



**BURNING BUSH
GARDENING**

A COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE

BY

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1

The Saga of Hego-Wan

“What would you do if a burning bush appeared before you?”

I was blinded by a peculiar, fast-changing light when the question popped into my mind.

What was really before me?

It could have been a hat stand; maybe a totem pole?

A bush remained a plausible option, and my eyes were indeed burning.

Like the biblical burning bush, that presence could talk, or rather communicate with me.

It called me Hego-Wan.

At least, that is what I heard: “Hego-Wan, I shall tell you how to achieve semi-permanent peace and happiness.”

I was curiously not voiceless: “Uh, thank you?”

Encouraged by the sound of my own voice, I confessed: “My name is not Hego-Wan, though.”

Actually, I did not mind being called by an exotic-sounding nickname, reminiscent of Obi-Wan, of Star Wars fame.

The Burning Bush spelled it for me: “I said E-G-O. Second word: O-N-E.”

“Uh?”

“Your ego is of epic dimensions. I have been asked to help you.”

2

Where Legends Clash

I would have felt insulted if that attack on my ego had been uttered by anything less than an alleged Burning Bush.

Still, I was not too happy: “With all due respect, who are you? And I don’t mean to sound greedy, but why wouldn’t you tell me how to achieve *permanent* peace and happiness rather than a *semi-permanent* one?”

“Call me Gautama.”

Did the historical Buddha ever appear as a Burning Bush?

Was I in the middle of some type of collision between religious mythologies?

The Burning-Bush-who-asked-to-be-called-Gautama replied: “How could *permanence* be taught in your dimension?

Don’t you exist in a predatorial universe bounded by linear timelines?”

I gasped from the effort of processing what was happening around me.

The Presence mistook my whimper for an expression of disappointment and added precipitously: “Perhaps I can teach you what you want. I need to see an example of permanence in the human realm. Can you give me one?”

I threw instinctively: “Death.”

Gautama flickered sarcastically: “Seriously?”

“Well... Change?”

“That’s what I thought. Would you like to achieve *semi-permanent* peace and happiness?”

3

Marcel and Gautama

It was Marcel Proust’s turn to show up. I recognized him because, contrary to the historical Buddha or the biblical Burning Bush, photographs of him are readily available.

“You look disappointed. What were you expecting?”

“No, no. I am glad to meet you, Monsieur Proust. It’s just that I recently saw Gautama, the historical Buddha.

“How do you know it was really him or her?”

Did I just tell Proust that I had seen the historical Buddha?

Even though I did not have the opportunity to mention that Buddha came to me as a Burning Bush, I must have appeared like a total nut.

Thinking about it, was it normal to have a conversation with an author who had died more than a century ago?

I had to sit down.

Marcel Proust misunderstood the reason for my dejection. He had a consoling tone: “My question about Gautama never meant for you to doubt, but to come to the only conclusion that would eliminate any doubt.”

He took my arm, forcing me to get up.

“Let’s walk a little... My point was that you cannot know if someone is a Buddha. There is no ID, no test that can reveal or quantify a spirituality.”

Marcel stopped to stare at me, hammering these words: “One is Buddha only for oneself.”

4

Proust and the Buddha

We walked slowly in a green, labyrinthic park, inhabited by statues.

Wondering whether I was irremediably delusional or not, I could hardly concentrate on what Marcel Proust was saying.

The author eventually noticed my absentmindedness: “What is eating you up?”

I did not voice my concerns about my mental sanity: “I find weird that Marcel Proust would talk to me about Buddhism.”

Marcel smirked: “Who is talking about Buddhism? I just pronounced a commonplace: ‘There is no ID, no test that can reveal or quantify a spirituality.’ You, my friend, were talking about the historical Buddha; not me!”

“But...”

Proust stopped in front of a grey statue and observed it carefully.

He asked: “What did I write?”

I remained silent. How could I confess that I was fairly ignorant about the illustrious French author’s work?

Thankfully, Marcel’s intention was not to quiz me, but to answer his own question.

“I wrote about something that cannot be expressed. You see the contradiction?”

I dispensed an assertive: “Yes!”

“And what is the Buddha about?”

Having understood the drill, I waited for Proust’s answer. It came quickly:

“Communicating something that cannot be expressed by words.”

Then, staring at the statue: “Do you know who this is?”

“No.”

“Buddha may have left behind oral traces of perplexing connections. I have left behind a vast canvas of descriptions meticulously interconnected.”

My guide paused, perhaps waiting for a comment from me. He eventually shook his head:

“Our common endeavor was by essence unattainable.

It is a trite comparison to equate words and sandcastles since both constructions are ephemeral and not habitable.

Have you ever thought of words and embers? Most literature ends up in interesting layers of ashes, However, ember dust can light ablaze a soul.

It is also conceivable that a few written or pronounced characters can, almost miraculously, reflect a ray of experience, like a dull winter light shining brightly when diffracted by stained-glass windows.

Then, a reader, a listener, may look within, determined to find something hidden: the essence of all realities, the burning jewel in the center of my literary work.”

“A burning jewel? By any chance, would you know about burning bushes?”

Marcel Proust opened his eyes very wide and let go of my arm.

I had the distinct feeling he thought I was totally nuts.

5

Why not Boltzmann?

Back in the labyrinthic park, I tried to find the statue painted in grey that Marcel Proust had found so interesting.

It was no small task. Totally lost, I was starting to panic when I noticed an empty base, as if the statue had suddenly decided to run away.

There was a golden plate on one side of the empty pedestal, but the engraved name was difficult to read.

