to me our major question, a question that torments us all.

KEEN: You'll need to tell me when you're tiring because I can come and go in terms of your energy levels and ...

BECKER: Well, I don't know what course my illness is going to take so I would just as soon get the interview over with. This fatigue is not going to hurt me terribly.

KEEN: I would like to do at least two sessions. We'll get better and better interviews with more time just by definition. It takes a lot to really make it rich because there is so much that has to be cut out.

BECKER: I'll let you know when I'm tired.

KEEN: I first read your *Angels in Armor* about a year and a half ago. I was very excited about it and I proposed to do a conversation with you. And somebody else proposed it at the same time and he left. Then just recently somebody sent me the death book, *Denial of Death*, and simultaneously somebody wrote a letter. So I just had this feeling also about your work that it was a body of work that really wasn't known generally. And it would be a fine thing to do as complete a portrait as we could.

BECKER: Yeah, I see. It was *Angel in Armor* that was really one of my frank statements of the need to merge with theology, too.

KEEN: Well, what impressed me about it, I guess, if you can talk a little bit about this, that it was almost the first time that I had seen somebody taking psychological issues and pushing them immediately to the ontological level, of

saying “look, we can’t understand fetishes and paranoia in terms of merely psychodynamics.” So pushing them right back into the ground of our existence, making them all existential problems rather than...

BECKER: Yeah, this is what led [Arthur] Koestler to call man a paranoid animal. That is to say that paranoia was an evolution which is a clumsy way of saying the same thing. If you push the analysis of paranoia to its limits you get to the ontological ground of existence. So people talk about a paranoid animal. Well, it’s not that man is a paranoid animal, it’s that paranoia is in fact a part of his awareness as a human being. That he is an insignificant creature trapped on a planet beyond his understanding. And he has no forces to be able to deal with this.

The way I feel about my work, I feel great misgivings about my earlier work. This is one thing I would like to say.

KEEN: Could we just, could I just ask you one thing?

BECKER: Yes.

KEEN: I wonder when Luther talks about “untrust” as the human condition, I think, it is the same thing as paranoia. And I wonder whether there is a natural progression from basic trust to paranoia back to basic trust? This is the romantic myth, at least, that in the beginning a tree is a tree and that we are in same kind of union with the world and then that we come to this position of alienation. It’s the story of the Prodigal Son also. Would you hold that in the course of the human path that there is a natural progression from trust to paranoia/alienation and then back to trust?

BECKER: I am not comfortable with that kind of generalization. My mind doesn’t function with that kind of generalization. I don’t know what to say. I don’t like to bite off that big a hunk of abstraction.

KEEN: Well, do it in Jungian terms. Jung makes the allegation that at about the age of 40, that man turns to dealing with the underside of his personality and that there is in that a kind of homecoming and that that is one of the natural rights of passage. Erikson does the same thing in terms of identity in the life cycle.

BECKER: Yes, some people do. I think some people do. To say that man does I think is an awful generalization. Archie Bunker [character in the then-popular TV sitcom “All in the Family”] doesn’t and the average world citizen doesn’t. I think it is important to realize that. When intellectuals are talking about the world we are not talking about our own class. And I think some people do, yes.

KEEN: Well, I interrupted you. You were talking about your early work.

BECKER: You want to get back to that? One of the big defects with my early work as I see it now, with the early books, was that instead of dealing cumulatively with the history of ideas, I tried to accommodate the history of the ideas to the opportunities of the sixties. I talked a lot about [Jean-Jacques] Rousseau and about what opportunities for education were formed and so on—things that I saw and I have become very disillusioned about since. And I think that this is a very great mistake to try to accommodate one’s reading of history and one’s understanding of the cumulateness of ideas to the opportunities of a particular effort. The fact that it is a mistake is attested to by how little is accomplished in educational reform—nothing. Nothing happened. There was no science of man. There is no synthesis of the disciplines. There is no unification. There is no relevance. There is no curriculum reform. None of this happened. So I have moved very much away from that to much more an attempt to present a picture of man, an empirical picture, irrespective of what we need and want, something that is summed up by the Frankfurt School by saying that the only honest practice is theory. There is nothing for the intellectual to do today in any honest way in the world mess except to elaborate his picture of what it means to be a man and what is the condition of man—something, of course, we have been working on since the Greeks. And I think something that has tremendous validity in some ways that are unknown to us—that man is the animal that holds up a mirror to himself showing himself what he is and if he does this in an entirely honest way, it a great achievement. After all, the only thing that we would be interested in if we went to another planet would be to what extent the creatures on that planet had self awareness and how far they got an accurate picture of themselves, isn’t it? So the only thing that makes the earth interesting is whether man on earth comes up with a self-reflective picture of himself and says “Look, here is what I am” and then he becomes an interesting animal, and an animal with possibility. But just to run driven, without stopping, without elaborating some kind of an image, without showing oneself what one is, this makes a creature very uninteresting. It makes a planet very uninteresting.

KEEN: Well, of course, there is another idea, Hegel's idea, basically that it is in man's blindness that he serves the will of the Absolute rather than in his self-knowledge and that it is precisely, you know, the cunning of the idea that somehow our blindness creates the passion that is necessary for the whole drama.

BECKER: Well, that is very good and it may be. But still it is the job of the thinker, if he has a distinctive role, to be the one who is not driven, who is not blindly running.

KEEN: It is to know his own form of heroics.

BECKER: I think Hegel may be right after all, which is why all of this group awareness may be quite beside the point. What we are here for is to use ourselves up, which is in fact what I said in *The Denial of Death*. We seem to be here to burn ourselves out and to use ourselves up and this may, in fact, be what it is all about. I didn't know that Hegel put it so succinctly.

KEEN: That is a nice idea. I hadn't thought of it. Then it would be that in some sense that the human potential movement has tried to make man into everything rather than to allow him to be something and that perhaps we only burn ourselves up by being the very partial kinds of creatures that we are. If we are intellectuals, we should be intellectuals. If we are dominantly, you know in Jungian terms, sensation types, that is what we should be.

BECKER: This is certainly what [Anton] Chekhov meant when he thought people ought to follow their passions. If you are in love, you act as though you are in love. You know, you don't give life second thoughts, which is the proper way to live. Well...

KEEN: Awareness is hazardous. It is the occupational hazard of the intellectual, of anyone who tries to be aware...

BECKER: I think that the matter, the trade of the intellectual is to work out a picture of the human condition, what it means to be a creature on the planet. I think this is his job and this is his trade mark, to try to figure out what it means to be a human being. But he gets into trouble, I think, when he generalizes this and says that this is what everyone should be doing and this is what is going on, that mankind is doing this. This is what I like about Paul Radin's anthropology. He makes the distinction right at the beginning between the thinker and the average person—the man of action and the thinker. So the Shaman as the thinker already brands himself as an odd ball and already brands himself as somebody who the tribe looks upon with suspicion and whom they don't understand because their job is to get on with the business of living and the Shaman would never say that the task of every member of his tribe is to become Shaman-like, whereas the thinker of today imagines that the task of everyone is to become somehow self-realized. And I think the world is just too complicated for that, too much of a confusion. It is just too big. There are too many people. There is too much drivenness. Too much driving. Too much action and passion.

KEEN: So that then you would say that the task of going beyond character is a very limited human vocation and that for most people staying within the bounds of character and defense, the psychological defense system—what should I say? That that is a form of heroics also?

BECKER: Yes, you said that is what Hegel said, right? Yes, I would tend to agree. That is what [Philip] Rieff says, too, in his work. Philip Rieff, that what are you going to do without limitation, what are you going to do without repression? I certainly wouldn't, knowing how difficult it is, knowing how difficult self-awareness is and what a hazardous thing it is to try and get rid of one's armor and what a painfully anxious thing it is. As Fritz Perls put it, to die and be reborn is not easy. That is a beautiful statement and the understatement of the year. It is one of the most excruciating things that you can imagine and to set this up as a program for people, it is just impossible. I can't imagine people that I know, everyday people, friends, relatives, I can't imagine what they would do without their character armor. I can't imagine how unhappy they would be if they had to peel that away. Somehow this business of getting rid of one's armor and being reborn into a kind of new awareness is, as you suggest, I think, a very limited vocation for a very few people and I don't know what validity it has. Of course, Jung and the New Group people and so on set this up as a goal, didn't they?

KEEN: Well, the degree to which psychology has become a religion sets it up as a goal for everyone and it becomes complex, because the other way is to celebrate life. And formal religion has to such a large degree broken down. It

doesn't give comfort, it doesn't give depth the way it once did. So what are the alternatives? The rites of passage were ways of celebrating the heroics of common life before and now we don't have those things and so any kind of crisis brings a person to the perhaps possibility that the only way out is through increasing self awareness and then he is on a trip that he can't stop.

Didn't you say earlier something about the only form of mental health is really the need to be obsessed about something, to have some sort of a compulsive obsession to do something specific? So if you were once very religious, orthodox, traditional, in that fashion, you had a way of being obsessed about your tradition, following it and practicing it.

BECKER: Yes, I would say so. Right. Mental health would be controlled obsession. The channeling of all one's energies in a definite direction and being caught up by that fact. And of course even the so-called self-realized person is somebody who has seen through themselves and their character armor and so on, they do live still in a very obsessed way, don't they? They have got to write another book, they have got to get that thing done. They are really not very attractive creatures then, are they? They are not much different from the driven man.

KEEN: Except they are obsessed by clarity.

BECKER: Except they might know that they are driven and they might be able to sit back and muse on themselves once in awhile. But in the daily business of living, they have still got to be obsessed, still have to be directing their energies outward in a controlled and focused way on some particular problem. I mean, here is the proof of that. I am lying in a hospital bed dying, and I am putting everything I have got into this interview as though it were really important, right? And I consider myself to be a self-realized person in that sense of having seen through one's Oedipus and having broken down one's character armor and yet for practical purposes, it doesn't mean anything. If I am going to live as a creature, I still have to focus my energies in a very driven way. I think that is very profound what you are suggesting.

KEEN: Would you like to tell me something about how you came to be who you are? Something of the story. How did you get into this business to begin with?

BECKER: How did I get into the intellectual business?

KEEN: Yes, the whole thing. How did you come to the position that you occupy? Put some meat of story on these bones.

BECKER: Well, I don't know. I think in the sense that every young man is a searcher, trying to find out what his talent is and what he is good at and hoping that he gets a chance to prove his excellence and prove that he can be heroic, I think that in that sense I was a searcher and had a feeling that I had something special to give, which every young man has, and hoping that I could translate this specialness into some kind of external form—what every adolescent does, right? And I went through the war—World War II—and back into civilian life, into the university, and I don't know, I guess I just became... I don't really know what to say. I just sort of stumbled along like everybody else, trying to understand things. I was always very interested in what makes people act the way they do. This has been one of my principal obsessions. I was always very interested in why people act the way they do. I never gave this problem up. I always came back to it. It intrigued me. And when I was in graduate school, I went to graduate, like everybody else does, to get a—what do they call that sheepskin? A bread certificate, a name they used to have for it. You got something to earn your daily bread.

KEEN: Meal ticket?

BECKER: Meal ticket. Right. There was nothing terribly idealistic. There was no idealism in my motives for going back to college. I was in my early thirties and I was floundering and I didn't know what I wanted to do. I had lived in Europe for a number of years. I had lived in Paris for 5 years and I wasn't getting anywhere and I started to become frightened that I didn't have it. I hadn't realized this inner talent, this gift that the adolescent feels he has and I was in my early thirties and I got scared and then I thought "Where was I happy? Where was I well off? Where did I seem to be doing something that may be valuable?" And I remembered that I had been particularly good in college and it was kind of a happy life and so I really chose it as kind of a meal ticket. I thought "I will be a teacher" and I

went back with that in mind. And it was a pretty cut and dry thing, working for the meal ticket, and I found that I liked it very much more than I thought I would like it. And I think the real question that is to be asked about me that is distinctive after this is how I became interdisciplinarian, I mean, why I ranged so broadly, why I am not a specialist, why I am a generalist. I think this is a question that has to be answered. The rest of it is pretty cut and dry, about a young man trying to express his specialness and trying to find a way to earn bread by that. The question that has to be asked is why I didn't bog down into some particular discipline. I think the answer to that is that I, guess I was just lucky. I was in graduate school and I was working on Zen Buddhism, as a matter of fact. I became interested in Zen and in order to do the kind of dissertation that I wanted, I had to go out of the historical treatment of Zen, into a psychological treatment of Zen, which meant that I had to study psychoanalysis. So I picked up [Otto] Fenichel's encyclopedia work on lines of psychoanalysis and I started reading that and I think this was the thing that broke me out of the boundaries of anthropology and I became very fascinated with psychoanalysis and very dissatisfied at the same time. I had the good fortune at that time to get a job at the Upstate Medical Center [Syracuse, NY] where Tom Szasz was working, so I became his colleague for a while and his kind of iconoclasm and daring and criticism of his own field gave those around him also the feeling they had the mandate to be critical, too. So I felt I could be critical of psychoanalysis and at the same time appreciative of it. And at that point the die was cast. I became a multidisciplinary thinker and focused on the question of why people act the way they do and became, of course, always interested in philosophy. And then I discovered [Paul] Tillich, which was a big moment for me. I remember going into a bookstore and looking at the book *Systematic Theology Volume 3* and reaching for it and then saying "What do we have to learn from theology?" And my hand fell back and I said "I don't know, maybe there is something." I took the book out and cracked it open and said "Gee, this looks good!" And I bought it and it was a big moment for me.

