

Sufi Teaching Stories,
Old and New

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Interrogative Imperative Institute

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Preface

Although told in a largely refashioned manner, a number of the following stories are very loosely based upon either time-honored stories of the mystics or are built around various, essential spiritual insights drawn from their teachings. Other stories appearing in this volume are wholly original but are still rooted in a traditional, spiritual perspective. In either case, the names have been changed to protect the innocent, and, as well, considerable poetic license has been taken in the telling and/or re-telling of some of these spiritual tales.

I am not a shaykh nor am I a spiritual guide of any kind. The stories are being given expression in the present volume because I believe they have something of value to offer to whoever cares to engage them and reflect on what is being said irrespective of one's spiritual orientation.

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Cul-de-sac

The King had been obsessed with fate and death for as long as he could remember. He didn't know precisely when his intense preoccupation with these intertwined realities had begun, but begun it had, and, gradually, the ideas of death and fate had come to consume nearly every waking moment.

Some children had a favorite toy which played a central role in their early lives. Other children had an imaginary friend who kept them company through difficult times. As a boy, during adolescence, and into young adulthood, the King's constant companions had been thoughts of these daunting twins.

The triggering events which helped precipitate his condition may have been the many wars that had been fought during his childhood ... so many of the Kingdom's families had lost fathers, sons, and brothers during their collective dark nights of the soul. Or, maybe, the terrible plagues which had swept through the lands -- taking the lives of numerous men, women, and children along the way -- somehow had planted a deadly seed of another kind deep within his subconscious.

Undoubtedly, the foregoing sort of factors played contributing roles, but the King suspected that the real source of his anxieties and fears started with the stranger who seemed to have paid a visit to the boy's room one night a long, long time ago. Quite frankly, the King had not even been sure whether what took place that night was a dream or something else, but the experience had stayed with him.

Whenever he permitted his thoughts to drift in the direction of 'the event' from his childhood, the whole scene would occupy his consciousness like an invading force. The experience was just as vivid now as it had been some three decades ago when it first occurred.

As young boys are wont to do, he had been lying in bed listening to the sounds of the night ... thinking about the events of the day ... planning what he would do tomorrow ... when he heard a noise of some sort, like someone clearing his or her throat. The noise had come from the corner of his room which was always in shadows at night ... even when the full moon shone through his window as it did on this occasion.

All his attention was drawn to that portion of the room. He peered into the darkness of the corner, and although he couldn't see anything,

nonetheless, he felt a presence of some sort. He knew, with certainty, he was not alone.

A strange fear descended on him. He became paralyzed.

All he could do was look and listen. Every so often he remembered to breathe.

While only a few minutes probably actually transpired, the event seemed to take hours to unfold. Finally, the boy-who-would-be-King heard a voice arise out of the shadows.

The voice was neither masculine nor feminine. The words had a quality which penetrated to the very core of his being.

It said: "Prince, if you wish to live forever, then, you must never hear either the complete words or music for" Something was whispered softly.

What was whispered was unclear. In his mind, he tried to concentrate on re-creating what had been said to him, but the words remained indistinct.

The boy managed to summon enough courage to stammer: "Wha...What did you say?"

There was a mocking laughter that softly began echoing in the room. The boy was near tears.

The laughter was replaced by an eerie silence. Then, once again, something was whispered ... seemingly, this time, the words came from somewhere very near to his ears even though the boy could detect no one near the head of his bed as he managed to shift his eyes left and right while the rest of him remained paralyzed. This time the words were said a little more loudly yet still were somewhat muffled.

The boy thought he understood what had been whispered, but he wasn't completely sure. "Please," the youngster said. "Can't you say the name of the song clearly?"

Only the sound of the wind could be heard. Otherwise, the passage of time was marked by grains of quiet.

The strain of intently trying to listen for who knows how long, as well as the stress brought on by his fear, had completely tired the boy out, and as he was drifting off to sleep, he heard: "If you follow these instructions, you will never die."

Soon after the eventful night, the boy's father passed away. The Prince became the new King, and from the moment he ascended the throne, he banned all music and singing in the Kingdom.

Although the boy believed he knew what had been whispered to him that night, he wasn't quite sure. Therefore, the safest thing to do was to create circumstances that would completely control what might happen in relation to hearing music and singing.

The boy-King's royal edict had a profound effect on others. The Kingdom had a long, rich musical history ... with many talented musicians, singers, and writers. Now, all the singers, composers, orchestras, and musicians were forced into a state of quiescence.

The King dispatched spies throughout the land. Whoever was caught singing or playing music was thrown into prison. The King didn't want to take a chance that somehow, inadvertently, he might hear the wrong song in its entirety and, as a result, bring his life to an end.

In addition, all schools were instructed to begin teaching children that music and singing were great evils. Children were given generous rewards for reporting any violations of the King's proclamation that they might witness in their homes or neighborhoods. Scholarships were awarded every year to those students who wrote the best essays about the 'music problem'.

From time to time, of course, people throughout the Kingdom continued to die. However, the King lived on, and, therefore, the purpose of his proclamation was served.

The King became so convinced of the wisdom underlying his ban of music and singing he began to engage in high-risk activities, confident he could cheat death as long as he observed the conditions of that momentous night of his childhood. The King's boldness and daring deeds became the stuff of epic poems ... which had to be recited in monotones for fear of any hint of musical melody creeping into a recitation.

One day, while traveling in a very remote region of his country, the King met a young woman and fell deeply in love with the maiden. Happily, the woman felt the same way toward him as the King did toward her.

Soon, thereafter, the two were married, and following the honeymoon, they returned to the King's castle. Although, initially, the King

was extremely happy with his wife, events took an ominous turn not too long after they were married.

The King had been walking in the gardens which surrounded the castle, thinking about his Queen, feeling very fortunate with respect to having her as his wife, and enjoying the love he felt for her ... a love which was growing with each passing day. Just as he had become ensconced in a very pleasant reverie concerning her, he heard something that deeply disturbed him.

Singing was drifting down from the window of the Queen's room. Unmistakably, the voice was that of his wife.

He rushed into the castle and fled up the stairs toward the Queen's room. He burst into his wife's room without seeking permission, and angrily roared: "Just because you are Queen, this does not give you the right to break the Royal ban on music and singing."

The Queen was shocked and puzzled -- shocked at the King's behavior and puzzled concerning the ban. She had never heard of such a proclamation since news of, and from, the Kingdom hardly ever reached the distant part of the country where she had been raised.

She explained this to the King. While her explanation helped calm him a little, nonetheless, he remained agitated and upset.

The King had never told anyone about his childhood experience. He did not feel comfortable in doing so now. Nevertheless, he could not have her singing due to his fear of what he had been told that night many years ago.

He said with great emotion: "Please, if you love me, do not sing any more. I beg you not to sing."

"Is there something wrong with my voice?" she asked.

"No, there is nothing the matter with your voice," he replied. "You sing beautifully. I simply cannot have this sort of thing going on in the castle.

"If I let you sing and do nothing, then, I will become known as a royal hypocrite. I have thrown many people into prison who have violated my ban on singing and music, so, how can I let you sing but not extend the same right to them?"

“Well,” inquired the Queen, “what would be so wrong about permitting people to sing and play music? Why not free the people you have imprisoned and do away with your ban?”

“I can’t explain it,” said the King, “but you don’t know what you are asking of me. All I can say is that if you love me and care for me, you will refrain from singing.”

The Queen’s face registered mixed emotions. “I do love you”, she said, “and if it means all that much to you, I will stop singing. On the other hand, I think you need to understand that singing is very important to my sense of peace and happiness, and, so, in a way, you don’t know what you are asking of me.

“In fact, I feel very badly for the people of your Kingdom because they are being prevented from doing something which has been nurturing their souls for centuries. If you cared at all about your loyal subjects, if you loved them as a king should love those who have been entrusted to him, then, you would reverse your silly and arbitrary ruling.”

The Queen’s words entered the King’s heart like a bolt of lightning. He could not deny the truth in her words, nor could he overlook how important a role singing and music played in the life of his wife.

If he loved her, how could he possibly deny her this great source of joy and satisfaction in her life? If he loved his subjects, how could he have treated them so cruelly?

How could he permit his own selfishness to adversely shape the lives of so many people? Yet, he loved life dearly, and, furthermore, if he were to die, then, what about the sadness which his wife, whom he knew loved him deeply, would experience in relation to his demise?

The immovable object of his childhood experience was being placed into opposition with the irresistible force of his love concerning his wife. What should he do?

For many days he reflected on this matter. His heart was being torn apart in, seemingly, irreconcilable directions.

Eventually, after struggling with the issue for some time, he realized he loved his wife more than he loved his own life. She was the empress of his heart. She was the ruler of his destiny.

He repealed his earlier edict. He freed from prison those who previously had violated the ban, and, seeking to make amends, he lavished great wealth on those whom he had wronged.

His wife was so pleased with him that she fell in love with him more than ever before. The two were very happy together, and the Kingdom was happy for them as well.

Despite his change of heart, the King could not stop worrying about the forces which he had set loose with his new Royal proclamation. He became entranced whenever he heard his wife sing, and, yet, there was a sweet sadness that permeated this listening, as if, each time, he might be hearing his own swan song.

The King was nearing his 50th birthday, and in honor of the occasion, the Queen had arranged for a special celebration. She wanted the party to be a surprise, so, for months she induced many of the courtiers to become co-conspirators in her secret preparations.

The night of the King's birthday came, and he was taken to the great banquet hall on a pretext. There, waiting for him, was his beloved wife and many of his adoring subjects who had long since forgiven the King for his earlier ban on music.

A great meal was served. Entertainers performed before, during, and after the meal.

Toward the end of the celebration, the Queen stood up and announced that to commemorate the occasion she had commissioned a song to be written. The Queen, herself, would sing the song, and she would be accompanied by a small group of musicians who had been especially assembled for this occasion.

The ensemble came to center stage, the music began, and the Queen sang. Tears came to the eyes of the King, not only because of the great beauty of the melody, words, instrumentation, his wife's voice, and the festive, joyous atmosphere of those attending the celebration, but because, somehow, he knew in his heart that this was the song about which he had been warned so many years ago in his childhood. This was what had been whispered into his ears that night.

As he was listening, he tried to feel the fullness of life ... its joys and its sorrows. He looked at everything in the hall anew and appreciated it for being part of his life, and he was grateful for having been given as

many years as he had lived and for having been opened up to the great love of his life.

As he was surveying the crowd and the musicians, the King noticed that one of the musicians was intently looking at him. The man was playing his instrument wonderfully ... as if the King were the only one in the room for whom he was playing.

The King knew who he was looking at. The King knew that Death had come for him that night.

After the song was finished and the crowd, including the King, gave a standing ovation for a performance which would take its place near the top of the great musical tradition of the Kingdom ... making a legend of the Queen ... the musician who had been focusing on the King throughout the performance silently motioned him to meet on the balcony behind the stage. Slowly, the King made his way to the balcony where the two were alone.

Death said: "Why didn't you listen to the counsel you were given so many years ago? You could have lived forever. You allowed yourself to be maneuvered into a street from which there is no escape. Things might have been otherwise."

The King looked at Death. His eyes passed over the land of the Kingdom which was bathed in the light of a full moon. His vision went into the Hall where he could see his wife talking with people, receiving their congratulations for her truly marvelous performance.

He had never loved his wife more than he did at that very moment. Then, his eyes returned to the face of Death.

He said: "Sir, we all seal our own fates. We can't avoid this." His gaze went back to his wife. "I just exchanged one fate for a better one. Now, let us get on with the business at hand."

A Problem And Its Solution

The spiritual guide stood before the group. She had been asked to give a talk on mysticism.

She began with: "This evening I intend to outline for you one of the biggest problems facing human kind. This problem is at the heart of nearly every single crisis with which human beings are confronted presently and with which they have been confronted throughout history. It is a problem which has undermined nearly every government and community that has ever existed."

She could tell by the look in the eyes of the audience she had managed to arouse their interest. She continued on: "The nature of this problem is both extremely simple to state, and, yet, at the same time, the ramifications which arise from it have the most complex of forms.

"For millennia, philosophers have tried to address this issue and, for the most part, have failed to arrive at workable solutions. Moreover, if anyone in the room could solve this dilemma, they would be awarded a Nobel prize, and the United Nations would declare a holiday to be observed around the world in honor of the individual who could offer a solution to this problem."

Budding interest began to transform into avid curiosity. What was this problem to which she was referring?

"Shall I tell what the problem is to which I am referring?" she asked in a kind of rhetorical fashion since she had every intention of doing so and the audience would have been annoyed if she stopped now.

However, the assembled group played their part. They gave an assortment of nods and verbal comments indicating they wanted the teacher to say more.

The spiritual teacher turned to the blackboard behind her. She drew a long line horizontally across the blackboard, and, then, at the extreme right end of the line, she drew a circle just beneath the line but touching the latter.

After drawing the line and the circle, she put down the chalk, turned to the group and said: "There you have it -- the problem."

Diverse murmurs of confusion, mystification, and annoyance ran through the group. Someone asked: "What kind of problem is this other than that I don't know what it means?" Then, as an afterthought the person speculated: "Is that it? Is the problem ignorance?"

The teacher laughed and replied: “Well, your suggestion is an excellent one, and there is no doubt that ignorance is a huge problem, but, in truth, ignorance might not be a problem if it were not for the problem that I have diagramed on the board.”

A few people in the audience began twisting their heads at various angles in the hopes a change of perspective might provide a clue as to what the drawing on the board meant. Most people just stared at the board and shrugged, or looked at one another to see whether any of their neighbors had any idea what it was all about, or shook their heads, waiting for the teacher to say something more.

The spiritual guide said: “I am very certain that everyone in this room knows what this drawing means, but the mental tumblers just have not properly aligned yet. Maybe an alternative example might start you thinking outside the box a little.

She turned back to the blackboard, picked up a piece of chalk, and printed:

t l d j q o t l t c t s b f

The group was even more mystified than before. How was this going to help shed light on the first drawing if they couldn't figure out what she had just written?

She let the group struggle with the letters for a short while. Then, she provided a clue: “What if I were to tell you that the letters I have put on the board have something to do with typing?”

There was a brief silence before someone near the back of the room said: “The lazy dog jumped quickly over the log to catch the sly brown fox.”

“Give that woman a cigar,” the teacher said. “Someone's neural pathways just fired, but all of you probably had this knowledge within you because, at one time or another, all of you have heard or seen something very similar to the words just spoken by our winner.”

The teacher smiled, raised her hands, and arched her eyebrows ... in a way which seemed to say: “Well, what about our first drawing?” and she pointed again at the diagram.

The group did not seem to be any nearer to an answer. A certain amount of frustration and boredom began to creep into some of the body language of various members of the audience, even though, supposedly, there on the board before them was the most critical problem ever to have faced humankind.

The teacher offered a clue by writing two letters on the board:

DW

She turned back to the audience and waited. A short while later her patience was rewarded.

A woman in the front row said: "Desire, World."

The teacher replied: "Exactly. Can anyone else expand on this answer?"

A man off to the right said: "The line represents human desire, and the circle represents the world."

"Right again," the teacher responded.

She deposited the chalk, which she had been carrying around with her, back in the tray beneath the board. Turning back to the audience she commented: "Although the diagram on the board appears to be static, the fact of the matter is that it is very dynamic since, after all, both desire and the world are in motion all the time. But desire being what it is and the world being what it is, there are certain principles or laws which govern how desire and the world engage one another.

"For instance, one of the ways in which desire manifests itself is in the way human beings always try to bend the world to the demands of desire, and since this can never happen except in limited ways, the attempt to do so tends to lead to nothing but frustration, anger, resentment, impatience, jealousy, envy, hatred, depression, and despair ... this is so even amongst the very rich and powerful because the nature of the world is such that it is forever eluding their grasp and cannot be completely controlled in the way they wish."

The teacher briefly surveyed the audience from right to left and from back to front before saying: "As I indicated at the beginning of this exercise, I was only going to outline this problem which I have diagramed on the board. But, let me ask you a question: "What is the solution?"

Lots of ideas came to the minds and hearts of the people in attendance, but no sooner were they mentioned, then, someone would point out a problem with the suggested solution. However, at one point during the discussion, a young man proffered the following: "It seems to me that if all the problems begin with our trying to make the world conform to our desire, maybe what we need to do is find a way to get our desires to conform to the actual nature of the world."

Everybody, including the teacher, liked the young man's answer. After a short pause, someone asked: "Okay. So how do we do that?"

The young man said: "I don't have a clue," and everyone laughed.

The eyes of the group returned to the teacher with a collective question written upon them. She smiled and said: "Spirituality ... not religion, but spirituality ... but to properly understand why this is the solution or how one needs to engage this solution, all of this requires a lot more hard work than figuring out the problem did, and I'll leave the details of the solution for another time."

Commitment's Reward

Paul still couldn't believe his eyes, yet, there was the proof in front of him. An engraved invitation lay on his desk indicating that Paul's presence was requested in order to meet with one of the richest, most powerful men in the country-- Thursday, 11:00 a.m.

At first, he thought the whole thing might be a hoax or an elaborate joke. So, he had pulled out the phone book, found the number for the man's headquarters, called, and confirmed that, yes, indeed, Paul Johnson had been invited for brunch at the downtown offices of Jeffrey Martin Thrace IV ... and should Mr. Thrace be expecting Mr. Johnson on that occasion?

How could he say 'no'? Of course he would attend.

The invitation also had mentioned something about an award of some sort was going to be presented. However, being a relatively modest man, Paul did not inquire into that facet of things. Besides, he only had a few more days to wait before everything would be revealed to him.

Around 9:00 a.m. on Thursday morning, Mr. Thrace's office called informing Mr. Johnson that a limousine would be by to collect him and bring him to the scheduled brunch. How considerate, Paul thought.

Picking him up certainly wasn't necessary. Nonetheless, the offer was a very nice gesture ... very much appreciated ... so, why not?

This kind of thing had never happened to Paul before. In general, he lived a fairly austere and disciplined life ... quite plain really, and, therefore, Paul didn't run in the sort of circles where brunches, limousines, awards, or the rich and the powerful were common companions of his.

However, every so often, Paul saw nothing wrong with 'living' a little as long as things didn't get out of hand. Besides, Divinity does work in mysterious ways, and, perhaps, the invitation might represent an opening that would permit Paul to gain access to opportunities which would enable him to begin to spread the Word of God in new ways and among other groups of people beyond his current horizons.

Paul had nothing against rich or powerful people. The laws of normal statistical distribution demanded that someone had to be rich and/or powerful. Moreover, what were these laws of probability and statistics other than God's Artwork made manifest?

More importantly Paul thought, sometimes people were so caught up in concentrating on all the things the rich and powerful possessed that few people ever stopped to reflect on what these people might not have ... such as peace of mind or a sense of purpose beyond their businesses and affairs of office. Perhaps, Paul could be of some small service to such people ... nothing big, just a subtle presence that, sooner or later, might help induce someone to move a little closer to his or her Lord.

He couldn't image what the award was all about. Yes, Paul's religious center did offer a limited amount of help within his own small neighborhood but hardly anything approaching Mother Theresa's efforts or struggles.

Possibly, his weekly newspaper column was having more of an impact than he realized. If so, that, certainly, would be a welcome surprise ... especially, when, so often, he wondered if there was anyone 'out there' who was paying attention to what he was writing.

At 10:30 a.m., the limousine arrived. Paul was ushered into the vehicle by the chauffeur and, then, was whisked away to the 11:00 a.m. appointment.

Once he arrived at Mr. Thrace's flagship building, he was taken to a private elevator that went straight to the penthouse suite. The 100- story journey was quick, quiet, and smooth.

When the door of the elevator opened at its destination, Paul was met by Mr. Thrace's personal secretary and led through a complex of rooms before entering a doorway which opened to a huge, beautifully decorated office. Coming toward him was Mr. Thrace, who wore an elegant blue suit and a very warm, engaging smile.

He said: "Thank you very much for coming Mr. Johnson. I'm sure you are a very busy man, and I appreciate your having made time for me. Please, let's sit over here," and he directed Paul to an area that was set off by several plush leather couches and matching easy chairs.

They sat down and Paul took a brief visual tour of the office before returning his attention to Mr. Thrace. "This sure is quite an office you have here, Mr. Thrace, and I must say I am rather nonplused about being invited, but I do want to thank you for your kindness."

Mr. Thrace moved his hand back and forth, as if to say ... 'really, this is nothing'. He, too, quickly gave his office the once-over and said: "Well, this place is not as nice as some others in the city that I have been in, but we like to call it home," and he smiled in a sort of self-effacing manner.

Mr. Thrace continued on: "I hope you don't mind Mr. Johnson, but I have taken the liberty of ordering for both of us. I'm sure there will be a number of things from which you can choose even if not everything is to your taste. In any event, the food, such as it is, should be here shortly."

Paul nodded a gracious 'not at all'. He sat back and, once again, surveyed the room.

Mr. Thrace interrupted Paul's inspection with: "I'm going to get right to the point, Mr. Johnson. The reason I have brought you here is because of my daughter."

Paul was caught off guard: "I'm sorry, you said your daughter. I don't understand."

"Well, Mr. Johnson ... ah, do you mind if I call you Paul? ... and please, it's Jeff."

"Of course, by all means, and, Jeff it is," Paul added with a self-conscious laugh.

Jeff said: "The last couple of years, I have been pretty worried about my child Stacey. She's 17 and has been going through a lot of things, as do most teenagers, and, well, I'm sure you would agree, Paul, we live in perilous times."

Paul replied: "Amen to that, brother."

"In any event, my daughter began to pick up some very disturbing habits and ideas ... at least to me and my wife these things were quite disturbing and upsetting. We couldn't control her because, like the rest of the Thrace lineage, when Stacey sets her sights on a certain goal, well, there's almost no stopping her."

Paul nodded his head. A thought ran through his mind as to where this all might be leading -- a request for an intervention of some kind?

The conversation was interrupted when a portable dining table was wheeled in and maneuvered to the area where Paul and Jeff were sitting. Stainless steel covers were removed from several of the dishes, Mr. Thrace was asked if there was anything else he wished, and when the answer was: "No, thank you, Miles," the man left the room.

Jeff invited Paul to help himself. A few minutes of silence followed as the two filled their plates with selections from among the various dishes.

Paul began to eat and listen. Jeff spoke between bites.

“Things had pretty much reached a crisis point with our Stacey. She was arguing with us all the time. She was rejecting the values which we had tried, as best we could, to instill in her during her formative years. She was behaving in ways that, quite frankly, Paul, were very alarming, if not downright offensive, to my wife and me.”

“I hear you, Jeff ... believe me, I hear what you are saying,” Paul commented.

Jeff nodded an acknowledgment of Paul’s words and continued on: “We took her to see counselors. We put her in, and took her out of, a number of private schools, and none of this worked.

“Stacey’s heart and ears were closed to us. My wife and I were desperate.

“We didn’t know what to do. We didn’t know where to turn. We didn’t know with whom to talk about this.

“Our friends were kind of keeping their distance from us. Moreover, they had told their kids to stop hanging around Stacey.

“I can remember something I read a long time ago ... I forget where ... in college maybe. It was a story about a stone that was placed in a garden, and over the years the stone began to take on the beautiful smells of its surroundings. However, somewhere along the line, the garden got destroyed, and the stone which had been part of the garden was used in the construction of an outhouse, and with time, the stone began taking on the smells of its new residence ... the whole idea being, I guess, that people, like stones, absorb some of the qualities of the environments in which they spend time.”

Paul smiled. “What a wonderful analogy,” he said. “I believe I will use that in one of my upcoming talks.”

Jeff continued on: “Well, as bad as things got, and just when we didn’t think things could possibly get any worse, the bottom kind of dropped out. Stacey became more and more removed from us and pretty much everything we had struggled to teach her over the years ... I’ll spare you the details, Paul, of all that happened.”

Paul gave a look of commiseration. “Jeff, please, is there something that I can do to help out here?”

Jeff's face, which had been distorted with pain, suddenly brightened. "No, Paul, you have already done it. That's the miracle of this whole sad state of affairs. You have managed to turn our Stacey around. She's a completely different person since you've entered the picture."

Paul was confused. "I don't believe I know or have ever met your daughter, Jeff, so, I'm not quite sure how I could have altered the situation any."

"Actually," Jeff said, "your help came in the form a combination of things -- part of it involved the talks you give down at your center; part of Stacey's transformation came as a result of your weekly newspaper column, and part of it was the result of discussions that Stacey had with young people whom you have influenced.

"Stacey, finally, has returned to her old self, again, thanks to you," Jeff said with gratitude.

"This is why I invited you here today," Jeff added. "This is why I wanted to present you with an award of recognition ... and, incidentally, there is a check for \$100,000 dollars which accompanies that award."

Jeff reached into a briefcase which was on a small table by his chair. He pulled out a framed parchment, a check, and handed both of them to Paul, saying: "Both Mrs. Thrace and I wish to say: 'thank you from the bottom of our hearts.'

"Quite frankly, we would be willing to pay ten times that much if it would help ensure that you could continue to do your good work." Jeff leaned back against his chair and watched Paul look at the framed award and the cashier's check before remarking: "We are so impressed with the way things turned out, we were hoping you might be willing to talk to the children of our friends as well, who recently have been indicating that all is not well in Shangri-la as far as their youngsters are concerned."

Paul shook his head and kept saying: "I'm overwhelmed. I had no idea."

A brief silence ensued. Finally, Paul put the award and the check to one side and asked: "Was there anything in particular that I said or that she read which may have been of particular importance to Stacey?"

"Paul, actually, Stacey mentioned quite a few things," replied Jeff. "However, the words which come to mind are: "dogmatic, rigid, intolerant, unforgiving, sexist, narrow, hard-hearted, divisive, inhumane, and egocentric."

Jeff seemed to be going through the list to see if there was anything which had been left out. When he was fairly satisfied that the list was complete, he said: "That's about it."

Paul was totally lost. "I guess I don't understand what you're saying Jeff."

"Pretty simple, really," Jeff replied. "You see, Paul, my wife and I are atheists, and Stacey was becoming very interested in spirituality, and this interest of hers was causing a lot of havoc in the Thrace household until you came along.

"You were so arrogant and overbearing about who was going to Hell and who was going to go to Heaven, and you spoke so disparagingly about anyone who didn't believe as you did, and you were so judgmental about everyone and everything, and you were so inflexible about issues of right and wrong, and there was so little room in your lexicon for words like 'love, kindness, compassion, forgiveness, tolerance, patience, and empathy', that Stacey got totally turned off to the whole idea of spirituality, and she is back in the fold as a fully committed atheist.

"So, once again, Paul, I doff my cap to you, and we are wondering if you would have any free time to be able to come out to our house this weekend to give one of your talks to the children in our neighborhood? We've got a lot of atheist friends who are becoming very nervous about their children's budding interest in spirituality, and we are sure that you are just the remedy for their dilemma."

Etymology

A group of people had gathered at the home of their spiritual guide. Following prayers, songs, chanting, and a eulogy in remembrance of mystics of earlier days, the meeting was opened up for discussion.

“So,” the teacher inquired, “what would you like to reflect upon this evening? What food for thought can we offer you?”

As various members of the group were wondering what issues or concerns should be put forward for consideration, one of the individuals present, a newcomer, said: “I’ve heard different descriptions concerning the essential nature of human beings, and, sometimes, I find myself confused. Although there are similarities and commonalities among such descriptions, there also seem to be important differences in what is said. Anything you care to comment on this topic would be very helpful to me.”

The teacher raised his eyebrows in a display of interest. “This is a very good question.”

He lowered his head and was silent for a few seconds, and, then, he raised his head and said: “Why don’t we see what people here have to say about your question?”

Someone quipped: “Isn’t that like asking the blind to lead the blind?”

The teacher and the rest of the group laughed. When the laughter had died down, the teacher replied: “Not necessarily. You know, according to some native spiritual traditions, when you sit in a circle as we are doing, then, the spiritual and creative energy of the gathering often becomes focused at the center, and, sometimes, as a result, a very elegant and educational process transpires. Therefore, as is the case with native spiritual traditions, why don’t we allow ourselves to be open to some of the possibilities of the moment?”

The teacher paused briefly and then asked of the group in general: “How would you describe the essential nature of a human being?” Silence descended upon the group as everyone became preoccupied with the question which had been placed before them. After a minute had passed, a woman asked: “Is it all right to tell a joke that might be related to this issue?”

“Why not?” the teacher said rhetorically and encouraged the woman to go ahead.

“Maybe you’ve heard this before or maybe in a different version, but, anyway, there was this mystic who used to travel about the town proclaiming: ‘I am greater than God, I am greater than God.’ Naturally, the mystic’s words were very, very upsetting to the religious orthodoxy, and they decided to drag the offending wretch before a tribunal and demand that the miscreant recant.

“When the mystic stood before the stern-looking judges, one of the jurists thundered down at the poor fool before them: “Yes or no, have you been going all about town claiming you are greater than God?”

“Yes,” the man said in a manner which suggested the judge was belaboring the obvious.

“That is blasphemous,” all three judges said in unison. “Not really,” the man retorted.

“Young man,” one of the judges said, “Are you so hopeless that you fail to understand nothing is greater than God?”

“You’ve got it, Your Worship,” replied the man.

A quizzical look appeared on the judge’s face, and, then, he gave the smile of a debater who believes he is about to score points: “What ... are you saying that we correctly understand that you are hopeless, or are you saying that you fail to understand that nothing is greater than God, or both?” the judge said triumphantly as he leaned back against his plush chair with a high backrest, looking left and right at his colleagues.

“Actually, none of the possibilities you mention are what I meant,” the man replied. “I was mistaken. I thought you understood what I was getting at when you asked your question. Indeed, nothing is greater than God, and, no one knows better than me that I am nothing, so, therefore, I must be greater than God.”

The man thought a bit more and added: “This really is just classical logic, gentlemen ... quite elementary, really, although some people may wish to quibble that the idea of ‘nothing’ has undergone a change of reference as one goes from premise to premise and, then, to the conclusion. However, as we mystics often like to say ... well, me anyway ... it’s all a matter of perspective. The perspective or intention through which one says things is very important. So, now, I trust you all will understand in what sense I am speaking when I claim that ‘I am greater than God’”

Everybody, including the teacher, enjoyed the story. The teacher commented with: "There is a great deal of truth in that story. Thank you for sharing it with us," and, then, he looked around and said: "Who's next?"

A man sitting next to the woman who had told the joke spoke up. "Your earlier reference to 'food for thought' and the story we just heard reminded me of a description that I once heard concerning the essential nature of human beings ... namely, we are like onions.

"In other words, when we begin to take a look at our nature and try to determine what, if anything, actually belongs to us, the reality of the human condition is that after we get done peeling away the physical body, the mind, our talents, abilities, and social relationships and come to realize these all are made possible by, and through, God, then, really, when we get to the heart of the matter, like an onion, there is nothing left to us."

The teacher gave a warm smile to the answer. "Yes, yes, this is correct in so many ways."

At this point, a younger man said: "I actually read something once which, to me at least, sounds very different than the onion analogy, but to keep the theme of food going, the object which was used to give expression to human nature was a peach. This approach emphasized that a peach has two aspects, an outer fruit that is manifest and an inner core around which the fruit grows and from which the outer portion receives certain benefits and protections.

"Furthermore, the peach pit is what makes a peach a peach rather than something else. The core represents the capacity of the peach ... its potential.

"If one accepts this peach analogy, then, the essence doesn't really seem like it is nothing. After all, seemingly, different people exhibit different spiritual capacities just like they exhibit an array of physical characteristics, intellectual abilities, artistic talents, and so on.

"Unless one wants to say that we are identical to God, which to my understanding, no real mystic says, then, presumably, there is something more than nothingness at the heart of human nature. Well, this is what I read anyway," he concluded with a sudden bout of self-awareness when he realized the teacher had been listening attentively to what he was saying.

The teacher shook his head in admiration. “Wherever you read this, son, the author is on the right track. What has been said just now is very important ... very important.”

The newcomer who had first raised the question about human nature said: “I have liked everything that has been said so far, but would you say something on this topic?”

The teacher tilted his head at a slight angle and raised his hand pointing in the direction, first, of the woman who told the joke, and, then, toward the onion-man next to her, and, then, to the peach of a young man: “These three people have spoken very elegantly. I don’t know what I could add.”

The newcomer implored the teacher: “Please?”

The teacher thought for a moment and, finally, said: “There is one thing which does come to mind on this matter. There was this fellow in Mexico who was a gardener, and he had spent his whole life experimenting with various grafting techniques, and I seem to recall he made a big splash down there when he was able to successfully cross a peach with an onion, and they referred to him as the ‘pe-on’ man. This is where the origin of the word ‘peon’ comes from, and you people here may or may not know that peon is Spanish for ‘servant’.

As people were mulling over the teacher’s comments, one of the people in the group who was a linguist and a history buff said: “Sir, I don’t mean to contradict what you are saying, but, really, that is not the correct etymology of the term ‘peon’ and, unfortunately, I think your history is, shall we say, a little shaky, too.”

The teacher laughed and had a twinkle in his eye when he said: “Etymologically and historically you may be correct, but what I have just said is, nonetheless, spiritually true. Human essence is really a something which is nothing or a nothing which is something ... depending on your point of view, and in either case human essence exists to serve Divinity.”

Crisis

The President was woken in the early hours of the morning. Something which couldn't wait until the noon briefing must be serious indeed.

She had been taken to the Situation Room without comment, and there, waiting for her, were: the Joint Chiefs of Staff, her National Security Advisor, the Directors of the CIA and FBI, the head of the National Security Association, her Chief of Staff, the Press Secretary, most of the Cabinet members, and a few individuals who she didn't recognize right away but who, presumably, had the appropriate security clearance.

As she entered the room, everyone stood and said in unison: "Good morning, Madam President." She acknowledged their salutations with a nod of her head and took the seat at the head of the large table.

"Be seated, ladies and gentleman," the President said.

She poured herself some coffee from the urn in front of her, took a sip to help clear the cobwebs of sleep and asked: "All right What's going on?"

Her eyes took a quick tour around the table, and she seemed to encounter nothing but puzzled looks until she reached her Chief of Staff who had his game face on. She reversed her tour, just to confirm her impression that everyone else was as much in the dark as she was and then came back to her Chief of Staff.

With an air of impatience, she said: "Well?" as her gaze settled on her Chief of Staff. He shifted in his seat, obviously uncomfortable with what he was about to say.

"We've got a real crisis on our hands," he replied. He followed up his opening salvo with: "I've taken the liberty of calling all of you here because something has come to my attention that just couldn't wait until the scheduled noon briefing."

"The Middle East, again?" the President asked with a sense of urgency. Her Chief of Staff shook his head in the negative.

She paused for a moment, gulped, and inquired: "Has there been a terrorist incident of some sort?"

Her Chief of Staff responded with: "It's too early to tell whether there is a terrorist angle to this. That possibility is being explored as we speak."

He looked at the President in a grim manner and managed to stammer: "There has been a series of verified outbreaks of happiness recorded in several states over the last 24 hours, in particular, and, more generally, there have been anecdotal accounts of such outbreaks that have been surfacing over the last six months."

The head of the Center for Disease Control said with a note of alarm: "I'm sorry. I didn't quite hear what you said. There has been an inexplicable series of what kind of outbreaks?"

"Happiness," the Chief of Staff said through clenched teeth.

One of the members of the Joint Chiefs exploded with: "What kind of an idiot are you, getting us all up in the middle of the night, wasting our time with some nonsense about 'happiness outbreaks'?"

The President's Chief of Staff bristled and shot back: "You military types lack both imagination and an understanding of how this country works."

He was about to go on when the President put her hand up and said, in an imploring voice: "Gentlemen, gentlemen, please."

She turned to her Chief of Staff and said: "Bob, we've been friends for a long time, and I have never known you to be frivolous or an alarmist, but I think I can speak for most of us around this table when ... how shall I say this ... well, happiness is not usually the sort of issue which brings us to the Situation Room."

With concern in her eyes for her long time friend, she said: "Are you feeling okay?"

Her Chief of Staff sighed. "I know what I am saying sounds crazy, but let me try to fill you in on some of what has been happening."

He motioned to one of the aides, and a map of North America became visible on the wall facing the President. There were a number of small red circles on the map positioned in various geographical regions.

"The red circles," he began, "designate areas where outbreaks of... of" ... he took a deep breath and continued: "of a strange kind of happiness have been reported during the last half year. The concentrated circle of red here" -- and he pointed to the map -- "mark the incidents that have been documented within the last day."

He was about to go on when the voice of the Attorney General broke in: "Sorry to interrupt, Bob, but I seem to recall that 'pursuit of

happiness' was one of the truths which were considered to be self-evident in the Declaration of Independence, and while, off the top of my head, I do not recall any specific mention of happiness appearing in the Constitution, nonetheless, many commentators believe that the idea of happiness is quite consistent with the principle of promoting the General Welfare which does appear in the prologue to our Constitution. I don't see the problem."

"Believe me, Mr. Attorney General," said the Chief of Staff, "I feel fairly confident that the composers of the Declaration of Independence, as well as the framers of the Constitution, likely would have found the kind of happiness which, recently, we have begun to place under surveillance to be far too starry-eyed for even their idealistic tastes. In fact, perhaps the whole exercise of constructing a constitution might have been considered irrelevant if the kind of happiness to which I am referring were a common phenomenon back then."

He nodded to the same aide as before, and the map of North America was replaced with a huge picture of a man who was obviously extremely happy. The Chief of Staff winced somewhat as he looked at the picture -- the condition seemed so alien and unnatural.

Like a reluctant but obsessed voyeur observing the carnage of a train wreck, he braced himself before, once again, looking at the photo, and, then, quickly looked away in pain and a sense of 'there but for the Grace of God ...'. Being the professional that he was, Bob proceeded with his presentation: "We believe this man may be our zero-vector for the infectious outbreak of happiness, although the entire scenario has become complicated somewhat because there are strong indications that multiple -- apparently independent source vectors -- may be involved in the phenomenon."

As he said this, other photos appeared on the screen, consisting of both men and women. All of the individuals depicted in the photos seemed to be in the throes of some consuming sort of ecstasy.

The looks on the faces of the people seated at the table suggested that no sane, rational person would dare to hazard even a wild guess as to how such a condition was possible. The gasps with which the photos had been greeted appeared to confirm the Chief of Staff's suspicion that the collective experience and expertise of the individuals gathered at

the meeting were being confronted with something totally foreign and unknown to them.

While continuing to speak, he turned over a few sheets in the dossier before him: "At this point, I'm afraid we don't have very much biographical information on the first individual you were shown ...or, for that fact, on any of the people you see on the screen ... other than that they seem to be people of mystery and secrecy, and these factors, in and of themselves, make these individuals 'people of interest' to our investigation. We've heard rumors that they like to stay out of the limelight for reasons of humility, but we believe this facade of humility may hide much more sinister intentions and ambitions."

He looked up from the folder before him, surveyed the people at the table and, then, spoke to the President: "What I can say is this -- oftentimes, when secondary vectors ... ah, people ... come into contact with these figures of mystery, the former individuals seem to become infected with some sort of deep-rooted sense of peace, contentment, intense happiness, and, as well" -- and here an ominous note crept into his voice -- "they begin to change in troubling ways."

The Director of the FBI spoke: "Bob, from our perspective at the Bureau, we would assume that peaceful, content, happy people would make good, law-abiding citizens and, therefore, should help crime statistics to decline. What's the troubling part of all this? We should have more problems like this."

Nodding in partial agreement with the FBI Director, the Chief of Staff replied: "Under normal circumstances, I would tend to agree with you, Jim, and I must admit that these people do appear, as far as we have been able to determine, to be obeying the law, but what is bothersome about all of this is that those who are infected seem to lose interest in careers, money, economics, possessions, and politics ... I mean, even though they usually have jobs, pay their bills, and so on, their commitment to the former items seems to be very superficial."

One of the President's economic advisors spoke at this point: "I think I see where you might be going with all this, Bob. Many studies have shown that much of our national economy is dependent on people who spend money in an attempt to pick up their depressed spirits, or to allay a sense of existential restlessness, or out of boredom concerning life, or to

enhance their social standing, or to acquire power, or because they want what they want when they want it, or to attract the opposite sex.”

Bob pointed a finger at the economic advisor, smiled, and said: “Bingo.” As he nodded in appreciation toward the man who had just spoken, the Chief of Staff said: “If you will permit me to complete the picture which you have begun to draw, Eric, our concern is this, Madam President ... if the sort of happiness about which I am informing you begins to spread, well, our GDP is likely to take a big hit. People who are content and happy with life are not the kind of people we can depend on year after year to go on buying and spending money. If this outbreak of happiness is not contained right away, we could be talking about an extended recession ... maybe even a major depression ... in just a few months, perhaps only weeks.”

As Bob’s words began to sink in, the member of the Joint Chief of Staff who had spoken earlier said: “I am sorry, Bob, for my earlier, hasty judgment, and I hope you will take into account the sort of stress we have been operating under over at the Pentagon and accept my apology for my previous remarks.”

Bob shook his head in a manner which indicated ‘no-problem’ and said: “It’s perfectly okay. I do understand.”

The General acknowledged the acceptance of his apology with a wave of his hand and continued: “I do grasp the serious implications for our country in relation to what you are saying, Bob, but has anyone considered the possibility that there is an upside to this as well? I mean, if we could study this phenomenon and master it, we might be able to use this happiness contagion to destabilize the economies of countries that are unfriendly to us. This could be a lot more effective in softening up an enemy than the deployment of any number of armed divisions might be ... not to mention the way in which the lives of our men and women in uniform could be saved and protected through the use of such a strategy.”

A political advisor to the President joined in the discussion at this juncture: “I don’t know about the viability of the General’s suggestion ... although I’m sure we could earmark an extra billion, or so, for increased Defense spending in the next budget so that we could explore some of those possibilities ... but I have a more immediate and practical concern.

“Content, happy people are not likely to be interested in making sure they get a piece of the financial/material pie which the government controls, and, therefore, if this happiness outbreak were to become an epidemic, we could be looking at a substantial shortfall in future campaign contributions.”

Shaking a finger at the people sitting around the table, he added: “Ladies and gentlemen, I don’t need to spell out for you what that might mean for all of our careers in public service. People who do not depend on their government representatives for pork barrel kickbacks, or for political favors, or for help in being happy, or for making sure that things are run in accordance with their biases and prejudices, well, why would those people want to give us any campaign money?”

Grunts and groans of agreement were heard around the table. This was a real crisis.

The Secretary of Defense said: “Madam President, should we raise the Def-Con level in response to this situation?”

The President reflected on the Defense Secretary’s suggestion and remarked: “Let’s hold off on that for the moment, Mr. Secretary. Before making that call, I would like to hear from some of the other people around the table.”

She looked over at the head of FEMA and said: “Dorothy, do you have anything to add to the discussion?”

The person in charge of the Federal Emergency Management Agency thought for a moment, trying to collect herself. She began with: “As you might expect, Madam President, a happiness epidemic is not something for which we have drawn up any contingency plans. I’m sorry to say we may have dropped the ball on this one.”

She paused for a moment and, then, turning to the Chief of Staff, she asked: “Do we have any Hazmat data on this? Has anyone tested the water in these affected regions for contaminants, or have there been any spills of hazardous wastes which might account for this anomalous happiness-behavior?”

“Maybe what we are dealing with here is a new, very subtle form of Bio-terrorism. Didn’t you allude to something of this sort when you first began laying this thing out for us, Bob?”

The Chief of Staff shook his head affirmatively. “Yes, that’s right, Dorothy. We have managed to place some undercover people in a few of the affected areas, and while the early reports indicate that something strange is going on, unfortunately, several of these agents have gone ‘native’ on us, and have resigned their positions ... apparently, peace, contentment, and happiness have become more important to them than being patriotic and observing their duty.”

Bob leaned back and looked toward the far end of his side of the table. He said: “I believe the NSA has been involved in the investigation of this situation, so, perhaps, Dr. Davis, as acting-director, you could shed some light on the matter.”

Dr. Davis started slowly: “Well, there is much I cannot say at the present time because not everyone in the room has sufficient security clearance for a complete briefing to be given, but a full report is being prepared for the President. However, I can say the following ... in conjunction with the National Institute of Health, the National Science Foundation, and the Center for Disease Control, we have done an extensive battery of biological and mental testing, including an array of tox-screens in relation to this phenomenon, and, quite frankly, we are stumped.

“If there is an infectious agent involved, it doesn’t appear to be airborne ... at least not down to a micron level which would encompass such entities as viruses or even prions, nor does this vector-force appear to get transmitted through physical contact. But, apparently, association of some kind does appear to play a major, causative role ... although, as of yet, we still haven’t been able to figure out the epidemiology of this process.

“We may be dealing with a form of matter which is even more exotic than the so-called ‘dark matter’ about which the astrophysics community is so befuddled. In the meantime, we have put together an elite group of mathematicians and quantum physicists to develop models which may be able to account for what we are seeing ... but I don’t see a breakthrough coming out of this work any time soon ... hell, we don’t even know what quantum theory has to do with general relativity let alone consciousness, intelligence, creativity, choice, or ... or happiness.

“Alternatively, some of our investigations have been moving in the direction of several further possibilities involving either brainwashing or, maybe, the adverse after-effects of some form of sensory deprivation program which is inducing an artificial and pathological

happiness in those people who are being subjected to such a process. We are pursuing a number of hypotheses in this regard, but, at this point, we are not ready to make any final recommendations.

“Finally, our cryptologists have been studying some documents that have been found at, or near, the epicenter of these possibly contagious outbreaks. We feel fairly certain there is an elaborate system of code which is, somehow, connected to this whole thing ... possibly part of a psychological environment which might induce an unusual state of suggestibility ... in any event, using an algorithm consisting of certain prime numbers, we have been able to establish the presence of a variety of keywords and phrases such as: love, friendship, kindness, generosity, forgiveness, patience, compassion, empathy, honesty, sincerity, self- realization, the essential self, and so on, in the documents we have found, but, so far, we don’t know how all the pieces of the puzzle fit together.”

The Director of the NSA looked around the table somewhat warily and concluded with: “This is all I can say under the circumstances, Madam President. I’m sure you understand the reasons for my reticence.”

The President’s face remained impassive and inscrutable as she listened to the Director of the NSA. When he had finished, she said, generally, to the people assembled: “Anything else I should consider?”

Her Press Secretary said: “Madam President, already I’m coming under some aggressive questioning from a number of nationally recognized correspondents and columnists. Somehow, they have caught wind of the fact that something is going on in relation to a wave of happiness, peace, and contentment which seems to be sweeping selected, though, currently, de-limited areas of the country, and these journalists have, apparently, grasped the idea that this phenomenon, whatever its nature, may carry ramifications for the economy, national security, and the political stability of the country.

“I don’t know how much longer I can keep them at bay. I think we need a cover story of some sort. Maybe we could float the idea of a chemical spill which causes hallucinations and manic behavior.”

The head of the EPA chimed in with: “No, I don’t think that’s a good idea. We would have the environmentalists all over us wanting to know why we hadn’t taken precautions to protect the public from such toxic chemicals.

Moreover, they would want specific information on the chemical nature of the compound and who was manufacturing it and why.”

As they were all thinking about the exchange between the head of the EPA and the Press Secretary, one of the people near the end of the table opposite the President raised her hand for recognition. When the President encouraged her to speak, she said: “My name is Dr. Janice Holt. I’m with the National Institute of Health. I do research in neuro-biochemistry with special emphasis on the role that various neurotransmitters play in mental disorders.

“With respect to the Press Secretary’s concerns for a cover story, why don’t we just say, for the time being, that there is a newly discovered mental aberration which may be due to some sort of genetically transmitted problem affecting the formation of neurotransmitters in the frontal cortex of the brain, and we are studying the problem. We could say the happiness outbreak appears to be related to certain kinds of bipolar disorders but requires further study.

“Such an announcement will buy you time, Madam President, until you know what you are dealing with. Maybe the Press Secretary could make an announcement concerning the formation of some Foundation that is seeking to protect the mental health of the general public, and the announcement about the Foundation is being used to simultaneously publicize the President’s concern with this happiness-outbreak issue.”

When the woman from the NIH was done, one of the President’s political advisors said: “I like this idea. It is pro-active.

“It puts you, Madam President, in a good light, as a caring occupant of the Oval Office. It gives us plausible deniability because no one in the public knows squat about neuro-biochemistry anyway, and, therefore, they will have a hard time poking holes in what we are claiming. Maybe we could bring some people in from the pharmaceutical industry to participate in the studies conducted through this proposed Foundation and, thereby, pay back a few political IOUs. It seems like a win-win-win situation, Madam President.”

“Furthermore,” added the Chief of Staff, “if any of this happiness outbreak begins to spread in an alarming fashion or becomes too problematic, we can always hospitalize these individuals who are in the throes of too

much peace, contentment, and happiness in order to protect them against themselves, as well as to promote the general welfare of the public, which" -- nodding to the Attorney General -- "as you have pointed out, is entirely constitutional, so we will be able to keep the civil liberties people off our backs."

The President smiled agreeably with the way things were working out. She looked toward the Secretary of Defense and said: "We will maintain our present Def-Con status, but let's get everybody to follow through on this. The Press Secretary can get together with Dr. Holt from the NIH, as well as the heads from both the Center for Disease Control and FEMA, to work out the details of the Press Release. In addition, Bob, why don't you get together with some of the economic advisors and see if we can't figure out how to hide the money for all of this in an obscure line item for an upcoming bill that is likely to get passage through the House and Senate."

The President thought for a moment more to see if there was anything she had missed and, then, proclaimed: "The code name for our collective efforts to deal with these inexplicable outbreaks of happiness will be: Mysticism."

Finally, she stood up, saying: "Thanks, Bob, for organizing this, and I agree, if people begin to become as happy as the case studies about which you have briefed us ... or, if the general populace even begins to suspect there is such a reality, we will have a huge set of political and economic problems on our hands that we may not be able to control, so, we are going to need to be very vigilant about this issue."

She thanked everyone who attended the meeting and left the room. People everywhere would be able to sleep better as a result of political activities that morning.

Job Well Done

Satan was feeling depressed. There was entirely too much love and harmony in certain locations.

Furthermore, even in some of those areas where war or hardship prevailed, there were an alarming number of people who were becoming interested in spirituality. The situation was desperate.

He assembled his troops. The troops trembled because they could tell by Satan's body language, as well as the anger which shone from his eyes, that he was in one of his really foul moods... the kind which made his normal demeanor seem almost angelic.

He began talking with an almost overpowering intensity and urgency. The walls, floors, and ceiling shook in resonance with his every word.

"I'm entirely dissatisfied with your efforts," he said accusingly to the companions, associates, affiliates, followers, and newbies who had gathered at his behest.

He continued by saying: "More and more, I am hearing gut-wrenching reports about human contentment, or human spiritual realization, or human acts of forgiveness, generosity, and kindness."

With tears in his eyes, he stopped, blew his nose with a red, heat-resistant hanky, and as he was replacing the specially treated cloth in a back pocket, he said: "I don't know if you properly understand how such reports eat at my heart and cause me great anguish. When human beings are happy with God or engaged in seeking Divinity, then, for me, it is like existence has lost its purpose."

Thoughtfully, he scanned across the crowd. Here and there his gaze stopped, flowed into the eyes of an individual, then, moved on.

He shook his head in a dejected manner and said: "You know better than anyone about what ensues when life loses its purpose ... despair, depression, and emptiness are not far behind."

He raised his arm and extended his forefinger into the space above and proclaimed: "And, when it comes to issues of despair, depression, and emptiness, I say ... better humans than us."

The crowd broke into a thunderous ovation. Like hockey players paying tribute to a star player, the sound of pitchforks hitting against the floor reverberated throughout the room.

After several moments of bedlam, Satan signaled with his hands, and the noise gradually abated in compliance with his command. Playing the gathering like a fiddle, as he had done thousands of times previously, he smiled in his uniquely charming manner and said in his most entreating way: "If you care about me, if you have love in your heart for my mission, if you are desirous of my peace of mind or even your own, then, please, double, triple, or quadruple your efforts ... according to your capacity and circumstances ... and let's see if we can bring some real misery into the lives of human beings."

He extended his arms in front of him as if he were embracing the crowd and broke into a broad grin: "So, are you with me on this?" His question immediately brought a resounding "Yes!"

He laughed and cupped a hand near his ear, saying: "What? I can't hear you."

The sound of "Yes" became deafening. Satan beamed his appreciation, and the gathering began to disperse as individuals and small groups left the room with determination etched upon their faces.

As they marched from the gathering, many of them secretly were hoping that she or he would be able to come up with something which was ... well, devilish clever ... because they all longed to be honored with an eternal membership in the coveted Hug of the Month Club when some lucky denizen among Satan's cohorts would, as a reward for the most Satanically inspired strike against the enemy -- namely, humanity -- be embraced, at a public assembly, by the oldest and most infamous of those who sought to lead human beings away from God and spirituality. The task which lay before them was a daunting one, but Satan, once again, had fired up the troops into a state of feverish, delirious dedication and abandon.

Quite some time passed, and the occasion finally had arrived when the winner of this cycle's Hug of the Month award was to be bestowed. The finalists were seated on the stage, one on either side of Satan's brimstone throne, and there was a current of electricity running through the atmosphere of the hall in anticipation of hearing about the stirring deeds, stratagems, and courage of the nominees' own stories.

The MC for the evening was someone who, apparently, once had worked in television as a game show announcer, so he knew exactly how to warm

up an audience ... not that there was much need of this given the nature of the place where the celebration was being held. After the MC had laid out the groundwork for the evening's program, he turned to his left and shouted: "Now, let's hear from Contestant Number 1," and, as he said this, he urged the crowd to lend a nice round of applause.

The individual stood up somewhat tentatively, peered into the extremely bright and very hot, flood lights which bathed the stage, and nervously walked to the floor mike. Quickly finding his confidence, he said: "Simultaneously, I have managed to start up five different wars on four different continents, including, believe it or not, Antarctica."

A murmur of delight and awe rippled through the audience. The demon at the mike raised his hand indicating he was not through, and, when the crowd had settled down, he said: "And early reports suggest there have been numerous deaths and casualties, as well as the displacement of rather large population segments. The grief of those affected, I have been told, has been nothing short of breathtaking ... at least from our point of view."

The demon gave a farewell, triumphant salute to the crowd with both of his hands clasped above his head and returned to his seat. The audience thundered its approval.

The MC returned to stage center and announced: "Without further delay, let's bring on Contestant Nuuummmmbbber Twwwwwwwwoooooo, and he turned and pointed in the direction of his other left. The individual being pointed to by the MC bounded from his seat and practically ran the short distance to the microphone. He was anxious to tell his tale.

When the drama of the moment had built to an appropriate level, the demon paused, and, then, merely said: "I have spread dissension between husbands and wives." He was filled with pride for his accomplishment and started to return to his seat.

Satan commanded him to stop. He ordered the contestant to approach him. When the demon came to within a few feet of the throne, Satan rose and embraced the demon, and in doing so, he had announced this month's winner of the Hug award with its eternal membership perk.

There were shouts of protest from the audience. Sounds of disapproval could be heard rising up in different parts of the hall.

Satan glanced at the audience with nonchalance. He said: “So, you think someone who starts five wars on four different continents and, in the process, helps generate hundreds, if not thousands, of deaths, casualties, and refugees should be the winner?”

The audience was in a defiant and rebellious mood, and normally Satan found this becoming in individuals but not tonight. The crowd clearly did not understand the significance of the accomplishment of this month’s winner.

Satan requested silence, and the very act of making a request instead of a demand was such an anomaly, the gathering was shocked into silence. Satan had a million and one tricks up the sleeve of his smoking jacket.

“Look,” he said in a somewhat impatient manner, “wars always come to an end, and, furthermore, wars rarely encompass the whole world but tend to erupt in limited theaters of operation. Moreover, although some people do die in wars, the people who are wounded or the individuals who are displaced eventually get to resume their lives ... although, perhaps, with some degree of difficulty – which is, of course, an added bonus for our side.”

