

The Z Factor

Shahriar Shahriari

To my mother, Firouzeh,
Who often wonders what it is that I do in life.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I honor the spirit of *Zarathushtra*, that ancient reformer of thought and teacher of great wisdom, whose teachings have influenced life on this planet, even though there are few who are aware of it. It is in *Zarathushtra's* honor that this story is entitled "*The Z Factor*".

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Finally and above all, to *Ahura Mazda*, the Supremely Wise Lord of Creation, my singular boundless source of inspiration and vitality, I am grateful for Life and the varied and wondrous experience of living.

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Foreword

Every creative work starts with a seed, with an inspiration and an image that the creator of that work has in mind. Yet more often than not, the creative work takes a life of its own and directs its own growth.

When I began writing this story, my intention was to use a very mundane setting and a familiar environment as a real and every day backdrop to illustrate the practicality of the teachings of Zarathushtra. I wanted to keep the experiences earthly, the language simple, and the characters ordinary, to show that it is not only possible, but also desirable to live a life based on his teachings.

What's more, to achieve this effectively, in a number of places, I have taken creative license to present scenarios that may or may not be realistic. I have made plants grow quickly and out of season. I have mixed ghetto settings with suburban mentality and vice versa. And I have kept life in this book simplistic and at times perhaps even too comfortable to be real - all to one end - to illustrate how Zarathushtra's teachings may apply to our day and age.

When the story was first completed, I thought perhaps its best use would be to turn it into a script for a movie. Yet "*The Z Factor*" had a different plan. It is now being introduced to the world and specifically to the Zoroastrian community of North America as a teaching tool. Who knows where it will end up. Perhaps one day it will become a movie. Perhaps it may inspire one of its readers to come up with a script of mythical influence to complete the intended purpose of this book. Or perhaps it will live a quiet existence of being a simple teaching tool for a brief period of time.

In any event, I am grateful for the opportunity of handling the pen that wrote it, and being able to see it take form and witness its growth and its life.

Take nothing that is written in this book as the Truth. Challenge everything presented here, for yourself. After all, you are responsible for your own choices.

In any case, I hope you do enjoy reading this book. And if you concur with the teachings of Zarathushtra, the best tribute that you can pay him is to live a life worthy of living, and in accordance with the Laws and Principles that were first introduced to the world by him.

May we all live a life dedicated to the renovation of the world.

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Happy and Blissful
is the person who does the right thing,
because it is the right thing to do.

The Z Factor

Answering The Call The Right To Choose

The sound of the gunshots jolted me awake. After a brief pause and finding my bearings, I looked at my alarm clock. It was 2:43 a.m. I was still in the only room of my basement suite. It was another unusually hot winter night in South Central. I could hardly go to sleep and kept tossing and turning on my mattress.

As I looked around my room, I could barely see the outlines of my empty room. The street light in the corner, the only one still working, shone its dim light through the small ground level window of my room. “Yet another sleepless night,” I thought to myself.

My frustration had reached explosive levels. Lack of sleep, together with the very noisy and tense neighborhood had depleted my patience and had left me with no peace of mind. God, what was to be done?

I looked at the clock again. It was 2:44. “When will it be morning again?” I asked in my head. I wanted to go for a walk and perhaps cool off a little. But my neighborhood wasn’t exactly the kind of place you would go for a walk. Perhaps in the middle of the day, but not at this ungodly hour.

I went to the sink beside the toilet to drink some water. All this time I was cursing and thinking to myself, “why? Why all of this? God, why don’t you answer me? Are you out there anywhere, or did we just make you up to give ourselves some comfort? How can there be a God with all this violence, pain and hardship?”

Helplessly, I made my way back to my mattress, pulled the sheet over my body and tried to empty my mind, so that maybe I could go back to sleep.

* * *

On Tuesday afternoon, I finished my shift at the bakery at 2 o’clock. I worked there four days a week, and had been saving my wages to buy a car. I had saved enough for a cheap second hand car, provided that I took care of some of the maintenance myself. “Perhaps if I got a car, the girl in the local 7-11 would pay more attention to me,” I thought.

I probably could have made a lot of money if I had joined one of the local gangs, and maybe could have driven a Camaro or something, but I was a bit of a loner, and frankly, I never liked to carry guns, much less use them.

When I was twelve, my best friend overdosed on some bad designer crap someone had sold him, and ever since then, I just kept myself to myself. I was quite afraid of dying but I didn’t want to tell anyone else about it. I guess my techniques worked because everyone else also left me alone.

Anyway, on that Tuesday afternoon, I picked up a copy of the local paper and was going through the used car ads. I found a cheap VW Beetle that was at least 20 years old. I called the guy up from the payphone by the 7-11 store and made an appointment for half past three. I was some way away, so I started walking,

but made it there fifteen minutes early.

I decided not to wait and knocked on the door. After half a minute a small built elder man with grayish hair and a distinctive gray beard opened the door. I introduced myself and asked if he didn't mind me getting there early. He was quite happy and invited me in.

His house must have had two or three bedrooms, but we sat in the living room in front of the house. He offered me a glass of lemonade and started the conversation, "what do you do?"

"I work in a bakery," I answered politely, wondering what that had to do with anything. "I am the assistant to the assistant baker. You know, I mix the dough and stuff like that." I tried to end this and direct the conversation to the car.

"Where do you live?" He asked.

I was somewhat reluctant to tell him, so I said, "look, I am interested in buying a car and have saved up enough money to pay cash for it. Does it matter where I live or what I do?"

He chuckled and gently said, "I have owned this car for twenty two years. I know every noise that it makes and I can feel its every little vibration. It has been very good to me and has taken me to many places. Now, I feel it can serve others much better than it can serve me, as I am settling down and won't need to go to that many places. But I want to reciprocate its kindness by putting it in good hands. I don't expect you to agree with my approach, but this is what I intend to do. You are more than welcome to leave and look for another car if my inquiries offend you." Then he just continued looking at me very calmly with a faint and almost undetectable smile.

He was silent and waiting for my reply, so before the moment became too uncomfortable, I said, "actually, you are right. I don't understand it. But if what you are saying is true, then it must be a very special car!"

"As a matter of fact, it is."

I proceeded to tell him where I lived. I noticed him shuffle in his seat a little, perhaps feeling uncomfortable about the future home of his car. He continued, "I don't assume you will have a garage for the car?"

"No," was my blunt reply.

"Well," he continued, "that's not important. What is important is what type of a person you are, and how much you are willing to give love and care to the car."

I couldn't believe my ears. Who had ever heard of giving love and care to a car? But I kept quiet.

"Why do you want to buy a car?" He asked.

"Well, because I want to use it to go places. And perhaps find a better job and move up in life." I paused, but then deciding to be honest with him, I added, "and there is this girl at 7-11..." I stopped there.

He smiled and said, "so you want to impress her... well, that is not important. What is important is that you were honest and truthful. That is good."

"Who is this man?" I asked myself. Then asked him, "who are you?"

"They call me Z," he replied. "I am a traveler and have been to many places, but finally decided to settle in South Central. It is one of the more humane places in the country."

"Is he out of his mind?" I thought to myself. "One of the most violent maybe, but humane?" But I only asked him, "what do you mean?"

"Oh sure," he said briefly, "it may be violent, but there is a lot of heart and a lot of wisdom here. If you

know where to look for it.”

I never imagined my car buying would turn out this way.

“Can you drive? Do you have a license?” He asked.

“Anyone can drive,” I replied. “And I was going to get my license as soon as I have a car to take the test in.”

“No, no, no. That won’t do.” He paused and thought for a moment. Then continued, “I think you may be the right person for this car, but you will have to take some instructions and get a license before I sell you the car. But not to worry, I can teach you.” He didn’t wait for my reply and continued, “in fact this way is better. If I teach you, I’ll know how good a driver you are, and I can train you well. Yes... that is the best way.”

“Wait a minute,” I protested. “But I haven’t even seen the car, and I don’t know if I like it.”

“Oh you will,” he brushed my comment aside. “I know you will love the car. And in fact, I have a feeling that this car will serve you as well as it did me.”

Then he got up and said, “let’s go.”

“Where?” I protested again.

“To see the car!” He said, somewhat surprised.

* * *

As soon as I entered his garage, the glimmer of the white Beetle hit my eyes. It was beautiful.

He opened the garage door, then unlocked the car, got in and switched it on. It started immediately and worked like clockwork. You could hear the distinctive burr and hum of the VW from its rear engine. “You must maintain the car yourself,” I commented.

“Well of course, why?”

“Because no mechanic would give so much care and attention to someone else’s car,” I heard myself echoing his earlier comments.

He gave me a knowing smile and said, “any mechanic who would give this much attention to other people’s cars will never be out of work. Just like any baker who would bake with so much love and care will never be in want of a job.”

Then he added, “do you want to go for a test drive?”

“Sure!” I started for the driver’s door.

“No, no, no. I’ll drive.” And after getting in, he leaned over and unlocked my door.

I got in, but he waited while looking at me.

“Are we waiting for something?” I asked.

“Aren’t you going to put your seatbelt on?”

“Do I have to?”

“You don’t have to do anything,” he replied. “You always have a choice, at least as long as you are alive you do. But let me put it this way, the law says if you don’t and if the cops catch you, then you will be fined. So it is up to you as to whether you want to disobey the law and try to get away with it, and are willing to pay the fine if you get caught, or whether you would rather not risk it.”

“Stupid laws...” I murmured, while grudgingly putting on my seatbelt.

“Of course, there is the other aspect too.” He said.

“What aspect?”

“Well, you see, I am a very good driver and drive very carefully. But there are other people who are not as careful as I am. Now, I may not hit anybody or anything, but there is always a chance that someone else may hit us.

“You see, I have the choice of risking severe injury as a result of someone else’s misdeeds, or playing it safe and minimizing that risk. When I think carefully and clearly, in spite of any pre-notions or habits that I may have, it makes sense to me to choose to wear the seatbelt. And if you asked me, I would definitely recommend you to wear it. But ultimately it is your choice.

“And of course there is the other matter too...” he said again after another pause.

“What other matter?” I asked.

“The matter of *my* choice. As the driver and the owner of this car, I may choose not to drive anybody who is not wearing his seatbelt.”

“What a long-winded way of trying to convince me to wear my seatbelt.” I thought.

As if reading my mind, he said, “you may think that this is a long-winded lecture on the benefits of wearing a seatbelt, but in reality this is about the most fundamental principle of life.”

“What?” I asked, while thinking this man was crazier than I thought. “What do you mean?”

“Very simply, in life we only have one fundamental right: the right to choose. That when the Creator created us, the Creator endowed us with the right to choose freely.”

“That’s interesting!” I responded sarcastically.

“Yes, but that is not the end of it.”

“What else is there?”

“Many other things, but for now all that needs to be said is said.”

“Intriguing!” I thought to myself, but did not pursue it any further.

Without saying another word, he revved up the engine and backed out of the garage. Then we went for a short spin. The car was perfect. I could find no fault with it. Even the price was very reasonable. We returned to the garage, got out of the car, and after he closed the garage door, we went into the house.

When we sat down he said, “I like you and have a sense that you are the right future owner of this car. Of course, you will have to prove your worthiness before you take ownership of the car. So are you interested?”

“Well, yes!” I replied with some hesitation, “but I can’t afford to pay you for driving instructions.”

“Not to worry,” he assured me. “The price of the car is firm and not negotiable. But I’ll throw in the driving lessons, to assure myself that you are the right person. So, do we have a deal?”

“Sure. Do you want me to sign anything? Do you want me to pay you a deposit?” I asked, trying to ensure he would not sell it to anyone else.

“No!” He replied. “Contracts are for lawyers. Your word is your bond. If your word isn’t good enough, then you don’t deserve to have this car in the first place.”

I felt as if I had to go through some initiation process to buy this car; as if I was becoming an apprentice to a spiritual master. Strange, but I felt comfortable. I also got the sense that this car, and perhaps more

accurately, this man was about to influence my life in ways that I could not imagine at that time.

“What is your first day off?” He asked.

“Thursday!” I shot back.

“Good. On Thursday go to the Department of Motor Vehicles and pass your written examination. They will issue you a temporary license, which you can use to start your driving lessons. Oh yes,” he continued, “wait here for a minute.” Then he disappeared into one of the bedrooms.

After a moment he returned with a booklet. He handed it to me and said, “you will have to learn these regulations and the meaning of all these signs to pass your exam. And I’ll see you here at 3 p.m. on Friday.”

“OK!” I replied, then said farewell and left without ceremony.

On my way back home, I was thinking, “what an eccentric old man! So weird!” But I also felt glad to have met him.

* * *

On the way back home, his words were ringing in my ear... “In life we only have one fundamental right: the right to choose!” Which planet did he live on? I never chose to live in the room that I live in. I had to because I couldn’t afford anything else. If I had the choice, I would have gone to a quieter neighborhood so that at least I wouldn’t wake up in the middle of the night because of gunshots. What an idealistic old man he was. I supposed he was another one of those do-gooders who was born with a silver spoon in his mouth.

Yet there was something about Z which was peculiar. He must have been in his late sixties, but he had a very young look about him, He was playful almost to the point of being mischievous. Yet you could see the tracks of wisdom on his face, which are only left by the harsh experiences of years of such living. He was somewhat enigmatic, and most certainly a contradiction in my mind.

“Well,” I thought, “maybe I can’t figure him out, but at least I’ll get a car out of this!”

On my way back, I tried to look at the traffic signals, find them in the book and memorize what they each meant. I would look at the different colored and shaped lines on the road, guess in my mind what they signified, and then check the book to see if I was right. It was almost like a game.

I was in this state of mind as I passed the 7-11 store. She was working there. Somehow I was confident enough to go in and ask her for a date. I don’t know what had possessed me, but almost without thinking I went in and asked her if she would go for a cup of coffee and maybe a walk after her shift was over.

“Sure!” She replied to my utter amazement. “I finish at 6 o’clock. How about if I see you in front of *Romeo’s* at 10 past?”

“I’ll be there!” Said I and left the store promptly. There it was. I had done it. I don’t know why it took me such a long time to ask her. And it was so easy. What was I afraid of? I suppose I was afraid of her saying ‘no’. I could have done the same thing the first time I saw her, but I hadn’t.

This was not like choosing the room I lived in. I could have asked her, but the fear of her saying no held me back. Again Z’s words rang in my ears: “in life we have only one fundamental right, the right to choose!” I suppose I chose to give in to my fears rather than risk being rejected. At least until today.

* * *

At five past 6, I was in front of *Romeo’s*. I didn’t even know her name. But I was very excited. 6:10 came

and went. Quarter past. Half past six, and she still wasn't there. By a quarter to seven, it was evident that she was not showing up. I felt disappointed. No, much more. I felt rejected and dejected. I sulked all the way back home.

But just as I was turning the corner into my street, something occurred to me. Z's words rang in my ears again, "if your word isn't good enough, then you don't deserve to have this car in the first place." Yes, that is true. If her word wasn't good enough, then she did not deserve to go out on a date with me.

With these thoughts I felt much better. As I entered my room, a question occurred to me. "What had changed since five minutes ago? Not a thing, except how I looked at the situation. Maybe Z is right. Maybe we do have the right to choose." Yet I was very quickly brought back to the reality of my barren room. I didn't even have a couch to sit on, or a TV to watch.

I was very tired, so I decided to go to sleep. I was pretty sure that I'd be woken up in the middle of the night again. So I thought if I went to sleep right then, I could study for my written examination when I was woken up. And I could also make it to work by 6 a.m.

* * *

Thursday morning I was at the DMV before it opened. I was the first one taking the written test and aced it. Not one mistake. I was proud of my efforts. The clerk issued me a temporary Learners' License, and I headed back.

On my way home, I passed in front of the 7-11 store. She was working inside. I wasn't sure how I was going to feel, but somehow I was very calm and easy. For some reason I was no longer attracted to her. But at the same time, I felt no resentment either. She had become just another person in the neighborhood.

At that moment she looked outside and saw me. She gave me a shy and somewhat embarrassed smile. I quickly waved at her, and then she turned away, back to her work. I was absolutely sure that I felt no bitterness towards her, nor was I attracted to her. So I just moved on home.

* * *

Moving Up In Life

Progress

Friday afternoon, right after I finished my shift at the bakery, armed with my temporary Learners' License, I headed towards Z's. The weather was great. The sun was shining, and everything had a shinny glow about it. As if the whole universe was celebrating the fact that I was moving one step closer towards driving my car.

Finally, exactly at 3 o'clock, I knocked on his door. He opened the door cheerfully and invited me in. He brought each of us a glass of lemonade and sat down, looking at me without saying a word.

I played along and finished half of my glass, and silently looked at him. Finally, I couldn't contain my excitement anymore. With a broad smile, I took the license out of my pocket, unfolded it and placed it on the table facing him.

"Congratulations!" He smiled. Then added, "but before we start the first lesson, let me ask you the question one more time. Why do you want to buy this car?"

"Well... because... I feel that it will give me mobility," I blurted out intermittently, "and... I will be able to look for a better job... perhaps somewhere outside my neighborhood... and move up in life."

"What about impressing the girl at 7-11?" He asked.

"My God, he remembers everything," I thought to myself, "I better be careful what I say to him." And then said out loud, "actually, I asked her out on Tuesday. She said yes, but never showed up. I suppose she is no longer in the picture."

"I'm sorry!" He replied.

"Oh no." I said. "Don't be. If her word isn't good enough, then she doesn't deserve to date me."

He simply smiled.

I added, "actually, that was a good thing because I realized that I wanted to get a car anyway, just because I want to move up in life."

"Very good." He said calmly, "which brings us to the law of progress."

"The law of progress?" I echoed.

"Yes!" He replied. "You see, in this universe of ours, there is an ideal state, a desired condition which we can conceive of. We can imagine a state in which everything is in perfect harmony with everything else.

"Then we open our eyes and look around and see how much disharmony exists. When most people do this, they are overwhelmed by the gap - or should I say the deep chasm between the two - and they lose heart.

"So they call the ideal state 'wishful thinking' or 'daydreaming' or things like that, and they call the actual state 'reality'. But the truth is that in reality, there is an ideal state and there is an actual state. And this is what gives rise to the law of progress."

"The law of progress!" I echoed again.

"Yes! The law of progress!" He echoed back.

"What exactly is the law of progress?" I finally asked.

“I thought you would never ask!” He said mischievously. “This law says that we human beings have the ability to conceive of an ideal state, discern the actual state, and work towards bringing the actual closer to the ideal.”

“This is going over my head,” I said. “Anyway, what has this got to do with our driving lesson?”

“Everything!” He replied. “A few moments back, I asked you why you wanted a car, and you said because you want to move up in life. You see, you have already imagined something better than what you now have. And you have figured out that being able to drive a car will move you towards that ideal.

“Yet your actual situation is that you neither have a car nor can you drive.”

I felt a pang in my heart.

“Don’t be disheartened,” he assured me. “This may be your present circumstance, but it need not remain this way. And in fact, you have already taken many steps to change that condition. You have saved up enough money to buy the car. You have passed your written examination. Now, all that is left to be done is to learn to drive, get your license and buy this car.”

I felt much better.

“One more thing before we go,” he said and then paused. “The ideal state is not at all dependent on the present circumstances.”

“What are you getting at?” I asked.

“You see,” he replied, “moving up in life is an ideal state for you. But the present circumstances are such that the girl at 7-11 was not impressed, or perhaps was too afraid to meet you. There could have been any number of reasons for which she did not show up.

“Yet your ideal state, moving up in life, is still valid, and a good enough reason to continue with your progress, undaunted by your present circumstances.”

I simply nodded my head in understanding.

“Are you ready for your first lesson?” He suddenly asked.

“Yes!” I replied as I got up.

We went to the garage. He opened the garage door and went to seat himself in the driver’s seat. In protest I asked, “but I thought I was going to drive?!”

“Patience!” was his only reply.

He drove us to a wide road in the neighborhood that went inside a park. He parked the car, switched it off and said, “now I want you to close your eyes and imagine yourself behind the wheel of this car, driving comfortably and easily, with your permanent drivers’ license in your pocket. Have you got it?”

“Yes,” I said quietly.

“Good.” He continued, “now open your eyes and see where you are! A little different, isn’t it?” He smiled mischievously again as if he was forcing me to do a reality check, or should I say an ‘actuality check’.

“OK. Now, let’s swap places,” he said and opened his door to come to the passenger side. I also got out and went around to the driver’s seat.

“Should I turn it on?” I asked with some excitement.

“Not so fast. As in most situations in life you must first do the necessary preparations. First adjust your seat so you are comfortable, yet alert. You must be able to see the road ahead of you, yet not be anxiously leaning forward, hugging the wheel. You must be in command of the car, not just in control of the

steering wheel. There are times that you won't be able to control the car, but you can always command it. And that goes for most things in life too."

I adjusted my seat until it felt right.

He continued, "the next step is to adjust your rear view mirror. You must adjust it in such a way that you are able to see what is behind you. Both the things that you have gone past, as well as the things that are catching up with you or are overtaking you.

"Are you ready?"

I nodded my affirmation.

"Good!" He continued. "Now look ahead, to the sides, and in the rear-view mirror. Do you see any cars approaching? Do you see any obstacles anywhere?"