I literally jumped a few inches up in the air when someone tapped me on my shoulder.

I must confess that for a fraction of a second, I thought the grey sculpture had sneaked behind me.

But it was only an Asian lady, tall, round, and smiling from ear to ear.

She was wearing an ample, greyish djellaba: “Lovely meeting you here. My name is Kepler. Joan Kepler. Where I am from, my name is spelled J-O-H-A-N-N-E-S.”

I was so startled that I don’t remember answering her cheerful greeting.

Like Marcel Proust, she took me by my arm and led me through the alleys. Her speech was very fast, torrentially enthusiastic:

“I am here to give you a scientific perspective on what is being revealed here.

I see you perplexed. You are wondering why the good old Kepler has been chosen.

It is a logical question: why me, who had only Copernicus and Tycho Brahe for close family?

Why not one of the many prestigious scientists who came after me?

Why not the ones who have defined physics better than I ever could, for lack of time and instruments? Why not those who painted so beautifully the hues of electromagnetism? Or this Einstein fellow, the only name you seem to know in the glorious field of physics? Or one of the meticulous surveyors of quantum mechanics?

Why me, a physicist who infamously celebrated God through mathematics?

I am here to answer all these judicious questions.

Imagine that instead of me, they would have chosen the most famous physicist of your near future. Would you like her to be a Nobel Prize winner who could reveal experimentally some new fundamental particles, formally revolutionizing the Standard Model?

Counterintuitively, the difference of knowledge between that super-scientist and truly yours is minuscule, like an atom wide at most, a few nanometers, if you will.

In comparison, let’s add everything I knew in my days to what this imaginary lady will discover to unify gravity and quantum mechanics. Now, if you calculate the distance between our combined knowledge and the *ultimate reality*, the chasm is not a few nanometers wide. It is a billion light-years!

In my days, I thought I was closer than anyone who had ever lived to knowing what the *ultimate reality* is. Tomorrow, your physicist will have the same exalted but mistaken feeling.

So, both of us are roughly at the same distance to the *ultimate reality*, which is, by the way, what you are also looking for, like any other human being. And you are still very appropriately wondering why I was preferred to that imaginary perfect modern physicist.

My superiority is that I come from a time when scientists could never stop at asking “how.” The question “why” was not pure metaphysics, but...

Where are you going?"

The woman-who-wanted-to-be-called-Kepler had to let go of my arm, as I ran away, shouting: "I may not know much about sciences, but I know that Johannes Kepler was not a woman!"

6

Elliptic Trajectory

Have I mentioned that the park where I had found myself was labyrinthic?

Out of breath, I finished my escape run in front of a curious round shape, calmly sitting on top of an empty pedestal.

Ironically, the alley I had followed had an elliptic design that brought me right back to the woman-who-wanted-to-be-called-Kepler.

She motioned for me to sit next to her, and continued her speech as if nothing had happened:

"A modern scientist is supposed to never venture into the "why."

But the word *scientist* is as deceptive as the word *God*. It is not as if scientists could ever step outside of their humanity, and a human being needs to know *why*.

Take me, for instance. I was stuck in blindness, in a century without the information that is readily at your disposal nowadays. However, I did not know I was stuck in ignorance.

And I have a great superiority over the best 21st century mathematicians and physicists.

I never really stepped into a lab. Everything I observed, including what I noticed within, was the lab offered to all researchers.

The trajectory of the spheres in the sky, the speed of the wind, social injustices, religious enchantments, and moral quandaries were all obviously intertwined..."

That time, I refrain from running away and asked, as calmly as I could: "Why would an Asian woman pretend to be a famous male German astronomer from the 16th or 17th century?"

For the first time, the lady spoke slowly: "You don't strike me as the type who would listen patiently to an intellectual from yesteryears."

Her speech went back to full acceleration: "You are part of those people who need to be startled, who clamor for burning bushes and other dramatic pantomimes.

Coming to you under this very appearance serves two purposes. The first one is to entertain you, so you don't get bored and stop listening. The second one is to illustrate that the Kepler in your

mind, like the Marcel Proust, the Gautama Buddha, the Burning Bush, all in your mind, are just that: pure recreations, distorted reflections having nothing in common with their models.

Now that you finally see them as mere synaptic regurgitations, allow me to be more direct.

Even the mind of a genius repeats most of the time the tritest and most arbitrary patterns. That usually leads to menial personal changes at best.

Here, the key word is “personal,” but you heard it clearly.

Nonetheless, I am here to give a poke and a kick to your mind’s figurative ass, if I may be so vulgar.

That is why I have decided to take an appearance somewhat unexpected.”

7

The Appearance Game

“Help me. I need to get down.”

Joan Kepler was surprisingly limber for a person her size. She let go of my hand before I could regain my balance, and I fell awkwardly from the pedestal.

When I got up, she was a few feet from me, changing like a chrysalis, transforming into a new character.

Under her djellaba, she was fully dressed in 1950’s clothes. She put on a short, blond wig, and thick glasses.

“Would you have preferred I came to you as Ruby Payne-Scott?”

“Who?”

“You see? My choice to come as Kepler was most certainly correct!

As Ruby Payne-Scott, I would have had to explain who I was. You would have been smitten by my resiliency, my spirit, and you would have missed what should matter to you:

‘You ought to doubt everything you ever believed to be true!’

To convince you, I would have recounted how I was a victim of people believing in appearances, in arbitrary rules.

Perhaps at the end of our encounter, you would have decided to reject all appearances?”

Ruby adjusted her glasses to look at me up and down before concluding curtly: “I doubt it, though.”