Satan let his words sink in, and, then, continued on: “But when someone spreads dissension between husbands and wives, every community, every city, every nation on the face of the Earth is affected. The quality of human life goes downhill, children often are abused and neglected, families ... the bedrock of community life ... are in constant chaos, disharmony, and misery as a result of such seeds of dissension, and, quite frequently, the wounds inflicted through this dissension never heal, remaining raw and painful for a lifetime and, therefore, are able to infect numerous generations with enmity and heartache.

“In fact,” he concluded, “if the truth be told, the work of the demon you all wanted to win tonight, the guy who helped start the wars, his work is made infinitely easier through the efforts of tonight’s real hero,” and he hugged the winner again.

The audience erupted with elation and thunderous roars of approval, regretting their earlier outbursts of immaturity. Man, they thought, this Satan really knows his stuff.

Becoming An Artisan

There once lived a person who was a sincere skeptic concerning the mystical path. In other words, although this individual was willing to allow for the possibility of truths and realities beyond the sensory, material realms, nevertheless, there were a lot of things concerning spirituality which didn't make a whole lot of sense to him and about which he puzzled.

For example, he wondered why mysticism seemed to be couched in so much secrecy. He didn't understand why there appeared to be such a hide-and-seek quality to the whole process ... that is, he didn't understand why the truths of the spiritual path just couldn't be laid out for everyone to see so that those who were interested could obtain what they needed.

In addition, he didn't really see the need for a teacher. Or, stated in an alternative way, he wondered why Divinity just didn't approach people directly through either their rational and/or their spiritual faculties rather than having to channel things through a mystical guide.

This man also had a variety of questions about philosophy, government, and science. However, the questions to which he kept returning were the ones he had concerning the mystical path, and these sort of questions seemed, for him at least, more important than the other kind of questions that preoccupied him from time to time.

Life being what it is, the mysteries of the spiritual kind often had to be put aside as he went about trying to earn a living and support his family. In fact, although this person was a hard worker, he, lately, had been encountering considerable difficulty trying to land a steady job because of the crumbling condition of the economy.

This person had a college degree, but he preferred working with his hands. Over the years, he had become fairly proficient in a wide variety of skills ... from light carpentry, to electrical work, and, as well, he had a smattering of mechanical aptitude.

Since he was a resourceful person, he often was able to scramble sufficiently well to earn enough money to pay rent, purchase food, and buy clothes for his family but not much more. Nonetheless, through a combination of factors ... including the lack of a union card ... he always seemed to be engaged in a financial high wire balancing act in which he worked without

a net, and, quite frequently, he wondered if he would be able to slip-slide his way along that financial wire and reach the temporary safety of the platform which signified that, for one more month, he had been able to pay his bills.

He had learned to be flexible and adaptable with respect to the jobs he took. Furthermore, he always was looking out for new opportunities ... things which either would allow him to develop additional skills or that might open up new career possibilities which offered more permanent job status.

Currently, he was, once again, in between jobs and was scouring the Internet, the newspaper classifieds, store windows, and job agencies, looking for work possibilities. The only thing currently available involved using his hands.

It was an apprenticeship position in a pottery shop. The job was located within a reasonable commuting distance from his house.

He called the indicated number and after several tries got through to the owner of the shop. She was an elderly woman who was getting too old for certain aspects of her business and was looking for someone who would help her out.

She couldn't afford to pay much more than minimum wage, but the work would be steady for the foreseeable future. Moreover, as a form of compensation for the low wages, she was prepared to train the person she hired to become a potter. She even indicated that if she found the right person, she would consider selling the business to that individual.

Due, among other things, to an increase in relatively wealthy clientele who, on the one hand, were looking for original works of art, and, who, on the other hand, were searching for certain kinds of pots to use in cooking and baking, the woman's business was more thriving than it had ever been. People were looking for products of durability and quality, and they were quite ready to pay good prices for the right sort of items.

The woman specialized in cooking pots. However, she was an expert craftsperson in all manner of pottery.

After talking with the woman, the man discussed the situation with his wife. He went over the pros and cons of the job possibility, and, eventually, they both decided that the job seemed to have considerable potential ... both short-term and long-term.

He phoned the owner of the shop again and said he would like to apply for the job. They arranged to meet the next afternoon, and, by the end of the day, he was hired as the woman's apprentice.

The woman was very meticulous in her training methods, and there was far more to learn than the man originally had anticipated. The woman wanted to impress on her newly hired apprentice that there were significant differences between pots that were mass-produced and those which were done in the traditional way, and, so, at the end of the first week, after he had been given enough information which would enable him to make a pot that would be similar in quality to the ones which were mass-produced, she had him fashion several baking pots. The process only took a short time, and when he completed the assignment, she had him set the pots aside on a storage shelf as a reminder of his first efforts.

After a number of years, he had become quite adept in all facets of making pots. The owner was quite pleased with his progress.

One day she informed her apprentice that she wanted to retire and, with certain reservations, she might be willing to turn the whole business over to him. She knew he was not a wealthy person and said she was prepared to take regular payments for the business until such time as it was completely paid for.

However, before she retired, she wanted to make sure the man really had mastered everything he needed to know about the making of pots. Her shop had developed a considerable reputation, and she didn't want to see all that hard work go to waste as a result of a decline in the quality of the pots which might be sold through the store in the future.

Consequently, she informed him that she wanted to be his first customer, and she commissioned him to make a special cooking pot ... one that was particularly difficult to make because, among other things, it had to impart a certain, precise taste to the foods which were cooked in it. This aspect of taste was very subtle, and if the pot was not made in just the right way, that taste would not be imparted even though the pot might be perfectly serviceable in every other respect.

The process for producing such a pot was very complicated and time-consuming. Among other things, not just any kind of clay could be used in making the pot. Furthermore, there were certain natural

ingredients that had to be prepared in an exacting manner and which had to be added at precisely the right time during the process, and, finally, the pot had to be kept in a kiln for an extended period at a carefully regulated temperature.

She had taught him everything he needed to know to accomplish the task. Now, however, she wanted to determine if the appropriate lessons had been learned.

If he was able to produce the desired pot, then, whatever reservations the woman had about turning the shop over to him would disappear. She would be able to retire with a clear conscience.

The man set about making the pot, and, nearly six weeks later, the pot was completed. Now the quality of the pot had to be tested.

The woman prepared some food to put in the pot. Since she had made more food than the pot could hold, she took several more pots down from the shelf and filled them as well. All three pots were covered and placed in the cooking oven.

An hour later, the oven was opened, and the woman set about removing the cooked food. Unfortunately, one of the pots had shattered, although the other two were intact.

After cleaning up the mess from the shattered container, the woman turned her attention to the other two pots. She took several wooden spoons and dipped each spoon into a different pot.

She tasted from the first spoon, and her nose wrinkled. She shook her head in a disapproving manner.

She tasted from the second spoon. A gleam came into her eyes, and her countenance radiated with approval.

Then, she invited her apprentice to dip two further spoons into the respective pots and taste the contents of the spoons just as she had done. Upon tasting, the apprentice's reactions were much as the shop's owner had been.

The shop owner turned to her former apprentice and said: "The pot which shattered was one of the two you had made when you first came here. It was made in haste and, as a result, was not able to withstand the heat of the oven.

“The pot that yielded the distasteful food was another pot you made shortly after you first arrived. Although it managed to survive the heat intact, nonetheless, it spoiled the taste of the food because of its poor quality. The average person might not have been able to notice the problem, but a true artisan would have detected the defect and its effect upon the food.

“The pot which contained the very tasty food was the one you just completed, and, I am happy to say it was made perfectly. So, you obviously have mastered everything that I tried to teach you, and you are no longer an apprentice, but now you are an artisan. Furthermore, I see no reason why we can’t go ahead and draw up the papers for transferring the shop to you.”

The man was very happy with the outcome of things and thanked her for all her help, knowledge, and patience across the years. He was excited and wanted to call his wife and tell her the good news.

The man was about to make the call when the woman stopped him, and said: “There is something more which I have to say to you.” The man put the phone down and waited for her to speak.

She said: “You not only know how to make pots, you also have the answer to some of your questions about the mystical path which you had when you first started working with me.”

The man was rather startled because he had never talked to the woman about such matters. While he was trying to figure out how she knew, she continued on.

“Many of the techniques that I have taught you are secret because if they were to fall into the hands of the wrong people who had little, or no, appreciation for the artistry of pot-making, they would exploit such knowledge by trying to cut corners and, in the process, produce pots which either were not able to withstand the heat or which imparted an offensive taste to the food. The same is true in mysticism.

“Secondly, just as it took time for you to learn the intricacies of pottery through acquiring insight, knowledge, and understanding in relation to an appropriate set of experiences, so, too, it takes time to learn the intricacies of the mystical path. One needs more than information in order to be able to accomplish this -- one also needs the right set of experiences, and, as well, one needs to work with someone who knows

how to utilize those experiences in order to help an apprentice develop a deeper understanding of what is needed to become an artisan.

“And the former point leads into my final comment. There are many books on pottery which are available in trade stores. You could have read all of those books and still not have understood what you have learned by interacting with me over an extended time. The learning which takes place between an artisan and her or his apprentice is much different than the learning that occurs when someone reads a book.

“You could not have made the pot you just did merely by reading books. There has been a special chemistry between the two of us which has developed over the years, and it is that chemistry which has found its way into the pot you just finished, and it is that chemistry which an artisan passes on to an apprentice and which transforms the apprentice into an artisan.”

The woman paused for a moment and then, said: “The questions you have had about the realm of spirituality were sincere ones, and Divinity responded to that sincerity by sending you to me. If you are ready and interested, perhaps, I could use my retirement to help you learn about the real purpose of life ... which, by the way, is not to make pots ... even ones of quality. Rather, the making of quality pots merely represents a worthwhile point of departure.”

Successor

There once was a mystical master who was nearing the end of his physical life on Earth and was going to inform the people of his spiritual community about the identity of the person who was to be his successor and, as such, continue to provide assistance to that community by, according to her or his capacity to do so, helping the members of that community to travel the path of infinite wisdom, compassion, and love. Of course, everyone in the community -- based on an individual's understanding of the mystical way-- had his or her own idea about who the successor might be.

Some thought the successor should be chosen from among those people who prayed the most. Others believed the successor should be selected from among those individuals who performed the most austerities such as fasting, night vigils, being in seclusion, and so on. Still others thought the successor should be from among those who were most learned in sacred scripture and spiritual traditions.

The teacher was aware of these differences of opinion concerning the matter of succession, and although he already knew who would be his successor, he wanted to provide a demonstration that would give the people of this spiritual community something on which to reflect. Consequently, he told the members of the community to assemble the next morning and that everyone would be required to perform a task in relation to a test which was to be given on that occasion.

The next morning, all of the members of the community came together at the appointed time. The spiritual leader of the group addressed them, saying: "The task which I would like each of you to perform is to go to the chicken coup, select a hen, go wherever you like in order to slay your choice of chickens and then, finally, bring your slain chicken back here and await further instructions.

"The only requirement which I will impose on this whole process is that you must be sure no one sees where, how, or precisely when you sacrifice your hen. Go, now, and do as you have been instructed."

The members all eagerly set about their assigned task. First, they spent some time at the chicken coup, taking special care to try to intuit which of the hens would constitute the choice that would be most pleasing to their spiritual leader. After making their selections, each of the members went off in different directions trying to make sure she or he would find an

isolated location where no one from the spiritual community, or even a chance by-passer, was likely to happen upon the details of their individual sacrifices.

One by one, the individuals performed the required task. One by one, the people made their way back to where the spiritual master was waiting. One by one, the teacher received the offerings with a nod and a smile saying each time: "Ah, yes."

Finally, all but one of the followers had returned from performing the assigned duty. Eventually, even this person showed up but with the chicken still alive.

The spiritual master spoke to the person in a very stern voice. "I thought my instructions were quite explicit. Was there something unclear in what I said to you about this task?"

The follower humbly looked down at her feet and said: "No, sir, your instructions were quite explicit."

The spiritual leader, his gaze still piercing and commanding, then, said: "So, why have you failed in your task?"

Looking even more crestfallen, the woman began crying and said: "Sir, I tried to do as I had been commanded, but there was no place that I could find where God would not witness the method, place or time of my act, so, I have returned as you now see me."

The spiritual leader's countenance remained severe for a fraction of a second longer, and, then, his face broke into a radiant smile. "My daughter," he said, "you have, indeed, done well, and you have not failed, for, you alone, among all of the people who sought to fulfill this task, have done the right thing, and your actions and understanding clearly show why you will be my spiritual successor."

Turning to the rest of the community, he said: "Now, come, let us roast these chickens that you have slain and prepare a feast in honor of this occasion inviting neighbors and strangers alike to join us."

The lone, surviving chicken seemed to have a smile of relief on her beak. However, since chicken beaks are notoriously difficult to read, one can't be entirely sure about whether, or not, such a smile was actually present.

Battling An Enemy

During an engagement between opposing forces, two representatives of the respective, warring parties found themselves face to face in a space which was away from the main hostilities. Each drew his sword and began to circle his opponent looking for an opening.

Since each of the combatants were both very skilled, the thrust and counterthrust went on for some time, with their swords finding nothing but shield, sword, or empty air. Suddenly, after quite some time had passed, one of the combatants tripped as he was warding off a blow and fell to the ground.

The way he fell knocked the wind out of him, and, as this happened, he lost both his sword and his shield. He was at the mercy of his opponent who moved in for the kill.

Knowing he had lost, the man on the ground saw the other man approach to within just a foot or so. The man standing over him began to prepare his sword to terminate the life of his fallen opponent. In the brief instant before the sword was to be thrust downward in a fatal blow, the fallen man, in one last defiant act, spit in the face of his would-be assailant.

When he was spat upon, a look of rage quickly came across the face of the man with the sword. Inexplicably, the man with the sword stepped backward away from the man on the ground and lowered his sword, saying: "Go. Your life is spared."

Not quite believing the turn of events and rather mystified about what was happening, the man slowly but warily got up. As he did so, he inquired: "I don't understand you. You had me beaten, you were preparing to kill me, and, when I did the only thing I could to show my contempt for you by spitting in your face before you slew me, you, first, became angry, but, then, you backed away and told me I was free to go. Why?"

The victor in the sword fight acknowledged the accuracy of his opponent's account of the situation and said: "I admit that when you spat in my face my ego became enraged and commanded me to cut you to ribbons for your insolent act. However, as the anger grew, my heart recognized that my ego was a more dangerous enemy than you were. Consequently, my essential Self counseled me to first tend to my inner, closer enemy -- namely, my anger and my ego -- and, let the external enemy

go. Victory with respect to this inner, spiritual battlefield is far more important than the worldly one with which you and I have been engaged.”

The Other Side

Two travelers were resting near a path which wound its way through the woods. As they rested, they shared some food and water as well as some memories from the past.

One of the men began talking about an experience he once had during a journey very much like the one on which the two were now engaged. He said the series of events happened about ten or fifteen years ago.

At that time the man was suffering from a rather intense case of wanderlust, roaming from place to place but not quite sure why. For the most part, at least in those days, he liked to travel alone.

At a certain point during his journey, the man encountered a mysterious stranger. She was sitting by the side of the trail on which he was traveling.

The seated stranger seemed to radiate an aura of wisdom and knowledge. Therefore, the traveler decided to stop for awhile and engage the individual in conversation. Perhaps the traveler might discover why she seemed to have such a compelling, commanding aura.

The stranger was friendly and, soon, the two struck up a conversation. Although the mysterious individual was humble and not at all seeking to dominate the conversation, the traveler quickly recognized that the person had a deep understanding of life and the human condition ... a wisdom which the stranger dispensed with both ease and clarity.

Wishing to benefit further from such knowledge, the traveler asked the mysterious stranger which way she was going. The elderly woman informed him she was going in the same direction as the man was traveling, and, when he heard this, he asked for permission to keep her company during her journey.

The woman said: "I fear you will not be able to adhere to the condition which I would impose on you if we were to travel together."

Not wishing to miss the opportunity to be able to listen to the woman's insights concerning life, the man assured her: "Noble lady, I will gladly submit to whatever condition you place on me."

The woman looked at him intensely for a brief instant, looked away, and replied: "All right. I will permit you to travel with me, but the

condition which I place on you is that no matter what may happen along the way, you can ask me no questions. You must be content with whatever I may say independently of any questions you might have. If you cannot comply with this condition, then, we will have to go our separate ways. Is this acceptable to you?"

The man nodded his head eagerly and said: "Yes."

The two individuals arose and began to walk along the path. From time to time, the woman would speak about this or that observation concerning their journey together, but, quite frequently, the two walked in silence.

At a certain juncture, they came to a beach area near a very wide river. On the sand was a fairly large, unattended, row boat.

The woman approached the boat, picked up a staff-sized, stout piece of driftwood and began pounding a hole in the bottom of the boat. When she had completed making the hole, she put the stick down and continued to walk along the beach.

The man was upset by what he had just witnessed for the woman had damaged a perfectly good boat ... one which, undoubtedly, was needed by its owner. He stopped the woman and asked, somewhat, angrily: "Why did you poke a hole in that boat? It was not your boat, and, surely, this was a very unjust act."

The woman looked at him with an unruffled gaze and said: "I told you before we even began our journey together that you might not be able to abide by the condition which I would impose on you, and here we are hardly half a day together, and you already have broken your promise not to ask questions of me no matter what took place."

The man was taken aback by the woman's peaceful demeanor through which such a pointed comment had arisen. He felt confused, alternatively looking at the damaged boat and, then, back at the woman.

He was caught between, on the one hand, his sense of the injustice of what had just occurred and, yet, on the other hand, his desire to continue accompanying the woman and listen to her words which he found quite profound and thought-provoking.

The man lowered his head and stammered: "Yyyess! I ... I did make such a promise to you, and ... and ... and I must admit I am quite puzzled

by what has just occurred, but I ask for your forgiveness and request that you continue to let me accompany you a while longer.”

A soft look spread across the woman’s previously stern face, and she said: “Okay. I’ll not invoke my right to leave your company despite your having broken the condition of our journeying together. But, you must promise me, yet again, that you will not ask me any questions irrespective of what happens.”

The man’s expression registered great relief and happiness. Once more he eagerly agreed to not ask any questions of her.

Later, in the early afternoon, and after stopping for a meal of fruit and bread by the side of the path while the woman spoke about life, the two individuals came upon an extremely handsome youth who also was quite self-absorbed. The woman walked over to the youth and, quite inexplicably, struck a blow to the young man’s temple, killing him instantly.

The man traveling with her was stunned into silence. He was quiet for a time, and, then, no longer able to contain himself, he pointed at her accusingly, and said: “How could you do such a terrible thing?”

The man was about to go on when the woman stopped him with a withering look in her eyes. There was something terrifying in the way she stared at the man, and the words in his throat died as completely as the young man lying on the ground.

Still transfixing the man with her commanding eyes, the woman spoke: “Once again, you have broken your promise. Can you tell me why I should not leave you alone at this very instant?”

Clearly, the man did not understand what was going on. While he could not overlook the killing of the youth, nevertheless, somehow his heart was urging him to maintain company with this woman for he felt a strange sort of transformation taking place within him as he listened to the woman’s commentary on life’s meaning.

He felt disgusted with himself for doing so, and, yet, he found himself asking for the woman’s forgiveness. Moreover, he started to cry and begged her to be permitted to continue on with her.

The woman’s fierce gaze lightened somewhat. A strange sparkle came into her eyes and a slight smile came to her lips.

“All right,” she said. “I will give you one last chance. But, rest assured, if you ask any more questions, then, we will part company. Is that understood?”

The man hung his head, looking at his feet, and slowly shook his head in the affirmative. He didn't know what was happening to him, but, for some deeply hidden reason, he wanted to continue on in the company of this woman.

They set off together in silence. After traveling in that manner for some time, they came upon a small village, and, since the evening hour was advancing on them, they decided to find a place to eat a meal and, hopefully, sleep for the night.

As soon as they entered the village, they began to be treated rudely by the inhabitants of the small town. There seemed to be neither rhyme nor reason for the ill-treatment.

In fact, the difficulties created by the villagers became so great that the two travelers had to quickly pass through the main part of the community and out the other side, seeking refuge in a grove of trees on the far side of the village. They ate and slept there.

The next morning, after they had resumed their journey but still had not gone very far from the edge of the village, they came to a stone wall which was in disrepair. The woman stopped and began repairing the wall.

This action baffled the man, and, so, he asked: “After the way we have been treated by the villagers, why are you doing them any favors?”

A look of disappointment and resignation appeared on the woman's face. She said: “I am sorry, but, you have broken your promise yet again, and this time, we really will have to go our separate ways. However, before we do this, I will inform you about some of what you have been asking me.”

She paused briefly and then continued. “The boat on the beach belonged to two poor brothers, and it was their only means of livelihood. Unfortunately, an army was marching through the area and confiscating all boats which they came across in order to transport the troops across the river. The hole I put in the boat was such that, with a little work, it would be easy enough to repair by the two brothers, but, at the same time, the hole left the boat in a useless condition as far as the advancing army was concerned.

“With respect to the youth whom I struck, his parents are good people, but their love for the boy, along with the youth’s arrogance and selfishness, are such that, in time, the parents would have permitted the boy to ruin all of their lives. In order to save the parents, the boy had to die.

“Finally,” said the woman, “the wall at the edge of the village which was inhospitable to us hid the inheritance of some orphans who live in that community. In fact, the place where the wall was in most disrepair might have revealed the hidden treasure if it were to have crumbled a little more.

“Consequently, I repaired the wall in order to protect the inheritance of the orphans from the greedy villagers who surely would have kept the treasure for themselves had they stumbled upon it. In time, the orphans will receive the information they need to locate the treasure.”

The woman started to walk away from the man but turned around and said: “If you were not so preoccupied with matters which you do not understand and that do not concern you, you might have benefitted greatly from our journey together, but, now, as a result of your actions, you must continue on your journey alone.

“If you will recall, I told you when we first met that I feared you would not be able to abide by my condition, but out of compassion for you, I decided, despite my misgivings, to give you a chance.

“I hope the rest of your journey works out well for you. You never know when the door of opportunity may, once again, open, and, perhaps, the next time, in light of your past experience, you may do better.”

She smiled briefly and then turned. Soon, she disappeared over the hill. The man never saw her again.

Upon finishing the story for his current traveling companion, the man became silent. Eventually, the quiet which descended upon the two was broken by the one who had been listening to the story.

He began talking about some friends of his who had encountered a person who seemed to be very spiritually gifted. This teacher also was a woman, just as had been the case in the story just related by his traveling companion.

The man went on to describe how his friends decided to take initiation into a certain spiritual tradition through this woman. One of the

conditions of initiation was that each initiate would not be permitted to ask questions just as such a requirement had been imposed on his traveling companion by the woman in his companion's earlier reminiscence.

Seemingly, things went quite well for his friends during the next couple of years. They all spent every moment they could sitting in the company of the woman who had become their spiritual teacher.

Each of his friends, both together and individually, had recounted many incidents to him in which amazing things appeared to have happened. Some of these events were intriguing but not necessarily extraordinary while other events which were related to him were truly mind-boggling.

The man had known his friends for years, and they were all extremely honest, sincere, and down-to-earth people who were not in the habit of making up fantastic stories. Nevertheless, although the man did not believe his friends were lying or 'telling stories', he decided to delay making any final decision about the truth of what he was hearing.

On many occasions his friends used to invite him to meet their teacher. For quite some time, the man resisted these overtures.

Sometimes his reasons for why he said he did not have the time to meet her were quite legitimate. On other occasions -- due to various feelings the man, himself, did not quite understand -- the 'reasons' given were just excuses which were meant to keep the well-meaning entreaties of his friend at a distance.

Over time, however, his resistance lessened. He began to seriously entertain the idea of meeting with the much vaunted spiritual guide, and, finally, he asked his friends how to go about doing precisely what they had been asking him to do for quite some time -- namely, take initiation.

The day he met the spiritual teacher was truly a special day. The man never thought that anything remotely like it would have been possible except, perhaps, in a fictional context.

There was something magnetic and magical about the woman. It was as if she could look into his soul and fathom its many currents and nuances.

On more than one occasion, the man seemed to sense that the woman could read his mind. All he had to do was begin thinking about something

and no sooner than one could blink an eye the woman began talking about exactly that matter which just a few seconds before, had been safely hidden – or so he thought -- under a veil of subjective consciousness.

The woman's command of various sacred and mystical classics seemed limitless. She was so focused, like a laser, and each flash of her wisdom burned away the fog of ignorance which previously had shrouded the man's understanding concerning this or that topic.

The man's heart was drawn to her. No, 'drawn' was too shallow a term to properly describe the intensity of what he was feeling. Furthermore, the man was quite certain that what he was feeling had nothing to do with lustful or romantic inclinations ... it was something else altogether.

In addition, for the first time in years, the man was at peace with himself and the world. He felt like he finally had found his spiritual home.

He wanted to be initiated, but the woman only smiled and said: "Be careful of the hand in which you offer to place yours. Perhaps, you should think about this decision a while longer. There is no rush."

The woman's words made him want to be initiated all the more. Here he was, frothing at the mouth, in a figurative sort of way, to become initiated and, thereby, place himself under a vow of obedience, yet, she was telling him to back off and reflect on the situation.

Don't rush into things. Be careful with the decision about choosing with whom one takes initiation.

Although feeling somewhat saddened by the turn of events, the man took the recommendations of the spiritual teacher to heart. He returned home meditating on the question of what to do.

On several further occasions, the man approached the woman with the intention of seeking initiation. On each occasion, the woman gently but firmly said: "Be careful in whose hand you wish to place yours," and, then, she would change the topic to some other issue.

Each time this happened, the man's heart was deeply disappointed. He began to think all manner of things such as: he was not fit for the spiritual path, and what was happening was just the spiritual guide's compassionate way of letting him down easily; or, perhaps, this was all meant to be a spiritual test, and, therefore, he was just going to have to be patient; or, maybe the teacher just wanted him to be really sure about what

he was doing and why before he committed himself to the regimen of the spiritual discipline.

One thing the man did realize during this dance of initiation. On each occasion he was gently rebuffed by the teacher with the words: "Be careful in whose hands you offer to place yours," the words had the opposite effect of what they seemed to be intended to have ... that is, instead of creating distance between the teacher and him, the words just seemed to kindle the fire in his heart ... a fire which might only become bearable through the process of initiation.

Several months passed with the man living in a limbo between worlds. On the one hand, there was his work-a-day life and its usual happenings, and, on the other hand, there were the incredible times when he was in the presence of the spiritual teacher.

The latter occasions were an altogether different world. It was a realm which seemed so much more real and intense than his work-a-day life, and, as a result, he often found himself wondering just which world was truly real.

Sometime later, he mustered up the courage to broach the issue of initiation one more time with the spiritual guide. To his amazement, on this occasion she did not say: "Be careful in whose hands you offer to place yours," but, rather, she stated: "It would be my honor to serve you as a spiritual teacher."

Instead of offering to perform the initiation right at that moment, the woman suggested a date just a few days off. On the indicated date, there was going to be a special occasion marking the commemoration of a particularly renowned saint of the spiritual lineage to which the woman belonged, and she felt such a time would be a very propitious one during which to become initiated.

Although it was very difficult to have to walk away once again without being initiated, at least now the man only had to be patient a short while longer. His heart, soul, and whole being were burning with anticipation.

When he arrived home, he decided to phone his friends with the good news. For whatever reason, he had not seen his friends recently.

More often than not, when his friends disappeared like this, they were off on some mission on behalf of their beloved spiritual guide.

Consequently, he was not sure if he would be able to make contact with any of them, but he wanted to let them know what was about to take place, and he was hoping they would be able to attend the forthcoming ceremonies.

The first two friends he tried to contact were either not home or unavailable. He was more successful with his third effort.

As soon as his friend answered the door, there seemed to be some sort of subtle emanation being transmitted between them which indicated that not everything was okay. When the man gave expression to his sense of things, the friend said everything was okay and the concern was unnecessary.

Realizing he had pushed his worries as far as he could without creating difficulties, he switched topics and informed his friend about the upcoming date of initiation. The news was met with a long silence.

Finally, the friend said: "I don't know how to tell you this, but we recently came across a fair amount of credible information that the person whom we have been calling a spiritual guide is nothing but a charlatan. I've been meaning to tell you about this, but the whole revelation has been so devastating that my mind and heart are still spinning. I've been kind of walking around in a daze.

"I'm sorry. In fact, we are all very sorry that we got you into this."

The friend went on to say: "For a long time, we just accepted everything which she said as the gospel truth so to speak. As you know, one of the conditions of initiation is that a student must not question anything which one sees or hears in relation to the teacher, and, as good seekers after spiritual truth, we did as we were taught to do by the person whom we thought would lead us to wisdom.

"In fact, we were all encouraged by her to relate to her anything of a problematic nature which we heard or saw which might adversely affect our relationship with her. Whenever we did this, she was always able to alleviate our concerns and worries ... as well as to put things in perspective for us.

"Now, however, the information that has come to us is incontrovertible. We feel we have no alternative but to withdraw from her circle, and we all would urge you to do the same."

A few questions about the information which had been discovered were asked. His friend detailed the evidence for him.

When he left his friend, the man's inner world was in turmoil. What should he do?

The evidence of his friend was being weighed against the nature of his own experience with the spiritual teacher. Were the things his friend was now saying about the teacher the truth? Just a few short months ago, didn't his friends believe something diametrically opposed to what was currently being said? Had his friends succumbed to the dictates of their carnal soul? Was this all just a further spiritual test for him and them, and, perhaps, the teacher?

The man who was relating the story to his traveling companion became silent. As the silence continued, his fellow traveler inquired: "So, what did you decide?"

The man replied: "When we first sat down for a rest and some refreshments, you told me of a story from your life about how the condition for carrying on a teaching relationship was not to ask any questions. You broke the rule on three different occasions, and, finally, this led to a parting of the ways between you and the mysterious woman whom you encountered during your travels.

"You said you never saw the woman again. Do you believe she was an authentic spiritual guide?"

His companion reflected for a moment, and, then, slowly nodded his head up and down, saying: "Yes ... yes, I do."

The man who told the second story inquired: "You believe this despite all of the things that you witnessed which seemed to run counter to common decency, morality, and justice?"

Again, there was a pause before the response came. Eventually, the man to whom the question was directed simply said: "Yes".

Upon receiving this reply, the inquisitor responded with: "Your story resonated with my own experience. In some ways, our stories are very similar to one another, and this is why I told you about the series of events which took place in my life."

He was silent for a moment, and, then, continued: "In answer to your previous question about my decision, I decided to take the advice of

the spiritual guide from whom I was seeking initiation. In other words, I decided to exercise caution with respect to the nature of the person in whose hand I was offering to place mine, and I withdrew from the situation.

“There was a poet once who spoke about a road less traveled being taken and how this less-traveled road made all the difference. I suppose one of the problems with life is not always being sure which road it is that is the less traveled one, and, moreover, quite frequently, it is not all that easy to judge whether a given decision has made all the difference.

“I guess we may find out after we die. However, by that time it is a little late in the day to correct the choices we have made.”

An Event

A group of people were taking an ocean cruise which was scheduled to make a number of stops at various exotic locations. At each port, the passengers were told they would have so many hours to explore the island, town, historic sites, or countryside -- depending on the nature of the stop -- before having to return to the ship and set sail on the next portion of the voyage.

On the basis of past experience, the company owning the cruise line had established several rules which were to govern the behavior of people during these stopovers. In fact, these rules were considered to be sufficiently important that certain stipulations were even written into the contract covering the conditions of the voyage, and prospective clients had to agree to these rules before being permitted to sign on for the trip.

First, if any of the passengers did not return to the ship on time, the cruise would continue on without such individuals, and those people would have to make their own, alternative arrangements for returning home. Secondly, although people were free to either buy or pick up whatever cultural artifacts they came across during these stops, the passengers were all responsible for the storage and safekeeping of such artifacts, so, if passengers were concerned about someone stealing any of their on-board possessions during these stopovers, people were advised to take their property along with them while visiting the island, town, or historic sites.

One of the crew members was a sort of amateur anthropologist, and she noted that the individuals who went on these cruises tended to fall into a number of different behavioral categories ... although there was a certain amount of overlap among a few of the members of the different categories who spent some time with more than one group. Indeed, the general pattern discovered by the amateur anthropologist was so consistent that even while one might not be able to predict, prior to a particular voyage, which person would fit into any given category, the overall statistical character of the pattern tended to remain the same from one voyage to the next.

For example, there was one group of individuals who approached the cruise as a symbol of having arrived at a certain level of status. According to these individuals, possessing the time and money to

participate in these trips said something about the character of the person engaging in that kind of activity.

Moreover, the cruises had a reputation for being rather special since, among things, they traveled to such interesting places. There was so much to learn, and anyone who took the extended, deluxe package was considered to be someone of substance and quality ... an educated person of culture, refinement, and accomplishment.

A further group of people were connoisseurs with respect to different kinds of collectibles. They seemed to be in competition with one another with respect to who could acquire the most rare, cultural artifacts during the stopovers. In addition, the more someone's collectible was steeped in historical lore and captivating legends of scandalous, amorous, and/or daring deeds, the greater would be the value of this or that artifact as a topic of conversation during, and after, the cruise.

Apparently, some of the people from this group were one of the reasons the cruise line had instituted its rule about passengers taking their valuables with them whenever they left the ship and went exploring the new port of call. After all, the cruise line did not want to be considered liable for whatever possessions of the passengers were lost or stolen.

Unfortunately, the passengers in this group became so loaded down with cultural artifacts that they often couldn't move fast enough to make it back to the ship in order to comply with the cruise's stated time of departure. As a result, they often had to be left behind.

Many of the people in this group were, initially, very excited about their bargains, finds, and discovered treasures. Yet, when they got back to the ship and were able to examine their collected items more closely, what seemed so valuable on land appeared to be rather mundane and commonplace when seen in the privacy of their state rooms.

However, they couldn't divulge such an unsettling and unpleasant discovery to anyone else for fear of being considered a fool and/or a plebeian collector. In addition, there were, of course, all the problems associated with having to constantly lug one's 'valuables' around in order to keep up pretenses and/or to protect the items from would-be thieves.

In fact, this process of having to lug around their possessions with them all the time frequently led to all kind of back problems and spinal misalignments. As a result, there was a thriving on-board industry

involving medical doctors, chiropractors, massage therapists, herbal practitioners, financial advisers, and emotional counselors to help alleviate the various kinds of pain arising out of collectibles.

Naturally, there were a group of people who -- by choice, circumstance, or education -- were not opposed to separating passengers and/or crew from their possessions ... that is, to take what was not theirs. Some of these people were even government representatives of one sort or another.

In addition, there were people in this latter group who seemed to seek out opportunities for creating difficulties in the lives of others. This tended to involve either stealing from, or some other form of trying to exploit the vulnerabilities of, passengers, crew, and/or the inhabitants of the various stopovers.

Another category of people saw the cruise as a chance to socialize and network. These people spent much of their time -- whether on ship or during the various stopovers -- looking for the appropriate sort of people to be with ... people who reflected the right sort of values, breeding, politics, ambitions, careers, or interests and with whom one could have intelligent, civilized discussions, and, thereby, pass the time while enjoying the different experiences which each cruise invariably generated. Running in the right circles was very important to such people ... despite the dizziness which such running tended to engender from time to time.

Closely associated with, but distinct from, the foregoing group, were the individuals who considered the cruise to be one long, mobile party. These were people who had paid good money to take the cruise and felt that as long as the basic conditions of the contract governing the voyage were not violated, people should be free to do whatever they like and to pursue whatever pleasures might be agreed upon by consenting parties.

Then there were the scholars who saw the voyage as a way to study different cultures, philosophies of life, histories, governmental frameworks, ecological systems, and so on, under pleasant, if not enjoyable, circumstances. More often than not, they came on board with boxes and cartons loaded with scientific instruments so they could precisely measure this or that variable -- although they had not, yet, come up with a device for assessing, let alone detecting, the quality of any of the quantities they were measuring.

In between stopovers these individuals often secluded themselves in their state rooms or the ship's library as they developed their theories about what they observed on the various islands and historical sites. Or, they busied themselves with preparing erudite papers for the Journal of Obscure Scholars.

Rumor had it that on more than one occasion individuals from among this group of people became so absorbed in their research that they failed to get back to the dock in time to board the ship before it left. Apparently, this group, along with the aforementioned 'collectibles' group, were among the primary reasons for the redrafting of the cruise contract to include a variety of riders detailing liability issues.

Although, frankly speaking, a certain portion of blame for the sort of problems which led to the re-writing of the cruise contract also should be laid at the feet of some of the members of the following group since the individuals from among this group sometimes were found wandering -- with slackened jaws and vacant expressions -- about the islands, entirely oblivious to their surroundings and the fact they needed to get back to the ship by a pre-established time.

More specifically, this latter group consisted of individuals who might be referred to as forming an aesthetically inclined group. They spent their time on board, as well as during the stopovers, writing stories, or composing poetry, or making films, or painting pictures, or creating music ... using the events of the voyage as subject matter.

These individuals usually didn't have any idea about where their creative inspirations came from, but, apparently, for many creative souls, possession is nine-tenths of the law. In any event, sometimes these people were so taken with the creative efforts being manifested through them that they became ecstatic with the 'I-ness' of it all and lost track of everything but themselves ... or, at least, who they presumed themselves to be.

Another enterprising group of individuals used the cruise as a sort of floating business center. Not only did they make commercial deals of one kind or another while playing shuffleboard or while skeet shooting on one of the lower aft decks of the ship or while sitting around the dinner table, but, as well, at each and every port to which they disembarked, they went in search of new possibilities for either exporting or importing the latest line of widgets. In addition, they seemed to be

engaged in endless rounds of musical chairs involving money, careers, jobs, and communities.

Some passengers saw the voyage as an interesting set of experiences, a way of passing time as they traveled from one point to the next -- frequently entertaining, often intriguing, challenging on occasion, sometimes dangerous and permeated with a sense of mystery. These individuals came, they saw, they learned, and they tried to reflect on the significance of what they learned through those experiences and utilize such learning to become more loving, compassionate, empathetic, generous, helpful, patient, and tolerant with respect to the other passengers, as well as in relation to the people who lived in the places where the cruise stopped.

The ship's amateur anthropologist -- who, quite informally but over many years of observation of, and conversation with, the passengers, had come up with the different categories of people which have been outlined above -- also had come across a certain amount of evidence, though this data was rather elusive and hard to establish -- concerning the existence of secret agents from various governments who were using the voyage as a cover for conducting operations of a, well, secret nature. The anthropologist was never quite sure about the purpose of such operations or against whom these operations were directed -- possibly the cruise line, or, maybe, the crew, or the passengers, or, perhaps, the islands and towns where the ship stopped during the voyage, or, maybe, even the other agents.

Although the cruise contract permitted almost every kind of individual to have an opportunity to participate on the various excursions, the one group which was specifically forbidden to enter the premises of the ship were lawyers. Somewhere along the way, someone had made a judgment that they were hazardous 'materials' and, therefore, in good conscience could not be transported via the cruise lines because of the dangers their presence posed for other human beings.

Well, to make a long story considerably shorter, one day -- nearly a week after the ship had left one of the scheduled stops -- the ship had an unexpected meeting with an iceberg in the darkness of night and quickly sank. No one knows what happened to the people on the ship.

A Board of Inquiry was convened -- perhaps by lawyers and/or secret agents for oblique, hidden purposes other than seeking to determine the truth of things -- to review and analyze various 'facts' concerning the

aforementioned event. The final report has yet to be issued, but a highly placed source who wishes to remain anonymous intimates there was testimony from a mystery witness who left the ship shortly before it struck the iceberg, and those journalists who are in the know indicate that the Board's findings will really shake things up ... apparently, much more was going on with respect to the cruise than many of the passengers or crew suspected ... video footage at eleven.

Humble Beginnings

A man lived in the countryside and had two donkeys that he loved. He had been given the animals when he was a boy in order to help him learn to be responsible, but what had begun as a parental exercise with respect to the child had been transformed into a life-long labor of service, caring, and affection for the animals.

As a boy, he had fed them, groomed them, and nursed them back to health the few times they had become ill or had injured themselves somehow while traveling about in the countryside. This loving care had continued into adulthood ... both with respect to the boy as well as the donkeys.

In their own way, the two donkeys had reciprocated the boy's affectionate attention. They followed the boy everywhere and would quickly do whatever the boy wished in the way of work-- although they would be as stubborn as ... well ... donkeys whenever anyone else in the boy's family tried to get them to do tasks on the farm.

The townspeople often made jokes about the boy and his donkeys whenever the latter three came into town on this or that errand. However, the boy didn't care what the townspeople said because he knew the joy which his donkeys brought to his heart just by being his constant companions and because of the gentle, friendly manner through which they responded to his caring for them.

As the boy became a young man and the donkeys got older as well, the three of them continued to be inseparable. Human nature being what it is, the townspeople who had no insight into the bond between the man and his two donkeys continued to ridicule the young man whenever they got the chance, and some of the townspeople even spread malicious rumors about the young man and his donkeys -- rumors which had no basis in truth.

One day a very old man came to town and made arrangements with the officials of the community to give a series of talks about mysticism. These talks were to be free and held in the town square each evening at 8:00 p.m., and everyone who was interested was invited to attend.

Since such talks were a very rare event in the area and because the people were both curious and somewhat bored with their lives, a great number of townspeople attended the talks. Moreover, since the elderly gentleman was a very knowledgeable and entertaining speaker, each talk was

eagerly anticipated by the residents of the community, and whatever was talked about the previous evening became the topic of conversation among the townspeople throughout the next day.

On the 3rd or 4th night of talks, as the elderly man was about to rise and begin his talk, the young man, who had become known, far and wide, as the Donkey Man, came into the heart of town crying and loudly lamenting. The young man's grief was so audible that the evening's discussion could not begin, and, naturally, the townspeople were quite annoyed with the disruption.

The elderly man held up his hands and motioned to the audience to be quiet. After the audience calmed down, the older man turned to the younger man and asked him to explain, as best he could, what had happened.

The young man, in between his sighs and tears, was able to explain that his donkeys had been missing for several days. Moreover, despite all his efforts, he had not been able to find them and feared the worst concerning them, and, then, he began to cry again.

The townspeople who had been silent throughout the young man's story, more out of respect for the speaker than the Donkey Man, now erupted with impatience and disdain concerning the interloper. Some of them began to make sarcastic remarks concerning the young man and his donkeys.

The speaker studied the crowd for a moment and then gazed at the young man in a strange way for a few seconds. Finally, he raised his hands again and asked the audience to be quiet. Eventually, they complied with his request.

The old man addressed the young man and said: "Son, if you will take a seat, I have just a few words to say to the people here, and then we will try to see if we can help you with your problem. Will that be okay?"

The young man nodded his head in the affirmative and took the seat which had been pointed out by the speaker. Though tears continued to flow from his eyes, the young man did his best to keep the noise of his crying muffled.

The speaker returned his attention to the rest of his audience and began to talk: "Ladies and gentlemen, first, I must start by saying that tonight is my last talk. Other duties require me to travel elsewhere in the morning."

This news was received with dismay by the townspeople, for, in just a few short days, they had become very interested in what the man had to say and, as well, many of them were attracted to his kind demeanor and friendliness. Some of the people protested and begged him to stay on -- if only for a few more days.

The old man smiled in a rather rueful manner at the crowd's response and indicated: "As much as I would like to stay, I really cannot. However, I do hope to return, at some point in the near future, and, perhaps, such a possibility will serve as some consolation to those of you who might wish me to remain for a while longer."

The speaker's words seemed to mollify the townspeople somewhat for the audience gradually settled down. They waited for him to speak again.

He said: "Tonight's talk is a very short one, but it goes to the very essence of all that I have been discussing the last few nights. Perhaps the best way for me to introduce this topic is to ask you a question."

He was silent for a moment as his eyes surveyed the audience. Then, he asked: "How many of you have ever been in love? I don't mean liking, or being affectionate, or lusting, or having acquaintances, or being amenable with one another. I mean real love."

The members of the audience became preoccupied with the question. Although most of the people listening to the talk had been searching for love all of their lives, many of them were not even sure what it was they were seeking -- just that there was some sort of absence or something missing in their lives, and the word which often was used to describe the quality that was not present was "love".

The speaker let them reflect on his question for a few moments and then asked the same question again but in a more emphatic way: "Who here has ever been really in love? Please raise your hands."

A minute, or so, passed, and, finally, a few scattered hands went up somewhat tentatively. The speaker nodded knowingly as he scanned the audience, and, finally, he indicated that the people with raised arms should lower them.

The elderly man said: "I have a suggestion for the rest of you who have not raised your hands in response to my query about love. My suggestion is for you to befriend this young man who has been crying about his donkeys because he may well know more about love than

almost anyone in this gathering. He knows about the joys of the wonderfully expansive feeling that love brings to life, and he knows about the service, longing, worries, compassion, value, sacrifices, acceptance, and meaning inherent in love.

“If any of you do decide to befriend this young man and learn what he knows about the love he has for his donkeys, then, I believe you will benefit greatly from his understanding. He has a wealth of knowledge to share with you, and, if you are fortunate, you will begin to put into practice in your own lives, and in this community, what he has been living for years.

“I will conclude my talk by saying that, perhaps, we all could pitch in tomorrow morning before I leave and try to help this young man find his missing donkeys. And, if we should not be successful in our hunt, then, let us find ways to console him and comfort him.”

Snake Charmer

There was a certain boy living in a village who once had gone to a carnival where one of the attractions was a snake charmer. This snake charmer showed the audience a great time by inducing the snakes in his charge to do all manner of amazing feats. In fact, the tricks were so incredible that they appeared to border on acts of magic rather than some form of animal magnetism.

The young boy was completely enthralled with the show put on by the snake charmer and from that moment on wished to become the world's greatest tamer of snakes. Consequently, after the performance was over, the boy approached the snake charmer, who was quite old, with a proposition.

The boy said: "Sir, I have greatly admired your demonstration of skills during the show, and I would like you to teach me the secrets of your profession. I mean no disrespect, but, sir, you are advanced in years, and I have inquired about you.

"Among other things my investigation has uncovered that you are without any family. When I discovered this latter fact, I thought that, perhaps, you might be willing to pass on your knowledge to me if I promised to work for you during my period of apprenticeship.

"I am an orphan who has been living in the stables, doing whatever odd jobs are available to earn my keep. So, you see, there really is nothing tying me to this town, and if I must work for someone, I would just as soon be in your employment while I learn a trade in which I am deeply interested."

The old man smiled when he heard the boy's words and replied: "I long have been looking for someone to whom I might pass on whatever little I know about the charming of snakes. I always had hoped that I might have a son or daughter to whom I could bequeath this knowledge, but, unfortunately, marriage and children have passed me by.

Yet now it seems we both are in need of one another. Therefore, I accept your proposition."

For many years, the two traveled together, sometimes putting on their shows as independent tradesmen and sometimes doing so in conjunction with carnivals that wandered from location to location. During these years, the two became very close and developed great affection for each other -- the man serving as the father the boy never

knew and the boy being the son the man always wished for but never had.

The man's knowledge about the charming of snakes was extensive. Nonetheless, the boy was very astute and paid close attention to everything the older man said and did. As a result, gradually, the boy absorbed every lesson his teacher had to offer.

In fact, the boy's interest in, and aptitude for, this profession was such that he began to excel his mentor in many ways. The old man could not have been happier if the boy were his own son.

More and more, the old man gave the boy, who was now a young man, top billing and was content to just do a few snake charming tricks here and there during the show. He preferred to watch his student go about the process of charming snakes for the young man was so skillful and graceful at his trade that the older man was filled with pride and gratitude for having had the opportunity to pass on his knowledge to someone, as well as to have had such enjoyable, devoted company for the last decade.

Eventually, the young man became known far and wide as the greatest snake charmer in the world. His boyhood wish had been realized.

Soon thereafter, the old man passed away. This greatly saddened the young man, but he was determined to keep the promise he had made to his teacher just prior to the latter's death.

More specifically, the young man had promised his teacher that he would not rest on his own, already considerable laurels, but instead, the young man would continue to learn all he could about the charming of snakes. As a result, the young man traveled far and wide, not only putting on exciting and amazing exhibitions of snake charming but, also, always looking for opportunities to enhance his knowledge and skills.

In one location, where the young man was conducting a number of shows, he happened to hear about some man who was described as being an individual of deep knowledge and wisdom. The young man decided to seek out this man of insight and see whether, or not, this person about whom he had heard such wondrous tales might be able to add to the young man's skills and understanding in the area of charming snakes.

After chasing down a few leads, the young man finally discovered the whereabouts of the alleged wise man's residence. Next, he sought an audience with the man and was very happy when this was granted.

The young man was told to return the next day at noon time for some lunch. The young man was so filled with the excitement of anticipation he hardly could sleep the whole night. For some unknown reason, the young man felt he might obtain information or knowledge during his meeting with the wise man that would help bring his skills to the sort of perfection he long had sought.

The following day, at precisely noon, the young man knocked on the door of the house indicated in the directions he had received the previous day. The door opened and the young man was escorted into a study where he was received by a friendly looking gentleman who was ten years, or so, older than the snake charmer.

After exchanging pleasantries and a few pieces of life history while eating a lunch which had been prepared, the slightly older man said: "I have gathered from some of my friends that you are billed as the 'World's Greatest Snake Charmer'. Is that correct?"

The young man was proud of his skills, but he also had some humility and, therefore, replied: "Well, I don't know about being the world's greatest snake charmer, but in all my travels I have not come across anyone or heard of anyone who surpasses the knowledge which has been given to me by my teacher and which I have been able to augment with my own studies."

The host smiled and nodded his head approvingly. He said: "Do you think you could provide me with a demonstration, for I must admit to not having witnessed such things in my life, and I would be grateful to you for filling in one of the many holes which populate my experience."

The snake charmer was somewhat hesitant and responded: "Well, I would love to comply with your kind request, but I don't have any snakes with me, and rather than merely demonstrate things with snakes which I use in my show, perhaps I should go out into the forest and obtain some truly wild snakes. This general region is rather infamous for the many species of poisonous snakes which inhabit the area, and I am sure that

with a little effort I could supply us with some useful specimens with which to give expression to something of the nature of my profession.”

The host accepted this idea, and the two agreed to meet the next morning at nine o'clock. So, the young man went off in search of the biggest and most poisonous snakes he could find.

For whatever reason, the young man had some difficulty in finding the species and size of snakes he would have preferred. Nonetheless, he was able to secure a fair variety of venomous beings before nightfall, and he took his catch back to his lodging in order to prepare for his visit the next day.

When morning arrived, the young man collected together all he would need to provide a sampling of his skills and knowledge. He, then, proceeded to return to the older man's residence at the appointed time.

Once, again, he was warmly received. After a brief conversation, while drinking tea, the older man asked: “Are you ready to give your demonstration? Should we adjourn to the patio or can you do things right here?”

The snake charmer indicated: “Here is fine, unless, of course, you may have fears about some of these poisonous snakes escaping into your house.”

The older man laughed and replied: “If you feel safe from them, then, I also feel safe from them. So, please, proceed.”

The young man began to go about his trade. He went through his whole repertoire and even added a few new tricks which he had been working on recently.

After he was done, he placed all the snakes in protective baskets. When he had completed these tasks, he sat down.

The older man began: “Well, I am quite impressed with your skills, but, you know, I couldn't help noticing that the snakes you used were not really very large, and I also noticed that some of the region's more poisonous varieties were missing from the snakes with which you were working. Does it make any difference how big the snakes are or how poisonous they are? Could you still charm them?”

The young man apologized and agreed with the older man that, yes, the snakes that had been used during the demonstration were not all that big and, yes, he had been hoping to find some particularly

dangerous snakes, but, due to time constraints, he had to cut his expedition of the previous evening short. He added, however: "In answer to your questions, neither the size of a snake, nor the virulence of its poison, makes any difference. I would be able to charm any snake you might care to show me."

The older man considered the young man's reply and then said in a very loving way: "Well, let me tell you about a snake whose venom is so poisonous and whose size is so large that if you are able to tame that snake, you will be a real sage, and that snake is the ego."

What's In A Word?

There once was a man -- let us call him Earl -- who liked to read about mysticism, and, as a result of his studies, he knew a fair amount about the theory of various esoteric traditions. Although Earl, for reasons he had never been able to understand fully, was intrigued by the teachings and stories of the mystics, nevertheless, he had a lot of reservations about whether much of what he read was actually true.

Because he lived in a rather remote region, Earl had very little opportunity to come in contact with people who were actively involved in mystical practices. Even when he went into some of the more populated areas of his country, and despite persistent efforts over many years, he had not been able to locate an actual spiritual guide.

If he were able to meet with a mystical teacher, Earl had lots of questions to ask. For the most part, the books he had read were good -- at least as far as they went -- but there were many issues which needed to be probed in a way that just wasn't possible through books.

Via snail mail and e-mail, Earl had tried to contact the authors and publishers of several of the mystical books which he particularly liked. However, in each of these instances, his attempts had gone unrequited.

He was beginning to suspect that, perhaps, the reason why his efforts had gone nowhere was because, in fact, there really was nowhere to go. Maybe, the authors were hiding from him because they knew the whole mystical idea was just a big hoax and didn't appreciate people asking embarrassing questions -- questions which might affect their book sales should their answers prove inadequate or implausible and, then, become known to the general public.

Still, Earl's heart was restless. The doubts he had were very hard to ignore, and, yet, he also fervently hoped there was some element of truth in the books he had been reading.

During one of his vacation periods, Earl had decided to visit a famous resort along the west coast of his country. Between difficulties, at work and his constant vacillation about whether, or not, to pursue the mystical path any further than just reading books, Earl felt he needed to just get away from things for awhile, and since he always had wanted to visit this specific resort area, he thought he would try to accomplish several goals at the same time.

On the fourth day of his vacation, Earl was reading the local paper in search of something interesting to do when an ad caught his attention. A woman, from some place he had never heard of, was going to give a lecture on mysticism that evening in the city's main library. Apparently, the woman was a highly regarded spiritual teacher ... although this might have been just promotional hype.

Because there was going to be a question and answer session following the talk, Earl believed the event was tailor made for his needs. Not only would he get a chance to listen to the answers given to the questions asked by others, but, as well, he might even be able to ask a question or two of his own. This was too good an opportunity to pass up.

That evening Earl found his way to the library's auditorium where the talk was to be given. While there were quite a few empty seats, nonetheless, Earl was somewhat surprised at the number of people who had showed up.

Although much of the material covered by the speaker already was familiar to Earl from his previous studies of the literature, it was quite informative and did supply some insights which were new to him. The next portion of the program--that is, the question and answer session -- was the aspect which most interested Earl, and he awaited it eagerly.

The first four or five questions which were raised by people in the audience annoyed Earl for they could have been answered by the people themselves if they had listened attentively to the speaker. Earl was becoming frustrated because the time allotted for the Q & A session was rapidly being consumed by unnecessary questions.

Ever since he had come across the ad in the paper, Earl had been trying to think of what would be the best question to ask for he might only get one opportunity to do so. He found it an excruciating exercise to try to distill all his doubts, questions, worries, and concerns down to one or two questions, but he finally had settled on just one question.

Earl had decided to raise a question which would give expression to his skeptical side. He knew the issue he wished to raise would be rather confrontational, but he felt justified in asking it, and, who knows, other people attending the talk might be grateful to him for broaching the subject.

When the speaker asked for another question, Earl raised his hand and hoped the intensity of his body language might attract the woman's attention. His hopes were realized for the woman pointed to him and waited for him to state his question.

Earl rose and began: "I enjoyed your talk and found it very stimulating, but I must confess that I have many doubts about the amount of truth that exists in what you have to say. Part of me would like to believe you, but there is another part of me which finds much of what you say which ... let us say ... strains credulity. So, here is my question, and I would like you to answer me as truthfully as possible."

He paused for a few seconds, mentally composing his question and, then, took the verbal plunge: "In your talk you mentioned the idea of chanting the Name of Divinity and indicated this to be a very important practice on virtually every mystical path. Now, why should I, or anyone here, believe that merely repeating a few words will be able to change one's spiritual condition?"

