Chapter 10

Zerka

ONE OF THE DIFFICULTIES in our mythologies of God is that He is usually pictured as a single person, either as a god or a goddess. Loneliness is the price we have to pay for monotheism. In the mythology of the Greeks, in which the pantheon exists on a lower level of intensity, God married and produced offspring, like Zeus and Hera, for instance. The stories of these marriages are full of disappointments, but they are more real to mortal men than the personalities of the monotheistic gods. Anyway, I was searching for an integrated partnership, for the Muse of Integration, so as to bring the Godplayer down to earth.

On a sunny summer afternoon in 1941, the door opened and a young woman stepped into my office. She was accompanied by three others, but I noticed her first. Only later did the others emerge. She had a little boy in her arms, about 3 years old. I looked at her; she looked at me. That was it.

I say to myself—my double speaks, "Yes, yes, yes," and I stretch out my arms in a broad, all-embracing manner. I feel that she is already mine, and that I am already hers. There she is. I don't know anything about her, but that she is She. I can even feel what she is saying to herself: "I am very unhappy. My sister is ill. He might think that this is my child. I have no children. I am single. I came to find a doctor, a psychiatrist for my sister." Then she makes a pause. I wait until I hear her again. "This man is not a simple psychiatrist. He looks and acts more like an artist, a creative man." Now there is a silence between us, but it comes into my mind, "If her sister is sick and her sister's husband is with her, why does she come along?"

As if she hears my query, I sense her reply, "He doesn't understand. These people are refugees from the Nazis. He doesn't know that they have just arrived here, in this country. I am with them, not only to help them but to protect the boy from further abuse. My sister is too confused to care for him. . . . I almost feel as if he were my child, not hers. I feel responsible. Besides, my brother-in-law speaks very little English. He needs an interpreter." And then it comes to her in a flash, "I did not expect to find such an enchanting, warm man. He greets us so warmly, as if he is really

glad to meet us. I expected a purely formal event between a doctor and a patient meeting for the first time. And he is so human, so charming, not just a professional."

I see tears in her eyes. "I like his way. He is handsome too, so masculine, in that white suit and blue shirt. The color of his shirt emphasizes his great, extraordinarily luminous, penetrating, deeply expressive eyes. What color are they? Oh, blue. I adore blue eyes in a man; somehow they always strike my heart. But why is he so lonely? I heard the nurse who greeted us say that he has a baby girl about the same age as my nephew. So he is, or was, married. It really doesn't matter. Yet, he is lonely, deeply lonely, possibly even unhappy, as unhappy as I am."

Silence. Now I hear her again, or I imagine that I hear her. "I am lonely and unhappy, too. I have just broken off a love relationship with a man I planned to marry."

"So," I say to myself, "she was planning to get married. Then the child is not hers."

"We were well along the way to setting the date and preparing for the ceremony. Now I have no one." A long silence, then, "It hurt badly for a while, but somehow I am glad to be free again. I'm getting ready for a new relationship, a more mature one. But the doctor is old enough to be my father, although he doesn't look or act that old. But he couldn't be interested in me personally; he obviously loves people, young and old, especially children. See how he smiles at the child and asks questions about him."

At this point, the baby glides off her lap, walks towards the fireplace and starts playing with the brass fire irons. He drops one with a clatter and we all focus our attention upon him. [She] goes over to see if he is hurt and gently brings him back to the chair, taking him on her lap once again.

The scene changes; she is back at her depth. Now she looks at me again and we smile at each other, assessing and confirming. "This has all happened before, hasn't it? But when? Where? Oh no, it has never happened before. Not like this. It is the first time. It is happening now." A pregnant pause here. Then another flash breaks in on her. She seems full of electricity, which discharges itself in my direction, sparked off by my own. Now it seems to me that I hear her voice very clearly. "He is not a simple man. This man is a great genius, perhaps the only true genius I will ever meet. Many men make believe, or try to, but this man is the genuine article. Oh, what could we possibly have in common? I am a rather inexperienced person, just starting to learn about life and its darkest corners. Yet, he looks at me with as much interest as he shows in my sick sister, the patient here. What can he be thinking? Perhaps it is just that my sister and I are physically so different. People are always astounded that we are really sisters.

And now we are certainly also clearly very different emotionally. But I feel he can see that we sisters are deeply tied together somehow. I am very depressed at this new outbreak of emotional illness." Silence. "I fear he will get the wrong information or no information at all about her history. I will have to make sure that I see him alone so I can help him to get to know her. She can't cooperate. She is too confused and doesn't recognize the nature of her condition."