I looked very carefully. There was nothing. So I said, "None!"

"Now look over your left shoulder."

I looked back and saw a huge tree in the middle of the road, as if it was part of the park. It was funny that I never saw this tree, not even in my mirror.

When he was happy about the impact of this oversight on my part, he said, "this is the first lesson in driving. This is called 'the blind spot'. Never assume that you see everything. Sometimes there are obstacles or vehicles in your blind spot that you do not expect. Overconfidence is deadly. Always check your blind spot. Always expect and be ready for the unexpected and the unseen.

"I don't mean to worry you. When you are driving, there is nothing in your blind spot for ninety nine percent of the time. But you must always be alert for that one percent. Not worried, just alert.

"And what that means is whenever you are driving, be present. Don't daydream. Don't think about your bills or your girlfriend or the dog next door. Be there. Be present. Otherwise, life may surprise you with what is in your blind spot."

I nodded quietly.

He simply put on his seatbelt and waited for me to see what I would do. I did the same. Then he said, "good. Start the engine."

With an exhilarating rush I turned the car on. And for the first time, I noticed this was not an automatic car. I would actually have to change gears. This fact had been in my blind spot and I hadn't noticed it. I guess life was trying to reiterate the point.

To echo my thoughts, Z said, "as you can see, this car is not automatic. It is manual, and you actually have to learn how to use the clutch and how to shift the gears. The bad news is that it will be more difficult to learn to drive a manual car. The good news is that once you learn, you can drive any car, manual or automatic, and you will have a much better command of the car.

"Which brings us to the next lesson: the clutch. Here is the best way to understand the clutch. The engine is always running in the car. It is the source of power. The tires on the other hand, only move when the car moves. And the car doesn't move when you have parked it.

"So what you need is an intermediary between the running engine and the stationary tires, that gradually gets the engine power to work on the tires and move them. And that is the clutch.

"The trick to this is that you must use it, gently and deliberately. For instance, if you are hammering a nail into wood, you must move the hammer deliberately. If you move it too slowly, it will take forever for the nail to go in. If you do it too forcefully, you will either bend the nail, dent the wood, or in the worst case

break the wood, and maybe even the hammer too.”

“Isn’t that true with everything in life?” I asked, thinking maybe that that was where he was going.

“Well, in most situations where there is an intention to do something or achieve something, you need to have a source of energy and power. You also need to have something that you work on, or intend to achieve. And then you apply one to the other deliberately and gently. If done too forcefully, something is bound to be damaged. If done too softly, nothing gets done.

“And it is the same with getting the car to go from one place to another. And the clutch is the thing that connects the engine to the wheels. The difference between a manual and automatic transmission is that in the manual case you control the clutch and gears, but in automatic transmission, the gearbox does the controlling.

“The other thing you need to know is that there are three pedals. The gas, the brake, and the clutch.”

I nodded.

He continued, “you control the gas and the brake with your right foot, and the clutch with your left. It is kind of obvious, I know. You are either accelerating or slowing down, but not both at the same time. That’s why they are both controlled with the same foot.

“So are we ready to start?” He asked unexpectedly.

“Yes!” I replied with some hesitation.

“OK.” He directed me. “Press down the clutch, ... shift into first gear, ... press on the gas slightly... Woah, woah, not so much. Be gentle with it.”

I went more easy on the gas.

“OK,” he continued, “lower the hand brake, ... and very slowly raise your left foot off the clutch.”

I tried my best, but the car jolted forward and stalled.

“Not to worry,” he reassured me, “it usually takes a while to get the hang of the clutch. Let’s try again.”

I turned on the engine and went through the motions again, but again the same thing happened. We repeated it four or five time before I managed to move the car without stalling the engine. But the car was moving with very jerky motions.

“Press on the gas,” he directed me.

I did and the car started accelerating.

“Good. Now slow down by braking.”

I pressed down on the brakes and the car came to a very abrupt halt, and the engine stalled. Again.

“Remember,” he explained, “you can’t have the engine moving and the wheels stationary unless you separate them. Otherwise, either the wheels will have to move or the engine has to stop, which is what just happened.”

“The clutch!” I exclaimed, with a light of inspiration on my face. How often in my life have I tried to work on something, and at the same time tried to stop it, or slow it down, and only ended up sabotaging my work and draining myself of my own energy. Even with the girl at 7-11, I would go to the store, but I would stop myself from asking her out, and leave without any success.

“Yes, the clutch.” He brought me back to the car. “The clutch is how you separate the source of power, the engine, from the work, the wheels. So remember, whenever you brake, you also press down on the clutch.

“OK. Let’s try again,” he prompted me patiently.

I started going through the motions, but he interrupted saying, “before you start moving, always check your mirror and your blind spot.”

We tried this for ten to fifteen minutes, long enough for me to get the hang of it, and to move the car smoothly. Then he asked me to stop, which I did immediately.

He said, “now that we can move the car, we need to learn to go faster, without putting more stress on the engine, and we do that by shifting gears.

“You see, gears are like levers. When the car is still, you need a lot of power to move it. But once the car starts moving, you can build on its momentum by using smaller leverage to move it faster and further, with the same force or energy.

“And that’s like any project in life. To start and get it off the ground takes all the power you can give it. But once it starts moving and has some momentum, you can maintain it and even improve it with much less energy.”

That was so true. When I started saving up money to buy this car, I had to really discipline myself with my expenses and budgeting. But the second month was easier and the third even easier and so on.

“Which brings us back to the clutch again,” he brought me back to the car again. “Every time you change gears, you separate the wheels from the engine, and change the intermediary lever. So we are back to the clutch again.”

First he asked me to practice changing gears while the car engine was off. Once I got the hang of that, he asked me to do the same while driving. He once again reminded me, “mirror, ... blind spot, ...go!”

I accelerated in the first gear until the engine was very noisy. Then he prompted me to shift into the second. I pressed down on the clutch, shifted gears and released slowly, but the engine had really revved up since I had not eased off on the gas.

“Easy, easy ... let go of the gas,” he urged me loudly, raising his voice above that of the engine. “Remember, the engine is working very hard and when you press the clutch, it is like pulling the wood from under your hammer. If you don’t ease up on the hammer, if you don’t stop banging on the nail, the hammer will go flying into space...”

In the second gear, I could feel the car was moving much more easily and much faster too. I wondered if progress was the same. When you progress, does the work actually become easier too?

We continued in the first and second gears for another fifteen minutes. Then he asked me to stop. He said, “this is the end of our lesson for today.”

“But I can go for at least another hour,” I begged him.

“You must understand that learning is a process. First you learn through action, then you need to integrate it and let your conscious and subconscious mind process the learning. If you move too fast, you will also tend to forget many of the details very fast. And that is the same with everything. This is why most of the people who progress too fast for their own good, also come down crashing very quickly. This is because they don’t integrate the details in their learning process. And the details are everything. Haven’t you heard the saying, ‘the devil is in the detail, and so is God,?’”

Reluctantly I accepted.

He drove us back to his house, and we agreed to meet again at the same time on Tuesday. I wanted to bring our appointment forward to Monday, but all he said was, “patience!”

Before leaving I turned to him and said, “Z, may I ask you a question?”

“Sure!”

“Why do you do this? I mean, you are teaching me how to drive, and you don’t even receive any money from me. And even when I buy the car from you, you won’t make that much. We both know the car is worth much more than you are selling it for.”

He smiled and said, “first of all, I am glad that you have a sense of value, that you appreciate things for what they are worth, not for the price people put on them. So many people go through life taking things for granted, until those things are taken away from them. You know, things like health, wealth, family, friends, and so on.

“Secondly, money isn’t everything. Many values cannot be defined or even measured by money. Possessions don’t determine what or who in life is worthy.” And with these words, he gave me a wave, signaling this was the end of his conversation.

* * *

On my way home, I decided to take a detour and walk through the park. The weather was very inviting, and the sun was still beating down on me. I sat on a bench by the pond, watching the ducks.

I was in my own thoughts when suddenly the noise of the sudden flight of the ducks brought me back. A dog that was chasing the ducks jumped into the pond. Then I turned to the person who was calling the dog back. She was a very attractive young lady with beautiful eyes and a broad smile.

I smiled at her and said, “hi!” I was somewhat surprised at my own courage.

She returned my greeting and before I knew it, we started a conversation. Suddenly out of nowhere, I asked her for a date later that evening.

To compound my surprises, she said, “sure, why don’t you pick me up at eight?”

“Well,…” I mumbled, “actually I don’t have a car ... yet!”

“In that case,” she replied coldly, “why don’t you pick me up when you *do* have a car.” And then quite abruptly, she called her dog, waved at me and went off.

I wasn’t quite sure what had just happened. I suppose she had assumed that I had a car, and had created an image of me in her mind. When I didn’t fit that image, she had just brushed me off. Two rejections in one week! “Not bad,” I thought, “this is one more reason I need to move up in life.”

Then suddenly I remembered Z’s last sentence, “possessions don’t determine who is worthy in life.” Here was an individual who could not see beyond possessions. “Well,” I thought, “just as well that I was saved from getting into such a relationship. A relationship that hangs on possessions is not worth having anyway.”

* * *

Saturday morning, I woke up at 6 o’clock. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t go to sleep. Finally after a half-hour of tossing and turning, I decided to get up. I looked around my room. It was a mess. And the walls, particularly where my stove was, had gotten very dirty.

Suddenly I felt this urge to do something about it. I closed my eyes and imagined a neat and tidy room, with a clean carpet, clean walls and stove, and a sparkling toilet and shower. When I opened my eyes and looked around, I felt overwhelmed. But I decided to take intentional and deliberate action. Just as Z had said, I decided to be gentle, but deliberate and decisive.

I started by making up my mattress and the sheets on it. Then I collected all the clothes from around the room, separated the dirty ones from the clean ones, and put them in their own places... the plastic bag I used for my laundry, and the closet.

I picked up the four or five books that I owned, and put them on my window ledge. “That is going to be my bookshelf,” I decided.

For the rest of the morning, I proceeded to wash the dishes, clean the carpet and wipe the stove. At about noon, I felt that I needed a break. I stood back and looked at what I had done. “Impressive!” I thought. “Even though it is not complete yet.” Then I went out for a walk in the neighbourhood.

The walk in the sun was quite refreshing. It somehow gave a rest to my engine, and rejuvenated me. Yet at the same time, it took me to “dreamland” where I was trying to understand what Z meant by the ideal state.

I was looking around me at the dilapidated housing conditions, the storefronts with iron bars, and the graffiti on the walls. Even the trees were dusty and droopy and uncared for. “Even my own neighborhood is too big to change, let alone the world.” I thought to myself. “I must move up in life and leave this neighborhood.”

I still couldn’t understand why Z had chosen to settle down in this area, and where were all the hearts that he was talking about. What heart would imprison itself inside rundown buildings with iron bars on its windows? Which heart would let go of the blue skies and the green meadows and thick forests, in favor of droopy, dusty and even comatose trees of the inner city? Sometimes Z made a lot of sense, yet other times he made no sense at all.

It was about 3:30 when I turned into my street. The ghastly sight of rundown houses, almost like ruins, with half dug out and half dried up gardens made my heart ache. “Why?” I thought. “Why do people do such things? How can they allow themselves to be surrounded by such misery? And the garbage that is thrown on the sidewalk and the street. This is too much. I must get out of here.”

By this time, I opened my room’s door. The sight of a clean and tidy room was a welcome and refreshing contrast from what I was leaving outside. “This is my oasis in the arid desert of South Central,” I thought to myself, and resolved to keep it clean and tidy.

In the afternoon, I decided to tackle the bathroom, leaving the walls for the next day. “The walls are too big a project to start now.” I told myself.

I spent the rest of the afternoon, bringing my bathroom to a shine. I had lost all sense of time. By the time I finished and came out, it was six o’clock. I decided to rest a little and eat something.

While cooking something I had thrown together from the things I had, I started tackling one of the oil stains on the wall that was right next to the stove. And then I tackled another, and another. I started eating while cleaning. When I finished my food, I washed the dishes and continued with my cleaning.

The next time I looked at the clock, it was half past midnight. I had completely lost track of time, but the walls were done. Exhausted, but with a sense of accomplishment I went to bed.

I slept straight through till 10:30 a.m. I don’t know if there were any gunshots that night. Most likely there were, especially since it was Saturday night. But in my exhausted state, I never heard any.

As soon as I woke up and realized what time it was, I got up and made my bed. I had a small breakfast and went out for a walk. I liked Sunday morning walks. Although I never liked going to church, and never did, I liked watching people who had dressed up to go to their respective churches. It somehow confirmed my sense of the hypocrisy involved with such practices.

Don’t get me wrong. I know there are many believers who go to church, but the majority either go out of a sense of duty, or guilt, or even worse than that, habit. They go because they have always gone. What else is there to do on a Sunday morning? Just like those who go to the bar every Saturday night, because that is what they have always done, and that is what everyone else does. Mindlessly conforming to the

forces of tradition and habit, they don't even think it is possible to question such things.

Somehow, my Sunday morning walks re-affirm my sense of existence, and confirm my disillusionment with society. A bittersweet combination. Who knows, perhaps this has become my tradition, my habit, my mindless addiction. Maybe one of these Sundays I'll just stay at home to see what happens.

* * *

Planting The Seeds

Communication

Tuesday afternoon, we finished work a half-hour earlier than usual, so I made it to Z's by 2:30. He was very pleasantly inviting, and we had our customary glass of lemonade and chatted a little. He asked me about my love life and I told him about my second rejection of the week. He laughed heartily. I joined him, even though the laughter was at my expense.

I told him about my clean up project and how I had created this oasis out of my room. That it had become my sanctuary in the wilderness of South Central.

He seemed very pleased and said, "remember one thing: all change, all transformation occurs within you."

He sounded so weird. I asked, "what do you mean?"

He replied, "first you change your mind and your heart, or your thoughts and emotions. Then that leads to a change in words and deeds. Which in turn transforms your environment."

"Good!" I said. "Because I can't wait till I move up in life and get out of this neighborhood."

"Well," he commented, "it doesn't work that way. If you don't transform your within, no matter where you go, you will take your problems with you. And if you do change your within, no matter where you are, your problems leave you."

"Of course, there are times that we have become so comfortable in our surroundings that the most efficient way to change our mind is to change our location. But that is only a means, and can only happen when we have already changed our within."

I was getting really confused, and I think he sensed that, because he said, "I know it sounds like word-play right now, but it will become apparent later." Then he changed the subject, "tell me about the bakery."

"Well... there's not much to say," I replied, "except that it pays the rent."

"You mean you don't like what you do?" He actually seemed surprised.

"It's all right. Like I said, it pays the rent."

"Tell me something," he said with that "daydream" look in his eyes, "if you were rich beyond need, if all your expense were already taken care of, what would you do?"

"I have never thought of it," I replied. "Actually, it never even occurred to me that I would ever be 'rich beyond need' as you put it."

"Well... let's think about it now." He replied quite undaunted. "After all, if we could envision an 'ideal state', you would not have any financial needs. Nobody would. And you would be doing what you loved to do. Just as everyone else would have done what they liked to do."

It was an unheard of notion for me, and although it was unrealistic, at least it was not an unreasonable assumption. "Gardening!" I blurted out. I paused a little and then added, "actually, I don't know where that came from, but come to think of it, I'd love to do gardening. You know, planting flowers, nurturing them, landscaping, getting my hands in the dirt and mud and manure."

He laughed and said, "sounds interesting." And after a brief pause added, "do you do any of that now?"

“Oh God, no!” I laughed. “I live in a basement room that I am renting. I don’t even have a proper window, let alone a garden. Come to think of it, I don’t even have a flower pot in my room.”

“But doesn’t the house you live in have a garden?” He asked.

“You must understand. Where I live ain’t no suburbia. The streets are littered with trash, the houses are falling apart, the yards are either paved or dug up or full of brown grass. Even the trees in the street, which the City supposedly takes care of, are droopy and half-dead.”

“I see.” He said pensively, “and I don’t suppose anything can be done about it.” He left the conversation at that and said, “I think it is time for our next lesson. Shall we?”

He drove to the same place as the last time, and then gave me the driver’s seat. Then he said, “this time I am not going to say anything. You just do the things we practiced last time.”

I put on my seatbelt, turned the engine on, put the gear in first, released the handbrake, mirror, blind spot, and off I went. At first it was a little jerky, but pretty soon I was driving very smoothly.

When he was satisfied, he told me to pull aside. Then said, “OK. Today we are going to go into the third and maybe the fourth gear. But to do this, we will have to drive on busier streets. Last time you learnt how to use the clutch, gas and brake. You tried the most difficult gear, which was the first gear. Then you tried the second gear, which was much easier. Well, the good news is that the third gear is even easier and the fourth is a breeze. The bad news however, is that you need to watch out for more things, since you will be driving faster. Is that clear?”

“Yes!” I nodded.

“The most important thing to realize when driving,” he continued, “is that you are not the only driver on the road. So you must communicate with others. You must tell them exactly and clearly what your intentions are, and you must clearly understand their intentions. Does this make sense?”

“Completely!”

“Very good. Now, do you know how you communicate with others?”

“The indicators?” I replied.

“Well, yes... but to be more exact, the lights. You use the indicators to signal your intention to turn or change lanes. But you also use the hazard lights to communicate that there is some sort of problem. Headlights are used to be able to see in the dark and to be seen both in the dark and in daylight. Brake lights come on automatically every time you brake, and they tell you that the car ahead is stopping or slowing down.... And this works both ways. You tell others through your lights, and they tell you by theirs.”

“Understood!” I confirmed.

“When you drive a little more,” he continued, “you will come across drivers who don’t know how to communicate, or don’t think it’s important enough. They may turn without indicating, or they may change lanes first, then signal their intention to turn.

“Think about it! What is the point of indicating if you have already changed lanes or are in the middle of doing it? The car is much bigger than the lights. Obviously the driver behind the car sees the car changing lanes. When you come across such drivers, don’t be upset with them. Just be careful. But most importantly, don’t become like them. Always clearly convey your intention *before* you take action.

“Of course, there may be the exceptional time that in order to avoid an accident or a reckless driver, you won’t have time to convey your intention. But let that be the exception and not the rule. Clear?”

“Clear!”

On his go ahead signal, I started to move. Of course, not forgetting the details: mirror, blind spot, indicator. We got to a bigger street and I started to move faster, and eventually got into the third gear. I was so happy. I could drive now. We drove for about twenty minutes or so, until we finally got to a place where the traffic was fast enough to go into the fourth gear. "Wonderful!" I thought, "I am driving!"

He was carefully directing me to the streets that were less busy so that I would get used to the gears. He was also constantly monitoring my indicator use and communications with others. I suppose the second lesson was about intention and communication.

Eventually he directed me all the way back to his house and told me to drive the car into the garage. Wow, what a feeling. It was like I had finally hit a home run. This was only the second lesson and I was already driving.

I was to return on Friday for my next lesson. Again he urged me to be patient and integrate and process what I had learnt. I wasn't quite sure what that meant, but I simply nodded my agreement.

Before saying goodbye, he went into one of his bedrooms and returned with a small flowerpot, which contained a sickly African Violet. He gave it to me and said, "here, I don't know how to look after this, and if I continue doing the way I have been doing, as you can see, it will die very soon. You try to see if you can revive it. Maybe you have a greener thumb than I do." Then he bade me farewell.

It was truly a sickly plant. I felt sorry for it and somehow was glad that it found its way out of his house. "I will bring you back to life." I told the plant on my way home.

When I got home, I put the flowerpot on the window ledge, right next to my books. It seems crazy now, but that evening, every hour or so, I would pick up the plant, look at it to see if it had gotten better, talk to it a little, give it some reassurance, and put it back in its place.

The next afternoon, on my way back from the bakery, I went into the nearby flower shop. I looked around at the flowers a little. They were beautiful and they smelt great. I was in my own world when a young lady who worked there asked me, "can I help you?"

"Well..." I stammered a little, "actually, somebody gave me a very sick African Violet to look after, and I am not sure how to take care of it. I was hoping... maybe... you could give me some advice?"

"Sure," she said and gave me a detailed account of how to take care of it.

When she was done, I thanked her very much, and just before leaving asked, "and... I was looking at... maybe planting something in my garden.... What would you recommend?" I couldn't believe the things I was saying. I didn't even have a garden.

She told me that daffodils were in season and in fact the bulbs were on sale. I bought 5 bulbs, not knowing what to do with them, and left the shop.

When I got home, I put the bulbs on the counter next to the stove, wondering where I could plant them. Then I tended to the African Violet.

That night I had a dream about daffodils. I dreamt of a very colorless and gloomy inner city neighborhood. Then suddenly one bright yellow flower surrounded with green leaves appeared next to one of the houses. It was very small, fragile and insignificant, yet completely out of place and very noticeable.

Then in my dream, there was another yellow flower next to the first, and then two more. Before I knew it, daffodils surrounded the whole house. Before long, as if this bright yellow and green was a contagious virus, it spread to the two neighboring houses. First one flower each. Then two, then four, and then the whole house, and before long the whole street was one yellow-green strip in a dull and gloomy neighbourhood. And as you can probably guess, pretty soon the whole neighborhood had turned yellow

and green.