The woman waited a few seconds to make sure that Earl had completed his question, and when she saw this was the case, she began to respond. She looked directly at Earl and asked a question: "What is your name, please?"

Earl spoke his name. She closed her eyes and was silent, as if concentrating very hard on something.

A few moments passed, and then she opened her eyes again. Once again, she looked at Earl and spoke: "Your father was a dishonest man. He cheated the people he worked for. He stole money from several of the community organizations with which he was affiliated. He lied to you about many things.

"Moreover, your mother was unfaithful to your father. She had numerous affairs with men from your father's work place as well as with the husbands of some of the women in your neighborhood."

The speaker was about to go on when Earl interrupted her. He was more angry than he could ever remember being.

He shouted at her, spittle jettisoning from his mouth: "You have no right to say those things. You don't even know my parents. You've never met them. I want ... no, I demand an apology from you. I really don't know who you think you are, but I have never been so hurt in all my life. I hoped

to come here tonight and be enlightened, and I have, because now I know that you and your kind, lady, are nothing but con artists.”

The woman held up her hand, as if pleading for Earl to stop. But, Earl was so beside himself with anger and outrage that it was a few minutes before he stopped berating the speaker, and he stopped not because his anger had dissipated but because he seemed to have run out of words to express his feelings.

When he paused, the woman began to speak: “I’m very sorry Earl. I really don’t know what came over me. I am quite certain that your parents are very good, decent, moral people who never harmed anyone in their lives. I am just as positive that they were, and are, wonderful parents who are pillars of your neighborhood and community.”

The more she lauded Earl’s parents, the more Earl’s earlier anger began to lessen. Soon, Earl’s anger had subsided completely.

When the speaker saw that Earl had calmed down, she said: “Earl, I am sorry for upsetting you, but I wanted to answer your question, as you requested me to do so, in a very truthful, direct way. I said negative things about your parents that you knew and I knew were not true, and, yet, your condition changed dramatically. Furthermore, when I began to praise your parents, even though I have never met them and do not know what kind of people they are, and you knew that I do not know them, nonetheless, your condition changed again.

“Now, if the stating of a few words which are either false or not based on true knowledge can alter your condition in such a dramatic fashion, don’t you think it is possible that repeating the Name of Divinity can alter your spiritual condition just as dramatically ... if not more so?”

Who Goes There?

There was a woman who had a great spiritual thirst and who had spent most of her life in search of mystical knowledge. She had traveled all over the world in her quest ... visiting holy shrines, ferreting out rare books of esoteric understanding, as well as spending considerable time with a variety of renowned spiritual guides.

Without doubt she was a person of great spiritual capacity. Her mystical knowledge was considerable and constantly growing.

She was quite content to continue on as she had been ... secure in the feeling that she was, after all, constantly learning, developing, and directing all her efforts toward becoming a better person. Everywhere she went she was always warmly welcomed, for not only was she a devoted student of mysticism, but, as well, she tried to put into practice, as best she could, whatever she learned.

One day, while visiting with a certain spiritual master in a nearby city, there was another, younger woman also in attendance, who, at one point in the discussion, spoke of a mystical practice about which the younger woman had heard of in her own journeys. This younger woman said she had never been able to learn more about the practice than what little she knew, but she had been told this practice was the ultimate key for unlocking the essential secret of the mystical path.

The spiritual guide who was present confirmed the woman's story and indicated that, indeed, there was such a practice, but there was only one place he knew of where the practice was still taught. This place was located in a very distant land, high in the mountains which ran along the northern border of a certain country.

The teacher had forgotten the actual name of the location, but he remembered the name, when translated into English, meant: 'the place where earth and sky meet'. The teacher added a few more pieces of information concerning the place, and then the conversation moved on to other topics.

From the very first seconds when the older woman heard of the foregoing practice, she was consumed with a desire to journey to this distant land, find the indicated location, and do whatever was necessary to be permitted to learn this secret of secrets. While the others around her

continued to speak, she began to make plans for setting off the very next day to the far-off country.

The trip took more than a month. Although the first part of the journey had been fairly straightforward, when she reached the mountains, the going got somewhat rough and became bogged down at a number of junctures.

In addition, she had lost some time pursuing false leads concerning the precise location of her destination. Finally, however, she had acquired the correct information and from that point on had made constant progress, and, eventually, she found herself at the doors of a rather medieval-looking castle, complete with moat.

She used the large knocker on the door to announce her presence and waited for the door to be opened. After some time had passed and no one came, she tried the knocker again.

Again, time passed, and there was no response. She was about to use the knocker a third time, when a voice, from the other side of the door, inquired: "Who is there?"

The woman, relieved that someone was in the building and that she had not been wasting her time, replied: "My name is Belinda, and I have come to learn from you, if you will permit this."

There was silence for a moment, and, then, the voice said: "Please, go away." No further sounds came from within.

The woman waited for something further from within, but all remained quiet. The woman stood at the huge doors for some time considering all manner of possibilities about why she was being refused entrance.

Although, initially, she was depressed about the turn of events, she was a determined individual. She decided that the reason why she had been turned away was because she needed to become a better person and spiritually purify herself more.

She resolved to go away and intensify all of her practices and efforts. She would return one day when she felt that, perhaps, she might be ready to learn about whatever the truth of the matter was on the other side of the castle door.

Several years later, after many spiritual struggles had been endured, the woman returned to the great door where she previously had stood. Once again, the woman used the large knocker to inform those within about her presence.

As had been the case a number of years before, a voice replied from within: "Who is there?"

The woman responded with: "It is me, Belinda. I have been here before, and I am seeking permission to enter and learn from you."

The voice from within replied with a simple but emphatic: "Please, go away."

The woman was somewhat heartbroken. She really had tried very hard to become a better person during the last few years. She had worked extremely diligently to spiritually purify herself, employing everything she knew in order to accomplish, hopefully, what needed to be done in order to gain entrance to this remote castle, but, once more, she was being turned away in precisely the same manner.

Although despondent, the woman was not ready to give up. She would continue on with her program of spiritual purification. In fact, she would re-double all her efforts.

For the next ten years, the woman devoted herself to serving others and to working on eliminating whatever faults she came to realize she had. Night and day she sacrificed herself with one goal in mind and heart -- to have the great doors opened to her when she returned and to be given permission to enter.

After a decade had passed, the woman returned to the same doors where she had stood, on several occasions, many years before. She hesitated, for a moment and then lifted the knocker and let it fall, as its thunderous echo reverberated from within.

A voice from within asked: "Who goes there?"

The woman said: "It is I, Belinda. I am requesting that you grant me permission to enter."

The answer came quickly and hardly seemed to be worth the years of struggle which she had endured ... "Please, go away."

The woman was not angry with this response, just puzzled. She had tried everything she could think of and, yet, the doors had not been opened to her.

Maybe she just didn't have what it took to be granted admission. Maybe she hadn't tried hard enough. Maybe there was some defect of character she was overlooking. Maybe, her quest wasn't meant to be realized, and she would just have to accept this.

Sadly, the woman retreated from the door. During the next decade, she wandered about the world ... still trying to learn and still trying to become a better person.

For a time, she almost forgot about the distant location and its protected secret. In her heart, however, there was a yearning to return to that place, and she consoled herself with the idea that, perhaps, one day she would go back ... one last time.

As the woman got older, she knew her traveling days were fast coming to an end. She decided she would make a final pilgrimage to the distant land with its mountains and those doors which hid a spiritual secret.

Recently, a certain perspective concerning the whole quest had gradually begun to bubble to the surface of awareness. She wasn't sure this new insight would change matters when at the castle, but it was all there was to offer.

Once again, she found herself before the great doors. She went straight to the heavy knocker, lifted it, and let it fall.

A voice said: "Who is there?"

The woman answered: "Thee," and the response came: "Please, enter."

Storm

One of the students of a spiritual teacher came to the main center one day in a very dejected and sad state. The young man asked permission to speak with his mentor, and the student was ushered into a den-like room by one of the center's attendants.

After a short wait, the teacher appeared and sat down near the student. The teacher requested that some refreshments be brought for the two of them, and while they were waiting for whatever was being arranged, the two of them engaged in light conversation about this and that.

The young man knew his teacher would, when the time was appropriate, ask about what was going on with the young man's life. Therefore, the student was content to let his teacher conduct the meeting according to the latter's nature and personality.

After the refreshments arrived and the two were left alone, the teacher inquired: "Son, I could sense when I first came into the room that you were upset by something, so, why don't you tell me what is burdening you, and then we'll see what can be done to help your situation."

The young man was thankful for the opportunity to finally discuss what was preoccupying his mind and weighing on his heart. The student started slowly but went a little faster as he began to enter further into the concerns which had brought him to his teacher.

"Sir, I'm not trying to complain, but there is something with which I am having a great deal of difficulty. I accept the idea that everything has its purpose and, as well, that there is a reason for everything which happens, quite independently of whether or not I understand what is going on.

"But," continued the young man, "there appears to be so much evil in the world. Everywhere I look evil seems to be on the rise and goodness appears to be in retreat.

"I often get suffocated by it all. When I feel this way, I don't know what to do. I seem to become spiritually lost and paralyzed."

When the student had finished, the teacher was quiet. Over the years the young man had come to understand that the teacher had his own way of resolving issues, and, consequently, his spiritual guide didn't always respond directly to questions and problems which were being posed.

After a few moments of silence, the teacher asked: "Do you know what the weather forecast is for tomorrow?"

The student was somewhat surprised by the question but responded with: "I believe it is supposed to rain."

The teacher received the information impassively. He was silent for a short while longer and then said: "Well, try not to become too caught up in your worries about the seeming omnipresence of evil. Do the best you can with this. I'm sure you will be helped to deal with it."

As he spoke the last words, the teacher arose, indicating that the discussion had come to an end. The student also rose and thanked his spiritual guide for the latter's time and consideration.

The student left the teacher's house in a slightly depressed mood. He had hoped his guide might have said or done something which would have resolved the problem, but such had not been the case, and, consequently, he didn't feel much better than he did when he had gone to see the teacher ... although no matter what happened, seeing his teacher always helped make things a bit more bearable.

The next day, just as the young man had related to his teacher during their meeting of the previous afternoon, it rained. The rain was steady and, from time to time, quite heavy.

The student decided he would go out for a walk in the rain. The storm was like his inner state made manifest.

Traipsing about in the rain helped give expression to what was going on in him. God willing, as surely as the storm would pass, so, too, his inner storm might pass as well.

During his walk he came to the garden in the city's central park area. Feeling a little soaked, he took a seat in a gazebo and just let his mind and senses wander about the garden area.

Because of the weather, the garden was deserted, and the young man was alone. However, this state of affairs did not last long.

Soon, a woman strolled into the park and began to move about the garden in a strange sort of way consisting of various kinds of jumps, gyrations, and contortions. Whirling about here and there, she seemed to be trying to accomplish something, but the student wasn't exactly sure what that 'something' was except behaving in an odd manner.

The jumping about, sudden movements back and forth, along with a sort of side-stepping motion with her hands down by her side, as if the woman were trying to work her way through a narrow alley, continued for nearly sixty minutes. Toward the end of the hour, the woman stopped the wild gyrations, shrugged her shoulders, sighed deeply, and started to dance in a most graceful way ... in fact, the dance was so elegant and beautiful to watch that the student was transfixed by the motion.

Suddenly, the woman stopped her dancing. She abruptly turned on her heels and quickly left the garden area just as the hour came to an end.

The following day, the student had some spare time in the late afternoon, and he returned to the spiritual center to meet with his teacher in order to talk about what he had witnessed the previous day. After a short wait, the young man was admitted into his teacher's presence.

When the young man took the proffered seat, his teacher asked: "So, what brings you back to us so quickly?"

The student described everything that had transpired while he had been sitting in the gazebo. The young man confessed that the whole sequence of events puzzled him.

"What do you suppose the woman you saw was up to?" inquired the teacher.

The young man replied: "I have been thinking about little else since witnessing those strange events, but I am sorry to say that I really haven't been able to figure out what was happening. It was all very strange and sort of surrealistic."

The teacher was silent for a moment, and, then, said: "You know, son, based on your description, I think I might know what that woman was doing. The first part you talked about -- the part where she was going through all those wild gyrations and weird movements -- I think she was trying to squeeze in between the raindrops and avoid getting wet."

Then, the teacher asked: "Do you think she was successful?"

The student laughed and said: "No, she looked pretty drenched despite all her activity."

The teacher looked at the student for a few moments ... as if studying him. Finally, the guide said: "You know the problem with which you came to me the other day -- the one about evil seeming to be everywhere --

well, you can no more avoid being touched by evil in this world than that woman could dodge the rain no matter how much she tried.

“When you fully come to realize this, you will see, as that woman in the park seemed to, that, perhaps, the only solution is to shrug and begin letting your spirit dance amidst the storm as best you can.”

Building of Rome

A youth who was interested in spirituality was initiated into a certain mystical path after spending a period of time with the guide for the tradition and learning about the basic teachings of that 'way'. Once the youngster officially had set foot on the spiritual path, the neophyte was given a mystical chant to do which would help him to deepen his understanding of, and commitment to, the aforementioned spiritual teachings.

As is often the case with newcomers, the youth had been observing the chant on a fairly regular basis. The excitement of embarking on a great journey had not, yet, worn off, and, therefore, the boy was very enthusiastic toward everything he was given to do.

One night, not too long after starting to practice his chant on a regular basis, the boy had an experience unlike anything else which previously had taken place in his life. The experience was so overwhelming that he rushed to the teacher's house and sought an audience with his guide.

Although the hour was late, the teacher was very accommodating to the youngster and permitted him to enter, showing the youth to a sofa in the living room. The rest of the teacher's family already had retired for the evening so the two were left undisturbed.

The youngster was spilling over with emotion, hardly able to contain himself. The teacher was about to say something when the boy exclaimed: "I have seen God. I have seen God."

The teacher smiled and told the boy to take a deep breath, try to relax, and, then, if possible, describe what had taken place. The youth followed the instructions of his guide, and, when a measure of calmness had descended on the boy, the youngster began to give an account of his experience.

The teacher listened carefully to the boy's story. When the youth finished his tale of wonder, the teacher remarked: "You silly boy. You haven't seen God. All you have experienced are the lights of blessing that sometimes occur when a person begins the chant which you have been given.

"Yes, what you have experienced is a very good sign. But, my son, what has transpired is a very long, long way from actually realizing or witnessing the Presence of Divinity in any essential way.

“In the future, try not to jump to conclusions. While I am always interested in whatever experiences you may have, you need to learn a degree of restraint, and, maybe, next time you might wait 'til a more reasonable hour before you start proclaiming you have seen God.”

The teacher rose, and, as he did, so did the boy. The teacher put his hand on the boy's shoulder and gave it an affectionate squeeze, and, then, led the youth to the door.

At the door the teacher said: “Good night, my son. Do keep up your observance of the chant you have been given, and, if God wishes, then you may be brought to a very good spiritual condition.”

The boy apologized to his teacher about having disturbed the latter and having been so foolish as to mistake his minor experience for the reality of having seen God. The teacher assured the youngster that it was perfectly all right and that such things do happen and not to worry about it ... just try to remember to have a bit more restraint and composure should the youth be visited by another mystical experience.

Many years passed, and the boy continued to trod the spiritual path, but because the mystical path tends to be quite long, with many ups and downs, the boy, who now had become a young man, was not quite as enthusiastic about the mystical way as he had been when he first stepped onto the path. Although the young man did try to be regular with his chant, he often went through periods when mystical practices seemed to be the farthest thing from his mind and heart.

During one of these mystical dry spells, he sought permission to speak with his teacher. Permission was granted, and, when he met with his spiritual mentor, he started to talk about the difficulties which he was encountering. As he described what was going on, he began crying.

In between sobs and sighs, the young man wistfully recalled his enthusiasm when he first set foot on the path and how meticulous he had been in everything. Now, it seemed that most of the earlier enthusiasm had left him, and he found doing such practices as the chant which had been given to him to be a real struggle ... a struggle which he didn't always win.

When the young man had finished unburdening himself, his teacher smiled and said: “Well, what you are going through is actually not all that uncommon. Many people, even some of those who have gone on to

achieve great spiritual heights, often have encountered times very much like those that you have been describing and in which you are currently immersed.”

The teacher continued on: “The good news is that even though you are struggling, nonetheless, you keep coming back to your practices from time to time, and, consequently, you have not abandoned them altogether. You may not feel the little you do is very important, but, believe me, son, every small thing you do in an effort to travel along the mystical way does not go unnoticed in the spiritual realm.

“Moreover, there is something which you may not realize, and perhaps the best way for me to inform you about this is to tell you a short story. This story is about Satan.”

The young man’s spiritual guide was quiet for a moment while getting ready to relate the story. As he waited for the teacher to go on, the young man noticed that already his spirits were picking up a bit just by being in the same room with his teacher and being able to listen to whatever the man wished to say.

The teacher began to speak again. “Satan is a very clever fellow. He is able to learn many things through his guile and disguises.

“On one occasion, Satan came to know about the existence of a chant which was said to guarantee Heaven to anyone who was engaged in saying the chant at the time of his or her time of finally departing from this world ... in other words, at the time of death. Through deception and stealth, Satan came to learn the precise nature of the chant, and he began to repeat this chant night and day to such an extent that even when he slept, his whole inner being was engaged in this chant.

“Satan believed he had found a way to outmaneuver his alleged destiny. He believed he had found a way to avoid Hell and attain Heaven.

“Because Satan is in denial about various truths, he does not accept the fact that at his time of demise, he will be made to forget the chant he has acquired through deceitful means, and, therefore, all the chanting he has been doing for so many millennia will do him absolutely no good, and his terrible destiny will be realized. He has been informed about all of this, but he does not believe what he has been told.

“In fact, all of this has merely angered him, and he has vented his pique against humankind, because, among other things, it is his jealousy of

human spiritual potential that caused him to be rebellious in the first place. One of the ways which Satan gives expression to his anger is to try to entice people who have stepped onto the spiritual path to forget to do whatever chants have been given to them by their guide.

“I think modern psychoanalysts would say that Satan is suffering from a mixture of denial, reaction formation, projection, and sublimation, and, as a result, he is trying to bring about in man what is going to happen to him. However, human beings who have stepped onto the path have a protection which Satan does not have for it is the spiritual link between a seeker and her or his guide that helps the seeker to keep returning to active observance of the mystical path.

“So, my son, please do understand that even though you are experiencing spiritual difficulty at the present time, the fact you keep returning to your chant from time to time is a sign of the spiritual support you have which is helping to remind you to do your chant. Satan does not enjoy this support and, consequently, as I indicated earlier, he will forget what he needs to be doing at the time of his passing away from life.”

The teacher rose as a way of marking the end of the session. He accompanied the young man to the door and sent him off into the night with a wish of peace and harmony for the future.

Some further years passed, and many of the young man's spiritual difficulties gradually fell by the wayside. He often remembered the words of his teacher, and, little by little, he began to do his assigned chant with more regularity and enthusiasm, feeling the bond between himself and his guide was growing stronger in the process.

The young man had been faithfully observing his chant for a number of years when he began to experience a certain amount of disappointment. He recalled the feelings he had when he first began doing the chant ... how extraordinary they were. Yet, in all of these years of observing the chant on a very regular basis, nothing further had happened.

Various sorts of doubts began to grow in his mind and heart. In fact, the doubts became so pervasive that he, once again, felt the need to go to his spiritual guide and inform him about what was going on, and, so, he made an appointment to see his teacher.

As always, his teacher received him with gentleness and kindness. The young man explained his situation and summed it up by

saying: "I guess my biggest doubt about all of this is I feel that I have been saying the chant you have given me every day for years now, and I don't feel like I am getting anywhere with it. I don't see any evidence that the effort has borne fruit. I haven't had any more experiences like I did when I first started to observe the practice, and I feel like I'm either doing something wrong, or there is something wrong somewhere or other, and I just don't know what the problem is."

The teacher shook his head and said: "Nothing is wrong. Everything is proceeding as it should."

"You are doing what you are supposed to be doing. The chant is doing what it was intended to do."

Somewhat frustrated the young man blurted out: "Then why aren't I seeing any results? Why haven't I had any more experiences like the one I had years ago when I first started doing the chant?"

The teacher responded by saying: "Well, first of all, the purpose of mystical practices is not necessarily to generate extraordinary experiences of this or that kind. Yes, sometimes, as a blessing, we are given certain signs to help increase our faith in the truth that there is a real efficacy in a given practice, but things don't always happen this way."

"You might be surprised to learn that if you were to experience, right now, all of the spiritual light and blessings which have accrued to you over the years while observing your chant, you would be burnt to a cinder. Perhaps the best way to explain things to you is to say that the benefit of your years of practice is being held in sort of spiritual escrow for you and that, at the appropriate time, you will be given what is due to you."

"If you will remember, I talked many years ago about Satan and how, night and day, he is observing the chant that he believes is going to be his ticket to heaven but which, in truth, will come to nought. Unlike Satan, what you are doing, God willing, is being preserved, and all you have to do is be faithful to the process."

"You are making good progress, and you should be happy that I am happy with the way things are going for you spiritually. Just remember what was said about the building of Rome and realize that the human soul is much more complex and delicate than a mere collection of material buildings."

A Gift

A saint, who happened to be a spiritual guide as well, was walking with a group of his students through an open-air market in a certain part of the city. The general area in which the market was located had, for some time, been a place where considerable tension between several ethnic groups existed.

On occasion there had been violence due to this on-going conflict, but, for the most part, a sort of wary truce had been observed by both sides. As often is the case in such situations, either no one really was quite sure what had started the problems, or everyone had a different opinion about what it was all about and why everyone supposedly had a duty to ensure that the conflict continued.

The saint had wanted to go to the market in order to purchase some food to prepare for a spiritual celebration which was to take place later in the evening. The occasion was to commemorate the life of one of the great guides of their mystical path, and as had been the practice of this spiritual way for centuries, all of the followers were keeping a special fast prior to the celebration.

Both the fast and the commemoration were extremely important observances for this spiritual way. Unless a person was ill or prevented by some set of circumstances of an unavoidable nature, everyone was expected to participate in both the fast and the celebration which accompanied it.

Most of the people who were followers of this spiritual path belonged to one particular community from among the two ethnic groups who had the aforementioned history of conflict. On the other hand, many of the merchants who had stalls in the market were members of the other ethnic community.

For years the saint had made a point of shopping in the market, trying to promote friendship and harmony whenever he could during his trips to the area. Moreover, as was his inclination whenever he walked through the market, he would stop and talk with different merchants, asking after their welfare, listening to their concerns, and exchanging observations or suggestions about various issues.

This particular trip to the market was no different. Because of the numerous people with whom the spiritual guide wished to speak, as well

as the many people who wished to speak with the saint, the journey through the market was very slow, but the students of the saint who had accompanied the teacher on many such occasions were quite prepared for the slow pace of the walk.

At one of the stalls a member of the other ethnic community saw the saint, smiled toward him and hugged the teacher. He began talking with the spiritual guide, and, the merchant's behavior clearly indicated his love for the teacher.

The two became engaged in a conversation involving an exchange of ideas and observations about life in the community, world problems, and their respective families. The people who were accompanying the teacher stayed together at a respectful distance, allowing the two to talk about whatever they wished to in relative privacy.

During the discussion, the merchant, who owned a dairy bar, put together a milkshake and offered it to the teacher. The saint took the offering, drank from it, and in between swallows, continued talking with the merchant.

When the teacher finished the drink, he lingered for a few more moments and completed the discussion. The spiritual guide, then, apologized for having to rush off, but there were still a few more stops to be made in the market, and, in addition, there were other preparations for that evening's celebration to which attention needed to be given.

The merchant fully understood, bid the teacher good-bye and asked the spiritual guide to say hello, on the merchant's behalf, to the saint's wife and children. The teacher assured the merchant that he would pass on the latter's salutations to the saint's family, thanked the merchant for the most delicious drink, and continued on with his journey through the market.

Once the remainder of the necessary purchases had been made, the teacher and his retinue started to head back to the spiritual center. One of the members walking with the teacher was quite upset about something or other, and his mood was readily visible to the others in the group.

The teacher, of course, noted the man's condition as well. The teacher put his arm around the man and the two continued to walk.

The teacher said: "Son, you are obviously upset with someone or something, and since we have a bit of time before we reach the center,

why don't you tell me what is burdening your mind and heart. Perhaps, we all can learn something if we discuss the matter together."

The man was reluctant to say anything. However, the teacher encouraged him and assured him that whatever he had to say would be okay.

Finally, the man, who was a relative newcomer to the spiritual tradition, replied: "Sir, I mean no disrespect, but I have witnessed something a short while ago which is confusing me and generating a lot of doubts in my mind about you, the path, and myself."

When the man saw that the teacher's countenance of concern and kindness had not altered as a result of the former's initial comments, the man went on: "Today is one of the holiest days of our spiritual tradition. It is a day of fasting. You often have told us how important observing this practice is.

"Yet, this afternoon I saw you drink a milk shake ... in fact it seems that not only was the fast broken, but this was done in conjunction with someone who is a member of the ethnic community with whom we often are in conflict. I'm sorry, but I just don't understand what is going on, and, as a result, I am quite confused about things."

The teacher continued to walk with the man, his arm remaining affectionately draped about the individual's shoulder. The spiritual guide responded by saying: "Well, your confusion is quite understandable, but there are several factors concerning this situation about which you may not be aware, and I'm happy you have raised the matter, for it provides us with an opportunity to explore the issue a little and reflect on some important principles.

"To begin with," the teacher noted, "you are quite right that I broke the fast when I drank the milkshake given to me by the merchant. However, you may not know that our spiritual tradition offers several ways for me to remedy this breach.

"For example, I could fast several months in succession. Or, I could feed a certain number of hungry people for so many days. Each of these is an acceptable manner of making spiritual amends.

"Since Divinity has been so generous in blessing our path with a variety of ways for satisfying our spiritual obligations, I, probably, will elect to keep the long fast because this is how my nature is inclined. I assure you,

however, keeping this fast of repentance will be far, far easier for me to do than it would have been for me to disappoint that merchant's loving demeanor toward me if I were to have refused his kind generosity merely to keep strict adherence with a requirement that could be satisfied in other ways which also have been authorized and approved by Divinity."

Absence

There was a theological scholar who was reviewing the course of his life. He remembered the many difficulties he had to endure in order to acquire his knowledge as well as the considerable dedication and sacrifices that had been required from him in order to arrive at his current position in life.

He had been gifted with a near photographic memory, and through persistence and much struggle, he had been able to learn all of the Holy Scriptures together with the entire corpus of sayings uttered by the great prophets and saints of his tradition. He was known far and wide for his encyclopedic command of the vast literature to which the religious tradition to which he belonged gave expression.

As he reminisced about his career he felt a familiar sadness creep into his consciousness. This sadness had haunted him for much of his life, and it seemed to revolve about the fact that although he was a very accomplished scholar, nevertheless, there seemed to be something which was missing in his understanding ... something he could never quite identify despite having spent many nights thinking about the issue.

Although he was semi-retired, he still gave a number of classes at the local university. These courses were always filled with individuals wishing to both learn from him as well as to be able to say that, once upon a time, they had studied with a scholarly legend, and, thereby, had made living contact with a well-known aspect of modern history within the region.

In one of the courses there was group of students whom the scholar did not exactly appreciate because they seemed to be constantly searching for some flaw in his knowledge. Fortunately, the scholar always had been able to produce quotes, sources, and evidence to silence them, but each time he entered the room for the problematic class -- or, at least, the class with the problematic individuals -- he experienced a certain amount of trepidation, not knowing quite what to expect.

Today was the time for that class to meet again. After he had delivered his lecture for the day, he opened the session up to questions.

Nervously, he eyed the side of the room where his problematic students usually sat, but, they were all quiet ... at least for the moment.

On the other side of the room, a young lady raised her hand, and the professor pointed in her direction, thereby inviting a question from her.

The woman said: "I am just auditing this course on behalf of the administration, but I have found your presentation to be well-prepared, and, if I may, I would like to follow up on one of the things which you discussed."

The professor smiled and nodded his head in a way which conveyed both a sense of acknowledgment concerning her prefatory remarks as well as assenting to her request. He waited for her to continue.

The young woman began: "In your lecture, you talked about a tradition which described an encounter between God and a human being who, if I remember correctly, was being chastised by Divinity because the individual had failed to visit God when God was ill, or feed God when God was hungry, or quench the thirst of God when God was thirsty.

"You went on to explain that the person being chastised had wondered how it was possible for God -- Who that person considered perfect and beyond all needs -- to be ill, hungry or thirsty. You further informed us that the individual, in response to his wondering, was informed by Divinity that God had been with a certain man who was sick, and the person being chastised had not visited that ill man, and, in addition, there had been a woman who had been hungry, and a child who had been thirsty, both of whom God had been with, and, yet, the individual being chastised had not fed the woman nor quenched the thirst of the child.

"Is my understanding of things correct, so far?" asked the woman. The scholar nodded his head in the affirmative, adding: "And, your question?"

"Do you agree with the implication of the story you have told? That is, do you attempt to implement its underlying moral principle and, therefore, try to be with those who are sick, or feed someone who is hungry, or quench the thirst of someone who may be thirsty ... not only because these are good things to do but because you know that God is present with such people and God is witness to what we do or don't do in these respects?"

Despite being put off somewhat by the challenging nature, if not sheer effrontery, of her query, nevertheless, the professor gathered his composure. While he was thinking of what to say, the thought crossed his mind that, possibly, the troublemakers in his course had been

fermenting dissension outside the classroom, and, for whatever reason, the administration had decided to investigate.

Sensing there was more to the question than appeared on the surface and uncertain about whom or what was behind the current situation, he tried to give a measured answer. "Well, young lady, naturally, no human being can be with everyone all the time, and there are limits to what can be expected of any individual. Nonetheless, I do try to help out the needy, and, therefore, the answer to your question is 'yes'... I have visited the sick, and I have fed the hungry, and I have given water to the thirsty -- although, I am sure there is probably much more that I could have, and should have, done in order to help people out."

As soon as the professor had finished, the woman responded: "Whatever else you may have done, I believe there is someone quite close to you who is ill, hungry, and sick, but you ignored that individual."

A wave of shock went through the classroom. People seemed to be divided over whether the woman's comments were rude and uncalled for, or whether they were about to hear revelations of something akin to spousal and/or child abuse.

There were others who thought the whole situation rather amusing. However, the professor and the young woman were not among this latter group.

The scholar was nonplused by the turn of events. He didn't quite know how to reply to the woman.

The woman turned to the rest of the class and said: "The professor is not the only one who has failed in this regard. Many of the rest of you also are guilty of the same thing."

Now that the fitting of the shoe had turned away from the professor some of the titters had changed to murmurs of indignation. Angry remarks arose from various sections of the classroom, especially from among those who often liked to give the professor a hard time.

The professor appealed for quiet. When things had calmed down somewhat, he turned to the woman and said: "Perhaps, you would care to explain yourself."

The woman wasted little time in taking advantage of the opportunity afforded her and remarked: "Professor, you are a very

knowledgeable and kind man. You have, indeed, visited many who were sick, as well as fed those who were hungry, or quenched the thirst of the thirsty, but I still maintain there is someone whom you have missed in this regard.”

The professor, who had a photographic memory, wracked his brain, trying to identify the individual whom he might have failed. Try as he might and without wishing to presume he was perfect in such matters, the fact of the matter was that no one came to mind, and, finally, he shrugged his shoulders, looking to the woman for some sort of answer and, yet, fearing what she might say.

The woman empathized with the look on the face of the professor and said: “For years, your soul has been ill, and although God has been with your soul night and day, nevertheless, you have not visited God there. For years, you have been hungering for the Divine Presence, but you have not taken the time to feed yourself spiritually. Rather, you were preoccupied with the information contained in books, and for years, you have been thirsting for knowledge concerning the reality of Divine unity, but you have not taken steps to quench your thirst ... rather, you were content to merely read about the Oasis in the desert.”

When one comes face to face with the truth, what can one do? One is grateful for the understanding, and one tries to think about what to do with such knowledge. So, the professor thanked the woman, ended the class, and began thinking about possibilities on the way back home.

What's Your Secret?

There was a man -- described by some as being mystically inclined -- who was renowned for his ability to get difficult conflicts resolved. Warring nations, divisive stockholders, labor strife, collapsing governments, as well as a number of failing marriages among the rich and famous had all benefitted from his counsel and negotiating skills.

However, for whatever reason, the man always had insisted that participating parties sign a contract prior to the commencement of even preliminary discussions concerning a given issue or problem. The conditions of this contract would bind everyone concerned to absolute silence with respect to what took place during discussions and any ensuing activities which, hopefully, might lead to resolution of a given problem.

The nature of the contract was such that everyone was held collectively responsible for breaches committed by any single individual connected with the conflict-resolution process, and the financial penalties for breach of contract were rumored to be quite substantial. Whether out of fear of the monetary consequences and legal entanglements, or due to the fact that the man had never failed in any assignment he accepted in which the condition of silence was honored by all parties, an aura of inviolability tended to shroud his activities, methods, comments, and suggestions whenever he was engaged in a process of conflict resolution. Moreover, because this man was a very private individual, and, therefore, rarely gave interviews of any kind, there were few clues available which might shed light on how or why he seemed to be so successful with situations that, on the surface, often appeared not to be amenable to being resolved in a harmonious fashion.

A faculty member of a prestigious university -- who had cross appointments in both the School of Management and the School of Public Administration -- knew that the aforementioned conflict resolution specialist was getting on in years, and the professor feared that a great treasure of knowledge would be lost forever if steps were not taken before the man died to try to establish a permanent record of how this individual was able to, so regularly, work his magic in situations laden with tension and animosity. So, the professor

spoke with various deans within the university as well as its president and the board of trustees about the possibility of taking a leave of absence in order to try to persuade the man who could resolve conflicts to record his extensive knowledge, techniques, methods, and so on, in order that such understanding could be passed on to subsequent generations.

The plan was approved. Shortly thereafter, the professor began his quest.

Because of the notorious reclusiveness and reticence of the focus of his research project, the scholar was anticipating that his task would prove to be both difficult and time-consuming. Therefore, he was quite surprised when he was granted an appointment to meet with the great man early in the following week.

The professor was to be given just one hour to ask whatever questions he wished. There would be no follow-up meetings permitted.

Obviously, an hour was not very much time in which to gather information that might affect the way courses in conflict resolution would be taught in universities for generations to come. The professor struggled to try to come up with questions that, hopefully, might be capable of penetrating to the heart of the matter and induce the man to divulge some of his secrets. After several days of hard work, the professor felt ready to conduct his interview.

When the time for the meeting arrived, the professor was escorted into a sort of large board room where the man to be interviewed was awaiting the scholar's arrival. The two shook hands and took seats.

After exchanging a few preliminary remarks, the professor decided to ask his first question, and, as he did, he encountered the first of many problems. The scholar would ask a question, and he would be met with responses such as: "I'm sorry, but that is classified information", or, "Contractual obligations prevent me from answering your question", or, "I would need the permission of so-and-so to be able to provide you with any information on this", or, "This touches upon on-going negotiations, and, therefore, I am not at liberty to comment," or, "That decision has been sealed by the Courts."

Question after question was met with similar responses. The time allotted for the interview was rapidly drawing to an end, and the professor had not come up with one useful piece of information.

The great resolver of conflicts could tell that the scholar was frustrated with the way things were going in the interview. The former man smiled sympathetically and a little sheepishly, saying, as he did: "I'm sorry if I seem very uncooperative. This was not my intention when I granted the interview. I truly did hope that, maybe, if circumstances permitted, something of value to you, and possibly others, might arise out of our meeting.

"There really are some very important reasons why information concerning these issues is so tightly controlled. Much of our success depends on such secrecy being maintained in a very rigorous manner, and if this sort of information were to become public knowledge, many of our future efforts might be undermined and come to nothing."

Looking at his watch, he continued on: "I fear our time is nearly at an end, but there may be one thing I can do for you before you leave. What I have in mind is this.

"There are several brief meetings which I have to conduct in this room. Why don't you sit in on these meetings, and, perhaps, you may catch a small sense of the flavor of how we go about things, and, therefore, you might come to feel that your time here has not been entirely wasted?"

The professor wanted to try to make the best of what had proven to be a very disappointing set of circumstances, and, consequently, he agreed to the suggestion. His host requested that the professor just observe during the meetings and if the scholar had any comments or questions concerning what went on to please wait until the two meetings had been completed.

The great resolver of conflicts pressed one of the buttons on the intercom and asked for someone to be sent in. A short while later a woman entered the room.

She took the seat indicated, and, as soon as she was seated, she began to complain about one of her co-workers who worked with the great resolver of conflicts. The woman went on for some time, describing how the man was creating difficulties of one sort or another in relation to a certain project.

When she had finished, the resolver of conflicts said: “Yes, yes, you are quite right in what you are saying. I will have a talk with him, and let’s see what happens.”

The woman left happy with the results of their meeting. As soon as she had left the room, the man again pressed one of the buttons on the intercom and asked for the individual about whom the woman just had been complaining.

A short while later the door opened. A man walked in. He took the seat where the woman previously had been sitting.

He was asked: “So, how is such and such a project going?”

No sooner had the question been asked when the man who had just entered began to criticize the woman who recently had left the room. The man spoke disapprovingly of the woman approximately as long as she had gone on about him, and he voiced many of the same sorts of criticism.

When the man stopped talking, the great resolver of conflicts said: “Well, I must admit that I can understand your point of view, and I couldn’t agree with you more. We’ll have to look into this matter very carefully and see what can be accomplished.”

The man, who previously had been the focus of the woman’s complaints, stood, expressed his gratitude for having had the opportunity to speak, and walked out of the room. When the man had left the room, closing the door behind him, the scholar’s host swiveled in his chair and faced the professor with a look that invited the scholar to voice whatever might be on his mind.

The professor hesitated for a moment ... unsure whether, or not, to say what he was thinking. Finally, he said: “I might be missing something here, but, quite frankly, your conduct during these two meetings seems rather contradictory.

“A woman comes in and complains about a man, and you agree with her. Then, the man about whom she was complaining comes in and proceeds to criticize that woman for having made the same sorts of mistake as the woman alleged with respect to the man, and, once more, you completely agreed with the complaints.

“What those two people were saying was diametrically opposed. They couldn’t both be simultaneously correct.”

The man looked at the professor, nodded his head, and replied: “You’re absolutely right.”

Mirror, Mirror

A very rich man lived in a certain country. Because the economy of that nation had been battered by a series of regional wars, droughts, and government scandals, many of the people of the country were extremely poor.

Fortunately, the man who was rich was also quite generous. With the blessings and encouragement of his wife, he spent a considerable portion of his wealth on those whose material circumstances often were bordering on the edge of disaster and who, as a result, needed help just to stay alive.

A variety of people were of the opinion that if not for the charitable nature of this man, many families in the country would have perished. Whatever the truth of this opinion might have been, no one doubted the importance of this man's contributions to promoting the general welfare of the country.

Rather than have his employees distribute his financial and material gifts, the rich man liked to take his wife, travel about the country, learn about people who were in need, and give to these people in a quiet, indirect way so the latter individuals would not be embarrassed publicly due to their impoverished status. The man spent half the year engaged in his various businesses, and the other half of the year was devoted to acts of charity.

Because of his kind and generous nature, he became a beloved figure. Everyone was happy to see him and his wife since the people knew that the couple's appearance soon would be followed by help being given to the needy families in the area.

During one of their charitable forays they stopped at a local restaurant. While eating their meal, they couldn't help overhearing part of a conversation in the booth behind them.

Apparently, someone in the next town was claiming to be a source of greater charity than the rich man and his wife. Since the couple had never heard of anyone else in the country helping the poor of the country to the extent they were doing, the two were somewhat mystified by what they were hearing.

In addition, the rich man was a little saddened to hear the news. He felt guilty for the trace of sadness that was present, but, being human, he had taken a certain amount of pride in his charitable work, and, therefore, the

idea that someone else might be outdoing him in such activities generated a small amount of envy in him toward the individual about whom he and his wife were hearing as they were eating their meal.

The rich man decided he would investigate this matter further when they arrived at the town in question. First, he would send out discreet inquiries concerning what he had heard and see if could learn anything further.

Upon arriving in the designated town, the couple went to the hotel where they had standing reservations during such visits. They settled in, and the wealthy individual set his plan in motion.

The following day one of the people whom the rich man had approached for purposes of learning more about his rival in charity phoned and said he had looked into the matter as requested and had been able to discover a name and address for the person being sought by the wealthy visitor. The information was given, and the rich man decided that tomorrow he would: make some excuse to his wife, set off on his own, and see if he could meet with the man about whom he had heard in the restaurant.

Since the town was not that large, the philanthropist didn't require a great deal of time to locate the address he had been given. However, he was rather surprised because the house at which he arrived was in the poorest part of the community.

He knocked on the door, and only a few seconds passed before the knob turned and the door was opened. An elderly man in ragged clothes stood before him.

The rich man said: "Are you Mr. Davis -- Carl Davis?"

The elderly man nodded in the affirmative and replied: "To whom do I owe my gratitude for having visited my humble home?" The wealthy visitor identified himself, and a look of recognition raced across the old man's face. The poor man added: "Please, come in. I've been expecting you."

The rich man stepped through the entrance and saw a room which was as shabbily furnished as the owner's clothes were tattered. The older man invited his guest to a chair near a wooden table, and when the rich man was seated, the host became busy with making tea and putting together a small bowl of fruit.

While the old man was preparing some refreshments, the rich man became preoccupied with wondering how his host had known he was coming. Had one

of the people whom he had asked to make discreet inquiries slipped up somewhere and, somehow, word of the rich man's interests had made its way back to the elderly gentleman who was puttering about the room?

The old man brought the things he was preparing to the table and encouraged the rich man to select whatever he liked saying: "I'm sorry, there is not much to offer, but whatever I have I am very happy to share with you."

The rich man waved his hands in a way that suggested he was content with whatever his host had prepared. The two ate in silence for a short while.

Not knowing quite how to broach the subject in which he was interested, the rich man spoke about the weather and asked a few questions about his host's family. The poor man responded with polite but brief replies.

Finally, the rich man said: "You know, on the way to this town, I stopped in a restaurant and, quite by accident, my wife and I overheard a very interesting conversation in the booth next to ours, and, believe it or not, you seemed to be the topic of that conversation."

"Oh," said the poor man. "I can't image why anyone would be talking about me."

"Well," exclaimed the rich man, "forgive me for saying this, since I see that you are a very humble person, but the people who were talking were saying you had been making claims that you were a greater source of charity than I and my wife, and I thought I would try to meet with the sort of individual being described by those people and see what truth there was to the story."

Looking around the room, the rich man continued on with: "I feel certain that someone is playing a trick on you or trying to create difficulties for you."

The old man replied: "What you heard in the restaurant is true. I have made such claims."

The rich man looked in a rather bemused manner at the man sitting across from him. "Mr. Davis," he said, "I'm not trying to be rude, but unless these surroundings are a rather elaborate charade of some sort, I really don't see how you possibly could believe you are a greater source of charity than I am."

“Yes,” the old man responded, “I can well appreciate why you might come to such a conclusion, but I believe you misunderstand the real nature of charity. For while it is true that you and your wife are very generous to poor people such as myself, nevertheless, what you do not seem to grasp is that whatever you give to us in the way of material or financial help is used up in a very short period of time, whereas the blessings which come to you through us, by virtue of our being recipients of your generosity, lasts an eternity. If we were not poor, you would have no one to whom to be generous, and, therefore, you would lose the blessings which come via such acts. Therefore, by being poor, we give opportunities of blessings for you which are far more spiritually enduring and beneficial than any of the financial or material gifts you may give to us.”

The old man paused briefly and, then, asked: “So, is it not true that I, and people like me, are a far greater source of charity than you are? Is it not true that something far more enduring, in the way of blessings, comes to you through us than comes to us through you?”

Dream On

The time had come for a spiritual guide to begin to instruct one of his students about the intricacies of dream interpretation. In time the student was destined to become a great mystical teacher, but, before her destiny would be realized, the student had to be trained in a variety of disciplines, and today marked the occasion when this student would start to learn about dreams.

Her guide had decided that the best way to begin the process would be to permit his trainee to sit in on a few sessions during which dream interpretation took place. This would enable the student to see, first hand, how the guide did things and, as well, offer opportunities for the student to ask questions about whatever might transpire on such occasions.

Normally, people came to the guide with their dreams at different times of the week according to whenever their dreams might have occurred. However, in order to accommodate the schedule of his student, he issued a special announcement to the community in which he lived indicating that for the next two weeks only, the usual routine concerning the reporting of dreams to the guide would be suspended and people should relate whatever dreams they might have had during the week at a time on the next several Fridays which was convenient to them.

The first Friday of the new arrangement arrived, and three people were sitting in the lobby of the center awaiting their turn to tell their dreams to the spiritual guide. The teacher and his trainee received these people, one at a time, in a relatively small room near the back of the center and away from the lobby.

The first person to present a dream was a woman. She obviously was very nervous, and while she wanted her dream interpreted, she also seemed to be embarrassed about the whole process.

This woman started to talk about her dream several times but stopped each time. As she did this, she would alternate between shyly looking at the guide out of the corner of her eye and staring down at the floor as she played with her purse.

The teacher gently encouraged her by saying: “Sometimes, because dreams are cobbled together in a symbolic language which combines elements of both the material world and the non-material realms, the form of the symbols that give expression to the dream may, on the surface, suggest one thing, when, in reality, the meaning of the dream is quite something else. So, if you find the surface form of your dream somewhat embarrassing, don’t worry, because the symbols used there may not mean what you think they do.”

The words of the spiritual guide appeared to relieve the woman. She hesitated only a brief moment before telling her dream.

She said there were parts of the dream which she had since forgotten, but the portion that remained with her was this: “She had seen herself engaged in an intimate embrace with the spiritual guide, and they were passionately kissing one another.”

She added: “I find the dream very embarrassing, and it has been bothering me all week for I really don’t think about you in such terms, but, nonetheless, this is the dream, and I am hoping you can help me determine if it means there is some kind of spiritual problem going on within me.”

The guide’s eyes twinkled. He laughed in a gentle way and responded with: “I can well understand why the dream’s form might have caused you discomfort, but, in point of fact, your dream is a wonderful sign. The dream informs us that you are both embracing, and in the embrace of, this spiritual path. Moreover, you are being lovingly looked after, in a very intense way, by some of the great saints of our mystical tradition.”

The teacher and the one who had just related her dream talked a bit longer about different facets of the mystical way. After a few moments, she asked the teacher’s permission to leave, thanked him for his kind words, and, following a few words of farewell from the guide, she left.

Approximately five minutes later, another woman appeared at the entrance to the room and proceeded through the doorway when beckoned forward by the teacher. She sat down near the spiritual guide, and, as she was taking her seat, she was looking at the trainee.

Over the next 30 seconds, she quickly glanced at the trainee a few more times before returning her attention to the guide. The trainee’s presence seemed to unsettle her a little.

Noting this, the teacher nodded toward his trainee and said: "I have complete confidence in my companion's integrity and capacity to be discreet with respect to anything she may witness here. I have asked her to sit in on some of these sessions so that she may learn about the interpretation of dreams, and, in time, she will be taking over some of my responsibilities in this area."

He was silent for a few seconds and, then, added: "If you would rather tell your dream to only me, then, we could, I'm sure, find another time that works for both of us. It's entirely up to you."

The woman mulled over the teacher's words for a moment and said: "No, in the light of what you have said, I don't mind her being here. I was just sort of surprised to see her when I came in, and the unexpectedness of it kind of unnerved me a bit."

The teacher nodded his head in a manner that indicated he understood. He waited for her to begin relating her dream.

She looked at the teacher and smiled in a very charming way. The woman seemed quite excited as she worked her way toward articulating her thoughts.

"Well," she began, "my dream was about you. I sense there was more to the dream than I will say, but since the other parts are so vague, I'll just stick to what seemed to be the main theme of the dream."

She smiled that charming smile again and continued: "You and I were locked in a very intimate embrace, and we were passionately kissing one another."

When it was clear the woman had said all she was able to about the dream, the spiritual guide said: "Sometimes, in our dreams, there are different things which become entangled with one another, and, as a result, there is a potential for confusion to arise within us in relation to such dreams."

The teacher expanded on his initial commentary: "For example, sometimes we project our own desires or passions onto a situation, and these desires obscure the real significance of the dream. In order to be receptive to the true meaning of a dream's message, we, first, may have to take charge of our own lower nature ... that is, we may have to go through a process of purification so that we become masters of our passions rather than have our passions be our masters. In short, we must seek to learn how to embrace the truth rather than embrace our desires and passions."

The teacher looked at the woman, smiled and said: “If you will reflect on what I have said, I believe you may come to understand the nature of your dream. I have given you a sufficient number of indications to help you, and, along with a little reflection, you should be able to derive benefit from what your dream is telling you.”

The guide, then, requested the woman’s help: “If you don’t mind, would you tell the other people who are waiting to see me that there are a few things which I have to do before I will be ready to receive anyone else. I’ll send out word, shortly, to let those waiting know when they may start coming in again.” The woman agreed to the teacher’s request, he thanked her for her assistance, and she left.

When the door closed behind the woman, the teacher turned to his trainee and asked: “Do you have any questions so far?”

The trainee nodded and said: “These two women both seemed to have exactly the same dream, and, yet, the interpretations they were given were almost completely opposite from one another. How does one know which meaning to give to which individual?”

The teacher moved his head in a manner that suggested he was saying: ‘Yes, this is the problem’. He elaborated by saying: “There are, at least, three dimensions to every instance of dream interpretation. First, there is the language of dreams which, on the one hand, involves symbols that combine elements of both the material and spiritual world, and, on the other hand, conveys a spiritual communication between the individual having the dream and the One Who is arranging and structuring the message which is being conveyed to the individual through the dream.”

The guide paused briefly, and, then, said: “A second dimension of the dream revolves about the spiritual condition of the person who is having the dream. And, finally, a third element arises out of the spiritual condition of the person who is providing the interpretation of a dream.

“As you indicated, the two women who came here did have exactly the same dream ... at least as far as the outer form of the dreams is concerned. The first woman is very sincere about the mystical path, and, as well, she has been working very hard to devote herself to this way. Her dream was meant to convey to her that her sincere efforts are being

rewarded and, consequently, she was receiving many spiritual blessings through the loving gaze of some of the great mentors of this path.

“However, the second woman has not, yet, settled down to commit herself to the path. As a result, she is embracing this path primarily through her lower, base emotions, and, in the process, she is conflating physical desires and spiritual love.”

“Thus, the same sort of dream can mean a great many things, depending on who the dreamer is and what that person’s spiritual condition is at the time of the dream. There is no ‘Compendium of Dreams’ which can be consulted that will be able to inform one what any given dream symbol means, because a symbol without a context is meaningless, and the spiritual condition of the dreamer is what provides the necessary context to lend meaning to a dream symbol.”

The spiritual trainee was listening intently to her teacher as he was talking about the nature of dreams. When he seemed to have come to the end of his comments, she asked: “You earlier had mentioned a third facet of dream interpretation ... namely, the spiritual condition of the one who is providing the interpretation of a dream. How does that fit in?”

“Ah, yes,” said her guide. “This is extremely important, and, sometimes, unfortunately, it can lead to tragedy when in the hands, so to speak, of the wrong person.” He shook his head slightly.

“I recall when I was being trained by my spiritual mentor just as you are now being trained by me. My teacher told me about a friend of his who had become interested in dreams and their meaning.

“There had been a spiritual guide to whom this friend of my teacher would go whenever the friend had dreams. But, on one occasion, this friend had become ill.

He not only was unable to leave his house but, apparently, there also was something wrong with his phone. However, because he had had a powerful dream of some sort, he wanted to know its meaning as quickly as possible.

“So, he told his dream to a neighbor of his and asked the individual to communicate the dream to the spiritual guide to whom the friend of my teacher used to go. Now, this neighbor was a somewhat silly person, and while on his way to relate the dream, as he had been requested to do, by the spiritual guide of my teacher’s friend, the neighbor

met an acquaintance, and, at some point, the neighbor told his acquaintance about the mission he was on.

“With a little prodding from his acquaintance, the neighbor of my teacher’s friend described the dream just as it had been related to him. Upon hearing the dream, the acquaintance provided some interpretation or other.

“Shortly thereafter, the neighbor and his acquaintance parted company, and the neighbor proceeded to fulfill the task which he originally had been requested to do. When he reached the house of the spiritual guide to whom he had been sent, the neighbor explained why he was there to the individual who came to the door.

“The spiritual guide, who had been the one to receive the neighbor at the door, agreed to listen to the dream. When the description had been given, the teacher asked the man if there was someone else who already had given an interpretation of the dream.

“The neighbor said that, in fact, someone had given an interpretation. Upon hearing this, the teacher shook his head back and forth with a sad expression on his face.

“The teacher informed the man that since someone else already had interpreted the dream, whatever benefit might have been inherent in the dream would be limited and shaped by the spiritual condition of the person who did the interpreting, and, furthermore, the teacher feared that since the person who had provided the interpretation was not even involved with mysticism, a great disservice had been done to my teacher’s friend because the latter had been robbed, in a sense -- at least temporarily and, possibly, permanently-- of the blessings for which the dream had been intended as a harbinger.”

The spiritual guide who had been telling the story about his own mentor’s friend became silent... as if lost in thought. Eventually, he said: “Today, the whole idea of dream interpretation has become something of an industry ... as if anyone, irrespective of spiritual condition, is competent to provide proper interpretation of dreams. More damage is done than people know by the manner in which ignorance -- of one kind or another -- obscures and distorts the purpose of dreams, as well as their language, their source, their meaning, and their value.”

The mystical mentor again became quiet. A moment later, he broke the silence with: "I also remember someone else about whom my teacher told me. This individual had a deep-rooted desire to be a spiritual guide, but, apparently, this kind of service was not in that person's destiny, and, therefore, she was never authorized by her teacher to give spiritual instructions to people who wished to step onto the mystical path.

"At some point, this woman's teacher died, and, as human nature is often inclined to do, the woman's desires to be a spiritual teacher were manifested in a dream which, on the surface, suggested she should immediately assume the duties of a spiritual guide, including the initiation of those who were seeking entry into the mystical way.

"When she reported this dream to my teacher, she was told: "Since you received your authorization in a dream, perhaps you should refrain from being a spiritual guide anywhere but in your dreams."

What Would You Do?

A spiritually realized individual was about to pass on to the next world. Before this took place, however, there were certain duties which he needed to complete.

One of these responsibilities involved appointing someone who would continue on with providing assistance to those individuals who were interested in pursuing the mystical path. There were quite a few outstanding candidates to consider, but there were four people in particular who were especially noteworthy due to the extraordinary beauty of their spiritual character.

In order to make his selection, the man decided to ask each of the candidates a simple question. He felt certain that one of the four would answer the query in a manner which would single out that person as reflecting the choice which God wished to be made.

Arrangements were made to interview the four individuals, one at a time. The date, time, and place were fixed for each person.

The first individual appeared at her appointed time. As soon as she arrived, she was asked the following question: "If you were to be given the patched frock which is symbolic of the mystical authority that is invested in the one who wears it, what would you do with such authority?"

The person reflected on the question and, then, replied: "I would use that authority to try to engender in people an abiding love of and commitment to the truth."

This was a good answer. The one who had asked the question was pleased with the response.

Later that day, the next candidate appeared at the indicated time. When asked how he would use the authority which accompanied the wearing of the patched frock, he remarked: "I would seek to help people to establish justice so that they would be able to live in a secure, peaceful, and harmonious environment where every individual received what was due to him or her."

This had been another excellent reply. Again, the man who had asked the question felt happy with the quality of the answer.

On the following morning, the third person was ready to be interviewed. Once more, the questioner was not disappointed.

This individual said: "I would use the spiritual authority to assist people to be kind toward, and generous with, one another."