An aside, "My brother-in-law is a poor refugee. He has had to borrow heavily to pay the fares to this country. He has no job. He only came here 2 days ago. We have to make sure her treatment doesn't take too long, or he will not be able to carry the burden at all. Besides, we need money to place the baby in a foster home. All this is a terrible, crushing burden." More silence and searching out. Then, "But why is the doctor so interested in me? What does he want from me?"

And I am asking myself questions at the same time, "What do I want from her?"

It comes to her sharply, "Why am I so interested in him? What do I want from him, besides help for my sister?" Now there is another voice. It is from her childhood. It is her mother's voice. "Don't get in your sister's way! This is *her* friend now, *her* doctor. *She* is the one who needs all of his attention. Make yourself almost invisible, subservient to her needs. *Don't* inject yourself! Don't take his attention, his focusing, his love away from her. You know you've managed to do this since you were little. The whole family loved you as their toy. You were the baby. Your sister is the oldest. Your father and your brothers adored you. Now she needs all the love she can get, especially the love of a good father. Don't make trouble for her again."

There are other voices just as sharp. Public opinion speaks now, "What could a *married* man want from a young single girl? He is not supposed to be too interested in single girls unless they are his patients. Is he just showing a professional interest in you? Remember, he is the father of a child, a baby girl. Whatever else his child needs, she needs her life undisturbed. Don't make waves. Don't get involved. Stay out of any close or personal contact with him. Only a professional relationship will do." Silence.

Her eyes are downcast, as if she is looking inward. Then, "Oh, remember, they almost didn't make it to America. My family was stuck. First in France, later in North Africa. They might all have been caught by the Nazis. I've helped to *save* their lives. Am I now going to deliberately do something that will complicate life for them now, even more, or even to ruin it? No! They must have every possible consideration first. They need any kind of help. They are desperate. Their lives are a shambles. The boy needs his own mother and father. However much you love him, he is not

yours. You are only a temporary substitute. Stay out of a parent's way. It will pursue you until the end of time if you don't. Your conscience will not permit it. Just as it would not let you rest until you had snatched them away from the shores of dying, agonized Europe. Now you have to show what you are made of. Keep in the background. Don't think of yourself now."

They have all left the office to see the patient into her room. I am sitting, waiting to see [the young woman] and the others before they depart for the city. Will I see her alone at all? As if in reply, there she is [Celine Zerka Toeman], knocking at the door. She has come to ask me for an appointment at my office in the city. She wants to consult me about her sister privately.

We met several times. It was a growing acquaintance. But one day we had a peak encounter. It was in the same room, my Beacon office, where we had met for the first time, but this time we were alone. . . . [Zerka] talked about herself, "I just saw George for the last time. He asked me again to marry him. He felt he was ready for it now, but I refused. I am free now."

Her eyes sparkled. She had a glowing expression. She looked at me, and I felt that she was really saying, "I am now free to live my own life. What's the next step?" I looked back at her and returned the challenge, "I'm also free."

She continued, "I've burned all my bridges. To my parents. That was not too difficult. I found a way to be free and still not to be disloyal. I could not be disloyal to my sister or to her child, either. But I've built a wall. Now they will live in the world of yesterday, and I can start my life with you." She opened her briefcase and took out the proofs of *The Words of the Father.* "Yes. I read it. It is as if I wrote it. My words."

I moved towards her and embraced her. She began to cry. "I don't want to start that way. That is how the others started. It is nothing physical. I'm overwhelmed with the new meaning that has come into my life. I wonder what needs to be done between us. How do I fit into your world? How do we organize or coordinate our lives together? I know now that nothing matters but our relationship and that to make it productive, I have to live it your way. I have got myself ready for that. I just need to know that this is what you want, too, or am I just fooling myself? Only you can answer that."

I answered, "Yes, that is what I want and need, too. I have to make my own sacrifices. Let's start right now. Move away from New York City and come live in Beacon. The rest we will work out, step-by-step, as we go along." And so it went.

At that time, Zerka worked at the Moreno Institute in New York City. She and my brother William were overseeing the operation of the institute.

When Zerka moved to Beacon, she commuted 5 days a week, from Beacon to New York, a round trip of 120 miles daily.