But soon after that I started seeing red spots and blue spots and white spots in different places, until eventually the whole landscape had become a colorful canvas.

“Weird dream,” I thought on Thursday morning. After taking care of the African Violet and having a small breakfast, I decided to take the bulbs back to the flower shop and return them, since I had nowhere to plant them.

As I closed my door and was about to walk the walkway leading from the side of the house to the street, I noticed a small dirt patch next to my door, which was filled with paper, plastic and cigarette butts. I had an idea. “No!” I thought to myself. “Everyone will think I am a sissy.” Then I told myself, “so what? You are going to move up in life and out of here soon. Who cares what they think of you?”

With that thought, I felt a rush of energy. I went back inside, got a plastic bag and started collecting the garbage outside my door, and putting them in the bag. When I was done, I went in, came back with a kettle full of water and poured it into the dirt patch. The water went down, softening the dirt. Then with my bare hands, I started digging into the mud, turning it over.

When the soil was soft, I dug five small holes, equal distances from each other, and planted the five bulbs. Finally I covered them with mud.

At that moment I felt a small breeze which carried two small pieces of paper from the walkway into the dirt patch. I had a look at the walkway and saw more trash covering it. I picked up the two pieces and decided to clean up the walkway too, in order to keep the dirt patch clean. “Otherwise,” I thought to myself, “the wind will blow more trash here.”

Within fifteen minutes the footpath was clean. I stood up straight, stretched my back and took a deep breath. At that moment I saw the droopy tree in the street in front of our house. The base of the tree was covered with trash. And from the way it looked, it was obviously in need of water.

Since I had the plastic bag in my hand, I thought, “what the heck! Let’s see if we can bring this tree back to life.”

As I was picking up the trash, one of the neighbors’ kids came and asked, “what are you doing?” I looked at him. He couldn’t have been more than five.

I answered, “I am picking up the garbage.”

“Why?” He asked in utter amazement.

“Because I think the tree is thirsty, and all this garbage does not let the water get to the tree. I am going to clean it and give it some water.”

“You’re crazy,” he walked away shaking his head.

“Well, maybe I am,” I shouted after him, “but this tree is sure glad to have a crazy neighbor like me.” There! I had vented my frustration and went back to work. I must have filled and emptied the kettle at least a dozen times. But it was worth it, and I felt good.

In the afternoon, I walked past the “Goodwill Store” and for no reason walked in. As I was looking around, I noticed that they had a spade and a rake for sale. Fifty cents each. Without thinking, I picked them up and bought them. It was crazy. I had nowhere to dig and nothing to rake... what was I going to do with them?

When I got home, I was wondering what to do with them. So I just decided to park them outside my door next to the daffodil bulbs.

* * *

Doing The Right Thing *Choice & Consequences*

Friday morning, as I was heading to work, I noticed the patch at the base of the tree was filled with garbage again. “What use?” I thought. “No matter how much I clean this up, it is going to be filled up again the next morning.” My frustration level was high.

As if to add to my frustration, that afternoon we finished work a half-hour later than usual. So by the time I got to Z’s, it was 3:20. He insisted that we have our lemonade together, “if for no other reason than to cool your nerves,” he said.

“How is the plant?” He asked.

“I think it is going to make it.” I then told him briefly about the daffodils and the tree and the reason for my frustration. He didn’t say much.

By 3:30 we left the garage. Again he was driving and we went back to the first spot where we started, to practice everything from the very beginning. We went over my moves, and my communications, over all four gears, and just before we were getting to the next lesson, we ended up being stuck in a bad traffic jam.

“God, why me?” I blurted out, utterly frustrated.

He looked at me quite bewildered.

I said, “look, one of the first things you told me was that the only right we have is the right to choose. Well, ... that is utter garbage. It may be true in certain cases, but it definitely isn’t in every case.”

“Will you give me some examples?” He inquired.

“Sure!” I replied, happy with the opportunity I got to vent my frustration. “It may be true that because of my fears I didn’t ask the girl in 7-11 to go out on a date with me, and it may be true that you chose to settle down in this neighborhood. But I certainly didn’t. I am simply stuck here in South Central, just like we are stuck in this traffic jam.”

He giggled a little and then said, “the right to choose does not give you the right to choose your circumstances or situation. It only gives you the right to choose how you will respond to those circumstances.

“Look, you are born in a certain country and family, with certain gifts and talents, and certain issues and challenges. The hand is dealt to you. You only choose how to play the hand. You can either bring out your gifts and use your talents, or bury them. You can either face your challenges and challenge your issues, or give in to them and give up.

“Getting stuck in traffic is not something we chose. But look at what is happening. We are both facing the same situation. I am calm and you are frustrated. Neither of us has an appointment to go to and neither of us has any plans that this has postponed. Now, I have chosen to accept this situation and deal with it one step at a time. You on the other hand, have chosen to react to it and get agitated and frustrated. That is where our choices lie.”

“It’s easy for you to say it,” I complained.

“Perhaps,” he responded, “but I wasn’t born with this discipline. I understood it and cultivated it in myself. It was very difficult to begin with, but as I practiced more and more, it got easier and easier. Just

as getting into the first gear was difficult for you to begin with, but as you have practiced more, it is getting easier.

“There is another thing that you shouldn’t forget. Just like you, everyone else has the right to choose, too. And you cannot impose your choice on them, unless they choose to accept your imposition.

“You have the right to clean up the garbage from under the tree everyday. But others can also choose to throw garbage there again and you cannot deny them that choice. This is not tyranny. This is the very thing that also gives you the right to choose. This is life.”

“But if that is the case, then why bother? I mean, what is the point?” I protested.

“Well, actually, a number of things. First of all, the right to choose also comes with a big responsibility. What the Law says is that every choice we make has certain consequences, every cause has an effect. And since we are given the right to choose, we are also responsible to accept the consequences of our choices, the effects we have caused.

“In plain language that means what you sow, you will reap. But you are free to sow what you like. If you plant daffodils, daffodils will come up. If you plant roses, roses will come. But you cannot expect to plant daffodils and get roses or plant nothing and expect daffodils to grow.

“Once you have planted daffodils and they grow, your neighbor may call you a sissy and that will cause some animosity between you two, and will cool off the neighborly relations. That is the consequence of his choice. He may even choose to cut down your daffodils. But then he will have to face the consequences of that too, which is bad relations with you, as well as having a neighboring house devoid of any flowers, or at least of daffodils.

“We are always facing choices like this. You may be frustrated by being stuck in this traffic and get mad and decide to go over the car in front of you. Well, you are free to do that, but then you will have to face the consequences of such a choice, which is an accident, perhaps an injury, and a much longer delay, not to mention losing the opportunity to learn to drive, get your license and buy this car. But you are free to do that.”

“OK, I understand this consequence thing,” I replied, “but what is the point of it all?”

“The law of Progress.”

“The law of Progress?” I echoed him.

“Yes. Remember? Having an ideal state, or at least a better state, and working towards it? This is how you can progress in life. By making progressive choices.”

“But how do I know what to do?” I asked again.

“Very simply, you look at every situation you are facing. Ask yourself what is the ideal state for this? And then ask yourself if there is anything you can do to bring the current situation closer to the ideal state. If there is something you can do and you have the time and energy as well as the inclination, then you do it. That is the right thing to do. But when you do it, do it with all your mind and all your heart and all your soul. Just like the way you planted those daffodils.”

“And what if the neighbor calls me a sissy or cuts them down?” I protested again, seeking some assurance.

“You do the right thing because it is the right thing to do. You don’t do it because of the outcome or the rewards. You do it because it is the right thing to do. And what you will find is that eventually you will receive all the rewards and recognition that you could possibly desire.

“Right now we are stuck in traffic. Right now, the right thing to do is to keep calm and stay put. In a

minute or two the traffic will move and then the right thing to do will be to move with it. If you keep on doing this, eventually we will get home and in a few weeks you will have your license and your car too.”

Trying to see its practical applications, I said, “so what you are saying is that if cleaning the garbage from under the tree every day is the right thing to do, then I must do that. And if watering the tree everyday is the right thing to do, I must also do that. No matter what the outcome or what the neighbors may think or do.”

“Absolutely,” he replied confidently, “of course, provided that you have the time, energy and desire to bring about the ideal state. And eventually you will find the tree will come to life. And life attracts life. What you will find is people will respect this tree more than they do now, because it will be *alive*. Eventually they will start respecting other trees, and who knows, they may even start watering them too, and before you know it, the whole neighborhood will be green again.” His explanation reminded me of my dream. He continued, “what’s more, because of your progressive choices, unexpected things will happen that will increase the quality of your life much more than you could even imagine.”

I was quite motivated by this time, but he put a pin in my bubble by saying, “but remember, you must do the right thing because it is the right thing to do, and not because of the rewards or the outcome.”

Within moments, the traffic started moving and soon we were home. Again we made our appointment for the following Tuesday. And again before allowing me to leave, he disappeared, but this time into his back yard. He returned with a fairly long wooden box, which he promptly handed to me. He said, “this is an old planter which I have not used in years. It is sitting in the backyard taking up space. Perhaps you will be able to put it to better use.” With this gift in hand, I headed home.

* * *

When I got home, I was disappointed to see the garbage covering the base of the tree as well as the walkway to my room. Yet I remembered Z’s words about choice and about doing the right thing. So with much serenity, I put the planter down next to the door of my room beside the rake and the spade. Then I got another plastic bag from the inside and came out. This time I decided to use the rake to clean up the garbage. Interestingly enough, it put less strain on my back and everything was completed in ten minutes. I felt like a successful professional. I also noticed the neighbor’s kid, the one who thought I was crazy, was watching me from across the street. I smiled and waved at him. He waved back.

When I was coming back with a kettle full of water to take care of the tree, the kid crossed the road and came to me. “Hi.” I said.

“What are you doing?” He asked.

“I am watering the tree.”

“Why?”

“Because it is thirsty.” I replied patiently, with a sense of *déjà vu*.

“Why do you use a kettle?”

“Because I don’t have a bucket or a hose.”

“I’ve got a bucket.” He said in such a way that I couldn’t figure out if he was showing off or offering to help.

“That’s nice!” I replied in such a way that he wouldn’t be able to figure out if it was a complement or an acceptance of his offer.

“You want me to get it for you?”

“That’d be awesome... then I can water this tree faster and maybe we can do the same for the tree in front

of your house.”

“You know,” replied the kid, “the other day when you said this tree was sure happy to have a neighbor like you, I thought you were crazy. But today I was looking at it, and it actually is happier than the other trees.” And off he went to return with a bucket.

When he returned, he handed me the bucket. I asked, “what’s your name?”

“Josh!” he said.

“That’s a cool name! How old are you?”

“Seven!”

“Seven? Wow!”

He had a broad smile on his face but said nothing.

“Here, let me show you something,” and I took the bucket, heading for my door. I stopped in front of the dirt patch, squatted on the ground and pointed at the five very tiny green buds. “See these? What do you think they are?”

“I don’t know.” He said with broad shiny eyes.

“These are daffodils. I planted them a few days ago, and they are already growing!”

“They are small. They’ll never be like that tree!” He commented.

I laughed and said, “well, you are right. They’ll never be as big as that tree. In fact they won’t get any taller than this,” I was showing him with my hands. “But you know what? They’ll have a very beautiful and bright yellow flower. The tree will never produce flowers like this!”

“Yeah,” he said. “That tree is kind’a big, but good for nothing. My mom says the man who lives at the end of the street is like that.”

I laughed again and said, “well, actually, the tree may not be able to produce flowers like this daffodil, but it sure gives a nice shade, and its leaves help clean up the air we breath. Not every plant has the same purpose. But every one of them has its own.

“And as for the man at the end of the street, he may not know what his purpose and gift in life is, but I’m sure he has one. Just like this bud here doesn’t know it is going to give a beautiful flower, but it sure will.” I said these words, echoing my own state in life, thus giving myself hope and assurance.

“Here, let’s fill this bucket.” I said and held the bucket under a tap just next to the daffodil patch. It felt good to think of it as a daffodil patch and not a dirt patch any more.

Josh and I took four buckets of water to the tree. And when we were done, I looked at Josh and said, “shall we now go help your tree?”

“Sure!”

“OK. You pick up the rake and the bucket, I’ll bring the garbage bag.” And off we went to the other side of the street, where we started cleaning up the base of his tree. When we were done, we gave it six bucketful’s, because it looked very thirsty.

“Come here, I want to show you something else.” I told Josh.

We went back to my walkway and I pointed to the planter and asked, “do you know what this is?”

“Looks like an old, empty wooden box to me!”

“Well, it may look that way, but it is much more than that. Sometimes you got to look beyond what you

see to find the real purpose of something.” Did I really say that? I guess I was talking more to myself than to Josh. “Perhaps Z had seen something in the residents of South Central that I could not see. And that is how he had found more heart and soul in them.” I thought to myself.

“So what is it?” Josh brought me back to reality.

“It is a planter. You fill it up with dirt, and then you can plant things in it. What do you think we should plant here?” I asked.

“Daffodils!”

“Why not!” I replied. “I’ll tell you what. Tomorrow morning I’ll go and get some daffodil bulbs...”

“Daffodil bulbs?!” Josh interrupted, laughing loudly. “Do they light up too?”

A kid’s perspective is always interesting and often catches me off-guard. I laughed with him and said, “I know it is silly, but that’s what they are called. Anyway, how about I get some and we plant them together?”

“Yeah!”

“But there is one condition!”

“What?”

“On the days that I go to work, will you come and take care of them and give them a little water?”

“Sure!”

“Promise?”

“Promise!” He was happy.

“How many should we plant?”

“Seven!” He replied instantly and almost instinctively.

“Let me see... I think seven will fit just fine.”

We looked at each other for a while and then I said, “OK, Josh, it is now time for you to go back, but tomorrow morning around eleven o’clock I should be back with the bulbs. Be here so we plant them and give the trees more water.”

“The bulbs!” He chuckled while walking back home.

“And don’t forget to bring the bucket.” I shouted after him.

* * *

On Saturday morning, again I was up at six. After making up my bed, or should I say my mattress, and washing myself, I went to look at the African Violet. I couldn’t believe my eyes. There were a few tiny buds that were about to bloom into tiny flowers. This plant was back from the dead. It was *alive* again. I was elated, or should I say ecstatic.

By nine o’clock, I was in front of the flower shop, waiting for it to open. The same girl who had helped me before, recognized me and said, “so how is the African Violet?”

“Resurrected!” I replied with a beaming face. “Thank you for your help.”

“You’re welcome! And how are the daffodils?”

“Slow!”

She laughed and said, “that’s the thing about plants. They are always slow in their initial growth and need

a lot of care and nurturing. But once they start growing, you will be amazed at their progress!”

She was saying what Z had said, but in a different language - in the language of the plants. Z had also said that the beginnings always take the most energy, but once the project picks up some momentum, it takes far less effort to make more actual progress.

I was deep in my thoughts, gazing at her radiant eyes. She must have felt uncomfortable because she broke the silence and said, “well... is there anything else I can help you with today?”

“Oh... yes!” I stammered. “I’d like to buy seven more daffodil bulbs.”

“Actually,” she replied, “ we have them on sale in packs of four, and you can pick up eight for a smaller price than seven.”

“OK! I’ll take eight then.”

I paid for the bulbs, but couldn’t stop gazing at her eyes and face. Finally, I mustered up the courage to ask, “what time do you finish work?”

“Four o’clock.”

“Would you like to join me for a cup of coffee or something after work?” There, I said it.

“Sure, that’d be nice.”

“Except... that... I can’t pick you up, because I don’t have a car.”

She smiled and said, “no problem. I don’t have one either.”

“So... four o’clock... here...!” With these words and with a broad smile on my face, I headed home.

Josh and his bucket were already waiting by his tree. It was not even ten yet. Kids are amazing. When they get excited about something, nothing else matters.

As expected, the bases of both trees were covered with garbage. Yet for some unknown reason, there seemed to be less than usual.

First, Josh and I cleaned up the garbage. Then using the bucket, we gave both trees plenty of water. Finally, we went to the planter.

“Josh, I got the bulbs,” I said, “but we need some soil. I picked up the spade and handed it to him, which he dutifully took from me. Then I picked up the planter and took it to the front yard. I dug a little and emptied the soil into the planter. Josh dug some, too. I brought the rake and leveled off the area that we had dug up. Finally, with Josh’s help I carried the planter back to the walkway on the other side of my door.

I showed Josh how to dig holes just big enough for the bulbs. Seven of them all together. “And now...” I said as if to a drum roll, “here come the bulbs.” Josh was very excited. “And... ladies and gentlemen...” I continued, “No, they do not light up!” I planted three of them showing Josh what to do, and he planted the other four.

Then I looked into the bag saying, “look... what is here?” and took out the last bulb. “It must be a bonus bulb. What should we do with this?”

Josh shrugged his shoulders indicating he didn’t know.

“I tell you what,” I said, “why don’t you take it and plant it somewhere in your house. But don’t tell anybody about it. Let it be a surprise . Don’t even tell me. Let it be a surprise to me, too.”

He was obviously delighted. He got up and started running back home. “Josh,” I shouted, and after he stopped and looked back I said, “The bucket!”

He came back to pick up the bucket with a sheepish smile on his face. I said, “tomorrow, same time?”

“Yes!” He said and off he went.

* * *

At four o’clock sharp, I was in front of the flower shop. A moment later, with a broad smile on her radiant face, she came out of the shop. I don’t know what it was about her that attracted me so much. She was not beautiful. In fact, by all standards she was plain. Yet she had a magnetic aura, a glow about her that pulled me towards her.

“There is a coffee shop right around the corner,” she broke the chain of my thoughts. “Shall we go there?”

“Sure!” I replied and started walking beside her.

After a moment of silence I said, “it’s funny, but I don’t even know your name!”

“I am Miriam,” she said. After the introductions, she told me a little bit about herself. How she put herself through night school to learn about flowers while working in a coffee shop, until eventually she got this job. Before it was my turn to tell her about me, we got to the coffee shop.

I felt very comfortable chatting with her. We spoke about lots of things. I told her about myself, and my thoughts, my frustrations and my aspirations. I told her about Z and the VW that I had seen. I told her how I had saved up money to buy this, and how Z was teaching me to drive.

I also told her about some of the similarities between her and Z. How she spoke about plants just like he spoke about driving cars.

“We both must have been talking about a Truth,” she said. “Because only a Truth can apply to every situation. And anyway, everything in life is the same as everything else. They are just different. Just like every plant is like every other plant. They are all plants. Yet they are all different.”

“Yes... I guess that’s true.” I said. “Funny that I was telling Josh, my neighbor’s kid, how everyone is the same while we are all different.”

“Z must really love to teach!” She commented.

“Why?”

“Because of the way you speak of him and because of the things he says!”

“I guess so!” I replied, not quite understanding her reasoning.

“Oh I know so,” she insisted, “otherwise he wouldn’t be able to see the truth in it. Love and truth go hand in hand.” Then she changed the subject. “How are the new daffodils coming along?”

“Fine!” I was trying to avoid the subject of my house, since I was not exactly proud of my neighborhood.

“Where have you planted them?” she continued.

“Well, actually, Josh and I planted the latest batch in a small planter just outside my door. And I gave one bulb to Josh to plant in his house. I told him to make it a surprise for everyone.”

“Intelligent kid!” She exclaimed.

“Oh, he is very smart.” I said, “and he is only seven.” I paused a little and said, “how old are you?”

She gave me a funny look.

I said, “oh I know it’s not polite to ask, but I am curious.”

“Twenty six.” She replied, watching my reaction.

Well, she was three years older than me, but she sure looked younger.

We chatted for at least another hour. When it was time to go, I wanted to see her again. In fact, I desperately wanted to see her again. So I said, “what are your plans for tomorrow morning?”

She said, “tomorrow is Sunday. I am going to church!”

She must have seen the disappointment and the disbelief in my face because she giggled and explained, “you know, not all those who go to church are sheep. Some of us actually believe in a God, and that is why we go.”

“I’m sorry!” I apologized, “but I have never understood all those rituals. It’s almost like going to the theater, except that it is always the same play, and it is very boring. Why would God need all this acting from us?”

She continued with her smile, “God doesn’t need any of the acting. We do. And the reason that we do is that each ritual has a significance. It is a symbol of something truly spiritual. Just like every good play has many layers of meaning. But if we get stuck on the acting, we lose the message of the play. And similarly if we get stuck on the ritual, we lose the message it is trying to convey to us.”

“Give me an example,” I asked, still not convinced.

“Maybe another day. If you want us to get together again, let’s make it on Wednesday. How about four o’clock, same place?”

“Sure!” I decided not to pursue the discussion. We said goodbye, and I headed home.

* * *

Road Blocks & Detours

Intention & Action

Tuesday afternoon, I got to Z's a little early. The pitcher of lemonade was on the table, so I poured each of us a glass. Z smiled and jokingly said, "make yourself at home."

Suddenly out of nowhere I asked, "Z, is there a Mrs. Z?"

I could see tears welling up in his eyes when he replied, "there was a Mrs. Z, but four years ago she passed away very unexpectedly from a heart condition."