The man asking the question could find no fault with such a perspective. Like the other answers, this response was simple, straightforward, and, God willing, would have a tremendously beneficial impact upon the community if implemented.

The appointment for the final individual had been set for the afternoon. When the designated time arrived, so did the candidate, and, the same question was asked yet again.

The person replied: "I would use the patched frock to cover the faults of people."

The answer was elegant. It brought a smile to the lips of the questioner.

Previously, when the dates and times for the interviews had been established, the four candidates were informed that the presentation of the patched frock would be made at a certain time on the morning following the last interview, and all four individuals were requested to be present.

Morning arrived. The four candidates plus the interviewer assembled at the indicated time and place.

The one who had asked each of the individuals the same question said: "The answers which each of you gave are exemplary. All of your responses brought joy to my heart, and I have no doubt that each of you, irrespective of whether, or not, you receive the patched frock, will dedicate your lives to putting into practice the answers you have voiced.

"However, as important and correct as the answers are which each of you have given to the question of what you would do if given responsibility for exercising the spiritual authority which is vested in the one who wears the patched frock, the answer that may be most necessary, in view of the weaknesses and mistakes to which human beings are prone, involves hiding their faults. This, truly, is a service to the people which places no demands on them and, yet, which is of great value to the community.

“Naturally, I do not mean to maintain that the truth should not be disclosed when justice demands this. However, sometimes, silence is the best part of doing justice, and, sometimes, silence about an individual’s faults is the most efficacious way of helping such a person to make spiritual progress. However, knowing when silence is appropriate and when it is not requires a considerable degree of spiritual insight ... the sort of understanding that I am confident our selected candidate, God willing, possesses.”

Having said this, he took the patched frock, placed it over the shoulders of the one who had opted for hiding the faults of others in response to the teacher’s question, and then hugged that individual. He said: “You are the one whom God is entrusting with this responsibility.”

Focus

There was a man who wished to become a mystic. He had wanted to do this as long as he could remember.

For many years he had conducted research and actively searched a variety of localities in order to find a spiritual guide. Finally, all his efforts were rewarded when, almost miraculously, events unfolded in such a way that he came to know about a spiritual guide who recently had moved into the area to which the seeker, himself, had just migrated.

When he learned of the fortuitous turn of events, he became very excited. Immediately, he began making plans to travel to the spiritual teacher's home town.

He waited for the right set of circumstances to arise -- circumstances that included having a number of free days strung together so he would have time to make the necessary journey, establish contact with the teacher, and, hopefully, spend a few days learning from that person before returning home. Soon, he saw his opportunity take shape, and, as a result, he activated his plan.

The physical portion of the trip was uneventful. He arrived in the small town, booked a place to stay, deposited his bags in the room, and got a bite of food at a nearby restaurant.

Afterwards, he made a few inquiries about the teacher and discovered that the gentleman spent an hour or so in the town square just about the same time every afternoon. People described the spiritual guide as being very friendly and approachable.

The seeker decided to start visiting the square the very next day. Perhaps, with a little luck, he would be able to meet the teacher in fairly short order.

The afternoon of the following day slowly rolled around. The visitor went to the square, which was just a short walk from the hotel where he was staying, and began looking for the spiritual guide.

By carefully observing what went on in the square, he was able to identify the person he had traveled to see. When the latter individual was alone for a moment, the seeker made his move and went over to the bench where the teacher was seated.

He introduced himself, and just as he had been informed on the previous day, the man was both very friendly and quite approachable. A discussion ensued. After a few twists and turns, the seeker was able to steer to the topic of mysticism.

The two had an animated discussion on this subject for a short while. In fact, the discussion went so well that the seeker had the courage to say: "I would like to step onto the mystical path. I understand there is an initiation process surrounding entry into mysticism, and I am wondering if you would initiate me."

The teacher remained friendly but said: "No, I'm sorry, that is not possible." As soon as he said this, he began talking about issues other than mysticism.

The seeker tried several times to move the discussion back to matters of spirituality. Although the spiritual guide remained very affable, nevertheless, on each occasion the teacher was able to deftly deflect the seeker's attempts to return to the topic of the mystical path in another, non-mystical direction.

Finally, the teacher looked at his watch, apologized for having to leave and proceeded to rise. He warmly shook the seeker's hand, and, then, he walked off, wishing the seeker well as he did so.

The man remained on the bench, watching the teacher disappear around a street corner leading away from the square. He was puzzled.

Things had not gone at all the way he had envisioned. Consequently, he began to replay the whole discussion in his mind's eye, trying to figure out where the problem might lie.

After giving the matter much thought while sitting on the bench, walking around town, eating supper, and lying down on his bed in the hotel, he had not been able to come up with anything that had happened during the discussion which might account for why his overture to obtain initiation had been rebuffed.

The man, however, did develop a few hypotheses concerning the situation. He would test these possibilities the next day.

The night and morning came and went. Afternoon had begun.

The seeker went to the town square and saw the teacher sitting on the same bench as the previous day. After a few people stopped and talked with the guide, a time came when the teacher was sitting by himself.

The seeker again approached the teacher and asked the latter if it was okay for him to sit and talk. The teacher's face lighted up, and he invited the visitor to sit down.

The teacher was polite, entertaining, and friendly, giving absolutely no indication of there being any ill-will present toward the seeker. The two engaged in an amiable discussion of sports, politics, and a few other topics.

During the discussion, the seeker worked certain ideas into their exchange in order to test his theories of what might be the problem. When none of his hypotheses proved tenable, he decided to, once again, broach the subject of initiation.

He asked to be initiated into the mystical way. The teacher responded in precisely the same way as on the first day they met: "No, I'm sorry, that is not possible", and like yesterday, he continued to talk in a warm, friendly manner about other subjects until the time for his departure arrived.

This time the guide walked away in a different direction, but the seeker was left in the same predicament. What was going on? Why wasn't it possible for the initiation to take place?

Not only was the seeker disappointed, but, as well, he was a little annoyed and angry with the events of the past two days. Tomorrow, he decided, if the chance arose, he would confront the teacher in a direct fashion and would attempt to discover why the request for initiation seemed to be falling on deaf ears.

He spent a restless night tossing and turning. The clocks seemed to be involved in a conspiracy for they moved in a way that suggested they were resisting bringing the afternoon on in a timely fashion.

The afternoon, however, did finally take place. The seeker went to the square, found the teacher sitting alone, and quickly approached the bench.

The teacher looked up, saw the man approach, and smiled in a very inviting and charming manner. The seeker asked if it was okay to sit with the

teacher for a little while, and the teacher warmly assented to the request.

Choosing to avoid dancing about with small talk, the seeker said: "I don't wish to be offensive or rude, but several times over the last two days I have asked you to initiate me into the mystical way, and on each occasion, you have said 'no'. Why?"

The teacher briefly gazed at the man and, then, turned his head away, surveying the rest of the square as he did. Very gently he said: "If you were willing to trust me to be your guide, don't you feel you might trust my judgment that, at least at the present time, you are not ready for the mystical path?"

The words were rather unexpected and had a point -- a sharp one. The seeker thought about what had been said and, then, replied: "But, I have wanted to be initiated for such a long time. I'm willing to do anything to prove my sincerity. I'm just asking for a chance to show you that I really am serious about my request."

The guide weighed the remarks of the man. The teacher briefly studied him, looked away, and returned his gaze to the seeker.

The mystic said: "Okay, I'll tell you what I'm prepared to do. I'm going to give you a task, and if you complete that task, I will initiate you."

The seeker first was very happy, but a sense of wariness swept across his face. He asked: "Is the task illegal, immoral, impossible, or beyond my ability?"

The teacher laughed and shook his head, indicating that the answer to all of the man's concerns was 'no'. He added: "The task, actually, is fairly simple and straightforward, but I don't believe you will complete it."

"Then, tell me what I have to do," responded the seeker, "and, I will do my best to accomplish whatever task you might assign to me."

The teacher said: "I want you to take off your shirt, go over to that variety store at the edge of the square, and, then, buy: a medium size basket, some candy to put in the basket, a baseball cap, and various materials for making a sign to hang around your neck. When you have done all that, I would like you to return here and compose a sign which says: 'If you will knock the cap from my head, I will give you a piece of candy.' Upon completing the sign and using some string to suspend it around your neck, I want you to walk around the square with your basket full of candy, and wherever you

find people, you should stop in front of them so they can read the sign and, if they choose, do what they must to get their piece of candy, and you should do this until all the candy is gone. Moreover, from beginning to end, you cannot explain why you are doing what you are doing to anyone.”

After the nature of the task was outlined, the seeker protested: “I couldn’t possibly do this. I mean, what would people think of me? I would become a laughing stock of the town, not just now, but for some time to come. Please, give me some task other than this.”

The teacher looked at the man, his gaze fixed on the eyes of the would-be seeker. In a very loving and kind way, the guide said: “You see, I told you, you would not be able to do this. You’re still too preoccupied with what people think of you rather than being primarily concerned with what Divinity wishes from you.”

Confessions

A man was critically reflecting on the spiritual quality of his life. Because he was an honest man, he had tried to be unsparing in his self-assessment, and, therefore, he was becoming uncomfortable with what he was seeing in himself.

There were a number of problematic themes that emerged during in his on-going autobiographical assessment. However, there was one behavioral pattern in particular which bothered him deeply.

Years earlier he had become interested in mysticism. He had been blessed with finding not only an authentic mystical guide, but someone who was, by the grace of God, a very pure servant of Divinity. After a time, the former individual had become initiated by this teacher into the mystical way.

Among other things, this seeker believed that initiation should christen the beginning of a deepening commitment to the principles of spirituality. Accordingly, to be initiated meant that a person should aspire to becoming more and more sincere about turning theory into practice ... to not just read and talk about the mystical path but to struggle to become what one was reading and talking about.

Yet, there was the rub. The spiritual seeker felt like he was a hypocrite. There seemed to be a rather substantial discrepancy between what he professed and what he actually did.

The man was so disturbed by what appeared to be an unavoidable conclusion with respect to the review which he had been conducting in relation to his life on the mystical path, he decided to go to a friend of his who also was a traveler along the esoteric way and confess everything to him, hoping his friend might have some useful suggestions as to how to get his spiritual life straightened around.

He began trying to summon up sufficient courage with which to approach his friend. Revealing one's faults to oneself is hard enough, but to disclose those secrets to other another human being tends to be far more painful and embarrassing.

Nonetheless, the man was determined to see this process of self-assessment and self-correction through until the bitter end. When he was ready, he went to his friend's house.

His friend received him, as always, with affection and warmth. The rest of his friend's family was away at some community event, so the two were alone, and this made the man's task considerably easier ... but still rather difficult.

After a few false starts, the man finally got down to the business about which he had come. He said: "Probably, after you hear what I have to say, you no longer will wish to be my friend, but I can't live this way any longer. I can't live with my hypocrisy."

His friend was surprised by the man's words. He always had considered his friend to be a good man ... a devoted husband and father, someone to whom one always could go if one needed help with some task or other, an individual of serious purpose concerning life.

Puzzled by his friend's comments, he said: "Why do you think you are a hypocrite? This is certainly not my impression of you."

His friend smiled weakly at these words of encouragement and replied: "That is very much like you to say such kind things, but, I tell you, I am a hypocrite."

His friend waited for him to continue on with his self-critical account. Perhaps, the whole matter could easily be dealt with once the specifics became known.

The one who was in a confessional mood began to expand on his previous statements. "I'll try to give you some examples of what I have in mind. For instance, whenever I am with our spiritual guide, all I think about is how to become a better person. When I am with him, I constantly am feeling the nearness of God and, therefore, I have no wish other than to remember and serve God. When I am with our teacher, I feel like the purpose of life is so clear, and I lose interest in everything else."

The man sighed with frustration. His shoulders sank in despair. "But, when I'm not in the presence of our spiritual guide, it often seems like the mystical way is completely forgotten by me. I become less dedicated to morally improving myself. I feel more distant from God. I become preoccupied with my wife, children, work, and the world. The purpose of life seems less clear, more elusive."

As the man spoke these words his friend shook his head in disbelief. Then, his friend laughed and said: "I thought I was the only one who felt this way about things. Your confession is like a carbon copy of what I have been

agonizing over for quite some time now, except you are more honest and courageous than me because you have had the integrity to speak about it, whereas I have been silent about such matters.”

He followed up on his own confession with a suggestion: “You know what we should do? We should go to our teacher, tell him everything, place our fate in his forgiving hands, and pray that he doesn’t disown us.”

His friend thought the suggestion was a good one. After all, they both had come this far, so they might as well go the full distance. Almost anything might be better than this deep sense of hypocrisy which was gnawing away at them.

They decided to strike while the iron of remorse was hot and go to the house of their teacher right away. Hopefully, the teacher would be home and not busy with someone or something else as well as be willing to see them without their having made an appointment.

They traveled in silence to their guide’s residence. Each friend was anxious about what their immediate future might hold in store for them.

Fortuitously, the teacher was home, not attending to some other responsibility, and he was prepared to receive them. The friends were ushered into the house and taken to the living room where they each were invited to take seats.

Once seated, the friends looked nervously at one another. They each were trying to communicate with their eyes and their eyebrows about who should be the confessional spokesperson.

Finally, one of the friends took the bull by the horns and began relating their concerns to the teacher. When the first individual hesitated for a moment, the other friend continued on, picking up in the critical commentary where the other one had left off. They played confessional leap frog in this way for a while.

The teacher listened attentively, without interrupting, to everything the pair said. When the two seemed to wind down and exhaust what they had to say, he smiled at them.

It seemed to be a smile of compassion, but the two were in such a state that they feared it might be the smile of an executioner ready to rid the world of moral refuse. They awaited their collective fate, hardly daring to breathe.

They were not kept in suspense for long. Their guide continued to smile and said: "Being concerned with your spiritual condition in the way you both are is a good sign because it indicates not only that you are serious about the mystical path but that you are not content to merely talk about spirituality. You want to change your lives so your character actively reflects the implementation of spiritual principles.

"I hope you both will continue to maintain this sort of sincere aspiration concerning the mystical path and continue, as well, to struggle through the ups and downs of this way. However, you both should know that if you were able to maintain the same level of spiritual intensity away from my presence as you do in my presence, the angels would line up so that they could shake your hand."

As Many Loaves ...

A woman and her husband had been trying to conceive a child for many years but without success. They had gone to all manner of doctors and clinics seeking a solution to their difficulty. Unfortunately, no one had been able to help them.

In desperation, the woman took it upon herself to visit a very powerful and spiritually gifted servant of God. If the practitioners of medicine and science could not resolve her problem, perhaps, a spiritual saint would be able to do so.

When she found herself before the great man of the mystical path, she pleaded her case. She recounted all that she and her husband had been through in an effort to have at least one child, if not more ... and, yet, here she was, still barren.

The friend of God closed his eyes and his concentration was so intense that he appeared to be transported to some other realm. A few moments later, he opened his eyes, looked at the woman with great compassion and said: "My daughter, I am very sorry to say that the Book Of Destiny indicates you will have no children during your life on Earth. There is nothing which I can do. I cannot change what God has ordained ... no one can.

"Please accept my sincere condolences for I do see how deeply you long for children, and it breaks my heart to have to be the bearer of such news. If there were anything which God's gifts permitted me to do in this matter, I would do so in an instant, but my spiritual hands are tied with respect to the problem which you have brought to me."

The woman cried when she heard the saint's words. Surely, if this man of God could do nothing for her and her husband, then, what hope could they have? The chapter on this phase of her life seemed to have ended with a painful ache that would cast a shadow over the remainder of her life as she saw other women enjoying their children on a daily basis.

In deep sadness and despair she left the saint and wandered out into the streets. She stumbled along, oblivious to her surroundings.

From somewhere within her consciousness she heard: "As many loaves of bread as you bake for me, you will be given children." The sentence kept being repeated.

The woman was startled. Was she dreaming? Who was saying this? Was it real?

Becoming aware of her surroundings, the woman realized the words she had been hearing were being spoken by a beggar sitting by the side of the road. The man didn't seem to be speaking to anyone in particular, but like a sort of street vendor, he was announcing to anyone whom might be interested what he had to offer as well as what he expected in return.

Like a mantra, he kept saying: "As many loaves of bread as you bake for me, you will be given children."

The idea seemed preposterous. Science couldn't help her. Medicine couldn't help her.

A saint not only couldn't help her but had just told her that her destiny was devoid of children. So, how could a miserable beggar help her when he couldn't even help himself be other than a beggar?

Yet, desperation makes people try strange things and take implausible chances. Furthermore, even if the whole thing were a con, she would lose nothing more than a little time and the cost of making some bread.

She approached the beggar and asked him: "Is your offer genuine?"

He kept his head lowered and nodded 'yes'. He, then, repeated his offer to no one in particular, as if the woman were interrupting his business activity by coming between him and other people eagerly wishing to take him up on his pronouncement.

The woman asked the beggar if he would be in this place again tomorrow. The man's head was still lowered, but he shook it affirmatively.

Having little to lose, the woman rushed home and began to prepare dough for baking. As she did so, she tried to counsel herself that she should not get her hopes up and that the whole exercise was rather foolish, and, yet, there was an undercurrent of optimism in her actions.

She baked eight loaves of bread. The next morning she took the physical manifestation of her efforts to the street on which the beggar had been the previous day, and she was relieved to find him there still spouting the same sentence as he had the day before: "As many loaves of bread as you bake for me, you will be given children."

The woman placed the several bags of baked bread in front of the beggar. The man rose, picking up the bags as he did, and with head still lowered in humility said: "So, it shall be," and walked away.

The woman knew that the beggar was not like a department store where one could go and complain if dissatisfied with the service. She suspected she was seeing the last of the man, her bread, and her hopes. She began trying to resign herself to her fate.

A few months later she became pregnant with her first child. Over the next nine years, she had eight children in all ... precisely the same number as the loaves of bread she had baked for the beggar.

One day, many years later, the woman was walking down a street with her children in tow. They ranged in age from 17 down to 8.

A man stopped her in the street, and she recognized the man as the great saint to whom she had gone so many years ago ... the one who had informed her that the Book of Destiny indicated she would have no children. She bore the man no ill-will since she was very thankful to God for having answered her prayers with respect to children, and, in addition, she really didn't have any idea of what the problem had been when he said what he did but believed the man to have been sincere, compassionate, and kind with her.

The saint looked back and forth between the woman and the children near her, finally asking: "Whose children are these?"

"They are mine and my husband's," she said proudly.

"Did you bear these children," the man inquired, "or did you adopt them?"

She was somewhat mystified by the saint's questions, but answered: "No, I didn't adopt them. They are all my natural children."

The saint looked at the woman in shock. He shook his head and said: "This can't be, and, yet, it is."

He asked her what had happened. The woman explained about what had transpired after she had left the saint and how the beggar had promised that as many children would be given as a person baked loaves of bread for him.

The servant of God apologized to the woman for carrying on as he had. He congratulated her on her good fortune and left.

As soon as he was out of sight of the woman, the saint collapsed on a set of stairs leading up into an apartment building. He laid his head in his hands, with his palms resting against his forehead, and wondered how what he just had witnessed could be the case.

He was a little irritated. He thought he was a friend of God. Somehow, however, he seemed to have been excluded from knowing some secret with respect to this woman.

When he had looked those many years ago, the Book of Destiny clearly had shown there were no children appearing next to the name of this woman. On the other hand, he just experienced a reality that was showing something very different from what he had seen in the spiritual realm.

He was feeling dejected and lonely. With head buried in hands, he heard: "As many loaves of bread as you bake for me, you will be given children."

The saint knew right away it was the same man as the woman had described. Perhaps, the beggar had come to taunt the saint about the state of affairs.

He went over to the man and kneeled down next to him. The beggar's head was lowered, and the man just kept saying the same thing, again and again, taking no notice of the saint.

The friend of God could sense the beggar's high degree of spirituality and sought the man's permission to speak. The beggar stopped hawking his offer and was silent, awaiting the saint's words.

The latter asked: "How, by the Grace of God, did this woman end up with eight children when the Book of Destiny indicated she would have no children?"

The man, whose head continued to remain lowered remarked: "You obviously are not very literate, my friend. The Book of Destiny did not show that the woman would have no children."

The saint was taken aback by the words. "Sir," he said, "I know what I saw many years ago, so, I'm not exactly sure what you mean by my lack of literacy."

“Well,” said the beggar, “if you really knew how to read the Book of Destiny, you should have realized the Book did not indicate that the woman would have no children. Rather, the space next to her name was blank.

“When she brought eight loaves of bread to me, I merely filled in the amount next to her name in the Book of Destiny and God completed the transaction.” He said it in such a way as if he might have been saying: ‘It’s elementary, my dear Watson.’”

He continued on: “People of spiritual literacy know how to both read and write with respect to the Book of Destiny. Since, apparently, you do not know how to read and write in relation to that Book, then, presumably, you lack a certain degree of literacy in such matters.”

When he had finished his explanation he began repeating: “As many loaves as you bake for me, you will be given children,” to no one in particular.

Seeking

There once lived a man who had spent most of his adult life trying to become spiritually realized. With perseverance, he had followed the instructions of his mystical guide ... at least as best as he understood her directives and counsels. Moreover, for nearly three decades, he had attended each and every mystical assembly which was held either in his town or in nearby towns.

He was conscientious, honest, sincere, and committed with respect to various mystical practices. In addition, he tried to help whomever he could ... irrespective of whether, or not, such people were on the mystical path.

Yet, he had not tasted the fruits of mystical self-realization. There was no deep, abiding joy in his life. His life lacked a sense of oneness with Being. His heart was not overflowing with love. He was still trying to catch even a glimpse of his essential identity.

He could not shake the feeling that somewhere, somehow, he was missing something of importance, and, whatever it might be that he was not understanding was standing in the way of his fulfilling the unique purpose of his life.

On many occasions, he had gone to his spiritual guide with this problem. She always had counseled patience ... that the mystical path was not a matter of storming the Bastille, but, rather, the doors of mystical perception tended to open of their own accord when the right combination of spiritual orientation, experience, humility, understanding, and readiness came into alignment... and even then, only by the command of Divinity.

For some people -- and God knew best why this was so -- this sort of alignment happened more quickly than others. All one could do was to politely keep knocking at the door, wait, and be ready to take advantage of opportunities if they should arise.

She often told him that if he truly trusted God with this matter God would not let him down. Sooner, or later, and according to God's schedule, not his, he would be given what he needed to cross the threshold from the ordinary ways of worldly understanding to the extraordinary ways of mystical understanding.

Although his spirits were lifted whenever he would come away from these sessions with his teacher, in time, the sense of optimism and hope he felt on such occasions would dissipate. Soon, he would find himself back in the same dark mood as before.

He thought about his problem until he was sick of the whole issue. He desperately wanted to understand the nature of his difficulty ... but to no avail.

Frequently, when these somber moods descended upon him, he would go out for long walks. He found that walking both helped him put things in perspective as well as tired him out so he could sleep soundly without being restless with respect to his spiritual condition.

One day, when he returned home from work in the early evening, the weather was so pleasant, he decided to go for a long walk. He would reflect on matters, see life in the city, and get some exercise.

As far as life in the city was concerned, the walk was relatively uneventful. However, he did feel he had made a few breakthroughs -- minor though they might be -- in relation to better understanding certain facets of his situation.

Whenever these sorts of mini-revelations occurred, his spirits were buoyed. He would often softly hum songs to celebrate his small victories of insight and understanding.

He was casually walking along, humming, when he saw a woman on her hands and knees, crawling about, from place to place, beneath a light standard in the park. Presumably, she had lost something or other.

Feeling in an expansive mood, the man decided to stop and see if there was anything he could do to be of assistance. When he reached the light pole, he asked: "Are you looking for something?"

The woman looked up briefly at the man and, then, peered back at the ground, continuing on with what she had been doing. Finally, she said: "I've lost my keys. Don't ask me how it happened," she said with a trace of embarrassment, "but I've lost my keys."

"Would you like some help?" the man offered.

She looked up at him again, this time with a certain wariness, and as she was about to say something, he held up his hand. The man explained: "I understand the concerns you may have, but if you will look around you, you

will see there are a fair number of people in the park relatively close by, and consequently, I think you are safe.”

The woman raised herself while still on her knees so she became somewhat upright. She quickly surveyed the park and nodded her head in agreement.

Smiling, the woman replied: “Well, I apologize for being cautious, but, in answer to your question ... yes, I would like some help.”

The man got down on his knees and began helping the woman look for her keys. As he became engaged in the process of scouring the ground asked for a description of the keys.

The woman provided the information. Since the key chain being described was rather large, with many keys and a few other small items on it, he felt they ought to be able to locate the missing keys in short order.

As the search progressed, from time to time the man would ask various questions ... as a way of breaking the silence as well as being friendly. At one point, after they had been searching for some time, he asked her: “How long were you looking for these keys before I came along?”

The woman sighed. “Quite awhile ...”

He replied: “If you don’t mind my asking -- and just so that I don’t duplicate what you already have done -- what areas have you already checked and what sort of search pattern did you use?”

The woman filled him in on what had gone on before his arrival. After she finished, the man said: “Well, apparently, you have been thorough in everything, but it seems rather puzzling that you have taken all these steps and you still haven’t found your keys ... especially given how long you have been searching for them.”

He hesitated slightly and, then, continued: “I know you said not to ask about how you came to lose your keys, but, maybe, it might help the search if you were to tell me what happened.”

Remembering the touch of embarrassment accompanying the woman’s earlier request for him not to ask how she had lost the keys, he quickly added: “Even if the circumstances were somewhat foolish, I promise not to pass judgment. After all, we all do silly things which often land us in various predicaments.”

The woman appeared to be thinking about what he said as she moved about beneath the light standard. "Well," she eventually said, "I was on the other side of the park, it was dark, and I was trying to get something out of my purse, but I couldn't see what I was doing.

"That part of the park is right near the street, and there was a lot of noise. I think the keys dropped out of my purse but because of the noise, I didn't notice them dropping. It was only when I got over here and began searching my purse in order to get them ready for unlocking my car that I noticed they were missing."

The man stopped what he was doing and looked over at the woman. "I'm sorry," he said, "I must have misunderstood you. Did you say you lost your keys on the other side of the park?"

"Yes," she said, rather shyly.

"Then, why, in God's name, are you looking for them here?" he inquired. In a manner which seemed to suggest everything made perfect sense, she retorted: "Because there's light here. There's no light over there in that area of the park."

The man stood up, shaking his head in dismay. "In other words, you have been wasting my time looking here for keys which are lost somewhere else just because there is light in this location."

The woman rose, as well, from her kneeling position. She stared at the man somewhat defiantly and remarked: "I don't think it is any more foolish for me to look for my lost keys here than it is for you to look for your lost soul beneath the light of reason even though your soul will never be found through such means."

She turned around and began walking in the direction of the other side of the park. As she went away, she looked back over her shoulder a few times. Each time she looked back she seemed to look more and more like the man's teacher, and, then, she disappeared in the shadows.

Original Intent

Spectrum Learning Associates was a model of modern enterprise – both with respect to the diversity of its integrated line of products and services as well as in relation to its organizational structure. Many business schools and textbooks used SLA as a paradigmatic case study of how to run a corporation.

An increasing number of universities, colleges, technical institutes, high schools, and early learning facilities had adopted its varied curricula packages and also were implementing its teaching model. In addition, the company was constantly developing an array of software and technological innovations that complemented and enhanced its written materials on a variety of levels.

Bonus programs, stock options, and other kinds of incentive arrangements had spurred the company to a steady increase in sales over the last decade. Furthermore, an open and flexible style of communication that encouraged employees to make a significant number of decisions without having to consult higher levels of management had, thereby, stimulated production, research, and company morale.

With so many positive indicators synergistically combining together, why was Joe Wilson concerned? The answer was as straightforward as it was difficult to convey to ears and hearts that weren't receptive to what he had to say.

Simply stated, the problem, as Joe saw it, was that the company had lost its sense of purpose. In the process, confusion had crept into the workplace. Sales, profits, dividends, and productivity were all up, but the original spirit of the company had been jettisoned somewhere along the line.

Among other things, Joe believed that increased productivity didn't automatically translate into an increase in quality ... either with respect to products, services, or workmanship. When the company first started, there had been a company-wide commitment to excellence.

Now, people were far less concerned with the quality of craftsmanship and workmanship than they were preoccupied with promotions, pay increases, and rewards ... with little consideration being given to whether the nature of the products and services being offered actually provided customers with what the latter needed rather than with what some wunderkind in advertising tried to convince the public it needed or wanted. Indeed, more and more, hype had replaced any inclination on the

part of management to search for the truth and provide customers with accurate information about whether, or not, the company's products and services could deliver as advertised.

Furthermore, things also seemed to be moving in another disturbing direction. Although, originally, the organization had emphasized the importance of being good corporate neighbors, during the last three to four years, Joe had witnessed a variety of scandals unfold involving practices that were not only adversely affecting the quality of life within the communities where different branches of the company operated, but these practices were generating a large number of potential ecological problems as well.

In addition, strategies had been devised by a troika of lawyers, accountants, and board members to either escape paying taxes altogether or which sought to impose various forms of financial, legal, political, and economic intimidation onto communities if the latter did not give the company an array of tax, union, and environmental concessions. Such tactics might make sense at the annual meeting of stockholders where the amount of dividends received was the altar at which many of them worshiped, but given that the company had been founded largely on the idea of being in the business of helping people and communities improve the quality of their lives rather than just increase profits, Joe could only shake his head with sadness in relation to the Zeitgeist which now appeared to pervade the company.

Moreover, many of the latest technological breakthroughs that were being touted by the company, unfortunately, seemed to have a dark side to them. Not only was the physical environment at risk, but, equally importantly -- perhaps, more so -- the mental, moral, and spiritual environments of customers was being threatened by the shoddiness of the principles, techniques, methods, and ideas that were at the heart of the SLA approach to learning and education.

The people in charge of research were enthusiastically committed to all manner of information processing technology. However, almost none of them had any idea of how to identify wisdom amidst the wealth of data which their technology could crunch.

They had lots of theories. Yet, they lacked knowledge about what relation their theories had to reality.

'Cutting-edge', 'innovative' and 'heuristic' were the corporate buzz words. Truth didn't seem to be in its vocabulary.

Finally, although in some ways employee morale was at an all time high because of the many degrees of local autonomy that characterized the company's management style, nonetheless, at the same time, there was an increasing amount of conflict, tension, and destructive competitiveness to which Joe had been witness as employees often played a zero-sum game with one another -- that is, there could only be one winner -- and as a result, themes of self-interest or selfishness frequently wafted through the company corridors and offices like a toxic cloud of smog.

Petty-minded company politics also often spoiled the atmosphere. All too many individuals would think nothing of sabotaging fellow employees if this would lead to career advancement.

The more Joe thought about the problems facing the company, the more he got depressed. Moreover, to add insult to injury, very few people seemed to have any interest in trying to critically analyze the situation. They were too caught up in careers, power, social status, and bonuses.

Originally, the company had come into existence in order to help students develop the skills and understanding necessary to become better human beings ... human beings who would be committed to the communities in which they lived as well as to the other communities that populated the larger world surrounding them. Originally, issues of truth, morality, character, identity, self-realization, and justice had been of paramount importance.

Now, at the urging of his company -- at least in its latest form -- truth was being replaced by information. Morality was being supplanted by preoccupation with values. Character was being converted into personality. Identity had become engulfed by psychobabble. Self-realization was being transformed into its antithesis -- namely, ego-enhancement -- while justice was virtually brain-dead and on life-support thanks to the kind of interpretive framework his company was promoting through its text materials and software programs dealing with the Constitution.

As Joe sat at one of the tables in the cafeteria, mulling over the manner in which his workplace had strayed far from the original intent of the company's founder, another, parallel issue occurred to him. Just as his company was being guided by a set of principles that was something other than the vision with which the company had begun, so, too, many religions seemed to have deviated significantly from their original teachings.

More and more, Joe felt spirituality had been hijacked by theology, dogma, indoctrination, rigidity, exclusion, and enmity. Yet, love knows no theology. There is no dogma to kindness or generosity. Indoctrination cannot lead to understanding the truth, let alone being able to freely choose such truth. There is nothing rigid about forgiveness, tolerance, or patience. Empathy and compassion are inclusive, not exclusive. Furthermore, what does peace or beneficence have to do with enmity?

Somewhat reminiscent of the attitudes of many of the employees of his company, Joe believed that all too many religious people had become preoccupied with issues of reward and punishment, heaven and hell, while casting aside issues of commitment to excellence or concern about the manner in which quality of life, for both the individual and the community, ought to be rooted in service to God and Creation rather than in a system of bonus incentive arrangements. In fact, if one's worship of Divinity were dependent on the receiving of a reward in exchange for worship, then, really, what was being sought ... the reward or Divinity ... and if the former is the answer, then, what does that say about the precise nature of one's worship -- that is, who and what were being worshiped and why?

Furthermore, like his company, many religions -- at least in their modern format -- no longer appeared to be good corporate neighbors. They often didn't seem to care about what destruction they brought upon the people and communities they were supposed to serve, or about whom they hurt as long as their opinions, agendas, politics, and prejudices prevailed, while the accursed heretics and infidels -- that is, anyone who didn't believe as they did -- were smitten down by those who fancied themselves to be agents of the Divine despite a disconcerting absence of evidence to support this allegation other than their own self-serving testimony.

Joe believed spirituality had started out as a way of helping people struggle toward experientially realizing the closeness of their relationship to

Divinity, as well as a means of bringing to fruition the unique spiritual potential that had been bequeathed to each human being. Spirituality, he felt, originally had been intended to provide people with a way to improve the quality of their lives, both individually and collectively, by emphasizing the importance of qualities such as: love, forgiveness, kindness, generosity, sincerity, honesty, humility, self-sacrifice, tolerance, forbearance, patience, courage, modesty, persistence, and beneficence.

Joe didn't see how there could be any legitimate room for theology, dogma, indoctrination, rigidity, exclusion, and enmity in any of this, and, yet, just as his company had slipped from its moorings over the years, so, too, spirituality seemed to have been cut adrift from the principles that traditionally had anchored it. Now, self-centeredness, cut-throat competitiveness, and zero-sum games appeared to dominate the interaction among many religious traditions just as such strategies and methodologies ruled Joe's company.

He suspected the decline in his company's moral profile was just one of the many problematic ramifications that had arisen because of the way all too many people were pursuing religion as currently conceived rather than as originally intended. He believed the same was probably true of many other facets of life ... from: government, to: family life and education.

Point-Counterpoint

A friend of God was in seclusion remembering his Friend when, all of a sudden, a bright light filled the room. A deep voice said: "Oh servant of God, your years of devotion are being rewarded. From this time onward, you have been relieved of all responsibilities for praying, fasting, or remembering God. So pleased is Divinity with you, your every action and thought are being proclaimed as modes of worship, and those activities shall replace, henceforth, all your works of austerity. This is the ease which has been promised after difficulty. Such acceptance is the goal to which you have been dedicated in this world, and Heaven, for which you have struggled so hard in the present life, will be granted to you in the next life in recognition of your good deeds."

The friend of God replied: "I have not striven for Heaven in this life; rather, I have sought God and God alone. Moreover, seeking acceptance by God is presumptuous, whereas being engaged in service to Divinity and having hope in God's mercy and compassion is more suitable. Whatever my spiritual station may be, this has been achieved, by the Grace of God, through prayer, fasting, and remembrance of God, so, why should I abandon the ship which God has provided to me for sailing the Ocean of Being?"

As soon as God's friend said these words, the light vanished and Satan appeared in his actual form. Smiling, he responded: "Truly, you are a master of the mystical way. Your spiritual knowledge has saved you. I have misled so many seekers away from the right path through that little stunt you just witnessed ... it's amazing how a few lights with a little razzle-dazzle thrown in can destroy years of hard work."

The mystic remarked: "My knowledge has not saved me from you. Only God can save me. What comes to us from Divinity is better than what goes to Divinity from us."

As the friend of God uttered these words, tears came to Satan's eyes. In between sobs, he managed to say: "If only I had met someone of your spiritual stature thousands of years ago, I believe my life would have gone in a much better direction, and I would now be a lover of God as you are."

"Love of God has never been your problem," retorted the mystic. "Obedience to God has been your weakness."

"Well, that's not entirely true," countered Satan. "How can any of us do other than the will of God? I do what God permits me to do."

The friend of God commented: "God, for Divine reasons, permitted you to do what you sought permission to do. Do not blame God for the manner in which you exercised the freedom that was given to you through your creation."

A 'eureka' expression came across the face of Satan. "My goodness," exclaimed Satan, "no one has explained things to me in this way. I'm beginning to understand. Please accept me as your student. I vow to follow all of your instructions."

The friend of God replied: "You vowed to God a long time ago that you would dedicate your life to misleading human beings away from the spiritual way. If you are prepared, now, to break your vow to God, what meaning can your present vow to me have? Besides, if you have been unwilling to follow God's instructions, you certainly will not follow any of the ones which I might give you."

"But, surely," argued Satan, "you should have empathy for a creature in my wretched condition. I have feelings, too, you know. Don't you think you render an injustice to someone like me with your present attitude?"

"No injustice is being done to you," the mystic said. "The nature of justice is to give everything that which is due to it."

"You are like the scorpion who wished to cross a flooding river but could not swim, and, therefore, implored a passing turtle to convey him to the other side of the river, giving precedents of compassion, charity, kindness, and so on, to induce the turtle to do the scorpion's bidding."

"The turtle was wary about the intentions of the scorpion and said: 'If I carry you, what is to prevent you from stinging me and causing my death?'"

"The scorpion felt indignation with respect to the turtle's remarks but managed to say: 'If I stung you, I would be committing suicide because you would drown when I paralyzed you, and, therefore, I would drown right along with you. Your suspicions are unwarranted, and, if I might add, a little unfriendly. Instead of trying to be so unhelpful, you should have empathy for beings like me who have not been blessed with your abilities. Why not try to help those in need instead of sitting in judgment of them?'"

“The scorpion’s words struck the turtle in his soft underbelly, and the turtle felt badly for having been so cautious and difficult. ‘Okay,’ the turtle said. ‘Get on my back, and I will take you across the river.’

“The scorpion crawled onto the back of the turtle. When the scorpion was safely aboard the shell, the turtle set off for the far bank of the river.

“About half way across, the scorpion stung the turtle. The turtle could feel the poison begin to work. Paralysis was rapidly taking over, and as he was beginning to sink he could only say: ‘Why did you sting me? You will die as well.’

“The scorpion shrugged as only scorpions can and said: ‘It’s in my nature.’ ”

The friend of God concluded the telling of his tale to Satan with: “I have all the empathy in the world for you and your wretched condition, but I also know it is in your nature to hurt creatures irrespective of any ramifications such actions might have for you or for them. Consequently, in your case, keeping a respectful distance is the better part of compassion ... for you and me.”

“So,” Satan sniffed, “you acknowledge that inherent in my nature is this inclination to bring chaos and misery into the lives of God’s creatures. Why hold me accountable for the manner in which God has made me?”

The friend of God smiled in a manner which suggested-- ‘nice try’. “What you seem to have overlooked,” remarked the mystic, “is that you freely chose what God willed for you, and, therefore, God served your wishes while, simultaneously, giving expression to Divine purposes.”

Satan raised his eyebrows ... as if to concede the wisdom of the mystic’s words. I am really enjoying this discussion of ours. Could I ask just a few further questions?”

“To what end?” inquired the mystic.

Satan smiled in a mischievous and triumphant manner. “Well, I have been so successful in keeping you from your remembrance of God -- which, if you will recall, is where I came in with my light-filled entrance -- that I thought I would keep you occupied with other than God for a while longer.”

God’s friend responded with: “There are many forms of remembering God. One of these is to remind others about the dangers of your cleverness so that when you try to pull tricks on them, as you

have with me, they will recall our little conversation which you have so enjoyed, and, as a result, those individuals may, God willing, be able to busy themselves with praising and worshiping Divinity ... which you will not at all enjoy but with which I shall be quite happy.”

He added: “I believe you underestimate the friends of God -- which is why you have always been jealous of them ... a jealousy that helped lead to your spiritual downfall. There is a mystery emanating from the friends of God that you may have sensed but which you have never come close to understanding or appreciating.”

The mystic studied Satan briefly as if gauging him in some way and, then, proceeded further: “God is reported to have said: ‘I and human kind were together and loving one another, until I showed humans the world, and 9/10ths of them left Me out of their love for the world. Then, I and the remaining 1/10th of human kind were together, loving one another, and I showed those who remained with Me heaven, and 9/10ths of this assembly left Me out of love for heaven. Then, of the remaining 1/10th who stayed with Me, I put them through great difficulty and many trials, and 9/10ths of that diminished group ran away from Me in great terror. And, of the 1/10th who remained, I promised to heap such tribulations upon them as Creation had never before witnessed, and they said: ‘As long as it is from You, O Lord.’”

“Tell, me, now, Satan, do you really think that this latter assembly of people ... the ones whom God placed in such peril and, yet, who would not turn away from Divinity ... that these sorts of individual would do anything but laugh at your ignorance and foolishness even as they do justice to you and give you your due by following Divine instructions to treat you as an avowed enemy of anyone who is seeking closeness to God?”

When he heard these words, Satan shrieked and disappeared ... but not really.

Status Report

One evening a very influential and wealthy shipping magnate was having dinner with several powerful members of government in a city where the tycoon was visiting. While this businessman dealt with all manner of exported and imported goods throughout the world, the bedrock of his fortune revolved around the transport of crude oil.

Even though this man was very rich, his financial and social status had not always been so exalted. As a boy, he had been quite poor, but through hard work and some extraordinary good luck which his efforts were able to take advantage of, he steadily built up a global shipping empire.

Despite his considerable wealth, the 'shipping wizard', as he was affectionately known in many places, was a very humble, down-to-earth individual. His mother had been a mystic of some note, and, consequently, the boy had taken an interest in spiritual matters from an early age due to his mother's considerable influence.

Among other things, the assembled group of powerful people who were dining with the shipping mogul were discussing the status of the world's economy and the impact which terrorist activities might play in undermining the shipping industry, in general, and this shipping magnate's operations, in particular. There was considerable concern in many economic and political circles about the issue, because, recently, there had been an increase of strikes against commercial shipping, both on the open seas as well as when docked, and the government officials at the dinner table were among those whose nerves were beginning to fray under the constant tension of uncertainty surrounding the time, place, and extent of damage in relation to the next set of terrorist attacks.

The dinner group was nibbling away at a variety of appetizers, waiting for the first course to be served, when a middle-aged man approached the table in a rather agitated state. The man was one of the tycoon's close aides.

The aide hovered at a respectful distance from the spot where the businessman was seated ... waiting for an opportunity to catch the eye of his employer. Clearly, the aide was in a controlled state of panic and in great need to be relieved of the burden with which he had come to the table.

Finally, one of the other members of the dinner party, who recognized the businessman's associate, touched the arm of the tycoon and motioned in the direction of the aide. The shipping magnate turned,

recognized his assistant, noted the man's frantic condition, and waved him to the table.

His assistant came to his boss, leaned over and began whispering in his employer's ear. "Sir, I am sorry to say there have been massive, simultaneous attacks upon your shipping interests by unknown terrorist groups, and the early reports are that the vast majority of your ships have been destroyed, and many others have been damaged extensively, perhaps irreparably. There are additional indications that quite a few of your port facilities in different countries have been rendered largely inoperable through additional attacks. I fear, sir, your shipping empire is listing badly and in danger of sinking altogether."

The other people at the table had been watching the shipping wizard during this whispered exchange, and his expression never changed. He listened calmly to the information he was being given, and when the aide had unloaded his terrible cargo, the tycoon was silent for a moment, seeming to gaze at something in the distance, and, then, he remarked: "That is good," told his assistant to return to his duties, and, once again, began talking with his dinner companions.

Several hours passed and the dinner engagement was still going on. The group was working its way toward dessert and coffee, and the dishes from the previous course had just been removed from the table.

As the waiters were arranging things at the table in preparation for the remainder of the meal, the aide who had visited the tycoon earlier in the evening entered the dining area and, once more, approached his employer. This time the aide's entire mood was upbeat and excited ... as if very happy about something.

The tycoon had seen his assistant come into the room and followed his progress to the table. When his aide was relatively close, the shipping magnate moved the fingers of his hand in a beckoning motion to signal for his assistant to come to the table.

The aide did as was indicated. He leaned down and whispered in his boss' ear: "Sir, wonderful news. The previous reports concerning your empire were in error. It was not your interests, holdings, and property which were damaged but those of one of the other global shipping empires. Your empire is completely safe and intact."

The tycoon listened impassively to what was being said. When his assistant had finished delivering the happy news, the shipping wizard

again appeared to stare into some space in the distance and commented: "That is good," after which he thanked his aide for keeping him informed of what was going on, and, then, dismissed him with: "I'll see you back at the office in an hour or so."

A little over fifty minutes later, the shipping magnate came into his offices, where he found his aide watching the latest television updates concerning the multiple terrorist attacks which had taken place earlier that day in different parts of the world. As the aide saw the tycoon come in, the assistant began supplying details of all that had transpired ... at least as far as the aide knew.

After completing his summary and answering a few cursory questions from his boss in relation to the day's events, the assistant sought permission to ask something of his own, and the businessman acceded to his aide's request. The aide remarked: "You know, one thing puzzles me about tonight. When I told you during my first trip to the dining table that, apparently, your shipping empire had been ruined, you simply said: 'That is good.' Yet, when I came on the second occasion with the good news, you also said:

"That is good'. If I am not being out of line here or too personal, could you tell me why you responded the same way on both occasions?"

His boss smiled slightly in relation to the question. He said: "Well, you aren't being insubordinate, and my remarks are neither classified, nor are they too personal. In point of fact, each time that you whispered in my ear and I listened to what you were saying, I was concentrating on my inner spiritual condition by carefully checking to see whether, or not, your news altered my heart's equilibrium.

"When I saw that your initial report did not upset my spiritual condition, I said: "That is good," and when I witnessed that your happier news also did not disturb the condition of my heart, I said: "That is good."

Asceticism

The man had been groomed to be King since he first came into this world crying and dazed. From cradle to throne, he had been pampered, coddled, and given every opportunity that money and power could deliver.

He liked being King. He thoroughly enjoyed the perks of 'Royal Command'.

He reveled in the fear and trembling which visibly emanated from his subjects when they were brought before him for matters of judgment. He treasured the fact he could buy anything and anyone whenever such a desire trickled across his consciousness. He eagerly sought out, and participated in, the political intrigues that were rampant in the Kingdom ... taking pride in the way he was able to forge situations to the shape of his will, as well in the manner that he consistently outflanked and, then, crushed even the most cunning of opponents.

Life didn't get any better than this. Moreover, he wanted everyone to know how powerful, clever, and wealthy he was. So, to demonstrate his lofty status, he often would do a tour of the country in which no expense was spared, and everything associated with the tour was full of pomp and pompousness.

In addition, the King would use such occasions to ensure that everyone knew who controlled their lives. During these tours, he delighted in, arbitrarily, either freeing or incarcerating whomever he wished.

As the King approached the conclusion of yet another successful tour, there was just one last town through which to triumphantly conduct his procession. He decided he would stay the night at one of his many castles around which such towns grew. In addition, he wanted to celebrate the end of his tour with a huge, lavish state dinner to which everyone in the town would be invited ... and which they must attend on penalty of imprisonment.

When the evening of the dinner arrived and the people of the town had assembled, the King began the proceedings by asking his royal spies whether, in truth, absolutely everyone in the town was present. One of his spies announced: "Sire, there is one woman who refused to come. We warned her she would be dealt with harshly if she did not attend the festivities,

but she just laughed at us and claimed that she did not participate in the assemblies of one who lived his life in accordance with ascetic principles.”

When the King heard this report, he was infuriated. The audacity of anyone who would try to lump him in with riff-raff, beggars, and the poor was almost too ludicrous to contemplate.

He commanded that she be brought into his presence immediately. Royal guards scrambled from the Dining Hall with as much speed as they could muster, fearing their master’s displeasure for not moving quickly enough.

A short while later, a number of guards ushered an old woman, whose clothes were tattered, into the Hall, and she was marched barefoot to where the King was sitting upon his throne dressed in the most elegant and expensive robes. The woman’s face was lined with a lifetime of hardship and exposure to the forces of nature, and the King’s stern countenance was smooth and unwrinkled from a life free from material concerns.

The King gazed with contempt at the woman. He carefully inventoried and appraised the woman’s wretched condition.

A smug smile came to his face. “Aha,” he proclaimed, “you are the person who does not attend the assemblies of those who live in accordance with ascetic principles.”

The King again gave her the once-over, and, then, he raised his hand, palm up, and moved it in a way intended to bring attention to the surroundings. “Does this Hall look like it belongs to an ascetic?”

He extended his raised arm upward and, then, both pointed with his forefinger as well as made a circling motion with his hand: “Does the castle in which this Hall has been built suggest its owner is a pauper who must scrimp and save to fashion merely a subsistence level of life?”

He peered at his apparel with a look of arrogance and said: “Do these clothes that I have on appear to be those of someone who must be skilled in the art of bare survival like a common street urchin?”

He pointed to the men who had brought her in: “Do these guards surrounding you, who would kill you with one flickering nod of my eyebrow, seem to be doing the bidding of some common pauper?” he roared.

“On what basis do you affront and insult the dignity of my Royal lineage?” he inquired, and, then, he commanded her: “Speak, woman, I demand

answers to my questions. How do you come to the conclusion that I am a person who lives in accordance with ascetic principles?"

Calmly and without any sign of trepidation or insecurity due to her surroundings or the King's imposing presence before her, she replied: "Sire, an ascetic is someone who denies himself or herself and establishes a pattern of living that conforms to such a principle of denial in order to achieve her or his ends."

Impatiently, the King said: "Woman, you are not only poor, you, obviously, are not in control of your rational faculties. I deny myself nothing."

He looked at her in an amused and taunting manner. "Isn't this clear to you?"

"Very clear," responded the woman, and, then she added: "And this is precisely why I call you an ascetic."

This King was totally confused by her remark, and his confusion fed his anger. His face became flushed with a venomous pallor.

"You imbecile," he bellowed at the woman. "How can I be an ascetic when my whole style of being is the antithesis of denial?"

The woman maintained her emotional equilibrium and was not in the least cowed by the raging force of the King's royal anger. She continued on with her explanation: "Although I agree with you that with respect to this world you deny yourself nothing, nevertheless, in relation to the spiritual realm, your indulgence in the ephemeral things of this planet prevents you from enjoying the eternal riches which grace the world of spirituality, and this is truly an exercise in great asceticism. I doff my kerchief to you and bow before your magnificent display of self-denial," whereupon she curtsied for the King.

Poison And Its Antidote

The wealthy socialite was about to be hit with a nuclear explosion of considerable magnitude ... one which couldn't readily be converted into tons of dynamite because the force would be emotional and spiritual rather than physical. Tired from a long day of politicking, making business deals, and attending various gala events, he had trudged wearily up the stairs to his bedroom.

He had been looking forward to taking a hot shower and, then, collapsing into bed. Presumably, his wife had retired quite a few hours earlier ... especially since she had not been feeling well.

The door to the bedroom was closed which, in and of itself, was out of the ordinary. Normally, his wife left the door open for him except on those rare occasions when, for whatever reason, he went to sleep before she did.

He quickly dismissed the anomaly and turned the knob. The door opened revealing a darkened room.

A sense of anxiety grabbed hold of the man's consciousness, and his stomach muscles tightened in response. Here was another oddity, for, usually, his wife kept the bathroom light on, with the bathroom door partially opened, and this gave off just enough illumination to permit him to be able to navigate his way about in the bedroom's semidarkness without having to turn on a light which might disturb her.

He didn't want to turn on the overhead light since it was possible that because his wife had not been feeling well, she simply had forgotten the routine and went to sleep. If this were the case, he really didn't want to risk waking her.

Slowly, like a blind person, and trying to recall the layout of the room, he went deeper into the darkness with his hands extended before him. He felt around for a few pieces of familiar furniture that would allow him to orient himself in the room.

Eventually, he worked his way over to the bathroom door, opened it, and reached in, along the wall, searching for the switch. Finding it, he turned the switch, and a dim light began to shine in the bathroom.

He fooled with the switch a bit more to increase the degree of illumination slightly and turned around to see the bedroom behind him. The explosion caught him full force.

There on the bed was his wife with another man, both fast asleep. His wife's arm was draped over the man's shoulder in an affectionate way.

The husband inched closer to the bed, trying to determine the identity of the interloper. In order to better see the man, the husband took out his glasses, and after he had put them on and inched still closer to the bed, he was shocked to discover the man was his favorite servant.

Anger shot up his spine like a hit of heroin and poured forth as if a volcanic eruption had taken place in his mind. He shook the sleeping man, yelling: "Get up, you ungrateful wretch ... you worthless piece of human trash."

The man on the bed began to unwrap himself from the cocoon of sleep in which he had been enclosed, but the woman was instantly startled awake by her husband's yelling. Seeing that his wife was now awake, her husband pointed a finger shaking with outrage at her, but all he could manage was: "How could you? How could you do this to me?" and he began to cry as he slumped into a chair by the bed.

His wife rushed over to him, put one arm on his shoulder and used her other hand to try to pry his head upward so that she could look into his eyes. Her husband shook his shoulder, dislodging his wife's arm that had been resting there, and he resisted the pressure from his wife's hand on his jaw.

His wife said: "It's not what you think, dear."

She glanced over at the bed, and a look of perplexity washed across her face. She said: "I don't know why our servant is in the bed, but nothing improper has happened. I swear to you."

The husband finally looked at her, his nostrils flaring, and his eyes glaring. "A smirk of disdain twisted his lips before he retorted with considerable sarcasm: "Isn't that what they all say ... 'Oh, it's not what you think, dear', or, 'Baby, nothing happened,' or, 'Honey, I know it looks bad, and I can't really explain it, but I swear to you I'm innocent.'"

Sarcasm was replaced with its near cousin, anger, and he continued on: "Do you really take me to be such a fool that I would come into my house and find my wife in bed with our servant, with her arm draped around him, and believe that nothing went on between the two of you?" The spittle of outrage spewed from his mouth as he finished his charge in the form of a rhetorical question.

By this time, the servant was fully awake. The man's eyes still registered residues of sleep, but more than anything they expressed fear and confusion.

The servant said: "I assure you, sir. Nothing went on, nor has it been going on between your wife and me. Please," he implored, "let me tell you what happened ... at least as much as I know."

The husband turned his attention to the servant, and the former man replied with contempt dripping from his every word: "Yeah, why don't you tell us what REALLY happened. Your account might be the most entertainment I've had all day," and he turned away from the bed cradling his head with his hands.

The servant stuttered as he began to tell his story while the husband stared blankly at the floor. "I, I, I cccome from ppoverty. I, I hhhave been pppoor all my life." The man seemed to be desperately seeking for something more to say.

The servant was about to go on when the husband's head shot up and said: "Don't you dare try to use your impoverished upbringing as an excuse for immorality. I pay you good money. It's not my problem that you don't know how to make that paycheck grow through proper investments."

The servant shook his head back and forth and said, several times: "No, that's not it ... that's not it." He struggled to find the right words: "I just wanted to give you a sort of reference point so you might understand what and how I was thinking."

The husband waved his hand at the servant in a dismissive way and went back to inspecting the floor. He sighed deeply.

The servant continued on: "I had just finished my duties for the day, it was early evening, the light of day was beginning to fade, and I was both tired and feeling sorry for myself.

"I came upstairs to put some fresh towels in the bathroom, and after I did that I walked past the bed and thought ... what a beautiful, elegant, expensive bed with its satin sheets and space-age, spring technology, and its ornate headboard. The bed must cost thousands and thousands of dollars, and I will never sleep in such a bed.

"I thought to myself: 'Why not lie down and see what real luxury feels like ... just for a few minutes?' Since the mistress of the house was

occupied with some guests downstairs, I felt like taking this -- possibly unique -- opportunity to sample something of a rich man's life, and, consequently, I lay down and pulled the sheets over me, but instead of just resting for a few minutes, I fell sound asleep, and that's all I remember until you woke me up."