It should be known that there were many blocks in our way. How would my brother feel about this? Also my wife? The patients? The students? The staff members? How would her parents react? Her friends, her sister, all of her other relatives in the city? What responsibilities did we have to all of these people and to the others who depended on us? We were not oblivious to these factors or to other details contingent upon so drastic a revolution in our lives. But they were not of the same essence as was our commitment and resolve towards one another. That commitment overrode all these considerations. We made a decision not to marry in a legal sense. It seemed that there was no need for us to ratify our relationship by standing before a judge and mumbling a few words.

Our decision to be together was not an act of desperation, nor was it an act of bravado. It was what we needed, both of us, to fulfill the deepest core of our beings. We found ourselves in one another, more completely than either of us had ever known before. That was the spark that made our creativity together into a fluid, workable partnership. It attached greater veracity to our common goal, and it made each of us feel more complete in the world. So we could never give it up, no matter what. . . .

In the late forties [after the divorce from Florence], I began to think about my advancing age and what the future might bring to us. It was partly my age, but Zerka was also getting older. We began to take stock of our relationship and asked ourselves whether any change in our position was advisable. Up to that time, our having a child together seemed unreasonable and unwise. Zerka did not feel that having a child was necessary for our relationship. She did not see how she could do a good job of being a mother in addition to all the other taxing roles she filled. She was concerned about my becoming a father again at my age, afraid that it would be too heavy a burden for me. I already had a daughter who [spent weekends] with us. Zerka felt we were both too old. She was also fearful that our travelling around the world, pilgrims of psychodramatic method and sociometry, would be impossible if we had a child.

But I began to muse. "I don't want you to be alone in the world if I should die," I told Zerka. "That means you should have a child." It was all rather logical and unemotional. "The first step might be that we get married." Thus, one evening, we legalized our relationship. We found a justice of the peace in Cold Spring, a village 10 miles away, who performed the ceremony.

Now the setting was prepared. Marriage had been the first step. Now we could seriously consider the possibility of pregnancy. If a child should be

conceived, it would be born under circumstances appropriate for his own safety and healthy development.

I've often been asked if my desire to have a child was really a dynastic notion. I give that impression in *The First Psychodramatic Family.* But it was the reality of having a son who would carry on my name which created my awareness of dynastic possibilities. Most of all, I believe in children. Therefore, I believe that women are very precious and especially chosen by the Lord. Children give meaning to life, to the universe. The universe is infinitely pregnant with children. Women who have had children are much more lovely than women who have not. They are just flesh.

When Zerka was pregnant, unfortunate things happened. In the third month, her right ear went bad. Some hormonal imbalance had caused her to go deaf there. And Jonathan's birth [in 1952] was 5 weeks late, which caused us a good deal of worry and caused Zerka a good deal of discomfort.

But once Jonathan was born, all the difficulties and discomforts were soon forgotten. We decided to break new ground and bring Jonathan up according to the principles of sociometry and psychodrama. . . .

When Jonathan was two-and-a-half, Zerka developed a persistent soreness in her right shoulder. We assumed that it was from carrying Jonathan up the steep staircase in our house. Zerka had suffered from bouts of rheumatism most of her life, and carrying a large-for-his-age child would certainly aggravate that. Jonathan was taught to go upstairs himself, and Zerka had a series of diathermy treatments which we supposed would get rid of the pain. . . .

Our doctor and his wife accompanied us to the American Psychiatric Association's convention in Chicago in May of 1956. Zerka startled us in the plane on the way back by blurting out, "Doctor, I'm going out of my mind with the pain." The doctor was most reassuring. "Come and see me," he told Zerka, "I have something new that might help you." That summer, for the first time, X rays were ordered for Zerka. Nothing out of the ordinary showed up. The new treatment was ultrasonic therapy. But nothing was helpful in relieving her pain. . . .

[In the summer of 1956] we stayed at the Stockton Hotel in Sea Girt, New Jersey. I slept for the two weeks we were there. Zerka stayed out on the beach with Jonathan and relaxed in the sun and the surf. The second day we were there she noticed a lump on the back of her shoulder as she put on her bathing suit. It was about the size of a robin's egg. It frightened her, but she was also relieved to see physical evidence that there was something really wrong with her. My attitude towards pain and illness in the ones I love is either to shut it all out—deny it—or to become overly concerned. I had been impatient with Zerka for over two years when she

complained about the pain she was in. I had made her feel like a real hypochondriac.