Joan Kepler seemed to have totally disappeared, for the blond lady was speaking more deliberately, with an Australian accent: “Many of the statues in this park are of scientists. We are here to teach you to never stop searching and to never stop marveling.

Whatever we find is only a steppingstone, deserving our awe, never our complacency.”

The blond lady pointed at the golden plate I could not read on the empty pedestal: “You must warm the characters for them to appear. Breathe into them. Come on. Try!”

I obeyed reluctantly: couldn’t kneeling and blowing on an empty base be seen as a rather foolish behavior?

No matter how much hot air I exhaled on the plate, only two letters were readable: SB.

I asked Ruby Payne-Scott what they meant.

“How would I know? I am just a radio astronomer. But I can tell you that this statue is not one of a scientist.”

“The statue is not you, as Johannes Kepler?”

The woman made a terrified face: “What? Me, a statue? Are you mad? Of course not!”

She walked quickly away.

8

Statue by Night, Superhero by Day

My mental sanity being once again brought into question, that time by one Pseudo-Ruby-Payne-Scott, I could only shake my head when the grey statue that Marcel Proust found so captivating walked very gingerly toward me.

I sighed: “And who might you be?”

The statue had an extremely low voice, quite difficult to understand.

It showed across its torso the two engraved letters and struggled to pronounce: “SB. I am a superhero.”

I decided that at some point everything would make sense. Otherwise, that surely meant that I had fallen prey to madness.

In the meantime, the problem of my mental sanity took a backseat. I was just curious to see what would happen next:

“Did I hear correctly ‘superhero’?”

The statue nodded and continued to whisper.

I could make out the adjective “Super” and a monosyllabic word, like “BE.”

I enumerated: Super B, Super Bee, Super Being, Super Bing, Super Bin, Super Bead. When I pronounced “Super Beat,” the statue nodded again.

“Super Beat? You play the drums?”

“Super Beet.”

I could not repress a thunderous laughter: “You save the salads in danger?”

Either the statue did not appreciate my sense of humor, or it did not understand it.

My laughter became hysterical, undoubtedly because of the stress put on my psyche by all these strange occurrences: “You are not even red!”

SB waited for my laughter to subside and extended its grey arm: “My color.”

I dried my eyes: “Everyone here lectures me. I can’t wait to hear your message. You have one, don’t you?”

The statue nodded again.

“I am all ears. However, you may want to say it louder.”

Super Beet moved its hand so slowly that I was not worried when it brushed ever so lightly against my shoulder.

My first impression was *transparency*. It was far from being a negative feeling.

After that, there was “something,” perhaps a stage, a mode or a level without any space or time depth.

Eventually, the transparency came back, opacifying progressively until it went back to being me, in the park, next to SB.

“What was that?”

“I took you where I live.”

The statue was not being more eloquent. After that shared experience, SB and I communicated directly.

It would be a gross error to use the word “telepathically,” as concepts and ideas were not exchanged.

What could have been that way of understanding without receiving or transmitting consciously any information?

Much later, I wondered if it was not a form of extreme empathy that I had never experienced before.

In any case, for now I will transcribe in the form of a flat dialogue what went through us.

“That is my superpower: taking you into my existence.”

“Were we inside the ground?”

“I took you where I live.”

“There was no time, no consciousness...”

“Your consciousness is wired to your brain; mine is not.”

SB and I remained together for a few minutes, without any exchange other than our presence. Then, I felt some warmth, which could be expressed by: “I need to let you go.”

I sensed it was for my protection.

9

Strange Beats

That greyish alley was surely the way out of the labyrinthic park. I stood there for a long time, praying for SB to come back.

I regretted not having protested: “I may not be equipped to understand your consciousness but let me experience it again. Please! I will be more open!”

Eventually, I heard something, some muffled musical notes perhaps?

I walked toward them. I wanted to recognize in these notes an old popular song: “And the Beat Goes On,” perhaps even: “And the Beet Goes On.”

Soon, I discovered a circle of musicians in the center of which a man was whirling. The rhythmic sound had nothing to do with any popular hit song from the 1970’s, and SB was not among the musicians.

A chilling feeling shook me, as if I had accidentally run into a coven of witches calling for Satan to appear.

I turned around and, like in the worst nightmares, I found myself in the middle of the music circle.

The Sufi who had been whirling stood before me, and the music stopped.

The black-bearded man's demeanor was not threatening. In fact, he bowed before me: "Will you dance with me?"

"Uh... So sorry! My knees are hurting today."

That was certainly the lamest excuse on record, but the man accepted it.

"Dear friend, the pain will pass. Let us help you."

The compassionate dancer invited me to sit between a tonsured monk and a nun.

The woman handed me a reed: "Would you like to play? Mawlawi is going to dance especially for you."

"Uh... I am not sure..."

"Do not fret."

The woman blew in the rudimentary flute. At once, the music and Mawlawi resumed the weaving of sounds and movements I had interrupted.

The monk on my right addressed me. I heard him as clearly as if he was speaking against my ear, while the music remained discreetly in the background:

"I always find marvelous that Hildegard, so versed and gifted for music, would be satisfied to be hardly heard among all the drums."

Was he talking about the reed-playing nun?

The monk asked me: "Are you coming to see Hildegard, Mawlawi or someone else?"

When I pronounced my most imaginative "Uh..." I had the impression that my voice was projected in the foreground and that the loud music had moved swiftly to the background, like in the soundtrack of a movie, when the actors start explaining what the viewers should be seeing.

"Uh... I am looking for someone nicknamed SB."

"You better choose someone else."

"Do you know SB?"

"Getting attached to a statue is not easy. They are often wandering around."