"I'm sorry!" I didn't know what to say. At these times, there seems to be nothing suitable or appropriate to say.

"That's OK. It happens to all of us. Some sooner, some later, but no matter how long we postpone it, it will arrive. Death is just as much a part of life as breathing is."

"Where is she now?" I asked.

"Heaven, I'm sure." He replied without hesitation. "She was too good to be allowed to enter into the other place." That mischievous smile was back.

"So you believe in heaven and hell, and life after death?" I asked.

"It's not a matter of believing," he replied. "It's kind of self-evident. But not like most people think of it. Look, when a car gets old, and eventually all cars will; even the VW; then the car will no longer function and will be scrapped. But all the service that it has provided, the life that it has lived, the memories that it has created, all of those things remain. The body of the car will be recycled, but its soul, its existence, and its reality will remain.

"Yet what remains is not like an individual car in one place, with boundaries and all that. It is just out there, somewhere, in our collective memories, in the memory of the world; in some dimensionless reality and in some formless form."

"What about heaven and hell?"

"That is also easy to explain. If the car has been serving well and lived a good life, then in that dimensionless place, it is considered to have been worthy and is appreciated. If it hasn't then in that place it always considers itself a wasted existence and separates itself from that worthy existence. That's all."

"Tell me about your life together." I asked, "I mean you and Mrs. Z."

"She was wonderful. The sweetest, gentlest and kindest individual you could possibly imagine. She was a source of inspiration and energy for me. She never ceased from doing what was right. At times, I would want to bend the rules and avoid the right thing, mainly because it was easier and because I was tired. But she would always ask me why and whether that was the right thing. She never told me what to do, but always showed me. It was as if we had this competition to see who would do most good and who would choose the best."

"It must have been tough!" I exclaimed.

"To the contrary, it was a lot of fun. You see, what really matters in life, and in marriage, is to work for the best. To choose the best and to do the right thing, because it is the right thing to do. Now, the nice thing about having a companion is that it becomes like playing tennis together, or dancing together, or

working out together, or going to school together. It is much more pleasant, plus you have someone to give you feedback, and to encourage you.

“Another added benefit is that you see your own choices mirrored in the other person.”

“It sounds very nice,” I said, “but it seems very idealistic and somewhat impractical.”

“Not if you’ve got the right partner. Why don’t you give it a try and see what happens?”

I was thinking about Miriam, but I guess I was getting far ahead of myself. Then I asked, “are there any Z juniors?”

“No. We decided not to have any children of our own. Which is very amazing, because we both loved children. But as it happened, we have grown to have many children that we never had. Maybe one day I’ll introduce you to some.

“Well,” he ended the conversation; “shall we go for a drive?”

“Why not?!” I replied as we both headed towards the garage.

I opened the garage door as he got into the driver’s seat. As I was getting in, I noticed how shiny the car was. As if Z had nothing better to do than to clean and wax the car.

As I entered, with a tongue in cheek attitude I asked, “how come this car never gets dirty? Is there some kind of magic to it?”

He laughed heartily and said, “as a matter of fact there is. It is called intention.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I intend for it to remain clean, and so it does.”

“You are pulling my leg!”

“No I’m not. Of course it needs a little help from me. Whenever it gets dirty, I take the time to clean it. I have found that it is easier to maintain something rather than let it run down and fix it. That goes with the upkeep of the engine, the mechanical parts of the car, and its looks.”

“You must spend hours.”

“Not really. Haven’t you heard of the Disneyland philosophy? They hire people to go around the grounds and pick up garbage as people drop them because they have found that people are more hesitant to throw garbage in a clean place than a dirty place.”

“The opposite of that works in my neighborhood. But come to think of it, since Josh and I started cleaning up the base of the trees, people have been throwing less garbage.”

“Well, the same thing applies with keeping the car clean. Once it is clean, it is easier to find the dirty parts and takes less effort to clean them.”

“That’s true,” I thought. “When my room was untidy, it was much more difficult to clean it up. Now that it is tidy, it is much easier to keep it that way.” And then I remembered Miriam’s words about a *truth* applying to everything in life.

“Shall we go?” He jolted me back to the car.

“Sure!” I replied, “let’s go.”

After he gave me the control of the car, I drove for a while. In one of the streets we saw heavy traffic in the distance. Z told me to turn right into a small street, presumably to avoid the traffic. Just as I turned in, I had to stop immediately because the road was blocked for construction.

“Well,” Z exclaimed, “this is as good a place as any to learn how to drive in reverse. Sometimes in life, you hit an obstacle, a dead end, a road block.” Naturally he was talking about more than just driving. “At those times, often the best thing to do is to assess your situation, examine your surroundings and your options, and go back until you see some clearing. Then you continue.”

With those prophetic words he taught me how to put the gear in reverse, “when you go backwards, you need to pay twice as much attention. You must see where you are going, but you must also look ahead and around, to make sure you don’t cause an accident, and to find the clearing that you are expecting. Observe well, and everything will be fine. Oh yes; I almost forgot. It is always more prudent to reverse slowly, in case something unexpected comes up.”

Very slowly I backed into the main street, and when the path was clear, I signaled, and proceeded to go straight past the obstacle.

“The trick in life,” Z continued, “is to distinguish which obstacles are detours that you can get around and which are blocks that you are better off backing away from. However, in the big picture, you will find that all obstacles are nothing more than detours. The only difference is some are smaller detours and some larger. But if you are alert and aware and patient, you will always reach your destination.”

“Unless of course,” I corrected him tongue in cheek, “time runs out before you get there.”

“Well,” he said calmly, “that applies to anything in life and not just driving. Besides, in a very real way, that is the final destination for everyone. And no matter which roads and which byways we take, we all end up there.”

“Almost like no matter which route we take in our drives,” I added, “we always end up in the same garage.”

“Yes,” he smiled with contentment. “All of life is a homecoming. We experiment and experience, we take main roads and side roads, we go where there is traffic and where there is nobody. We do all of these only to return home.”

“What do we find when we get home?” I asked, hoping for some insight into afterlife.

“Lemonade!” He replied with that mischievous smile of his.

Exactly at that moment, a car beside us drove into a puddle and sprayed the side of our car with dirty water. It was as if life was showing me that even this VW is not immune to the hazards and mishaps of our everyday reality. Z calmly observed the event and did not even blink. Completely unaffected with this, he simply gave me more instruction as to which roads to take and where to go.

Eventually we returned home and I parked the car in the garage. We were about to go inside when Z said, “I’ll be a minute.” I decided to wait and observe.

He picked up a cloth and cleaned the remnants of the dirty spray on the car. It took him under a minute to do this, and the car was as shiny as ever, as if nothing had happened. As he was walking towards me to go inside, he simply said, “it is easier and quicker to clean it now than when it is dried up.” I was very impressed with the fact that he was true to his words. He lived what he said.

Shortly after, we parted, of course, after confirming our usual Friday afternoon appointment.

When I got home, I saw Josh watering the daffodils in the planter. “How is it coming along?” I asked.

“Very nice. They have sprouted... but the ones in the daffodil patch are much bigger.” He said with some disappointment.

“Well, of course;” I replied, “they started earlier, and that’s why they are ahead of the game. But ultimately they all get the chance to play the game and give their flowers... that is, of course, if we give

them water, look after them and help them grow.”

He was somewhat relieved. Then I asked him, “how is your surprise daffodil coming along?”

“Very nice,” he replied with a sparkle in his eyes. “You can just about see the bud.”

“Do you want to plant more daffodils next to it?”

“Yeah!” he said with some excitement.

“OK!” I’ll get more bulbs tomorrow.”

We then proceeded to clean the trash and water the trees. In the meantime, I was telling Josh about Miriam and what a lovely girl she was.

“You like her, don’t you?” He asked to my surprise.

“Well, yes!”

“Are you going to bring her here and show her these things?”

“Maybe,” I replied. “But I’d like this place to look greener and nicer.”

“You want to impress her, don’t you?”

“Oh, I don’t know about that.” I returned. “Besides, if she needs to be impressed with things, then something is wrong.” In the meantime, I was checking my feelings and noted that I was a little anxious.

“What if she hates our neighborhood?” I thought to myself.

“Josh, I have an idea.” I finally said.

“What?”

“Let’s go and clean up the other trees and water them too.”

“What if the neighbors don’t want us to?” He asked.

“You are right.” I thought for a moment and then said, “who is the most obnoxious person in the neighborhood?”

“What does that word mean?” He asked.

“Oh, who is the meanest, nastiest person on the block?” I forgot that he was only seven.

“Angry Joe, of course!” He exclaimed, “you mean you don’t know?”

“Where does he live?”

“Two doors down from me.” He said pointing at his house.

“Let’s try something!” I urged.

“What?”

“Let’s clean up the tree in front of his house, and if he doesn’t mind, then nobody else will either.”

“Are you sure?” He asked half-heartedly.

“What have we got to lose?” I said while noticing that three of the neighborhood kids were watching us. My excitement was building up. It was as if I was about to embark on some daring adventure.

Josh picked up the bucket and the rake, and said, “let’s go!”

I picked up the garbage bag and followed him. The three kids were coming closer, as if they had sensed that we were about to test some limits in the neighborhood. When we got to the tree, we started to clean

up.

Within thirty seconds, the door slammed open. Up until then I thought that doors could only slam shut, but this one actually slammed open. A big husky man in his mid fifties, who must have been Angry Joe, came out and in a loud voice said, “what the hell do you think you are doing?”

In a timid voice I replied, “we are trying to give some water to this tree, and we need to clean the garbage first.”

“Get the hell away from my house, and leave it as it is,” he shouted even more loudly. “And if you ever come back here again, I’ll add both of your ears to the garbage there.”

I tugged on Josh’s sleeve and we started walking away very fast. Angry Joe added, “the tree needs fertilizer too,” while laughing at his own joke.

As we were walking away, the neighborhood kids started giggling at our misadventure, but Angry Joe, looking at them, shouted, “be quiet and go back to your homes.”

When we were in front of Josh’s house, Josh asked, “what now?”

“I don’t know,” but I remembered Z’s words and said to Josh, “sometimes when you hit a dead end, the best thing to do is to back away to where you began until an opening appears. Tomorrow we will figure something out.”

At this time Josh’s mother opened the door and shouted, “Josh, it is time to come back in.”

Josh winked at me with a smile and headed for the inside.

I followed Josh part of the way and when Josh was in, asked his mother, “excuse me... you don’t mind Josh helping me water the trees I hope.”

“Are you kidding me?” She exclaimed with astonishment. “It is much better for Josh to be interested in trees and daffodils than grass and dope. Especially in this neighborhood.”

I simply smiled.

She added, “look, ever since Josh got to meet you, I’ve been watching you very closely. You are a good kid. You go to work and have healthy habits. I trust you. Just make sure you treat him like a little brother of yours.” Then she smiled and said, “good night,” turned back and walked in.

I felt good. I now had a little kid brother, which I never had before. I even felt as if I was part of that family. With that excitement, I walked back to turn in early.

But before going to bed, I checked on the African Violet. Its flowers were in full bloom. Beautiful vibrant tiny purple flowers! I looked around and noticed that I didn’t have much, but I felt alive.

* * *

Wednesday afternoon. I was at the flower shop fifteen minutes early because I wanted to pick up some bulbs for Josh. Miriam came forward with her usual broad smile and said, “you are early!”

“Yes!” I replied. “I wanted to buy some daffodil bulbs for Josh.”

She smiled and said, “wait here.” Then she went behind the counter and came back with a bag and said, “here’s a dozen bulbs. I wanted to give them to you and Josh as a gift.”

I was surprised but very happy. Then spontaneously and without thinking I said, “I’d like to buy another dozen also!”

“What for?” She replied.

“I don’t know, maybe I can get the other kids involved too.” I said without knowing what I was saying.

At four o’clock Miriam and I came out of the shop with two dozen bulbs.

“Shall we go for a walk?” She asked.

The weather was good and I had already spent much of my discretionary money on luxuries in life like daffodil bulbs, so I welcomed the suggestion. Unintentionally we started walking towards my neighborhood.

We chatted quite a bit. I told her about Angry Joe and our episode the previous evening. “I don’t know what to do now!”

She laughed and said, “typical of men! Why do you always have to start from the most difficult part? Why not go to the nicest neighbors’ trees and gradually win the rest of the neighborhood over? If you want to go hiking, do you start from Mount Everest, or you start with one of the local hills?”

It was good to hear a female perspective, although not so pleasing to the ego. She made a lot of sense. I then said, “you are right. It doesn’t make much sense to try to change Angry Joe first.” Then, again without thinking, I added, “we are close to my home. Shall we head that way? You can meet Josh too.” Almost as soon as I said this, I regretted it. But I had no time to retract because she said, “that’s a great idea.”

Before I knew it, we were in my street. I wasn’t sure how she was going to take it. I simply said, “well, this is my street.”

She said, “let me guess which are the trees you’ve been taking care of.” She looked around and laughed. Then she said, “well, it’s pretty obvious because there are only two healthy trees in this street. But let me see...” she pointed to the one in front of my house and said, “this must be the one you tended to first. It is a little sturdier than the other. It looks more confident. If I were to guess, I’d say this one is in front of your house.”

“You are absolutely right,” I said with astonishment.

Before I knew it, Josh ran up to us and said, “this must be Miriam... Hi!”

“Hi!” replied Miriam. “You must be Josh?”

“Yes. Do you like our trees?”

“I sure do. I was just talking about them, telling him how much healthier than the rest of the trees they look.”

I added, “Josh, she has some presents for us,” while I held up the bags.

“Daffodils!” he burst out with elation.

“There is a dozen bulbs in this bag. Six for you and six for me. I suggest you plant the six next to your surprise daffodil.” I was improvising and making plans for the bulbs as I was going along.

“What will you do with yours?”

“I don’t know!”

Miriam suggested, “why don’t you plant three by each tree?”

“That’s a great idea.” Josh almost jumped up with excitement.

“OK.” I concurred.

By this time the three neighborhood kids had come up to us too. One of them, a little girl, said, “who is

this?" pointing at Miriam.

"She is a plant expert!" Said Josh. "She works in the flower shop and has come here to help us with the trees."

Miriam and I looked at each other and smiled.

Then Miriam looked at the kids and said, "are you going to join this group of workers? We are going to water every tree in this block... except Angry Joe's!"

They all seemed excited. Josh was happy and proud to be a senior and founding member of this work group. They all agreed.

I went inside my room, put down the daffodil bulbs, and came back with three plastic bags. Josh had also returned with the bucket. Then we all started working. First we started with my tree. We cleaned out the garbage and gave it water. Then we moved to Josh's tree. Then systematically, we went from tree to tree, moving away from Angry Joe's. When we got to the end of the block, we came to my side of the street, and we worked our way to the other end of the block. Back to Josh's side of the street... up to Angry Joe's... skipped his tree and moved to Josh's neighbor's.

By the time we were done and ready to take a look at the outcome of our work, we heard Angry Joe's door slam open again. He came out and shouted, "what's wrong with you? Are you blind?"

We looked at each other, and looked back at him without uttering a word.

He went on, "you missed out this tree." Pointing at the tree in front of his house. "Well, ... what are you waiting for?"

In disbelief we looked at each other and then cautiously went forward to take care of his tree too. He watched us to make sure we do a proper job, and before going back inside, he shouted, "if you miss this one the next time, I'll make a tree out of each of you!"

"Some people just need an excuse to be angry," I thought to myself. "And it doesn't matter what the excuse is." Then said out loud, "good job everyone. Lemonade is being served in my room." And with these words I lead the work group to my room.

We all sat on the floor and I brought everyone a glass of lemonade. Then I opened the second bag of daffodil bulbs and said, "and here is our reward for the wonderful job that we did." I took out two bulbs at a time and gave them to each member of the work team, including two to Josh, two to Miriam and two to myself. Then added, "and I suggest each of you plant these bulbs somewhere special."

The little girl said, "how do we plant these?"

Before I got the chance, Miriam said, "I believe Josh knows how to plant these. Why don't you let him show you tomorrow morning?" you could see the light in Josh's eyes fill the room and his smile push the walls apart.

I added, "OK everyone. It's time to go home now. But tomorrow morning I'll be here and we can do the same thing again. Sharp at ten o'clock be here."

Miriam said, "I have to be at the flower shop, but I'll come and check up on you at least once a week."

Then Josh added, "and make sure we do a good job for Angry Joe. We don't want to end up as trees." And with those words they left.

When the kids were gone, Miriam looked at me and said, "do me a favor!"

"What?"

She handed me the daffodil bulbs and said, "plant these by Angry Joe's tree!"

I was amazed at the kindness and the wisdom of her choice. I simply nodded, not knowing what to say. After a pause I said, "I want to show you something!" Then I got up and brought the African Violet and placed it in front of her.

She picked it up and said, "beautiful. I knew I could find life in this neighborhood!"

"What?" I didn't understand.

"This is a sign. If this little plant could be resurrected from the dead and come to full bloom, so can the neighborhood."

"What do you mean?" I still didn't understand, although this sounded like the kind of thing Z would say.

She explained cryptically, "the same life force that infused this little plant with life, can infuse the whole neighborhood with life." Then she added, "never underestimate your gift."

I still didn't understand, but I decided to let it go.

* * *

9:15 Thursday morning, as I was returning from a brisk morning walk, I noticed that there was a lot less garbage in our block. I guess the Disneyland approach was working. By the time I got home, I saw all four young members of our work group were lined up in my walkway. "What enthusiasm!" I thought.

"Good morning!" I greeted them.

"Good morning!" They all replied in unison.

"Are you all ready?"

"Yes!"

"OK." I started to organize them. "First three of us will go around and pick up the garbage. That group will be us three." I pointed at two of the young boys and myself. "The second group, which is you two," pointing at Josh and the little girl, "will take the bucket and water the trees."

They all listened attentively. I added, "we start here, and when we get to the end of the block, we will swap members and do the same thing until we get to Angry Joe's!" They all nodded. I continued, "then we will swap members again and do the same until we are back here again. Is that clear?"

"Yes," they all confirmed.

"Does everyone agree with this plan?"

"Yes," they all agreed.

I continued, "when we are done, we are going to plant some daffodils. Josh will show us by planting bulbs beside his tree. Then each of you will plant one bulb by my tree. And then we all go and plant our own daffodils. Does everybody agree?"

"Yes," they all nodded again.

"Are we ready?"

"Yes!" They said louder.

"Are we ready?" I almost shouted.

"YES!" They shouted back.

"Let's go!" And we started working on our plan.

By ten o'clock all the trees were cleaned up and watered and we were in front of Josh's house where he

planted three bulbs by his tree, just as Miriam had suggested. When he was done, we came to my tree. Each one of the three kids dug a hole and I gave them a bulb each, which they dutifully planted.

“Does anybody have any questions?” I asked when we were all done.

“No,” they all repeated.

“Good!” I said. “Now you can each go and plant your bulbs. I suggest you plant at least one bulb beside your tree.” The three kids then separated and headed home.

Then I looked at Josh and said, “good job!”

He was pleased with our efforts too.

“You now have eight bulbs left. Do you have any idea where you want to plant them?” I asked.

“Yes! I have a great idea!”

“Would you share it with me?”

“Sure!” He replied. “I am going to plant one bulb beside every tree until I run out of them.”

“Wow!” I was amazed with his generosity. “I have two more left too. I’ll do the same.” Then I added, “can I share a secret with you?”

“Yeah!” He said with anticipation.

“Miriam asked me to plant her bulbs by Angry Joe’s tree.”

“You’re kidding?”

“No kidding!” And after a pause I added, “I tell you what. I’ll see how many trees are left and this afternoon I’ll go and buy more bulbs so that every tree will have a daffodil. But we must be quick, because pretty soon the season for planting daffodils will be over.”

“What are we waiting for then?” Josh exclaimed. “Let’s go...” and off he went.

In the afternoon, when Miriam was taking a break, I went to the flower shop and purchased the daffodil bulbs that we needed, and returned home. Much as I wanted to see her, I wanted this to be a surprise to her.

By the evening, every tree in our block was not only having its thirst quenched, but had also found a new companion, a daffodil.

* * *

The Map, The Compass, & The Car *The Paradigm*

Friday afternoon, the usual time, Z and I were drinking lemonade in his house.

When comfortably seated, I asked, “Z, you know, the last time you were saying that life is a homecoming and no matter how many times we get in the car to go out, we always return home! Were you implying that there is reincarnation?”

“I was referring to everything in life as well as life itself!” He replied in his usual enigmatic style. By now he was familiar with my blank look, so he simply added, “look, every thing, every project in life, and every life has its seasons and cycles. Once we understand these cycles and stages, then we can approach them confidently and with less worry.”

Fortunately, he went on to explain, “first there is the conception where everything is just a dream, a hope, a vision, an image, a seed. Yet that seed, that vision, contains everything it needs for its fulfillment, within it. Part of that seed is the plan or the blueprint for that project, that idea or that thing to be born. And part of it is an implicit recognition and acceptance of the operating laws and limitations. A seed knows that it can’t grow when the ground is frozen solid. It must wait for the thaw. That is a recognition of its limitations, which are imposed upon it by the natural operating laws of the universe. But it also knows how to grow and into what it will grow, once the ground is thawed.