When we went home, Zerka was really feeling good. Two weeks in the sea air had refreshed her. The pain had gone away for the first time in over 2 years.

However, the pain soon returned. Zerka continued with the ultrasonic treatments, and our doctor arrived at a diagnosis of "demineralization of the bone due to arthritis." Nothing was able to relieve the pain, though. Another series of X rays that November showed changes in the bone. The radiologist recommended that we study her condition further so as to rule out the possibility of a bone tumor. Our doctor, who had made his diagnosis, felt that the rarity of tumors in the bone made further investigation unnecessary. We would have had to go to an orthopedic surgeon for a biopsy. I have the traditional psychiatrist's disdain for surgery and surgeons. I did not want to believe that there was any chance that Zerka might have something as serious as a tumor. So I went along with our doctor's superficial approach to her case. I thought his diagnosis was probably correct. It seemed to be the most reasonable explanation of her condition.

The pain grew worse and worse. It radiated from her shoulder, down her arm. She felt a tingling sensation in her fingers. By May of 1957, the lump had grown much larger. Zerka continued treatment for arthritis. One day the doctor told her, "What cannot be cured must be endured."

That was an ironic statement. The doctor had some kind of hunch about himself. He had an X ray taken of his right lung. There was a large malignancy, and he died a few months later in great pain.

When I saw that Zerka was getting worse and worse, I suggested that we combine our usual trip to Switzerland in the summer of 1957 with a month at one of the famous spas of Germany or Austria. We chose Badenweiler, which was convenient to Zurich, where our International Congress was to meet in late August. I could come and go as the pressure of my work dictated. Zerka was also seen by some doctors in Europe. She took the full course of treatments at the spa: mud packs, Turkish baths, medicinal waters, dietary adjustments, and massages. By this time, she had been examined by five doctors, all of whom agreed that her condition was, indeed, arthritis.

A masseuse at the spa stated emphatically that the lump on Zerka's shoulder could not possibly be arthritic. The masseuse had treated many arthritics with demineralization of the bone, but she had never seen a condition like Zerka's. The muscles of her upper arm were thinning out. And, although there was a great deal of pain and swelling, the joint still had motion. The masseuse said that she had never seen muscular deterioration of that sort to arise from arthritis. Also, she had never seen such a swollen,

painful joint retain motion. The usual pattern in arthritis is for such severely affected joints to freeze into immobility. When Zerka told me what the masseuse said, I dismissed the whole thing. What was the opinion of a masseuse against the combined expertise of five doctors? . . .

Luckily, we found Dr. Wahl. He was the first practitioner to recognize the seriousness of Zerka's condition. Dr. Wahl felt that a local operation to excise the growth, supplemented with radiation therapy, was the necessary course of action. . . . Searching for a second opinion, we were referred to Dr. Bradley Coley of Memorial Hospital in New York City. Dr. Mendel, the radiologist, took a series of X rays which showed the precise location of the growth. Dr. Mendel had Zerka wait while the X rays were developed. He was so shaken by what he saw that he said to her, in violation of medical protocol, "You have a tumor there. Did you know that?" Zerka had already been informed by Dr. Wahl but was relieved to hear it. At least she now knew that she was not just a nervous, hypochondriacal female. She assumed that the growth would be cut out, like most tumors. She would have a scar, perhaps some stiffness in the joint. But that was not too high a price to pay for health. . . .

The biopsy was performed in Memorial Hospital on a Monday morning. The pathologist promised that his report would be ready by Wednesday. I had to go out of town and promised Zerka to be back in time for the report. Zerka knew that the findings were ready on Tuesday, though. All the nurses and staff who had been so attentive to her before now made a wide circuit to avoid her. She saw only the housekeeping personnel and the people who brought her meals.

I called Zerka from Grand Central Station at noon on Wednesday and told her that I was on the way to Dr. Coley's associate, Dr. Higginbottom's office to hear the diagnosis and that I would come to see her as soon as I had conferred with the doctor. Dr. Higginbottom was a kindly, tall man. He explained the diagnosis as "chondrosarcoma of the acromion process." In plain language, a malignancy of the cartilage in her shoulder joint. It was impossible to just remove the tumor. Amputation of the right arm *and* shoulder was the only treatment. "We have no alternative: Amputation or death." I just listened to him. He was the authority. "Sarcoma of the cartilage in such a pure form is very rare. Chondrosarcoma is very resistant to radiation therapy or any other therapy. Every day we wait is a day too late. Every day it grows. It grows—in the direction of the lungs. If we don't work fast enough, we may have a sarcoma of the lung, which is inoperable."