The husband looked over at the servant and gave him a quick once over. The man was, in fact, dressed in his usual servant's attire, but, maybe, the servant had dressed after his little tête-à-tête with the wife and, then, had fallen back asleep.

The husband shrugged his shoulders and said: "Your story is plausible, but what you say could easily be countered by other possibilities which also are consistent with the available evidence."

He turned to his wife and said: "So, what's your spin on things?"

Disappointment appeared on her face. "I don't have a spin on things," she said defensively -- apparently a little too defensively for the husband's liking, and a wariness crept into his expression.

She tried to block out her husband's aura of accusation and proceeded to her account of events. She began with: "As you know, I wasn't feeling well. After some friends left, I fell asleep on the couch downstairs ... probably one of the effects of the medicine I am taking.

"I awoke about an hour later kind of groggy, and decided to go to bed properly. I stumbled upstairs, and since the room was dark and the door was open, I assumed you already had gone to bed but had been too tired to turn on the bathroom light.

"So, I closed the bedroom door, undressed in the dark, and put on my pajamas that were draped over the chair by my side of the bed. I left the light off because I didn't want to disturb you.

"When I got into bed, I thought the body already there was yours, and, so I draped my arm over the shoulder of the man who was lying there ... which in the present case turned out to be our servant." As she finished her account, she moved her shoulders and arms in a way which seemed to indicate: 'You see, there's nothing to it.'

The husband looked back and forth between his wife and the servant. On the surface, their stories appeared to corroborate one another, and everything seemed innocent enough, but, still, there were some nagging doubts that were whirling about within him.

Many of his friends were experiencing problems of infidelity. It was like an epidemic, and his wife was friends with many of the people who were playing musical beds.

Furthermore, he never liked the way his wife always had been warm and friendly with the servants ... far too warm and friendly, at times, he felt. Not only did he consider it improper, but her friendliness -- especially the male ones -- had been causing talk at the Club.

He often was away from home on business. She had complained just last week about how lonely she was ... maybe he even was the blame for putting temptation in his wife's way.

Then, there was the servant. The husband always had liked the man because of the servant's great flair for humor, but he also was young, charming, handsome, and Latino ... everyone knew about the hot, passionate blood which ran through their veins.

In addition, one of his friends had been trying to give him the heads-up a few days ago concerning this very same man. His friend had heard certain amorous rumors about the guy and claimed the servant enjoyed a considerable reputation as a lady's man around town and, apparently, on more than one occasion, the servant had violent encounters with aggrieved husbands.

He looked over at his wife. She had been a good wife, but he knew that although she cared for him, she didn't really love him. Their union had been more of a corporate merger than a marriage.

In strictest confidentiality, a friend of his wife's once had disclosed to him the story of a passionate romance from his wife's youth. She had fallen in love with a boy from the wrong side of the tracks-- a Latino kid, it seems -- and her parents had put an abrupt end to the relationship.

According to his wife's friend, she never quite recovered from that romance. Indeed, there always had been a subtle sense of sadness about her for as long as he had known her.

He suddenly remembered his wife once had said that this servant -- the one who was sitting on the bed ... the one with whom she often was so friendly -- reminded her of someone she once knew. He recalled, quite vividly, that there had been a strong current of melancholy in her voice when his wife had told him this and how, at the time, he had found the presence of that current somehow strangely disquieting.

The husband was caught between, on the one hand, the available evidence -- that is, the stories of his wife and the servant -- and, on the other hand, his doubts. He had a decision to make.

Should he have faith in the accounts of his wife and the servant, or should he be swayed by all the doubts, anxieties, and concerns which had arisen within him as he added pieces to the puzzle based on other information and experiences that were in his memory banks and on which he could draw in trying to arrive at a judgment on the situation? Was his wife innocent of any wrongdoing just as she and the servant had said, or were they having an affair? He could build a plausible case for either possibility.

Were his many doubts and anxieties concerning his wife and the servant a poison, and his faith in each of them, the antidote? Or, was it the other way around? Much of spiritual life revolves around these same kinds of questions.

Phoenix Rising

From the first moment she laid eyes on the man, she was consumed with love for him. She thought about him day and night. He was in her dreams and fantasies.

Through some complex, strange form of association, everywhere she looked she was reminded of him by what she saw. When he was near, she was in ecstasy, and when he was away, her being was filled with sighs and sobs.

She constantly asked the people she met if they had seen him. If they had not, she moved on in search of someone who had, and if the people whom she met had seen the man, she would implore them to give every last detail of their encounters ... often asking them to repeat some part of the account which she particularly liked.

She only had three problems. First, she already was married ... to someone else. Secondly, people were beginning to talk, and a huge scandal was brewing because her husband was a very influential and jealous individual. Thirdly, the man of her affections did not appear to be in love with her, and, even if he were, his spiritual character was such that he would, God willing, resist any temptation that might be thrown in his path by her.

In fact, she did try to seduce him in a variety of ways and on a variety of levels ... but without success.

These failures did not depress her. In fact, quite the opposite, since the more her plans did not work, the more determined she became, and, as a result she was spending all her time, effort, talents, and abilities focusing on winning him over, and she enjoyed this ... much like a huntress might enjoy a hunt in which early set-backs only made the final conquest all the sweeter.

A time eventually came, however, when her husband was fed up with her antics. More and more, the whole situation had become a huge source of embarrassment for him because now his wife was not even bothering to hide her obsession from public view anymore as she had done when she first became enamored with, and mesmerized by, the stranger.

His wife and he had become the talk of the town, both in the gossip columns as well as in nearly every party and social occasion being held across the

city. He couldn't go anywhere without running in to those 'funny looks' which bothered and upset him so much.

He knew what lay behind those looks ... namely, minds tittering over someone else's misery and difficulty. People heaped ridicule upon him behind his back, and, then, became excessively quiet whenever he happened by their hushed conversations ... only to begin chattering again as soon as he walked a 'respectable' distance away, looking at him recede from them with amusement smeared on their lips like some uneaten piece of carrion.

The situation was affecting his ability to conduct business and politics effectively. Enough was enough, so he threw his wife into the street, and, by means which were as cruel as they were legally permissible, he cut her off without a dime and made sure that no one in the city would give her employment, and, consequently, she became homeless and a beggar.

Many years passed, and the scandal had largely been forgotten. Occasionally, people in the so-called circles of cultural refinement played 'Do you remember?' and reminisced about what should have been laid to rest long ago but were being dug up again as a tonic for some ghoulish hunger -- much as a grave robber might go looking for targets of opportunity amidst the shadows of the soul's darkness -- and whenever this occurred, the players would recount the whole affair once again.

One day the man who had been the object of the married woman's obsession was on errand in the center of the city. As he crossed the street and was waiting for a car to pass by, he looked toward an alleyway that was next to the store where he was headed, and he thought he saw a familiar face.

When he got to the far curb, he took a closer look at the person who was sitting on the pavement, and his earlier impression was confirmed. The woman who had fallen madly in love with him so many years ago was sitting with a bowl in her lap, her eyes closed, and her lips seemed to be moving. A sign next to her read: "Please give alms for the poor."

He took out his wallet and put some currency in the receptacle on her lap. Her eyes remained closed.

He stood over her not knowing whether to move on or stay for a while longer, waiting to see if she would open her eyes. He did not wish to embarrass her, but he had lost track of her after her husband threw her out and often had thought about her with concern, and he would have liked to say 'Hello' and see if there was anything he could do for her.

She had been a beautiful woman back then. If she had been single, he would have married her in a fraction of a New York second, but since she was not free, all he could do was resist her advances, try to avoid her when possible, and feel badly for both her and her husband since the woman obviously had been struck by a force that transcends all reason.

The years ... and street time weighs more heavily on humans than can be measured even in dog-years ... had taken an obvious toll on the woman. She was no longer either young or beautiful. Creases lined her face, and grey eddies ran through her hair.

He was about to leave when she stirred, shifted her position slightly, and, then, opened her eyes. She had the look of someone who had been far away without having gone anywhere.

She squinted against the sudden glare of light and looked upward. A smile of recognition came across her lips. A twinkle came into her gaze. She said: "How are you?"

He crouched down, to be level with her, and put his hand on her shoulder. "I'm fine. And how are you?"

She replied: "I am as you see me, and, praise be to God, I am happy despite my worldly circumstances."

Feeling empathy for her well up in his heart, he realized he still loved this woman although he could never have confessed to her back then without helping an already impossible situation to deteriorate further into chaos and madness. He spoke to her of the love which he used to have and still had for her and why he had been silent about it all these years.

She said nothing, and just looked at him with affection. There was an aura of satisfaction that had gathered about her like morning mist around a field.

He said: "I heard long ago that your husband divorced you. I've often searched for you but always without success ... until now. And, since you are an eligible woman, if you wish, I would be very happy if you would become my wife and let me take you away from all this" ... and, as he said this, he moved his hand in a general reference to the immediate physical circumstances.

She lowered her head and, then, raised it again and looked into his eyes. She said: "Well, I am single, but I am not eligible."

Not sure what she meant by her remark, he said: "I'm sorry. I don't understand."

She closed her eyes and began to talk. "Back when I was caught up in my madness concerning you, I did not comprehend what was going on. I didn't realize that the source of my overwhelming love was not you, per se, but, rather, you were a locus of manifestation through which something else shone, and I confused you with that which was shining through you.

"I realize, now, I was like a deer caught in the headlights of Divinity, and you were merely the car that brought that light toward me. You were the candle, but God was the flame."

She opened her eyes, and although her eyes were directed down the street, her vision was somewhere else. As she stared at that which was both near and far, she continued to speak: "I no longer have need of an external candle because the flame burns within me now. The light that shone through you has ignited something within me which, God willing, is self-sustaining, and I am happy with the warmth and joy this inner light gives to me. This has been my Companion all these many years ... this is what has, and continues to, sustain me."

She returned her gaze to him. "You are very loving and sweet to offer your hand in marriage. Indeed, your very loving and kind nature was the wax that formed the candle that, all those many years ago, permitted the Divine light to shine through and melt my heart. But, I am fine ... go back to your life in peace, now secure in the knowledge that the woman you worried about all these many years has been, and is, happy and content with her life's destiny."

She looked at him for a few more seconds, and, then, closed her eyes. Her lips began to move again in a silent hymn. He stood, looked down at her with a sense of awe and admiration, and, then, turned and walked away.

But the story does not end here. For, always, that which unfolds is continuously unfolding.

Several more years passed. The human candle had just come out of a store and was thinking about whether he should walk home or hail a cab ... the weather had been unsettled for most of the day. Rain seemed to be hiding in the air, ready to spill down.

He felt a tug on his arm, turned around and, once more, was looking into the face of the same beggar woman. Without any preliminary chitchat, she said: "If the offer of marriage still stands, I accept."

The man laughed, as much out of the unexpectedness of her words as out of his sense of joy with respect to the potential completion of a chain of events that had been set in motion so long ago. He asked: "Why the change of heart?"

She replied: "My heart has not changed. But the light within has informed me that if I wish to serve That which makes such light possible, then, first, I should love humankind, and I can think of no better portion of humanity with which to start than you."

Prayer Revealed

He was the elder brother, and he was hurt that his younger brother never visited any of his spiritual services or gatherings. Many times he had complained to his mother.

She either responded to what he said with the wisdom of silence, or she would say something such as: "Well, dear, you know your brother always has been a little different and strange with respect to the way he goes about things. He loves you very much, and I am sure no slight or insult is intended by his behavior."

From time to time, she would casually mention to her youngest son that his elder brother was upset that his younger brother never attended any of the spiritual sessions being conducted at the center where the elder brother presided as spiritual leader and authority. Her youngest son would nod in acknowledgment and respond along the following lines: "Yes, Mom, I know he is annoyed with me. He has invited me to his center many times, and, I feel badly for having to make excuses about why I can't come to those sessions, but there are some very good reasons for this, one of which is that I do not want him to be embarrassed by anything that might happen if I were to come."

Now, the younger brother also was interested in mysticism. He kept his activities very quiet and hidden from his elder brother and even from his mother.

His spiritual pursuits didn't involve anything immoral, illegal, or hurtful to others. Nonetheless, experience had taught him that talking to people about what he was doing only led to misunderstanding, conflict, and problems, and, consequently, he preferred to go about life in his own quiet way.

He had tremendous love for his elder brother. He was happy his elder brother had such a high standing in the community and was well-regarded by many, many people ... some of whom had genuine, sincere affection for his elder brother.

Yet, spirituality had called the younger brother in a different direction. Someday, perhaps, the younger brother might be able to convey to his elder brother something of the nature of the spiritual quest in which he, the younger brother, was interested ... but not at the present time.

Over the next ten months, the foregoing scenario played itself out on a number of occasions and through a variety of venues. The elder brother would grumble to the mother. The mother would pass along the complaint to her youngest son. Through one means or another, the younger son would hear, accept, and continue to avoid accepting the constant stream of invitations issued to him by his elder brother.

Although the younger brother always had been very courteous, kind, and compassionate when he refused his elder brother's overtures, the younger brother was beginning to run out of excuses that had a ring of plausibility to them. The younger brother had become quite adept and proficient in creating tales of urgency and woe to which he was being called and, thereby, offered an explanation for why he would not be able to attend his elder brother's next gathering. Of late, however, the muse for excuses was either beginning to run dry or hiding from the younger brother, and, as a result, the situation was becoming a little dicey.

Furthermore, the elder brother had begun to suspect that while the 'reasons' being given by his younger brother might be true in some way, they were not entirely credible, or those 'reasons' might be credible but were not entirely true. Being a resourceful and an adaptable individual, the elder brother devised a plan to make his younger brother's attendance at one of the elder brother's gatherings something of a *fait accompli*.

One day the two brothers happened to cross paths while they were going about their respective lives within the city. After exchanging a polite amount of chit-chat, the elder brother said: "I would like you to be the guest speaker at one of my weekly sessions, and I would like to set a date and time when you would be free to participate."

From the moment the breath of his elder brother had been used to propel these words to the world at large, the younger brother knew the noose of acceptance had been placed around his neck. He knew by the way his elder brother raised the matter that as far as the latter was concerned, if the two of them had to stand there all day, night, and into the next morning, the elder brother would ask about dates until the end of time in order to finally force his younger brother into submission on this matter and agree that, yes, he was free on such and such a date just this side of Judgment Day.

Rather than try to delay the inevitable and instead of trying to outflank his brother any longer with respect to this issue, the younger brother relented.

He would be 'free' in several weeks and would attend his elder brother's spiritual circle.

The elder brother was very happy with his younger brother's willingness to co-operate. He thanked his younger brother and ambled off, whistling an ode of some kind to joy.

During the intervening days between the 'ambush' and the gathering, the elder brother became busy with publicizing his younger brother's forthcoming appearance at the spiritual center. Everybody was looking forward to the occasion since, for most of them, the younger brother was perceived to be something of a recluse and enigma, and many of the members of the center had known of the elder brother's long-standing, genuine desire to have his younger brother attend at least one of the weekly gatherings.

The eventful day finally arrived. The crowd which assembled was fairly substantial.

First, the elder brother arrived and sat in one of the chairs that had been placed on the stage near to the rostrum. Shortly thereafter, the younger brother arrived followed closely by a number of his spiritual associates.

The elder brother signaled for his brother to sit on the stage with him. The younger brother complied.

The session began. As was true of every such gathering, the proceedings were begun with a prayer that, usually, was led by the elder brother.

Out of courtesy and sincere humility, the elder brother extended an invitation to the younger brother to lead the congregational prayer. Out of courtesy and sincere humility, the younger brother declined, preferring to defer to his elder brother on this occasion.

The elder brother bowed to the wishes of his younger brother and began the prayer, which consisted of different segments -- part said aloud, part said in silence; part in praise of God, part in gratitude for the blessings which have been bestowed by Divinity, and part in remembrance of this or that facet of spirituality. Several minutes into the prayer, the younger brother rose from his chair, walked down the stairs, and proceeded to walk to one of the center's exits.

When the individuals who had accompanied the younger brother saw this, they, too, got up and began to leave. All of this created quite a commotion.

A number of the elder brother's close friends were quite upset with the rudeness of what transpired. They felt the younger brother's actions were very disrespectful and inconsiderate toward the elder brother.

Consequently, these friends of the elder brother rushed out of the center desiring to confront the younger brother about the incident. Wishing to avoid having a bad situation deteriorate further, the elder brother hurried out of the building as well and was preparing himself for quelling whatever unpleasantness might have arisen outside of the building.

As the elder brother neared the crowd in front of the center, he could hear the voices of some of his friends berating his younger brother with pointed questions and comments of one kind or another. His younger brother was silent ... just listening to the accusations being hurled at him.

Struggling, the elder brother gradually worked his way to the focus of the fray. He stepped between his younger brother and the people who were busy disparaging the latter.

Holding up his hands, he asked for everyone to stop arguing. "Perhaps", he said, "we should discuss this situation without rancor."

When the crowd had quieted down, the elder brother, pointing to one of his friends, said: "Okay. Why are you upset?"

The man, making an effort to control his temper, replied: "We think" -- and as he said this he motioned his head in a way that included many of the people in the crowd-- "that what your brother did was very wrong and disrespectful ... not only to you, but to the congregation and to God. We feel it was sacrilegious."

The younger brother asked: "What did I do?"

To which the friend of elder brother retorted: "Why, you left the prayer. Everybody saw you do this."

The younger brother glanced at the man, and, then, looked at his brother for a few seconds. Finally, he said: "I only left the prayer because my brother did and, as you all know, it is the duty of those in attendance to follow the leader of the congregational prayer."

The younger brother's comments caused a stir of confusion to ripple through the crowd. One of the people queried the younger brother with: "What do you mean your elder brother left the prayer? This is nonsense intended to cover up your own lack of spiritual etiquette. The way in which you are trying to make your elder brother the fall guy in this fiasco is nothing less than disgraceful, and you should be ashamed of yourself."

This man was about to add further insults to his offering when the elder brother shook his head, smiled in a sheepish way, and said: "No, my younger brother is right ... leave him alone."

The people present pressed the elder brother for an explanation. He responded by saying: "When I was giving the prayer, a thought came to my mind suddenly about having forgotten to send off a package to a friend of mine, and it was at that point that my younger brother got up and walked out of the building. So, he was right, I already had left the prayer for something else."

He was silent for a brief period, and, then, he addressed the crowd: "My brother saw me leave the prayer, but none of the rest of you did. All of you only saw the exterior of the situation -- that is, the part where my younger brother left the prayer in a physical sense ... a prayer that I already had left in a spiritual manner."

He gave his brother an affectionate, warm, and repentant hug, asking: "What would have been the theme of your talk?"

The younger brother simply said: "The essence of prayer, but now I think the talk is no longer necessary."

Curiosity Shoppe

Most things in life defy full and, sometimes, even partial explanation. Of course, we have our theories, biases, sciences, theologies, philosophies, ideas, and opinions. But in the end, something always eludes us, and, as a result, events often are other than we suppose them to be.

For example, there may be certain events which we replay over and over again in our minds, trying to figure out how they came about, or why we, in particular, encountered such happenings rather than someone else. On a certain level, we know these kind of events are real because we were there, yet, we are creatures who tend to be in need of consensual validation, and, as a result, when we can't find anyone else to verify that, yes, such and such an event went on at such and such a time, we become uncertain ... we waver between wanting, on the one hand, to hold our existential ground with respect to the proposed reality of an event, and, on the other hand, wanting to fold up our tents and disappear into the night, leaving a disputed occurrence to be blown away by the winds of time.

Hank Cummings was struggling with just such an event. Via the instant replay machine of his mind and for the 50th time, he was walking himself through an event -- actually, several linked events -- which had happened to him ... at least, he thought they had.

Tuesday afternoon, following work, he had decided to walk home because it was a beautiful fall day -- the kind that makes one glad to be alive ... not that every day shouldn't be viewed this way. The sun was shining; the wind was light and playfully engaged in a game of tag with the leaves on the ground; the temperature was slightly chilled but inviting.

He remembers walking down Plymouth Avenue and cutting through the market area near Concord Street. He liked this part of the city because it was always so vibrant and filled with interesting places to browse through and, occasionally, in which to buy an item or two.

Something had drawn his attention to a shop on the corner of Lexington and Green. He had tried to slow down his memory tapes and do a frame-by-frame analysis of this part of things, but no matter how closely he scrutinized the tapes, he really couldn't figure out why he paid any attention to the store.

There was nothing about its exterior which was remarkable or out of the ordinary. It was just a store like hundreds of others in the area.

Yet, the next thing he knew, he was inside looking around. Apparently, it was some sort of 'box' store. Hank didn't quite know how else to describe it.

Seemingly, there were endless shelves filled with boxes of all different descriptions. Wooden boxes of various sizes -- some quite plain, and some very ornately decorated or carved -- were staring at one from every corner of the store. It was nearly overwhelming.

Hank could remember the tightness in his stomach. He always felt this when he walked into a situation which, in some indefinable manner, felt threatening to him.

Normally, this sense of vague foreboding would have been enough to make him retreat to the relative safety of the streets. However, resisting the urge to bolt, he stayed and began to wander about the store.

There didn't seem to be anyone else in the store, not even a clerk. Perhaps the person or people running the place were in a back room.

Consequently, after one box in particular had allured him for an encounter of a closer kind, he was startled when, just as he was about to touch it, a voice from behind said: "That's a very nice piece of workmanship, don't you think?"

Inside his consciousness, Hank jumped, but his fright was hardly visible on the surface. Nonetheless, the voice said: "I'm sorry. I've startled you."

Hank turned and was face to face with a tall, thin man who seemed to be around forty-something. The man was smiling in an apologetic sort of fashion.

The man pointed down to his feet. Hank saw socks, but no shoes.

"Very comfortable," the man said, "but, sometimes, they are too quiet. You are not the first person to have fallen victim to my primitive form of stealth technology."

Recovering, Hank smiled and managed: "That's okay," and he returned his attention to the box which he had been trying to examine.

Hank remembered the man's question and silently agreed that, yes, the craftsmanship of the box was exquisite. Hank had never seen anything quite like it.

Still looking at the box, Hank asked over his shoulder: "How much?"

"Oh, that one goes for, let's see, ... ah, \$10.00," the shop keeper replied.

Hank turned around again and said: "In view of its quality, that's pretty cheap. Why sell them at such a low price?"

"Well, to be frank with you, sir," the man said, "I was thinking of taking it off the shelf in the next day or so. I don't like to keep boxes hanging around here for more than a day or so. Whenever boxes remain here too long, I find they sort of lose their usefulness and appeal.

"You've come at just the right time, as far as this box is concerned. It's going at a bargain price."

As the man was speaking, Hank's eyes had been glancing at a nearby table laden with several boxes roughly the same size as the one he liked, and, seemingly, just as nicely done. "What is the price for either of those items?" Hank inquired, nodding in the direction of the table.

The man followed Hank's gaze, paused briefly, and replied: "Each of those goes for \$125.00."

Taking a step closer to the table for a more careful look, Hank said: "They all appear to be pretty much the same. Why is there such a price difference?"

"Your question is quite reasonable," the man remarked, "but a reasonable answer is much harder to give. Let's just say there are subtle differences between the boxes that would be readily apparent to a trained observer but not so apparent to someone who is unfamiliar with the story of how these boxes came into being."

Hank thought over the man's reply and accepted it even though he really didn't know what the shop keeper actually meant. Hank removed his wallet from his jacket pocket and plucked out a twenty dollar bill.

"I've got just the place for this box in my living room," Hank said as he returned his attention to the first box at which he had been looking. He handed the money to the shop keeper.

The man lifted Hank's box off the shelf and carried it over to the cash register. He rung up the purchase, took what was owed from the drawer, and gave the change to Hank.

As the man gave Hank his money the shopkeeper said: "What I'm going to say to you may sound strange, but you shouldn't open the box until midnight."

"Why?" Hank asked. "Will it turn into a pumpkin or something if I do?"

"Not quite," the man countered. "However, we have found that customers tend to get their full purchase value only if they follow the instructions accompanying the box. But it's yours now, so you do what you want with it. I'm just trying to offer a helpful suggestion."

Actually, Hank hadn't even been thinking about the box's interior. He liked its exterior craftsmanship, and, therefore, he only had been thinking of putting it in the living room as a piece of art or a conversation piece. The issue of what might be inside the box never crossed his mind.

The man said: "Can I put this in a bag for you?"

Hank shook his head and responded with: "No, it's fine as it is. I don't have far to go."

The two men exchanged final post-transaction pleasantries, and Hank left the store with the box under his arm. He was home in ten minutes.

He went into the living room and placed the box on the coffee table. Some people had books on the coffee table. He had a box ... a very attractive box.

He sat on the couch, admiring his acquisition. While doing this, a number of thoughts occurred to him: 'I wonder what's inside and why I should wait until midnight before opening it? The whole idea of waiting seems ludicrous ... what difference could waiting possibly make? ... surely, whatever is in the box now will be in the box at midnight.'

Going with his rational judgment, Hank reached over and opened the box. He was unprepared for what happened next.

His eyes and nose were assaulted by an array of sensations. Strange colored lights emanated from inside and various kinds of smells as well.

The interior of the box seemed to be sectioned off into cubbyhole- like compartments -- maybe twenty or more -- except that the top of each section was open. Lights were shining from only some of the compartments. When Hank tried to determine the nature of the

light source by attempting to probe the open cubbyholes with his hand, something prevented him from examining that part of the box ... as if there were a force field of some kind in place.

Some of the compartments seemed quite dark ... manifesting a sort of preternatural darkness. When he poked his index finger into one of these holes, that part of his hand seemed to become engulfed in shadows which couldn't be penetrated by normal vision despite the fact there was still plenty of daylight seeping into the room.

He brought his nose down near the box. There was no doubt about it. Some of the compartments had smells and some didn't.

The ones that had an aroma arising out of them varied in character. Hank tried to look down into these holes to see what was generating the smell, and he also felt around with some of his fingers, but in neither case could he get to the bottom of things.

Some of the compartments had a very pleasant smell even if he couldn't identify what the smell was. His nose wrinkled with disagreeableness in relation to some of the other holes, and in a few cases, his head involuntarily shot back because the stench was so strong.

Several of the compartments had a sort of grayish hue to them. When he dipped his index finger into these holes, his fingertip didn't disappear as in the case of the 'black' holes, but his fingertip did seem to be washed in a grayish kind of aura.

The whole experience was unnerving. Hank didn't have a clue what to make of the situation.

He decided to contact his next door neighbor and have him take a look at things. For whatever reason, events always seem more real when they are shared by two or more people... even when everybody disagrees about what they believe the nature of that commonly-held experience may be.

He left his house, went to the one on his right, knocked on the door, and waited for the knock to be answered. As he waited, he suddenly remembered his friend had a meeting that night and wasn't going to be home until very late.

Hank turned around on the porch of his friend's house, surveyed the neighborhood, and briefly considered going to another house but rejected

the idea. He wouldn't feel comfortable approaching anyone else with this ... at least, not quite yet.

He headed back to his house, went through, closed the front doorway he had left open, and returned to the couch. Hank would wait for his friend and ask him to come over after he got back from his meeting.

Throughout the evening, Hank stared at the item on his table. He fixed and ate his supper, hardly tasting anything ... preoccupied with his new box the entire time.

As the evening wore on, Hank became convinced the box's interior was changing in various subtle ways. The lights were altered somehow, and there were a few new smells which were somewhat nondescript in character.

Around 11 p.m. Hank saw the lights of his neighbor's car flash past the window as his friend pulled into the garage area. Immediately, Hank jumped up and rushed out of the house, hoping to reach his friend before the latter disappeared into the house.

His friend waved to Hank as Hank rounded the corner. Hank merely said: "I need to show you something. Please come with me."

His friend was obviously tired, but he trudged along behind Hank like good friends are sometimes called upon to do. The two men entered Hank's house, and Hank ushered his friend into the living room and pointed to the box on the coffee table.

His friend approached the box, picked it up, looked it over for a few moments, and, then, placed it back on the table. "Nice!" he said. "Where did you get it?"

Ignoring his friend's query, Hank looked at him and asked: "Do you see anything strange about it, or do you smell anything out of the ordinary when you are near the box?"

His friend looked at the box and back at Hank. He shook his head. "Not really," he said and, then, quickly added: "It's a nicely done box, but that's about as far as it goes."

"How would you describe the interior of the box?" Hank inquired nervously.

His friend returned his gaze to the box and studied it for a few seconds. Shrugging, he said: "There are a bunch of compartments." He paused and said: "Am I missing something here?"

Hank was lost in thought. He came out of his reverie long enough to smile, somewhat embarrassedly, replying: “No, it must be just me. I thought there was something odd about the box and wanted to get your take on it, that’s all. It’s just one of those things, I guess. I’m sorry to have dragged you over here.”

As an afterthought and a way of changing focus, Hank asked: “How’d your meeting go?”

His friend rolled his eyes and smiled: “You know meetings. They go on forever and never seem to accomplish much except paving the way for further meetings. I think meetings use humans to make other meetings possible, like flowers use bees.”

His friend waved good-bye to Hank and said: “I can show myself out, thanks.”

Hank gave a weak imitation of a wave and watched his friend leave. He sat on the couch, looking at the box again and sniffing at it here and there.

The smells were still there, but the lights had nearly vanished. In addition, Hank noticed that most of the areas which, previously, seemed to be protected by some sort of force field were now accessible to him. Most of these compartments had become dusted with a grayish tinge similar to the aura that characterized a number of the other compartments.

Suddenly, Hank was very tired. He gave one last, long look at the box, and, then, went off to bed.

When Hank awoke the next morning, he rushed downstairs to view his box. It was pretty much as he had left it last night, except that, now, all the lights had disappeared, leaving only the smells.

Hank dressed quickly, picked up the box, and headed for the store where he had purchased it. He covered the distance quickly and entered the shop and saw the same man who had assisted him the previous day sweeping the store floor.

The man acknowledged his entrance, noted the box beneath his arm, and continued to sweep. Finally, the shopkeeper said: “Can I help you with anything?”

Hank put the box down on the counter and said: “So, what’s going on?”

The man went behind the counter and commented: "I take it that against advice, you opened the box before midnight. Is that right?" he said, with one eyebrow raised as if a prosecutor were making a charge.

Momentarily flustered with the man's question, Hank hemmed and hawed. Shortly later, he confessed.

The man waved his hand in a dismissive way. "Well, there's no real harm done. But I warned you about not getting full value for your money."

Hank was mystified. Again, he asked: "What's going on?"

Finally, the dam broke and a flood of questions burst forth: "What is this all about? Why am I, apparently, the only one who can see the lights and smell the aromas arising out of the box? Why can I put my fingers in some of the compartments and not others? And, why does the box appear to change? What does it all mean?"

The man had an amused expression on his face, followed by a mock sense of surprise as he said: "My, my, so many questions."

The shopkeeper took the box which Hank had brought with him and threw it into a collection bin, commenting, as he did this: "I guess you're all through with this one."

Hank was upset: "Wait, what are you doing? That's my box. Why are you throwing it out?"

"Don't worry," said the man. "I'll give you a discount on your next box." The shopkeeper stopped, hesitated, and, then, asked cautiously: "You do want another one, don't you?"

"Not without an explanation, I don't," Hank said defiantly. "Very well," the man said. "What do you want to know?" "Everything!" demanded Hank.

The shopkeeper shook his head and replied: "Sorry. I don't know everything. I can only tell you what I know. You'll have to be satisfied with that."

Hank thought this over and said: "All right. Tell me what you know."

The man shook his head again: "Sorry. I'm not allowed to tell you everything I know ... I can only tell you some things."

Frustrated, Hank exploded: "Then, for God's sake, tell me what you can."

A very pleased expression came over the man's face. "I would be happy to do that," he said.

Clearing his throat, the shopkeeper began: "The box has 24 compartments. Each compartment contains one hour of your life. If you had waited until midnight, the box would have had 24 fresh opportunities shining forth for you to take advantage of, but since you opened the box prematurely, the box could only show what was left of your day and what already had transpired.

"You couldn't access certain areas of the box because that time was not, yet, yours. Those compartments glowed with the light of potential but otherwise were off limits to you.

"The black holes which you saw give expression to the time when you were sleeping and doing nothing with the time that has been allotted to you. The gray-tinged areas encompassed the times when you did nothing with the hours of the day to either help, or hurt, your efforts to realize the purpose of your life, and since last night you wasted a lot of time just looking at the box and wondering about things, there are a lot of gray areas in your box.

"The smells coming from the box constitute the things you have done throughout the day which have either aided the purpose of your life or have served to undermine it. If you will think back to what took place yesterday and are honest with yourself, I believe you will be able to map various smells onto different deeds which you did during those particular hours.

"As far as why no one but you can see what is in the box is concerned, well, they are your hours, after all, aren't they? You're responsible for them, and out of courtesy, certain forces are present which help keep those contents hidden from the view of others ... but the smells, well, sometimes, even those can't be camouflaged, and, I should warn you that, under certain circumstances, those smells may follow a person through eternity."

The man smiled in summation, adding: "So, would you like to get another box for tomorrow, or would you prefer another bargain box like you purchased yesterday -- the kind with respect to which you don't follow instructions, and, therefore, lose the value of the box?" The shopkeeper's eyebrows were both raised to punctuate his question.

Hank stood in a sort of stupor. He was nonplused by the whole situation.

The man noted Hank's condition and said: "If you purchase something other than one of our daily bargains, there are different costs associated with any of the selections which you might make. If I were you, I would choose carefully."

Inheritance

A mother had passed away and been laid to rest. All that remained was the reading of the will.

The only surviving relative was a son who had been asked to come to the office of the family lawyer on the morning following the funeral. The young man had arrived at the indicated time and was now in the reception area waiting for the lawyer to make an appearance.

A few moments later the lawyer rushed into the room, apologized for being tardy, and asked the waiting man to please accompany him to an inner office. The secretary watched the two men disappear behind a door marked 'Private'.

The lawyer directed his guest to a chair on the near side of a table and, then, headed for a seat across from the young man. Before sitting down, the lawyer took off his raincoat and hat, placed them in the chair next to him, opened his attaché case, took out a manila folder, shuffled a few papers, looked briefly at the young man across from him, and, then, back at the papers, cleared his throat, and, finally, sat down.

He removed some papers from the folder and passed them to his guest, saying: "That is a copy of your mother's will. It's pretty straightforward, but I would draw your attention to two facets of the document.

"First, your mother left you the property, house, and contents which are located along the town line at the north end of our community. The precise address is noted in your copy.

"Secondly, there is a proviso or stipulation concerning her bequeathing of the foregoing items. More specifically, on a daily basis throughout the non-winter months, you must place a special grass ... the name of the grass is specified in the text of the will ... in all of the rooms of the lower floor of the house, and if you are not prepared to comply with this condition, then, the property, house, and its contents are to revert to the town to be used for whatever purposes the town may deem fit, including the sale thereof.

"If you agree to accept the inheritance, then, there is an agreement which you need to sign stating you have been informed about the will's contents and that you accept the conditions stated therein. If you would like a few days to think this matter over, then, we could meet again -- on

Thursday morning, for instance, but, in any event, no later than Friday afternoon at the close of business,” and as the lawyer completed his short presentation, he leaned back in his chair, looking at the young man, awaiting some sort of response.

The son’s eyes skipped down through the will. Raising his head his eyes drifted to the left of the lawyer toward a large window that looked out onto the river that ran through the town.

He thought back to his youth. How he hated that chore of going out into the woods every day early in the morning, locating the special grass his mother had shown him how to find, cutting it, bundling it, bringing it back to the house, and distributing it throughout the lower floors of the house in which he had grown up ... the one which, now, had been bequeathed to him -- well, possibly.

The young man’s thoughts returned to the office, and he asked: “How is my compliance supposed to be monitored?”

The lawyer replied: “Apparently, you are on the honor system. However, you might want to note there is a rider, of sorts, following the statement of conditions in the will which indicates that should noncompliance become evident and provable, then, forfeiture to the town becomes automatic.”

Once more, the young man’s gaze went to the river as his thoughts went inward. His mother never really told him why he had to do that daily chore when he was growing up. It seemed to be one of those things which parents think will make a man of a boy ... teach a boy the value of responsibility, commitment, and hard work.

Or, maybe, to be fair to her, she had tried to explain to him why the chore was important but, being an immature kid, he never properly listened to what she was saying. In general, however, the task seemed pointless then, and it seemed even more pointless now.

On the other hand, he loved his mother, and despite the many arguments which, over the years, had taken place concerning the chore, the young man always had completed the job. Plus, at the present time, he was -- as they say -- between jobs and was going to have difficulty covering the rent on his apartment for the coming month ... just a week away. Another question occurred to the young man: “What if I want to sell the property?” he inquired.

The lawyer referred the young man to the appropriate section of the will and, then, read aloud the relevant paragraph. Concluding, he said: "So, you see, the language is quite clear. You cannot sell the property, the house, or its contents."

The young man smiled to himself. This was vintage Mom, and while there was a certain amount of annoyance that had crept in about the way things had been set up by his mother, the son decided to accept the inheritance, along with its condition, and see how things went.

He would try to comply with his mother's wishes. His mother was doing the son a favor, but, as usual, there was a catch to it ... or so it always seemed.

The first couple of months went fairly uneventfully. Eventually, he got back into the routine of his youth, but, initially, the whole thing was tiring and tiresome.

He went through a short period of not even minding going out and finding the special grass. In fact, for a time, he sort of came to enjoy his walks in the forest and didn't know whether the walks in the forest were the means for collecting the grass, or collecting the grass became the means for taking a walk through the forest ... either way, the chore and the walk brought him a certain amount of peace and quiet, low-key happiness.

There came a time, however, when he began to feel a growing resistance to, and resentment toward, this condition of his inheritance. First, this resistance began by delaying going out into the forest for as long as he could manage to keep his conscience off his back, and, then, a time came when he started to bring back less and less of the special grass, and, then, a time came when he would skip a day here and there, and, finally, he stopped doing the required task altogether.

The special grass had a peculiar odor to it -- not exactly offensive, but not overly pleasant either -- and because the young man had gotten use to the smell, he didn't notice any difference in things until, after a couple of days, the grass began to decay and produce something of a stench. He busied himself with cleaning up the decaying grass and removed it from the house altogether.

About a week later, the young man had fallen asleep on the living room couch in the late afternoon. He awoke to a strange sensation. Something was crawling along his leg.

Glancing down, he saw a black snake working its way toward his mid-section. Alarmed and panicked, he tried to brush the snake away with his hand, and the snake bit him.

Immediately, he began to feel the effects of the venom. He tried to rise and was bitten again.

He managed to right himself and watched dimly as the snake slithered off in the direction of the kitchen. He started to get up, felt faint and weak, reached for a chair in order to maintain his balance, missed the chair, and toppled over onto the floor.

His breathing became rapid and shallow. His skin felt feverish and pasty at the same time. The places where he had been bitten throbbed with pain ... as if they were on fire.

Lying there, he vaguely recalled words of his mother concerning snakes and the special grass sprinted through his consciousness, disappearing almost as quickly as the memory of his mother speaking to him had appeared. His eyes stared blankly at the ceiling ... life had mutated into death.

A short time later, the property, house and its contents reverted to the town council for its considered disposition. Sometimes, people are granted an inheritance which they do not understand or they do not honor, and, as a result, in one way or another, the inheritance is taken from them due to non-compliance.

Dancing With The Moon

The couple had been arguing for months. Quite skillfully, the pair's spiritual guide had been skirting around the conflict for some time, keeping her distance as best she could.

Her primary task was to help the two, as individuals, to enhance the quality of their spiritual lives. However, since matters of the world often spill over into, and create problems for, mystical pursuits, she couldn't ignore what was going on between the two. The challenge was sort of like a high wire balancing act.

On the one hand, she had to avoid falling into the trap of allowing herself to be dragged into the matter, and, as a result, be perceived, among other things, as taking sides, thereby risking having one of the two distance himself or herself from the spiritual path. On the other hand, if something wasn't done soon, both of them might allow the negative emotions which were running at high tide in their relationship to completely inundate their spiritual activities altogether.

However, when the local version of the 'War of the Roses' seemed destined to enter extra innings and, in addition, began to suck other people of the spiritual circle into the dangerous, outer currents of the marital maelstrom, she decided things had reached a fail-safe point and that something needed to be done to address the issue ... for the good of all. The spiritual guide had talked with each of the parties on an individual basis, dropping subtle hints here and there about how to treat one's spouse as a partner in life rather than as an adversary. Nonetheless, these sessions appeared to have fallen on deaf hearts, and, consequently, a much more direct, joint meeting was indicated.

The couple had agreed to come to their teacher's home that evening. As a joke -- and, hopefully, as a way of lightening the atmosphere somewhat -- she briefly entertained the idea of receiving the two in full Samurai battle gear but discarded the idea because the two were far too caught up in unpleasantness to be able to laugh at themselves.

She knew that deep down both of them loved one another. Yet, unfortunately, and as occurs all too frequently, their love for one another had been misplaced or lost or buried somewhere along the way, and, therefore, they had forgotten how, why, or where they had become separated from the river of love that once flowed so freely and abundantly between the two of them.

After the two showed up at her door ... like strangers who happened to stumble onto her porch as a result of an improbable set of coincidences ... she greeted them, took them into her study, seated them, provided them with some refreshments, and, finally, she sat down as well. She dispensed with any preliminary chitchat, and, instead, walked straight into the arena and said to herself: "To those who are about die, we salute you."

She began with a story: "There were two seekers of the truth who once made a journey together. Unavoidably, the route which they planned to take took them straight through the heart of countryside inhabited by people who were their sworn enemies -- that is, enemies of anyone who was interested in seeking truth in a way other than what people of that country accepted as being 'the' proper path to truth.

"For most of their journey, the companions ... through a combination of intelligence, vigilance, and luck ... had managed to stay out of difficulty. But, one day, events conspired to entangle their path with that of one of their avowed antagonists.

"Essentially, what happened is as follows. The pair came to a small river where they found a man lying on the bank nearest to them.

"The path of their journey was such that the two hoped to ford the river at this point since it was the shallowest portion of the river for quite some distance in either direction. The man on the ground had injured his leg and needed to get to the other side where he had a horse and cart tied up.

"Even though the water was relatively shallow at this juncture of the river, nonetheless, it still was too deep to negotiate for a man with an injured leg ... especially given that there were some strong currents that came into play near the far bank. The man needed help, but the two could tell by the color of the hat the man wore that he was also one of those who had tremendous enmity for people -- like the traveling companions -- who were adherents of what the former kind of individuals considered to be apocryphal teachings.

"One of the two traveling companions offered to carry the man on his back. The injured man accepted the offer with gratitude, not realizing that the two strangers were precisely the sort of people with whom he would not be caught dead under other circumstances.

“A short while later all three individuals were safely on the other bank of the river. The one who had carried the injured man across the river also helped him get onto his cart, and, then, the two travelers bid the man farewell and continued on with their journey.

“The pair walked in silence for some time. Eventually, they stopped in order to eat something.

“The two had been friends for a long time. They knew one another’s quirks, moods, and manner of engaging life.

“One friend knew that something was bothering his buddy so he said: ‘What’s up? I know something is upsetting you. Why not tell me what’s on your mind?’

“His companion was a forthright individual, so he replied: ‘I don’t think you should have helped that injured man this afternoon. The guy hates people like us, and if he had come to know anything about what we believe, once he got to the other side he probably would have called his neighbors to murder us and believed that both the killing and the help he was given was as God wished.’

“His friend shook his head in sadness and remarked: “You know, I took that guy off my back hours ago, but you still are carrying him around with you. Why don’t you put him down? Our journey is taxing enough as it is without the extra baggage.”

Upon completing her story, the spiritual guide was quiet, giving the couple sitting in her study an opportunity to reflect upon the tale’s potential significance for their own situation. A few minutes passed like this.

The man shifted in his chair, coughed once, and said: “That was a very good story. I liked it a lot.” Then, casting a sideways glance at his wife, he added: “I wish certain people would appreciate its teaching as much as I have.”

His wife’s lips curled into a tight smirk. She shook her head ... as if to say: “There you go again, always at me, always criticizing.’ The man’s wife remarked: “Well, notwithstanding the opinion of some people, I also loved your story. But, you know what really boils my brass” She started to say something, hesitated, looked at her teacher in embarrassment, closed her mouth, and the muscles in her jaw tighten.

The wife was silent for a moment longer before saying: “I really wish I could take a long holiday somewhere ... you know ... just get away

from all the pressure, stress, and conflict. In fact, I've been thinking about maybe going to that spiritual retreat out in the countryside which is affiliated with our spiritual center.

"Maybe I could do this for an extended period of time. I think it would do me a lot of good," she asserted.

Upon hearing the woman's thoughts, the spiritual guide said: "I once knew a fellow who was a very dedicated member of some spiritual group or other. In fact, if memory serves me here, he was so committed that he sacrificed job, career, family, and quite a few other things in order to go and live at a monastery, ashram, or the like. I forget, now, exactly where it was that he went, but it was remote and cut off from the rest of the world.

"This guy loved the place. He adored its quiet, its remoteness, its simple life, its code of letting everyone do his or her own thing.

"He spent all his days and nights at the spiritual center just reading sacred scriptures, chanting, fasting, doing vigils, helping out in the kitchen, discussing spiritual issues with the other residents, working in the garden, and taking long, peaceful walks through the forests and around the lake which was on the property. The entire set of experiences was exhilarating, joyous, ecstatic, life affirming.

"Indeed, the whole arrangement was so wonderful the man stayed at the retreat for fifteen years. Eventually, he felt sufficiently energized and in-tune with his own being that he decided to re-enter the world beyond the horizons of the spiritual center where he had been living for such a long period of time.

"Consequently, he got an apartment and a job in a nearby city. Surprisingly, before long, he was miserable. His life was filled with difficulties that quickly overwhelmed and consumed him.

"The problem was simple. None of what he had learned at the spiritual center was being transferred to his new circumstances ... not because there weren't valuable teachings being transmitted through the spiritual center but because he hadn't learned how to make those teachings work outside of the very restricted, protected, remote, simplified way of life which was being lived at the spiritual center.

"He had allowed himself to be deluded into supposing that since he had a strong faith when he was not called upon to test such faith while spending time at the spiritual center, he also believed his faith would

remain intact when he moved to a world that would challenge his principles, values, and commitments at every turn, and he was wrong.

“Fasting, chanting, vigils, seclusion, discussion, and reading are all important activities. But they are a preparation for living, not a substitute, and one tends to run into problems when one assumes that if one can do such feats of austerity, that, therefore, being able to successfully engage the world will follow automatically.

“It’s similar to the difference between military training and actual battle. One might be great in boot camp and, yet, fall apart during combat because, even though the two are related, they are not the same.

“Or, to take another example, there are people who do very, very well in the context of schools but cannot, or will not, make the adjustment to non-school environments. Knowing how to play the school game is not necessarily the same thing as knowing how to play the game of life.

“Running from life is not the answer to anything. One needs to learn how to run to life and embrace life for the set of opportunities it encompasses.”

The husband’s eyes had been aglow all through the teacher’s story and follow-up commentary. He was eager to say something, and when he was sure his teacher had finished, he blurted out: “I’ve been trying to tell my wife exactly that for so many years. Of course, I didn’t say it anywhere near as beautifully or succinctly as you did, but the gist of my ideas was pretty much the same.”

A grimace appeared on his face. “I just get so annoyed with her when she goes into these hide and seek games she plays ... as if running away is the answer to everything.”

The spiritual guide lowered her gaze to the floor and replied: “There was a woman I used to know many years ago who had a daughter. During the summer, every evening around twilight time, the two of them would sit out on the veranda, while talking and listening to the birds sing their bedtime songs.

“The daughter was in her late teens or early twenties. She used to stay with her mother when home on summer vacation from the university.

“One evening, the mother asked her daughter what the name of a certain bird was that was perched on a long limb of a nearby tree. The mother described exactly where she was looking so her daughter would be able to identify what her mother was referring to.

“The daughter told her mother the name of the bird, and her mother thanked her, and the two were silent for awhile. A short while later the same thing happened again.

“The daughter was a little puzzled about this and thoughts of Alzheimer’s passed through her consciousness, but, once more, the daughter answered her mother’s query, but a slight, subtle strand of annoyance had crept into the daughter’s voice. As before, her mother thanked her daughter for the information.

“A few moments later, her mother asked the precise same question, and her daughter said in an exasperated tone of voice: “For goodness sake, Mom, will you ask some other question, I’ve already answered your question twice within a very short period of time. What is it with you on this bird thing?”

“Her mother smiled at her daughter’s remarks ... the way mothers do when they see the faults of their children but love them anyway. She said: “I guess you don’t remember when you were very young -- three or four -- you used to ask me the same question five times a day for weeks on end, and every time you would ask me, I would give you the information you sought, and I enjoyed doing it. The mother paused briefly before adding: “Whatever else they teach you at university, patience doesn’t appear to be in the curriculum.”

Upon the conclusion of their teacher’s story, the man’s wife laughed, commenting: “How completely appropriate.”

She looked over at her husband and said: “When one person wants something, they want everybody to be patient, but when the shoe is on the other foot, well ...”and her voice drifted off.

The teacher said: “Actually, the story was for both of you, as are all the stories which I have been relating to you. I’m not directing these stories at one or the other of you but to both of you.”

She studied the couple for a moment. “Do you two dance together at all?”

The couple shook their heads in unison -- one of the first things they had agreed upon all evening ... and for quite a few months. The husband said: "A long time ago ... we used to dance when we were dating, but we haven't done so in years. Why? Are you suggesting the solution to our problems is that we go out dancing more?"

"Not exactly," the teacher said. "And, yet, the whole idea of dancing has a lot of relevance to what I see going on between the two of you."

The spiritual guide paused and, then, remarked: "Maybe, by way of introduction and in the hopes that I am not inciting any impatience in either of you, I could relate another story."

She looked at the two of them. They both gave signs of interest.

"There was a saint who lived in an area outside of a town. Although the townspeople knew of his existence and held him in great esteem, nevertheless, for the most part, they used to leave him alone.

"However, a drought had been gripping the entire area, and the townspeople were becoming desperate. If they didn't get rain soon, the crops would die. As a result, during the coming winter, many people in the community would be at great risk of perishing as well.

"A delegation from the town approached the saint and asked if he would intervene with Divinity on their behalf. The saint thought about the request, took a wet handkerchief from the wash he had been doing and instructed the delegation to take the piece of cloth and put it on a rock outside where it could dry.

"The saint's directive was followed. No sooner had this been done when a heavy rain began to fall.

"The people in the delegation were extremely happy, expressed their gratitude to the saint, and thanked God for the desperately needed rain. Soon, they went to their respective homes.

"About a week later, another delegation came to the saint's home. This time, their problem was the exact opposite from what previously had been the case.

"In fact, ever since they had asked for the saint's assistance with the drought, there had been non-stop rain. Now, their crops were in danger of being ruined because of an excess of water and an absence of sunlight.

“Hearing their plight, the saint took off a bandana which was hung around his neck and said: ‘Please take this outside while it is still raining so it can be washed. It is quite soiled in places.’

“The delegation did as requested and, immediately, as soon as they went outside, the rain stopped. They were all very happy with the change in weather, but they were also somewhat puzzled.

“Returning to where the saint had been sitting, one of the delegation members asked: ‘Sir, when you asked for something of yours to be dried, it rained, and when you wanted something of yours washed, it became dry. We don’t understand.’

“The saint raised his eyebrows and gave a shrug which seemed to say: ‘Well, what can one do?’ He commented: “These days my relationship with God is such that whatever I want, then the opposite will be done.”

When the spiritual guide finished the story about the saint, she continued on: “One mistake which you both are making with respect to your relationship is that you don’t seem to realize what the name of the dance is that you are supposed to be doing, and you are upset because you both are trying to do your own individual dance while Divinity is engaging you in another kind of Dance which neither of you are interested in doing ... at least not at the present time.

“The saint in the story had learned the secret of not arguing with the Beloved because although his relationship was such that whatever he wanted, Divinity did the opposite, the saint was wise enough to change his approach to things and, thereby, operate in accordance with how Divinity wished things to go, rather than how he wished them to be. When he wanted something washed or something dried, he sincerely wanted the washing or drying to occur, but he also knew what the result would be, and he accepted that ... completely ... without resentment or feeling hurt.

“You each are doing a variation of the ‘I’ve been done dirt’ two-step, but that’s not the dance you should be doing ... not at all. Apparently, God has arranged things in a way that is the opposite of what each of you want, but you haven’t developed the wisdom yet to make adjustments to accept God’s way of doing things rather than your own.

“You both are being resistant to God’s will. However, you each assume the source of the conflict is a function of your respective disagreements

with one another, when, in truth, the source of conflict is the way you both insist on arguing with the Beloved ... in other words, Divinity.

“You don’t seem to realize you are engaged in a much more important dance than the ‘you-done-me-dirt’ two-step because your real partner is Divinity. Your spouse is just one of the ways through which God relates to you, and you to Divinity, during the course of the Big Dance -- which, contrary to the opinion of many, does not refer, primarily, to playing professional sports or vying for athletic championships. You show your regard, or lack thereof, for God by the way you treat your spouse, since it is God Who, for Divine reasons, puts you together as dance partners in the first place.

“Someone once said that ‘marriage is half the faith’. Since faith only develops through being tested, challenged, and placed in the forge of life, then, marriage is an excellent way to strengthen and improve the quality of one’s faith because marriage is filled with struggles ... both small and large.

“Among other things, marriage requires: patience, tolerance, empathy, forgiveness, repentance, sincerity, trust, kindness, compassion, love, persistence, courage, sacrifice, selflessness, nobility, magnanimity, and so many other things. Moreover, marriage needs these qualities not from just one of the partners but from both of them.

“There are two ways of ‘dancing in the dark’. One is warm, intimate, glorious, loving ... when two move as one in synch with the music’s rhythms and moods. The other manner of dancing in the dark is when the couple bumps into things, steps on one another’s toes -- figuratively and literally -- and are so preoccupied with the pain of the experience, they lose their feel for the music to which they should be dancing.

“You two have been doing the latter kind of dancing in the dark. There is a mismatch of expectations, hopes, desires, needs, and interests. As a result, you are tripping all over one another.

“You each insist on leading and get annoyed with the other person for not following. You each hang on to your silly ideas about who is right and who is wrong.

“In a song entitled: ‘For What’s It’s Worth’ by the Buffalo Springfield, there is a line which states: “Nobody’s right, if everybody’s wrong,” and you both are wrong in what you are doing.

“One of the worst things we can do when in a relationship is to hold onto our ideas of rightness, because when we feel we are right, we have no place left to move, and, furthermore, our sense of rightness fuels our sense of being justified in holding onto our anger, mistrust, impatience, unkindness, selfishness, and so on, ad nauseam. When we believe we are right and justified, we tend to make moral judgments about the other person, and in making such judgments we become even more convinced that our hurt, sense of betrayal, and resentments are all justified.

“But even if one were 100% correct in all one’s accusations concerning one’s spouse, where does this really get us? It doesn’t get us anywhere because we are stuck with all our negative feelings, and we have no place to go with those negative feelings except for them to become, at best, smoldering, underground fires that flare up under the right circumstances, and, at worse, they simply become more intense and entrenched over the years.

“If you ask married couples what they want when they start out, almost all of them would say they want happiness, peace, harmony, intimacy, trust, commitment, sincerity, respect. Yet, as Tolstoy, I believe, once said, ‘Everybody wants to go to heaven, but no one wants to die.’

“And die we must. We must die to what we want and become alive to what God wants of us ... in marriage and out of marriage.

“How can anyone possibly hope to perform a dance of love if one is not prepared to listen to, and comply with, the music, the rhythms, and the harmonies of the Divine band. If we insist on marching to the sound of our own drummer, we might be great individualists, but we will be lousy dance partners ... and, more than anything, life is about dancing -- not marching ... life is feeling the Divine music with all one’s being and learning to go with the flow of that music ... therein lies the secret of our happiness and contentment.