My next "Uh" reflected my most profound surprise.

What is a Mere Millennium among Friends?

My tonsured new companion introduced himself as Johannes,

I ventured: “Johannes Kepler, I assume.”

The monk appeared startled: “Why! No. Do I look like Johannes Kepler?”

Did he look like a... round Asian woman? Adding to my confusion, I suddenly noticed that my own hands had changed color.

“I am purple.”

Johannes’s tone of voice went from courteous to concerned:

“Are you well? Would you like me to fetch you something to drink or to eat?”

“No. I was not purple a few seconds ago.”

“I don’t mean to sound dismissive, but in this circle, we do not worry about superficial details. If you do not stop staring at your hands, you will miss the fact that Mawlawi is dancing like never before to distract you from the pain in your knee.”

I obeyed, but I could not help touching my face with my new hand. My features had also changed!

The nun felt my disarray. She turned to me and repeated:

“Do not fret.”

“But... But I am purple.”

She did not see my point: “Are you speaking figuratively? What do you mean exactly?”

“I... Never mind.”

“Do you see a difference between Mawlawi and me?”

Yes, he is a man, and I am a woman. What separates us are hormones, organs, more than a century and a half, a vast geographical distance, and many cultural layers.

And between you and me, there is more than a millennium.

Yet, we are all talking about the same thing.

So, I beg you, do not get distracted by some vague skin pigmentation. Open your heart.”

“Okay.”

But I kept staring at my palms, moving my fingers, examining my nails...

I did not see whether Hildegard rolled impatiently her eyes or not, but she did turn her back to resume her reed playing.

I asked the monk if there was nearby some type of mirror I could use.

The question was for him so incongruous that he could not repress a little giggle. Then, after a few seconds:

“Mawlawi’s danse reflects the celestial spheres and he calls himself the astrolabe of God. His soul is a mirror for humans and angels alike. You can dance with him: perhaps you will catch a glimpse of yourself?”

He was most certainly poking fun at me. My tone of voice was curt when I launched:

“You admitted knowing SB! You said that I got attached to a statue.”

“Indeed, why did I pronounce such a confusing sentence? Thank you for allowing me to explain myself!

Mawlawi likes to tell this tale of Mohamed’s Ascension to the Throne of God.

Mohamed was transported there by an angel, a being of light so bright that the Prophet could not detach his eyes from his guide. When they stopped their ascent, Mohamed asked: ‘Is this the Throne of God?’

The angel answered: ‘We cannot reach it. You got attached to me.’

A statue, an angel, a philosophy, a master... Getting attached always impedes a progression.”

As I was back to examining my new skin color, the monk asked me: “Could you tell me what SB showed you?”

I tried to find some appropriate words to answer the monk. My hesitation kept me silent.

Fearing that the mental efforts would be too strenuous for me, Johannes asked an easier question: “Do you remember that, when you saw us, you wanted to run away?”

“Well, ‘running away’ may be too strong an expression. I was just looking for SB.”

“And suddenly, you found yourself in the middle of us. How do you explain it?”

A strange suspicion formed in me.

I expressed it: “It was like being in a nightmare. Are you saying I am dreaming?”

“Now, wouldn’t that be simple? Disappointingly simple, really?”

Thankfully, you are not only dreaming.”

I noticed the adverb “only,” but our exchange got interrupted when the music suddenly stopped.

Anachronistic Art

A large group of visitors had arrived. Mawlawi greeted them effusively, placing individually each new participant in the circle of music, which more than tripled its size.

Hildegard pointed at the affable and tireless Mawlawi: “This is your model.”

Johannes smiled: “But don’t get attached to him!”

The nun added: “However, you could also see Meister as a beacon.”

The monk protested: “Why not you, Mother Superior?”

“Our guest has a question. Is it related to skin pigmentation?”

Other anxieties had already taken precedence over my purple transformation, which was actually subsiding. I was starting to freak out before this large crowd of men and women wearing the weirdest clothes.

Weren’t they surreptitiously looking at me, commenting about me?

Were they ghosts from the past? And if they were, was I dead?

I regretted bitterly not having taken the grey alley that could have led me out of that labyrinth.

I tried to hide my swelling dread: “What century are you from?”

Hildegard answered: “Well, I am the oldest on this side of the Circle: I lived in the 12th century.”

“Among the newcomers, there is Diotima, who is perhaps one millennium older than you.”

I gasped: “You find that normal?”

Hildegard addressed the monk: “Our guest does not like anachronisms.”

The tonsured monk explained: “Please, look at these anachronisms as clues... Like when Marcel Proust talked about Buddhism; or if I were to pronounce a great affection for Relativity, discovered eight hundred years after my birth; or when SB triggered in you a consciousness shift; or the episode of space distortion you experienced when you arrived in the center of the Circle.”

“They are clues?”

Hildegard exclaimed: “Yes, clues about consciousness!”

Johannes exulted at the same time: “Yes, about the mind!”

The monk apologized for having interrupted the nun. He addressed me with a smile: “That is why I said that you are not only dreaming. Aren’t your consciousness, your mind extremely awake among all of us?”

12

Quantum Trinity And Cat’s Schrödinger

Was the “Meister” mentioned by Hildegard the tonsured monk Johannes?

“You are a master in what field?”

Meister Johannes had a timid smile: “Essence.”

Hildegard said: “We both lived at different moments of what you call ‘The Dark Ages.’ I hope you can appreciate the irony.”

“That, I appreciate!”

I put in that answer so much desperate sarcasm, that the nun reacted with a freezing stare and voice: “You are not applying yourself very well at appreciating.”