Then he excused himself and went next door, where his students had assembled for a class. He used Zerka's case as an illustration.

I had to accept the doctor's dictum. Psychiatry was out of the question there. You cannot talk to bones. . . .

It was five o'clock before I went in to Zerka. I entered her room with face averted and went directly to her bathroom, where I washed my hands, slowly, deliberately. She had been waiting for me since noon, but I was still unprepared to face her.

Finally, I was able to tell Zerka what the doctor said. After talking a while, we tried to digest the information. Amputation seemed . . . much too radical a cure. We wanted to see if there were any other way of dealing with the tumor.

I got Zerka out of the hospital the next day. Nothing had been decided yet. I had a list of six doctors to consult in the hopes that one of them might give us a less-ominous diagnosis.

The first two doctors on the list were a father-son team. They were refugees from Hitler and practiced on Madison Avenue. Zerka found them to be kindly men, but so stooped and wizened that she has, forever after, called them "the gnomes of Madison Avenue."

After a careful examination, they looked at us searchingly. "Why are you here?" the father asked. Then he said, "Dr. Coley knows his business. If that is what was found, that is what you have." We left the office. . . .

When I look back on Zerka's illness, I am confronted by the irony of it, over and over again. There I was, a doctor, but so naive about the matter of her illness. Why was I so smart for other people, but not smart enough to appreciate my wife's suffering?

I certainly wasn't a hero in that terrible time. The only thing that can be said in my favor is that, all along, I did everything I could, everything that seemed reasonable, to assist her. I was very devoted to her and willing to undergo any travail or expense to help her, but I was not a hero.

I really did not accept the hopelessness of her condition until shortly before the amputation of her arm. One night she was alone in her bedroom. I heard crying. When I went in, Zerka was wringing her hands—"like Lady Macbeth," she said later. "How will I manage all the things that must be done?" she was asking herself. "Will I be dependent on others for everything from now on? How will I dress myself, comb my hair, do housework, type, drive, write? Can anyone as independent as I am live happily when dependent on others? Will I feel inferior, less attractive, shut out, unwanted? Will life be empty, a bleak, hopeless procession of days and nights? Will I ever get out of the tunnel, back into the light of day?"

She cried to me, "Will I ever be well again?" I tried to reassure her, to help her regain her calm. I reminded Zerka that we owed it to Jonathan to maintain our equilibrium. I assured her that I would love her as much as ever. I felt she would be the same person. An arm was, after all, not the

essence of her. Finally I said, "You do not have to undergo amputation unless you really want to. It is your body. You must decide. But you must consider all the possible consequences." Zerka put all of her agonized indecision behind her. She was ready.

I brought her down to Memorial Hospital on January 17, 1958. The amputation was done on the 20th.

I was driven from Beacon to Memorial Hospital every day to see Zerka. I spent most of my time at the hospital. When I was not with Zerka, I prayed and meditated on what had happened. At one point, I tried to imagine what prayer Zerka might have made. "You have given me a right arm, and now you take it away. You gave me an ear, and then you took my hearing away." For myself, I felt like Job.

Zerka's illness showed me the hopelessness and vanity of medicine. I had seen her in the hands of doctors who didn't know what was wrong with her and who had no idea how to proceed with her case. In the end, all that could be done was to remove the offending part. I had such a feeling of helplessness and despair that it was close to self-hatred. My medical knowledge and my Godplaying helped her not at all. Of course, we wondered sometimes if Zerka's arm might have been saved if the sarcoma had been diagnosed early in the illness. Dr. Coley set us right immediately. The only way to treat chondrosarcoma at any stage is by radical surgery, but we wonder just the same.

During the years of Zerka's illness, I was increasingly afflicted by arthritis. I suffered my first bout of arthritis in Vöslau as a young man, but it had never been a severe enough condition to limit my life in any way. In the 15 years since Zerka's operation, she has gradually taken over more and more of my duties as my arthritis [has] increased in severity. She has become a very able administrator, in addition to all the other skills and personal qualities which have made her a talented psychodramatist, able sociometric researcher, writer, editor, and teacher. She does just about everything she did before the operation. She drives, sews, dances, types, everything but swim. . . .

With Zerka's illness we had the reverse of the Godplayer—humility.