“When we are thoughtful, kind, compassionate, forbearing, charitable, patient, noble, and so on, we are in synch with the Divine music. When we are in synch in this deep, soulful, and heart-felt manner, we experience in our souls and our hearts the justice and love which permeates the universe. However, when we are selfish, impatient, unkind, inconsiderate, unforgiving, and the like, then, we distance ourselves from God’s music. We introduce disharmony, injustice, and enmity as counterpoint to God’s melodies and rhythms.

“Neither partner in a marriage ought to lead. Both of them should follow the Divine lead and learn the Divine Dance.

“When we are wrong, there is room for movement. One can repent for the error one has made, and, then, struggle to become one with the truth.

“When one is right, or believes oneself to be, there is no room for movement, and one has no motivation to change one’s behavior. Consequently, it is better to assume one may be wrong and allow some degrees of freedom for improvement rather than to presume one is right and be stuck with a lot of negative emotional baggage one cannot jettison because one has no incentive to do so -- after all, why should one change if one supposes oneself to be right or justified?

“If you look at the great saints, they have a profound sense of humility and modesty. These people are friends of God, and, yet, they are quite aware of their own imperfections and are willing to accept the possibility that nearly everyone else is better than they are. They always feel there is room for improvement.

“And, yet, people who are married, most of whom are not saints, have almost no humility or modesty when it comes to issues of assuming themselves to be right or justified in how they behave or treat one another. This is a recipe for disaster.

“The purpose of marriage is not primarily about sexual intimacy, or raising a family, or establishing a home ... although all of these have their importance and their place. Rather, the primary purpose of marriage is to have an opportunity for learning the great lessons of life: patience, kindness, commitment, sincerity, forgiveness, repentance, trust, gratitude, self-sacrifice, compassion, and love.

“This is the essence of the mystical waltz ... whereas the world calls us to the Mephisto waltz which is the exact opposite of the former activity. When we dance to the tune of the latter, we feel nothing but pain, and, ironically, despite all of the misery the Mephisto waltz gives to us, its very nature is to induce and incite us to indulge our bad moods, attitudes, and feelings, and, in so doing, seduce us into refusing to give that dance up even though we understand it is the source of all of our unhappiness.

“One of the keys to learning the steps of the mystical waltz is to stop criticizing God’s creation, and God’s creation includes one’s spouse. With criticism comes a hardening of our spiritual arteries, and when the

life line of our hearts become constricted, then, the heart is less able to perform its intended function, which is to listen to, be in synchronicity with, and respond to the rhythms of the music played by Divinity for the purpose of life's dance.

“When we judge our spouse, this fuels our sense of justification for feeling angry, resentment, mistrustful, suspicious. Such emotions are never to our advantage ... only to our disadvantage because they don't accomplish anything of a constructive nature. All they do is underwrite discord, enmity, separation, and self-aggrandizement.

“Now, please don't misunderstand me. I am not saying one should have to put up with endless rounds of bad behavior from one's spouse. What I'm saying is a couple must search their hearts and determine what kind of dance they are interested in pursuing ... the mystical waltz or the Mephisto waltz.

“Believe me, if a couple is truly interested in doing the mystical waltz together, then, despite whatever missteps there might be, they will work out the differences together in an amicable fashion and, then, move on. Moreover, people who are sincerely committed to such a Divine dance will feel the joy and peace which comes when they die to themselves in order to be able to trip the light fantastic in a mystical way.

“If one, or the other, or both partners in a marriage are not interested in learning how to do the mystical waltz, then, the bitter fruits of this sort of intention will be all too painfully palpable, and, under such circumstance it is better for these individuals to say “Peace” and go their separate ways so that they might find partners who share common values and purposes and who are like-hearted with respect to the nature of the dance they wish to do.

“Just as the moon is the last outpost of light from the sun in the night sky, so, the soul is the last outpost of light from the spirit in the darkness of the material world. When two people become one in the mystical waltz, then, as they dance their dance of harmony and intimacy in the darkness, it is like dancing with the moon, for, by the Grace of God, the light of the spirit shines upon their souls, and the night becomes bright with the sound of music ... Divine music ... and there is only one Source of rhythms, and one Source of movements, and one Source of intimacy, and one Source of melodies, and all purposes are reconciled.”

Fantasy

The professor had thought about this decision for months. He had been close to following through on his plan a dozen or more times, only to lose courage at the last minute.

Now, once again, he was staring his demons down in the middle of the night. A faculty meeting had been scheduled for the morning, and he wanted to speak his heart to the assembly.

Yet, the message of his heart had real consequences for him as an individual. Moreover, there was no assurance anyone else would go along with him on the matter.

In fact, by the end of the meeting, he probably would be like the sound of one-hand clapping. The only question remaining is whether there was going to be a right-handed or left-handed clap.

Based on hundreds of conversations he had with fellow colleagues across the years, he knew that in their heart of hearts many faculty members thought as he did. However, there often is a huge divide between the thinking of something and its doing.

Sometimes this is for the better. Sometimes it is a source of shame.

He had rehearsed the situation in his mind's eye so frequently he feared a great deal of spontaneity and passion might have been lost, and these two factors could play an important role in helping to sway some of his colleagues to accompany him on this, perhaps, quixotic quest. Nonetheless, he went through the process one more time.

Following the usual order of such meetings, new business would be sought from the chairperson. That would be the time to stand up and be counted.

He would turn around, face his friends and associates, and begin to speak. He would search for his rhythm, perhaps stumbling a little at first ... an orator he was not.

"My fellow colleagues, I stand before you today as an individual who is being haunted. The ghost of my conscience has been keeping a vigil for quite some time, hoping I would summon up the necessary resolve to do that which is needed.

"I remember how excited and happy I was when the idea of being a teacher first alighted on the surface of my consciousness. I was

captivated by the idea of helping people to find themselves -- to learn about issues of identity, purpose, meaning, truth, integrity, commitment, justice, and happiness ... all the issues which tug at the core of our beings ... the issues which bed down with us at night and rise with us in the morning.

“But, today -- and, really, for some time now -- the initial idea that seemed to be calling to me, asking for my service, appears to have been transformed into something entirely different ... as if I have been under attack from an ‘invasion of the body snatchers’ that has taken my soul from me and left something else behind ... something which looked like me, talked like me, acted like me, and, yet, something from which a certain dimension of humanity had been lost or removed.

“In high school I was fortunate enough to have spent time with one of those rarest of specimens -- a teacher who actually knows something ... not about information, or this or that set of data, or how to do experimental work ... which, to a greater or lesser extent, all of us have an understanding of sorts ... but a teacher who not only knows about life but has a deep, passionate insight into all that life entails.

“That teacher taught me a great deal ... much of which, I am sad to say, has been put on some existential shelf to gather dust along with my books and journals. There is one teaching, however, which came to me from my former mentor that keeps coming back to me and which, more and more, makes looking in the mirror a very difficult activity for me to do.

“The teaching -- as all great jewels of wisdom are -- was both simple and profound. More specifically, I was urged by this high school teacher not to attend the circle of any learned individual unless that person requests me to give up five things in favor of five other things ... namely, I should be asked to give up: doubt in favor of faith; hypocrisy in favor of sincerity; worldliness in favor of asceticism; pride in favor of humility, and enmity in favor of love.

“I regret to say that, in many ways, I have turned into precisely the kind of learned person about whom my high school teacher had warned me to stay away from, and, I would like to share with you, briefly, some of why I feel this way.

“Skepticism can be an important tool which enables one to cut away a great deal of theoretical drivel, but it is a tool with a blind spot. The nature of that blind spot is we are very rarely ever skeptical about skepticism, nor are we as skeptical about our own ideas, opinions,

theories, priorities, and values, as we tend to be skeptical in relation to the ideas and opinions of others that challenge our own cherished beliefs.

“All too frequently, skepticism is a device for attacking someone or something rather than serving as just one tool, among many, which can be used for helping to uncover the truth. The goal is not to end with skepticism but to use skepticism, judiciously, as a mode of transportation toward wisdom, and, then, as necessary, modify our use of skepticism in order to refine our search for truth rather than throwing the baby out with the bath water as we inevitably end up doing when we insist that the one unshakeable tenet of faith which everyone must adopt is to be skeptical about anything and everything ... even the truth ... even wisdom.

“I keep asking myself -- what do I have faith in these days? I have plenty of beliefs, opinions, understandings, and interpretations ... but do I have faith in any of these things, and the answer, unfortunately, is ‘no’.

“I end up giving my students a hodgepodge of: half-baked theories, pieces of information, the latest fad in methodology, and try to convince them that upon completing my course they will have become educated individuals. And, if they are so foolish as to not accept my concept of an educated person, well, insult is added to injury because I assign them grades in order to be able to punish them for the rest of their lives if they don't see things my way.

“My high school teacher taught me that faith is not blind ... in fact, it must not be blind, for if it is, then, it is mere belief, not faith. Faith is probing, inquiring, curious, exacting, relentless, critical of ignorance, dynamic -- but faith can do something which skepticism and doubt cannot do ... faith can embrace and love the truth when that truth becomes manifest. Faith can live in harmony with doubt, but the reverse is not true.

“I teach my students to doubt everything, to have faith in almost nothing. By doing this, I perpetrate a great injustice against my students.

“I speak with my students about wisdom, justice, truth, morality, and, yet, very little of what I teach is put into practice by me. I teach them -- do as I say, not as I do -- and why would anyone in her or his right mind want to follow someone who is a hypocrite and fails to practice what is preached?

“Like so many places of worship -- and, indeed, academia has become the new home of the high priests and priestesses who promulgate a theology of rationalism -- I give my sermons, and, then, as soon as I leave the classroom behind me, all that has been mentioned is forgotten. Rarely do I want to examine the gulf between what I say as a teacher and what I do as a teacher.

“To give just one example, I know grading to be an inherently immoral act which is antithetical to all we know about how and why people learn. We grade people because we want to be able to control them and to use them for our purposes ... grades are the great stick we hold over every student’s head which says, in effect, if you don’t accept our idea of what constitutes an educated person, you will be punished and your lives will be adversely affected.

“Yet, I continue to assign grades. Why? Not because I believe grading assists learning -- because it really doesn’t, and there is much experimental data to prove this which we conveniently hide from students and from ourselves.

“I assign grades because I fear losing my job. I continue to assign grades because I want my students to put aside the lesson of skepticism and to have faith in a system that cannot stand up to critical scrutiny. I assign grades because I wish to continue to have the privilege of being a hypocrite and to be paid very nicely for being one.

“I have forgotten how to be sincere with my students or my colleagues or with the world in general. My life is buried in so many lies to myself and others that I seem unable to interact with anyone anymore from my heart rather than from a personal agenda concerning my own career or self-interests ... and too bad for everyone else.

“Part of my role as a teacher is to counsel students. I counsel them about how to create a career ... how to make the decisions which will enable a student to have a good chance of obtaining those positions that will lead to advancement, higher pay, more power, enhanced social status, professional competence, and so on.

“I counsel them about the academic version of the good life. I counsel them that everyone should aspire to more money and/or more possessions. However, I never have an answer for how a world of limited resources is going to be able to supply everyone’s expectations or how we are going to solve the environmental problems that accompany elevated demands for

goods and services, when we cannot even deal with the ecological damage which is accruing presently.

“Instead, I teach students that life is a zero-sum game in which there are winners and losers, and if you want to be the former or avoid being the latter, then, you have to position yourself at the expense of your fellow human beings. I tell students this is a basic law of life, but I hide the skeptical slide rule from view so that they won’t begin to question whether life really must be played as a zero-sum game or so they won’t begin to critically reflect on what the inevitable end-game of such a process must be.

“I don’t counsel my students about gaining mastery over their egos, emotions, or desires. I stoke the fires of ambition, selfishness, greed, or fame. Yet I and others consider me to be a responsible human being for doing this.

“How could I do otherwise since I don’t have mastery over myself? I counsel people according to what I know. Yet, much to my deep regret, what I know is not true self-discipline ... that is, a discipline of abiding by the truth ... a discipline of being fair, kind, generous, compassionate, empathetic, tolerant, forgiving, and loving of others ... a discipline of modesty and moderation ... but, rather, what I know, and, therefore, what I counsel is ambition, selfishness, greed, and career recognition.

“I’m proud of my academic accomplishments, and therein is the problem. Instead of being humble before my own ignorance, instead of having humility in light of all the many things which I don’t know or understand, I have wrapped my pride about me like a coat of armor to keep the truth of the matter from penetrating my inner being.

“My pride is the roar of a delusion that signifies nothing of importance. My pride is the actor who childishly refuses to give up center stage and who needs to bask in the adulation of others to feel alive and have a sense of identity -- an identity which withers away into nothingness ... a terrible, empty nothingness ... as soon as one leaves the glow of the spotlight.

“I loved my high school teacher for, among other things, his humility. He was the wisest of human beings, and, yet, he lived a life of elegant humility. My pride is a dance of not-so-quiet desperation which seeks to be remembered, if not loved, and the likelihood is that neither will be the case.

“My high school teacher used to say that “poverty is my pride”, and although arriving at an understanding of some of what he meant by that statement has taken considerable time, I have come to realize he was talking about his sense of self-awareness. He was devoid of ego, and, yet, he was incredibly aware of life.

“He was happy with his impoverished sense of self-absorption. He was content with his anonymity.

“My sense of self is a sin with which none other can compare. It gets in the way of everything, including my ability to teach students about the importance of humility and the dangerous sickness which is inherent in pride. “Pride does go before the fall. The ego knows this but is in love with itself and does not wish to let go of its delusions and, therefore, fights tooth and nail -- both against oneself and others -- to hold on to pride, because for the ego there is nothing worse than the fall into sincere humility and selflessness.

“Finally, against the advice of my high schoolteacher, I have been teaching my students the subtle nuances of enmity, rather than love. I have taught them to hate one another as they vie for grades, jobs, and recognition.

“I have taught them to hate and ridicule approaches to truth that are different from mine. I have taught them to hate faith, sincerity, self- mastery, truth, and humility.

“I have taught them to pay lip-service to diversity but harbor a subtle subtext of contempt, arrogance, and superiority concerning other ways of life, other forms of wisdom, and other ways of acquiring truth. I have taught them to hate that which is trans-rational and induced them to force fit the universe into square holes of rationality, irrespective of whether, or not, the universe fits.

“I have taught them to hate themselves and sell their souls for grades, careers, and acclaim -- to forget finding out who they really are or what the purpose of life is or what their essential potential is ... I have taught them that these are all frivolous pursuits that can be fooled around with once the important matters of life -- such as career -- have been secured and life has become materially comfortable. In short, I have taught them to hate learning and tried to convince them that education and real learning are one and the same ... when they are not the same and have not been the same for a very long time.

“So, where do all of these considerations leave me? I feel there is only one conclusion which can be drawn from the foregoing, and that is I must resign my post from the university, and I implore others of you who feel as I do to do so as well.”

When the time arrived for this latter portion of his comments to be put forth -- the part concerning his decision to resign, the professor hoped there might be others who would stand with him ... perhaps, if enough faculty members listened to their conscience, as he was trying to, a movement in the direction of bringing sanity, morality, and justice to the halls of higher learning might become established.

But the professor also realized this was just a fantasy and, in all likelihood, no one would stand up with him ... just as he, probably, would never give the talk which he had rehearsed in his mind so many times ... not because what he felt was untrue but precisely because it was true. Just as the law usually has nothing to do with justice, education often has nothing to do with truth since few people wish to pay the costs associated with following a curriculum committed to seeking, finding and, God willing, applying to their own lives whatever truths might have been discovered.

For all too many people, truth, pursuing truth, and living in accordance with truth are but a fantasy -- better to stick with the realities of doubt, hypocrisy, worldliness, pride, and enmity. The professor's high school teacher would have been saddened by this truth, but his high school teacher would have understood, and, despite everything, he would have retained a tolerant, loving, empathetic, encouraging compassion for the professor ... hoping upon hope that the professor would find it within himself to be a better man than the latter had permitted himself to become.

A Depressed King

There once was a King who had everything a person possibly could want in the way of money, fame, power, and material possessions. In addition, the King had been blessed with good looks, considerable intelligence, and extraordinary health ... to such an extent that he had never known a sick day in his life. In fact, not so much as even a slight toothache had touched him.

Yet, he felt something was missing in his life ... something that his wealth could not buy, nor his power command, nor his fame attract. Consequently, he was mystified by his condition because he had been brought up to believe that the gateway to happiness was gained through all the money, treasures, and status he already enjoyed, but, alas, he was not happy.

However, the King was not an ungrateful individual, and despite his feeling of dissatisfaction or sense of malaise about a certain aspect of his life, he was very thankful for all the many, many blessings which had been conferred on him. Indeed, since the King was a good man who cared about his subjects and was not interested in being a tyrant or making the lives of his people miserable, and because he was not someone who had acquired his wealth at the expense of his subjects -- through such things as taxation, stealing from them, or confiscating their lands -- the King did all he could to try to improve the lives of others by sharing his good fortune with them.

Being human, however, sometimes the King became disappointed with his life. While there seemed to be no reason why he should feel unhappy or sad, nonetheless, this was his condition, and he seemed powerless to do anything about it. Furthermore, the combination of a lack of understanding concerning the source of the problem, along with his inability to do anything about it, would, from time to time, induce him to fall into a condition of despair about existence.

Whenever he came under the spell of this state, he would become agitated with trying different kinds of activity or seeking to find something that would alleviate his sense of pain and darkness caused by his mysterious ailment. However, nothing he tried ever really seemed to work, and, instead, he found that given enough time, the condition tended to pass on its own ... seemingly in a manner which was unrelated to any of the things he had tried in order to hasten its departure.

Nevertheless, sometimes, the amount of time that would have to pass before he felt his condition improve was considerable, and these periods were very painful. Furthermore, he was somewhat fearful because he believed the length of his depressions was starting to increase with each new manifestation of the malady.

One day, when the King was in such a state of depression, he assembled the people of his Court and said: "My people, I am sorry to say on this occasion that I am under the sway of a certain kind of darkness and emptiness within, and although I have tried different things to dispel this feeling, I have been unsuccessful. So, I thought I would try something else and see what happens, and I need your assistance in this."

Since the people of the Court recognized the King as a just and good man, they were eager to do whatever he wished and awaited further instructions. These duties were spelled out when the King informed them: "Please, go into the city and, as quickly as you can, bring to the Great Hall of the Palace whatever people you may find from our Kingdom. When those whom you have gathered have been assembled, I will make an announcement that may be of interest and benefit to everyone."

The members of the King's Court set about their task. Within an hour, a great many of the King's subjects had streamed into the Great Hall. The room was filled with an electricity of anticipation concerning the King's forthcoming pronouncement.

Finally, when all who were going to come appeared to be present and had taken their seats, the King rose from his Throne and started to speak to the hushed crowd. "My people, as you may know, I am experiencing one of my periodic bouts of malaise, and I am hoping that what I am about to do may help my condition. More specifically, I am issuing a Royal Edict entitling each of you here to take one object from among the treasures of this Palace. When your appointed turn arrives, please take whatever you like ... whether it be jewels, gold, or other precious things ... from the Palace and leave in peace. If I can't be happy, then, perhaps, seeing your joy will help bring some sense of contentment into my life."

The people were all amazed at the King's generosity and kindness. After the reality of the great opportunity inherent in the King's words began to sink in among the assembled people, they started to roam through the Palace, and one by one, each of them was permitted to take

whatever she or he wanted. Since there were a lot of people present, this process took quite some time.

Late in the evening, all but one of the King's subjects had selected an item and left the Palace. The individual was brought to the King, and one of the representatives of the Court who was accompanying the person indicated that this lone straggler, who was a young man, was requesting permission to ask the King a question.

The King was tired after the long day's events, and despite the great happiness which appeared on the faces of his subjects as they left the Palace with this or that treasure, the King was still feeling despair over his own unchanged, inner condition. However, the King quickly granted the man his request for the King wished to dispense with this last matter and go to bed.

"Is it really true," inquired the young man, "that I may select whatever I wish and love from among the contents of this Palace?"

The King, believing his earlier Edict to have been quite clear, was somewhat irritated with the question. Nonetheless, he kept his frustration in check and gently said: "Yes, anything you want is yours."

The young man hesitated and then, eyes brimming with emotion, indicated: "In that case, I want your friendship, because I have always loved and admired you as a human being."

One of the King's attendants said to the young man: "What a clever fellow you are. All of the other people took single items, but you're going for the source of everything. You play a good game son ... why settle for one thing when you can have whatever you want, whenever you want it?"

The young man replied: "No, that is not my intention. I wish only the King's friendship ... nothing else."

The King was somewhat stunned at the young man's words. After all, the individual could have had anything he wanted from the Palace, yet all he wanted was the King's friendship. But there was something even more extraordinary that the King noticed in conjunction with the young man's request. The King's depression and emptiness had disappeared.

The Interview

A woman who appeared to be fifty-something straddled the doorway through which she had just entered the room, opened the folder she was carrying, raised to her eyes the glasses strung around her neck, scanned the contents of the folder, looked around the room, and, then, settled on a man sitting in the corner reading a magazine. “Mr. Carlyle?” she said somewhat hesitantly.

The man reading the magazine looked up, smiled and replied: “That’s me.”

The woman motioned for him to follow her into the area beyond the reception area. Mr. Carlyle placed his magazine on the table by his chair and did as requested.

On the other side of the door was a corridor leading to a number of interview rooms. The woman looked back over her shoulder to make sure that her charge was still in tow and proceeded to walk down the corridor until she reached a door marked ‘C’, turned the knob, and disappeared.

When Mr. Carlyle reached the doorway to Room ‘C’, he found the woman waiting for him by the door in the room’s interior. She smiled in a perfunctory manner and urged the man to enter the room.

Pointing to a chair, she invited Mr. Carlyle to be seated. She, then, navigated her way to a chair opposite the man on the other side of a medium-sized table in the middle of the room.

Placing the folder before her, she sat down. She interlaced her fingers and rested her elbows on the table.

She began with: “Hello. My name is Helen Anderson. I assume everything has been explained to you by Mr. Townsend. However, just to be clear about things, I’ll outline the purpose of our meeting.”

She continued on with: “This meeting is stage 5 of our vetting process. You already have been given a battery of intelligence, psychological, aptitude, and personality tests. Those tests have now been scored and analyzed.

“Obviously, people here have liked what they have seen so far in relation to your scores. Otherwise, you would not have been invited to this session.”

She had the polished, somewhat detached delivery of a person who had said the same words a thousand times before to other candidates. Her manner was neither friendly nor hostile but, rather, geared toward the

sort of neutrality which is intended to perform a task efficiently, with as few human entanglements as possible.

She proceeded on with her introduction. "I am not an employee of the organization which is expressing an interest in your services. I am an independent contractor whose task is to conduct an interview and make recommendations on the basis of that exchange with respect to your possible 'suitability' for the position in question.

"I urge you to speak forthrightly about anything I may ask. Everything which takes place in this room is being recorded, and I can assure you that the consulting company for which I work will spare no effort to authenticate whatever statements, comments, or claims you may make during this interview.

"Do you have any questions about the purpose of this meeting or in relation to anything which has been said so far?" When she saw Mr. Carlyle shake his head in the negative, she said: "Good. Let's move forward."

She opened the folder in front of her, picked up the top sheet, perused its contents, and placed the piece of paper face down on the table surface to the left of the folder. She, then, placed her forearms across the top of the folder. Her palms were slightly raised above the table with her forefingers directed toward Mr. Carlyle.

"Tell me about your marriage, Mr. Carlyle," and as she spoke her eyes studied the man with a gaze trained to miss nothing of what might be manifested by the interviewee.

Mr. Carlyle thought for a moment and shrugged a little. "I'm not sure what to say." But a few seconds later he became somewhat more expansive in his response.

"We've been married for seven years and have three children ... two boys and a girl. Because of the nature of my work, we have had to move a few times ... which has carried some stresses with it, but, on the whole, I would say that my wife and I enjoy a very good, loving relationship.

"When at work, I call her four or five times a day just to see how she and the children are doing ... to see if there is anything I can do. I like to know that everything is okay at home as well as what people are up to ... you know, stay on top of things."

Ms. Anderson interjected with: "How do you and your wife make decisions?"

Not much time had passed before Mr. Carlyle said: "We always consult with one another about the decisions we make, but, to tell you the truth, Jean, my wife, usually likes to defer to my wishes in most matters affecting the household. She seems to be comfortable with my actively taking charge ... and, I do feel that 'leadership' is one of my strengths – whether at home, or at work, or in the community."

The woman conducting the interview opened the folder before her and fingered her way through a few sheets in the folder before arriving at what she was looking for. She picked up the piece of paper, looked at Mr. Carlyle and said: "I understand that five years ago there was some sort of domestic dispute. What can you tell me about that?"

The man paused for just a second and, then explained: "It was a misunderstanding really. My wife and I had been discussing something – and, quite frankly, I forget what we were even talking about. The discussion got kind of loud and animated, and, at some point, I'm not really sure how it happened, but my wife got in the way of one of my hand motions, and she fell down, knocking over a table lamp in the process.

"Well, some of the neighbors got a little overexcited about all the commotion and phoned the police. However, when the police arrived, the situation was all under control, and my wife gave the police the same account I just gave you.

We – both my wife and I – have gotten much better at handling situations since then. She knows what she has to do, and I know what I have to do to make sure things don't get out of control ... and, I guess we have been pretty successful because no one has had to call the police since that one incident." He gave a rueful smile as he said this.

Ms. Anderson's face remained impassive. She listened but did not react.

Returning to the folder on the desk once more, she rifled through a few more pieces of paper and, then, pulled another sheet from the pile. She studied the material briefly and asked: "What are your economic views?"

The man raised his eyebrows, exhaled through pursed lips, and commented: "Wow, that's a pretty broad question," and looked to the woman

across from him for further cues. When none were forthcoming, he looked down to the hand resting on the table, examined the fingernails of his right hand for a few seconds, and, then, looked back at Ms. Anderson.

Starting slowly and gradually picking up speed as he went along, he said: "I believe in capitalism. I believe in the profit motive. I believe in the sanctity of private property. I believe in the importance of working hard and using one's God-given talents to help make the world a better place. I believe that business leaders should be permitted, with minimum interference to do what they do best ... which is create wealth that can be distributed across communities and nations. I believe that the limited liability corporation is one of the great innovations of modern history and through this invention incredible technological and organizational strides have been taken to help humankind prosper materially and politically."

Mr. Carlyle was about to go on when Ms. Anderson asked: "Do you believe there is any limit to what can be accomplished through capitalism? Do you believe that, eventually - and sooner rather than later - everyone will be able to share in the wealth?"

"Absolutely" Mr. Carlyle replied.

"So," Ms. Anderson responded, "you believe that everyone will achieve the same standard of living as a result of the distribution of wealth made possible through corporations, the captains of industry, as well as via the movements of the invisible hand that guides free markets?"

With a faint hint of annoyance, Mr. Carlyle said: "No, obviously, not everyone will be able to enjoy the same standard of living. The people who put up the capital, the people with the innovative ideas, the individuals who have the organizational skills to put the capital and ideas into a productive format ... these people are entitled to a greater share of the wealth which is created."

"Why shouldn't the general workers benefit from all of this as well?" inquired Ms. Anderson.

Initially, the man looked at her like she was asking a question for which the answer was so obvious that it didn't deserve an answer. Thinking a bit more about the situation, Mr. Carlyle responded simply: "Without capital, an idea, and organization, nothing gets done."

“Well”, countered the woman, “couldn’t one also say that without workers, nothing gets done either? If you have capital, an idea, and organizational skills, but you have no workers, then, how is the latter less important than the former?”

The man shrugged his shoulders. “Coming up with an idea, raising money to implement that idea, and organizing things so that the idea will come to fruition ... all these things are the catalysts which start the economic engines.”

To which Ms. Anderson responded with: “And workers are the catalysts who help finish things. If you start a process but can’t finish it, then, how is starting things more important than finishing things?”

The man shot back: “If not for the wages which owners pay workers, the workers would be without food, clothing, and shelter. Owners give workers work.”

Without the slightest trace of rancor in her voice, the woman replied: “Owners don’t give workers anything for which those owners do not receive something in return. More specifically, without the profits that workers help make possible, then, capital, ideas, and organizational skills are worth very little.”

Mr. Carlyle acknowledged the point being made but qualified things with: “Naturally, workers deserve a fair wage for a fair day’s work.”

“How does one calculate what is fair ... either with respect to wages or the work expected for those wages?” Ms. Anderson wondered.

“Law of supply and demand,” the man remarked. He added: “If there is a large supply of labor, then, the price of wages goes down, and if there is not a large labor supply, then, workers are scarce and, as a result, their bargaining position is stronger.”

“What does the law of supply and demand have to do with the issue of fairness concerning wages? Irrespective of how many workers there are, shouldn’t anyone who works be fairly compensated for the work they do?” she inquired.

“Look,” Mr. Carlyle began, “the profit motive and good business practice demands that the owners of a business should try to maximize profits. Consequently, one of the degrees of freedom with which they have to work in order to be able to maximize profits is to play hardball with workers and get the latter to work as economically as possible.

“This is at the heart of the issue of productivity. The more productive the work force is, the more profitable a business tends to be.

“Costs are one of the variables of productivity. If one can cut costs, then productivity should be enhanced.”

Ms. Anderson commented: “If I understand the logic of your position, then, if one could, somehow, get workers to work for nothing, then, presumably this would be a sort of paradise for the owner because one would have totally eliminated one source of business costs entirely. I guess the only thing which might be better from the perspective of owners is if they could induce workers, say through taxes, to hand over some of whatever money workers had managed to acquire so that the government could help subsidize those businesses to be more profitable ... at least for someone.”

“You make it sound like owners are engaged in criminal activity or something,” sniffed Mr. Carlyle. “All they are trying to do is earn an honest buck and help others along in life as well.”

Impassively, Ms. Anderson followed up with: “This brings us back to the issue of what exactly is necessary for someone to get along in life. Would you say that helping workers to acquire health care, or to enjoy safe working conditions, or have access to livable retirement packages, or to be free of ecological problems as a result of economic activity ... would you say that all of this is part of fair wages?”

Mr. Carlyle reflected on what had been said for a short period and indicated: “If you undercut profit too much, then, capital, ideas, and organizational skills have no reason to put forth an effort. You have got to reward these elements of the economic equation, or the *raison d’être* for such activity disappears.”

“What’s a fair reward for such efforts, Mr. Carlyle? And, how would you differentiate the fairness with respect to this kind of reward from the fair compensation package to which a worker might be entitled?”

With a certain degree of exasperation, Mr. Carlyle replied: “By law, corporations must maximize the profits for the shareholders of a company. So, legally speaking, the first among equals in the apportioning of the economic pie are the shareholders.”

“And what is it that shareholders do exactly? How did they earn this right to have their financial rights protected above that of workers?” asked the woman.

“They supply the money which greases the wheels of industry,” the man remarked.

“Other than in the case of something such as an initial stock offering, this is not entirely true, is it, Mr. Carlyle?” mused Ms. Anderson. “I mean, most of what is traded on the stock market is, in reality, just the moving around of money from one stockholder to another rather than the introduction of new cash into the system.”

“Furthermore,” she stated, “people buy stocks at a certain price, and they sell them at a certain price. The people who sell the stocks get to keep the money – minus, of course, the government’s cut of the action through such things as capital gains tax.

“If the price of stocks rise, then, so do the level of dividends to the stockholders as well as the level of returns for those who sell their stocks ... such as CEOs who often get millions of dollars worth of stock options in exchange for helping the price of a company’s stock to increase in value. Incidentally, if the cutting of costs is so important to productivity, then, why don’t companies decrease the salaries and pay-out packages to CEOs and other financial officers?”

“Surely,” he retorted, “you can’t expect such people to work for little or nothing.”

“Why not,” she wondered? “Many corporations and businesses don’t seem to have any problem with this logic when it comes to regular workers.”

“In any event,” she noted, “with certain, limited exceptions, once a company goes public, it acquires the majority of its investment, research, and operating cash through avenues other than the stock market. And, consequently, I’m still trying to figure out the nature of the constructive component that stockholders add to the economic equation other than to make money from the whole process – often at the expense of workers, the community, and the environment? What gives them the right to be first to the feeding troughs?”

Mr. Carlyle shook his head slightly in a sort of manner of disbelief. “The stockholders represent one of the ways through which the wealth that

is created by industry and commerce is distributed. Everybody has a chance to benefit from this process through engaging in the stock market. When profits grow, so does the wealth which can be distributed among shareholders.”

“Is this wealth distributed evenly among those who are stockholders?” she asked.

“Every share is worth the same as every other share,” he informed her. “The only difference is due to how many shares of any given stock one owns.”

“Wouldn’t this mean that if one had little, or no, money to begin with, then, the egalitarian nature of individual share prices would make little difference to the impoverished?” she offered.

“Some people are better than others in managing their wealth. You can’t fault the system for the failings of individuals. Besides,” he added, “little by little more and more people are being encompassed by the spread of wealth.”

“So,” Ms. Anderson queried, “how long before we can anticipate that everyone will be safely ensconced within the protective womb of the egalitarian justice of the invisible hand of the marketplace?”

“Obviously, no one knows,” he answered. “However, corporations and businesses are working night and day to make this time as short as possible. People have to be patient, work hard, and wait for their opportunity. People have to be willing to make sacrifices ... progress demands sacrifice from everyone.”

The woman paused for a moment and said: “Does this mean that the owners, stockholders, and leaders of the business world are willing to make as many sacrifices as the workers are being asked to make? Are these ‘leaders’ willing to forego the raises, bonuses, pensions, stock options, dividends, health benefits, premium parking spaces, and other perks associated with their positions so that the burden of progress is borne by everyone equally? Don’t you think that if the quality of life of the leaders were tied to the quality of life of the poor that advances in economic progress might happen that much more quickly?”

“That is not how the system works,” the man said somewhat wearily. “The invisible hand of the market must be permitted to operate in accordance with its own principles of distributing goods and services

rather than be forced to follow the arbitrary dictates of this or that political or social policy. If left alone, the free market would serve all of our needs.”

“How do we know this would be the case?” asked Ms. Anderson.

“Has there ever been a time in which the markets have been left alone to go where they will and, thereby, proven that what you are saying is true?”

“This is precisely to the point,” Mr. Carlyle said triumphantly. “The economic and political mess in which we find ourselves is directly due to the manner in which the invisible hand of free enterprise has not been permitted to move society in the direction of greater wealth for all.”

“Really?!?” Ms. Anderson said partly as an exclamation and partly as a question, and, then, she remarked “If history teaches us anything, isn’t it that when self-interest is permitted to serve itself in a relatively unrestrained fashion, humanity tends to end up with oppression, dictatorship, fascism, and cartels who are not interested in distributing wealth and power but, rather, in monopolizing these commodities to the great disadvantage of the majority and to the considerable benefit of only the few?”

Mr. Carlyle was about to respond when he was cut off. “Before moving on to other topics, I have one last question to ask you in this general area. Let us assume, for the moment, that all you have said about economics is true. Let us further assume that all that is necessary is for time to be extended to the invisible hand of a free enterprise marketplace and, as a result, everyone eventually will be able to join in the prosperity. Where are the resources going to come from which will permit everyone – all seven billion of us – to have houses, cars, appliances, clothes, luxuries, food, and the like and to continue to have these things into the indefinite future?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “Obviously, not everyone can have everything they want. The marketplace will determine what is feasible. Moreover, the marketplace will engender the innovations and breakthroughs which are necessary to solve these problems. Whenever there is an opportunity to make profit, well, this is the mother of all invention.”

“If what you say is true,” hypothesized Ms. Anderson, “then, why doesn’t the opportunity to make a profit make inventors and entrepreneurs of us all?”

“God helps those who help themselves,” Mr. Carlyle quipped. “Are you saying those who are not successful in business don’t try to help themselves?” she inquired.

“Let’s just say,” he responded, “that I have never come across anyone who was willing to make the necessary effort who wasn’t rewarded for the efforts expended. People make their own luck and destinies.”

Ms. Anderson followed up with: “Where does God fit into your vision of things? Does Divinity have nothing to say about who gets what and when?”

“Naturally, God is the ultimate arbiter in these matters. However, I believe that God favors certain individuals and societies over others – that is why some people flourish and others do not, but even among those who are successful, efforts have to be made.”

“How,” she wondered, “do you know that what you call success and flourishing are signs of God’s favor rather than Divine wrath? After all, I have heard it said that when the ego is enhanced, the spirit is diminished. Isn’t it possible that worldly success is merely a prelude to a spiritual fall?”

“Not necessarily,” he replied. “God guides those whom Divinity wishes. One can have worldly success as well as success in the next life ... if God wishes. People who are sincere with God ... well, God is sincere with them.”

“How does one know when one is being sincere with God?” she asked.

“God discloses signs to the chosen,” he remarked.

“But, how does one know what constitutes a sign, or, more importantly, what that sign means?” she pressed.

“One has to have faith that one is on the right path,” he said. “If one is, then, understanding the signs is made clear to one’s heart, mind, and soul.”

“Isn’t this somewhat circular reasoning?” she wondered. “Not if one is right,” he stated.

“And, if one is not right?” she countered.

Mr. Carlyle shrugged his shoulders and said: “I believe in a forgiving God.”

“But what if the choices you make end up hurting other people?” she asked. “Are they required to forgive you as well?”

"I hope they will, but whether, or not, they do, the only thing of importance to me is my relationship with God."

"But," she queried, "what if God is not prepared to forgive you for the harm you do to others unless those people are willing to forgive you for what you have done ... then what?"

While Mr. Carlyle was thinking about the matter, Ms. Anderson changed directions slightly. "What do you think about the war on terrorism?"

"It is very necessary," he replied. "Why?" she asked.

"For a variety of reasons," he said, and, then, he began to speak to some of those reasons. "First, it is better to fight terror where it is being bred than in our own country."

He was about to go on when she interrupted: "It is better for whom and in what sense?"

He quickly responded: "Why, better for the people of this country, of course. Moreover, why should we put our society at risk unnecessarily ... let's get the job done now so that we do not have to become further entangled in these matters such that our society ends up being as chaotic as some of the places where the terrorists are busy trying to undermine peace and justice."

"What about the innocent people whose lives are destroyed ... physically, emotionally, psychologically, economically, and spiritually ... in the areas where the terrorists are going about their business by means of the war on terror? Don't they get to chose how to go about things? Why must they be required to accept our way of handling the problem?"

"Yes, it is a shame," he commented, "that innocent lives are caught up in this war, but whether those people understand it or not, we are fighting for their freedom ... so they can be secure ... so they can improve the quality of their life ... so they can be free from brutal dictatorship."

She replied with: "Personally, I have difficulty understanding how such people might come to appreciate what you are claiming when they are dead as a result of our actions. Furthermore, even with respect to the ones who are still alive ... they are not free ... they are not secure ... the quality of their life has not improved but deteriorated ... and they have seen one brutal dictatorship go, only for it to be replaced by another."

“Well,” he retorted, “these things take time, and people have to be willing to make sacrifices to win their freedom.”

She said: "What chance did we give them to make their own choices about such sacrifices before we imposed our final solution upon them? How do you get a people to choose to be free when the methodology that is used to accomplish this is one of force and oppression ... how does democracy get engendered through tyranny? Why are we so willing to sacrifice their life to protect our own?"

“If the situation were reversed, do you really think that people in this country would appreciate the fact that some army from another country invaded us, killed thousands of innocent people, maimed untold thousands more individuals, destroyed our infrastructure, ruined our economy and our communities, imprisoned our people on mere suspicion, tortured us, humiliated us, and put into power a puppet government that they could control, and, yet, they said the reason they were doing all of this was for our own good and that we must be prepared to make sacrifices ... do you really think that people here would say: ‘Hey, what a great idea. Thanks?’

“Look,” he responded, “I understand what you are saying. I really do, but, sometimes, with greatness goes great responsibility. Leadership must be permitted to lead so that the vision of such leadership can be realized. I hate to sound so trite, but there is a real truth in the fact that in order to make an omelet, you gotta break some eggs.”

“But,” she inquired, “what if the rest of the world doesn’t want an omelet? What if they don’t want to break any eggs? What if they don’t like the way we make omelets?”

He shook his head in a dismissive manner. “This is where leadership and the vision of leadership come in. The great leaders always lead people where they need to go even if the people don’t want to go to where they are being led.”

“How do we know where people need to go?” she asked

“Well, that’s the issue, isn’t it?” he remarked. "Visionaries know and the generality of humankind do not. So, sometimes, the former have to kick the latter in the rear end to get these people moving in the right direction.”

“Are you certain of this?” she challenged.

“As certain as I am that I am sitting in front of you.” he responded.

She followed up with: “Of course, you do realize that people who are delusional and/or suffering from various kinds of mental disorder tend to feel, believe, and understand that what they claim to be true is just as true as what you believe to be the case about marriage, economics, religion, and terrorism.”

“Are you saying that I am delusional or insane?” he asked.

“That’s not my call,” she indicated. “My job is to evaluate you with respect to your possible suitability for a given position. And I believe that I now have enough information on which to make a decision concerning you. So, if you will return to the reception area, there are a few administrative items which I have to clear, and, you will be notified shortly about the decision.”

She rose, invited Mr. Carlyle to do the same, she, then, escorted him through the door, down the hallway and to the passageway leading to the reception area. She said good-bye and thanked him for being candid during the interview.

She returned to Room ‘C’, sat down, and began to write: “Mr. Carlyle has tendencies toward abusive behavior and, as well, is inclined toward being controlling of others. He is delusional, possibly a sociopath. In addition, he is a true believer in the phenomenon of leadership, rather dogmatic about many things, presumptuous, somewhat ethically challenged, and willing to sacrifice others to further his own beliefs. Finally, he has great difficulty seeing events from any perspective but his own. I believe he will make an excellent candidate for the job opening that exists in the terrorist organization which contacted you recently. I believe he has all of the qualities necessary for a first-rate terrorist.”

After re-reading what she had just written, she gathered together the papers scattered about on top of the table, stacked them neatly together, placed her assessment on top of this pile, and, then, she closed the file on Mr. Anthony Carlyle.

Another job completed. Productivity was on the rise, and if things kept going this way, the stockholders would be very happy when dividends were declared in the next quarter.

Blind Man's Bluff

Knowing that direct experience often tends to be a far better teacher than mere discussion or book learning, a spiritual guide selected four of his students for a field trip. He had arranged to pick each of them up at his or her home.

As soon as one of these individuals got in the teacher's vehicle, he followed the same procedure. The guide handed the person an air-filtering mask with elastic band, several ear plugs, and, finally, a cloth blindfold, indicating that the three items should be donned when instructed to do so.

When all four students had been prepped for their excursion in the foregoing way, the teacher began to outline the nature of the exercise. At an appropriate time, each student would be taken to an object of some kind, and the student's task was to identify whatever mystery entity might be presented to that person.

The air-filter, augmented by recent technological breakthroughs, was intended to eliminate, for the most part, any sense of smell. The ear plugs, which were industrial strength, took care of any sounds that might assist a person to identify an object. The blindfold, although neither enhanced by modern science nor of industrial strength, was an effective means for keeping vision in the dark. Only the sense of touch was left unencumbered.

The teacher assured each of the students that nothing associated with the task placed them at risk, and, in addition, he would be by the student's side throughout the exercise to help the students navigate through unknown surroundings. Moreover, the teacher indicated that a person should reserve any judgment she or he might have concerning the identity of an object until they all returned to the teacher's residence for a debriefing period with respect to the field trip.

Finally, since each individual was to be taken alone to an area where something to be identified was located, the teacher asked the students not to try to speak to one another while waiting in the vehicle for the guide and a given student to return from an object identification run. Because they were going to place plugs in their ears in the near future, and since when that occurred, talking with one another would be pretty difficult, if not impossible, the teacher wanted to make certain everyone understood the ground rules and not be tempted to swap information about their respective experiences.

The group drove for about 20 minutes before the time for the first stop was beginning to approach. When they were about fifteen minutes away from the initial destination, the teacher told the students to get ready to put their equipment on, but, before they did, he explained to them that when the vehicle finally stopped, he would tap the person who was to come with him on the right shoulder, help that individual out of the car, and the others were to just stay put until the two returned.

Eventually, the vehicle stopped. The teacher tapped the first person on the shoulder, and, per instructions, he helped this person out of the vehicle, locking things up before the two went on their way.

The teacher and the student walked for a few minutes but were slowed somewhat by the caution and anxiety which accompanied the student's loss of senses. Since the way to wherever they were going was punctuated with a number of turns to the left and the right, the student was pretty disoriented by the time the two arrived at the site of the object to be identified.

The teacher guided the student to the target object, placing the student's hands on the item. The blindfolded individual began to feel about, searching for clues through which to identify the mystery.

The student could feel lots of metal as well as hard rubber. The shape of the rubber portions were round, while the metal shapes varied in form ... although there seemed to be some overall pattern to the way the metal shapes repeated themselves.

Several bar-like pieces rose from the metal attached to the rubber aspects of the object, as if the bar-like features were connected to something else. However, if the bar-like portions were part of some larger entity, the student couldn't tell, because he was not tall enough to reach the end of wherever the bar-like pieces were heading ... assuming, of course, they went anywhere.

The student was pretty sure the round rubber portions were tires of some kind, but due to the way this part of the object was configured, there appeared to be a number of the round rubber portions which were linked together. The arrangement seemed somewhat like some of the big tractor-trailers he had seen, and, yet, different.

After a number of minutes had passed, the teacher gently grabbed the student by the elbow and led him away from the object and returned to

the vehicle. The teacher helped the student back in, got in himself, and drove away.

They traveled for another 20 minutes and stopped for the second leg of the field trip. Once again the spiritual guide tapped one of the students on the right shoulder and proceeded to disembark with the student in tow, locking the vehicle as he did this.

Following a further five minutes, or so, of walking this way and that, the two arrived at the pre-selected destination. The teacher led the student to a set of stairs and leaned down to help the student place his right foot on the first step.

Proceeding slowly, the two walked up a series of stairs. There were, maybe, 18 steps in all, and the angle of ascent was steep but relatively manageable ... although the stairs seemed to shake somewhat as they went from one level to the next.

At the top of the stairs was a flat area, and this seemed either connected to or close to another surface that had a slope or slant to it. After the student had been helped to step onto the second, somewhat sloped surface, he was touched by his teacher in a way which suggested that the student had arrived at his object and should begin to explore the object in question.

The student walked along with her hands in front of her trying to find parts of the object, but there was nothing there. Every so often, the teacher would gently take her by the shoulders, as if he were in back of her, and induce her to move in another direction. On some of these occasions, it seemed to the student that the surface on which she was walking was beginning to slope downward more.

This pattern of exploration went on for a few minutes. A thought occurred to the student that whatever the object to be identified might be, the surface on which she was walking was a primary component of that object.

As a result, she kneeled down and began crawling along the surface, feeling ahead of her as she went along. It seemed to have the coolness of a metallic-like surface, but, in addition, the metal felt as if it had a coat of polished or varnished paint on it.

She also noticed that, in places, the surface on which she was crawling seemed to have more give to it than in other areas, as if some portions of the

metallic, painted surface were suspended somehow. Along one boundary area of the surface on which she was sometimes crawling and sometimes walking, the surface beneath her seemed to meet up with another metal surface that sloped up and away from the portion with which she had been largely preoccupied.

At this point, the teacher gently took her by the elbow, turned her around, and guided her back to the place with the steps. They carefully descended, walked back to the vehicle, and got ready to travel again.

This time, they drove for about 10 minutes ... although, naturally, it was very hard for any of the students to really know how long they had been riding along before they stopped again. Once more, the teacher selected one of the students, locked the vehicle after getting both of them out of their means of transportation, and proceeded to take that individual to the object in waiting.

While in transit to their destination, they walked along a surface which sloped slightly downward before sloping upward again. This part of the walk seemed to be on a surface that vibrated a little with each step the two took ... as if it were a temporary structure of some kind.

Eventually, they came to a passageway, door, or narrow opening. The student was uncertain which, if any, of these possibilities might be the case.

The student suspected one of the three ideas which occurred to him about this facet of his experience might be correct because they seemed to have to go single file. Moreover, when this happened, he brushed against something on both sides of him as he went through whatever it was.

His teacher guided him to the right as they got through the relatively tight space. After taking a few steps, the teacher stopped the student, and, then, placed the student's hands in front of him, encouraging the student to explore whatever was there.

Initially, the student felt a fabric of some sort. The top of the object was at about his lower chest level.

He followed the fabric down some two or three feet, whereupon it reached an area that proceeded out at right angles for a couple of feet before sloping downward. This lower portion seemed to work its way back into

the object, and beneath this part was an empty space and, then, the floor, which seemed to be carpeted.

On either side of the area of the object which was at right angles to the upright portion he first had been exploring, there were several padded areas that also were at right angles to the upright portion. The student's impression suggested the object was some kind of fancy seat or easy chair.

He had a sense there might be other, similar seats or chairs in the immediate area for when he had been examining the object to which he had been directed, he briefly leaned up against other objects which appeared to be very much like the one he was examining. Fleeting thoughts of a theater of some kind or, maybe, a lounge area passed through his head.

The guide signaled to the student via the latter's elbow that the assignment was over, and the two worked their way back to the vehicle. Soon, the occupants of the vehicle were on the road again.

They traveled a further fifteen minutes before coming to a rest. The final student was tapped on the shoulder. After disembarking from the vehicle and locking it, the two headed toward the designated object of mystery.

When they got to the desired location, the teacher placed the student's hands on the object. Immediately, she began exploring the object. However, as she did this, she noticed the teacher was hanging onto her ... as if to make sure she didn't get into trouble by going in the wrong direction.

For the most part, the teacher encouraged her to stay in one place. She began feeling around with her hands.

The surface was metallic and seemed to slope upwards on two sides. It felt warm -- as if either the sun had been shining on it or as if it was connected, in some way, to machinery or an engine. Moreover, she felt like there was a vibration being radiated through the object she was touching.

The woman was permitted to feel about a little more, and, then, she was stopped by the teacher. They returned to the vehicle, got in, and they drove back toward their spiritual guide's house.

When they arrived at their teacher's residence, the teacher removed their ear plugs and instructed them to take off their

blindfolds and the air-filter masks. Following this doffing of gear, they got out of the vehicle and went into the house.

Earlier, the teacher had prepared some refreshments for this occasion. After the students were seated, he brought out the treats, placing them within easy reach of the four and took a seat nearby. The students helped themselves to whatever they liked.

When everyone was comfortable and settled, the teacher asked each of the students about his or her experiences and what each thought about the identity of the objects to which she or he had been brought. The accounts followed the order in which students had been selected during the field excursion.

Once the students had finished their descriptions and given their impressions and guesses concerning the identity of the objects to which they had been led, the teacher nodded his head in appreciation of all that had been experienced and discussed. He looked at each of the students and smiled somewhat mischievously.

He said: "I'm afraid I have played a bit of a trick on all of you. In truth, you all were exploring different aspects of the same object.

"All the driving around was just a diversion. I merely took different routes away from and back to the same parking lot we stopped at the very first time.

"Furthermore, the other precautions that I took were, in part, to protect the nature of the diversion. Furthermore, in part, the precautionary steps were thrown in to help you become disoriented with respect to what was going on.

"However, I also tried to set things up so that you would be forced to engage experiences in non-usual modes. The methodology I used hopefully helped induce each of you to approach things in a way that you might not ordinarily do, and, therefore, possibly, help you to start reflecting on your experiences in a non-habitual manner.

Having confessed to the deception, their spiritual guide asked: "So, you now all have heard the experiences which each of you have had. What do you think the object was?"

The students all proffered a few guesses. The teacher smiled throughout the process.

At various points, the students broke into heated debates about the nature of the object, using the collective evidence that had been gathered to support or refute various opinions. When the student suggestions and discussions came to an end, they looked to him with eager anticipation to see if any of them had been correct.

He began by indicating: "None of you were completely right, although some were nearer the mark than were others. In point of fact, the object in question was a commercial airliner. I had made arrangements with an air-executive friend of mine to be able to conduct this experiment.

"If each of you thinks back, I believe you will be able to deduce which parts of the plane you were led to for exploration. However, the identity of the object is not the most important facet of this whole affair."

He surveyed the faces of his students and inquired: "So, what's the principle at work here?"

The students were absorbed in contemplation in relation to their teacher's question. After some time, one of the more perceptive student's said: "Just as all of our understandings of the one object - - in this case, a commercial jet -- were shaped by our individual experiences of that plane, so, too, all of our understandings of God are shaped by our individual experiences with, through, and by Divinity."

The teacher shook his head in the affirmative, and said: "Yes, this is right, but I'm going to toss your answer back at you with a bit of a curve on it."

Looking briefly at each student in turn before speaking, he, finally said: "What if I were to tell you that all through this experiment, each of you were in a state of self-hypnosis, and the events you thought you were experiencing never actually happened in quite the way you allowed yourselves to believe?"

The students looked at one another with puzzled, mystified expressions, and, then, they looked at their teacher, trying to fathom his words. The one thing which did not surprise them was the fact that just when they thought they had figured something out, their teacher had a tendency to wrap a lesson in further questions ... as if no matter how deeply one probed or understood things, there was some dimension of

reality which was hidden beneath the surface of appearances ... even apparent understanding.

One of the four students said: "So, is your question just a hypothetical, or are you asking us to consider the possibility that most of us tend to live in a state of hypnotic trance which is self-induced?"

"Well," the teacher responded, "have you not heard it said on good authority that 'existence is maintained through illusion', or, alternatively, have you not heard it said that 'we live in a state of dream, and when we die, we wake up'? Aren't these kinds of observation resonant with the question which has been placed before you?"

After a short silence, one of the students, attempting to summarize things in her own mind, asked: "If, to a degree, I sort of understand what you may be trying to get us to think about, you not only seem to be saying -- on the basis of the field experiment we did today -- that everybody parses the presence of Divinity according to one's own way of interpreting and structuring experience, but you also seem to be saying that above and beyond the manner in which Reality is differentially interpreted by us, there is a substantial component of delusional and illusory thinking that makes up the fabric through which we weave our tapestry of life. Is this way of putting things more or less correct?"

Sensing that the student had not, yet, finished, the teacher responded with a non-committal: "And...?"

"And ... and ..." the student stammered, tailing off trying to figure out how to recapture what she had been intuiting just a moment before. Finally, after a brief pause, she added with a touch of exasperation: "And I guess I'm wondering if it is ever possible to know what the truth is?"

"Well," the teacher replied, "to use your words, it is possible to 'more or less' have a correct understanding of things, but the secret is in knowing which is more and which is less, as well as to learn how to go about increasing the former while diminishing the latter. Moreover, a very important part of this secret is to come to terms with how we are responsible for maintaining existence through illusion, along with keeping ourselves in a state of sleep ... because until we come to understand our own role in these processes, then, to paraphrase someone: 'We begin at no beginning, and we work toward no end'.

“Finally, just as you all went through this experience minus some of your sensory modalities, and, as a result, your ability to understand what was taking place was seriously affected, so too, in everyday life, even though we may enjoy the use of our physical senses and minds, most of us operate without the use of other spiritual modalities of understanding which are being veiled ... and this affects our judgment.”

The Sufi and the Snowman

Once upon a time there was a snowman whose heart was cold as ice. He liked it that way because he did not know that things could be otherwise. The coldness of his heart reflected the bitter, stormy land in which he lived.

No one could agree on how the snowman had come into existence. One day he did not exist, and then, all of a sudden, there he was -- as if, somehow, in the darkness of night, a mysterious being had stealthily crept into the town square so that the snowman could be shaped, formed, and clothed without the town people's knowing what had taken place.

The snowman existed in the north end of the town square. It was common knowledge that snowmen (and, as well, snowladies) -- at least those who live in the Northern Hemisphere -- like to be as close to the north as possible because the compass of their hearts tends to point in the direction of a part of the earth -- namely, the North Pole -- that is deliciously cold and holds a magnetic-like attraction for them.

Indeed, snowpeople are drawn to northern climates like mice are drawn to cheese ... that is, it is in their nature. Or, at least, this is the way it had always been for as long as snowmen had existed on the face of the earth ... except, of course, for those strange snowmen and snowladies who sometimes were sighted near the South Pole and, as a result, were upside down in their thinking.