KEEN: Volume 3. That is the liveliest of the volumes.

BECKER: I started with Volume 3 and I discovered that these people were really trying to answer the same questions that we were, what makes people act the way they do and what does it mean to be a man? And so everything sort of fell into my purview at that point. I had a very anachronistic struggle with Freud and without realizing that his instinct theory had been disproven a generation ago, I worked on disproving it. I think many people went through that. I think that has to be explained more, my interdisciplinarity. So I just for several years read everything I could get my hands on and I have the kind of mind that tries to impose a pattern on what I work on. I try to unify it and simplify it and economize it and in that sense I like to think that I have a certain simple mindedness. I don't like complexity and I try to impose simple-minded patterns on the manifolds of experience. I think this is a necessity for any synthetic thinker.

KEEN: Is this why you call yourself a scientist?

BECKER: Yes, and I think I have been successful in that. I feel I have been able with a certain amount of simple mindedness to take large difficult issues and boil them down to essentials. I think this is my particular strength. I can't stand mystery and esoterics. I want everything to be clear and discursive. This is why I don't like the later Norman O. Brown. I just don't understand that kind of thing. I don't know what it means. I don't know what purpose it serves. I know that poetry and myth are important, ultimately the most important thing. But as a scientist and as a thinker, one has to remain on a discursive level.

KEEN: Well, certainly something that a lot of people would ask is, is it accidental that you became fascinated with the topic of death or is this a premonition for you and was this a life task which was suddenly handed to you?

BECKER: I see what you mean, yes. Well, no, a few people have asked me, you see, I became ill with cancer last year and my book, *The Denial of Death*, was published this year and they said "Maybe you were even looking for something ontological that I worked into my awareness." Somehow that I occupied myself with this problem. No, it has nothing to do with myself. It is purely that book was finished long before, a full year before I was sick, in its initial forms. I came upon the idea of the denial of death strictly from the logical imperatives of all my other work. I discovered that, in fact, this was the idea that tied the whole thing together—this was the ultimate, economical simplification. This was the ultimate idea that everything reduced itself to and I found this in the work of Otto Rank. When I found Rank I became terribly excited. I don't think anyone has excited me as much as Rank, whom I consider to be one of the most terribly neglected thinkers of modern times. A man of genius, really, who worked this thing through very systematically in many ways, showing that the fear of life and the fear of death are the



mainsprings of human activity and that everything can be explained from those fears. And he did this in a most beautiful way, historically and psychologically both. His historical psychology has yet to be used and discovered, although Lifton is working on a similar attack with variations.

KEEN: Maybe this isn't the time because I don't know how your energy is. I have some questions that I want to really ask.

BECKER: My energy is good.

KEEN: All right—sort of from the limits to push you.

BECKER: My mother is working on it. [Becker here jokingly refers to his IV bag as his 'mother.']

KEEN: Because it seems to me that you have done something which is extremely valuable, to bring this together and is really incredibly neglected, this aspect, the tragic aspect of life. But it also seems to me, too, that there is a certain distortion in it. When I look at your work, I think immediately of Rudolf Otto. If you look at life in the raw, it is a *mysterium* and *tremendum*. Otto says two things, that the *mysterium est tremendum et fascinans*. And it seems to me that you picked the *tremendum* aspect and you deal with life as awesome and as terrifying. You speak a good deal of the terror of life and that life in its wholeness is terrible. In Hindu thought the goddess Kali always has blood dripping from her mouth. But it is also *fascinans*. And the *fascinans* aspects is the degree to which we are drawn by something which is desirable and is desirable. And so it seems to me that at the basic ontological level, there is a kind of duality of motivation and only part of it is terror and fear of death. Part of it is that which just draws us—the Eros—which draws us into life and which is unconnected with the aspect of terror. Like sexuality itself, which has all of the terror, always has the terror, and yet it always has the fantastic appeal.

BECKER: Well, all right. I think that is very well put. I have no argument with that, except only to say that when one is doing a work, one is always in some way directing that work against prevailing trends. In other words, the work itself has a certain iconoclastic meaning, too, and if I stress the terror it is only because I am talking to the cheerful robots I see. I just think the world is full of too many cheerful robots and I have considered it my task, in fact, to talk about the terror rather than, as everyone else, talking about the joy and everyone talking about the good things. I just feel that in that sense the critical intellectual has to call attention to what is lacking. I suppose that gives a one-sidedness. I remember this time when I lectured to this group of theologians at Union Seminary here and I was talking about pretty much about we are talking about, the dynamic of evil, man's creatureliness, and so you would think that with a bunch of theologians I would be communicating with them, right? They were up in arms. One of the guys was so mad he wanted to throw me out the window. He said "How can you talk against the world out there, the beautiful world in which we have achieved so much? How can you make that seem as if we are merely a reflex of your own kind of morbid feelings about life and so on?" And it seems to me that theologians themselves have gotten away from what the world is all about and I was really shocked. I was really quite shocked that the theologians would turn on me. I would expect businessmen to turn on me.

KEEN: I got that little jab at "Dancing God," [Keen's 1970 book *To a Dancing God: Notes of a Spiritual Traveler*] but you would be surprised to know that most theologians consider me to be much too much in the tragic sense of life.

BECKER: I am sorry you got that because I enjoyed the book.

KEEN: That's all right.

BECKER: As fuel, as grist for my own mill. It is one of the unfortunate things about being an intellectual. You are always using everyone else's grist for their mill. You know, then again, I am glad you brought that up because in trying to explain human evil in a book I am working on now, I am going to try and pull together—you see, if I have any talent, it is in pulling together what other people have already said. Well, there already exists in the libraries a completely comprehensive theory of what the phenomenon of Nazism is all about—explaining that evil—but it hasn't been pulled together. What I want to do is to pull it together between two covers, to explain from all possible sides why we use scapegoats, why each person needs a Jew or a Nigger, somebody to kick. We all need somebody to kick, somebody to give us a feeling of specialness, special purity. And I have been working on the holocaust and

when you are working on the holocaust, it does something to you. It gives a certain realism about life—the kinds of things which happened during holocaust, which people don't really know yet. The reports which came out at Nuremberg, the kinds of things that were done in these death camps are so atrocious, so terrifying, that it is no longer possible—and this is something the Jews, of course, realize—it is not longer possible to have a naturally optimistic view of the world. One of the reasons we are obviously on this planet is to be slaughtered, which of course is the Christian message. We are here to be slaughtered and this comes home so strongly, this comes home so full in the face.

KEEN: Isn't the message more that if we do not allow ourselves to be used up, then we will be slaughtered?

BECKER: Well, in any event we are slaughtered, we are used up, on one hand like Chekhov's peasants or Gorky's peasants. You can see the brutal unthinking life of wife beatings and bickerings. We are either used up in that way or, as you say, we are just outright slaughtered and I don't think it is a matter of if/or—I think it is a matter of both. I mean, we are both slaughtered and—I have a friend who is a psychologist of tragic leanings and she gets up every morning and says "Today the blow is going to fall"—which is the Jewish consciousness again. Is it today that the blow is going to fall.

KEEN: It is also a way of warding it off.

BECKER: It is also a way of getting ready for it and warding off the effects of it by expecting it. But the facility with which objects disappear, the suddenness with which tragedy happens—again I mention Chekhov because I happen to be reading Chekhov's stories. I mention whatever is current in my mind. I have just read about 10 volumes of Chekhov's stories and there is this marvelous story about the guy who is taking his wife to the doctor. She is very ill and he is on a sleigh and he is taking her to the doctor through a snowstorm and he is talking to her. He says "Don't worry, dear, we will get there soon." And he starts reminiscing about the kind of life they have had together and he realizes that she has been a good woman and he has never really thought about their life and so on, and that maybe he should have been a little nicer to her now that they are getting old and so on. And he looks back and notices the snowflakes aren't melting on her face and just when he developed this great sentimental mood toward her she is dead and he says "Oh my God, how sudden everything happens." And he turns the sleigh around then, and he drives and drives through the snowstorm and finally he gets despondent and falls asleep. And he...

KEEN: Please, please tell me when you want to rest. I can come back any time.

BECKER: Tell me when you have had enough of a first interview. Let's put it that way.

BECKER: So he is a skilled craftsman, by the way—I forgot to mention that—and he wakes up in a room and he says "Doctor, what happened to my arms and legs?" His arms and legs were amputated. And the doctor said, "You fool, you have allowed yourself to freeze."

NURSE: I still have to clear up your room and stuff.

BECKER: Can you wait a while? A half hour?

NURSE: OK, that's fine.

KEEN: Maybe we can just go in a half hour and then come back this afternoon if you would like.

BECKER: That would be all right.

KEEN: So many of the best things come after you sort of think about what you didn't say, sort of realize the things you didn't say.

BECKER: Well, the other thing I wanted to say is when he looks and sees his arms and legs are gone he says "My God, how suddenly it all happens." And I think this is a beautiful insight into the suddenness of catastrophe and the thing which people try to banish most from their minds with their character armor, which is the suddenness with which terror strikes life on the planet; the fact that people are really so fragile and so insecure. There is nothing they

can do. There is that beautiful line from *The Pawnbroker*, where he repeats “I couldn’t do anything. I couldn’t do anything.” There was nothing he could do and this idea that there is nothing that you can do is not something that people allow themselves to bring to consciousness. They always feel that there is something that they can do. So they manufacture these huge edifices of control and the Russians imagine they are doing something in the world. In fact, the Russian denial of accident is very interesting—of accident, fatality and suddenness, contingency. They don’t publish airplane crash announcements in their own country. You see, in paradise these things are supposed to have been eliminated, so the only time you hear about a Soviet air crash is when it is smuggled out in foreign news sources. This is a state dedicated to the hypercontrol of accidents and having no god to explain anything anymore, they have got to do all the explaining, so they have to control accidents.

KEEN: The thing that struck me is that the Christian Science paper is called *Christian Science Monitor*—it monitors out catastrophes.

BECKER: Well, this is the control aspect of character armor which is so vital to the human being. I mean, I don’t know what people would do at large if they had to live with the knowledge that there is nothing they can do in the accident and catastrophe department. It is really quite impossible to live that way. Worry about every car that goes by, and then when your kid is going to school. You just can’t live this way and yet actually this is the way things happen. The planet runs this way. So sort of the natural craziness of human life, the fact that people are, in effect daily, leading crazy daily lives, is the result of the craziness of their position. I bring this out I think in *The Denial of Death*. And in the second edition of *The Birth and Death of Meaning*. Of how natural it is for man to be a crazy animal, because of the crazy life he has, because of his knowledge of death.

KEEN: Let me ask another kind of question. In your work, you constantly refer to the fact that man lives on two levels. He is an animal and he is also a symbol maker. He is fated and lives in a realm of necessity and also in a realm of freedom. Then you go on to talk about fact and illusion, and how character armor is so much the effort to create these edifices which keep us from the raw facts of life. But I want to question the idea because it seems to me that this is one place where you don’t follow Tillich. Tillich was careful to always say “Never say ‘only a symbol’ because, in fact, we don’t have this world that the positivists told us we had. We have fact plus interpretation. That what we really have is a world which is always interpreted mythologically and that we have neither in science, and certainly not in psychology, do we have any thing like a noninterpretive world, a world which is factual.” So it seems to me that somebody could say to you, “Very well, in what way is that the factual world?” It certainly is a fact that people die. Again Hannah Arendt springs to my mind. She said “The nature of the human condition is such that although man (and I think this is a direct quote) although man dies, he is not born to die but in order to begin again.” In the way she talks about action. If you flip over the human condition and look at it from a different perspective, then death is not a finality. And how do you know that one interpretation is any more “factual” than another? Let me put it in a question. Kierkegaard once said to Hegel, you know, “If you will show me where you stood to see the march of the Absolute Spirit, then I will put down the handkerchief and bow.” Where do you stand to see that this is THE fact of the human condition, and not merely A fact?

BECKER: Yes, I see. That is a very good point. I don’t really know how to answer that. In other words, what you are saying is that the symbolic transcendence of death may be just as true as the fact of death.

KEEN: Yes, let me put it in a broader framework. There are basically, I see, two basic stances toward the world, the Apollonian and the Dionysian stance. If you start from a largely Apollonian stance, the world is pluralistic and the problem is always how do you gain any kind of unity and you stand in what William James says is the sand heap universe and the problem is always, is there no unity? And at that point, of course, death is the overwhelming problem because it is the problem of the plurality of life and how do we ever talk of a universe. On the other hand,, if you stand within the Dionysian thing broadly, you start with the fact of some kind of a unification. The world is one, we are one, or I can put it also in left, brain right brain terms, within, as you say yourself, within the unconscious, within the dominance of the right brain, there is no time and there is no death. So it seems to me that in some ways your philosophy is a left brain philosophy and takes its clues from that, and rather if you take it from the right brain or if you take it from both brains, I would have to say that what you say is as true as the thing that there is no death. There is no possibility of death.

BECKER: I see what you mean. Of course, I would agree with that. I would say that from my point of view, the transcendence of death, symbolically, or from the point of view of the whole universe, may be very real, just as real

of the fact of death. I think that what I am doing then is talking to the consciousness of modern man, who by and large doesn't have these or who by and large doesn't live in the Dionysian universe, or who by and large doesn't have easy moments of transcendence. Maybe that is what I am doing. I am talking to a man who doesn't have a canopy of symbols to surround himself with and is quite afraid. Maybe I am doing that. I don't know.

