

Smothered by Choice

The Peace Core Part 4

A Dialogue on Consciousness, Identity, and the Human Condition

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June, 2026

A continuation of the Peace Core Series

There is a form of self-harm that leaves no mark on the body. It is done not by violence against another but by a quieter and more insidious act: the refusal, again and again, to listen to one's own conscience. The old law of clean hands is usually understood as a prohibition against harming others. But it carries a second, less-remarked meaning — a prohibition against harming oneself. Each time a person turns away from what conscience has already told them, something in them weakens. Not all at

once. One choice at a time. And it is this slow, cumulative turning-away — not a single catastrophic failure, but a habit of ignoring — that produces what I have come to call smothering: the abdication of the self to the appetites of the Id.

The conscience does not vanish in this process. It is not defeated so much as buried. What rises in its place is not a stronger self but a hungrier one — the Id, ascending from the subconscious into the seat the conscience once occupied, while the conscience itself is pressed downward, submerged, still alive but no longer heard. What the person feels, when they feel anything at all, is something like a millstone hung around the neck. A weight with no clean name. It gnaws from the inside. It produces tension without object, stress without a traceable cause, and moments of catharsis that promise release but never quite deliver it — because the thing that needs releasing has been pushed below the water, and what surfaces instead is only its pressure, not its voice. This is a peculiar kind of drowning: not in water, but in the pool of one's own mind, alone, with no one else able to see that it is happening.

I did not arrive at this framework in a library. I arrived at it slowly, over decades, beginning with something I witnessed and did not yet have the language to name.

One of the things I was proudest of in my mid-twenties was buying a house — a modest new home in a new neighborhood, bought at real cost, while I kept driving the same old truck I'd had since after high school. I could not afford both a new house and a new car, so the truck stayed, and I made my peace with it. I liked the trade. I liked working on that house on the weekends — yard work, small repairs, keeping the truck running well enough to get me to work through the week. On Saturdays and Sundays, once the outdoor work was done, I allowed myself a break, and that break usually meant walking down to the tavern closest to my house — close enough that if I overstayed, I could walk home safely rather than drive. I was, even then, more attentive to safety than to any deeper reckoning of right and wrong. That would come later.

This particular tavern sat at the south end of one of the main streets in my hometown, and some Saturday mornings, after the week's grocery shopping and before the yard work began, I'd stop in for a Bloody Mary or two. On those mornings I began to notice the same five or six young women sitting together at the bar — clearly at the end of a long night rather than the start of a morning, having what I slowly understood to be their version of a happy hour after a shift of work. I was naive enough, the first few times, not to know what kind of work. Once I understood, I kept my distance. I had no interest in what they were selling, and if I'm honest, I was a little afraid of them at first — not of any danger they posed, but of not knowing how to be around them, or what my presence might seem to mean. Still, I sat

close enough at the bar to overhear their conversation, and something in it held me. They were, unmistakably, genuine people — funnier and more self-aware than I expected, and entirely unlike whatever flattened idea I'd been carrying in my head.

The morning that changed things was the morning one of them turned out to be someone I'd gone to high school with. Her father owned a well-known business in town; I'd have called her family rich, in the uncomplicated way a teenager sorts these things. She recognized me, came and sat beside me, and we talked for a long while. That conversation opened the door to the others. Yes, she had chosen this life. Yes, she was using heavily. Yes, by her own account, it was what she wanted — though I would come to understand, over years of returning to that bar on quiet mornings, how much weight that word "wanted" was being asked to carry, and how little it actually explained.

I had real trouble accepting what she told me, and that difficulty is, I think, what kept pulling me back on those weekend mornings, drink after drink, conversation after conversation. Once they understood I wasn't there for what they sold — that my interest was only in knowing them — something shifted. They liked it, and more importantly, they trusted it, and that trust opened a door most people in their lives never got to walk through. I never asked about the mechanics of the work itself. I asked why. I asked how it felt from the inside. And to my surprise, they seemed to need the asking almost as much as I needed the answering. It has always struck me as strange and true in equal measure — how often people will hand their deepest, least-examined truths not to family, not to whoever stands closest to them in daily life, but to a stranger they trust, in an unguarded hour, over a few too many drinks in a quiet bar. I had planned, thirty years ago, to write something out of what they gave me. Life intervened, in ways I could not have foreseen, and the writing waited. It is only now, in retirement, that I have the room to take it back up — older, and with a framework these women never had the chance to hear, but that I believe would have made sense to them if I had.