“But you must also understand that we are not talking about some imaginary man-made or artificial laws here that we should be afraid of, either made by ourselves or by others. We are talking about the operating laws of the universe. And we are not talking about being blocked by imaginary limits or things that we are concerned with. We are talking about respecting the bounds of nature and the limits of our physical existence.”

I nodded my understanding of this first stage of the cycle. He went on to add, “then there is the adventure, the going out, the implementation of the project, the growing of the seed. And that stage needs two things: The first is sustained effort and energy, as well as care, attention, love if you will. The second thing this part of the cycle needs is confidence, a belief in oneself and in the process, faith in ourselves and in life.

“You see, to undertake a project you must give it attention and energy in a sustained way. When you hit obstacles, you must either overcome them or bypass them, and that takes effort. When the seed grows, if the sprout is blocked by a stone, it must find a way round it, or else it will die underground.

“But that is only a part of it. This work or energy must be controlled with care and attention and love. Unchecked and uncontrolled energy can be dangerous, even explosive. That’s what a bomb is. Uncontrolled release of energy which will result in explosion and destruction.

“But there is something else that must work with that love, and that is faith. Faith and belief are just as much a part of love as care and attention are. Belief in what? Belief in the fact that the process is real and that with sustained effort it will reach its desired goal. When you go out in the car, if you don’t have faith that you will eventually get your license, then after encountering the smallest obstacles and difficulties, you will give up. When the sprouting seed hits the rock, if it does not have faith that it will find a way around the rock, it will give up and die.”

“But life doesn’t always work that way!” I protested.

“That’s true. Sometimes the rock is bigger than the seed can handle, and the seed will die because it has

no more energy to sustain its efforts. If you will, time runs out. But that's just life, and you can't do anything about that.

"Like we were saying the other day, life deals you the cards. Your choice is about how to play them. The seed does not choose the rock that blocks its growth. But it can choose to try its best and even die trying to reach the surface. Or it can choose to roll over and die."

"OK," I summarized his points, "so the first stage of the cycle is the vision and the operating laws within which the vision must work. The second stage is the faithful and loving sustained effort and energy."

"Let me clarify one thing again." He added. "Sustained energy doesn't mean mindless persistence. Sometimes when you hit a brick wall or a dead end, the best thing to do is to reverse and find another opening, just as we were discussing last time. Otherwise, you will only end up with a damaged car, a broken head from banging it against that wall."

"But how can you tell the difference?" I asked.

"To distinguish the difference between a detour and a dead-end is a delicate art." He replied poetically. "It is the art of mindful living, and it comes with wisdom."

"I guess that's that!" I thought to myself, not knowing how to ask for more clarification.

He picked up the thread of his original discussion. "But there is a third stage in the cycle of any project, and that is the phase of results, achievements, destination, outcome, fruition and so on.

"What the law says is depending on the level of your compliance with the first two stages, the third will come about in a better or worse shape. If you have adhered to the laws and planned well, and if you have done the work that needed to be done diligently and with the best quality you could, then the outcome will inevitably be perfect and timeless."

"What exactly does that mean?"

"That means, you do your part of the bargain, and the world will deliver on its part. If you take care of stage one and two as ideally as you can, then you will see the outcome in its best possible form. And regardless of what else happens, you have left your mark in history. That outcome will be your, and so it will be timeless."

"But a thousand years from now, who is going to remember my daffodils, for instance?" I argued.

"When the law says it is timeless, it doesn't mean it will last forever. It simply means that it transcends time. It goes beyond time. Look," he continued, "quality is something that is not dependent upon time. Neither is love, or care, or joy, or laughter, or truth, or any number of similar things. They are just attitudes, approaches, states of mind. And no matter when you express them, they exhibit the same essence. That is what is meant by timeless. So, even a thousand years from now, you can put the same level of care and attention and love into planting daffodils, and you will still have wonderful flowers. That is perfection and eternity."

"And where do these laws come from?" I challenged his authority.

"From the Creator!"

"Ha..." I played the devil's advocate. "Throughout history, whenever people didn't have proof, when they could not find a cause for the first things that came into being, they attributed the first cause to a God."

"Well," he replied calmly. "I am not suggesting you should accept these. But these are quite plausible assumptions based on which the Creator could have created the whole universe: With planning and within laws, with effort and energy, in a loving and faithful manner. And so we have a universe that approaches

perfection itself, and is eternal.”

“OK,” I replied, “let’s assume everything you say is true. So what?”

“Actually, this is a very important point,” he responded. “If these assumptions are true, then we have some tools for living. We may not exactly have a map for our lives, but we have the car and the compass to direct us.”

I was trying very hard to figure out what he was saying but still couldn’t make sense of it. He must have noticed this because he continued with his explanations, “you remember we were talking about the ideal and actual states?”

I nodded.

“Well, the point is our perception of the ideal state changes as we change. As we grow wiser, we perceive more and understand more. Our understanding grows bigger and wider. And our perceptions become clearer. As a result, our image of the ideal state also becomes clearer, and at the same time approaches the best ideal state, the absolute ideal state.

“If you will, as we grow wiser, the road map also changes and becomes more accurate. So we will find that some of the roads that we had previously chosen are either dead-ends, or lead us further away from our destination. And thus we begin to avoid them and bypass them.

“Yet while the map changes, the vehicle is still the same and the compass still points to the north. The three stages that I described are like the car and the compass, and the project itself is like the map or destination.”

“Let me see if I understand what you just said.” I tried to clarify for myself. “What you are saying is that the three stages you just described are the tools we can use in the various projects and things in our lives?”

“Not quite.” He replied. “It is not like here are three steps to success and happiness or such like. In reality the stages are nothing by themselves. But your understanding of the three stages gives you a perspective in life with which you can look at the various things that are going on in your life, and understand them better. If you like, they are more like glasses through which you can look at life. And the clearer perspective or the better understanding they provide gives you the calmness and confidence to continue with the right attitude.

“For instance, in your driving lessons, you are now in the second stage. The stage of doing the thing, putting the required effort into it with care and attention, love and faith. When you get your license, that will be the third stage. But with your moving out of the neighborhood, you are still in the first stage, you are trying to understand the natural laws and plan accordingly.”

“But I thought I was taking the lessons to buy the car, to move up in life, and to move out of the neighborhood. Isn’t that the stage of doing the things I need to do?”

“You believe you are in the second stage, but that is because you have not understood the natural laws yet.”

“What natural laws?” I was almost losing my patience.

“The ones that apply to making a change and moving away.”

“And what are they?” I prompted him on.

“Well, for one thing, to change your environment you need to change your mind. Another is a change of the environment will also create a change of perspective. And another is that if you don’t change your mind, no matter how much you change your environment, you will simply take your problems with you,

wherever you go.”

“What does that mean?” I protested.

“Simply that if you don’t change your consciousness, your within, no matter how far you run away from things, your problems will go with you. Perhaps in a different form, but the same problems will be there. And that’s because they are inside you. So no matter how far you run, you just take them with you.”

“Are you saying that I shouldn’t move out of the neighborhood?”

“Not at all!” He said reassuringly. “All I am saying is that if you change your consciousness, you will automatically find that either you have moved to a different neighborhood, or to your astonishment and disbelief, your neighborhood will have changed and transformed.”

He was right to some extent. I had already noticed that there was less garbage on my block and the trees felt more revitalized. And even the people were a little friendlier.

“Let’s go back to the map and the tools,” I urged. “How do I know what to do?”

“Very simply!” He stated. “Just think of the best ideal state you can imagine. Compare it with the actual case, and see which parts of the actual you can change to move towards the ideal. Don’t try to change the whole thing all at once, because you will be overwhelmed, and most likely you will give up. Take one small bit at a time. Remember, there is no such thing as a big thing. Everything is one thing, and everything is a small thing. The big things are nothing more than a series of small things following each other. Take care of the small things, and the big thing will take care of itself. Live one day at a time, and life will take care of itself.

“And then, simply do the right thing, with energy and vitality, but also with care, attention, love and faith. Do the right thing, not for the outcome, but because it is the right thing to do. And above all, don’t worry. Trust! Have faith. And you will find that sometimes you succeed and sometimes you fail. But regardless of that, you will know that you have always done the right thing.”

“And what if I am wrong?”

“Then you are wrong!”

“That’s it?” I said with surprise, “as simple as that?”

“Well, yes and no. It is as simple as that, because none of us claims to have infinite wisdom. We can only try our best. Yet it is not quite that simple, because we will have to take responsibility for our choices, right or wrong, and face their consequences. But that’s called life.”

“But maybe it is better not to choose at all rather than risk making the wrong decision.” I said, trying to find a safe way out.

“To choose not to choose is also a choice. At best, you will not progress towards the ideal state. At worst, it will lead to stagnation and decay. So at best you don’t win and at worst you lose. So if you choose not to risk because you are afraid of making the wrong decision, you will be in a no-win situation, and in the long run you will always lose.

“Whereas to risk means to risk failure, to risk facing the consequences of your choices, to pay the price. But also it gives you the chance to succeed, to benefit from your right choices, to collect the rewards. To risk means that at least you have a chance. And that, too, is called life.”

As he was getting up he said, “but above all, remember to do the right thing because it is the right thing to do. And right now, the right thing to do is to go for our driving lesson.”

With those words he headed for the garage. By now I must have been proficient enough because he tossed me the key and quietly went and sat in the passenger seat. I, in the driver’s seat, slowly backed out of the

garage, being very careful not to hit anything inside or outside. And we set off.

I had been driving for about five minutes when suddenly he covered my rear view mirror and asked, “what color is the car behind us?”

I had to jog my memory since I had not been paying too much attention to my rear view mirror. Finally remembering, I said, “red!”

He then uncovered the mirror, and I saw that there were no cars behind us. I was embarrassed, and as if he wanted to increase my embarrassment, he said, “for the past two minutes we have not been followed by anybody!” And then he remained silent.

I didn’t know what to say, so while feeling very hot and almost sweating a little, I just kept on driving.

After a few very uncomfortable moments, he said, “often in driving and in life, when we get used to things, we tend to take things for granted. We switch to autopilot. We stop thinking and lose our alertness. We are no longer mindful.

“Now, there are things that should better go on auto-pilot, things like how to change gears and how to use the clutch. But our mindfulness... we must never lose that. Overconfidence is dangerous. Always try to be alert and aware of your surroundings.”

I simply nodded, taking every word in. As for driving, I think I will never forget about my rear view mirror.

“The other lesson in this experience,” he continued, “is that often when we are not mindful, we imagine things are chasing us which have no actual existence. We protect ourselves against imaginary things, things that are not there in the first place. We even fear them. All because we don’t pay attention and we don’t see clearly. Instead we choose to see what we want to see... behind us, ahead of us, even with us and within us. Which takes us back to what we were discussing earlier. Be aware, do not worry, and do the right thing because it is the right thing to do.”

We couldn’t have gone another mile when he suddenly said, “pull aside, and stop!” which I did immediately.

I don’t think the car had come to a full halt when he quickly opened the door and jumped out. Right in front of the car, an old lady had fallen and was trying to get up. “How did he see her?” I thought.

While I was trying to park the car, I saw that he was helping her inside one of the houses. I locked the car doors and went towards the house. The sight was amazing. He had picked her up and was carrying her up the stairs and through the front door.

As I walked into the room, he was placing her on a couch and calming her with his gentleness and sense of humor. He then introduced me to her and asked if she had a telephone.

“Sure. It’s right over there,” she replied, pointing to a corner of the room. Then she added, “why?”

“I think we should call an ambulance.” He said calmly. But noticing her concern and change of complexion, he added, “I don’t think this is anything serious, but I am not a medical professional. I would feel much better if the paramedics had a look at your leg and your hip.”

She gave her consent.

Z then asked me to call for an ambulance, which I duly did, while asking the old lady her address, to convey to the telephone operator.

While we were waiting for the ambulance, Z talked to her about her younger days and what she did in her youth and other topics to take her mind off her pain. Finally the paramedics arrived and started examining her. I looked at Z and said, “shouldn’t we leave now?”

He simply said, “not yet!”

I protested, “why not? We are going to miss the rest of our lesson!”

He gave me a determined look and said, “because staying is the right thing to do!”

“That was the end of that conversation,” I thought.

We waited until the paramedics finished their examination and decided to take her to the hospital for an x-ray. Z found a piece of paper, wrote something on it and handed it to the lady while saying, “this is my phone number. If I can do anything for you, let me know.” And then laughingly added, “And you come back home very soon. OK?”

“OK!” Replied the old lady while being carried out on a stretcher.

We went back to the car and started heading home. It was a very quiet journey back.

Pretty close to home, Z very calmly said, “in life, when we look at the ideal conception, we start making plans to move the actual towards it. But sometimes things come up that we did not plan on. Situations change in ways that we couldn’t imagine. At those times, instead of doggedly sticking to our plans, the wise thing to do is to re-evaluate the ideal, compare it with the new situation, and consequently revise our plans, simply because we want to do the right thing.

“Earlier I was saying that as we change and grow wiser, the map changes with us but the tools don’t. Also, sometimes as situations change, we realize that our map was not right. So the best thing to do is to revise the map and our destination, but keep the tools, the compass and the car.”

I simply nodded and very quietly added, “and this is what happened when you saw the old lady on the pavement.”

“Precisely. And at that point, helping her was more important than continuing with our lesson. That was the right thing to do, and so we did it.”

“You mean you did it!” I corrected him.

“No!” He replied. “I started it, and you didn’t have much choice because I knew you would not choose to drive the car on your own. But you also helped. You parked the car, you called the ambulance, and so on. You did the right thing, but you didn’t understand why. Now you know.... And I am sure the next time you will choose the same thing, but knowingly.”

We got back to the house, and we set our next appointment for Tuesday afternoon. Just before I was about to leave he asked, “how is the African Violet coming along? You never told me.”

“Oh, very well. It is resurrected!” Suddenly I realized that maybe I had chosen the wrong word. But he understood my innocence and laughed heartily. I then added, “it is now flowering and looks beautiful.” Then with some hesitation I added, “would you like me to bring it back?”

“Oh no,” he said to my relief. “Obviously you have a green thumb. If you bring it back here, I’ll probably have to give it back to you again in a sorry state, ready for one more resurrection.” And then he laughed loudly, continuing, “... and that would not be the right thing to do...”

Finally we said goodbye, and I left for home.

When I got to my street, I noticed that our block had a different feel about it. I don’t know how to describe it, but it felt healthier, cleaner and quieter. And the colors were more vibrant and alive. It felt like an energy field had descended upon our block and somehow protected it from the decay of the neighborhood. It was an oasis in that desert of the inner city neighborhood.

Suddenly I remembered that a couple of weeks before, I had used exactly the same image and words to

describe my room. Previously my room was the oasis. Now the block had taken on that role. What was happening? Was my neighborhood slowly transforming? Just like Z had predicted?

When I got to my house I noticed Josh and the gang at the end of the block, with a garbage bag picking up trash. Josh noticed me and waved and shouted, “we are almost done with cleaning. You are right on time for watering the trees.”

“Good God!” I thought. “They had taken the initiative without my presence. It seemed like they were beginning to take pride in their neighborhood and had begun taking responsibility for it.” I then shouted back to Josh, “I’ll be there in a minute.”

As I was coming out of my room heading for the work group, Josh’s mom, who was standing right outside her door, waved and said, “thank you!” And without waiting for my reply, she went back in.

When I joined the kids, they were very excited. They were pointing at the little buds coming out of the bulbs. The little girl said, “very soon this block is going to be full of flowers.”

I looked at her and said, “today, why don’t you organize the work group?” Then I looked at the rest and said, “do we all agree?”

To her excitement, they all nodded. We decided that every day, one of us would take charge of organizing the work group. And we would do that until the daffodils bloomed.

When we got to Angry Joe’s tree, I noticed that he slowly opened the door and quietly watched us to make sure we did our job properly. When we finished, we all looked at him for his approval. He mumbled something and went back inside.

“I think he is pleased with our work!” I said to the group.

“Yea,” confirmed Josh, “because he didn’t shout at us!”

As we were heading for the next tree, I looked back to see if Angry Joe would come out again. Suddenly I remembered my rear view mirror experience and Z’s words. “Often we protect ourselves against something that is not even there. We even fear it.” I laughed at my own reaction and resolved to not worry about Angry Joe, and to keep on doing the right thing because it is the right thing to do.

When we were done with the street, I told the gang that I would meet them again the next morning. As I was about to tend to my planter and daffodil patch, Josh’s mother called me over. When I crossed the street, she said, “will you join Josh and me for dinner tomorrow? I’ll be cooking some stew.”

It was a long time since I had proper home cooking, but I was hoping to see Miriam that evening. So reluctantly I said, “thank you, but I was hoping to spend the evening with Miriam.”

“Is that the young lady who was here the other day?” She asked.

“Yes!”

“Well, she is welcome to join us too.”

“Can I take a rain check for Wednesday instead?” I asked while keeping my fingers crossed. “She is planning to come here on Wednesday evening.”

“Sure,” she smiled. “We will make it for Wednesday.”

I thanked her and headed home to tend to the daffodils and the African Violet.

The next morning at nine o’clock the work group was ready and waiting for me by the walkway. “Good morning,” I greeted them.

“Good morning,” they all replied.

We selected one of the young boys to organize the group, but before we began work, I announced to the group, “I think we are getting the hang of this very well. We can probably take on something new as well as what we are already doing. Would you like to do that?”

They were all excited and agreed.

Then I added, “let’s think about this while working, and then at the end let’s share any ideas that may come up.” With those words, we started.

While cleaning up the base of the trees, I noticed that the daffodil buds were coming along nicely. They were beginning to grow very quickly. I knew that in a couple of weeks or so the street would have yellow flowers. What an oddity. How out of place. One block in the whole neighborhood would have flowers and lively trees. Everywhere else would be dull. “I wish everywhere could be as lively as this,” I thought. “Maybe we should dare to do the same thing for the next block.”

By a quarter to ten we were almost done. Three kids from the next block were watching us. Finally they approached us. One of them said, “what are you doing?”

The boy who was organizing the group said, “we are cleaning up the trees and watering them.”

“Why?” was the inevitable retort.

“Because the trees are thirsty and need water.” came the inevitable reply.

“Should we do the same on our block?” the other boy asked.

The whole work group turned towards me, waiting for a solution. It was as if these three young men were the final prompting that I needed for our expansion plans. I thought a little and said, “I think we can figure out something, but first we must all agree to it.”

They all kept quiet while looking at me and waiting for my suggestion. I continued, “I think it would be a good idea to expand the work group, but we must all agree that we take responsibility for everything. We don’t give any preference to this tree or that, to this block or the next. You three will work just as hard as the rest of us on this block, and we will also take care of the trees on the other block as if it was the same as this one. This way we can get things done much faster, and we can get more done too.”

They all agreed that it was a good idea.

Then I added, “now there is going to be eight of us in the work group. What we should do is divide ourselves into two teams of four. Each team will take care of one side of the street. Sounds like a good idea?”

They nodded silently. Then I turned to the boy organizing us and said, “well, since today you are organizing the work group, you pick the two teams.”

He separated us into two teams then said, “but we only have one bucket. So instead, one team will take care of the garbage and the other will water the trees.”

“Very sharp!” I thought.

Josh said, “that sounds like a good idea, and I think it will work.”

And with these words, we went off to our duties. Because of our larger numbers and our experience, even though there was more work to be done on the next block, we managed to finish everything by half past ten.

The kids were all excited and energized. Josh then said, “I am ready to do more. What shall we do now?”

I was concerned that we do not expand our project too rapidly because I wanted to make sure nothing would be neglected. The easiest way to fail is to keep things incomplete and put up with them. I turned to

Josh and said, “do you have any suggestions?”

“Yes,” he replied. “Let’s go to my house and work on my garden.”

“And what needs to be done there?”

“I want to make a grass lawn in our front yard.” He added.

“If we help you Josh,” I asked, “ would you be able to take care of it from now on?”

“I promise I will.” He replied with an incredible determination.

How could anybody say no to such resolve? I looked at the rest of the work group, and they all nodded their agreement to help.

When we got to Josh’s house I asked, “do you have any grass seeds?”

“No!” He replied, and without flinching added, “but first we need to dig up the yard and turn the soil over and flatten it. When that is done, we can go ahead and plant grass seeds.”

“How do you know all this?” The little girl asked.

“My mom said so.”

I was somewhat relieved. Because that meant that Josh’s mom was at least aware of what was about to happen.

The rest of the team started collecting the garbage, the broken pieces of wood, the old and rusty car parts and metal chunks as well as the rocks and broken bricks in the garden, and piled them up in one corner. In the meantime I went to get my spade and rake and returned. First I started digging the earth with the spade and turning it over. One of the boys from the other block got a piece of rock and started hitting the dried up pieces that I was turning over and smashing them into manageable soil. Josh picked up the rake and started raking the manageable soil.

Somebody else had an idea to mark the walkway from the street to the house with some of the rocks that we had collected. And so the work party improvised and worked with a lot of energy and creativity, each of us taking turns at digging, smashing and raking. By noon the whole project was done.