KEEN: Put it another way. Why should it be that man's deepest longing—his deepest longing, which as you show is the longing for immortality—why assume that that is not cognitive?

BECKER: Not cognitive?

KEEN: Not cognitive. Because your position in some way is largely dedicated to show that it is not cognitive, that what real knowledge is beneath it is in terms of plurality and the fact of death.

BECKER: I am not sure I understand, Sam, what you are saying. I think that the creature—the fundamental fact of being a creature—is that the creature hungers for continued experience, which translates itself into the hunger for immortality, the hunger for immortality being a kind of an abstraction for the hunger for more experience. The creature wants to continue experiencing. It doesn't want to stop experiencing. This of course is archeological again. There is something about being a creature and being born where you don't want to stop experiencing. You want to continue experiencing yourself, appetites, sensations, and the awareness of the world. I don't know at what point it is cognitive or physical. I think it's basically physical. It becomes cognitive for many, in my view, at the point in which you start setting up doctrines of immortality, so that as a creature he will continue to experience. Am I talking to your point at all?

KEEN: Let me hit from just a little different angle. Of course death has always been with us and always will. But in certain conditions it is not as much of a problem to man. In a tribal culture, where there is not the degree of individuation that we have in the modern world, death is not psychologically as much of a problem. And with that wherever you are in a tribal culture, in a matriarchal culture and largely in agricultural, where the view of the world as the cosmic rhythms prevails, death is seen not as a problem. As you say yourself, it is a doorway. It is a part of the natural cycle and it is almost in those cultures as if the problem becomes the problem of individuation. Somebody said that in the Hebrew view—in the Old Testament—you don't have any individuals except as representatives.

BECKER: Well, certain tribes, certain peoples, believe that death is in fact the final ritual promotion, as you go through rites, as you go through puberty and so on and that death is your final promotion, in fact, your promotion to eternity. So that if you live in that kind of society it becomes a very great opportunity where you finally become individuated to the highest degree. The only thing is that we don't have those beliefs.

KEEN: Well, here is where I want to take it beyond the sort of theoretical back into the empirical. My view has been very much like yours—until recently I have begun to wonder. The things that make me begin to wonder is an entirely different world, which I see emerging in terms... all right, let's take ESP, let's take psychokinesis, let's take all of these things, which are beginning to... let's take healing, that kind of thing. From every angle it begins to look as if the models that we have had of mind in the West are certainly wrong. They are just wrong. That the model of mind as isolated and the problem that we had from Descartes on, is how does one isolated mind get in touch with another isolated mind, which then heightens the problem of death because it heightens the problem of isolation. Well, now even in terms of the empirical kinds of efforts to understand ESP, telepathy and things, it begins to look like, well, maybe mind is more like what [Alfred North] Whitehead talks about, more an axis or a pole. We don't have metaphors yet but that does put us in a world of greater unity where even things where one understands—at least I understand at least where things like reincarnation and things of that kind—where that kind of thing comes from which doesn't seem like nearly an illusion, where I can see the kind of empirical evidence and the kind of theory that gives credence to that kind of view. And I guess the question that I have to ask you is to what degree your view is based on what is largely an Apollonian view of the world and largely coming out of a specific technological society, where we really have isolated ourselves and where isolation and alienation have been constitutive for our consciousness. But that may not be constitutive for human consciousness.

BECKER: I think that to answer that I would probably have to admit that I was of the Apollonian bias and that the idea of kind of mind that you are positing, that people are talking about now—ESP and all of that—is a bit strange to me. And I say this not again getting back to empirical levels. I think it all right to talk about that and I think there

may be a lot there, I don't know. I want to keep an open mind about that. But from a practical point of view, I don't know how much there is there, when it takes 20 years of marriage in order to finally communicate with one's spouse about the differences one has and the ways one sees the world. It is so terribly impossible to break through to an understanding of what another person's experience is, and people spend entire life times isolated from one another. I don't know what ESP or any of that means in terms of the hard facts of daily experience. Do you see my point? I think that based on the way I see the world and feel about it, people don't communicate. People are really separate minds and separate bodies. Children and parents don't understand one another. Everybody does live in his own little compartmentalized world to the extent of which it is terrifying. Psychiatrists who are married don't use their knowledge of human nature even in dealing with their own spouse, so that there is such lack of understanding in the world.

KEEN: Yes, but why? I sometimes think that we are all wrong about communication and namely that the communication between two people is complete, instantaneous, total but that we have all kinds of barriers to keep us from saying what we know or even from knowing what we know. And very often the experience is "Well, I knew that about you a long time ago." You know the kids speak about it in terms of vibrations. And certainly we know that—what?—15% of what we communicate is verbal, 85% is nonverbal. On that level you know we are communicating. It is to say that we are not as separate as we have thought.

BECKER: Well, I guess we have a difference here that is probably one of personal bias on my part. I don't think that people do communicate. I am much more with [Samuel] Beckett's "End Game" here than I would be anywhere else. I am more with the absurdity of speech and the fact that everyone is locked tightly within his own appetites and that people are locked within their automatic character conditioning and are locked within their fears and desires and that the only people I suppose after that who really communicate are those who manage to see through their conditioning, admit what they are, or admit that the little that they are—I think that people at that level communicate. In fact, I have an article coming out in the new international journal, *Communication*, which is called "A Man's Ideal," [published title is "An Anti-Idealist Statement on Communication"] which deals with communication. I point out that very thing, the impossibility of communication, because of the fact that everyone is locked, firmly locked, into his own appetites, blind motivational systems, and just can't understand what the other person is saying and what they want and what they mean. This is my bias. I mean, this is where I stand. I am much more with Beckett's "End Game".

KEEN: [Arthur] Koestler, whom you admire, I think who is moving into this area and points out some of the things that I was talking about.

BECKER: Well, I don't admire anyone uncritically. Koestler I admire for certain of his basic good intuitions about animality and paranoia, the limitations. I don't know, I am very suspicious, Sam, let's put it this way. I have grown increasingly suspicious of all idealisms and all hopefulneses. Now I don't know what this means. I am not saying I am right. I am not saying I am with it. I may be wrong and the currents may be going by me, but I am very suspicious of all these things and people who talk about hopefulneses and talk about togethernesses and talk about possibilities. I am just very suspicious of all these things. I think works like [Samuel Beckett's] *End Game* and [Saul Bellow's] *Mr. Sammler's Planet* and [Bernard] Malamud's *The Lieutenant*—I think these are the true works of our time. The terrible hopeless isolation of people, to me it seems like grabbing at straws to talk about left-brain, right brain types of relationships that we are overlooking, radiating influences and hopefulneses. I am not comfortable there any more.

KEEN: Your own option in life for yourself is a stoic form of heroism.

BECKER: Yes, though I would put the qualification that I believe in God, not in Tillich's understanding.

KEEN: But in order to come to that point of trust, all illusions must be broken.

BECKER: Yes, in fact, all illusions must be broken. But the thing that is killing, again it is programmatic, right? From a critical, scientific point of view. In other words, if you are going to be a critical scientist in these times, all illusions must be broken. The fundamental scientific task now, even though it means a certain warp and bias on the part of the scientist, even though you are getting at something—say you are getting at something valid in terms of the criticism of me. I am not saying you are, I don't know, but it seems to me that the fundamental scientific critical task

is the utter elimination of any consummations that are not empirically based. That is, a complete stark picture of what the human condition is without any consolations and this seems to me to be the task and the need and, as I say, I may bend over a little backwards to give this but it seems to me just wholly necessary and to offer little ways out and little ways around attenuates the force that is necessary.

KEEN: I guess my position is a lot more pluralistic in one sense, that when I look at myself, you know, I know I am not one individual but, just to be over simplistic, let me use Jungian categories, that although I am dominantly an intellectual and thinking type, or maybe even a feeling type, I am not certain. There are days, especially now that I am past forty, there are days when I go into the sensation, when it will be a day of sensation and there will be days of intuition. Now, if I ask myself on one day what the world looks like, when I am a thinker, when somebody said to the person who thinks the world is tragic to the person who feels, or to the person who thinks, the world is comic to the person who feels the world is tragic and well to the person who is in sensation or intuition, the world is entirely different. Well, who am I? Where do I take my clues? I sometimes think as a philosopher that I don't have a right to take my cues solely from the days in which I am a thinking being. See what I mean? Lao Tze. Last night I dreamed I am a butterfly. Well now, am I a man dreaming I am a butterfly or a butterfly dreaming I am a man? And that other world in which I swim at times in dreams and in the unconscious, and which is more and more with me, it gives me different clues and I don't know that intellectual honesty means taking one rather than the other. I mean, I sometimes flip—you know, I went through this existentialist thing, too, and I thought the red badge of courage and all that was what it meant to be a man. And then other days I think that now especially, I think that maybe there is a resistance of hope and maybe hope is a kind of courageousness in those who are hoppers. I don't know for myself. I am just saying that I am in the same dilemma.

BECKER: I think that is very good and true. I don't have anything to say against that, but I think that that represents a different level of achievement. I think that represents something that one achieves in one's life. I think that I very much feel that joy and hope and trust are things that one achieves after one has been through the forlornness. I think this is very real. But they represent to me the upper reaches of faith and the upper reaches of personality development and very much to be worked on and very much to be cultivated, very real but I suppose I am still cleaning out the front room intellectually before one can get to these upper reaches.

KEEN: Well, in the moment when you say "Yes, I am a stoic but of course I believe in God." The moment your mind flips into that space, what does the world look like? How do you see yourself now. I mean looking at yourself with those dual perspectives, what do you see and feel?

BECKER: Well, I suppose the most immediate thing I feel is relieved of the burden of responsibility for my own life, putting it back where it belongs, to whoever, whatever hatched me. I think this is the most immediate thing I feel, a great sense of relief and trust that eggs are not hatched in vain. [Abraham] Heschel's idea "Beyond Absurdity There Is God." In other words, beyond this world of accident and contingency and terror and death is meaning that redeems—this is what I mean, redeems it not necessarily in any personal way of immortality or anything like that but that makes it good somehow and this is enough. This is what I mean, and I think when you talk in the terms in which you are talking, you are talking about personal achievements in that realm, in that fielding realm and I would not want to disparage that, I just think that on the one hand you are talking about my published intellectual work which is on the level of house cleaning and on the other hand you are talking about Lao Tze and something like that, which I think is already beyond the level of intellectual house cleaning and has of course a great and even higher validity. But for people to talk of joy and happiness and to be dancing around completely under the reaches of their Oedipus complex without any self-knowledge at all, completely reflexive driven creatures, this doesn't somehow seem honest to me. I don't know. The thing that I really can't understand, I always watch Billy Graham when he is on because I can't understand the guy. I can't understand that kind of reflexive joy. There is something very spooky about it. The whole evangelical fundamentalist movement—I just can't understand how they can be so sure and they can be so secure in their happiness. The thing has all the characteristics to me of a straight conditioning phenomena. It is a Skinner's box and at that level I don't like to talk about faith and joy. At the level at which you have put it, of course, I would want to begin talking about it as a higher human achievement, where intellect is left behind and emotional and other types of experience start coming into play.

KEEN: Maybe that is enough.

BECKER: That's a good breaking point. I am exhausted today anyway.

## Second Session

KEEN: Let me start off with a sort of complicated question. You know I come back to the present situation an awful lot in my thinking. I realize that all of the things about you, being here and talking to you, one of the problems is that it exemplifies what you are talking about. My tendency is, of course, to avoid death and even to speak to you as if I was in a different category, as if because you are dying and I wasn't, you know, somehow, we are in different categories. And I realize, you know, that is really stupid. That to talk to you, I need to talk to you really as someone who is not one bit different than you are and so to ask some questions that I really want to ask you personally, you know, as a human being, because it seems to me that there is a lot of things I can dig out of your work. I didn't have time to do all my homework just because I didn't have time but I will go do it now. But there are a lot of things I can't dig out. Like you have thought harder and more about death in this book than most anybody in the modern world and now you are, as it were, doing your empirical research.

BECKER: It only hurts when I laugh.

KEEN: And somehow I would like to ask you what you can add as a person, going through, you know, to speak to people because it is so hard dying in our culture and I think that just as a person you must have a lot that could be added along side of what you have said when you were not so close to the experience.

BECKER: I see what you mean, yes. Gee, I don't know. I can't say anything that any one else hasn't already said about dying or death. You know, there has been some very beautiful research done on it by Avery Weisman at Harvard. He is occupied with this and, I don't think I have thought about it longer and harder than people like himself or [Robert] Kastenbaum or [Elisabeth] Kuebler-Ross or those people have. I think they have been working with patients who were dying and so on. Do you know Weisman's book?

KEEN: Yes, I know Kuebler-Ross.