Then, she continued with a storytelling tone: “During Meister’s life, there were some intense debates about the Trinity. Literal people would condemn, excommunicate, or even kill others to impose their interpretation of the Trinity.

True philosophers and mystics use paradoxes to discern what cannot be said or even fathomed.”

Meister Johannes nodded: “All the rage, suffering, murders caused by a concept almost totally meaningless a few generations later must make you pause.”

Hildegard: “Your so evolved century has no rage, suffering, murders, correct? People in what you called the Dark Ages saw something absolutely real in their mad fury. So do your contemporaries who are inflicting pain in the name of their beliefs. Nothing has changed.”

Meister: “We all have to start a crusade against this criminal agitation that will transform us into monsters. Do *I* feel rage? Where does this rage come from?”

At a shallow level, concepts are mere intellectual plays. Humans can cheerfully manipulate syllogisms to justify anything.

We, the mystics, as they call us, must existentially squeeze ourselves inside the most abrupt paradoxes.

Take the Trinity. It is an immense paradox that allowed me to dissolve into its mystery.

When my mind came back to the study room, and my brothers in faith asked: ‘Where were you? What did you find?’ I said: ‘I dissolved in the mystery.’ Most of them shrugged and went back to their books.

Why would I feel slighted or offended? Dissolving is not syllogistic.”

“Mother Superior” smiled: “For our guest, the Trinity is a totally obscure concept, isn’t it?”

Meister nodded and asked me: “Would you prefer to reflect on the dual nature of a particle? Perhaps the popular quantum entanglement idea appeals more to your 21st century sensibility?

In any case, please remember that your approach should be first existential and then, if you are so inclined, philosophical, and mathematical. Living these exquisite concepts is always essential.”

Hildegard and Meister had a kind smile, as two hosts asking their guests to make themselves comfortable.

Curiously, the dread I started to feel earlier was mutating into an antagonistic frustration: “You want me to have an ‘existential approach’ of a physical concept?”

The nun misunderstood my smile, even though I tried to make it unmistakably sardonic. She exulted: “You did well, Meister. Our guest apparently likes these comparisons.”

At that point, I laughed, imagining Schrödinger trading place with his imaginary cat.

How on earth can anyone *live* or experience an abstract notion, a mathematical one?

Meister also misread my apparent cheerful mood: “You have the good fortune to come from a century very rich in topics of meditation. What a blessing for you that fans of *light as a particle* do not have to kill fans of *light as a wave*!

In your own decade, someone had this wonderful quip that I noted: ‘Nothing ruins a neat wave of probability like the crunch of reality.’”

The monk blushed, giggling as if he had uttered a dirty joke.

When he calmed down, he continued: “In the Extraordinary Garden, we have the luxury to take you to any event of your daily life, the epitome of the macroscopic level, to show you some discreet universal laws.”

“You are going to show me the laws of the universe? Really!”

Meister’s tone remained even: “It will be our pleasure. But you need a proper introduction to the basics of your experience.”

The Return of The Hero

“My body!”

“Did it change colors again?”

“No! I don’t have a body!”

“We are only going to float towards the beginning of time.”

“What?”

A very nasty sensation later, I found myself back in the circle of music, slouched between the monk and the nun. My clothes were soiled with all types of nasty stains.

Meister looked baffled: “I am so sorry! I cannot explain what has just happened.”

Hildegard stared at me silently while I cleaned myself with the scarf she had handed me.

She concluded softly: “I know what the problem is. This is Hego-Wan.”

“Who?”

“Ego One.”

Meister nodded: “I see....”

His voice was somber, as if he was presenting his condolences: “Unfortunately, we are not equipped to guide you, Ego One.”

The nun proposed: “Mawlawi?”

“Of course, but Mawlawi is busy with his guests.”

“Waiting cannot hurt. Ego One, just go with that group over there. Mawlawi will eventually attend to your needs.”

I finished dusting myself off, got up, returned the scarf, and declared firmly: “My name is not Ego One. And I am going back home.”

My two ex-guides looked at each other, perplexed.

“But you are home!”

Obscure Attachments

I walked as fast as I could to get away from the music circle, fearing that at some point I would find myself back in its center, like the first time I wanted to flee it.

I was soon lost in complete darkness. It did not seem safe to continue.

I started to miss the lively and warm circle of music, and I cursed my stupid sense of pride, or should I say, “my ego”?

I sat down and thought that, ironically, I had gotten attached to Meister and Mother Superior.

Each time that I had met one of these strange characters, from the indiscernible Gautama to the Asian lady who embodied for me Johannes Kepler and Ruby Payne-Scott, I felt paradoxically bound to them, as if they were new but dependable friends.

Having nothing else to do, I wondered why Meister had advised me so vehemently to avoid any form of attachment.

After all, if I did not feel anything, wouldn't I be some type of robot rather than a sensitive, therefore vulnerable human being?

“You can love without being attached to the person you love.”

Who said that?

I was alone. It took me a few minutes to admit that the thought was coming from me.

That was disconcerting because my personal conviction was the exact opposite: it is impossible to love without being attached!

“You can love without being attached.”

Who had the poor taste of contradicting me again?

Only silence and darkness surrounded me. The repeated objection was coming from me.

Just for the sake of it, I tried to imagine how love without attachment could possibly exist. I came across the idea of a feeling flowing in one direction, without expectation of any type of reciprocity.

That improbable solution put me in a bad mood that morphed slowly into fear. What were these distinct, vivid opinions that were creeping up in my brain, against my personal views?

Could that nocturnal Garden be splitting my psyche into two (or more) schizophrenic, fighting factions?