What follows is what I learned.

Most of them, at the beginning, were simply young women who liked to party — a favored drug, an appetite for a strong sex life, an early discovery that entertaining men could get them what they wanted faster than most other paths available to them. That may be how it started. It was not how it ended. By the time I knew them, the drugs had stopped following the trade and started driving it — need financing supply rather than the reverse. I assumed, at first, that what they'd rejected was conformity itself: the ordinary job, the ordinary life, the demands of fitting in. I was wrong, or at least only partly right. What I slowly came to understand was that the life exacted a toll at a depth they were

reluctant to name, even to me, even after trust had been earned.

Underneath everything, in every one of them, there was a deep, settled remorse. Something gnawing, unresolved, sitting at a depth below whatever they said out loud. A kind of extreme exasperation with no clean object — not quite regret, not quite grief, but weighing on them the way both do. And I watched the same motion happen again and again, in different women, on different mornings: a deep breath, and then a visible pushing-down, an effort to leave the feeling behind before it could surface into words. I did not have a name for what I was watching then. I have one now. It was the sound — or rather, the practiced silencing — of a conscience being smothered, one choice at a time, by women who were, in that very motion, teaching it not to speak.

I did not have the vocabulary for what I was watching, not then. It would take thirty years, a career spent inside government and behavioral health work, and a body of research I would not encounter until long after those Saturday mornings had ended, for me to understand that what I saw at that bar had a name, or rather several names, arrived at independently by people who had never met and were not talking about prostitutes at all.

The clinical name is moral injury. It was coined by researchers working not with women like the ones I knew, but with combat veterans — men who had killed, or failed to prevent a killing, or stood by while something happened that violated what they knew, before any order was given, to be wrong. Brett - and his colleagues, writing in 2009, drew a distinction that the field of trauma psychology had not made cleanly before: that fear and guilt are not the same wound. Post-traumatic stress, as it had been understood, was built around threat — the nervous system's response to danger, real or remembered. But something else can happen to a person that has nothing to do with fear at all. It happens when a person perpetrates, or fails to prevent, or simply witnesses, an act that transgresses what their own conscience has already told them is true. The wound in that case is not fear. It is closer to what Scripture would call conviction, except the convicting no longer resolves into confession and repair. It just sits there, unresolved, doing damage from the inside.

Later researchers split this further, and the split matters for what I am trying to say. Some moral injury comes from betrayal — something done to you by someone you trusted, a wound inflicted on your moral sense from outside. But some of it comes from the other direction entirely: from acts the person themselves committed, willingly, against their own moral code. This second kind carries a different weight than the first. It does not produce hypervigilance, the way fear-based trauma does. It produces shame. Self-condemnation that does not fade with time the way fear does, because it is not a

threat response. It is a verdict, rendered by the self against the self, and repeated every time memory returns to the scene.

This is close to what the women I knew were describing, though none of them would have used those words. What they described instead was a weight. A thing eating at them from the inside that they could not name and would not discuss in detail, only enough to let me know it was there. I now believe I was watching moral injury of the perpetration kind — not injury done to them, though plenty of that had likely happened too, but injury they were doing to themselves, one transaction at a time, each one a small and private verdict rendered by a conscience that did not stop functioning just because it was being ignored.

Because that is the thing I want to be precise about, because I think most people get it wrong: the conscience did not die in these women. It did not go silent because it had nothing left to say. It went silent because it kept being overruled, and a voice that is overruled long enough does not stop speaking so much as stop being listened to. Scripture has old language for this. Paul, writing to the Romans, says that even those without any external law written down still have a law written on the heart, and that this internal law bears witness — his word is that it accuses or excuses, depending on what has been done. That is not poetic language. It is a description of a mechanism, and it is the same mechanism the moral injury researchers rediscovered two thousand years later using clinical vocabulary instead of covenant vocabulary. A conscience does not require permission to render a verdict. It only requires that something be done which it already knows to be wrong.