BECKER: I don't really have anything to add except to say, to repeat what others have already said and nothing really new, that what makes it easier is to be able to transcend the world into some kind of religious dimension and that is the only thing I would say that is most important thing to know that beyond the absurdity of one's life, beyond the apparent injustice of things, beyond the human viewpoint, beyond what is happening to us, there is the fact of the tremendous creative energies of the cosmos, which are using us for some purposes we don't know and to be used for divine purposes, however we may be misused. I think of Luther when he says, or Calvin, "Lord, thou bruise me, but since it is You, it is all right"—something to that effect. And this is the thing that I think consoles. Or [Jean] Piaget, who when his child had this very serious illness just went to church and gave the child over to God and said "I can't do anything. You take care of him." I think this is the beauty of it. I think one does that with one's life too, or should try to just hand it over, the meaning of it, the value of it, the end of it, whatever it may mean. This has been most important to me. I think it is very hard for secular men to die, yes. I think it is very hard for secular men to die. The injustice of it, as it seems to him, the meaning...

KEEN: Has this become more tangible to you when you became ill? And where did your religious tradition, have you found yourself going back to the symbols? You came out of, what? a Jewish tradition?

BECKER: Yes, I came out of a Jewish tradition, but I was an atheist for many years and I only re-woke to the dimension of the divine gradually, through, what was that beautiful saying? "It is not the intellect that teaches us about God, it is life that teaches us about God." And through seeing children born and just sort of waking up to the miracle of what is going on. I think this is what woke me up. I think the birth of my first child was the miracle that woke me up to the idea of God more than anything else, seeing something pop in from the void and seeing how magnificent it was, unexpected, and how much beyond our powers and our ken. But the feeling that I have now is of no especially different quality or intensity. I don't feel more religious because I am dying. It is just a continuation of the general feeling of openness to the divine that I have cultivated through having lived with my eyes open for the last 10 or 15 years. I think like Kierkegaard I would want to say that I have become religious not because I am getting older but—remember him saying how old he was? "I am in my thirties when I am writing this so you won't think it is because I am a frightened old man," something to that effect. I would want to insist on the same thing. I think one very important aspect of my writings or one point that I bring out that I think might easily be overlooked

and that is that if you take the growing up process of the child, which is essentially a masking over of his own fears and anxieties with the secure cultural screen that protects him against his knowledge of his creatureliness. I think that is pretty secure, that this is what character armor is. But the most interesting part of that whole business is that what the child does without knowing it is, since he feels powerless and since he knows on some level of his personality that he is very, very vulnerable, he has to reinforce his sense of power and he does this by plugging into a source of other power, literally. I look at it in electrical circuit terms. Father, mother, or in some cases the cultural system of ideas or ideology, becomes his power source and this is always unconscious. One doesn't know what one's power source is. One does not know that he has given over the aegis of his life to this power source and that he himself is merely plugged into it. And I think the greatest deception of social life is that you talk about people who are [possible page missing in the original transcription here, or the page numbering is mistaken] your own. But, in fact, and this is what comes out in therapy, isn't it, the personality breakdown, that what is revealed to the person is that he is not his own person.

KEEN: We are all possessed.

BECKER: Yes, he is a construct. He is lying. The lie of his life is that he has tried to pretend that he was his own person.

KEEN: I have thought sometimes that really the person named Sam Keen started about 40, the year 40. Until that point I am living out to some degree my parents' life. About 40 you have a chance to begin your own life if you get through the character armor and the play begins more your own. At least you become conscious of the people that are inhabiting you. And I will continue in my son until he is 40 and then he has a chance to get rid of me, maybe.

BECKER: Maybe. It is a fascinating phenomenon because the fundamental deception of social reality is that there are persons, independent and decision-making centers walking around, and there are not. They are relay switches. It explains the big conferences in Air Force One over Viet Nam, the type that everybody is looking at everybody else to see what they are going to say, and then Big Daddy comes out with a decision and they all lap it up. The human animal just doesn't have any strength, and I think it is very, very important to know, this inability to stand on one's own feet. I think this is one of the most tragic aspects of human life. And the point being, of course, the thing that I have been writing is, that when you finally reveal to yourself that you are vulnerable and that you are weak, when you finally do find it out through therapy or through life, then it is impossible to continue living without massive anxiety unless you find a new power source. And this is where the idea of God comes in, I think, for the person.

KEEN: But isn't there also something else. At least my experience has been that the more I get rid of the character armor and things, yes, there is an increase in anxiety, but there is also an increase in energy, that the energy that had been necessary to hold those illusions down is not... I mean, there is more joy.

BECKER: That is very good. Yes, definitely. There is definitely an increase in productive energies of the most, well definitely an increase in creative energies.

KEEN: I remember one of the beautiful things [Gabriel] Marcel says, where he talks about the spirit of truth somewhere, and he uses the example of a child who is feeble minded and the parents have never acknowledged it. And then one day they say, yes, it is true! And he says there is like this fantastic metaphysical sign and there is a relaxation in which now that energy—at least it doesn't change anything except now that energy does not have to be programmed into building an illusion, so there is a gain, a net gain.

BECKER: Yes, I think that is very true. I don't think that really creative work can be done unless there is that release of energy. Or maybe it can, maybe people can work.

KEEN: I want to ask you another complex question, really impudent. One of the things that psychosomatic medicine has done is to reverse one of the great gains we made in Western thinking, that all illness was taken as judgment until Job and Job's comforters coming and saying essentially, "Why are you ill?" And the naturalistic view of illness, at least, severed suffering and guilt. And now with psychosomatic medicine we are back into the thing where Job's comforters are again at the bedside and all of us when we get a cold say, "Oh, what have I done wrong?" or we say there is a style of illness like there is a style of life and styles of dying as well as styles of living. And I know that at least I go through the thing when I think, well you know probably my style of living is going to end up in a



heart attack or some thing—a burst kind of spurt thing. And I wonder what reflections you have on that, on embodiment of styles of living and dying?

BECKER: Well, I think there is an awful lot to psychosomatic fear, yes, obviously, and I was very interested in it at one time. I compiled quite a file of research on it. I think there is a lot to it. The only thing is to take it back to our earlier conversation this morning and to compare it to mental illness generally. There is nothing you can do about it since we are a driven creature. And supposing that we do find out that a certain style of life leads to heart attacks or certain styles lead to cancer or certain styles lead to this stress or that stress. I think the approach still has to be the microscopic one. That is the physiochemical one because practically people cannot change their character. Practically, people cannot avoid their drivenness, and I think we are finding out things here that we can't do anything about. Like my theories of mental illness. My theories about mental illness are all very good, but my theories, you know, [R.D.] Lang's theories and [Harry Stack] Sullivan's theories and so on, that I have sort of tried to wrap up to get there in a bundle—but now to be able to take children away from their mothers if there are such things as schizophreniagenic mothers, you can't envision societies doing things like that. You can't avoid people, there is no way to program society so that people aren't helplessly dependent upon other people, which leads to depression when that person betrays them and so on. So that approach would always have to be a remedial biochemical one, where you give them a shot so they don't feel bad or you tone down the symptomatology.

KEEN: Except the awareness does bring change. It just doesn't bring the degree of change that we want and it brings it much more slowly and less of it.

BECKER: Well, yes, maybe in the long run. All right. If you talk about it, if you envision it as a sane society and you are talking about heart attacks and so on, stress phenomena and so on. I suppose you would talk about more leisure and less rat race and so on, which would have some mitigating effect on them. But you are still going to have the terribly driven individual who just wants to burn himself up and there is no way to handle that except microscopically. I think this is one of the great tragic paradoxes with the human sciences, because we are finding out things about disease and about illness, mental illness and about psychosomatic disease, that we really can't do anything about.

KEEN: Or we have to do everything about.

BECKER: Yes, or we have to do everything about. I am glad you asked that question because it really gets into something basic.

KEEN: One of the things that really impressed me about your thing is where you really do away with the idea of symptoms. Look, there aren't symptoms. At least they are symptoms of a life. I think you put it that we don't just think with our heads, we think with our whole embodiment and that therefore, you have to change the whole style of embodiment if you want to change the thought patterns.

BECKER: Right, and how do you do that? How do you do that? We seem to be actually moving onto an ultrahuman level of cogitation about these problems. We are already in the realm of angels here, aren't we?

KEEN: Yes.

BECKER: We are talking about ourselves from such an objective point of view that we have already transcended the human, but we are unable to transcend it within our selves, within our own limitations. But in thought, we have transcended it. And maybe, this will stand it for some future civilization or some civilization that is now in the stars, as some fantastic knowledge that we leave behind as a record, much as the Greeks left behind their writings. They seemed fantastic to us when they were discovered. A civilization that knew too much about itself, in a sense, and yet couldn't stop scurrying. It is almost the same parallel.

KEEN: Except of course, there is always a part of the civilization that knows too much, fortunately. I guess fortunately it is not all of the civilization.

BECKER: Right, it is the thinker.

KEEN: Another question I wanted to ask. It seems to me that in some way your thought is excessively masculine, that is—it is natural enough, you are a man—but when you talk about the human project of consciousness, of man being a father of himself, I wonder if the condition that you portray is not more the masculine condition than it is the human condition and if it isn't largely a condition which is at least exaggerated by the kind of culture in which the rational, the driving, the competitive, the masculine, the rational elements, have been the formative ones. How do you think if you had been a woman that your approach would have been different?

BECKER: That is some question. I don't know. You are over-asking me there. I don't know except that I know that categories like heroism and scapegoating and avoidance of evil and the attempt to make the planet into something which it is not can be shared just as well by women as by men. Look at the Nazi effort. There is very little known, I mean, there has been very little... there is a lot of research to be done on the tremendous roles the German women played in Nazism, encouraging this kind of heroics.

KEEN: Immortality drive doesn't seem so much the same. I mean, the thrusting out to create artifacts. I suppose that men create artifacts because they can't create children.

BECKER: Well, it is the old opposition between direct creativity, yes. I think there is validity in that, that generally speaking, the woman might be more relaxed in her creative role.

KEEN: We have to create *ex nihilo* in a way. Women create out of their biological given, in a way that we do not.

BECKER: Which leads probably to less competitiveness among women.

KEEN: Yes, and more instability among men because we don't have such easy standards to judge our creativity by, nor are we so easily nourished. I mean, a child goes into the world and there it is, you know you have done it—and a book, you don't know. And then you always have to do another book. I mean that has been my experience.

BECKER: A book is such a shallow phenomenon compared to a child, isn't it?

KEEN: Yes.

BECKER: And it is such a transient heroics compared to a baby. I think your point is well taken. I have no argument with it. I don't know about my own work, whether it is masculine or feminine. I think there is an awful lot of femininity in it in terms of the kinds of things I have had to feel, just as people speak about the feminine side of Freud contributing to his work. But I think I am talking more about men than about women when I talk about the drive to be a hero and the need to stand out as a creative person. Men are very competitive in that. The whole drama of history is a drama of men seeking to affirm their specialness, isn't it? The whole drama since the decline of primitive society, of one state after another, one war after another, is the attempt by men to make the world into something it can't be through their own creative efforts and all the evil wrought, by that. You just can't imagine a feminine Bobbie Fisher with that fantastic energetic devotion to this symbolic game, living in hotel rooms. It is pretty hard to imagine. It would be a strange kind of woman, but it is not a strange kind of man exactly, is it?

KEEN: No. Another question. All primitive mythologies. Death is always mythical in a sense. It is not a natural event. It is always an interpreted event. We die because we are guilty or because it is time for promotion into another realm or some by accident. What is your mythology when you think about death? I mean some people have said that the difference is in our society. Very often women will visualize death under a lover and men as the castrator, that is our mythology—what is this event?

BECKER: I am not so sure I know exactly what you mean. Are you talking about the kind of image one has at the moment of dying?

KEEN: Yes.

BECKER: Like Lou Andreas-Salome's—when she dies she believes she will fall back into someone's arms? Or somebody says he believes he will go forward into the light, something like that? I don't know. I don't have any idea. I don't have any idea, except I consider it to be a peaceful event. I don't consider it a turbulent event. I don't

see it in terms of the grim reaper lopping heads off. I consider it in terms of a peaceful kind of darkening, if that answers your question at all. How well that answers it, I hadn't thought about that. I have thought whether you go forward into light or whether you go forward into darkness or whatever.

KEEN: Have you ever done any psychedelics at all?

BECKER: No.

KEEN: Because one of the experiences that people have who have gone into that is whatever precedes the moment of death, whatever comes up to it, that the last moments of life have got to be very ecstatic, just because consciousness, when it finally lets loose, there is an ecstasy to it, like in sex. You know, that just...

BECKER: I don't know. I really don't know. I really can't say. I really haven't thought about that, in that sense.

KEEN: That is just one of the images that I have sometimes had when I think about my own death and I thought that, well, maybe in some way love is the educator for death, and that this strongest of all drives. When D. H. Lawrence talks about orgasm as that gentle reaching out toward death and that moments of blending are so ecstatic for us because they are so rare that, you know, perhaps we are educated in that way.

BECKER: Well, certainly the peaceful look on the face of many dead people is very indicative of something, isn't it? They really do look peaceful, and as if they have died peaceful deaths, but I don't have any mythology properly speaking about that.

KEEN: Another thing I wanted to go back to. Since the idea of heroism is so important in your thinking, who were your heroics? I mean, who were your earliest... I don't mean by the time you were becoming an intellectual but who were your early heroes. Who were your models?

BECKER: I was a standard cultural kid, you know, standard American vintage fellow. When I grew up it was cowboys and Indians, Chief Sitting Bull, George O'Brien, Tom Mix. I think these were the early standard cultural type, if I had any particular heroes. I had a very ordinary American childhood.

KEEN: OK, let me switch a little. If you were going to do a symbolic portrait of yourself, what would you do?

BECKER: If I had to do a symbolic portrait?