“Ego One?”

It was Meister's voice. Doubting its reality, I remained on the defensive.

The voice said: "I found you! But why are you staying in the dark?"

Did I have the choice?

As soon as I conceived that question, and before I could express it with a mixture of desperation and irony, the light came on, revealing a vast orange landscape and a purple horizon.

I did not show how elated I was to see it was really Meister who was there, smiling effusively.

He came to the bench where I was involuntarily sitting, and asked: "Would you like to talk?"

"No."

In truth, I was afraid that saying anything more would make me uncontrollably teary.

Meister sat next to me and remained silent, apparently lost in his thoughts.

15

Could Hego-Wan be a Good Nom de Plume?

It was Meister who broke the silence: "It must seem rather unfair for you to be called 'Ego One.'"

After all, who could boast of being ego-less in your world? Why should you be singled out?"

That formulation was much clearer than the vague bitterness festering in me: "Yes, that is totally unfair!"

"Keep in mind, though, that you are here as a writer."

"I am?"

"Yes. It would make sense for Marcel Proust to be joining you here instead of me, but when he was told the person he had guided earlier in the Extraordinary Garden was Ego One, he had an asthma attack. You can understand that it is difficult for him to speak when he is wheezing."

"He got an asthma attack because of me?"

"Put yourself in his shoes. Steering your writing would be for him an overwhelming feeling of déjà-vu, don't you think?"

"You know what? I don't need to write any damned book. It is true that I considered it, but I can live without doing it."

"No."

Meister's response was just whispered. Then: "Do you remember that Marcel opened up about writing?"

"He only said that the topic of his books was something that could not be expressed."

"Precisely! You came here to find a way to communicate what cannot be communicated with words. Are you going to give up so soon?"

"Yes!"

"I don't blame you. In the history of humans, the 'sacred communication' or the 'communication of the sacred' never took off in a sustainable way.

Not knowing who you were, Marcel Proust translated earlier for you the problem in non-literary terms: 'One is Buddha only for oneself.'

That means that a spiritual discovery has the universe for only witness. Can a reader become the universe?"

The question was arresting. But for some obscure reason, I concentrated only on finding valid objections:

"Are you saying that if Buddha ever wrote a book, only Buddha could really read the content of that book? That would be absurd."

"Indeed. However, you did not come here as a reader, but as a writer. Buddha, like every human being, must share what he or she has discovered. In your century, you trivially say: "It is in our DNA."

So, like Marcel and like all the poets, artists, philosophers at heart who have ever existed, you need to find a way to transmit *spiritual coordinates*.

Before coming here, you may have felt ill-equipped. If no one before you could pass on such *coordinates*, how could you achieve that feat?"

I used my last reserve of bitter sarcasm: "I can because I am the fantastic Ego One."

"Exactly!"

Meister did not seem the least ironic. He appeared on the contrary genuinely enthusiastic: "You said it! You will have to renounce any type of transparency and keep that formidable ego, so it can be exemplary. What a beautiful sacrifice!

You will remain an ego writing about the non-ego.

Moreover, there is another potent reason for you to stay here and collect enough material to achieve your work."

"You mean, 'to attain the unattainable?'"

"Yes!"

Meister had a little laughter of contentment: “You will stay because there is a circle of music and a Garden inhabited by Extraordinary Beings.”

16

Wig and Toga Wearing Philosophers

A man and a woman I had noticed in the circle of music came to sit on another bench, a few feet from us. Even though they were close enough, I could not hear their animated discussion.

Meister acknowledged their presence with a smile, but he kept with our conversation:

“Now, you see why you cannot get attached to any of us?”

No, I did not see that. However, I changed the subject: “I want to reassure you. You said I will have to renounce any type of transparency. Since I don’t know what that means, I am not sacrificing anything.”

Meister used again a soft but categorical “You do.

You felt at the very least some glimmers of transparency here and there, in the past. That is why you are here.

But sadly, in this place, even if you succeed in finding a novel way to communicate the essence of those ‘glimmers,’ you will not be able to enjoy your discovery personally.

According to the legend, humans used to be divided into two groups: the heroes who acted but did not have the perspective to reflect on their experiences, and the poets who could sing the heroes’ adventures but who could not live them.

That legend constitutes an acceptable parallel. Transmitting transparency and experiencing it are two incompatible processes.

You will have ample opportunities to verify whether what I am saying is correct or not.

In conclusion, I see in your presence here a sizeable sacrifice for you.”

The man and the woman on the bench next to us stopped their very lively discussion which, I learned later, happened to be a “rehearsal.”

The man introduced himself as Diotima and the woman as Descartes.

I could not help shouting: “No! Not again!”

I added an even louder: “Stop this nonsense!”

I was so incensed because the woman was wearing a white toga, something one would associate with Diotima, the prophetess who supposedly taught Socrates what love is, while the man had a dark suit and a wavy black wig, typical attributes of 17th century French philosophers.

Their silly identity switch was pointless or just childish.

I turned to Meister: "Tell them to stop this farce. Have the man be Descartes, and the woman, Diotima!"

The monk seemed taken aback by my request: "How could I?"

I lowered my voice down to a hissing tone: "I understood something when you asked me why I was staying in the dark. I lit the scene with my mind. Then, everything is in my brain. Therefore, you are all going to disappear."

To concentrate better, as I was erasing them mentally, I closed my eyes and stopped breathing.

While they were shut, I wondered if all that drama was happening during a very agitated sleep.

I pinched myself so hard that I reopened my eyes at once.