“I think we should call it the day now. It has been a very productive day.” I told the group.

One of the boys from our block said, “maybe each time we can do the same for one of our houses.”

“That sounds like a great idea. But remember that we would need to take responsibility for our lawns, and that would take a lot of energy and attention.”

They all nodded. And with that, we broke up for the day.

Saturday afternoon at four o’clock I was in front of the flower shop, where Miriam joined me. She said she couldn’t spend much time with me, as she had to go and visit and take care of her grandmother for the weekend. So we went for a short walk together.

I told Miriam about the expansion of our project and work group, as well as Josh’s plans to make a lawn even though he had no seeds.

“I almost forgot,” I said just before parting, “Josh’s mother has asked us to have dinner with them on Wednesday.”

“That sounds nice.” She replied. “I’d be glad to.”

* * *

Life's Challenges

Duality

Tuesday afternoon, I made it to Z's by a quarter to three. He welcomed me in and we began to talk over our customary lemonade. I told him about the work group and how we took care of Josh's garden even though he had no grass seeds to plant.

He smiled and said, "Kids... bless their hearts. They know so much without actually knowing that they know."

"What do you mean?" I simply had to ask.

"Well actually, you have been applying two principles without knowing that you were doing that."

My intent gaze must have been enough prompting because he continued, "the first is that you do the right thing without worrying about the outcome or the reward. You see, for Josh, the ideal conception includes having a lawn in his front yard, even though he has no grass seeds and perhaps no money to buy them either. But if he commits himself to doing the right thing, the means of bringing it about will also appear. Do the right thing, without worry and without expectation, but with care, love, hope and faith. That's all. And that is what you all were doing."

"I guess that makes sense." I replied.

"And the second is the principle that says, 'happy is the person who works for the happiness of others'."

I simply kept quiet.

He continued, "when you decided to help Josh with his garden, you only did it because that would help him do his part in the world to bring the actual closer to the ideal. And that makes him happy.

"But what is interesting is that seeing the happiness in him and helping him achieve this happiness, makes you happy too. Remember when you were working in the garden? You didn't have a care in the world, except for preparing the garden, which was exactly what you were doing. That is a timeless and eternal experience. And those are the times when we experience real happiness, or what some call bliss. When we are so focused and absorbed with the things that we do, that we have no concern for the past or the future, and we lose our sense of time."

He made sense to me. He described my experience of that day very accurately. I simply nodded while deeply absorbed in my thoughts, trying to fully understand and integrate his wisdom within my psyche. And Z kept quiet, giving me enough space to digest his words.

After a while I said, "Z, I have two questions. First, when we were turning the soil over, when we didn't have any grass seeds... what if we never have any seeds?"

He replied, "for all you know, you could be dead tomorrow. The question is never 'did you achieve your goals?' The question is always 'did you do the right thing?'"

"And for all you know, some developer could come tomorrow and buy all these houses and tear them down and turn them into a strip mall or something similar. But you don't have a crystal ball, and you couldn't go on living if you constantly second guessed yourself. All you can do is assess the actual situation at any given time, compare it with the ideal at that time, and do what you can to bring them closer to each other." And then he paused, looking at me to see if I understood what he was saying.

"I understand... or at least I think I do!" I confirmed.

“And what is the second question?” He asked.

“My God...” I thought. “Talk about mindfulness! This guy doesn’t miss a beat.” Then I collected my thoughts and asked, “when you say happiness is for the person who works for the happiness of others, I am not sure if I buy that. I actually chose to help Josh because I thought it would make my own neighborhood better looking and more pleasant to live in. Plus, I would prefer to have his yard be the first one with a lawn rather than mine. And not to mention the fact that I didn’t have permission to do that in my own yard.

“And just for the sake of completeness, I love to do gardening anyway.”

When I finished my oratory he simply said, “granted! What you did brought you happiness. But there are two factors at work here. The first and simpler one is this: I agree that you had all those reasons that brought you happiness. But when you think about Josh’s reasons, yours pale in comparison. In other words, Josh’s reasons were more compelling, and he benefited more from this arrangement than you did. But it brought you happiness too.” Then he paused for my reaction.

“And the second factor?” I asked, trying to be just as mindful as he was.

“The second factor is very simple, but actually harder to accept, because it requires a degree of faith. Faith in the simplicity of the complex universe in which we live. Believing that the most profound notions are also the simplest. And that is the elegance and economy of the universal system. It does not waste a thing, and it matches everything perfectly, just like a jigsaw puzzle.

“What that factor is, is the notion that we can help others best when we employ our gifts, and those are the things that bring us most happiness. In other words, if your gift is your green thumb, the best way you can contribute to others is through gardening, or agriculture, or something related to growing healthy plants. This is doing your part in making the world progress towards perfection.

“So, paradoxically, while bringing a lot of joy to yourself, you can bring a lot of happiness to others. In fact, you can be sure that if you feel that you are making a sacrifice, or you are not joyful about what you do, you are also compromising your contribution to life and universe. You actually bring less happiness to others than you could otherwise.”

“This is some convoluted thinking!” I exclaimed in my confusion.

“Actually it is a very simple proposition. What it says is that one leads to the other, while the other leads to the one.

“If you choose otherwise, you end up in a vicious cycle of fear and distrust and desperation and misery. In other words, you are unhappy with what you do, so you don’t do as good a job as you could if you were happy. And this makes others unhappy with your performance. Then you feel betrayed and disappointed because they don’t even appreciate your contribution and self-sacrifice, which leads you to doing an even lousier job than before, which makes them unhappier. Do you get the picture? Do you see where this is leading to?”

“I think I do.”

He didn’t wait for more comments from me and added, “and the proposition is also a self-affirming and self-feeding cycle. Let’s call it a joyous cycle. If you do what you enjoy doing, you’ll do a better job, which makes others happier with your contribution. They recognize you more with honor and wealth and gratitude. Which brings you more joy and even encourages you to do a better job, and so the cycle goes on.”

“I get the picture...” I replied. “But is that realistic?”

“Well, let’s look at your gardening venture. You started with one dying flower, and that led you to a

daffodil patch, which then resurrected a tree and brought you a recruit. Then you went on to add a planter and another tree, and three more recruits and after a while a bunch of trees, and a couple of dozen daffodils, and now you have a team of eight, a couple of street blocks, one yard and more coming, not to mention your consultant in the form of a girlfriend!”

This was the first time I thought of Miriam as a girlfriend. For a long time I wanted to, but I couldn't permit myself to call her that. Finally Z broke the spell for me. “Was this another one of those imaginary self-made limitations?” Just as I thought this, Z broke in and said, “I am sure a lot of your neighbors are happy about this too!”

“Actually, that is true.” I responded. “Josh's mom has invited us to dinner, and even Angry Joe doesn't seem as ferocious any more.”

“Who knows where all this may lead,” continued Z. “It may lead to fame and fortune, or it may simply lead to having a nicer neighborhood, or maybe even a new job. But all you need to do is keep your part of the bargain. Just keep on doing the right thing...”

“Because it is the right thing to do!” I completed his sentence.

He chuckled and said, “let's go for our lesson. Today we have two difficult tasks to undertake.” And with these words we headed for the garage.

On our drive, he directed me to a hilly neighborhood, and when we were on a very steep incline, he asked me to pull aside and stop the car. Then he said, “first let's practice uphill starts. As you see, you are trying to get the car to move uphill. The problem is if you lift your foot off the brake, the car will roll back, and if there are any cars or obstacles behind you, you might hit them.

“The trick to this is to make the car want to move forward before you release the brake. And you do that by pulling the hand brake, putting the car in the first gear, releasing the clutch a little bit up to what we call the biting point. The biting point is where the car wants to begin to move, but the clutch is not fully engaged yet.

“At that point you take your foot off the brake slowly, and as you put it on the gas and rev the engine, you release the hand brake, and very slowly let go of the clutch. If you do all these just as I said, you will find that the car moves. Eventually when you get good at it and become familiar with the car, you can omit the hand brake. Did you get all of that?”

“I think I did.”

“Imagine you are rock climbing.” He continued. “And you are using a rope. Sometimes you will find it easier if you first find a foothold, stop yourself, and then use your hands and arms to climb up the rope. The hand and foot brake are like finding a foothold. The clutch is like your hands moving up the rope, and the gas is like using your arms to pull yourself up.”

“OK!” I said. “Let's give it a try.”

When I tried the first time, I stalled the engine with a jerky movement. Z explained that I released the clutch too far past the biting point. “You can hear the tone of the engine change the moment you reach the biting point.” He explained. “Plus, if you really pay attention, you will feel the car putting less pressure on the brakes, and even wanting to move forward. Let's try again, but this time release the clutch very slowly.”

I tried again and it actually worked, though the movements were somewhat jerky. We tried it over and over an over again. I don't know how many times. It must have been at least a couple of dozen times, but I really got the hang of it. And then we tried some more, but this time, without the hand brake. I felt that I was getting to know the car very well.

Once I mastered this technique, he directed me to a remote and abandoned airfield. We must have been the only car for miles. Again he asked me to stop. Then he said, “now we are going to try the emergency stop!”

It sounded exciting and worrisome at the same time. I simply listened.

He continued, “sometimes you will find yourself in a situation where you have to brake hard. Someone from a side road may suddenly turn into your lane, or a kid or an animal may run in front of your car. You simply have to stop immediately because of some imminent danger.

“At those times, the worst thing you can possibly do is to slam your foot on the brake. What that will do is simply lock the wheels and make the car go into a skid. Then it becomes like ice-skating. The only difference is that you will have no control. You won't even be able to turn the car.

“The best thing to do is to press down on the brake quickly, firmly and mindfully. But above all, do not panic. Never, ever panic. Panic means loss of command and can only lead to disaster. Remember, even if you lose control, you need not lose command of the car.”

“OK,” I replied. “But what if I lose control?”

“You can only lose control if the car goes into a skid and starts to turn. The problem is if the car turns right, our instinctive reaction is to turn the wheel left to correct it. But that actually makes the skid worse. What you need to do is to go against your instinct and turn the wheel right. And that is why you should never panic.”

“Turn right?” I was surprised.

“Yes. You actually turn the car into the skid, and you let go of the brake.”

“Let go of the brake?” I echoed again.

“Yes. When you do that, you actually align the wheels with the direction of the movement of the car, and then since you are not braking, the wheels start rolling again. Remember this: rolling means control; locking the wheels means skidding, and that is loss of control.”

“Turn the wheels into the skid and release the brake,” I repeated his instructions.

He continued, “and when you regain the control of the car, again press on the brakes firmly and correct the direction of the wheels.”

“OK!” I replied.

“All of this is theory,” he went on. “It doesn't mean a thing until you experience it. And that is why we are here. So, let's give it a try. Accelerate and when I hit the dash like this,” he tapped on the dash in front of him, “you try to stop the car as if a kid has run in front of you.”

“OK!” I replied while my heart was pumping.

The first try I was kind of nervous and my braking was not that firm. “You have just killed the child that ran across the road!” He commented and added, “Too slow! Let's try again.”

The second try I pressed harder but not hard enough, because he said, “well, this time was better. You didn't kill the kid. But you sure sent him to the hospital.”

The third time I went all out and the car went into a skid. “Turn into the skid,” his words echoed in my ear and in my mind. I instinctively did the opposite and the car spun twice before it came to a halt.

“If we had been going any faster, you could have rolled the car.” He evaluated the situation. “Let's try again. And this time I want you to slam down on the brakes and when it skids to go against your instinct.”

I did as he said. As the car began to skid and turn, I turned the wheel into the skid and released the

brake. It was amazing. I actually regained control of the car. At that point everything he had said made sense. He was right. Up to this point all that he said was theory. But now I actually understood it, because I had experienced it.

He said, “Good!” Very good! Now, what would be even better is if you never ever get to this point. Let’s fine-tune the process. Let’s brake firmly without skidding.”

We tried half a dozen times more until I got the hang of it. And then we headed home. What a day it had been and what an interesting lesson. But little did I know that it was not over yet.

On the way back, suddenly a driver swerved in front of us and we nearly had an accident. Almost involuntarily I shouted, “what a bad driver!”

Z asked me to pull aside and stop the car, which I promptly did. I could sense another principle coming.

When we were safely aside, he said, “what happened just now?”

“This lousy and careless driver pulled in front of us, and we nearly had an accident.”

“Why do you think he did that?”

“Because he is a bad driver!”

“And what exactly does that mean?” He continued with his line of questioning.

“What do you mean? He is a bad driver. He doesn’t know how to drive!”

“Let me explain something to you.” He said. “You are right. He is a bad driver. But he does know how to drive. He must be able to drive to be able to drive in front of us. He is a bad driver because he doesn’t know how to drive safely.”

“OK. But what exactly is your point?” I asked.

“The point is this. Not anyone who can drive is a good driver. So don’t assume just because you can drive, you are a good driver. It is just as easy to become a bad driver as it is to become a good driver. All you have to do is become careless about, unconcerned with, or ignorant of the regulations and principles of driving. Just like in life. To do bad things, all you need to do is become careless about, unconcerned with, or ignorant of the principles of life.

“You must realize that there is no driving school that sets out to train you to drive recklessly. Nor is there a second DMV that tests you to see how badly you drive, issuing you a license only if you commit certain violations. I mean it is not that there are two authorities and two systems, one trying to teach you how to drive well and issuing licenses to good drivers, and another trying to teach you how to drive badly and issuing licenses to bad drivers. There are no two opposing systems in competition with each other. There is only one system. But you still have good drivers and bad drivers.

“All of this is because each driver has the choice to be mindful and careful, or unconcerned and careless. Each of us can spend the time and energy to learn what we need to learn or remain ignorant. The cause of bad driving is ignorance and an uncaring attitude. The cause of good driving is an attitude of concern and learning and wisdom.

“And this applies to life too. There really is no Devil out there trying to train you to rebel against God. Yet if you are unconcerned, uncaring and ignorant, you are quite likely to commit evil. On the other hand, if you are caring, mindful and wise, you will only choose good, or at least you will try your best to choose good.”

“OK, I understand all of this, but why pull aside and be so serious about this matter? I am careful, and I try to drive properly.” I protested.

“The reason is that no matter how much aware you have been in the past, you can still take things for granted at any time. Caring and mindfulness is not a given fact nor is it genetic. It is an attitude, a state of mind. And as such, it is subject to all the changes of emotion and intellect we go through with time.

“In other words, you could be a great driver today, but tomorrow, because you may have had a fight with your girlfriend, your mind will be elsewhere, and as a result you could become a reckless driver. Or you may pass your test with flying colors and drive well for fifteen years, but gradually things become so automatic that you are no longer concerned about being mindful. You may no longer try to keep yourself educated with the latest rules and regulations of the road, and gradually begin to ignore things that you used to observe, and slip back into ignorance. Then, even after fifteen years of driving, you may have gradually become a bad driver.

“It is important to always be aware of your choices and your attitude. Remember this: caring, concern and mindfulness produce a good driver as well as a wise person. Carelessness and ignorance produce a bad driver as well as a person who commits evil.”

I simply nodded my understanding of what he had conveyed to me, and after he was satisfied that I had taken everything in, he allowed me to drive back home.

* * *

Wednesday afternoon, after I finished my shift at the bakery, I headed straight for the flower shop. However, something happened along the way that startled me. In one of the major streets which at that time was not that crowded, I was mugged. A tiny bearded man approached me, pulled out a knife and demanded my wallet.

My first instinct was to either refuse and fight or run away. But he had a knife. Z’s words echoed in my ears. “You have to go against your instinct... turn into the skid.” I decided to suppress my instincts. I put my hand in my pocket and took out all the cash that I had with me. It was about seventeen dollars and change.

He took the money and said, “give me your wallet!”

“I don’t have a wallet. This is all I have with me...” and before I knew it, he had disappeared.

“It’s a good thing I went against my instincts,” I thought. “It is not often that you can buy your health and even your life for seventeen dollars and change.”

By about a quarter to four I reached the flower shop. I was quite shaken when I went in, but the smell of the flowers and Miriam’s smile had a calming effect. I busied myself by studying the various flowers in the shop.

I was lost in my communion with the flowers when Miriam tapped me on my shoulder and said, “shall we go?”

“Is it four o’clock yet?” I asked, not expecting the time to go by so quickly.

“Yes! Come on. You can study these another time.” With those words, she took my hand and pulled me out of the shop.

“She is in a playful mood,” I thought. Then I told her about the incident that I just experienced.

“You definitely did the right thing,” she affirmed. “It makes no sense to act macho and then be injured. Now, if you remember his face and features you can report the incident to the police. But it would have made no sense to try to fight him.”

At this point I remembered Z’s words about how ignorance and an uncaring attitude lead a person to commit evil. I realized that the mugger had made the choice to mug me because he was acting selfishly,

without concern for anyone else's well-being, as well as his ignorance of the fact that there may have been better ways of earning money.

"No, the police is not the solution." I suddenly blurted out. "That man mugged me because he didn't know any better. As far as I am concerned, understanding his state is important, not condemning it. And then helping him and others like him understand the alternative choices they could make. And help them see the effect mugging has on its victims and on the society in general."

"That's a tall order..." Miriam said in surprise.

"Well, that's true. I don't know how to do it now, but perhaps one day I will be able to do something about it. But I do know that reporting to the police is not a long term solution." And I decided to leave the incident behind me right there and then.

We talked about many different things before we reached our street. As soon as we turned into our block, she stopped and said, "Wow! What a change!"

I was very happy at her reaction.

She continued, "life is back in this street... and look at those daffodils. Give them another week or ten days and you'll have flowers too. This is wonderful."

At that point the kids in the work group noticed us and ran up to us.

"Hi!" They all shouted and giggled.

The little girl turned to the three newest members of our work group and said, "she is the plant expert. She works at the flower shop."

"How does it look?" Asked Josh with considerable enthusiasm.

"Wonderful... wonderful," replied Miriam. "Your progress has been remarkable. It is as if you have been doing some magic here."

Then Josh proudly turned to the others and said, "they are going to come to my house for dinner."

Miriam simply continued with her sentence, "I think by the end of next week you will have some bright yellow daffodils along here."

"It seems that you have already watered the trees." I told them after I noticed the muddy bases of the trees.

"Yes," said Josh, "I told them that Miriam was coming tonight, and we decided to go ahead and do the work."

We then went to the various trees on the two blocks and Miriam gave us tips on how to tend to them individually. With some we needed to air the soil. Some she said did not need as much water, yet others needed more. The interesting thing was that even though I could not remember most of the things she said, every one of the kids remembered fully. I was happy to have had such remarkable partners in our work team.

Finally around six o'clock, Josh's mom came out and asked us to go in for dinner. Miriam must have seen the turned over and raked soil in Josh's front yard, as we walked on the marked footpath to his house, but didn't say anything. "This was quite unlike her." I thought. I also noticed the disappointment in Josh's eyes.

As we entered, Miriam reached into her bag and, addressing Josh and his mom, said, "I was thinking of bringing you some cut flowers, but I thought they would wither away in a few days. Instead I thought I should bring you something that lasts." At this point she took a package out of her bag and handed it to

Josh and said, “these are grass seeds. I noticed you have prepared the lawn. I just hope you haven’t planted any grass yet, so you can use these.”

Josh couldn’t contain his pleasure. He almost hit the ceiling. I don’t think there are any words that can describe how he felt at that time.

Josh’s mom turned to Miriam and said, “young lady, this kind of grass seed is something that I can definitely approve of. Thank you.”

While Miriam was explaining to Josh how to plant the seeds, I remembered Z’s words, “if he commits himself to doing the right thing, the means of bringing it about will also appear.”

“It works,” I thought to myself. “It really works!”

Josh’s mom invited us all into the kitchen where we sat around a very old yet clean wooden table. She then began to serve a delicious looking, aromatic stew, straight out of the pot. “I hope you are all hungry!” She said.

“It was a wonderful dinner.” I told her after I finished. “My first taste of home made stew in a very long time. Thank you!” I could see the happiness in her eyes, as if she was blessed with the opportunity to mother us.

It was a cozy and family-like ambiance. Not only had I not tasted such food in a long time, but also I hadn’t even felt this close to any family as I did in that kitchen.

For the rest of the evening we sat around the kitchen table, sipped tea, and told stories about our lives. At the end of the evening, Josh’s mom put some leftover stew in a plastic yogurt container and gave it to me saying, “take this with you. Warm it up for your lunch tomorrow.”

We all then said goodnight and left. Miriam walked me back to my door, kissed me goodnight and left for home. This was the first time she had kissed me.

* * *

Thursday morning, nine o’clock, the whole gang was ready for work. They all looked somber and very disappointed though. I tried to put on my most cheerful face and said, “good morning!”

One of the kids from the other block pointed in that direction and said, “it sure don’t look that way!”

I looked in that direction and saw a lot of garbage strewn around the street and particularly at the base of the trees. It almost looked as if a gang had deliberately come to sabotage our efforts. Fortunately, our block was not affected, and the daffodils were still intact.

At that moment I remembered Z’s words about the uphill climb. “Hold the brake down to find a foothold.” He would say. “Then slowly release the clutch, up to the biting point, then release the brake, then the hand brake, and press on the gas. It needs more power from the engine.”