KEEN: I mean just figuratively illustrate this article, illustrate this conversation. I mean do the art work.

BECKER: Well, if I had to do a symbolic portrait, maybe it is indicative of the fact that, you know, whenever you ask me a personal question, notice how I hesitate? I am not really personally caught up in this so much. I mean, my personality tends to fade to the background. The only thing where I think I am personally caught up, where I think I have really achieved something as a person, which is distinctive, is that I have achieved a self analysis of a very unusual, deep going kind.

KEEN: You were never in analysis?

BECKER: No, and this is due to a long story that I hoped at some later date to be able to write it up, because I think it is very important.

KEEN: Why don't you tell me a little bit about your self-analysis.

BECKER: Well, let me get the other thing going first before I forget it and then I will.

KEEN: OK, because that is fascinating.

BECKER: If you ask me what kind of portrait, the only thing I can think of is if I wanted portraits of myself, I think of Rembrandt and his successive portraits of aging, when you see the effects of his life on his face. I think that is

how I would think of myself symbolically. Or Van Gogh, where you see the individual as young and then every successive portrait becomes somehow a face that has been marked by the teachings of life and by the disillusionments of life and the fact that the world is not our oyster and we can't have what we want as our happinesses, the kind of symbolism I have of my own passage through life, that is maturity as a disillusionment into wisdom. This is the way I would think of the portrait sequence. But I haven't thought in any personal way about that.

KEEN: It is almost the opposite of the portrait of Dorian Gray.

BECKER: Yes, the opposite, right. I am very much against the cult of personality. I can't stand actors' faces. I can't stand gurus' faces. I can't stand scientific faces. I mean, everybody puffing up and pushing himself as the wise man, with his hair a certain way and his clothes a certain way. These constructs with just the right pair of glasses and Ernest van den Haag, with just the right look. I didn't object to Fritz Perls for some reason. I felt he was pretty much an entire person. And it looks natural on an old man to have a white beard and a lot of white hair. But I object very much to this pushing of the image of oneself as the answer to things and as the one who is going to figure things out. And as a result of that objection, I myself have wanted to push my face more and more into the background. I will never forget what Socrates said, and it always remained one of the things close to me. He said, "I am obviously a better teacher than the stoics because of my ugliness." He said "They win over by their handsomeness and their beauty. But if you are won over by my doctrine it has to be by the doctrine itself." So he considered his ugliness a factor in his favor. I always loved that. I think that one ought to be won over by the force of intellectual ideas and when I see Arthur Janov and faces like that, it just infuriates me. The face that beams out from its own vitality and by that fact seems to convert somebody to the doctrine. And then there are certain people I like because they don't have a face and their face doesn't fight through. I mean after all, in the accumulated knowledge of the human condition, what is a face? And again, there is something false about face because it implies that there is an independent person behind it, which is very rarely the case, if somebody is plugged into somebody else's source of power. The personality exemplified by the face is *ipso facto* a lie.

KEEN: I just had a flash of a portrait. I mean, it is a wild one but I suppose your portrait would look something like a man who had a face and behind him were all of these other faces that were the plugs one by one been pulled out, and there was one still left in, but all the other ones had been pulled out.

BECKER: Yes, that's pretty good. That is kind of cute. But personality implies that there is a person behind that or an independent source of judgment, and it is not true. It is not true. That is a great deception. I remember this little photograph I had. I don't know what happened to it. Unfortunately, I lost it. I had it when I lived in San Francisco, pinned up in my room. It was a picture of Lyndon B. Johnson in Air Force One with his team around him, the brightest and the best. There is Maxwell Taylor's face and Dean Rusk's face and every body else's face and each one of those faces was a lie because they were only doing what Big Daddy wanted and they were there looking at each other and they weren't real entities. I suppose that is why we like babies' faces so much. At least they are still real. They have a real face, at least before the plug has been put in.

KEEN: They all universally look like Churchill, as somebody said. Tell me about your self-analysis.

BECKER: I think this was a very big event in my life, lasting over a period of years. Supposedly it is something that can't be done and yet, of course, all the early psychoanalysts, Freud and so on, claimed to have done it, so I think it can be done. But it is very hard and it is very accidental. It requires a certain concatenation of circumstances that are very unique, but it was in a period of my life where I was experiencing great anxiety. Suddenly started to experience great anxieties. It was a transition period in my thirties, early thirties, and I wanted to find out why I was experiencing this anxiety, and I said to myself "What the heck is bothering me? What is bothering me?" At that time I was into psychoanalysis very deeply, reading about it, and I read a couple of very good books about dream analysis, Fromm's book, *The Forgotten Language*, and other very good things. I don't remember what they were at the time. And I thought that this would be a good time to try it myself, except that you know when you wake up in the morning you don't remember your dreams. So I took a night pad, like one you have there, with a big thick pencil, and I decided to take it to bed every night. And then when I would wake in the middle of the night with a really striking dream, I would write out what the dream was in the dark—it was a scrawl but I could always read it the next day. I would write out what feeling I had at certain points in the dream. And then I would wake up in the morning and there would be the night pad with my dream on it. And very often I was very surprised that it was

there, for I had forgotten completely about the thing. In a half sleep, in other words, I had written down the dream and my reaction to it. And of course, as often happens with these things, your dream, in fact, gives you a salient message. I think that the unconscious, in that sense, and many people have said it, the unconscious tells you what's bothering you and the unconscious wants to help you get over it. It is a very strange and yet real phenomena. In other words, you get what are called message dreams, dreams that tell you what is going on and what is bothering you, which your ego will never tell you because your ego, of course, is your defensive mechanism. And I remember one very salient dream, a very vivid one, and I struggled for days after I had that dream trying to analyze it, trying to analyze the meaning of it, and it is amazing how easy it was to analyze it once I said this happened in the dream and I felt great anxiety at this point and I would say, "Why did I feel great anxiety at that point?"

And I can almost not tell you this without telling you the dreams, which makes it, you know, the dream makes it very involved and it so highly personal that I don't know to what extent I want to get into it. But let me say that over a period of time, I found out what my characterological problem was, what was bothering me. I found out that what bothered me, or was bothering me, was that I was living by delegated powers. I found out that my power sources were, in effect, not my own and that they were in effect defunct. And I did this over a period of several years with gradually increasing intensity of revelation about myself, and I think that if you talk about an analysis, what you are revealing to the person is his lack of independence, his conditioning, his fears, and what his power source is. And I found out that my power source was not what I thought it was. It wasn't in me and this was just a shattering revelation to me. I kept analyzing my dreams for years after that and all I got was just more support for that idea.

And so I had to consciously then find a way out of this dilemma and it was at that time that I started exploring other dimensions of reality, theological dimensions and so on. What it means when you have a tremendous anxiety attack is something that one can figure out, I think, if one goes through this kind of arrangement. I don't know. I ask Fritz Perls once, "Do you think it is possible for one to be self-analyzed?" He said "No." Then he said, "Well, maybe in very rare instances it might be possible." And I think I was one of those rare instances, where I was able to reveal to myself my dependence on powers that were not my own. When you throw them back on yourself, what can you do except to reach out for other kinds of power. But then you do it in a very honest open way, you see, you are not doing it in a reflexive way at all. This is the difference. I think this is the difference between fundamentalist evangelical religiosity, where you are reaching for other power is imprinted on you more or less, and genuine religiosity, where you reach for God because there is nothing left for you. Like [Jean] Piaget in a nutshell.

KEEN: That occurred to me. Do you know [George] Bernano's *Diary of a Country Priest*?

BECKER: No.

KEEN: Oh, you would love that. I will get it for you.

BECKER: Really. I will read it. I would like to.

KEEN: It is about a person very much in your condition, a country priest. And his whole struggle with himself. It is one of the most beautiful books, just gorgeous. I will see that you get it.

BECKER: Oh, thank you. My voice is so soft. Am I coming through on that thing?

KEEN: I think so.

BECKER: So that answers your question rather fully, doesn't it?

KEEN: Yes.

BECKER: Without giving you any details, which are highly personal. I don't know if I would recommend it to anybody. It makes one a very unhappy person. This is the point. I remember I was teaching—I used to teach a course from that book *The Birth and Death of Meaning*. And the students would often get up and say, "Are you advocating that we go through this, that we change our personalities?" And I would say, "No, I am not advocating this. It is very painful." So they would get annoyed and say "Why are you teaching us this?" I would say "I am just giving you the

information. I am not proselytizing. I am not asking you to go through it. I am talking about human nature.” And I wouldn’t want to proselytize it. I don’t think it is, I think it is just an awful burden to go through these things.

KEEN: Again, I think it is a different burden. It is interesting that men don’t remember their dream near as well as women do. That sort of openness to the unconscious is much more...

BECKER: Is that a fact?

KEEN: Oh, yes, it is a fact that women remember, have dreams more easily, have dreams more in color than men. I know it was only maybe 6 months ago that I began to have color dreams, and they were really joyous dreams. I still have to do the thing. I work with my dreams, too, but I have to write them down and then I will have them for a week or two, and then they will go away if I don’t pay attention to them. The same process.

BECKER: Well, I think that in life one has one or two very crucial, very critical dreams, and they remain the model to the standard messages about oneself and ones character.

KEEN: One of my loveliest dreams was a very short one. It was before I went through a divorce and everything and I was lying in bed and I knew that I was about 47 or 48 or something like that. I was lying in bed, and a man came in the room. He was very weathered and I knew that he had fought in a lot of jungles and had a very beautiful sort of strong face. And he just sat down on the bed where I was and he looked at me and said “I have learned one thing in life and that is how to begin again.” He got up and he walked out and his presence has been with me for years.

BECKER: Marvelous. That’s really marvelous. There is something about the unconscious that just... I hate mysticism. That is, I am not a follower of mysticism or anything of mystery but there is something sort of spooky about the unconscious and its revelations to us. It is the life force at very elemental levels, isn’t it, nourishing us, trying to help us through a struggle.

KEEN: Yes, as well as the characterological thing that keeps us distorted, there is something in us also that wants our wholeness and is constantly working for that.

BECKER: Exactly that. The message dream is definitely something that is striving for wholeness. I interrupted you. You started to ask something.

KEEN: I just wanted to ask, what other kinds of things would like to say that is unfinished that you would like to say.

BECKER: Gee, I don’t know. We have pretty much covered a lot of territory. I wanted to talk to you about power and people, plugging into sources of other power, which of course supports [B.F.] Skinner’s views, doesn’t it? When Skinner talks about people being unfree, he is absolutely correct. People are definitely conditioned into the Oedipus complex to a screen over their behavior, into a mask. And they are not free but they will roast anyone who says they are not.

KEEN: It goes back to Plato and the myth of the cave.

BECKER: They will roast... As Freud said, “At least they didn’t burn me at the stake.” And I think it was a very appropriate remark. For certain prophets to go around telling people they are unfree, they are determined, they are not their own masters, they are not their own power centers, this is more than they can take. And the opposition to Skinner stems in large part from people’s unwillingness to admit that are not free. And also, of course, his program for liberating them is hardly palatable. But I think he is definitely right about that. I think this is probably one of the great fruits of psychology in the 20th century, that it has shown to man that he is not a free agent. And when you look at all the work of the other disciplines, like philosophy and economics and so on, with their heads so far in the clouds because they won’t accept the fundamental data of psychological science, which says that they are not free, you don’t even begin to do any work until you realize this. And it seems that this is really the great emergent discovery of our time, that people are conditioned and unfree, and it is just not broad enough currency. It is just not well enough known.

KEEN: Well, there is also the thing that primitive people knew this to some degree, but they seemed to be happier with people who inhabited them than we are. I think, for instance, of Janov and how much of Janov's cures he gets by marshalling people's resentment against their parents. Which is a way of saying "Look, they are in you and they are bad." Well, it is not so bad to have your play, to have a lot of strange characters wandering through it if they are nice characters, if they are good characters. Sometimes I think that is what it is about strong personalities that integrate them more easily, because they don't think they are in control so much but they like the people in their dramas. It is hard if you have people in your dramas as primal parents who you don't like.

BECKER: I like the way you put that. As an anthropologist, I am very wary about making any kind of generalizations about the primitives, because there is an awful lot of malevolence among the ancestral spirits too—they were very much afraid of them. So I am very suspicious of any kind of generalizations about the primitives, except to agree with you that, generally speaking, the primitive is quite comfortable living in a world of spirits, of ancestral spirits or being lived by them. I think, generally speaking, you might say that certainly the Australian aborigines were quite comfortable in living successive reincarnations of animals.

KEEN: Let me get on kind a different slant. Norman Brown says that in some way the problem of the modern world is that we had lost our fathers and the authorities, the power of authority or authority power or the parent. So many people in the modern world are troubled by the fact that the people who inhabit them are not powerful. Their role models are weak role models. And I wonder what it means to have a strong role model and a strong authority in relationship to the possibility of shedding the character armor later in life. In some ways, it seems as if people who have strong parents, they have a harder fight up until that point. They have a harder initial fight but then they get to that point, they have a kind of power that helps them to get rid of character armor in a way that people with weak models don't have.