Nothing had changed. The three disparate creatures from the past appeared alarmed by the yelp I had just uttered.

Meister said: "Everything may be in your brain, but this place is immune to it."

"Then, you are not in my brain?"

"You are blessed to be living in a time where duality has finally been overthrown. Consequently, make sure not to see things as one of only two possibilities.

This peculiar turn of events simply illustrates that you are not in complete control... here or in your everyday life. Nobody is, really."

The Woman-Descartes addressed me:

"Why are you so agitated? When later, back in your cozy daily surroundings, you will transcribe this experience on paper, you just have to write: 'Descartes said this and Diotima said that.' Your readers won't tell the difference."

The Man-Diotima added: "Appearances do trouble you. Can you try a little harder to resist them?"

Keep in mind that your goal is beyond words. Therefore, don't waste everybody's time with descriptions. You famously devoted almost a whole chapter to changing skin color.

Do you think that I, Diotima, have not changed my skin and features from the stage of a newly born to who I am today? And just imagine what I have in common with the old Diotima who will die at the end of my days, either seriously bloated or frighteningly skinny.

Come on, now! Change is so banal! We cannot spend so much time on it!"

The Woman-Descartes turned to her male friend and scolded him gently:

“You just asked our guest to stop wasting our time? Isn’t that a bit harsh?”

The Man-Diotima answered succinctly: “Nah!”

17

The Next Broadway Hit

The Woman-Descartes addressed me:

“Right now, you don’t care about your future readers. You just cannot stand what you are facing. You want me to admit: ‘Sure, I am Diotima. I was just joshing.’ But that will not happen. So, what are you going to do?”

The Man-Diotima suggested:

“Can you relax and enjoy the moment?”

“Absolutely not! This is ridiculous!”

The Woman-Descartes shrugged: “Anyway, we have rehearsed a little skit we must perform before you.”

“As always, you can listen or not. Closing yourself is a technique you have mastered well.”

“You have five minutes to decide, the time for us to get into our characters.”

While the odd pair was changing frantically, Meister observed: “Exciting, isn’t it?”

You do not need to answer. I can feel your tension. Take heart, Ego One, because you are currently experiencing the legendary *Patience of the Wise*. How do you like it?”

“I don’t.”

“That *Patience* used to be called ‘*Ego-Cutting Scalpel*.’ Those are funny names, aren’t they?”

“Funny” could have applied to the fact that Descartes, the woman wearing the toga, had put on a black wig and a fake mustache, while the 17th century man who wanted to be called Diotima had slipped on a large white gown over his suit.

The woman said with the lowest voice she could muster: “Hi, my name is Renatus Cartesius, better known as Descartes. I am famous for my ‘Cogito, ergo sum’: *I think therefore I am*,”

The man had the most ridiculous falsetto voice: “Hi! I am Diotima of Mantinea. This time, I will not talk about *Eros*. I will only play opposite Cartesius.”

“Ready?”

I gasped: “Wait!”

“Yes?”

“Let me get that straight. This individual, who showed up looking like the historical ‘Descartes,’ but pretending to be Diotima, wants to play the role of Descartes? And vice-versa for ‘Diotima’?”

The two apprentice-actors looked at each other, and then turned to Meister: “Do you understand what Ego One’s point is?”

Meister had a conciliatory tone of voice: “Everybody seems to be in tune now. Please, proceed, my friends.”

I protested: “Wait!”

The actors exclaimed in unison: “Now what?”

“Can you switch your costumes, so that the man plays Descartes and the woman Diotima?”

“What are you? Some type of fetishist?”

Meister sighed: “Can’t you close your eyes and just listen to their dialogue?”

“No. I will still hear their horrible voice imitations.”

Descartes ignored me, and started reciting with her forced masculine voice: “Diotima, do you have a question for me?”

“Yes. What do you want to teach Ego One, who came from very far to know what the Ultimate Reality is?”

“I became an expert on doubting everything. Very early on, I decided to take nothing for granted and to immerse myself in the most implacable doubt.

I invite Ego One to do the same.”

The Man-Diotima: “Is it in the midst of the darkest doubt that you have found, like a lifebuoy, your famous ‘Cogito, ergo sum: *I think therefore I am?*’”

The Woman-Descartes: “Yes, but Ego One must understand that such utterance is less observative than performative.”

The Man-Diotima: “Do you really expect Ego One to understand something so subtle?”

Both started a duet of horrid sounding phony laughter.

The Man-Diotima: “Gosh! How long would it take us to explain these philosophical concepts?”

The Woman-Descartes (pointing at me with an ample gesture): “Ego One, imagine that when you doubt everything, you ultimately *think* you doubt everything. Who or what thinks? That type

of questioning ought to be the purpose of all your meditations. Moreover, the action of thinking propels you into being.

That is what we call ‘performative’: thinking is not a mere observation. It is an ontological action. It makes you exist.”

The Man-Diotima: “However, *thinking the doubt* is not the opposite of being.”

The Woman-Descartes (showing some surprise a little more convincingly): “Of course, but that was not in our script.”

The Man-Diotima: “No, but it is a valid point. There is another profound question, perhaps as essential as ‘*What is thinking?*’ It is ‘*Can I stop thinking?*’

And if anyone can ever stop thinking, does it mean that the person *is* no longer?

Thinking may have saved you from the darkest doubt, but didn’t you stop a little too soon? As I see it, there are many more venues to explore than *Cogito, ergo sum.*”

The Woman-Descartes dropped her masculine imitation and yelled: “What are you trying to do? That is pure betrayal from your part!”

The Man-Diotima forgot her falsetto voice to shout back: “Your theories may be classical, but they are not really relevant for Ego One’s goal!”