I then faced the kids and very calmly said, “it looks like we have our work cut out for us this morning. I only have one plastic bag left, but I don’t think that would be nearly enough. Who has some plastic bags at home?”

Four kids indicated that they did.

“I think we are going to need at least ten bags.” I continued. “So why don’t you go and get as many bags as you can and come back and join us. The rest of us are going to start the work.”

At this time the four kids ran back to their homes and the rest of us, like a bunch of street warriors, marched to the next block. We had hardly begun work when the four kids reappeared one after the other.

“We have seventeen bags.” I said after counting them all. “I think this should do it. So let’s get going.”

We all started at the base of the first tree. We were about to move to the next tree when the little girl said, “what about the trash in the street?”

There was never any car traffic in our block, so I said, “let’s do it, but be careful in case any cars come by. In fact let’s have two watchmen. One to look in each direction for any cars that may be coming.” And just to add more fun, I added, “you know, like in the old days, castles had watchmen to tell them of any armies that may be approaching.”

The whole process had now turned into a game. Regularly we would change places and swap duties. Two would look out, two held out a plastic bag each, and four of us would fill the bags.

Shortly after half past nine we were done. I turned to the work group and said, “look at what we have accomplished! Isn’t that great?”

Josh said, “sure, but the trees are still thirsty.”

“What are we waiting for then?” I asked. “Let’s get going!”

By ten o’clock both blocks were clean and all the trees and daffodils were watered.

The little girl then said, “my mother said it’s OK to fix our front yard. She said if we do it, she will get enough grass seeds for all of us!”

Josh said, “I already have grass seeds for my garden!”

Concerned about not diffusing the spirit of teamwork, I thought a little and said, “maybe, Josh, we can use your portion of the grass seeds to plant in Angry Joe’s yard!”

“He’d never let us do that!” Josh replied.

“Not to begin with. But once he sees there are eight other yards which are done, he will be on our backs about getting his yard done too.”

Josh thought a little and said, “that’d be awesome. Who would have thought...!”

Finally with a new and enthusiastic spirit of teamwork, the whole group headed for the little girl’s yard. By noon we were all done and complete. Quite satisfied with our work, we decided to quit for the day.

Josh then approached me and said, “I am going to plant my seeds now. Will you help me?”

“Sure!” I replied. “But the only problem is that last night I wasn’t listening to Miriam’s instructions. So you will have to show me what to do.”

Josh was very happy with this proposition, and thus we headed for his yard. The first yard in the neighborhood to have a lawn. What an honor!

* * *

Picking Up Speed

Community & Synergy

Friday afternoon, after we poured our glass of lemonade, Z said, “I want you to call the DMV on Monday and set an appointment for Thursday morning to take your road test.”

I was so surprised, I almost dropped my glass of lemonade.

Z noticed this and chuckled. He then added, “it is very natural. Every project sooner or later comes to an end. Even life itself comes to its end. Now with some of them, when you graduate, you get some sort of certificate to confirm your graduation. With most you may not get that. But with driving, you end up getting your drivers’ license.

“The problem is most people think the benefit of having driving instructions is to get the drivers’ license. But the truth is that the real benefit is to be able to drive. The certificate is only some outside authority confirming that you have gained enough proficiency to be permitted to drive on public roads. But again I want to emphasize, the real benefit of the driving instructions is to learn to be able to drive.”

I nodded, still trying to understand the magnitude of its implications.

Z then slightly digressed by saying, “I wonder when we graduate from the school of life, whether we get a living certificate or is the only benefit learning how to live...” He paused slightly and then continued, “unfortunately most people don’t learn how to live either.

“But I am digressing...” he continued. “The thing is, you are very close to completing your instructions. Today we will learn about highway driving and will actually go on a freeway. Then on Tuesday, we will have a review session and practice everything we have learnt so far. And finally, on Thursday, we will practice a little early in the morning and will go to the DMV together, where you will take your road test. Sounds good?”

“Sure!” I stammered, still somewhat shocked and a little nervous.

Z then said, “let me tell you about driving on a freeway. As I had said before, we always have options. We don’t necessarily need to drive on freeways. But let’s say you want to go from here to the other side of the city. I know that it is only twenty-five miles, but if you want to take the normal streets, even if you take the larger ones, you will be on the road for at least an hour, and that is if there is little traffic.

“However, if instead you take a freeway and go to the other side of the city, and then take the normal roads when you get close to your destination, you will be able to achieve the same thing in under a half hour. In life, sometimes it makes sense to take a freeway since you can make the same progress at a much faster rate.”

I nodded, understanding everything that he implied about driving, as well as living.

“The thing about life though,” he continued, “is that you don’t always come across freeways. But when you get lucky and come across one, boy you should take it and ride it...”

I nodded again, wondering what would be my freeway in life.

Z added, “the thing about driving on a freeway though is that since the speeds are much higher, if you have an accident, it is much worse. That’s why it is important to be more careful and aware on a freeway. But that’s not all. Another thing about freeways is that since the cars go much faster, if you want to go at normal urban speeds, you will be the hazard on the freeway. In other words, you will have to drive neither

too fast, nor too slowly, otherwise you will have a greater chance of getting into an accident.”

I simply continued with my nodding.

“The challenge arises mainly when you want to get on or get off the freeway. In other words, as you are driving on the on-ramp, you will have to accelerate from the very slow city speeds to the much faster freeway speeds, and to smoothly merge with the freeway traffic. And usually you have very little room to do this in

“This is the most challenging part of freeway driving, but also of living. In other words, when life presents you an on-ramp to a freeway, you will have to move very quickly yet carefully, to take advantage of that opportunity and get on the freeway. This initial acceleration takes a lot of power and energy, and you have to press the gas pedal almost all the way down to the bottom.

“But once you merge with the freeway traffic, it is smooth sailing. You can simply cruise with everyone else, at very high speeds, yet with very little effort. Do you understand what I am saying?”

“Yes!” I said, though I would have liked to have heard an example of this.

“Another thing about freeway driving is while you are cruising, you should be alert and follow the signs. Otherwise, you may get drowsy and fall asleep, which is a sure recipe for disaster. Or you may take the wrong turn or even miss your exit altogether. Then you will completely miss the point of freeway driving. You will never reach your intended destination. Instead you will end up where the freeway takes you, which may be miles and miles from where you wanted to go.

“Most people when presented with a freeway in life, miss this point. They forget where they were heading. They get so excited by the fast speed of the freeway that they just keep on going and going. The speed becomes the destination. They actually forget to get off the freeway, because they forget why they got on it in the first place. Do you understand?”

“Yes!” I reassured him of my understanding.

“The final thing about freeways is that when you get to your destination, and it is time to come off of it, you have to take an off-ramp to come back to city driving. And here you have very little time and space to decelerate from the very high freeway speeds to the relatively low city speeds. So you must slow down quickly, but not in a fashion that will impede the flow of traffic on the freeway behind you. Otherwise, they may hit you from behind.

“This is why it is important to be alert and aware and to follow the signs. It is also important to be prepared for it. In other words, as you get on the freeway, you generally enter from the right hand lane. As you pick up speed and intend to go the longer distance, you merge left. When you want to accelerate, you overtake others from the left hand side, and then merge back to the right hand lanes, but not too much, unless it is time to get off.

“When it is time to get off the freeway, you gradually come back towards the right hand lane, until just before it is your off-ramp coming up, when you will be in the furthest right hand lane, from where you get off. There are exceptions to this pattern, where a lane may exit from the center of the freeway, but signs for those are generally well posted, and you get enough of an advance notice to prepare yourself accordingly.”

I continued with my nodding, again to assure him of my making sense of what he was saying.

“Now, when you see the signs for your destination off-ramp, you move to the right, but maintain your speed. Then as you get off the freeway, you must also be willing to let go of the fast pace of the freeway, and quickly adjust to the city speed pace. I know I am repeating myself, but so many people forget about this, that it deserves repetition. So get off the freeway, and slow down. Quickly, but safely.”

“It reminds me of the conversation between the Rabbit and the King in Alice in Wonderland,” I said. “The rabbit says, ‘Where should I begin?’ and the king replies, ‘Start in the beginning, go to the end, then stop.’ I guess most people forget to stop.”

“Actually, most people forget to go to the end,” replied Z. “They are either diverted long before approaching the end, or as they reach the end, don’t know where it is, and keep on going. But then the second most common mistake is not knowing when to stop, once they get off the freeway.”

I kept quiet, thinking about his comments.

“Are you comfortable with all of that?” He asked.

“Yes.” I nodded.

“Are you ready to go for our next lesson?”

“Yes!”

“OK. Let’s get on the freeway of life...” and with those words he headed for the garage.

It was exactly as he had said. There was very little room to accelerate very quickly in order to get on the freeway. All the other cars were coming so fast, and usually the gap between them was very small. So it was quite a trick to try to accelerate quickly to their speed and gradually merge into the flow.

We kept entering from an on-ramp and getting off on the next or the following off-ramp. In again, out again. We repeated this at least a dozen times until I got the hang of it. Then one of the times that I was off the freeway, he asked me to pull aside and said, “now we are going to head back. But this time there is going to be a difference. I want you to practice changing lanes. Gradually merge left, and try to overtake a few cars. Then merge back into the middle lanes again. We will continue doing this until we reach our home exit. But the difference this time is that I will keep completely quiet. It is entirely up to you to follow the signs and place yourself in the appropriate lane for our exit. You got all of that?”

“Yes!” I was quite excited with my new ability, to drive in the fast lane on the freeway. “Who knows,” I wishfully thought, “today the road, and tomorrow life!”

“One more thing.” Z added, “when you change lanes, do a shoulder check. The blind spot is somehow exaggerated on the freeway, because people drive so much faster.”

“Shoulder check when changing lanes.” I repeated while nodding.

“OK. Let’s get going.”

I got on the freeway, heading back home. I was quite excited because I got to go to the middle lanes. When I felt comfortable enough, I tried to overtake a slower car that was right in front of me. I signaled, checked my blind spot, accelerated and changed lanes. Then I accelerated a little more and moved past that car. When I had gone far enough, I signaled again, checked my blind spot on the right hand side, and moved back one lane.

I did this a few times until I got the hang of it. One time however, as I was about to move one lane right, another car was about to move one lane to the left into the same lane. Luckily, when I checked my blind spot, I saw it coming and quickly moved back into my own lane. Z smiled slightly, I suppose delighted with the fact that his point about shoulder checks was proven in practice.

I was enjoying my driving, when I suddenly noticed that the next exit was our off-ramp, but I was too far left. I tried to change lanes, but realized that I was going to miss our exit. At this point Z broke his silence and said, “when you realize that you are missing your exit, it is safer to continue on the freeway till the next exit, but make sure you change lanes safely. You can always take the next exit, turn around, and then return one exit until you are back where you wanted to exit in the first place.”

I nodded, although I was quite embarrassed.

When we were on the street again, he asked me to stop. Then he said, “the important thing about freeway driving is awareness and preparation. You should always plan ahead as to where you are heading and which exit you want to take. However, if for whatever reason you miss your exit, then it is far more important to respect the nature of the freeway and go with the flow, rather than turbulently disrupt that flow, which will only lead to accidents.

“Then you simply continue with the flow, but correct your course by turning around and coming back one exit. Again, always remember where you were heading in the first place.”

I nodded again.

“One thing this experience has shown you is how easy it is to get carried away in the flow and the speed of the freeway, and lose sight of your destination. It is no joke. It happens much more often than people realize. That is why it is important to be aware and alert, particularly on the freeway of life, and to know where and how to get off.”

That was the end of our lesson. We headed home, made plans for the following Tuesday and I left Z.

* * *

Saturday morning, as I headed out to join the work team, I noticed that the daffodils in the daffodil patch had bloomed. Beautiful tiny yellow flowers about to raise their head into the world. I was very excited. The rest of the street couldn't be more than a few days behind.

As the work team gathered, before starting with our duties, I brought them all to the patch and showed them what we could expect with the rest of the street. They were extra energized. After finishing our street duties, we all had so much energy that we decided to tackle two yards. The little girl's mother had already provided us with enough grass seeds for all of us, so as we prepared the yards, we also planted.

As it turned out, we finished one lawn on each block. “Who knows,” I thought, “perhaps by the end of next week, even Angry Joe could have a lawn. Well, not a fully grown one, but at least one planted.”

At the end of our work, a couple of the kids who had obviously talked about it before, said, “do we need to have you with us to prepare the lawns?”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because you are never at home. We can work on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Friday. But since you are not there, we don't prepare any lawns.”

“I tell you what,” I replied, “I always leave the tools outside my door. Why don't you all use them without me? But there are two conditions.”

“What?” The chorus came back.

“First that you prepare one lawn per day, and at the end of the day I get to inspect it. And second, you will not do any work on any yard where we don't have permission to work.”

“Sure!” They all replied happily.

“Promise?”

“Promise!”

“That was settled easily.” I thought. Little did I know what was coming next.

* * *

Sunday morning, Miriam had promised to take me to church. I was hoping that I could see things from

her perspective and perhaps get a different understanding of religion.

I was ready in my best attire when Miriam knocked on my door. To my surprise, when I opened the door, I saw that she was dressed fairly casually, and quite comfortably.

“Look at you...” she said, quite surprised at how I looked. I was quite overdressed compared to her.

“Should I change to something less formal?” I asked.

“No, no...” she replied. “This is fine. God will commune with you, no matter how you are dressed.” After a brief pause and looking me up and down, she added, “I have decided to go to a church different from the one that I normally go to. Let’s go somewhere close by.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because the location is not important. After all, God is everywhere. And familiarity is not important either. Because God knows all. And finally, habit is not important either. All rituals address the same divinity. What is important is the connection and the understanding.”

With those words we set off. As we left our front yard, she said, “I can see the daffodil patch has already bloomed, and the rest of them are just about coming out. Pretty soon you are going to add a new color to this street.”

“Yes. You should have seen the energy of the kids yesterday when they first saw the blooming flowers.”

When we were getting closer to the church, she turned the subject back to the topic of God. She said, “any form of worship is designed for one thing only. To bring us closer to our source and our center. Whether we go through elaborate rituals, which is really like a theatrical production for the heart and soul, or listen to long sermons, which are merely stories for the mind and soul, they only serve one purpose. All they try to do is to give us an understanding of who we are, and why we are here. In other words, they make us reflect upon our lives and choices, and help us make better decisions.”

“What exactly is a ‘better’ decision?” I asked.

“One that is more in tune with our nature and inner being. One that makes us more who we are. One that helps us be who we are. Decisions that are not based on fear or conditioning or habit. But decisions that are mindful and come from an inner awareness. An awareness of what we are and why we are making the choices that we are making.”

I don’t know if I fully understood what she said, but she sure seemed to know what she was talking about. I wasn’t so much convinced by her words as I was by her conviction. I suppose conviction is not only convincing, but also contagious.

I didn’t think much of the church service, yet there was something different about my attitude. Instead of observing the process with a critical eye, I was more accepting, and was observing without judgement. It was as if a whole play was being performed in front of me. But the players were not merely the priest and choir. The players included the entire congregation and the heroine was Miriam. I was particularly observing and enjoying her approach to this entire event. How she was fully absorbed in her communion with her God. How she was so centered. How she understood and meant every word of prayer that she uttered.

I was also watching others. Some were simply bored and were passing time, because they felt they had to be there. Although I can’t figure out why they thought they had to. Others were there because this was a way of paying back their debts to God. Who knows, perhaps they had made wrongful choices, and this was a way of unloading their guilt. You could tell those apart from others because they were most ardent in their zeal, yet their eyes lacked holiness.

Yet there were some who were there for the social occasion. They sang the hymns with more involvement

than others did. They would look around during the sermon and nod or wave hello to the ones they had recognized or made eye contact with. And of course there were those like Miriam, who were there with an air of serenity and sincerity, who were fully absorbed in the process, yet radiated a aura of divinity.

At the end of the service, on our way back, Miriam asked, “so how was it?”

“I guess I was more in touch with other people’s center than my own.” I replied.

“What do you mean?”

“I was beginning to understand the other people in the service. Why they were there and what they got out of it. As for myself, I’d much rather be working in a garden.”

She laughed and said, “which reminds me of what the old man said, ‘let the love that you have be the work that you do. There are a thousand ways to pray and to worship God.’ What is important is not conforming to any particular social standards, but to get centered in a way that works for you. So if gardening is the way you pray, so be it. And I know you have been doing a lot of that lately, haven’t you?”

“Yes, I suppose.” I replied. “What’s strange is that whenever I am working with the trees and daffodils I feel a lot more grounded and centered. Things take a different perspective. I even say things that surprise myself. I ask myself, ‘did I really say that? Wow! How profound!’ I don’t know if I make any sense, but this is how I feel. Things come to me from out of nowhere. I see things in a different light and with a lot more clarity. I am even more alive and can relate to life better.”

She continued my sentences, “You feel more energized. Even healthier. You have a reason to wake up in the morning. And you even need less sleep at night. No matter how tired you are, as soon as you start this work, a rush of energy comes to you, and you end up feeling less tired. You can’t stop thinking about things related to gardening. You think about them at the bakery. You think about them when you eat, or even when you sit on the toilet or take a shower. Even when you are asleep, you dream about them... how am I doing so far?”

“I guess you know exactly what I am talking about.” I responded.

“Well, this is your contribution to life,” she continued. “This is your active prayer. And if you don’t need to meditate or say a prayer, because none of that brings you this centeredness, then so be it. The thing about me is that working in the flower shop is my active prayer. But I also very much enjoy the church services and my passive prayers at church and at home. They all bring a different centering to me.

“In the flower shop, because I spend so much time with people, I am on a different energy level. During these communions, I shift my energy and attitude to a more receptive mode where I get inspired. I shift from the active, doing, giving, to the receptive allowing, accepting. With your active prayer, you also get the chance to be in the passive and receptive mode. And perhaps that is why these services just don’t do it for you.”

She went too fast for my comfort, but I must admit she made some sense. I could now see that there are those who have a two-way communion with the Divine simultaneously, kind of like when I am gardening. Yet there are those who have to switch from transmitter to receiver. They give, and then at another time they receive, just like Miriam. I could see the functionality and utility of religion and ritualism as an addition to spirituality.

“What we talked about is only one aspect of religion.” She interrupted my thought pattern just as I thought I was getting the full picture. Insisting that there was a bigger picture she continued, “there are other purposes to rituals and to religion too. For one thing, rituals are an enactment of belief systems, and what they do is reinforce the belief system and give it a living dimension. They make the belief applicable to life situations.

“But the problem arises when the ritual becomes the belief and replaces the belief. People then become dogmatic. Rituals lose their essence and become rigid rules and formulas. Spirituality turns into prescriptive magic. Communion with God is then replaced with communication technology, and usually a technology of a bad kind, or at least ineffectual kind.

“What creates the repulsion towards religion in people is not really rejection of the spirit of that religion, but aversion towards the rigid and dogmatic formalism that generally becomes the framework and the visible part of that religion. The invisible essence still is very attractive but veiled by the iron mask of the dogma. And that turns people off. Not only people like you, but also people like me. From your point of view that is dogma and from my point of view that is heresy and blasphemy.”

“She is very articulate!” I thought to myself, while pondering what she had said. Even though she had used a lot of big words, what she said made sense. I could definitely relate to them.

* * *

The Final Test Process & Results

Tuesday afternoon, after finishing my lemonade, I told Z, “I’ve got an appointment for Thursday at 10:30.”

“Very good. That gives us plenty of time to have a warm up practice before you take your test.” He then paused, sipped his lemonade, and continued, “as for today, we are going to practice everything we have done so far, except for the emergency stop. You won’t need that as part of the test. That was only necessary for learning to drive. What I want you to do is to pay full attention to everything. Then when you get home tonight, go over the whole thing in your mind. Do that one more time tomorrow night, and then I’ll see you here on Thursday morning, at nine o’clock sharp.”

When I got home that night, the first thing that I noticed was that the work team was waiting in front of my yard. They took me to the home of one of the team members, and asked me to inspect the lawn. They had done a wonderful job of everything, just like the previous day. They had also cleaned all the garbage and watered the trees. Pleased with their efforts, I gave them my approval to go ahead with the next one. I also told them that on Thursday morning I’d be taking my driving test. So they would get the chance to take care of one more lawn on that day too.

Then I headed home and in my mind reviewed everything that Z and I had done. I went over every detail and every comment and correction he had made. And when I was done, I looked at the African Violet that by this time was quite bushy and had a good crown of flowers.

* * *

Thursday morning, nine o’clock sharp, I was at Z’s door. Without hesitation he and I got into the VW and started to go for our practice run.

“Did you go over the details in your head?” Z asked me as I had pulled the car out of the garage.

“Yes. Once on Tuesday night and once last night.”

“Good. Now, let’s try something similar to that this morning, except that I won’t be directing you. You just take me where you will.”

I did as he said. I even remembered every little side road that we had turned into. We went forward, and in reverse. We started uphill and downhill. We drove in the city as well as on the freeway. We tried everything.

At ten o’clock, Z told me to head towards the DMV office. By a quarter past, we were in the parking lot of the department office. He then turned to me and said, “do you remember the three stages of life and every project in life?”