BECKER: Yes, you may be right. I like that way of putting it. I like that way of putting it. Certainly, one has to have solid internal *imagos*, as the psychoanalysts say, if we are at all to feel secure. I think that is very true. Generally speaking, men with weak fathers at some level lack tremendous, have a tremendous lack of self-confidence. But on the other hand, men with strong fathers have a tremendous barrier to get over. There is this strong father who always stands again in judgment on one. I don't think there is any easy way to generalize about these things. I don't think there is any easy way to generalize about these things. But you are saying something along the kinds of lines that [Jan Hendrik] van den Berg is talking about in some of his later works. Do you know van den Berg, from Holland, with his historical psychology? [*The Changing Nature of Man: Introduction to a Historical Psychology*, 1961] Very important work. I can't recall just exactly what he said about this but he said something similar to what you are saying about the dilemma of modern man. He is one of the few people who has done really interesting work. I was a great admirer of [Erich] Fromm, you know, for a long time, and lately I have gotten away from Fromm. I don't like Fromm's attempt to apologize for man. I don't think he is being a hard enough scientist, sort of bending over backwards to sort of show that people aren't so bad, that certain things are possible. And I don't like that lack of realism in him, the kind of realism that [Max] Horkheimer has, for example, and Fromm doesn't. Fromm is very much the utopian, very much the rabbi, very much wanting us to be something different and showing us that it is possible. And I think his work suffers because he bends over backwards showing us. His whole recent discussion of aggression, for example, begs the question of human aggressiveness by saying it is in the service of the organism. Sure it is in the service of the sadist to hurt the masochist, but what is that to the masochist? And how does that help the masochist, or the victim rather? And Fromm, I just have come away from Fromm on that. I think he is being much too facile about possibilities of freedom and possibilities of what human life can achieve. I feel there may be an entirely different drama going on in this planet than we think is going on. That is, for many years I felt like many other people, like Fromm and almost everybody else does, that the planet was the stage for the apotheosis of man, and I would think in future terms like, this will happen and that will happen. And this will happen and this will be possible. I wrote a lot of my earlier books along that line. But now I don't feel that way any more. I now feel that something may be happening on our planet that is utterly unrelated to us, to our wishes, that is and may have nothing to do with our apotheosis or our increasing happiness or our increasing well being. I don't know what we have to do with this, I don't have any idea about that. But I very strongly suspect that it may not be possible for mankind to achieve very much on this planet, and the illusion that he can achieve something may be the last illusion, which, of course, throws you back again to the idea of mankind as abandoned on the planet, and of God as absent. And then of the only kind of meaningful dialogue being between man and an absent God, crying up to the heavens, "Why are we here?" I suppose what I am saying, I am getting away from the horizontal, to use Tillich's terms, from the horizontal view to much more the vertical view, that the person is addressing himself to God rather than to the future of

mankind. And it would be kind of funny, wouldn't it, if Jerusalem did win out over Athens, as many people thought it would, as Chekhov thought and as Kierkegaard thought and as...

KEEN: Well, certainly it is true. I remember Tillich, I studied with Tillich for about 4 years and knew him well and I think the most passionate statement ever made was he said that all real thinkers really spend a lifetime combating the grand inquisitor. And that is certainly true that all the visions of man that point toward the apotheosis and the ideal states and the Utopias, they end up with the five year plans which try to, which create more of the misery of human life. Certainly our idealism creates more misery than our realism does.

BECKER: This is the thing that we talked about before. Man's attempt to make the earth what it cannot be, a place free from death, free from accident, free from creatureliness, in effect causes more direct evil than anything else. You can see that in the Soviet Union today, which is why Jung made the statement that the Soviet Union is the apotheosis of evil in the modern world. And of course, it sounds like a terrible statement to make, and yet he meant it in that sense and in the sense in which the Soviet Union is attempting with all its might to deny the truth of the human condition. It is, in effect, twisting and turning man to a degree that is very, very antihuman. We see that now, don't we, that psychiatric confinement for dissenters and so on. The great thing about the United States is that we have not gone that road.

KEEN: That's right. We are always an enlightened culture.

BECKER: It is the beautiful thing about America that whatever is wrong with us, we have not gone the road of sacrificing people to a Utopian idea and we may be... the meaning of the United States of America before the world may be that in the future.

KEEN: It is precisely our pragmatism that has saved us.

BECKER: Yes, our pluralism.

KEEN: I think a lot of times one of the statements I have loved from Camus when you come down to this critique—and whenever I give this critique I am always accused of being pessimistic and things like that—and Camus' thing about the tragic sense of life, there he says that once you discover the absurd, then you are tempted to write a manual of happiness.

BECKER: That is very good, yes.

KEEN: But that's real, and I love the thing in *Summer in Algiers*, that thing where he talks about the sea and the abiding values and the love of the earth and both the love of the earth and real trust come in only after disillusionment, not before it, and I guess in this sense I remain an old Lutheran myself.

BECKER: Yes, the sense of joy is some thing achieved after much tribulation, where in the Franciscan sense all activity stops to listen to the bird. But that is an achievement, you see, that is not something that one gets in a couple of group therapy sessions or a few screams. This is the point, I think. In the highest reaches of faith you do have joy, or you should have joy, and this is very much the religious idea that since it is God's world and since everything is in his hands, what right do we have to be sad - the sin of sadness. But, gee, it is very hard to live that. It is very hard to live that. I remember when Luther's twelve-year-old daughter died, was it, when he was crying and lamenting and his wife said "What are you carrying on like that for? You might think God had died!" and he snapped right out of it. But as I say, there is obviously something very different on this planet going on than what we think and I think it is up to human studies of the science of man, or whatever you want to call it, to try to point out the real condition of people on the planet. And then we can go on from there. So at that point we can go on intelligently, but as long as we keep disguising and lying and hedging and hoping falsely, we can't get anywhere. I don't know where we are going to get, but I think truth is a value, an ultimate value, and false hope is a great snare. I always liked [Nikos] Kazantzakis' phrase, "The rotten-thighed whore". I thought that was just beautiful, and I think that the truth is something that we can get to, the truth of our condition, and if we get to it, it will have some meaning. I don't know what meaning, but I think that truth in itself has a meaning. This was the whole brunt of [Abraham] Heschel's book *Passion for Truth*.



KEEN: Well, if shedding the character armor is any analogy, then it is only truth that makes it possible to love, finally, which really actually releases the energies which allows you to contact the other rather than the screens. So maybe that is the best analogy we have.

BECKER: Well, Heschel has this thing in the book of *Passion for Truth* that I was very struck with. It is a parable about when God created man, Truth objected and said "Now he will be a false creature." And God had to choose between Truth and man and he cast Truth into the ground. And I think this sums up beautifully the human condition, because the creation of man meant the downfall of Truth. That is, man, in effect, lies about himself and his condition, and the point is now to resurrect Truth and to show the truth of the human condition that man has been lying about. I think the Western world has been working on that for 2500 years and what it means and how it will be done and what effects it will have on the world, no one can say. Yet it seems to me a most valid enterprise. Certainly as a scientist it has kept me going, this passion for truth has kept me going. ... We seem to be all talked out, don't we?

KEEN: That's fine.

BECKER: I seem to be all talked out, but I will answer anything that occurs to you. I just can't think of anything more. I could talk for hours on the philosophy of science and all that jazz, reductionism, Skinner, but I don't see any point in it. I have a nice paper coming out in *The Journal of Philosophy and Social Science*. It is called "Toward a Merger of Animal and Human Studies," trying to merge [Konrad] Lorenz and these people into an existential, ontological perspective, and I think it is a great merger paper, it is a great rapport paper.

KEEN: I thought if you wanted to, I could get Sol [Kort] to bring a tape recorder over and if anything you just thought of that you wanted to add.

BECKER: I think, Sam, in an uncanny way we have covered everything. You have put some questions to me that really stumped me and made me think beyond what I would normally do. And I think we have covered it.

KEEN: I see all the elements necessary for the picture.

BECKER: You do? That's good.

KEEN: Oh, yes. I can harden up some elements with actual words from your text and stuff like that.

BECKER: There is a lot of myself in my books, obviously. It is almost all of myself in my books in the sense that they are a record of my own growth, which is partly unfortunate because they are also a record of one's immaturities. But that is the way human sciences are.

KEEN: I will send the tapes down and get them transcribed and work up the...

BECKER: That's good. I really appreciate this. It is a good thing for me, the idea that these ideas will get broader currency and also the more selfish notion that I will be able to leave behind, I might be able to leave behind a little chunk of royalties for my family. It is very important to me. As the Jews say, what you are doing is a Mitzva, a religious good deed, that will accrue to your merit, you know, if the book does sell. You like the book?

KEEN: I like it. Not only that sometimes it is a bit of a dip in an acid bath, but I find that whenever I take that dip, that something, I have more energies available. That is all there is to it. Shedding of illusions is finally an erotic process just because of the energy. It is not pleasant initially but the wind doesn't blow you away so much afterwards.

BECKER: It is funny, Norman O. Brown really said all those things. The only thing, I don't know what happened to them, why they got lost. Why do we always have to repeat? Why does one thinker have to always come up ten years later and say the same thing in a different way? Just as Otto Rank said most of Brown's things before him. The only thing is, there is a great ambiguity in Brown.

KEEN: And also your stuff brings together, I mean a lot of those elements were there, sure, but you really bring it together in a way that the pattern just sort of emerges so much more boldly.

BECKER: I guess that is the scientific work as work of art really, as an organization.

KEEN: Knowing what to eliminate so that the patterns become clear.

BECKER: That is, I think, very true. Knowing how to insist on what is significant and to hammer at it. This is, really, I suppose, my talent. I have a tremendously good nose for significance. This is one of the things I always admired about William James. I think what makes him, he has been one of my models in almost all ways really, and he had that sense for what was a significant point. He said "This is significant" and he wrote it. And then after he wrote it he rewrote it for public address in plainer language.

KEEN: Yes, it was beautiful.

BECKER: That was so tremendous, his sense for what was significant, and the work that goes into something like that. Geez, the work that goes into that.

KEEN: I think almost the favorite thing that I have that I wrote was the first piece that I ever wrote and published called *Hope in a Post-Human Era*, and it just essentially had two points. One was we do not know that obviously the human condition is endarkenment, that we are ignorant about the ends of existence and that any pretense to the contrary is a pretense. And second, what are our choices? We have the choice of basic mistrust or basic trust. Basic mistrust ends us in paranoia about ourselves, so we better trust. But it was everything that I didn't say that I like about it, and nobody ever picked it up much because it was one of those Zen things. And I still think when I come down to my theology, that is all I have to say.

BECKER: That is beautiful. Yes, that's beautiful. The problem with all intellectual work is like the problem of the artistic, or the problem of organization, forcefulness. It is like Picasso. The more you can illuminate unnecessary things, the more you can stay with essentials and keep from rambling and you can't help it. Always when you envision your piece of writing, it is a good deal simpler than it is when you do it. You always get far more involved than you want to. It requires some, skill and some practice.

I know Renee Tillich. I didn't know Paul Tillich. Do you know Renee, his son?

KEEN: I met Renee in Hawaii.

BECKER: Yes, I knew Renee at Berkeley, I remember. We had dinner a few times together. This isn't on, right?

KEEN: It is on.

BECKER: Oh, it is? I don't care. It doesn't matter. We had dinner a few times and he looks exactly like his father. It is uncanny, isn't it? It is really uncanny.

KEEN: Paul Tillich was beautiful. Studying under him was, I guess, it was the thing that made me think that you could be both honest and belief-full, because I had lost that confidence and then I discovered him at Harvard. He has Eros about thinking he loved. I mean you could see the passion of a thinker and that was so lovely in those days. That was in the fifties, and so much of the intellectual world was sterile and theology in those days was really alive. It was one of the few live places, much livelier than philosophy.

BECKER: What is happening to theology now. Where do you think it is going to go?

KEEN: I think it is going into stuff like yours. I think yours is theology today. You see, the formal theologians won't do phenomenology, and so they are dead. They will not start with experience. And I believe that the only analyses that are worth a flip are those that start with experience and show, you know, exactly like you have done. All right, you go from there to there and there, and then there is the question and then if you start with that question, if you start with that trust XXX before going there, it is no good. It is no good.

BECKER: I was very flattered by Gregory Baum's interest in my work and several people at Trinity College in Toronto. And then I hear that Herbert Richardson has become very interested in it, and I like him. And these are people who are working toward a merger of the science of man.

KEEN: Gregory especially.

BECKER: Gregory is especially taken with sociology, you know, he worked with Peter Berger at the New School and was very taken with sociology. What did he read of mine that he liked? He wrote me a letter on it. *The Structure of Evil* it was, and [Abraham] Maslow liked that book, too. Maslow wrote me a letter on that. Maslow said (I am blowing my own horn but I think it is worth while in this context, I think I can permit myself as a dying man a few kudos) Maslow wrote me out of the blue and said that it was a great work that everyone should study it, and is absolutely a "must" book. He said he was so excited that he just had to write. I thought it was a beautiful thing and I was very grateful for it. Yet the book dropped dead. The book dropped dead in spite of everything. Baum also wrote that kind of letter. It is strange.

KEEN: But you can never tell about books. You can never tell when a book is dead and not. So often they come back, like for instance [Wilhelm] Reich. Reich is current. He wasn't anything then. He was not paid any attention to. Jung is another one, Jung is much larger now than he had every been before.