What I watched happen at that bar, across those mornings, was not the absence of conscience. It was the presence of one, working exactly as it was built to work, rendering verdict after verdict against women who had found a way to survive those verdicts by refusing to let them surface into words. The deep breath. The pushing down. That was not peace. That was the sound of a conscience being buried alive by someone who could not yet afford, in every sense of that word, to listen to it.

I have come to call this smothering, because I think it is the most accurate word for what happens. Not killing. Not silencing permanently. Smothering — a covering-over of something that is still alive, still breathing under the weight, producing exactly the kind of low-grade, formless suffering these women described and could not name. A weight with no clean object. A millstone, if you want the older and harder image, hung around the neck — not thrown into it, not yet, but hung there, dragging with every step, heavier with each choice made against what the conscience had already ruled.

There is a point, I believe, past which the smothering stops being merely endured and becomes

something the person does to themselves on purpose. Not because the fight was lost through exhaustion alone, though exhaustion plays its part, but because the person arrives, consciously or half-consciously, at a kind of terrible logic: if the weight will not lift, and the drowning will not stop, and the conscience keeps rendering its verdict no matter how many times it is pushed under — then the only way to stop feeling the millstone is to stop resisting it. To agree with it. To take the very thing that has been accusing them and hand it over, fully, as an offering, rather than go on losing the same battle a thousand more times.

I want to be careful and exact here, because I think this is the hinge the whole essay turns on. What I am describing is not collapse. Collapse is the absence of a decision — a slow going-slack, the will simply running out of strength to keep pushing the water back. What I watched, and what I believe I heard in the words some of these women used, was closer to its opposite: an act. A willing handing-over. Not the conscience finally losing the argument through attrition, but the person themselves stepping in and settling the argument on the Id's behalf, because settling it, on any terms, felt like the only way to stop drowning.

I think this is the sense in which it must be understood as a kind of consecration — a word I do not use loosely, and do not use for effect. Consecration, in the tradition I come from, is the act of setting a thing apart, wholly, and handing it over in full to something beyond the self. It is ordinarily spoken of as the most life-giving act a person can perform, because in Christian understanding the self is not diminished by consecration to God but established by it — you become more fully yourself, not less, in the giving. What I am describing is the same structural act, the same willing and total handing-over, except aimed in the opposite direction. Not toward the image a person was made in, but toward the appetite that had been rising the whole time the conscience was being submerged. A consecration to the Id. A countersacrament, offered not in worship but in surrender, and offered, I think, for a reason that almost makes it more tragic rather than less: not out of love for what they were giving themselves to, but out of a desperate wish to be free of the weight.

This is what I believe happened to some of the women I knew, though I want to say plainly that I cannot know it with certainty in every case, only in the ones who told me so directly. They did not describe a slow fading. They described a moment, or something close enough to a moment, when they stopped fighting the current and let it take them, because fighting it while still drowning was worse than simply drowning. "I already gave myself away," one told me, and I did not understand until much later that she was not describing fatigue. She was describing a transaction she believed she had completed — a gift given, in full, past the point of taking back.

And here is the cruelest part of this particular mechanism, the part that separates it from ordinary sin or ordinary failure: an act of consecration is not designed to be reversible. That is what makes it consecration and not merely a bad decision among many. A vow, once made in full and willing surrender, does not leave behind a receipt that can be quietly torn up on a better morning. This is precisely why, I believe, so many of these women told me it was too late for them to change. They were not being melodramatic, and they were not simply describing exhaustion, though I think even they might not have had the words to explain the difference. They were reporting, as accurately as they knew how, the felt reality of a covenant — the same structure of promise-keeping that in its rightful use binds a soul to God, running instead in the opposite direction, and binding just as tightly.