“What sort of time is it to talk about these things?” I thought to myself. Then I said, “actually Z, I need to focus on the test now.”

“Listen to me!” He insisted. “The other day we talked about the three stages of every process. Do you remember?”

“Vaguely...” I replied reluctantly.

“Focus...” He insisted. “The first stage is conception, which includes good planning, according to the natural and universal laws.”

“Yes. I remember.” I replied.

“The second is?”

“Implementation!”

“Good. Now what does that include?”

“Doing the work, with love and care as well as faith and trust in the process,” I replied, now in a slightly more relaxed state.

“Very good. And the last?”

“The result, which is perfection and immortality.”

“Excellent!” He applauded me. “Now listen very carefully. When you first set out to get your drivers’ license, you looked at the rules and regulations. You also planned how to approach this. And I was there with you all along. And we both did an excellent job. We did the best we could.

“Then we took action. We put the work that was necessary into this project. We went through a number of lessons. It took us weeks to get to where we are. But that wasn’t all. We did it with a lot of love and care and attention. And we had faith. We had faith in the process of learning. We trusted that if we do these things in that manner, you would learn to drive.

“And now you have. We have achieved the perfect and timeless results. You have learnt how to drive. More than that, you are a good driver. You can drive a standard car in the city, on the freeway, uphill, downhill, fast and slow. You know how to command the car, and when it goes out of control, you have learnt how to command it and regain control of it. You are a good driver. And you have already achieved the timeless and perfect results.

“Now you are going into this office, because there is a license there waiting for you. All you have to do is take the examiner around for a few blocks, maybe fifteen or twenty minutes. And once he or she sees how well you drive, you will complete this process, and they will send you your license. Is that understood?”

“Yes!” I replied, while feeling a rush of energy in my entire body.

“Good. Just remember. Keep calm, and be mindful. Go for it. Go in now. You don’t want to be late.”

With these, his final words, I entered the office and approached the examination counter. I introduced myself and was told to wait until the examiner called me.

At this point I saw Z enter the office, approach me with a smile and say, “you forgot something.”

“What?”

“The car!” He said while dangling the keys in front of him. “You are going to need this for your test.” And then he tossed me the keys, and came and sat beside me.

As the examiner was approaching me, Z’s words echoed in my head, “You are a good driver. And you have already achieved the timeless and perfect results... you are going into this office, because there is a license there waiting for you.”

The test was much simpler than the lessons that I had had with Z. The examiner was impressed with my familiarity with the car and the standard transmission. He was very happy with how I managed to signal and communicate with others while driving, as well as all the other aspects of my driving. Thanks to Z, I passed with flying colors.

When we returned to the office, the examiner congratulated me, and then Z came forward and congratulated me, too. The examiner issued me a temporary license and said the permanent one would be mailed to my address.

We then left the DMV office. “This calls for a glass of lemonade!” said Z. “And this one is on me. Let’s go to this little café I know next to the DMV office.”

After our little celebration, we went back to Z’s. We planned that I would return on the following week’s Friday afternoon to pay for the VW, and to do the paperwork. I was very excited about my new license, and about my new prospect of getting a car. I was one step closer to moving up in life.

With that thought, I felt a pang go through my chest. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to move out of the neighborhood. After all, I had a whole bunch of young friends, and a number of trees and daffodils to tend to.

When I got to my street, I was happy to notice all the blooming daffodils. On my way out early in the morning, I was so absorbed with my test that I didn’t even notice them. But now the whole street had come to life. Particularly with all the yellow and green mixed together. It was wonderful. Life itself was smiling.

As I approached my house, I noticed that the front yard had been prepared and planted. Suddenly from behind me I heard a chorus shouting, “surprise!”

I turned around and saw the work team. I didn’t know what to say. I was happy and upset at the same time. The first thing I said was in a tone of reprimand, “I thought I told you that you were not to work on anything without first getting permission for it!”

The little girl replied, “since you were going to take your driver’s test, we thought we should surprise you with this. And anyway, we got permission from your upstairs neighbor.”

I hadn’t even met my upstairs neighbor yet. That was fascinating. My attitude changed dramatically. It was now all elation. So very gently I said, “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have assumed otherwise. I am very surprised and very happy. Thank you!... and by the way, it was my driver’s test, not diver’s test. And I can now legally drive.”

“Yeah...!” the kids shouted. Although I am not sure if they fully understood what I was saying. I suppose to them it sounded good, and any excuse for a celebration was a good one.

“This calls for a lemonade!” I said, inviting them in. “By the way, did you notice all the daffodils come out?”

* * *

The Legacy *Perfection & Immortality*

Monday afternoon, as I returned from the bakery, I noticed a commotion in my block. There were a number of trucks with lots of people who were talking to Josh's mom and the work team. A whole bunch of others from the neighborhood had surrounded them too.

As I got closer, I noticed that two of the people had television cameras, and one had a microphone in hand. I also noticed that on two of the trucks I saw the name of a television station. Since I didn't have a TV, I couldn't recognize it, but it was definitely a TV reporting crew.

Before I had any time to react or feel in any way, I saw Josh's mom pointing at me saying quite loudly to the reporter, "here he comes. This is the man responsible for all this." At that point the cameras and the reporter turned towards me and started approaching me very quickly.

Before I knew it, I had two cameras pointing at me, and the reporter who was a good-looking lady asked, "I understand you are the man responsible for all this."

"All of what?" I asked quite bewildered and somewhat concerned.

She must have realized how abrupt her question was because then she explained, "in the whole of South Central, there are only two street blocks where the trees are well maintained, and you even get flowers. I understand you are the man behind all of this."

"Well, it's me and seven others. We are all part of a work team that takes care of these two blocks. In fact they are all there." I pointed at my work team. One of the cameras turned towards them. They were all waving back at me.

"Yes, but I understand you are the one who started it. Can you tell us how it started?" The reporter continued focusing on me.

"Come over here," I shouted to the kids, urging them to come and join me. Then I continued, "it was actually quite simple. One day I came home, and realized that the tree in front of my house was very thirsty. So I decided to give it some water. The next day I did the same, and that was when Josh joined me. Then we both watered the two trees in front of our houses." Josh at this time was smiling quite brightly, as he and the rest of the work team had surrounded me.

The reporter echoed my words, "so you started all this because the tree in front of your house was thirsty?"

"Yes. I mean there was no big plan. It just seemed like the right thing to do. So we did it. And one thing led to another, and now we have two street blocks which are quite green and alive."

"And what about the daffodils? Why daffodils?" The reporter continued.

"One day I was in the flower shop, and the daffodils were in season, and they were on sale. So I bought a few bulbs, and planted them. Then one thing led to another, and we got more daffodil bulbs and so we planted some by each tree. And now we have a whole block full of daffodils."

"Do you realize that daffodils are now becoming the symbol of inner city neighborhood revival?" She asked.

"Really?" And that was all I could say.

She then turned to the camera and said, “here is the face behind the daffodils of South Central.”

I shouted, “wait a minute... what about our work team?”

“Yes,” she corrected herself, “and here are the rest of the faces behind the daffodils of South Central.” Then she turned to me again and said, “why do you only have kids in your work team, except of course yourself?”

“I suppose... kids are more accepting of doing the right thing, because it is the right thing to do. They will more readily water a tree because it is thirsty. But there are a lot of grown ups who are behind the scene support. All the families in this neighborhood have been very supportive of what we have been doing. Miriam at the flower shop has been extremely helpful in both an advisory capacity as well as in providing us with some of the raw material. Even our good neighbor Joe has been supportive of these efforts.” At this point I turned around and waved at Joe who was standing at the footsteps to his front door, looking at the commotion. To my utter surprise he waved back, right in front of the camera.

* * *

Friday afternoon, I went to Z’s at the appointed hour, but without the payment for the VW. I wasn’t quite sure how to tell him.

As I entered, I noticed he had the lemonade already prepared and sitting on the coffee table. He started the conversation; “I saw your TV interview. It seems that you have already had your fifteen minutes of fame.”

“You saw that?” I asked with a shift in my energy.

“Yes. I even saw the good work you have done in this neighborhood. Those trees and daffodils are great. Can you believe it? You have created a symbol for inner city neighborhood revival. Daffodils!”

“Who could have thought?” I replied.

“But I bet there is more than this. I bet with you lots of things have happened since Monday.” It was almost as if he had read my mind.

I didn’t know how to put it, but his enthusiasm was contagious. I started, “actually, lots have happened. It is as if I suddenly got on the on-ramp of the freeway of life. Today was the first chance I got to take the off-ramp and come and visit you. And I don’t know where to start.”

“Remember the Rabbit and the King?”

“Yes... start at the beginning. Go to the end. Then stop.... OK.” I said. “On Monday night the interview was aired. On Tuesday afternoon somebody from the city office had left a message that I should go there on Wednesday, just before noon. So I took the morning off from work, and I went there.

“As it turned out, quite a few people in the city office had seen the interview, and they had all arranged to meet with me. They interviewed me to find out if there was anybody behind this whole process. You know, if anybody was sponsoring me and was trying to capitalize on the publicity. I wish I knew all of these things before the TV interview. Then at least I could have pulled together some sponsors and could have become a businessperson, and earn big bucks.”

Z simply listened with a serene smile on his face.

I continued, “once they were satisfied that there was nobody behind me, they offered me a job.”

“A job?” Echoed Z.

“Yes! They said they had a tough time finding gardeners for the inner city, and since I already did this work very well, how would I like to become a city employee. I was going to jump at the opportunity since

I love to work with plants so much. But something inside of me told me to pause a little. So I paused.

“Then without my saying anything, they said that they would give me a high salary. When they said how much it was, my chin nearly hit the floor. They were offering me three times as much as I earn at the bakery.”

“Great!” Said Z.

“But that wasn’t the end of it. Because of my shock, I just kept quiet. Then they said, they would also give me medical insurance and dental insurance and a whole bunch of other goodies which they listed for me.”

“Wonderful!”

“But wait, there’s more...” I said and hesitated a bit. Then I continued, “they said they would also give me a truck as part of my work, and that I could keep that in the evenings and even use it for my personal use.”

“Fantastic!” Said Z.

“Fantastic?” I echoed this time.

“Yes. It is wonderful. You are getting three times the salary, insurance and a bunch of goodies, and a truck fully paid for and insured by the city, and you don’t have to buy another car, so you get to keep the money for yourself too. That’s fantastic.”

“But Z,” I urged, “what about the VW?”

“O, you would never have bought that.”

“Why not? I love the car, and I have the money for it too.” I protested.

“It’s not you. It’s the car. It just wants to stay with me and keeps helping me help others.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, twelve years ago was the first time I put an add in the paper to sell this car. And that sales experience turned into helping somebody learn to drive. And very much like you, she ended up moving up in life and become a beacon of light in her circle of influence. So a few months later, I tried again, and the same thing repeated. The second buyer is now the president of a very successful hi-tech company. The third buyer is working in the juvenile penitentiary, helping a lot of ex-gang members get back on their feet.

“The fourth one runs a daycare center in South Central. She was also interviewed on TV. Much like you were. The fifth one is a baseball coach in the local high school, and has put at least three dozen kids through college. These were kids who never had a hope in hell. And the list continues. You are number fifty-four. Do you want me to continue?”

I wasn’t sure what I was hearing. So I simply said, “you mean you knew all along?”

“Well, I knew in general terms, and I knew that you would not be buying the car. I just didn’t know what would be your story. And the fun for me is while I am helping you learn, I also get to live your life with you. I witness the unfolding of your story and that is a wonderful privilege.”

“You mean you never intended to sell the VW?” I asked.

“No. It’s not like that. I know one day I will sell the VW. But that is when I have done my work on this planet. Perhaps I’ll get a little leisure time after that or perhaps not. What I know is whoever ends up buying the VW will have a fate similar to mine. That person will end up using the car to bring a lot of joy and growth to others, and consequently to himself.”

“Z, what you are saying is incredible. If I am number fifty-four, you must have influenced thousands of lives. Have you ever thought of writing a book about your story?”

He laughed and said, “maybe when I finally sell the VW, I'll write something down. But what you must realize is that every one of us influences thousands of people. The question is not whether we do it or not. The question is how we do it.

“You see, you have a circle of influence which includes Josh and the rest of the kids, and your girlfriend and others. Now, each one of them has a circle of influence that covers a number of people. And each one of them also has a circle. I think you get the picture. In this way, everything that we do affects everybody and everything else. The question is not whether we affect them or not, but how we do it. If we leave a positive effect, then it spreads positively, and if we do it negatively, again you get the picture.

“We are all interconnected. And that is why it is important to do the right thing because it is the right thing to do. I don't think about those kids in the daycare, or those employees in that business, or the baseball players who went through college. I just do the right thing because it is the right thing to do, and trust that the process of life will take care of itself.

“Yes, I have influenced thousands of lives, and so have you. I just hope the influence has been for the better.”

I pondered upon his words for a few moments, and thinking of influencing other lives I said, “one interesting thing out of this whole interview has been that since Tuesday, Miriam tells me that the sales in her shop have shot through the roof. Because apparently somewhere during the interview, I mentioned the name of their shop, and people have been flocking there to get daffodils and other things.”

“There you go. Here is one way we influence things without even realizing it.”

“Z, I never asked you this before,” I said after a pause, “are you retired? What do you do for a living?”

“No I am not retired. I was contemplating it, but after Mrs. Z passed away, I decided that I should continue with my profession. I am a driving instructor.”

“What?”

“You heard right!”

“You mean you do this for a living?”

“Yes!”

“But you never charged me a penny. You paid for the gas that we used and even for the celebration lemonade.”

“Well, I enjoy doing this so much, that I'd be willing to pay to continue to do it. Now I have the chance to get paid and do it. Besides, most of the ones I train are there merely to learn to drive. Few of them care for learning the real principles of driving and life. That is why I could afford to be choosy as to whether I was going to sell you the car or not.”

A lot of things just fell into place. I could now make sense of a lot of his behavior. Why he was so good at doing what he was doing. Even at what Miriam said about him loving his work so much that the truth came through.

I remembered him telling me about him not having children... and said, “you once said you and Mrs. Z never chose to have kids of your own but ended up having many more...”

“Yes. So far there are fifty-three, and as far as I am concerned you are number fifty-four. However, that is up to you too. I keep in close contact with every one of our kids. Also every year, we have a get together for Thanksgiving, where the newest members get introduced to everyone else. It is one big happy family.

I hope you can make it this year.”

I had tears in my eyes and didn't know what to say. The only thing that I said was, “can I bring Miriam too?”

“I'd be delighted. But you must introduce her to me much sooner than that!”

“For sure.”

* * *

Post Script

Z died four years ago. He never got to write his own life story. He only lived it.

Before he died, he sold his VW to the buyer number sixty-two. She is, just as Z predicted, using the VW to help others learn about life. But she is not a driving instructor. She is a car mechanic. She now owns a shop in South Central, where every three months, she takes on a new apprentice from the Juvenile penitentiary, where buyer number three is now the managing director.

Josh is now a teenager, but every summer, when he is out of school, he helps me with the City work. We have now created a small park on the grounds where our houses once stood. It is called the South Central Daffodil Revival Park. Two summers back Josh proposed that project, and it was through his tireless efforts that last summer that project finally came to realization. Among ourselves, we call it Z-Park.

I now have my own team of eight people, working the trees of the entire South Central.

And Miriam is now running her own flower shop, and we have a two-year-old son, whose middle name is Z.

* * *

Principles & Laws

The principles and laws expressed in this book are based on the teachings of *Zarathushtra*. The major principles and laws discussed are:

The principle of Choice:

In life we only have one fundamental right, the right to choose. We always have the freedom to choose our responses and actions, in any situation and under any circumstances.

Corollary 1: Just as we have the right to choose freely, every other individual is also free to choose.

Corollary 2: We may not be able to choose what happens to us, or how other people's choices affect us, but we can always choose how to respond.

Corollary 3: To not make a choice is to choose not to choose.

The principle of Cause and Effect:

Each choice that we make causes certain effects and leads to certain consequences. Since we are free to make the choice, we are also responsible for the consequences of our choices.

The law of Progress:

In reality, there is an ideal conception, and there is an actual condition. As human beings, we have the ability to conceive of a condition approaching that of the ideal conception, and compare it with the actuality around us. And we can make our choices in such a way as to make the actual progress towards the ideal.

Corollary 1: Our purpose in life is to be among those who make the world progress towards perfection (the ideal conception).

Corollary 2: The ideal conception is independent of the actual conditions. As such, regardless of our circumstances, we can always make progressive choices.

Corollary 3: Our perception of the ideal conception is relative, and more closely approaches the absolute ideal as we grow in wisdom.

Corollary 4: We must be mindful of changing circumstances that may show a previously distorted perception of the ideal as well as the actual. In such cases, the best course of action is to review our perceptions and correct our choices.

The principle of Beginnings:

To start anything consumes a lot of power and energy, but once it gains some momentum, it is much easier to maintain the progress.

The principle of Doing the Right Thing:

Do the right thing, because it is the right thing to do, not because of the outcome, rewards or recognition.

Only then, all the rewards and recognition you could imagine will follow, and more.

Corollary 1: The right outcome is a byproduct of doing the right thing, not its objective.

Corollary 2: Do the right thing, and the means of completing your action will appear.

Corollary 3: Do the right thing without worry or fear.

Corollary 4: To do the right thing, one must be constantly mindful and present. Lack of mindfulness will lead to lack of clarity, which will cause the imagination to create imaginary limitations, barriers, and problems. This leads to fear of things that do not exist.

Corollary 5: To do the right thing, one must be constantly aware of and present in the now.

Corollary 6: Doing the right thing is its own reward.

The principle of Truth:

Only a Truth can apply to every situation.

Corollary 1: Everything in life is the same as everything else. They are just different.

Corollary 2: If you love what you do, you can see the truth in it, because Love and Truth go hand in hand.

Life and Afterlife:

Death is as much a part of life as breathing is. Afterlife is a state of boundless being that is timeless and placeless.

Corollary 1: Heaven is the state of best consciousness and union with the Divine. Hell is the state of separating oneself from the worthiest existence.

Corollary 2: All of life is a homecoming.

Marriage:

In marriage the partners have the opportunity to strive to compete with and surpass each other in goodness.

Good thoughts, Good Words, Good Deeds:

Think Good, Speak Good, and Do Good.

Corollary 1: Walk your talk. Preach what you practice.

Corollary 2: Honor your promises.

Corollary 3: Think before you speak.

Corollary 4: When appropriate, communicate your intention clearly before you act.

The principle of Vitality:

Life begets life.

Corollary 1: Like attracts like.

Corollary 2: Stagnation and destruction will only lead to more of the same.

The principle of Creation:

Any creation has three stages: Conception, Implementation, and Results. Each stage has two pillars:

Conception: Planning, and the natural universal Laws.
Implementation: Sustained effort and energy, and loving and faithful attitude.
Results: Perfection, and Immortality.

Corollary 1: This is how the Creator created the world. And this is how any creator can create anything.

Corollary 2: Perfection is the level of closeness to the absolute ideal conception, and immortality is timelessness or transcendence of time, not for ever.

Corollary 3: If conception and implementation are undertaken in the best possible manner, Results will follow automatically.

Corollary 4: Understanding this process of creation is like a lens that enhances our perception of reality, and helps us understand where we are in each project, and what else remains to be attained.

The principle of Consciousness:

Consciousness must flow.

Corollary 1: Everything starts from within. Our consciousness within, must and will flow to reflect itself without.

Corollary 2: To change anything on the outside we must first change our thinking.

Corollary 3: Since flow of consciousness is inevitable, our external is the creation of either a progressive consciousness, or a fear-based consciousness, or a combination thereof.

Corollary 4: We can never run away from our problems. We can only transform them from within.

The principle of Happiness:

Happy is the person who strives for the happiness of others.

Corollary 1: We can best serve others by using our innate gifts.

Corollary 2: The best way to bring happiness to others is by bringing joy to ourselves.

The principle of Duality:

Duality arises out of choice.

Corollary 1: A singular Creator or system of Creation created the universe. There is no pantheon, and there is no opposition.

Corollary 2: For choice to be meaningful, there must be distinction. For distinction to exist, there must be opposites. The existence of opposites is called duality. Light without darkness is meaningless. There is no day if there is no contrasting night. And good

without the potential for the existence of evil cannot exist.

- Corollary 3: The existence of ethical duality is a necessary condition for human beings to make meaningful moral choices. If one can only choose Good, then this is not a choice, but a fulfillment of pre-destiny.
- Corollary 4: Evil arises out of making choices in contradiction to the principle of Progress, choices that do not take the actual towards the ideal. The cause of evil is ignorance, or not caring, which itself arises from a deeper level of ignorance.
- Corollary 5: Good arises from making progressive choices, choices that take the actual towards the ideal. Wisdom can only lead to good choices.

The principle of Prayer:

Prayer is a two-way communication.

- Corollary 1: Our thoughts are our prayers, whether articulated and spoken or not.
- Corollary 2: Our deeds and our lives are our active prayers.
- Corollary 3: Prayer consists of both transmitting and receiving.
- Corollary 4: Going through the habitual and customary processes of praying without the actual communion is simply a technology not a prayer.

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