BECKER: Yes, I think so: I have come to appreciate Jung in recent years. I had sort of a Freudian analyst thing against him for a while, but I was wrong. He is tremendously profound. The only thing is, he is too scattered and it is hard to pull him together. You know the nicest thing that Reich ever wrote, the most beautiful thing he ever wrote, was a chapter in his book *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, written in the early thirties, on the causes of human misery due to the fundamental denial of animality. Just beautiful. Those pages are gold. Then, of course, he steps off and reduces it to sexuality, which is the misstep. I mean, it is animal vulnerability and not sexuality that we are worried about. He makes that misstep, which undermined his whole thesis, but in that thing he analyzes Fascism for what it was. Fascism is the fundamental protest that we are not creatures, that we are not animals, and that we are something greater. And he goes line by line. It is superb. When I read that, I appreciated Wilhelm Reich. I forgave him everything. He saw the dissolution of Freud very early, in the thirties, and so did Otto Rank, and then Brown rediscovered it in the fifties. This is really what happened. I am surprised that Brown never read Rank, but if you talk about one's education, it is such a hit or miss situation that it is ridiculous.

KEEN: You know that Brown never read Freud until a few years before he did *Life Against Death*. All his reading of Freud was in two years.

BECKER: My goodness.

KEEN: That was incredible when I found that out. Two years before *Life Against Death* he didn't know any Freud.

BECKER: It is just awful that we don't have an accumulative body of science about the human condition, that we can teach the universities and go up to different levels of complexity. Remember I told you that I pulled Tillich's Volume 3 off the shelf. Why do you have to pick these things off by accident?

KEEN: That is the ideological nature of the university that when you try to deal, starting with the person, and especially when you try to integrate all the areas of the cognitive and the affective and the theological and the cognitive domains, the university gets very uptight. The one thing the university will not examine is the ideology of the university. It is so hard to get that, I found when I was teaching.

BECKER: I don't have any hope for the university either, except I see it as a haven.

KEEN: Yes, it is a privileged place that could do something with its freedom. It does so little.

BECKER: Yes, I suppose it could. Maybe it could. Maybe it could. It all depends on what is happening on earth. We don't know what is happening. The accidentality of one's education never ceases to amaze me, the fact of your happening to reach for this book rather than for that one, the fact that it opens up a whole new world.

KEEN: Oh, but I think that is what makes us interesting, that we are partial. Half of my intellectual verve comes from the fact that I was educated in the South and I didn't have any education, so all these...

BECKER: In the South?

KEEN: Yes, as a kid, and there were all these things I didn't know. So when I began to cover up all the things I didn't know, I began to have to create my own theory.

BECKER: I think that is a good point you are making there about miseducation. As an anthropologist, I was terribly miseducated, which is what prevented me from going into specialization.

KEEN: Like every place else, like Joe Campbell says, "The beauty is in the fault." or "Beauty is in our fault intellectually and whoever pursues their fault with passion will create a thing of beauty."

BECKER: That is very nice.

KEEN: I mean, it has to be that way or else we are sunk anyway. I mean, if somehow in our partialness we are not all right, I am sure there is no happiness in earth. Maybe I had better let you rest.

BECKER: I think we have really covered it.

KEEN: I think we have.

BECKER: I am really surprised that I was able to respond to you as well as I have because I have been very tired, but I think I rose to the occasion and managed to babble, to shoot my mouth off, to a sufficient degree. If I were feeling better, it probably would have been better, sharper.

KEEN: It is excellent. Very sharp.

BECKER: But the mind works quite to a bit better than the body in that sense. The mind has its own alertness. I was glad you came up now because I am getting progressively weaker and I don't know how long I am going to last, so I told Sol [Kort], "Tell him to come up as soon as possible because I don't know where I will be even this week end."

KEEN: Yes, that is why I am not prepared. I gave the keynote address at this Esalen conference on "Spiritual Fascism and Tyranny" over the weekend, so I was really tired and I took two days to try and read and get ready. I usually come prepared, having read everything somebody has written and thought more, so I just had to depend on you.

BECKER: I am sorry to have put you through that trial. It is a little bit like the anthropologist with the dying American Indian, you know, with the tape recorder there, trying to get the last names down before he expires and there isn't time. You never had an interview like this before, did you?

KEEN: No, but of course, once I raised the possibility, it was something I had to do—if you didn't want to do it, it would be the world's worst thing to do and if you did want to do it, it would be a good thing for you, in order to be able—and once you said you wanted to do it, I wanted to really do it whatever.

BECKER: Gee, I am sorry I won't get to see it probably.

KEEN: Well, I will do a good job.

BECKER: Yes, I am sure you will.

KEEN: I will do a good job for you.

BECKER: I am sure you will. You don't always have to see everything. You don't have to be that selfish. It is funny, now I have been working for 15 years in almost complete oblivion, with a dedicated obsessiveness, to developing this thing. That really has been kind of amazing in a way. I just kept dropping one book after another into the void and carrying on with some kind of feeling of confidence underneath that this stuff is good, I mean, it is not bad enough to warrant this. And just now, these last years, I started getting letters from people saying that, talking of my work and that it is very interesting

KEEN: Your oral legend is great around Berkeley and around San Francisco.

BECKER: Oh, yes, that is because of the Berkeley experience. You know about that? Gee, that was something. I have got a whole scrapbook on that from the [San Francisco] Daily Chronicle and the [Berkeley Campus] Daily Californian. Gee, that was really something. That was the greatest moment...That was in 1965...no, not the beginning of the Free Speech Movement, later on... 1967 it was. I used to lecture to a thousand students in Wheeler Auditorium, packed to the hilt. And they used to go back after my lectures and spend all night in bull sessions and miss their other courses, which is what got the other professors mad. It was really a Shamanistic Sophistic competitiveness between teachers and I was really... it was just tremendous for me. I was so disillusioned when I moved, but it wasn't possible for me to continue there. It was not possible to teach.

KEEN: Were you teaching a different content or was it just your style?

BECKER: No, I was teaching from *Birth and Death of Meaning* and things like that.

KEEN: What was it that was turning the students on particularly?

BECKER: That is a good question.

KEEN: I have asked people that and one thing I get is style. They say "He had style." And there seemed to be the passion with which you bring your ideas. That remains. Because seemingly so much of your philosophical view is so different than the New Left. It doesn't have that naivete'.

BECKER: It wasn't anything political. This is what was so amazing about it, nothing political. Other professors thought the students were being turned on because I was getting to their political minds, but it was nothing like that. I had no political views at all. I was just teaching straight anthropology. Well, straight, well, certainly anthropology, it wasn't straight anthropology, but I was teaching culture and personality and introductory sociology and nothing political at all though. I didn't give one speech on political matters or anything. I was utterly uninterested in that. The question you ask is a good one because I have asked myself that a lot of times. One of the main things that I think is style is that I have a tremendous platform style. Then what is style? Style is the ability to take a difficult idea and make it simple and highlight it with the right anecdotes or else with the right joke, and style is the ability to take very deep ideas and talk about them casually. And I think that is what style is. I had that and the other things the one thing that I think I did. One of the students wrote a letter to the Daily Californian saying that and I said "Yes, he is right. That is right." He said, "This man awakens our imaginations like no one else, from no one else have we had our imaginations jolted and awaked as we have from his lectures. So what I will do, for example, I will be talking about primitive world, right? So I will come in and I will talk about different time perspectives. I will talk about cyclical time. Now, for a student, a student doesn't know what cyclical time is. Never heard of it right? And I will start talking about it and I will say "Well, cyclical time is the time of the seasons around a calendar, where everything is related." And I would say Buddha's followers had the idea of a Great Kalpa [Maha-Kalpa] and things bursting out into the world and going back. And I had the ability to talk about cyclical time versus familiar time and ideas like that, that just brought people out of their accustomed perception. And this was quite a great strength as a teacher. So that people really felt they were coming in contact with the meaningful. I would talk about self theory, for example, talk about the self identity and I had the ability to make them feel that man had a soul and what it meant to be separate from the body and those kinds of things. All of those chapters in *Birth and Death of Meaning* were given in those lectures. And they went across better on the platform than they do in writing, for reasons of style and personal contact. I had the ability to somehow, what they call "feel with the audience." That is, whenever I felt that I was losing them in complexity, I stopped. I could stop immediately. I never got carried away and as soon as I felt that I was going a little too deep, I came back with an iron jolt. And I had a very casual style, as a matter of fact, one of the students, a great admirer of Lenny Bruce—as a matter of fact he renamed himself Lenny he was such an

admirer of Lenny Bruce—he was sitting through my course and he said “You know, I sat through your course for a whole two months, and I thought, What the hell is this reminding me of? why is this so fascinating?” And then he said “I saw it was intellectual Lenny Bruce.” And I never thought of that but it was. It was intellectual Lenny Bruce. It was Lenny Bruce on the level of talking about things like linear time versus cyclical time.

KEEN: There is something charming in this because I think one of the things that stops most people is their inability to admit that they love style, that they love dramatics, that human life is dramatized, and so they are ashamed of their dramas. I mean your philosophical theory gives you a right to perform well also, and that is a delight to other people when you can do it.

BECKER: Yes, they like that. That is another element of style, the staging business. Well, we are all out of time, but it is just kind of an odd coincidence that I happen to mention that. By odd coincidence, Wheeler Auditorium was the stage for the production of *Lear* one of those terms. So they had the *Lear* stage, with the beams, you know, a beautiful *Lear* stage, with the somber background and the beams. And I had to climb up on that, so I was lecturing from the *Lear* stage, and so I took that as a tremendous opportunity to use that dramatization, and a couple of things in *Angel and Armor* I lectured on, the Kafka story.

KEEN: It's beautiful.

BECKER: Well, when I lecture on a Kafka story from the *Lear* stage, I tell you, it was like Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. When I finished, nobody moved and I ended off with the lines “Father, you know, dear parents, I have always loved you.” And that was the end of the lecture, from the *Lear* stage with the beams and everything. And nobody stirred. Usually they give you an ovation of some kind, but nobody stirred, and I walked off and it was just fantastic, breathtaking. And then I remember some students left a note under my door the next day at my office door with a little poem on it. It was a beautiful poetic summing up of that experience. It said “Dear Dr. Becker. Hero of our hands. Sitting on the sky roof beams of *Lear*.” Isn't that something? I have that poem. “Sitting on the sky roof beams of *Lear*.” Gee, that was beautiful. I very rarely individually have the kind of fulfillment that I had at Berkeley. It was just so beautiful. But I worked hard. Gee, I worked to prepare those lectures. I really worked. I never went to a lecture without my little packet of cards, knowing exactly what I was going to say, and in what sequence I was going to say it. So the casualness was easy to do, because I was so well prepared. When spontaneity comes from being well prepared, then you can afford to relax. Boy, those Berkeley days. It was a great thrill. It is a hell of a commentary on a university that so little is done in terms of awakening imaginations.

KEEN: Isn't it, though?

BECKER: One guy has to come up and awaken imaginations and just shake up the whole campus. Shake the whole campus. Of course, it went to my head. But I was prepared for it. I knew what I was going to do. When I go back to Berkeley, I am going to really show these people what it is to teach a course. And, of course, I made an awful lot of enemies among other professors because of the Shamanistic competition. And my teachings were far from orthodox courses really, using all this good stuff, anthropological. I have a scrapbook this thick. Too bad I couldn't show it to you. It is at home. There was always a reporter in my course from the Hearst paper, or somewhere else, trying to figure out what the hell the phenomena was and they would all go home happy. And so when Wheeler Auditorium burned down, you know, and somebody said, of course it is quite fitting that Wheeler Auditorium should burn down because they chased Becker out of it, which I thought was really funny. There is a ham in each of us, right? And there is a megalomaniac in each of us and I think very rarely does a person get the chance to blend ham and megalomania into a dramatic moment.

KEEN: Sure. I love to do it. I do it on stage, and when I am lecturing I do it.

BECKER: You seem like the kind of guy who would do it.

KEEN: I love it. Well, if you admit your stage of your existence, then the only thing is to ask is, are you going to do it well. I mean the dramatics are part. Well, I don't know, I am just dramatic. I think dramatically. I experience my life dramatically.

BECKER: And dramatics brings home the point too, doesn't it. I mean, when you can make emotional closure on intellectual problems with dramatic intensity.

Hi, Miss [RN's name]. Am I still alive?

NURSE: You are still alive.

BECKER: This girl takes such excellent care of me. Such excellent care. It is amazing.

NURSE: Anything you need?

BECKER: Is this all right? They have to change this every once in a while.

When you can use drama to drive home an intellectual point. One student said to me, I said "Weren't you in this course last time." He said, "Yes, but I have been taking LSD since and I know what you are talking about now." And those are the kinds of comments that you get. I said "Gee, I have seen you before" and he was sitting there in the front row. And he said "Well, I took LSD and now I know what you are talking about." And the fact is, it was not political, because when the people of the fraternities and sororities were sitting there right shoulder to shoulder with the radicals and nobody could figure it out. It was just that. It was the talent for style and drama and the ability to awaken imagination with a well-turned idea, simplified. And something you believe in. Something you are passionate about yourself. And I don't think I ever lost that graduate student ability to know that. I mean, to take a simple idea and present it as though it really were a big discovery, which you normally lose, right? You say those are the simple ideas and I am not so concerned about them. But I was always able to take the simple idea and still approach it as though it were a great discovery, and this, I think, is also part of the problem of being a good teacher. That you don't get blasé.