Yes, this was the natural order of snowpeople in the Northern Hemisphere until there was a certain, momentous event which took place in a small, little town in the middle of nowhere. Then, there was a major shift in the nature of reality ... for one snowman.

The snowman stood all alone in the town square. An elegant but drooping top hat was perched on his head. In addition, he wore sun glasses (perhaps so he would not suffer snow blindness).

A yellow scarf was wrapped around his neck and would flutter about when the wind blew. A smallish plaid vest covered part of his body. On his feet were red galoshes, and he held a shovel in his right hand with the business end of the shovel pointed skyward ... as if he were on duty, ready to go into action during the next snowstorm.

It is uncertain whether the snowman had picked out his clothes on his own or if they merely had been forced upon him against his will. The clothes may have been imposed on him because snowmen are famous for not being able to defend themselves against those people who seek to do with snowmen whatever such individuals like ... on the other hand, the snowman may have selected the clothing himself because snowmen are also well-known for having a poor sense of color coordination in the clothes they wear.

For some reason, even though everyone in the town was curious about how the snowman came to be, no one came near him. They studied the snowman through little spaces which had been rubbed clear on the frosted windows of stores and houses in the neighborhood.

Each of the town's people had his or her theory about the snowman and his mysterious origins. Every other Thursday, the local newspaper ran a column outlining the latest thinking on the matter.

Almost all of the people in the town were reluctant to visit with the snowman. This made the snowman sad.

However, the snowman never let anyone know how much the lack of visitations hurt his feelings. He just kept the same expression on his face no matter how much people talked about him, or pointed at him, or theorized about him, or made fun of him.

People looked upon the snowman as little more than a curious but lifeless topic of conversation. Consequently, the town's people were entirely unaware that there was a consciousness within the snowman which was very much aware of the town, its people, and all that took place in the little community.

One day a man came and sat on the green bench which was near the snowman. Based on the snowman's observation concerning life in the town, the snowman knew the man who came to sit near him was as much a mystery to the townsfolk as was the snowman himself.

Just as people would point at the snowman and speak, at a safe distance, in hushed whispers concerning the latest gossip that had been spreading around town like a wildfire with respect to the snowman, so too, people would lower their heads when the man walked by them, and, then, once the man had passed and was out of earshot, they would begin talking rapidly amongst one another in conspiratorial tones and, occasionally, pointing in the general direction of the man.

The man was referred to as a Sufi. Nobody in the town quite knew what this meant, but they all seemed to talk as if they knew. The one thing which they all could agree upon is that the Sufi was someone about whom they should be very cautious ... perhaps even suspicious.

There were many stories in circulation concerning the Sufi who lived in the town. He was described by some to be a madman. Others considered him to be evil, a source of deeds that hurt people. Some said the Sufi pursued a peculiar set of beliefs and practices with respect to life's meaning.

When told about the existence of the Sufi, some visitors to the town reported that they had heard it said there was some sort of buried treasure about which Sufis knew. The treasure was said to be of infinite value ... a very large sum indeed.

Furthermore, due to the stories told about such treasures, a certain amount of difficulty had arisen in different localities. More specifically, some dishonest people who were greedy for money and power tried to trick unsuspecting individuals into believing that the dishonest people were real Sufis who knew about the hidden treasure and would gladly help people find the treasure if these 'victims' would give the pretenders some money to cover various 'expenses' as well as follow the detailed instructions of the make-believe Sufis – instructions which often had nothing to do with finding any treasure but, instead, helped the pretenders control the lives of their intended victims.

As a result, many individuals became confused about who was a real Sufi and who was a counterfeit Sufi. Money is not the only thing which can exist in a real as well as a fake form.

So many people in other towns had been tricked by the fake Sufis that many people came to believe that the stories of fabulous treasures associated with the Sufis were just so many fairy tales, invented to trick people to seek something which didn't exist. Many – perhaps most -- of the people in the town where the snowman resided shared such a belief concerning the Sufis, but, fortunately, for the snowman, the Sufi who lived in the town was a real Sufi and, therefore, was not trying to trick anyone or cheat them out of money, or gain control over anyone's life ... except, perhaps, his own.

In any event, the negative ideas and thoughts concerning the Sufi in the little town in the middle of nowhere had taken on a life of their own.

The people in the town merely passed those ideas around amongst themselves much as a virus which causes a cold or flu is passed on from one person to another through a cough or sneeze or some other form of contact.

Of course, all of the uncertainties and rumors might have been cleared up if the people had just gone to the man and asked him what it meant to be a real Sufi. However, nobody did this, and, in fact, the people kept their distance from the Sufi just as they kept their distance from the snowman.

The snowman was both very pleased and a little nervous about the fact that the Sufi had come to sit on the bench nearby. The snowman was pleased because he was quite lonely, and, yet, the snowman also was nervous because he wondered about why the Sufi had chosen to sit near him when no one else in the town would do so.

The snowman didn't know whether the Sufi wanted to be a friend or whether he had some dark purpose in mind that, ultimately, might come to harm the snowman. The snowman was very human-like in such doubts and wonderings.

Day after day, the Sufi came to sit on the bench near the snowman. Sometimes the Sufi would bring a book and read it. Sometimes the Sufi would move his lips silently, as if talking to himself. Sometimes the Sufi would merely sit on the bench, with eyes closed, seemingly asleep or lost in remembrance of something unknown.

On other occasions, the Sufi would stand up from the bench and come over to the snowman in order to straighten the latter's hat, or tie the snowman's scarf more securely, or push back up over the snowman's coal-black eyes the sunglasses which had been sliding down the snowman's nose due to the heat of the sun. Sometimes the Sufi would place the shovel more securely in the snowman's hand. Sometimes the Sufi would pick-up some snow and pack the snow into places which were becoming a little worn due to the howling winds that, every now and then, would rush across the town square and hit the snowman with a powerful wallop.

From time to time, the Sufi would look intensely at the snowman. It was this last action which proved to be most disturbing to the snowman because it made the snowman feel strange inside and somewhat uncomfortable.

When the Sufi gazed at the snowman, the snowman felt something odd going on in his heart. The snowman had always been used to his heart feeling a certain way – that is, frozen – but, now, beneath the intense look of the Sufi, the snowman felt like his heart was melting ... and for a snowman a melting heart couldn't be a good thing ... could it?

The snowman tried to think about the situation and determine what was happening to him. He wanted to know why his heart was melting and why, apparently, the melting only seemed to take place when the Sufi came and spent time near him.

The strange inner feelings and experiences had not started right away upon being visited by the Sufi. In fact, as far as the snowman could determine, nothing much had taken place for the first several weeks except that the snowman stood motionless in the town square, while the Sufi, once or twice a day, would sit on the green bench near the snowman, engaged in various activities that on the surface, at least, did not seem to be out of the ordinary.

The Sufi never seemed to want anything from the snowman. Rather, the Sufi just seemed to go about his life ... reading, thinking, remembering, and so on.

However, the snowman did recall that the first sense of strangeness had entered his heart when the Sufi began to do little acts of service and kindness for the snowman ... things which the Sufi didn't have to do and for which he seemed to expect no reward or notice, and, yet, which helped the snowman in various ways ... things such as straightening the snowman's hat, or adjusting the slipping sunglasses, or re-tying his scarf, or patching up the snowman with new snow.

The snowman appreciated all these acts of kindness, but he didn't know how to thank the Sufi properly. After all, the snowman found it very hard to say anything which could be heard by others because words just seemed to get stuck in his very cold mouth and wouldn't come out properly except as frozen currents of air that steamed from his mouth.

Moreover, the pieces of coal that made up the snowman's mouth always seemed to get in the way and block the escape of any words which the snowman might have formed in his mind and wanted to say to whomever might have been within hearing range. Everyone merely assumed that the snowman couldn't speak and didn't understand that the snowman actually could speak but had trouble getting his words out.

Fortunately, whoever had made the snowman had left him with a smile on his face. The snowman hoped the Sufi would accept this smile as a token of the snowman's gratitude for being treated so nicely by the Sufi.

However, even though the first strange sensation in the snowman's heart was associated with the kind acts of the Sufi, the snowman noted that the real serious melting hadn't begun until the Sufi began to look intently at the snowman ... sometimes for hours on end. Something was taking place between the Sufi and the snowman during these gazing sessions, but the snowman didn't know what this strange 'something' was.

The snowman not only felt this 'something', but it was almost as if these experiences had a taste quality all of their own. Just as ice cream and vegetables have their own unique, identifiable tastes, so did the feelings and experiences in his heart have a sort of taste all of their own even though it seemed rather strange to think in terms of there being some sort of a 'taste' in the heart.

Furthermore, he had no words to give expression to the feeling because he had never encountered such experiences before. In fact, as far as he knew, no snowman before him had ever encountered such experiences ... certainly not any of the snowmen that he knew about from among his immediate family snow-tree had ever mentioned anything like this.

So, how could the snowman talk about a part of life that went completely beyond his understanding or experience? He knew his feelings and experiences were real because he was having them, but he had no way of proving their reality should anyone ask him to do so ... which was not likely to happen given the unfriendly and distant manner in which the town's people regarded him. They probably believed he didn't have a thought in his head or even a heart with which to feel ... or taste.

Although, at first, the experiences in his heart had alarmed the snowman and made him feel uncomfortable, and although such experiences were a deep mystery which the snowman didn't really understand, nonetheless, in time, the snowman came to look forward to those experiences when they did arise. The experiences were a complicated mixture of warmth, peace, friendship, purpose, a new sense of self, and a sort of feeling like one was at home in the world for the very

first time, and none of these feelings had been part of the snowman's life before encountering the Sufi.

Through these experiences the snowman was beginning to catch sight of something within himself which he hadn't paid much attention to before meeting the Sufi and, yet, this new aspect of himself seemed to have been there all along just waiting to be noticed. Moreover, through such experiences, the snowman was starting to develop a sense of identity about himself ... that he was something more than a snowman even though there was no denying the fact that he still was very much a snowman in every outward sense.

In time, the snowman began to feel completely comfortable with the visits of the Sufi – even when these visits involved the Sufi looking at the snowman very intensely. However, no sooner had the snowman begun to feel comfortable with things, the Sufi stopped visiting the snowman ... in fact, the Sufi seemed to disappear from the little town altogether.

The snowman did not know what had happened to the Sufi because none of the town's people seemed to know anything about the whys and wherefores of the Sufi's disappearance. Since the townspeople were the snowman's main source of information concerning what took place in the town, the snowman was as much in the dark in relation to the Sufi's disappearance as the townspeople.

Days passed by, and the snowman missed his companion. Yet, the snowman made a wonderful discovery during the Sufi's absence.

Whereas, previously, the snowman noticed the strange, melting sensation in his heart took place only when the Sufi was physically nearby, now he began to realize that he could feel the same warmth, peace, purpose, and sense of who he really was whenever the snowman remembered the Sufi in his heart ... even though the Sufi was not physically present. As a result, the snowman began to remember the Sufi whenever he could ... morning, noon, or night.

The Sufi might have traveled or disappeared to who knows where. Nevertheless, as long as the snowman remembered to keep his heart focused on the memory of the Sufi, it was if the Sufi were still present with the snowman.

This practice of remembering the Sufi was especially comforting during the long, cold, windy nights in which the snowman would be standing all alone in the north end of the town square. Outwardly,

the expression on the snowman's head looked much as he always had – a sort of blank, smiling face -- but inwardly within the snowman's awareness, there was much taking place that kept the snowman concentrating on something other than the cold, deserted, wind-swept, lonely town square.

The snowman began to remember the Sufi so much that the activity started to affect him in a strange new way. More specifically, the image of the Sufi which he had in his heart began to glow.

It was as if the image of the Sufi were giving off a mysterious light that didn't seem so much to come from the memory of the Sufi as it did from an unknown source of light that was showing through the Sufi. It was as if the Sufi were the wick for a candle that burned with a brightness that was borrowed from an unknown source of light ... a source of light which seemed to surround the Sufi even as it was independent of him.

Moreover, the snowman began to notice another difference. He seemed to be shrinking.

The snowman always knew how tall he was by comparing his height to the height of the green bench which stood near him. Unfortunately, now it seemed that with each passing day, he was becoming shorter in relation to the height of the bench.

When he thought about the matter and wondered why it was happening, he eventually realized that the light coming from the activity of his heart was not only melting his heart, but the rest of him was beginning to melt and disappear as well. He was faced with a very serious problem.

If he continued to remember the Sufi who had disappeared from the town and if he continued to experience the light that shone through the snowman's memory of the Sufi, then, in time, the snowman feared he would melt away completely, and who knows what would then become of the snowman. On the other hand, if he stopped remembering the Sufi and stopped remembering the light which shone through the Sufi, then, the snowman would feel lonely, restless, without any purpose, and, as well, the snowman might begin to lose sight of his new sense of himself which he had started to catch glimpses of within his heart.

What should he do? Should he continue on with the activities which were causing him to melt away, or should he stop and continue on as snowmen had generally existed ever since snowmen first came into

existence on earth ... with a frozen heart and a consciousness that was filled with not much of anything except thoughts of cold, snow, and what was going on among the townspeople?

After thinking about this matter over a period of several days, the snowman decided that he would rather melt away into the unknown than continue to exist in the north part of the town square without a sense of peace, warmth, friendship, or a sense of who he really was ... feelings, experiences, and understandings that he received from remembering that which seemed to give existence purpose and meaning. So, gradually he let go of his fears and permitted himself to melt away.

As far as the town's people were concerned, the snowman disappeared as mysteriously as he had arrived. Some of the town's people believed the snowman disappeared because of the effect that the sun's heat had on the snow from which the snowman had been made.

However, you and I know that the real reason why the snowman melted away is tucked inside his heart. This is the understanding of a heart which returned to the mysterious source through which the snowman had come into existence, and therein lies the true story of the buried treasure which is sought and discovered by real Sufis ... weather permitting.

For the first time in the history of snowpeople, the heart of a snowman pointed in a different direction than north. But, the direction toward which the snowman's heart was attracted was very true.

A Taxi Man's Service

On the Day of Judgment, there was a small group of four people who were being asked to provide an accounting of their lives as well as to respond to the question of why they should be admitted into Heaven. The group consisted of a preacher, a school teacher, a judge, and a taxi driver.

When asked why he should be admitted into Heaven, the preacher replied in the following way: "All my life I have spread the word of God to the general public. I have traveled far and wide, often encountering very difficult and dangerous circumstances in order to ensure that as many people as possible had the opportunity to hear the Holy Scrolls and benefit from the teachings therein. In fact, the money for these spiritual expeditions often came out of my own pocket, but I don't regret a single penny that I have spent in the good cause of delivering the Divine message and giving people a chance for eternal salvation."

The schoolteacher, a woman, responded to the same question in her own fashion. "I have considered my duties as a teacher to be a sacred trust, a calling to which I have responded and tried as best I could to help children to aspire to their spiritual destinies. It has been my honor and privilege to sacrifice many conditions of comfort in order to assist hungry, eager minds and hearts to struggle toward knowing God. Indeed, I would gladly give everything I have to help children learn about the true purpose of life."

When the time came for the judge, who also was a woman, to give an answer to the aforementioned question, she said: "I made a solemn oath that I would do everything in my power to uphold the law and try to make the community safe for citizens to be able to go about their lives and be able to pursue the meaning of life free from fear. I have spent countless sleepless nights wrestling with the great issues of justice so everyone would know that those who came into my court were being dealt with in a fair, impartial, equitable manner in order that the common good might be better served for all concerned."

The taxi driver was about to give his answer to the all important question when he was stopped and told he could proceed to Heaven without providing any reply, but the others would all have to go to Hell. Naturally, the preacher, the school teacher, and the judge were rather upset and wondered why a common taxi driver could attain Heaven, and, yet, the other three, despite

their great service to, and sacrifice on behalf of, humanity were being condemned to Hell.

One of the three who was destined for hotter regions blurted out the query which was on the minds of each of these three individuals: “Why should the taxi man be admitted into an eternity of Bliss, whereas we three, who have devoted ourselves to the service of spirituality, truth, and justice, should be among the losers in life?”

The following answer was given to them. “Yes, each of you three spent your lives in service, but this service was not really to spirituality, truth, justice, or your fellow human beings. Unfortunately, the real, underlying motive of your actions was so that your egos could bask in the acclaim of self-aggrandizement, name, fame and power, and you tried to hide your real motives in actions which, overtly, seemed to be for the benefit of others but were really only for your own benefit.”

After pausing for a second, the voice continued. “The taxi driver is not a great man, but his driving has put the fear of God into many lives. Consequently, numerous people have become devout, loving servants of Divinity after near encounters with death while riding in his cab, and Heaven is our way of rewarding him for this spiritual service.”

The Worthless Son

Although, as a man, the father despaired over his son, nevertheless, as a father, he loved the youngster. However, everything the boy did grated against the man's basic nature.

The father didn't care for the boy's personality, attitudes, habits, friends, activities, choices, or interests. Again and again, the father had lectured the youth about this or that aspect of the latter's wayward style of living, but to no avail ... or so it seemed to the father.

As far as the father was concerned, the boy only had one good quality. The father had never known his son to lie. Nonetheless, in the opinion of the father, this one quality was not enough to off-set all of the other problems which he saw in relation to his son.

The boy always listened to his father without comment and with equanimity. The youngster believed his father to be a good man, with considerable wisdom about the world, and, as well, someone who had a good heart but who, unfortunately, often let his better self get buried beneath a variety of ideas about how the universe did, or ought to, work.

Whatever was of merit in the father's words of counsel, the boy tried to incorporate into his life as best he could and in his own way. Whatever the boy believed to be untrue or unfair in those words he let go without resentment.

The boy loved his father, but the youngster also knew that as a son he was a huge disappointment to his dad. His father wanted him to make something of himself in the world, to be a success, to be someone of whom the father could be proud.

Instead, there was just an intense anguish concerning the son which smoldered beneath the father's exterior ... like a ground fire which lingers in the roots of a forest. From time to time, anger about the son's situation would erupt from the father as some event or set of circumstances would fuel and fan the omnipresent smoldering, flickering flames.

The mother was caught between two worlds. She loved both her husband and her son, but after many bitter experiences, she had learned that keeping silence and patience was often the best way to approach the problem. After all, no matter what she might say in the boy's defense, the father's disgruntlement in relation to his son was so strong that his wife's

attempts to sow seeds of empathy for the boy tended to fall on fallow ground.

As is often the case, the mother knew things about the boy which the father did not understand and/or appreciate. She also knew her husband, and when he got in his moods of disparaging the boy, words formed a very ineffective levee for stemming the flood of her husband's tirades.

Wishing to bring peace to the family and desiring to bring to the surface the love she knew the boy and his father harbored for one another, she began thinking about how to resolve the problem in a way that might, once and for all, put the father's concerns to rest and reconcile the two. She considered a number of possibilities and rejected them due to some difficulty or weakness inherent in those plans ... problems which weren't initially apparent but came to light with a little analysis.

Finally, after several weeks of constant reflection, one plan arose in her heart that she felt, God willing, had the best chance to accomplish her purposes. She would set about implementing the idea tomorrow afternoon when her husband had finished work and the boy was back from school.

The next day, when the boy and his father had returned home, she said: "Son, I was wondering if you would help me out."

The boy smiled and replied: "Sure, Mom, what do you want?"

"I'm preparing a special dinner for us, and I wanted to give the meal a festive look. So, would you go out into the fields and collect a variety of flowers which we can place in several vases within the dining room?"

Her husband, who was reading the paper, shook his head slightly and rolled his eyes a little as he thought about the problems which his wife was inviting by asking the boy to do anything. This look of contempt was hidden from the boy by the paper, but his wife noticed the expression.

She ignored her husband's attitude, went to a counter top in the kitchen and selected a large birch bark basket with a handle. She gave the basket to her son and said: "Don't be too long. Dinner is going to be ready soon."

The boy left on his mission. After their son had left, the father remarked to his wife: "You know, you're just asking for trouble. He'll find some way to foul things up."

“You should have called me and told me you wanted flowers. I could have picked some at the florist's on the way home.”

“I'm sure you're right, dear,” she answered, “but I always feel that if we give the boy just one more chance, maybe, he will turn things around and demonstrate his true worth.”

She had a strange smile on her face. Her husband noted the smile and sighed with a certain amount of exasperation as he often did whenever his wife acted in a way that seemed to defy reason.

Nevertheless, he looked at her in a loving way and said: “That's just one of the many things that I love about you ... your capacity for hope,” then, after a short pause he added with a note of disdain: “Even in hopeless cases like our son,” as he returned to his paper with its reports about the real world.

Several hours passed, and the boy had not returned. The meal had been growing cold waiting for the youngster.

The coldness of the meal was in contrast to the hotness of the father. For the last hour, he had been criticizing, in turn, first his son for being unreliable and, then, his wife, for being too soft with the boy.

Just as the father was on a roll with respect to berating his son, the boy came into the kitchen through the back porch. The basket in his hands was empty.

The father saw the basket, gave his wife an ‘I told you so’ look, and exploded in anger. “Why haven't you done as your mother asked? Can't you do anything -- even the simplest of tasks -- correctly?”

The boy was in tears ... not just because his father was angry with him but because he had, most likely, deeply disappointed his mother. He ran to his room and threw himself on his bed, sobbing into the pillow.

His mother indicated to her husband to come with her to the boy's room. Reluctantly, he accompanied his wife, glaring all the way.

When they got to the boy's room, his mother sat down on the edge of the bed, rubbed his back and gently said: “Son, what happened? Why didn't you get the flowers I asked for?”

The boy turned over, still crying, and hugged his mother. “I'm sorry Mom. I really did try.”

“So, what happened?” demanded his father.

The youngster looked toward his father over his mother's shoulder while the boy was hugging her. The boy appeared to be thinking how best to respond to his father's demand.

The mother gave the boy a warm squeeze and stood up, going to her husband's side. Both of the parents were looking at the boy, waiting for an explanation ... the father with impatience and the mother with empathy.

The boy looked at both at them and, then, hung his head. As he lowered his head, he said: "Whenever I tried to pick a flower, I could hear it singing the praises of Divinity in its own unique way. I could not bear to interrupt the flower's remembrance of God, so, I left that flower alone.

"The same thing happened again and again. And, I must confess, I found their singing so beautiful and enchanting that I kept joining the flowers in their songs of praise.

"All of this delayed me. When I realized the sun was about to set, I knew I would not only be late for dinner, but I would have no flowers to bring back, and my fears about how I would be received here caused me to hesitate returning for a while longer ... until I understood that further delay would only make a bad case worse, and, so, I came home."

The boy's mother looked over at her husband, not knowing quite what to expect. There were tears in his eyes.

He went to his son, hugged him, and said: "Can you ever forgive a stupid, old man who does not recognize a treasure of great value even when it appears before him every day of his life?"

The boy's heart leapt with joy at his father's words, and he said: "Father, I love you."

As he looked over his father's shoulder, he could see his mother's face, radiant with happiness and admiration for a son who had not disappointed her in the least ... quite the contrary. A cold dinner was delayed for a while longer since the three had much about which to talk.

Bidding for Services

Every Wednesday evening had become known as the 'Gentlemen's Club' at the Center for Spiritual Pursuits. Part of the reason for this moniker was because most of the people who attended such sessions were quite wealthy and from fairly aristocratic families.

However, as with many things, there was a history, of sorts, leading to the Club's formation. More specifically, the mystical guide for the Center believed that since rich people -- some evidence to the contrary notwithstanding -- are people, too, he also felt such individuals ought to have an opportunity to be exposed to spiritual teachings. In order to help these individuals feel comfortable with their surroundings, the teacher had organized things so that mostly individuals from well-to-do families would be in attendance on such occasions, and, thus, over a period of time, this practice had developed into, more or less, an unofficial institution known as the 'Gentlemen's Club'.

The way these meetings unfolded tended to vary from week to week, but, usually, at some point during the evening, there would be a period of discussion concerning the nature of the mystical path. During such sessions, those who were interested often would ask about how to solve certain difficulties of life because ... some prejudices to the contrary notwithstanding ... rich people are not immune to problems.

For instance, an individual might say to the spiritual guide: "I am having a real tough time dealing with my son. He won't listen to me. What can I do?"

Of course, the advice dispensed by the guide would vary with the question raised, but the general form of the teachings often would be something like: "Well, Mr. Smith, you need to say such-and-such a sacred chant 100,000 times, and, then, you should repeat such-and-such a litany so many thousands of time. In addition, if you were to fast on every Monday for the next three months, I think, God willing, you will discover that this problem you are having with your son may disappear."

Now some participants of the Gentleman's Club sincerely tried to put into practice whatever advice was given by the Center's spiritual guide. Quite a few of these individuals often found that, by the Grace of God, many of the difficulties with which they came to the teacher would, in time, disappear, either completely or would become greatly improved and,

therefore, eventually would help bring about much more manageable and enjoyable lives.

On the other hand, there also were some members of the Club who, for whatever reason, were not really interested in following the practices recommended by the teacher for dealing with some of life's problems. Nonetheless, these individuals found benefit, of one kind or another, in attending the Wednesday meetings and, among other things, liked listening to the stories which the guide usually recounted during those occasions.

Since the teacher did not stop being a guide for all the people who came to the Center just because the Gentleman's Club was in session, what frequently happened was the following. One of the teacher's assistants would appear in the entranceway to the room where the Club's gatherings took place and wait for the guide to notice her or him, and, then, once the assistant's presence was acknowledged, the assistant would say something like: "Sir, Mr. Jones is here with a problem."

The guide would give instructions to have the person in question brought to the door. When that individual appeared, the teacher would say something like: "Mr. Jones, go home. Your problem is solved."

Sometimes, the assistant to the teacher might say to his or her guide: "Sir, Mr. Jones is here and he just has something brief to say to you," and the teacher would agree to having Mr. Jones come to the doorway, at which time Mr. Jones might say: "I just wanted to thank you for your help with my problem. By the Grace of God, it got solved just the way you said it would." And, then, Mr. Jones would leave, and the activities of the Gentleman's Club would resume at whatever point they had been temporarily suspended.

Many of the people who were ushered to the room's threshold at these junctures were very poor. Naturally, such individuals were most welcome throughout the other days of the week, but in order not to exclude them from having access to the teacher on Wednesday evenings when the Gentleman's Club was in session, the foregoing process had been observed for as long as the Club had been in existence.

One night, after the usual Wednesday meeting had been completed, a member of the Club requested a private audience with the teacher. This individual was one of those people who liked spending time with the guide but who still was not ready to become committed to the spiritual path.

The man opened the conversation with: "I've observed over the years that there have been numerous instances in which you briefly have interrupted our Wednesday meetings from time to time in order to accommodate the needs of this or that person who had come to the door seeking your assistance. I think what you do for these people is wonderful, but I couldn't help notice there appears to be a difference in how you treat those individuals relative to how you treat the members of the Wednesday evening sessions.

"I mean, when we have difficulties, you give certain chants, litanies, or practices for us to do, and, then, oftentimes, by the Grace of God, our problems do disappear, but when those people show up, you seem to just tell them that their problem is solved, and, they go away. I may be missing something here, or it may be possible you have assigned certain chants and so on to them when we are not around, but, if you will forgive me for saying so, there seems to be a certain ... shall we say ... difference in how things are handled with those people and the members of the Gentleman's Club.

"Now, the reason why I'm bringing all of this up is that I am an extremely busy man. My various companies keep me going seven days a week, 18-20 hours a day, and I consider myself very fortunate to be able to free up even a few hours of time for these Wednesday meetings.

"The various practices which you give to us when we come to you with our life problems tend to be very time-consuming. I would like to be able to devote the time necessary to do these things, but, unfortunately, under the present circumstances, this is just not feasible ... but, of course, I am hoping that in the foreseeable future my situation in this respect may change, and, then, I will have the time required to do the things you are advising us to do to help people like me who encounter different kinds of difficulty.

"However, for the time being, I was wondering if, perhaps, I might be able to pay whatever amount of money you feel is appropriate as a sort of substitute for not having to do the practices. I realize the people who come to the door on Wednesday night are usually quite poor, and, maybe, as an act of charity, you just help them out, and I don't really have a problem with that.

"Moreover, since money is not an issue with me, I am quite prepared to give thousands of dollars in lieu of time -- which for me is more precious than money -- if you would be willing to accept this proposal I am

making. If you wanted, you could distribute what I give to help out the poor. I would be quite happy with that.”

The guide had been listening to the man, and when the latter had finished outlining the suggestion, the teacher merely shook his head and said: “Sir, I’m afraid you can’t afford the cost of such an arrangement.”

The teacher’s words startled the man. The latter protested: “You may not realize it, but I am one of the wealthiest men in the country. Really, money is no object. Charge whatever price you like, and, believe me, I can write you a check for that amount.”

The teacher merely repeated his former words. The guide thanked the man for his proposal, apologized for not being able to accommodate the idea, and suggested that if the man were in a position to do so, then, whatever money the man cared to donate to the poor would be a good thing and proceeded to terminate the conversation.

Many years passed. As always happens with the passage of time, things simultaneously changed and remained the same. With respect to the rich man who had come to the spiritual guide with a proposal of exchanging money for time, the tides of fortune had turned to low ebb.

The economy had fallen apart and so had the man’s business empire. He had lost almost everything, including his family.

One thing led to another in his downward spiral, and, as a result, he had taken to drinking. Eventually, he hit rock bottom and was as miserable, depressed, and forlorn as a person could be.

Waking up one day in a shelter for the homeless, he felt deep despair. In such a condition, he remembered the Spiritual Center and how kind and charitable the teacher always had been with respect to the poor and unfortunate, and, as a result, he decided to go there that evening.

As the irony of fate would have it, it was Wednesday and the Gentleman’s Club was in session. The man spoke with one of the teacher’s assistants, requesting an audience with the guide.

The assistant came back a short while later and said: “The teacher cannot see you right now, but if you will wait, he will try to meet with you in an hour or so.” The assistant led the man to a room on the third floor, asked him to take a seat and be patient.

The man was disappointed. He had hoped he would be ushered into the room, as had been done with all those other poor people he had seen when he

was a member in good standing with the Gentleman's Club and that he would be told by the teacher: "Go home, your problems are solved," but such was not the case.

Instead, he had been kept waiting. Under the circumstances, it was an added humiliation, but because his situation was desperate and he felt as if there were nowhere else to turn, he waited in the room to which he had been taken.

A little over an hour later, the door to the room opened and the teacher entered. He smiled, approached the man, and shook his hand warmly, saying: "I'm terribly sorry for not coming sooner, but there were a few things which delayed me."

The guide sat down near the man and commented: "I have not seen you for such a long time. What's been going on?"

As soon as the question was asked, the man broke down and cried. Over the next hour, amidst sporadic tears, the man told the teacher all that had happened."

The teacher listened with great empathy. When the man had completed summarizing the last ten years of his life, the teacher gripped the man's shoulder in affectionate commiseration and called out for one of the Center's assistants to come into the room.

When the assistant appeared, the teacher said: "Contact Mr. Carson and tell him we have someone to occupy that position he has been looking to fill," and when the assistant had left, the teacher returned his attention to the man in the room.

"I've taken the liberty of putting you forward for a job I have in mind. If you like the position, naturally, you can keep it, and if there is a problem, we'll see what else we can find for you, but, in the meantime, this job should help your situation out somewhat, and, then, we can begin to take a look at some of your other difficulties."

The teacher hesitated briefly and continued, by saying: "I didn't talk with you immediately when you came to the Center because the Gentleman's Club was in session, and I didn't want to embarrass you. I know you used to travel in the same social circles as those people, and showing up at the door in front of them might have been very difficult for you."

The teacher became quiet and reflective for a moment. Eventually, he said, "Do you recall that conversation we once had years ago when you were in position to offer money in exchange for the time which, then, you didn't have available for doing various chants and so on that I used to recommend to the members of the Gentleman's Club whenever they had problems of one sort or another?"

The man nodded his head in remembrance of that occasion, and feeling that he knew where the teacher might be going with the question, the man said, with a sheepish grin on his face: "Well, I guess I've got the time to do those things now, don't I?"

The teacher laughed and said: "Yes, perhaps so. But, actually, I was thinking of another part of that conversation ... the part when I told you that you couldn't afford the cost of the service which would permit you to exchange money for time. That remark puzzled you, didn't it?"

Thinking back, the man said: "Yes, quite frankly, it did."

The teacher responded to the admission with: "At that time you could afford the price of nearly everything, but, spiritually speaking, you knew the cost of almost nothing. And, now, you can afford the price of almost nothing, but you have a much better appreciation concerning the spiritual cost of many facets of life. Son, the important things of life are always about cost ... never about price.

"The price of our services here at the Spiritual Center has always been free. However, there is a cost associated with everything we offer ... both in the receiving, as well as in the giving. At the time of our earlier conversation, you could not afford the cost of our services ... neither with respect to the practices which I recommended, nor, especially, in relation to the help which used to be given to the people who would show up at the door during the meetings of the Gentleman's Club. Now you have experienced something of these costs through the events of your life during the last decade, and, consequently, I think you are ready to benefit from our help."

The man embraced the teacher, crying with relief and deep gratitude for the assistance he was receiving. When he managed to compose himself a little, he noted: "There is one thing in relation to what you just said that I'm not sure I understand."

Upon noting the teacher's indication to continue on, the man said: "You spoke about there being a cost associated with the services being

offered here ... both with respect to the receiving, as well as the giving, of such services. I suppose, to some extent, I may have garnered a little insight concerning what costs might be associated with the receiving of spiritual services, but I don't quite understand what costs are associated with the giving of these services. Presumably, you are not talking about the price of things necessary to operate this center, are you?"

The guide shook his head, saying: "No, you're right ... although obviously there is a cost associated with the time, effort, and talent which underwrites the ability of people to acquire money to -- for instance -- donate for the rent of this building. However, what I had in mind was more a matter of the tremendous sacrifices which many mystics of the past have had to make in order to ensure, by God's leave, that this spiritual tradition might be preserved and be available to those people today who are interested in seeking to take advantage of what the mystical path has to offer. The costs of their sacrifices are incalculable and very rarely are ever properly appreciated -- except, of course, by the One who inspires and helps them to cover such costs."

Second Opinion

A young man, who lived in a rural area of a certain country, had long dreamed of finding a spiritual guide. The evenings of his youth had been filled with stories told by his parents and some of their friends concerning different friends of God whom they all had met ... either individually or collectively ... together with accounts of some of the experiences which had transpired during those encounters.

One spiritual guide, in particular, who had been mentioned by both his parents, as well as many of their friends, had an inexplicable attraction for the young boy. The lad kept pestering his parents to tell the same stories over and over again in relation to the boy's favorite mystical guide.

As the youngster grew older, he searched out every piece of information he could uncover with respect to this same spiritual teacher. He visited the book stores, the libraries, and various spiritual centers in the town in search of the sought after material.

Although he liked to read the works of various spiritual teachers, no other guide held his interest nor fascinated the youth in the way this one friend of God did. The boy wanted, more than anything, to be able to go and visit the man and take mystical initiation with him, and until he could do this, he felt very restless ... always longing for a distant source of his preoccupation.

One book which the boy came across in the town library had an old photo of the saint. Immediately, the boy fell in love with the image in the picture.

In fact, the boy was so infatuated that he ran up huge overdue fines because he couldn't bear to have the book with the prized picture leave his house. Eventually, the parents realized it would be cheaper to special order the book at the local store than to have to go on paying the fines on the boy's behalf.

When the boy was in his late teens, an opportunity presented itself which enabled the youngster to visit the city where the saint resided. Fearing the spiritual teacher might be traveling somewhere else at the time of the boy's trip, the youth had written a letter to the spiritual center with which the guide was affiliated, seeking an audience with the teacher.

The teenager was on pins and needles until a letter arrived from the distant spiritual center. The boy ripped open the envelope, read the contents, and whooped with joy because his request had been granted.

Somehow the youngster managed to survive the impatience he felt throughout the several months leading up to his trip. Eventually, that day came, as all days eventually do, and the teenager left for his destination -- namely, the longed-for spiritual guide.

When the boy arrived at the spiritual center, he presented the letter he had received several months previously and asked where he should go for his meeting with the teacher. The youngster was taken to a second-floor room and found the guide waiting for him.

The two chatted about the boy's trip and life in the town where the teenager lived. The youngster mentioned his parents' names and described them a little, and the spiritual teacher indicated that he remembered both his mother and father. He laughed about some of the amusing events which the boy's parents had recounted to the youngster over the years.

Nervously, the teenager edged closer to the issue which had been burning in his heart for such a long time. Finally, he blurted out: "I would like to be initiated by you. I want this more than anything ... not just the initiation, per se, but initiation with you," and the youngster emphasized the word 'you'.

"I don't understand what this is all about or why these feelings are within me, but you captivated my heart when I was just a boy ... or, at least, more of one than I still am ... and I have gone to bed every night since then with this question on my lips," said the youth. He looked imploringly at the teacher.

A trace of concern spread across the face of the guide, and as the teacher's expression grew more concerned, the boy's spirits began to plummet. Surely, the youth's dream was about to be dashed.

The friend of God saw the boy's condition change and quickly said: "There is no need for you to become alarmed. My concern is not over whether you should be accepted onto the path but whether you will be doing so with what the lawyers refer to as 'informed consent.'"

Although the boy's heart stopped its steep decline into despair when he heard the words of the guide, the teenager was mystified: "I'm sorry," the boy said, "I don't understand. I have read a great many

books on the subject, and I have talked with many, many people about the nature of the mystical path.

“While I realize that I don’t have any real, experiential understanding of the nature of spirituality, I do feel that I understand enough to know this is what I want to do ... especially with you.”

The guide smiled at the youngster’s enthusiasm and fervor. He replied to the youth’s words with: “I don’t doubt you have read a lot, and I don’t doubt the sincerity of your intention concerning initiation, but, nonetheless, let’s do this the right way, so there will be no doubt in your mind about what you are going to do.”

The teenager waited to hear the guide’s proposal. The youngster couldn’t imagine what would be requested of him, but the youth was ready to do whatever was necessary.

The guide said: “There is a yellow house about a mile to the east on the road which runs in front of the spiritual center. The house is on the same side of the street and near a variety store called ‘Neighbors’, and it is the only yellow house in that area.

“I want you to go the house, ask to speak with a Dr. Smith, and without letting on that you have met me, tell the good doctor your story about wanting to become initiated through me. Before you begin your story, tell the doctor that someone who wishes to remain anonymous has sent you to that house to ask him his opinion of your idea and to seek his assistance in the matter.

"You should listen to what he says without comment, but do feel free to ask whatever questions you like. When you are satisfied you have received all the information the doctor has about this matter, then, come back here to the center, and we will talk further.”

The teenager followed the instructions. About 40 minutes later, he was at the door of the yellow house.

The youth knocked on the door. A short while later an elderly man with a friendly face appeared. The visitor explained his mission, and the man indicated that he, in fact, was Dr. Smith and that the latter would consider it his sacred duty to speak with the youngster concerning the spiritual matter which had brought the boy to the doctor’s door.

The youth was taken into the living room and was guided to a spot near the far end of a couch that ran along one wall, nearly covering the length of the room. The doctor headed for a lounge chair which was positioned near where the youngster had been taken.

When the two were settled, the doctor became very serious and intense. He proceeded to berate the spiritual guide who had, unknown to the doctor, sent the youth for the doctor's assistance and advice.

The doctor had absolutely nothing good to say about the teacher. He called the guide a fraud, a charlatan, a con artist, an egotist, a lunatic, a dangerous influence, and someone who misleads people away from the truth of things and straight into damnation.

The doctor had a wealth of information to share with the youngster and proceeded to do so. From time to time, the teenager asked the doctor whatever questions came to mind.

When the doctor finally ran out of things to say, he concluded with: "Son, my advice to you is to stay as far away from that so-called mystical teacher as you can. He will cause you nothing but problems and try to trick you into wasting your life chasing after occult pipe-dreams."

The youth thanked the doctor for his time as well as the extensive information, and he indicated to the doctor that the conversation had given the youngster a lot about which to think. As the boy rose from the couch, the doctor rose with him, placed an arm of friendship around the teenager's shoulder and walked the boy to the door, where the two said 'good-bye'.

Following a relatively short period of time, the youth had returned to the center. Upon arriving, he sought out the guide once again.

When the two were together, the teacher said: "Well, what happened?"

The boy gave a blow-by-blow account to which the guide listened attentively. When the youngster was through, the teacher said: "Well, in light of what you have been told, do you still want to be initiated by me?"

The teenager nodded his head and said: "Yes, very much."

"What the doctor said didn't alter your spiritual intention in any way?" inquired the teacher.

The youngster shook his head -- 'no'. Then, the teenager asked: "Who is that man, and why did you send me to him?"

The guide smiled and replied: "The good doctor is my uncle, and I thought you should have a second opinion before deciding what you want to do about me and the mystical path.

"Sometimes in the matter at hand, as with a great many other issues, second opinions are very important -- and, of course, sometimes they are not ... and it was your responsibility to decide which was the case in the present set of circumstances. This is known, to whatever extent it is possible in human affairs, as informed consent."

Leaving

The focus of the meeting was mysticism. The gathering had been arranged by a spiritual guide who lived in the area.

Among those who attended the session were people who gave expression to different degrees of commitment to the purpose, observances, practices, and etiquette of the mystical path. Some of these individuals were long-time spiritual students of the teacher. A certain number of the people in attendance had been involved, in one way or another, for a lesser time, while others had been newly initiated, and still others were merely visiting, trying to decide if they wanted to pursue things beyond listening a little or asking questions.

Because there are many ups and downs encompassed by the mystical journey, there are various events in life which either can plunge one into spiritual doubt and resistance or which can send one soaring with joy and wonder. Moreover, in between these two, extreme poles of the path, there is a large area marked by numerous skirmishes of a lesser, but still important, magnitude through which the tides of spiritual struggle ebb and flow in a million different directions.

Every event in the life of a spiritual traveler brings a teaching. Whether or not an individual is open to what is being taught is another matter altogether.

Frequently, even, seemingly, small events may lead to very essential lessons. For example, consider the situation of one of the individuals who was part of the assembly that had been convened by the aforementioned guide.

This fellow had been initiated some years before by the spiritual teacher. According to the person's inclinations and circumstances, he had been doing what he could to learn about and put into practice the principles of the mystical way being taught by his teacher.

The man liked to ask questions when it was appropriate to do so, and the meeting had been convened for precisely this purpose ... that is, to give people an opportunity to ask whatever questions they wished concerning different aspects of the mystical life. So, among those asking questions was this man.

As sometimes happens, one of the questions raised by this individual led to an answer from the spiritual guide which, for reasons

that were not readily apparent, upset the man. Outwardly, this person was still part of the meeting, but inwardly he was far away.

As his question was being answered and, as well, upon completion of the teacher's remarks, the student had permitted himself to be caught up in some of the many emotional and mental currents that ran through his consciousness while he had been listening to the teacher's comments. As a result, before the man knew what was happening, he had become swept away by a very strong undertow which was dragging him down into the murky depths of doubt, fear, anxiety, and panic.

Every time he tried to extricate himself from his internal plight through this or that lifeline of thought or understanding, the man began to be drawn in the direction of a new eddy of uncertainty and difficulty. Within a very short period of time, the man's spiritual condition went from bad to worse.

Feeling very despondent and uncomfortable, the man waited for a chance to leave the gathering in an unobtrusive manner. When the right opportunity arose during a break, he began heading for the stairs with the intention of leaving the building.

On his way out, he met one of the long-time associates of the spiritual guide who, with a rather surprised expression on his face, said: "Are you leaving so soon? Things are just getting interesting."

In a non-obvious way, the long-time companion briefly studied the man who was leaving and followed up his earlier inquiry with: "I liked the questions you were asking. The responses which our guide gave in relation to them were very helpful, I feel, to many of those who were in attendance."

The man's head nodded in appreciation of the compliment, but his facial expression, along with his rather rueful semi-smile, suggested that the comment had touched on a sensitive issue. The man merely said: "Well, I'll see you sometime soon, I'm sure," and he walked away from the teacher's close companion, down the stairs, out of the building, and toward his home.

When the assembly once again began the discussion, not very much time had elapsed before the teacher surveyed the gathering and asked: "Where is so-and-so?" ... that is, the man who now was on his way back to his house.

The associate who had met and talked with that individual prior to the latter's leaving the building informed his teacher that: "He has gone. He seemed to be upset by something which went on during the meeting ... in relation to one of his questions I think."

The teacher turned to another long-time student and requested him to go and bring the man back. Immediately, the individual did as he was asked.

About an hour later, the two men came into the room. The teacher motioned for the man who had left in an emotionally distraught condition to come and sit by him.

When the man sat down, his guide inquired: "Son, why did you leave?"

The man was reluctant to say anything. Part of this was because he was confused by the whole series of events that had taken place and didn't quite know what to say, and part of his reticence was because he knew he had made a mistake by not asking the teacher's permission to leave the assembly.

Finally, feeling rather embarrassed by the whole situation, he said: "I was upset by some of the things you were saying in response to my last question. Emotionally, one thing led to another inside of me, and before I knew what had happened, I found myself walking out of the building, heading for home. I apologize for not, first, seeking your permission to leave, and I hope you will forgive me."

The teacher gently said: "I didn't call you back because of your lapse in etiquette. Such things happen sometimes, and in the entire scheme of things that issue is not as important as the principle for which you were brought back."

The man began to feel very anxious. What other mistake had he made?

His guide smiled at him and said: "Dear one, you may leave me, but I cannot leave you."

Dependence

Many people considered the man to be a very spiritual individual. He prayed a great deal, fasted as often as circumstances permitted, kept night vigils during which he continuously sang the praises of Divinity, went on various journeys to sacred landmarks, and tried to lead a good life, including being as charitable and kind as he could toward one and all.

The man, himself, was fairly humble, but he did take his religious pursuits very seriously. Currently, he was attempting to struggle with a spiritual condition in which developing a dependence on Divinity was of fundamental importance.

One day he was walking in the forest, which he liked to do because of his love for nature and the way all of Creation reminded him of the Creator. The area was new to him ... which he also liked since he enjoyed exploration and being exposed to diverse experiences.

Suddenly, his nose twitched with the first whiff of a harbinger that wafted through the air. Smoke!

At first, he thought there might be a campsite or cabin nearby that was generating the odor that he smelled. However, there was not only far too much smoke for it to be from a simple campfire or a camp chimney, but also he began to see different creatures of the forest scattering in different directions ... not a good sign.

Above the sound of a small river that ran through the forest, the man could hear the distant crackle, pop, and roar of a substantial fire. He began to be concerned.

Based on the nature of the smoke in the air, he thought he knew where the main body of the fire might be located. However, he wasn't sure.

Forest fires were tricky customers. They jumped from place to place ... sometimes with alarming speed.

Furthermore, one couldn't always trust one's immediate senses in such circumstances ... wind currents, atmospheric conditions, and the geographical properties of the area where a fire was raging could all affect how the fire burned and where it went. Consequently, one easily could misread the signs.

One's eyes, ears, and nose might induce one to believe one was heading toward safety. Nonetheless, despite what one's senses seemed to be

telling one, one could run smack into the very thing one was trying to avoid.

The man was facing some additional problems. Not only wasn't he very familiar with the surrounding terrain, but, somehow, he had become lost and disoriented while wandering about.

Normally, this wouldn't be a problem. It had happened with him before and, usually, given enough time and effort, he always had managed to find his way back to familiar ground.

Now he didn't have the luxury of time. Which way should he go?

The man did not panic. He composed himself, knowing his best chance to survive was to remain calm and thoughtful about the situation.

Furthermore, he had been trained by his spiritual mentors to respond to the crises and problems of life by always seeking Divine assistance. Consequently, he said a quick prayer while trying to come to a reasoned and speedy decision about what to do.

One should always depend on Divinity for help. Yet, this dependence needed to be balanced with trying to do whatever one could to help oneself ... indeed, an old cowboy he once read about used to say ... one needs to trust in God, but, son, don't forget to tie your horse.

He felt, as a first step, that he should move toward the river, so, he began quickly walking in the general direction of where he believed the water to be. A short while later he was on the bank of the river ... a river that was neither large nor small.

There was a bend in the river at this point. Trees from both sides were hanging over the water, making it difficult to get clear information about where the fire might be. As he was looking downstream, he heard a voice hail him.

A woman in a canoe was coming down the river. She was heading toward the bank where he stood, and she said: "Come on, get in, we'll be able to paddle our way out of trouble."

The man hesitated. He considered the possibility that following the river downstream might not be the right way to go.

Something within him seemed to suggest that trouble could very well be the only thing which he might find downstream. He waved the woman off, saying: "No, I do not believe that is the way Divinity wishes me to go."

The woman was first concerned that the man seemed to be refusing her help, and, then, shrugged. She was worried about saving her own skin, as well, so she began paddling away from shore and picked up speed when she hit the main current.

The man started to walk upstream, following the riverbank. However, since there was a lot of overgrowth and bog areas along the bank, sometimes he had to detour to a path that ran along a small ridge which rose above the shore area.

On one of these occasions, he came to a place where the path forked off in another direction. Coming toward him were several young hikers who met him at the fork.

They had been running and were out of breath, but as one of them caught his breath, he said: "You better come with us, mister. We've just come from upstream, and conditions may be worsening there. We have some knowledge of these woods, and we think our best chance to escape the fire will be to cut across the forest to a pond on the other side. But, we better hurry ... there may be not much of a window of opportunity for us to be able to safely make it through."

The man looked at the boys and considered their youth. Maybe they were boy scouts or kids with a certain amount of wilderness survival skills, but they just seemed to be too young for him to be willing to entrust his life with what they might, or might not, know.

However, wishing to place the matter in God's hands, the man looked into his heart for some sign about what to do. Nothing seemed to jump out at him one way or the other.

He tried to persuade the boys that they all should stick with the river and keep heading upstream. Staying close to the water might be the wisest thing to do under the circumstances.

The boys disagreed with him and started running up the path that traversed the forest and led to a pond. He watched them disappear around a corner.

Once again, he headed back down to the lower riverbank and kept working his way upstream. A short while later he came upon a man who was sitting on an all-terrain vehicle, inspecting the other bank of the river.

The man on the ATV was looking downstream as he lowered a flask from which he had been drinking. He seemed to be inebriated.

He offered the new arrival a ride. The plan was to cross the river at this point since the man on the ATV believed the river was fairly shallow here. In addition, the man on the ATV felt the fire hadn't jumped to the other side yet.

Looking at the flask in the ATV man's hand and smelling alcohol on his breath as the former gentleman outlined a plan for crossing the river, the man without transportation was uncertain about how to proceed. Once again, he concentrated on his heart, hoping to discern some flicker of intuition or feeling that would inform him about what decision should be made.

Still, nothing out of the ordinary was detectible. Presumably, this meant he should continue on as he had been doing.

He wished the man on the ATV good luck and continued to travel upstream.

When he looked back, the ATV had just reached the other bank and was heading up a path that led away from the river.

For another five minutes he walked upstream. Sometimes he did so along the bank, and sometimes he walked along the path running parallel to the river but which was ten or fifteen feet inland.

At one point, the man came upon a firefighter who was sitting down, coughing, apparently overcome somewhat by the aftereffects of smoke inhalation. His face was painted with charcoal stains, mixed with sweat and some blood.

The firefighter looked up, saw the man approaching, and, with difficulty, tried to rise. The man helped the firefighter to his feet.

The firefighter coughed, tried to catch his breath, and, when he did, pointed toward an area of woods running diagonally away from the river in an easterly direction, saying: "The fire cut me off from my crew. If we move in that direction, I'm pretty sure we will reach safety. There are some helicopters in a clearing not too far from here that will be able to lift us to safety. If you'll help me, I'll show you the way because it's easy to miss the right cutoff."

The firefighter seemed to know what he was doing. On the other hand, he had been cut off from his crew and who knows what mistakes in judgment had led to that separation.

Wishing to depend on God's guidance, he closed his eyes and focused within. He concentrated for only a few seconds when a light shone his mind's eye and there seemed to be a voice emanating from the light. It said: "Look, you already have been given two ways out of this mess, and you're not going to get any more help than you have been given."

The man was both startled and elated by his experience. He also was mystified.

Thinking back, he recalled meeting: the woman in the canoe, the two hikers, the drunken man on the ATV, and, now the firefighter. If he had been given two ways to safety, what did the other events mean?

In response to the man's thoughts, the voice associated with the internal light replied: "Two of the ways you encountered were choreographed by an adversary of Divinity who was seeking your destruction."

But, which two, the man wondered? How was he supposed to know? Moreover, hadn't he tried, on each occasion, to discern the path that God wished him to take? He was confused.

His sense of confusion was responded to with further words from the light within: "When you finally learn to really depend on Divine assistance, you won't be plagued with these questions and doubts, you'll know, with certainty, what to do ... and spiritual certainty is something very different from merely being convinced that one is right.

"In fact," the light continued on, "there was once a servant of Divinity who was so steeped in the station of Dependence that despite not having eaten for days, nonetheless, when someone wanted to give him four loaves of bread, he refused since God had promised him five. Therefore, he knew the present offer was not the one which Divinity wished him to take. So, until you develop this level of confidence in depending on your Lord, why don't you help this firefighter, who is someone who knows what he's doing, and let him guide you to safety?"

The Ceremony

Every Thursday evening the same program was set in motion. The friends would gather together at the center and wait for the arrival of their spiritual guide.

When she appeared, roughly at the same time each week, she would signal for the music to begin. The songs which were selected often varied from one occasion to the next, but they always were intended to help create a state of focused remembering with respect to Divinity's presence.

She always came dressed in a frock made from white, plain muslin material. She would stand at the center of a circle formed by the rest of the participants.

At a pre-arranged point, a number of people would bring in a wooden box and set it on the floor next to the teacher. The box was made of unvarnished and unpainted pine wood.

Several other individuals would enter the interior of the circle and line the box with various kinds of simple cloth. Another person would sprinkle rose petals into the box.

When everything had been properly prepared and the other people had rejoined the circle, the spiritual guide would lower her head, push both hands before her in an outward motion, slowly bring them back to her chest area, and, then, extend them outward again, as if bringing something in to her from the circle as well as passing something back again to the individuals surrounding her. Next, she pivoted slightly on her right foot in order to face toward a different part of the circle, and she repeated the previous movement with her hands.

The hand movements and the pivoting on her right foot would continue until she had made a rotation back to her original starting point. When the rotation was completed, she would kneel down and kiss the floor with her lips as well as touch it with her forehead. After this, she would rise up, bring her hands to her head -- touching first her eyes and, then, her ears briefly with both hands -- and, finally, cast her hands away in a, more or less, vertical direction, as if she were throwing something away.

After bringing her hands down, she would stand for a moment, head lowered as if in silent prayer. When ready, she would raise her head and walk to the wooden box and lie down in it.

Several people from the circle would come with a sheet and cover the box. Once this was done, they would return to the circle.

With the exception of the music, everything would be quiet for a time. However, after several moments, the music would stop, and people in the circle would begin to sing songs in praise of Divinity ... oftentimes in unison, but, occasionally, someone would offer a solo.

Usually, this portion of things went on for about an hour. When it was done, the people would leave the circle and retire to a room where a meal was served.

Near the end of the meal, their guide would join them. She always seemed to be radiating a degree of happiness, peace, contentment, joy, and love above her usual sense of being when she came into the dining hall from the room where she had been laying down. She would eat a little of the prepared food as the rest of the group finished their meal.

At the end of the dinner, everyone would stand up and, along with the teacher, offer a traditional prayer of gratitude. When the prayer was finished, the teacher would slowly make the rounds among the tables and gently touch each person on the head or shoulder. Sometimes her hand would linger on someone's head or shoulder, and the teacher would close her eyes and lower her head slightly during this portion of things before she moved on.

Following this facet of the program, everyone sat down. The session would be opened to questions for which their guide offered various responses.