I do not believe this is where the story has to end. I will not pretend the mechanism itself is gentle, or that what I am calling consecration is a metaphor I am reaching for to make the suffering sound more literary than it was. I believe it is closer to a literal description of what actually happened inside at least some of these women, in some specific and namable moment, even if neither they nor I could have pointed to the calendar date on which it occurred. They gave themselves away. That is the phrase they used, and I have come to think it was not confession dressed up as poetry. It was the most precise language available to them for what they had actually done.

But I watched one of them prove that consecration, terrible as it is, does not have to be the last word.

There was one young girl who I watched as she sat quietly. She never said much. And I had only spoken a few words to her. But one day she came in alone, and none of the other girls were around. So I asked her, "Do you really want to be doing this?" And she said, with the utmost exasperation, "No." I said if she wanted, she could come stay at my house for a couple of months. I would ask nothing of her, and nothing from her. But there would be no drugs. I told her that right now her mind was not clear, but given time it would clear up, and she could make some decisions of her own. She said yes.

So she did come and live with me, like a younger little sister. It took about six weeks for her head to clear. I was at work most of the time, but she just hung out at the house and took a breather. She had not been damaged as deep as the others — her conscience, I believe now, had been smothered but not yet consecrated away. There was still an audible "no" in her, the one she gave me the day I asked. That may be the whole difference between her and the others: not that she suffered less, but that she had not yet made the vow.

Once her head had cleared, I took her up to the cabin next to the creek — the same place my father

and I shared for years, the place that has since become, in ways I did not expect when I first brought her there, the interior architecture of everything else I have built since. She spent a full summer at the cabin. Isolated. No supply, no demand, no one seeking her out and nothing for her to give them even if they had. Just quiet, and water, and time. I have come to believe that isolation of that kind does not repair a conscience directly — nothing a person does from the outside can reach in and repair another person's conscience. What isolation does is simpler and, I think, more honest: it stops feeding the hunger that had been smothering the conscience in the first place, and it waits. Long enough, in her case, for the second voice to become audible again on its own.

After the summer at the cabin, I finally got her to call her parents and go home. I told her I did not want to stay in touch, but I wished her well, and dropped her at her relatives' house. I thought I would never see her again.

But once, at a local business, I saw her. She looked healthy and had put on the good kind of weight. She was applying for a job. Then she saw me and recognized me, and smiled and waved. I was with a group of people, and she was with others. She left with her head held high. And I was as satisfied in that moment as I have ever been. Happy. Knowing that I had made a difference.

I want to be honest about what her story does and does not prove. It does not prove that every woman I knew could have recovered the way she did, if only someone had built them a cabin and given them a summer. Some of them told me, plainly, that it was too late, and I never got to see any of them prove that verdict wrong. One of them, I believe, had crossed further than smothering — had reached the point of full consecration, past the reach of any isolation I could have offered her, and her ending was not good. I do not know, and will not pretend to know, whether "too late" is ever a true metaphysical statement about a human soul, or only ever a symptom reporting on its own condition from inside a darkness it can no longer see the edges of. I suspect it is sometimes the second thing wearing the mask of the first, and that no one, including the person saying it, can always tell the difference from the inside.

What I do know is this. The girl who told me "no" — who still had enough of her own voice left to answer a simple question honestly — recovered. Not through anything clever I did, and not through willpower alone on her part, but through the plain mechanism of being removed, for long enough, from the thing that had been smothering her, and given quiet enough to hear herself again. That is not nothing. It may, in fact, be the whole of what this essay has to offer as a warning and as a hope in the same breath: that the window for recovery is real, that it does not stay open forever, and that the

difference between the women who walked back through it and the ones who did not may have had less to do with how deeply they had sinned against themselves and more to do with whether someone was there to ask the question, and whether there was still, underneath the weight, a voice left to answer it honestly.

Remake your life while there is still a chance. I did not understand, thirty years ago, how much I meant that sentence, or how many people I would go on to meet in a long career who never got the chance at all. I understand it now. And I believe, though I cannot prove it, that somewhere underneath every millstone I ever saw hung around a neck, there was still a voice, submerged but alive, waiting to find out whether anyone would come looking for it before the weight became a vow.

The Law of Clean Hands is not just so you do not harm others.

It includes ones self. That is a first rule of Self Respect.