KEEN: It is parallel to Fritz's [Perls] therapeutic method. First of all, his genius was always that he ignored every thing except the obvious, which is what most people always ignore, not what they are saying, but how they are saying it, how they are sitting, what their voice says, and most intellectuals can ignore everything, can ignore the obvious and go on to the arcane so easily, and I think that is why they are so cut off from people's experiences. That is why they don't speak to a general population, nor students anymore. I think that is what the trouble with the university is, that the dramatization of really the fundamental...

BECKER: Yes, I like your idea of dramatization. I really like that. I think that gets to the heart of it because I think the average professor, if you had to draw a symbolic portrait of him on the podium, is a guy who has a little fort built up around him. Like this one professor I know who actually lives there. He has books piled around, all open to the different pages, right? And he has essentially a fortress around him and he's just looking over the top of that, mumbling very highly esoteric ideas. That is just the polar opposite of a dramatic moment, isn't it?

KEEN: Well, you are not in it. That is the point. Because on the one hand, if you think of drama as the negative thing, it is performance, showing off. If you think of it as the positive thing, it is risk-taking. But you took the risk. I am in that idea, so when I step out there and put it in motion, and put a body, who can put a whole thing in it, that is me, I am in my work. That is the difference, and of course, I am a self-conscious animal, so of course I know I am doing it. Who should I fool. But I am in it just the same. I am in it.

BECKER: I guess it is the willingness to take the risk that most people aren't willing to do.

KEEN: To think with your life.

BECKER: Yes, to expose yourself that way.

KEEN: You know, if my thinking is crooked, well, I at least want it to be the same crookedness as my life, because that is my only hope.

BECKER: Yes, that is very good. It is a strange world, a strange world. Berkeley is pretty dead now, I guess.

KEEN: It doesn't seem too lively to me. They are looking for a vision again.

BECKER: Yes, everyone is looking for a vision. Listen, anyway. Give my best to [Esalen Institute co-founder Michael] Lang Murphy. Lang Murphy was very flattering once. I am not chasing you away. I just want to say this before you go. Lang Murphy came up here and lectured and I was the one that introduced him and he was nervous as we always are before we lecture, everybody is. Even Tillich admitted he was anxious just before a lecture and he [Lang Murphy] was a little anxious. He said "You are the only guy in the world that I am really afraid of." Really, I thought that was precious. I liked that. I said "Well, it doesn't matter. It will be easy as pie. You will see. We are all on your side." He gave a beautiful talk but he said and he pointed at me over the dinner table and said "You are the only guy I am really afraid of. The only one who intimidates me," he said.

KEEN: It must be true. Mike certainly isn't intimidated much.

BECKER: No, I thought it was the most flattering thing anyone had ever said to me. Sol Kort brought all these people up here. I think Sol is doing a good service. Tom [Thomas Szasz] was with you, wasn't he?

KEEN: Yes, I did the first end and he did the second end.

BECKER: What did he talk about?

KEEN: Well, he did his normal thing about—in a sense it wasn't very appropriate for that audience. You know, whoever gets the definitions first—it was the shoot out at the OK Corral, except he used definitions and that is OK. It is a good point but it doesn't solve the problem, because if we don't let the official define in terms of the problems of human pain, we still have the problem of who does define and how do we define, just in terms of getting some handles which will allow us to deal with people who are in psychic pain. He didn't address himself to that. We laid the gurus out. Boy, it was something. I did this thing and I said essentially, "look, leader/follower game." I called it the Tyranny Game or How to Play Follow the Leader. And it was something that I had been very sympathetic with. I said, "Look, there is the domination/submission thing. It takes two to play. It is a very human game," and I set up the rules and how it does, you know, always promise them everything. First, you have to have them guilty, then you promise them everything if they will just follow these rules, you know. And I just listed one after another of the therapies, you know, how you promise them Satori 24 or the Kingdom coming or polymorphous perversity, whatever.

BECKER: I would have loved that.

KEEN: I will send you a copy. I have a copy.

BECKER: Yes, I would like to have that.

KEEN: Then I went on to say, "But look, you know, it is a very human game to do this and probably before we can do it, to stop it, we have to play both sides of it, but once you have played both sides, if you want to, then comes the End Game, and if you want to, you can learn to play the Equality Game. It is hard to do, but you can learn to play it." And then I just gave [them an] Anti-Tyranny Kit. I said I don't believe, here are the things I believe in and the things I don't believe in, and it was sort of my standing up in front of all the fathers of the movement and saying, yes and no. And the Gurus were all there and it hit the fan. I said "I don't believe in ego reduction. My ego is not [reducible], and I don't believe in a life without attachments. That is maybe all right for God, but not for me." I mean, I am partial, I am human. I will send you a copy of it.

BECKER: I would like to see it. Thomas Szasz is an old friend of mine. I mean, as much as he can be friends. He is a very bright person, a very driven person.

KEEN: Yes, he over generalizes. He does just beautiful work, just getting ready, and then he tries to take it into areas where it doesn't fit. I think his definitions don't fit.

BECKER: I know he has over generalized. See, when he wrote *The Myth of Mental Illness*, he wrote his theory of hysteria in that book, but he did not cover the other two syndromes, schizophrenia and depression. In order to show



that mental illness is not a disease, one had to do that. I did that in *Revolution in Psychiatry*, that was my exclusive task, to show that these syndromes were not diseases in the medical sense but that they were styles, and nobody has realized that that is what this book does. It shows that mental illness is a myth, not a myth, but that these are styles of behavior, rather than diseases. I remember I asked Tom when we were colleagues in Syracuse, I said “How come, Tom, you did hysteria but you didn’t do schizophrenia and depression?” Because I was working on it at the time, I had just written a book and he had read it, and he said “Well, to tell the truth, Ernie, I didn’t know how to grab them.” Which was really a very honest impression. He wasn’t up to grabbing those syndromes, but he could get hysteria out, which is rather kind of a false paradigm, because that is not really very much an illness today, and he based his whole case on that.

KEEN: I think most psychiatrists would pay \$300 to get a hysteric that they could go back and say “Look, I got one like Freud started, you know.”

BECKER: I remember when I was working at the Upstate Medical Center, one of the residents came to me and said “Hey, I have got a psychopath. Come and interview him.” You very rarely get psychopaths. And it was a sweeping experience to deal with him. And I went out and interviewed him. He said, “Are you here to help me out?” I said “Maybe.” I mean, this is grist for their mill, you know. He right away tried to con me. It was marvelous. I have met psychopaths. I might even say I have got his [Szasz’s] theory in the conference room. I have learned a lot from Tom indirectly. He is not the kind of person who teaches things directly, but just by listening to him and watching, I have learned a lot about psychiatry, although he is somehow personally not an amiable man though. He is in the grips of his demons, and he is being driven, just driven. And I guess we all have our demons. I was driven by writing theoretic books, one right after the other, like pancakes, one right after the other, right off the griddle. I would have another one half to three quarters done on social theory and then, as soon as I would have got that out of the fire, I would have been working on another one—crazy, crazy. But there was a great joy in that writing, a great joy. It is a marvelous thing to be able to turn the right phrase and the right idea, as you know.

KEEN: I probably like having written more than writing. I am not an obsessive writer. Actually, it was rather freeing a month or so ago when I found out that I am really an oral personality. I really am and that I write is really secondary for me. I do it. I do a lot of it, but I really love the interplay with people a lot more. I mean, doing conversations, like this is, really I love it, just because it is such a privileged thing to be able to really talk.

BECKER: You are working full time then? Is this your full time job?

KEEN: No, I don’t have any full time job. I am a consulting editor and that means that they let me do now most anything I want to do. I don’t do anybody if I am not interested in them and I don’t do any routine work at all, so it is totally writing and it is totally people that I think are important and that I have some interest in. That is, really, I don’t think I could do the other thing. I don’t think I could do routine assignments, because if I am not interested, I don’t have a love for it and if comes to writing and if I don’t have a love for something, I can’t even write any more. I will postpone it and everything. Unless I really... and so especially presenting people to the world... I mean, because it is such an intimate thing, I have to crawl inside them in a way. And I don’t want to crawl inside somebody I don’t like, and so I have to crawl and just feel them and feel how to do it

BECKER: Who have you done so far, Sam?

KEEN: I started off with Norman O. Brown—well, I ghost wrote that one, because Warren Bennis had already started it, but I did it. And then [Herbert] Marcuse, [Joseph] Campbell, [John] Lily, [Carlos] Castaneda, [Roberto] Asagioli, who else? I am sure there are some more, but I have forgotten. And I have done articles on [Arthur] Janov. I couldn’t do a conversation with Janov, just because he doesn’t converse. He is such a closed man that I couldn’t do it. And I have done an article on Rolfing, and I have just done one on humanistic psychology or on transpersonal, which is really a piece on Apollonian/Dionysian worldviews and how everything follows from them. I am starting to do more now, just because I want to get to people who are really shapers, I think, of the modern mind. And *Psychology Today* gives me the right to republish my own stuff in a book, so that all conversations that I do, I am only doing the people that I think really are significant shapers of the modern mind.

BECKER: Did you do [Robert Jay] Lifton?

KEEN: I haven't done him. George did him. I am going to do Edgar Shaw. Oh, I did Oscar Ichazo and Stan Keleman.

BECKER: I don't know these people.

KEEN: Well, Oscar Ichazo is head of the Arica Institute and that sort of thing, and is sort of a new Guru type, and Stanley Keleman is in bioenergetics at Berkeley. Very good bioenergetics person. I am trying to do Erikson and Edgar Shaw, the Sufi. Who else have I got down here at the moment? I have been trying to do Hannah Arendt, but I can't get to her.

BECKER: Really? She must be very old by now.

KEEN: She is, but I really respect her thinking. Of course, the one I really want to do is [Martin] Heidegger, but I can't find a way to get to him. Heidegger, and I should have done [Gabriel] Marcel, because I knew Marcel and that was really just stupid of me not to have gone on and do it.

BECKER: He was very old?

KEEN: He was very old.

BECKER: I heard him lecture when I received an honorary degree at Des Moines College, it must have been 15 years ago. He was a very old man. He was a marvelous man.

KEEN: He was. I guess my criteria, when it comes down to it is, my subjective criteria, is people who live their categories. I am really not much interested in thinkers who don't, because I have come to the stage where I don't usually read somebody unless I like them, I mean, unless I respect that they lived, you know, they lived their thinking and lived their lives.

BECKER: Yes, something like myself. I am not really interested in people who aren't disillusioned, who haven't been through the breakdowns in some way. I am more interested in people who admit their creatureliness, cut through their character armor.

KEEN: Yes, the twice born.

BECKER: It limits finding interesting people tremendously, although I can't say I am not interested in others, but those are the only people who really grab me, that I really feel amuse me.

KEEN: Like Don Juan. Did you read *Journey to Ixtlan*?

BECKER: No, but I read so much about it.

KEEN: In the end of it, he talks about how so often people become ghosts. Well, when somebody is operating still just naively on these things, it is so very hard to be intimate, because you see things about them that they are committed to not seeing and there is nothing that you can do to stop your seeing, and so that flow doesn't go on. You are always afraid of stepping on their territory.

BECKER: You have to help them keep up their mask.

KEEN: That's right. You have to play their game. It is three to one in their favor. Two of them and one of you.

BECKER: In fact, most of one's social life, when you get right down to it, consists in helping people patch the chinks in their armor as you are talking to them. I see that very much for myself in my colleagues, which is why interaction is so fatiguing.

KEEN: If you are helping those who really want their chinks, to get under them.

BECKER: Well, if you want to keep playing that game. I haven't played that game. Gee, you know, I was just sitting here talking to you like this and it makes me very wistful that I won't be around to see these things. I won't be getting to Esalen. It is the creature who wants more experience, another ten years, another 5, another 4, another 3. I know that, but I still feel wistful now. I think, gee, all these things going on and I won't be a part of it. I am not saying I won't see them, that there aren't other dimensions in existence or anything like that, but at least I will be out of this game and it makes me feel very wistful.

KEEN: Yes, and I know I will feel that way, too, and I think the only worse thing than that is to not feel wistful. So many people are finished before they die, they don't desire, they are empty, they are done.

BECKER: That is a good point.

KEEN: To still be alive all the way, that is the dream, the dream is still there, you know. I know that is what I fear. I fear more than anything not having the dream still there until the end.

BECKER: Well, if you are really a live person, I don't see how that is possible. You are bound to be more and more interested in experience, more and more things to discover, if you are a growing person.

KEEN: Well, the old self-deceiver is never dead, unfortunately. I am afraid that one stays on.

BECKER: What is the future of Esalen, they will be there for a long time?

KEEN: Yes, I think so. It is a pretty creative place. It is a pretty courageous organization, looking at itself and changing and not getting caught in stereotype... like this conference.

BECKER: Yes, can you imagine a conference like that?

KEEN: Where an institute really stands up and pokes fun even at its own ideas, and Michael, who is my best friend, he specifically said, "You do it. Poke the holes where they need to be poked."

BECKER: Do you know [Philip] Rieff?

KEEN: I don't know him. I know *Triumph of the Therapeutic*.

BECKER: *Triumph of the Therapeutic* is pure all around. It is amazing. I mentioned this book, that Rieff is restating all around some 30 years later in his own way and very beautifully, very powerfully, solid as a rock, for this generation. It is amazing how these people think, and nobody realizes what they have said. The Otto Rank Society is going to be very happy anyway. They are so hungry for material for Rank. They are going to be so happy for anything that comes on Rank.

KEEN: I guess I should run on.

BECKER: What time is it?

KEEN: A quarter after six.