Although many kinds of queries were raised during these interchanges, sooner or later during the evening, someone would ask about the meaning and significance of the ceremony which had preceded the current discussion. Usually, the teacher would merely suggest that people reflect on the entire process because her providing ready answers to such questions wasn't always the best means through which to learn, but, sometimes, she encouraged them to reflect out loud.

Over time, numerous possibilities had been suggested in an attempt to explain the ceremony. Some supposed the ceremony was intended to remind everyone present that death awaits us all and is the one true certainty of life. Some individuals believed their guide was trying to teach them how precious life is and that we should take advantage of the opportunity which time offers before it is taken away from us.

Other people felt the ceremony was a sort of passion play concerning death and resurrection ... with the meal representing the reward which awaits those who have committed their lives to the right sort of principles and actions. A further segment maintained she was reminding the members of the spiritual center that she would not always be with them but life and the teachings should carry on.

Another group of individuals believed the theme of gratitude was prominent throughout the ceremony. Consequently, these people felt the entire evening was intended to help the members of the center to be thankful for all the wonderful things that were encompassed by the gift of life and especially the gift of spiritual opportunity. Still others considered the ceremony to be an interwoven series of exercises in Divine remembrance.

The guide listened attentively and appreciatively to all the ideas. However, the people in attendance at these gatherings often sensed that while she indicated the various suggestions given were good ones and embodied valuable insights none of the proffered possibilities really captured the essence of the ceremony's ultimate purpose.

On certain occasions the guide would approach this or that individual to take her place in the ceremony. Such people would be instructed by the teacher about how to do the ceremony, and, once selected they were not permitted to reveal anything of what they had been told to the others.

There were noticeable differences in how different segments of the selected people reacted to their participation in the ceremony. There were a few who seemed to emulate the teacher. More specifically, after the members of the circle had retired to the dining hall and when the time came for the individual selected by the teacher to substitute for her in the ceremony would enter the room, these individuals seemed to exhibit the same sort of radiance as the teacher always did -- happy, peaceful, content, joyous ... full of life and light.

Others who were selected by the teacher did not exhibit such qualities. In fact, they often appeared depressed, anxious, worried, or upset ... as if an opportunity had been given and lost and as if they were weighed down by some sort of burden.

Irrespective of how a person selected for the ceremony responded, the teacher never displayed any sign of approval or rejection. She treated everyone with equanimity and acceptance.

One Thursday evening, after the ceremony and the meal following it had been completed, the guide addressed the gathering: "Tonight is the last time I will participate in this ceremony. My time on Earth is coming to an end."

Naturally, the assembly was dismayed to hear this news and was quite shocked. Some began crying. All were very quiet and attentive.

She continued on: "We all knew this time would come for me, just as, one day, it will come for all of you. However, by the Grace of God, we have been able to make good use of some of the treasure trove of time that Divinity has allotted us by spending our Thursday evenings together in remembrance, friendship and the pursuit of bettering our understanding as well as our character ... both collectively and individually.

"As a parting gift to you, I will explain the significance of the ceremony which we have been observing for quite some time now. Of course, some of you already know, to varying degrees, what the ceremony entails with respect to its inner dimensions.

"Essentially, the ceremony is about letting go. Life weighs us down with emotional baggage. We spend our days enveloped in a steady torrent of troubles created by ourselves because we are not prepared to let go of the pain that we believe others, rightly or wrongly, have inflicted upon us. Instead, we become preoccupied with the slights, rejection, disrespectful attitudes, ridicule, contempt, cruelties, betrayals, insincerity, lies, manipulations, and hypocrisy which people seek to impose on us.

"Our spiritual path is intended to help us die to ourselves and accept what our Creator has arranged for us, be it sorrowful or joyous, through the acts of other people. We must release both the positive and negative emotions that Divine events have engendered in us because, in truth, none of these emotions belong to us ... they have only been loaned to us.

"When we hold on to them as if they belonged to us and as if there were a real 'us' capable of possessing anything, then, such emotions begin to poison our attitudes, thinking, understanding, and behavior. We begin to take things personally, rather than come to the realization that we are only limited role players in a much bigger drama production than we often

suppose ... one that is precisely choreographed and which involves no injustice despite what appearances may suggest.

“As someone once said, there is no such thing as a small role, only small-minded actors. Divinity fully appreciates all of our roles, but Divinity also wants us to understand we are but virtual locations through which our roles are being manifested, and, then, we must let go of whatever transpires ... be it joyous or sorrowful.

“Many of us are like actors that want to hold on to the props and trappings of a play after it has concluded ... not understanding that we must prepare ourselves for further stage entrances during ensuing acts of Being’s play. When we hold on to issues and emotions from previous scenes, sooner or later, this begins to interfere with our ability not only to perform in the Divine Drama but interferes as well with our ability to enjoy the dramaturgical process.

“So, each week I died to myself. I died to my desires, my expectations, my hopes, my moods, my emotions, and my sense of being an independent self or being. We all need to die to ourselves all the time in this manner, but the ceremony offered an opportunity to have the idea begin to permeate our hearts and souls before we face the real final curtain of our lives.

“When, by the Grace of God, we are successful in letting go of all this mental, emotional, biographical, and existential baggage, a tremendous burden is lifted from us. We feel the joy, happiness, peace, and contentment that God intended us to experience when we give back to the Producer, Director, Playwright, and Chief of the Prop Department what does not belong to us, as well as openly acknowledge and accept this fundamental fact of existence. As someone once said: ‘We must die before we die.’”

In silence, she stood before the group of friends for a while longer. Then, she waved good-bye, exited stage right, and passed on to the next Act.

Three Amigos

Community life at the spiritual center had been deteriorating for quite some time. The many stresses, confusions, and seductions of modern society had taken their toll on people's commitment to activities sponsored by the center.

The head of the center had been fighting a rearguard action for years trying to encourage individuals to become involved in the various programs, classes, groups, and services being offered through the center but with a diminishing degree of success. She had been a good woman, of wonderful character, who had devoted her whole life to the purposes and principles to which the center had given expression for several decades.

Now, she had passed away, leaving just three individuals to carry on her work. These three-- two men and a woman -- were her legacy, and what a legacy they were. She had often referred to them as 'the three amigos'.

All three had become affiliated with the center a long time ago. Little by little, the head of the center had witnessed each of them spiritually develop into individuals of considerable spiritual substance and quality.

Some years back there had been an old woman who showed up at the front entrance wanting to speak with the head of the center in order to become a member. When the director of the center asked how the visitor had come to this decision, the old woman recounted the following story:

'There had been a person from the center -- one of the male Amigos - - who used to walk to the center down a set of narrow alleyways that ran along the back area of the building. Every day, the man's passage through these corridors was not only like clockwork but followed the exact same route each day.

'One of the people who lived in an apartment complex bordering an alleyway on the man's route had watched this member of the 'three amigos' pass by at the same time each day and became curious about who he was and what he was about ... so, inquiries were made.

'Eventually, the individual who lived in an apartment near the man's daily path and who had made inquiries about the man's identity came to discover the man's affiliation with the spiritual center. When this fact came to the surface, the person in the apartment became quite annoyed because that

individual really didn't like the whole idea of spirituality and was contemptuous of anyone who indicated having even the slightest interest in pursuing such a possibility.

'To demonstrate this displeasure, the apartment dweller used to lie in wait for the man to walk by, and, when the man was directly beneath the apartment, the individual dumped garbage, kitty litter, and anything else within reach that might humiliate the man. Oddly enough, not only did the man never deviate from his usual routine or route after such incidents, but he never reported the matter to the police.

'Day after day this mode of engagement transpired. Each time, the man would look up trying to see who had done this deed, and, then, calmly, he would brush off what he could of the thrown refuse before moving on toward the center.

'At first, when the man down below looked up, the apartment dweller had ducked back from the balcony, not wishing to be seen, but after awhile the perpetrator just stood in plain view, arms placed arrogantly on the balcony, laughing at the man in the alleyway.

'After several weeks of this treatment, a morning came when the man from the center walked beneath the balcony of the troublesome apartment and, lo and behold, nothing happened. The man looked up, and there was no one there.

'The man hesitated ... apparently thinking about something. He checked the balcony again and, then, went down the alleyway next to the apartment building and headed for the front of the building.

'He asked a person on the apartment building's front stoop who lived on the second floor and was given the information for which he had asked. Next, he went up the stairs to the second floor and knocked on the only door on the landing.

'An elderly woman -- wrapped in a shawl, hair disheveled, and bearing a gray, sickly pallor -- opened the door. Despite the appearance of the woman leaning on the door, the man immediately recognized her and said in a sort of rhetorical fashion: "You are the woman who has been throwing garbage at me the last couple of weeks, aren't you?"

'A look of fear descended upon the woman, and she said: "Please, I am sick. Go call the cops if you want to cause me trouble, but I'm not going to argue with you about what I did or why."

'The man at the door responded with: "I don't want to create any trouble for you. I was worried when you weren't at your usual spot waiting for me, so, I came to see if you were all right and if there were anything I might do for you."

'The woman was stunned. She had tormented this man for weeks, and, now, not only had he not complained or filed a complaint against her, he was concerned over her welfare and health.

'The woman broke down and cried. The man asked permission to come in, and when the old woman beckoned him with a barely raised and shaking hand, the man came to the woman's side and helped her to a couch where she had been encamped prior to his knocking on her door.

'The man covered her with the blanket which was lying crumpled on the floor, and, then, he began to look after her. He stayed with the old woman for the rest of the day and into the early evening, and before he left, he promised to return the following morning.

The individual who had told the story and who had come to the center seeking to become a member concluded her tale by indicating: "The woman in that story is me, and I wish to follow the same spiritual path which that young man who cared for me follows."

Then, there was an incident involving one of the other members of the three amigos -- the female representative. She had been the victim of a mugging which, for a time, had her playing revolving door tag with a number of medical clinics as well as a hospital in the area.

Although, eventually, most of her injuries were repaired and healed, she was left with a slight limp. From time to time, the leg would act up and cause her quite a bit of discomfort and pain for a day or two before subsiding and, then, disappearing altogether ... until the next time the leg would act up again.

One day she was sitting with a friend, and the woman was experiencing one of her recurring episodes of pain from the gimpy leg. Her friend, noticing she was in pain, said to her: "Oh, dear woman ... your pain is the result of those terrible boys who beat you up."

This female member of the three amigos looked at her friend in a rather stern manner, saying: “No, nothing comes to me except by the will of God. You’re confusing secondary causes with the Primary Cause.”

Well, one could go on with more such tales involving the three amigos. However, the foregoing stories serve to reflect something of the character and spiritual quality of these three individuals, but this is a digression of sorts.

The three amigos were faced with a problem. Who should become the new head of the center?

Actually, this was only part of the problem. The real problem was that none of them wanted the position for himself or herself.

This was not because any of them wanted to avoid the headaches that inevitably went with the position of director or because they wanted someone else to do the work. Each of the three was prepared to do whatever was needed, irrespective of who was the head of the center, in order to work toward bringing the center back to a life of spirituality that engaged and assisted the community. Instead, such benevolent finger-pointing was because each of them preferred one of the others to serve as the head of the spiritual center rather than herself or himself.

Simply stated, they each thought the other was better than, or knew more, or was more spiritually advanced than he or she was. Each of them would say words to one another to the following effect: “The previous head of the center said such complimentary things about you [i.e., one of the other three amigos], and, therefore, I think you should be the director.”

However, no matter what was said, the person who was being addressed would counter with something like: “Perhaps, but I distinctly remember how much the previous head loved and admired the two of you for the depth of your spiritual knowledge and dedication, so, really, one of the two of you should be the new head of the center.”

All three of them treated one another with such respect, kindness, thoughtfulness, sincerity, love, and generosity, that listening to them and watching them was like watching a beautifully choreographed ballet of spiritual etiquette. Their unassuming, as well as innocent, displays of humility, modesty, and selflessness became the talk of the neighborhood.

In fact, over time, so many people became enamored with the quality of life exemplified by the three amigos that the center began to thrive with spiritual activity. Membership applications began to climb, and the center's volunteer work began to increase in a number of directions.

The revitalization of the center left only one problem. Who would be the new director?

A Father Complains

The center's spiritual guide read the message again. 'Mr. Carson wishes to speak with you about his son and would like to stop by tomorrow morning at 9:00 if that time is convenient. He is awaiting your return call. Please respond by 4:30 p.m.'

A phone number was neatly written at the bottom of the note. The teacher picked up the receiver, dialed the number, connected with Mr. Carson, spoke briefly, and agreed to meet with him at the indicated time on the following day.

At 8:58 a.m. the next morning, someone knocked on the guide's door. He arose from his desk, walked to the door, opened it, and found himself face to face with a tall man who appeared to be in his early fifties. The man was well groomed and tanned, had a full head of black hair with only a touch of gray along the sides, and piercing blue eyes.

"Mr. Carson, I presume," said the center's spiritual director, and he extended his hand in welcome.

The man smiled, acknowledged the correctness of the presumption, and accepted the hand being offered. Mr. Carson was invited in, and the door was closed behind them before the teacher guided the man to a couple of easy chairs by the window.

"May I get you anything in the way of refreshments, Mr. Carson?" asked his host. "Coffee, tea, or, perhaps, a soft drink?" he added.

His guest politely declined with: "No, thanks ... really, I'm fine."

The teacher sat down, folded his hands, rested them on his leg, and waited for the man to speak about whatever had brought him. The wait was very short.

The man opened with: "Sir, I believe you know my son, Allan Carson," and noting the teacher's nod of agreement, continued on. "Well, I'm concerned about a number of things in relation to his affiliation with the center."

The teacher's hands unfolded and made a sign of encouragement, as if to say: 'Yes, go on.' Then, he folded them again and rested them on his leg once more.

"My boy has been coming to your center for three or four years now, and while I do see some promising changes in his behavior and attitudes about quite a few things -- and this does please me --

nonetheless, there are some issues which bother me. For example, he tells me that he has different duties at the Center and included among these responsibilities are cleaning both the stables and bathrooms. Apparently, he has been doing this for several years.

“Although I can understand why some amount of this sort of thing is appropriate and constitutes part of the training, I think that two, or more, years is far too long a period for any son of mine to be doing that sort of thing. He has informed me of his other duties, and, for the most part, I don’t have a problem with the other things he does, but I would like to make a proposal concerning the bathroom and stable details ... if you don’t mind, of course.”

The teacher shrugged his shoulders and raised his eyebrows, saying: “I try to be open to possibilities. What do you have in mind?”

Mr. Carson started right in: “I’m a fairly well-to-do man. I would like to have a few of my employees come over here on a regular basis -- at your discretion of course -- and assume most, if not all, of the stable and the bathroom cleaning duties. This would free up my son -- and, maybe, some of the other students here as well -- to be able to spend more time on the sort of spiritual activities for which they came to the Center in the first place. What do you think about this proposal?”

The teacher’s head made a kind of half shake, and he replied: “Your offer is, certainly, very kind, Mr. Carson, but, let me ask you a question -- or better yet, if you will permit, can I show you something?”

“Sure, please do,” he said.

The teacher rose and walked to the door, saying to Mr. Carson as he did: “Please, come with me.” The two went through the door, down a corridor, walked through another door near the end of the hallway, and walked up some stairs to the next floor.

The teacher opened the door, and the two of them entered the Center’s Infirmary. Proceeding down the hall, the teacher took a right into a room with several patients.

The teacher said ‘Hello’ to the people in the room and asked how they were all doing. Everyone gave brief responses of acknowledgment and status reports on their respective conditions, and, then, the teacher indicated that the people in the room should carry on as if he weren’t even there.

He went over to a chart on the end of one of the beds, looked it over, and took some pills off a tray on a nearby cart. He poured a glass of water, and, then, he came back to Mr. Carson and said: "Here, please take the pills," as he handed him a cup of water.

An incredulous look flashed across the face of Mr. Carson, and he said, in rather exasperated tones "What are you talking about?"

The teacher registered surprise at Mr. Carson's response. "Why won't you take the pills?" the teacher inquired.

"Because I'm not the one who is sick ... That man over there is," he said, nodding to the person on the hospital bed."

The teacher shook his head in agreement with Mr. Carson, saying: "Yes, that's right, so why do you want your employees to take your son's spiritual medicine?"

Mr. Carson blinked a few times, looked at the man on the bed, and back at the teacher. A look of understanding briefly sped across his face.

He ran his fingers through his hair, exhaled slowly, and chuckled. "You've made your point, I guess. But, there is one other concern that I have that is quite different from this present issue."

Looking at the teacher and getting the 'let's hear it' signal, Mr. Carson said: "My son says he doesn't eat all that well here -- plain rice, some stale bread, a few assorted grains, a couple of vegetables. Yet, my son also says that some of the older students eat very well, including lots of fancy chicken dishes ... why such an inequity? Why can't my son eat chicken like some of these other students do?"

The teacher remarked: "Ah, yes." He motioned for the father to follow him.

They went to an elevator and rode it to the basement. They walked a short distance and went through some double doors marked "Cafeteria."

The large room was nearly empty with only a few scattered people here and there. The teacher maneuvered around some tables and approached a man sitting by himself toward the back portion of the Cafeteria. The man had just finished a meal.

The teacher extended greetings to the seated individual, and these were cordially returned. The teacher sat down and invited his guest to do so as well.

When the two were seated, the teacher said: "This is Mr. Carson who is talking with me about various issues concerning the Center."

The two men exchanged a handshake. When this had been completed, they both looked over at the teacher.

He said: "How long have you been at the Center, Mark?"

"Oh, I don't know, maybe ... let's see ... maybe, 35 years," Mark said. He thought about it a bit more, and said: "Yeah, 35 years."

The teacher looked at Mark, and, then, he looked at the plate in front of the man, and, then, he looked at Mark once more.

Mark concentrated on the bones remaining on the plate, and, slowly, they became transformed into a whole chicken breast. When this was done, he got up and said good-bye to the teacher and Mr. Carson."

The guest was dumbfounded by what he had just seen ... or, thought he had seen. It couldn't be, but it was.

While Mr. Carson continued to stare at the plate in disbelief, the teacher whispered in his ear: "When your son can do that, Mr. Carson, he can have chicken too."

Falling Upwards

A saint lived in a city by the ocean. As often is the case, almost no one knew of his existence. With many friends of God, oftentimes the only ones who know about them are other, like-hearted friends, and, sometimes, Divinity even keeps some of these hidden from view ... much like a rich connoisseur of art locks away the most precious pieces of workmanship in a vault that is never open to the public.

Sometimes, people gather together just to spend time recounting the amazing stories of these spiritual treasures because of the sense of awe, peace, hope, inspiration, and happiness that hearing about the lives of such marvelous exemplars of human potential bring to one's soul. For example, one story making the rounds with respect to the aforementioned, relatively unknown saint involved the time that a man, who was in search of truth concerning the purpose of life, had been told by someone that if one wished to learn the secret of life, then, one should try to locate a particular person who lived in a certain city. Fortunately for this story, the person for whom the man was told to go in search of was none other than the saint to whom allusions are being made.

Following some hard work, the seeker after truth finally tracked down the saint about whom he had been told. He found the sought-for man sitting in a small garden just off the main square of town.

The saint appeared to be meditating on something or engaged in some other silent form of remembering the Friend, for his eyes were closed. There seemed to be an aura of peaceful contentment about him, and, yet, at the same time, the countenance of the saint seemed to glow with a sense of focus and concentration that radiated outward from whatever was going on within the saint's consciousness.

The man who had been looking for the saint sat down on a bench across from the penultimate dimension of his quest. Knowing something about the etiquette observed by the friends of God, he sat in respectful silence, waiting for an opportunity to address the saint.

Morning turned into afternoon, and the afternoon began to merge with the evening. Still, the saint had not moved, nor opened his eyes ... at least as far as the truth seeker knew, none of this happened. There were a few times when the visitor had grown weary of sitting or had become hungry or had to answer another of the calls of nature and, therefore, took a few short breaks before returning to the garden and resuming the vigil

once more ... and, therefore, the saint may have opened his eyes during these times of absence ... but other than this sort of possibility, there seemed to be no movement in the spiritual guide.

Finally, as night began to prevail and the town lights had been turned on, the truth seeker noticed a slight change in the body language of the saint. Shortly thereafter, the saint's eyes opened.

He rubbed his calves a bit, as if to restore a little circulation or to let them know they hadn't been entirely forgotten and glanced over at the man on the bench. "How are you?" the saint asked.

The man smiled and nodded his head, and, then, said: "Good, thank you. And you?"

"Wonderful!" he replied, "just wonderful."

The saint scratched his head slightly and inquired: "So, what brings you to our fair city?"

"You," the man said. "I have been told you know how to realize the purpose of life, and judging by the great concentration I have been witnessing in you throughout the day, I would say what I have been told about you may be correct. Where did you learn to concentrate like that?"

"My cat taught me," the saint replied. "One day I was watching him, and I was amazed that her eyes never left a mouse hole for hours on end, and, suddenly, I understood what needed to be done if I were ever to have even the faintest hope of discovering Divinity."

The foregoing vignette is actually only a prelude to something else, but the foregoing incident helps to establish a context of sorts.

More specifically, there was a time when the saint was returning home from his place of employment, and the hour was rather late.

The streets appeared to be deserted. The saint had a bag of groceries in his arms and had just turned a corner, ready to head down a long set of steps leading down the hill to his house, when he was surrounded by three thugs demanding his money.

Because he had spent what little money he possessed on the groceries which he was carrying, his wallet and pockets were empty of cash. When the thieves found out that the man had no money or valuables, they became enraged by the man's poverty and began to beat him.

Eventually, their anger subsided somewhat, but before coming back under complete control, they gave the saint one last shove, and the saint lost his balance and started to fall down the stairs which were nearby. Head over heel he went down the long flight of steps.

Scared by either the turn of events or the racket it was making, the would-be robbers ran from the scene. Lights began coming on in different houses in the neighborhood, and people looked out of windows and doorways to try to figure out what was going on.

The saint was now at the bottom of the stairs. Someone who had been walking in the street near where the saint lay rushed over to him. "Are you all right?" the passer-by asked.

The saint was conscious, and he blinked a few times, as if to reassure himself that he was still among the living. His eyes focused in on the woman who was standing above him.

He smiled and said: "Yes, I believe God has pulled me through this in remarkably good shape. In fact, I'm sorry there weren't more stairs."

A worried look spread across the woman's face. Undoubtedly, in view of the man's comment, such possibilities as concussion or head injury were dancing through her mind.

She gave the man on the ground a reassuring smile. She looked up, saw a neighbor standing in the doorway, asked her to call for medical assistance, and the neighbor raised her hand in acknowledgment before disappearing into a house.

The woman standing over the injured man returned her attention to the saint, kneeled down, and began trying to comfort the man as best she could. Hoping to gain further information that she might be able to pass on to the emergency team when they arrived, she inquired: "What did you mean when you said you wished there had been more stairs?"

The saint struggled to rise to a sitting position despite the woman's counsel that, perhaps, he should remain in a prone position until the medical people got there. He patted the woman on the shoulder and said: "No, really, I don't believe there is anything seriously wrong with me, but I will wait for the emergency people and let them look me over."

He was quiet for a moment, as if acclimating himself somewhat and regaining a degree of physical equilibrium. He looked at the woman and responded to her question: "Believe it or not, as I was falling down the stairs, each time my head

hit one of the stairs, God elevated my spiritual condition and showed me a new realm of Being. By the time I reached the bottom, what I was being shown through these states was so incredibly beautiful and filled me with such joy and awe, I was wishing there were more stairs left on which to hit my head.”

The woman’s gaze froze on the man in a ‘Houston, we’ve had a problem’ look. Surely, the man was suffering from hallucinations or something similar.

The woman chose not to believe what she was being told. But, the friends of God know otherwise.

The Crying Beggar

Alice had been watching the man for some time. Quite likely, he was homeless.

The man's shoes had holes on the sides where parts of his feet stuck out a little. The bottoms of his trousers were frayed, and there was a tear near one of the knees. The jacket he wore was soiled and ragged-looking. His face had the sallow hue of someone who: neither ate well, nor did any of the other things which are necessary to maintain health. His hair had an ongoing wild affair with the wind from which it only occasionally disengaged.

The man's obvious poverty was not what had drawn Alice's attention to him. After all, there were so many homeless individuals these days, and, for the most part, they disappeared into the background as people became habituated to their presence ... often on the periphery of one's awareness but rarely in the center of that attention.

No, what had attracted her was his behavior. She had been surreptitiously following him all day long, and, since she was a student at the university, she had both the time and the interest to pursue the moment ... even when it was an extended one.

The man didn't seem crazy. He wasn't mumbling to himself or carrying on arguments with unseen assailants or making bizarre gestures with his hands.

For the most part, he was very quiet and well-behaved. He wasn't bothering anyone, stealing anything, or panhandling.

He was just walking about the city. Yet, every so often the man would happen upon some situation or event, and he would begin to cry ... not just a few tears but copiously.

On these occasions, he did not wail or lament about anything. He just came to a stop, observed whatever was going on, and, then, he would begin crying.

The tears would fall for a minute or so, very heavily, and, then, almost as if a faucet had been twisted somewhere, the crying ended. When this happened, the man would start to walk again.

There seemed to be no pattern to the behavior. Both the walk and the crying appeared to be random.

The last time the man cried, he had witnessed -- and, therefore, Alice had, as well -- a loud argument between a couple who had broken up and were not shy about letting everyone know about it. The argument had gone on for a few minutes and ended when the young man walked off in a huff, leaving his former girlfriend behind in tears, begging the guy to come back.

Before that, he had cried when there was a fender-bender at an intersection. Although both parties involved in the accident were fairly upset over the damage which had accrued to their respective cars, they had been relatively civil to each other, exchanged insurance and registration information, and moved on with their lives.

However, as the two gentlemen got in their cars and were preparing to pull away, the poor man started to cry. He continued on with the tears until the two cars had disappeared in opposite directions, and, then, the crying discontinued.

Prior to the accident, there had been a procession which was being organized at a neighborhood funeral parlor. A casket was being placed in the hearse to be transported to one of this world's terminal junction points.

The man began crying. One of the people who were standing nearby tried to comfort the man.

Eventually, the procession got under way. The poor man did so as well.

Before the funeral, there had been a little boy who had been looking for his dog that, somehow, had managed to wiggle out of the harness being used to keep the dog in check. The boy was crying, and the homeless man joined him until the boy moved on, and the man started walking again but in a different direction.

The first event in this sequence of crying episodes that had been witnessed by Alice took place outside a local market. There had been some sort of altercation between the proprietor and one of her suppliers, and the two were exchanging insults and complaints about someone cheating someone.

Alice had been sitting at a sidewalk café, reading a book, taking leisurely sips from a coffee mug, and, occasionally, taking a bite of the buttered bagel she had ordered. The café was across the street from the market, and Alice had watched the whole scene unfold, including the appearance of the homeless

man and the first episode of crying ... at least it was the first instance of crying during the period of time when she subsequently became involved with whatever was taking place.

Time was running out for Alice. She had a 5:00 p.m. appointment at the university, but she also wanted some sort of resolution concerning her curiosity about the man's behavior.

She decided to follow the man for another half hour and see what transpired. ... if anything Irrespective of whether there were any further incidents of crying, at the end of this allotted time, she would approach the man and ask him why he was crying.

As she was watching the man, trying to stay back far enough not to be noticed but close enough not to lose him in the crowd of people who were out and about, she began to form various kinds of hypotheses concerning the behavior. One possibility was that while the man was not crazy in any certifiable sense, perhaps, he was emotionally disturbed and was very sensitive to any kind of conflict or tension which was going on around him.

Another possibility was that although the man might be homeless, maybe, nonetheless, the man considered the neighborhood to be his home. Being on the street each day for hours on end, perhaps, the man had come to be familiar with, and develop attachments to, the people who lived there and, as a result, sort of treated everyone as part of his vicarious family which he had conjured up.

Most of the events Alice had witnessed did seem to involve stress of one kind or another. On the other hand, both the little boy whose dog was lost -- at least, temporarily -- and the person who had comforted the homeless individual at the funeral home seemed to know the man, and, maybe, in ways that Alice was not aware of, the homeless person might know, on some level, all of the other people who had been associated with the bouts of crying. Alice was leaning toward the 'vulnerability to conflict' hypothesis, but she had not completely closed the door on the 'vicarious family' possibility.

The homeless man walked by someone who was singing a line from an old Guy Mitchell song -- 'I never felt more like singing the blues,' and the homeless man began to cry. The individual who had been singing stopped and asked the man if he was okay ... if there was anything wrong".

The man whom Alice had been following cried for just a bit longer, shivered slightly with a sigh, and, then, told the singer that he was all right, and he thanked the man for asking about his welfare. The homeless man began to be on the move once again.

Alice checked her watch, worked up her nerve, and began quickening her pace in order to overtake the man she had been watching. She finally caught up to him, slowed down to match his pace, and said: "I have a confession to make."

The man was very casual about being addressed and replied: "What confession would that be?"

"I hope," Alice responded, "you won't be too upset with me when I tell that I have been following you for quite some time while observing your behavior."

"Why would I be upset over that?" the man asked. "It's a free country, and, to be honest with you, I find it rather flattering that someone would want to spend so much time taking an interest in anything I do. This is certainly not the normal way people tend to interact with me."

The two walked on in silence for ten strides, or so, and the man said: "Well, might I ask why I have become such a cause célèbre with you?"

Alice was somewhat taken aback by the question ... not so much that it was asked but in the way it was asked. Somewhere in this man's background there appeared to have been some degree of exposure to culture and education.

Hesitatingly at first, but picking up steam as she went along, Alice summarized what she had seen since first seeing the man at the market store across from the café. She concluded with: "I've been debating with myself over the reasons why you have been crying. I'm not trying to pry, and if this involves something too personal, then, I'll drop the matter and leave you in peace, but I guess your behavior has aroused my curiosity, and, if you can, is there something you are able to share with me about what has been going on throughout the afternoon?"

"For instance, why were you crying when you heard the guy singing?" Alice specified.

The man said: "The kid had just lost his girl friend. He was upset, and he was trying to sing away the blues via the Blues."

“Do you know the fellow who was singing?” Alice inquired. “Nope,” the man said in a laconic style reminiscent of Gary Cooper. “Then, how do you know why he was singing?” Alice pressed. “It’s hard to say, really,” the man replied. “I just know things, but I’m not exactly sure how what I know gets into me.”

“Well,” Alice added, “what about the people at the market where this whole affair -- at least, for me -- all started? Did you know any of those people?”

“Nope,” he answered.

“Were you upset by the conflict and tension associated with any of those events?” Alice asked, having eliminated one of her two hypotheses. “Not really,” the man responded.

“Did you know any of the people at the places where you cried?” Alice inquired, trying to narrow down the possibilities.

“Nope,” the man said.

Alice put her hand on his arm, slowing him down to a standstill. She turned to him and said: “Let me get this straight ... you weren’t reacting to the stress or conflict at any of those incidents, and you didn’t know any of those people, so why were you crying?”

“At their sense of loss,” the man said simply. “If you will review the nature of those events, there was some kind of loss, or perceived loss, involved in each set of circumstances. I was crying about their sense of loss.”

“But, that’s silly,” Alice retorted. “Why would you cry about people losing something when you don’t even know them?”

“Actually, it’s not silly at all. Now, you want to know what is silly ... people being upset about losing things and relationships which do not really belong to them. The money, the cars, the boyfriend, the girlfriend, the dog, the life which had passed on ... none of those belonged to the people in question. They belong to God, and Divinity was merely taking back that which had been loaned to the various people for Divine purposes.

“I cried because all of those people are so attached to that which they do not own and which is not their property. The fact of the loss is God’s business, and, therefore, why should I cry about that? This is just the way things are ... it’s the nature of life.

“However, I do have empathy for all the individuals involved in these incidents because of the suffering they endure so long as they are

under the illusion that they have lost something which belongs to them rather than being witnesses to the great returning which occurs when that which has been given, on a purely temporary basis, reverts back to the true Owner of all things for further disposition.”

The man smiled at Alice and said: “I believe you have a 5:00 p.m. appointment, and I suppose you better hurry or you may find me crying over your sense of loss, as well, if you should miss that appointment.”

No Time

The man rushed into the spiritual center and approached the several members who already had gathered in preparation for the evening's program. "Have you heard the latest about that so-called teacher Nate Williams over on the other side of town?" he asked with breathless exhilaration.

The man's question was met with silent interest and unspoken encouragement through the body language of the other members. He took a seat, ran his fingers through his hair in a combing fashion, and expanded further on his news: "Well, it seems he's in a real pickle. Apparently, there are some questions being asked about his use of discretionary funds. One is hearing the phrase 'misappropriation of funds' sung over there quite a lot these days.

"Can you imagine it ... a guy has the gall to try to pass himself off as a spiritual guide, but, in reality, he may be fleecing the flock instead of leading them into the pastures of righteousness?" He shook his head as if he found the whole situation to be an incredible irony.

"The man has the audacity to claim he has taken an oath of poverty. What he doesn't say is that his oath seems to involve relieving others of their money so they become poor rather than him.

One of the other members of the small group added: "From what I have heard, the funny business surrounding the center's finances is only the tip of the iceberg which has ripped their ship apart.

She looked briefly at each of the others, got the equivalent of a 'thumbs up' via their expressions, and proceeded to say: "A friend of mine, who is close to one of the members at that center, says there have been quite a few stories floating about concerning sexual misconduct as well.

The excitement of the hunt was written on her features as she recounted what she had been told. She noted: "Although no children, thank God, are involved, apparently a lot of hanky-panky has been going on during 'special' teaching sessions ... if you get my drift ... in which, apparently, union with the Beloved has become a code for something else."

"I don't think it stops there," chipped in another man. "I've heard this Williams guy spends a lot of times drinking in a tavern downtown, and, then, once the bars close, he heads off to some speakeasy, or other, for a night of

excesses. I guess the only thing he keeps a night vigil for is to determine whether his glass is empty or full ... a real drunk if you ask me.”

Another woman joined in the discussion. “I’ve talked with some of the parents at that center. They don’t seem to be very pleased with the educational programs which Williams has put in place.

“The guy keeps saying things like: one has to talk to people according to their level of understanding, but the parents are beginning to think the fellow is just a flimflam artist. They want results, and he just keeps stalling them with a lot of hocus-pocus about how the journey is a long, difficult struggle, with many ups and downs.”

As the small group was reflecting on all that had been said, another person walked into the room. She greeted everyone and took a seat near them.

The newcomer inquired about what was going on, and she was brought up to date. When she was up to speed, one of the people in the group asked her what she thought about the entire mess at the other center.

The woman pursed her lips, raised her eyebrows, and, then, sighed. “I guess there are a few things which can be said. First, I understand some of the people in that center have been saying similar things about our own teacher. Secondly, I really don’t know what the truth of the matter is when it comes to what their teacher may, or may not, be doing, but I do know I love and trust our spiritual guide, and he has told me not to go sniffing out the sins of other people as well as a warning concerning the vulnerability of people living in fragile houses or some such thing. In fact, I’m so busy with thinking about, and trying to apply, the teachings of my own guide, as well as with constantly seeking to remember God, that, quite frankly, I really have no time to think about Nate Williams.”

Asymmetry

Owen was devoted to his spiritual guide, and this had been so for years. He would hang around the center, looking for anything he could find which needed to be done and with which his teacher might be pleased.

Nearness to his teacher made Owen very content. Even if Owen were not in direct contact with his guide, just being in the same building as his teacher, or going on some errand for his guide, generated a sense of happiness within Owen and seemed to sustain him while he performed this or that task.

Like most people, Owen had his shortcomings. However, Owen was aware of many of them and was constantly struggling to become more spiritually mature.

One issue that did bother Owen -- and he was not really sure whether the issue touched on a problem within him or was a problem in certain other people -- is that Owen became upset when he saw anything which he felt was disrespectful toward, or inconsiderate of, his teacher. As far as Owen was concerned, a spiritual guide is sort of like a philosopher's stone that, through the Grace of God, serves as a catalytic agent or surface which greatly enhances and facilitates the process of spiritual transformation within a seeker.

Owen felt that when an individual was disrespectful to her or his spiritual guide such an individual was committing two errors. First, Owen believed treating the friends of God in a disrespectful way was just plain wrong ... in fact, according to Owen, such actions, ultimately, displayed disrespect for the One Who had assigned the Divine friend to help Creation.

Secondly, Owen was of the opinion that people who were inconsiderate of, or disrespectful toward, or failed to show an appropriate spiritual etiquette with respect to their teacher were really putting spiritual obstacles in their own way. Indeed, they were distancing themselves from the very means -- the secondary cause -- through which God ... the Primary Cause ... brought about spiritual transformation.

Owen believed that just as Divinity used certain chemical or physical substances as catalytic agents to induce material reactions which served Divine purposes, so, too, he believed God used certain human beings -- the Prophets, saints, and spiritual guides -- as catalytic agents to help induce spiritual reactions that served Divine purposes. As

above, so below ... the Purpose and Cause were the same, but in the material and spiritual worlds Divine intention was given expression through laws of a physical or spiritual nature that were manifested through an appropriate media or means -- physical media in the case of chemical catalysis and human media in the case of spiritual catalysis.

Consequently, from the perspective through which Owen approached life, if a person was disrespectful to his or her spiritual teacher, this was like cutting off one's nose to spite one's face. Owen felt a spiritual counterpart to Newton's first law of physics -- which says that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction -- came into play, and, therefore, people only brought spiritual difficulty onto themselves via their own thoughtlessness concerning the spiritual guide ... not because the teacher wanted this to happen ... it was just the way things tended to work ... at least Owen believed this to be true.

There had been several relevant incidents last week, in particular, which Owen had witnessed that had upset him. For example, in one case, a man who was affiliated with the spiritual center had been talking to some newcomers, and rather than let these people meet with, and talk with, or listen to, the spiritual guide directly, the fellow had taken it upon himself to speak on behalf of the teacher and in the process had created some confusion and misunderstandings.

Eventually, when the newcomers met with the spiritual guide, these confusions and problems got sorted out, but a considerable amount of difficulty had arisen as a result of what this person had done. Although Owen was willing to concede the counterfeit teacher probably had the best of intentions and was just trying to be helpful but got carried away by his ill-considered, enthusiastic impatience, nonetheless, Owen had taken the man aside and let him know that what he was doing, however well-intended, was being very disrespectful to the spiritual guide. Not only was the man trying to usurp a spiritual function which did not belong to him, but he was creating difficulties for his spiritual guide.

Then, there had been that whole speaking engagement mess. Someone had called the center and wanted the spiritual guide to address an assembly of some kind about mysticism.

The teacher had been otherwise occupied at the time and couldn't take the call. Defying all common sense, rather than taking a message and passing it on to the teacher for his disposition, the woman who had been

doing phone duty at the time took it upon herself to say the teacher would be happy to speak with the group, and she did a first rate job of taking down all the details involving place, date, and time ... only to discover, subsequently, that the teacher was already booked at that time and date. Unfortunately, by the time the teacher had come to know about the double booking, the second group had begun to advertise the teacher's appearance.

Owen didn't know exactly how his teacher had resolved the fiasco, but, somehow, in his own amazing way, his guide had, once again, by the Grace of God, been able to find a way to accommodate everyone without anyone being inconvenienced or embarrassed. In the meantime, Owen had tried to help the woman at the heart of the mess to understand that this simply wasn't the way to do things and it showed a great deal of disrespect for the teacher.

Owen had tried to maintain equanimity during the exchange with the woman. However, he wasn't entirely successful -- although he had behaved quite a lot better than he frequently did under similar circumstances, which, Owen supposed, indicated some degree of spiritual improvement.

On occasion, the thought crossed Owen's mind that, perhaps, he should not be trying to inform these people about their mistakes - - even if he did so quietly and unobtrusively. On the other hand, the spiritual quality of his teacher was such that the man often did not chastise people directly for their misdeeds ... although there had been a few exceptions to this general principle which Owen had come to know about over the years.

His teacher preferred other, more indirect, subtle methods. Owen believed educators referred to this approach as waiting for "teachable moments" to arise and, then, taking advantage of such moments when they occurred.

Owen remembered one occasion of this sort very well for he had been at its fulcrum point. Owen had not been with the spiritual center very long when his teacher -- who even then, had been elderly and periodically suffering from bouts of ill-health -- had asked someone to request Owen to do something.

The chore was relatively simple. Owen was to take something to one of the caretakers of a spiritual shrine on top of the hill that rose up behind the center.

The hill was not huge, but it was not small either. Making the hike from the bottom to the top took about an hour, and in some places, even

though there was a cut trail all the way, the angle of incline was fairly steep.

Whether it was laziness or feeling hurt he had not been asked directly by his teacher or something else, Owen was not quite certain, but the bottom line was that Owen put off doing the task. Two or three hours later, when his assigned task still had not been completed, his teacher -- frail health and all -- walked to the top of the hill in the heat of the afternoon ... and it had been one of the hottest days of the summer ... and delivered the desired object to the caretaker of the shrine.

His teacher had never mentioned the incident to Owen. In fact, he treated Owen with even more love and compassion after the incident than Owen believed to be the case prior to the incident.

Yet, Owen had gotten the message loud and clear. Owen had cried about that occasion many times since and still deeply regretted the disrespect and inconsiderateness which he had displayed on that day.

He had been trying to repent for his mistake ever since. Owen supposed his own mistake might form a substantial part of why he took it upon himself to speak with people and try to warn them about the importance of showing consideration and respect for the teacher under all circumstances.

Consequently, although he did, sometimes, wonder if he was being presumptuous in talking with certain people when such things came to his attention, he also felt that as long as he kept things quiet and didn't try to embarrass these individuals in front of others, then, maybe, it was okay. Besides, he was sure if there was a problem surrounding what he, on occasion, was doing in this respect, then, sooner or later, his teacher would say something to him about the matter.

One day Owen was helping out in the kitchen. There was going to be a celebration at the center later that evening, and quite a few people were expected to attend, and, as a result, a lot of preparation was required since a banquet was on the menu.

Practically everyone at the center was helping out in one way or another. Owen had pulled kitchen duty, and he was just about to go to the market to pick up some supplies when one of members of the center indicated that before he went the spiritual guide had wanted Owen to speak with the teacher in order to make certain everything that was needed from the market would be obtained.

Owen went upstairs to the teacher's office, knocked on the door, and heard the words: "Come in." His teacher greeted Owen warmly.

"Please, Owen, take a seat," he requested. When Owen sat down, he inquired: "How are the preparations coming along?"

Owen replied: "Quite well, I think. We still have a ways to go, but I feel everything will be ready in time."

His teacher said: "Wonderful," and added, "I understand you are on the way to the market to gather some last minute items."

"That's right," Owen remarked.

"Good, good," he responded. The teacher seemed to be preoccupied about something or other, and Owen waited for him to say whatever he was thinking about.

The teacher said: "When you go to the market today, I want you to take special care to treat everyone you meet with lots of empathy and compassion. I know, Owen, you understand that whenever any of the people affiliated with the center go out into the community that they reflect, to varying degrees, something about our center's spiritual teachings and principles.

"In a sense, anyone who goes into the community is like an emissary, of sorts, for the center, and we should always try to be on our best behavior in order to avoid whatever problems and unpleasantness we can. However, there is also another reason for doing this.

"More specifically, everyone, whatever they may or may not believe about God, is part of God's Creation. In that sense, all of Creation is sacred and deserves to be treated with as much respect as, God willing, one's spiritual capacity permits.

"Now, I find no fault with the way you have been conducting yourself whenever you have gone into the community. Indeed, on such outings, you always have represented the center very well.

"But I also know that, sometimes, this is a struggle for you. So, what I wanted to do is give you a way of looking at things which may make such interactions easier for you.

"I know you love me very much, Owen. You have tremendous respect for me because, among other things, you feel, as you once explained to me, that you consider a mystical guide as sort of a spiritual version of the philosopher's stone and that through association with me you feel you

absorb, by God's Grace, certain qualities which are helpful to you in your spiritual quest. And there is some truth in how you feel about this matter.

"But what I would like you to do, Owen, is to treat everybody as if they are your spiritual guide ... for, in a sense, they are. God teaches us through all the events of our lives, including the people with whom we meet, and not just through those events revolving around one's spiritual teacher. I want you to show the same respect to everyone else that you very obviously show to me.

"A spiritual teacher may, by the Grace of God, have a special function to perform and, in fact, does have a role that no one else can duplicate and for which others cannot serve as a substitute. But this special function does not entitle the teacher to special treatment.

"If I am deserving of respect, then, really, all are deserving of respect. Everyone should be treated with the same consideration and willingness to help them out as best one's circumstances permit.

"If people at the center treat me better than they treat other people merely because of my special function, then, perhaps, I have not properly communicated a very important principle of our spiritual way. To the best of our ability, we should treat everyone, both inside and outside the center, as sacred expressions of God's creation."

The teacher smiled a very loving smile. "Well, I shouldn't delay you any further, Owen. I know you have a number of errands to run. I do appreciate all your efforts on our behalf, but do try to keep in mind what I've said just now."

Owen thanked his teacher and left. Walking down the stairs, Owen realized that while, on the surface, his teacher had been talking primarily about Owen's trip to the market, in reality his guide had been actually talking about the events of recent weeks. His spiritual teacher had, in fact, gotten around to talking to him about what had been transpiring over the last several weeks -- but in the teacher's own inimitable manner.

Reunion

They had been meeting every year on this date for nearly six years. The occasion marked their way of commemorating the passing on of their former spiritual guide.

There were just six who were able to attend this year's gathering. Over the last several years, time, disease, and accidents had removed four people from their annual, group festival ... no doubt those four would be observing the event from somewhere in the next world.

Setting aside a day to remember someone of relevance to one's spiritual pursuits was not uncommon. Many people celebrated the lives of various saints or observed the day when such and such a spiritual being left this world to live amidst the spiritual gardens of Divinity.

However, there was something a little different about the nature of this annual reunion. The person whose life was being remembered was a fraud ... a spiritual charlatan ... a false guide.

The individual who was the focus of these festivities had not died seven years ago, and the reunion had not begun the year following the man's death. In fact, the person had died nearly ten years ago, but it took awhile – and this period was longer for some than for others – to work through the toxicity and problems associated with discovering that the individual one once cared so much about and one thought so highly of was, in truth, nothing but a very clever, charming, manipulative, narcissistic sociopath.

For a long time, many of the members of this reunion group, including the ones who had since passed away, had been drowning in a turbulent ocean of shock, denial, betrayal, grief, alienation, frustration, and anger. To come to the realization that another human being would be willing to go to such lengths in order to hurt one through devising elaborate ways to fill one's life with calculated misery ... this realization would be devastating enough. But, then, when one factored in how intimate the relationship had been ... there really were no words to describe how confused, empty, and adrift one felt amidst the storm set in motion by the revelation that the individual was a spiritual fraud.

The man had been invited into their homes. He had slept and broke bread in all of their homes. He had been invited into their families. He had been invited into their hearts and souls.

Once the reality of what had been going on finally became clear, they each felt, in his or her own way, like an individual from some science fiction movie in which the monster or alien being, once it gains access, slithers about inside one's consciousness, feeding from within, laying eggs here and there to hatch later ... hatchlings that will eat away at the host from deep within the soul ... silently, secretly, painfully, destructively.

In the first stages of this invasion, one is unconscious or unaware of what resides within ... as if mesmerized by some strange narcotic that dulls the mind and understanding. Later--and this is part of the alien's 'fun' -- one begins to awake to the horror of what has taken up residence inside of one.

Some people come to this stage and become paralyzed. They are like those climbers who are frozen with fear, and, as a result, they are unable to do anything that might help them save themselves. They know what is at stake, and that is why they are afraid, but they cannot bring themselves to either continue up the face of the mountain or to try to work their way back down from whence they came.

Other people who have come to realize the presence of spiritual abuse are, for reasons best known to God, somehow able to get their feet moving. Despite their enervated condition -- despite being in shock and reeling from confusion, doubt, embarrassment, uncertainty, and betrayal, somehow, by the Grace of God, these individuals begin to take the baby steps which are necessary to begin to extricate themselves from the situation.

Even for these lucky individuals, the way forward is fraught with difficulty because the poison of spiritual abuse lingers in the system for some time. Furthermore, such individuals must deal with a world that, for the most part, has very little insight into the problem of spiritual abuse even though many of these same people are victims of spiritual abuse themselves but are still locked in the stage of unconsciousness when, due to the presence of a mind and mood-altering narcotic, they believe everything is okay, and they have not, yet, realized the horror of their situation.

Many of these people wonder how one could be so naive and foolish. They wonder how anyone could be so stupid as to not recognize the presence of spiritual fraud.

They suppose everything is like the movies when, as members of the audience, one often enjoys the advantage of having elements of the script shown to one

which indicate that, for example, a given character is a con-artist and the hero or heroine are, unknown to the latter, at risk. Or, these people tend to forget that most good movie scripts are framed in ways such that even members of the audience are taken in by the underlying twists and turns of the plot that no one in the audience saw coming.

People are fooled all the time -- by spouses, children, friends, lovers, neighbors, the media, organizations, government officials, advertisers, educators, lobbyists, corporations, and business people. Events are framed in ways that make things appear other than they are, and like Charlie Brown and Lucy, no matter how many times the latter individual has removed the football just before the former individual tries to kick it, we always seem to be willing to believe that this time the ball really will remain where it is supposed to be.

To be sure, there are frauds that are so inept that they are easy to see through. But not all charlatans are made from the same cloth.

The former guide of the reunion group was an extraordinary fraud. He was intelligent, charming, insightful, lots of fun to be with, knowledgeable, as well as full of interesting and informative stories.

He had the capacity – whether natural or unnatural – to read people, as well as the ability to insinuate himself in precisely those areas where a given individual was most vulnerable ... most at risk. He had the knack of faking sincerity and, thereby, leading a person to believe that he cared about that individual's problems and life.

He had the 'common touch'. That is to say, he could induce people, irrespective of their station in life, to feel that he understood them... that he was one of them ... that he was just a regular person who happened to enjoy the great good fortune to have been brought near Divinity, as well as having been given the immense responsibility of helping others to struggle toward their Lord.

It seemed virtually impossible not to like the man ... not to feel warm toward him. He was so attentive ... so accommodating.

He was not harsh and threatening like so many religious figures seemed to be. He wasn't into condemning people but, rather, he was committed – or so he said -- to encouraging, supporting, and assisting those in spiritual need in constructive ways.

He was the friend one always hoped for. He was like a wonderful grandparent who just stepped out of a Norman Rockwell painting.

At a certain point, if anyone had come to the members of the reunion group – prior to their having distanced themselves from the ‘spiritual guide’ – and had began hurling charges at their ‘guide’, they would have been outraged. They would have wondered if the person making the charges was either seriously mentally competent or whether, perhaps, that individual was an agent of the Devil ... someone who had been sent to wage war with one of God’s soldiers.

Whenever such tawdry incidents did occur, the ‘teacher’ handled himself admirably. He said that his heart ached for this sort of poor unfortunate who had become caught up in the web that had been spun by Satan. He said he forgave the person and would pray for that individual and would continue to be the person’s well-wisher.

Gradually, over time and across events, rumors began to circulate about certain improprieties of the ‘guide’. At first, the members of what would become the reunion group discounted such rumors as just that ... rumors.

Sooner or later, all authentic spiritual teachers must go through the unpleasantness of evil-intentioned people trying to throw slime at a good person in the hope that some of what is thrown will stick in some way and, thereby, create difficulties for the authentic guide. Anything which might induce followers of the teacher to begin to have doubts about the spiritual authenticity of their guide was a useful weapon in the arsenal of those who are up to no good.

The members of the future reunion group were, in the beginning, of this opinion. They rallied around the teacher and became more fervently committed than ever before.

Eventually, however, ‘things’ began to happen to the members of the not-yet-formed reunion group. Some of them came to know, without any possibility of error, that the ‘teacher’ had spread lies about them among other members of the ‘guide’s’ following. Some of these individuals came to be sexually abused by the ‘teacher’. Some of them were betrayed in other essential ways.

For a time, these individuals were too confused, embarrassed, shocked, and bewildered by what had been transpiring in their lives with respect to the ‘guide’ to talk about what was going on either with ‘outsiders’ who

often were derisive of anything having to do with mysticism or spirituality, or with other people who also were followers of the 'teacher'. But a time came when, by the Grace of God, these haunted individuals began to do the one thing that the 'teacher' did not anticipate ... they began to share information with one another instead of remaining like isolated, wounded, fearful animals.

At first, there was an unwillingness to trust either themselves or anyone else with such delicate matters. Once a person is betrayed in essential ways, trusting anyone or anything – especially oneself – becomes a very difficult thing to do ... it is like going back into the waters in which Jaws swims and from whose teeth one has just miraculously and inexplicably escaped. These people tend to be filled with a deep sense of existential trepidation as well as beset with virulent, essential attacks of soul-stopping doubt and uncertainty.

Those who began to discuss, explore, analyze, and reflect on the issues before them started to heal ... little by little. But the healing process was quite protracted and subject to many setbacks.

There were others who, for whatever reason, were unprepared to talk about what was going on. These individuals did not seem to fare as well in the recovery process.

They remained embittered, alienated, confused, given to resentment, and cast adrift on the perilous waters of existence. They could not go forward, nor did they feel there was anything of value to which they could return. They had become lost in something akin to a spiritual Mariana Trench.

Prior to the formation of the reunion group, those individuals who later would become its members went through a protracted debriefing period with one another. They served as compassionate witnesses for each other ... people who were willing to listen with empathy to what was being said and who were willing to extend whatever compassion they could during the debriefing process.

They would go over things again and again. They would sift through the debris with great deliberateness and attention to detail.

They argued together. They got angry with themselves together. They grieved together. They came to understand together, and they started to heal together.

A point in the healing process arrived, however, when, by general consensus, they felt it was time to take a break from their group activities and walk about on their own for awhile. They each wanted an opportunity to try to reflect on events from their individual perspective, needs, and circumstances.

Several years later, several of these individuals happened to run into one another during a community event. They reminisced and commiserated for a time, and, then, one of these individuals broached the idea of getting together for a reunion ... maybe as a way to compare notes and check for any problematic residual effects that might be left over from their days with the 'guide'.

Phone calls were made. Details were worked out. A time and place were arranged for later that summer.

When they all assembled together on the occasion of the first reunion, things began a little tentatively. Nonetheless, not much time had to pass before their initial shyness and reservations faded away and the celebration began in earnest.

There were many toasts of gratitude that night ... for having been shown the truth ... for having been given the strength of character to break free from the mesmerizing gravitational pull of their former 'teacher' ... for having been given one another ... for having had the opportunity to heal ... for being able to eventually eliminate the toxicity of their former 'guide' from their system ... for having been given a way to learn about themselves and life in a way that might only have been possible through the detour provided ... for having been allowed to retain their spiritual faith despite what had taken place ... for being able to still be open to possibility – albeit perhaps a little more cautiously than previously might have been the case ... for having been shown the way to forgiveness and being able to let the past go ... for being able to laugh about life's perplexing aspects and being able to enjoy life's many wonderful opportunities ... for having been permitted to love again -- for having been helped to triumph over evil.

Near the end of the evening marking this first reunion, one of the participants said: "You know, I don't believe there would be anything more upsetting and disturbing to our previous 'mentor' than for him to feel that in spite of his best efforts he had failed and that notwithstanding his many attempts to bring misery and devastation into

our lives, we have, by the Grace of God, sailed through the daunting seas which he set in motion with his inclination toward evil. Moreover, I believe he would be deeply saddened to know that once again, by the Grace of God, we are enjoying life rather than feeling like miserable, raw, embittered, angry, wretches ... which is, I believe, what he would have liked.

“So, I propose that we make this festivity an annual affair. Let us continue to rejoice in the fact that, with God’s help, we have survived our close encounter of the worst kind with spiritual abuse. Let us mark our gratitude for all that has been bestowed upon us – the problematic as well as delightful – with a commemoration each and every year at the same time.”

The suggestion carried unanimously that night. It was considered to be the very first plank in the group’s ‘Spiritual Bill of Rights’. During each succeeding celebration, a new plank was added that was acted upon and, as a result, enriched their lives.