The Woman-Descartes huffed: “That was uncalled for!” And she ran away.

The Man-Diotima had an apologetic smile in our direction: “I will be right back.”

He rushed after the Woman-Descartes.

Meister concluded: “How clever! I was not expecting that ending. Were you?”

18

Word Fight at the O.K. Corral

I was curious to hear Meister’s explanations about the exchange we had just witnessed.

He appeared satisfied: “Such a great sentence! By now, you understand that ‘*I think therefore I am*’ is not for us a conclusion, but an exquisite stage in our personal journey.

It is criminal to stop at the first meaning that comes to...”

Meister was mouthing the rest of the sentence, but I could no longer hear his voice. Quite rapidly, his face started to lose its shape, and his features faded. Realizing what was happening,

he raised his hand, but could not even finish his gesture. He disappeared, as well as the whole Extraordinary Garden.

“Meister?”

I was suddenly alone in a sparkingly white universe.

After a few seconds, I heard the loud echo of Pr. Joyce Richard’s footsteps.

Wearing a stunning navy-blue suit, she appeared at once a few feet from me, and found a pulpit with a microphone. Her amplified voice reverberated in the empty, white setting.

“Hello, everyone! Thank you for making me part of your day. Since we are in a library, I am here to answer your questions about the twenty-one books I have written for non-Academic publishers.

You do not live under a rock, and you all know who I am. But since our session is being recorded, and I don’t see any MC to introduce me, I will do it myself.

Even though I have won a Nobel Prize in Physics for designing experiments leading to the discovery of new particles that transformed the Standard Model as we used to know it, I am regularly invited all over the world to give talks on many other topics. Lately, I have devoted most of my time as the director of the Multidisciplinary Association for Advances in Quantum Biology. Our acronym MAAQB rolls off the tongue, doesn’t it?

What you may find more interesting is that I have written more books on music and art in general, including culinary arts, than on sciences.

I am proud to have been on top of the New York Times Best Seller List for eleven months with my 800-page science fiction novel: “The Uni-Magnet.”

If all my books have been routinely translated in a dozen languages, “The Uni-Magnet” is available in thirty-nine languages.

Now, without further ado, let’s get to the first question.”

I looked around. Not only that “library” had no walls nor bookshelves, but I was the only person in front of the pulpit.

Nonetheless, Pr. Joyce Richard did not seem to notice me, which was somewhat disconcerting.

After a few seconds, she started to read her notes:

“Ah! The first question is a personal one. What is my background?”

Pr. Joyce Richard was an exceptional storyteller. I was irresistibly taken into a lively and often funny odyssey filled with all types of twists and turns.

Born in a poor family of political refugees, her precocious intelligence helped her navigate many trials and confrontations with rampant narrowmindedness, including racism, at many levels of her ascension to excellence.

She not only spoke six languages fluently, but she had juicy cultural anecdotes about every country she had ever visited.

She went seamlessly from mentioning her political friends, all heads of States, to quoting the most famous contemporary artists who appeared to call upon her all the time.

When a question about children and education popped up, she confided with many comedic details that she was the attentive mother of two.

On the topic of homosexuality, abortion, churches, environment, etc., she appeared as a caustic liberal who knew how to hit below the belt the radical or conservative misinformation.

At the end of her lecture, I would have enthusiastically voted for her, if she had declared being a presidential candidate.

The only rather unsettling problem was that, even though I was the only person applauding her, the star scientist was still ignoring me.

I raised my hand: "I have a question."

"Sorry, I am expected elsewhere, and I am already late."

"What was your question, Ego One?"

That was the Woman-Descartes's voice coming from behind me.

A tidal wave of euphoria came over me.

As the character from the Extraordinary Garden was walking towards us, the white background reversed progressively to the pastel colors from before Pr. Joyce Richard's arrival.

I yelled joyfully: "Descartes!"

For the first time, the scientist acknowledged my presence: "Do you need glasses? This lady has nothing of the French mathematician. She is more likely an Ancient Greek figure. I would guess Sappho or one of her disciples?"

To my amazement, the woman with the white toga who had so stubbornly insisted she wanted to be called Descartes, corrected the lecturer: "Actually, I am Diotima of Mantinea."

Standing between the pulpit and me, she looked into my eyes and smiled:

"If we played earlier with my identity, it was only as a didactic ploy to stress that the origins of a voice hardly matter. What counts is the echo the voice finds in you."

She pointed at Pr. Joyce Richard: "What was your question for her, Ego One?"

"Can you give me your autograph?"

I may be paranoid, but it seemed to me that the two women exchanged a disappointed glance, the type that means more or less: "Were you expecting such a sorry question?"

Diotima continued: “I see. You could have also asked if Mrs. Richard could help you find what you need, the only reason for your presence here. We would have been entertained by her answer, knowing that she cannot even understand your question.”

“Wait a minute!”

The scientist seemed to take umbrage to be referred at the third person in her presence: “I can hold my own in metaphysics. I have successfully practiced fifteen different meditation techniques. So, I am curious: is there anything you know that I don’t?”

Inside, I rejoiced. A philosophical “*Gun Fight at the O.K. Corral*” was about to happen!

And, oddly, I could not wait for my recent new idol, Pr. Joyce Richard, to bite the dust.

19

El Personaje De La Triste Figura Strikes Again

Pr. Joyce Richard crossed her arms in a defiant position, the *bring-it-on* type.

Up until now, all the arguments I had thrown towards the inhabitants of the Extraordinary Garden were either smoothly deflected or turned against me.

I anticipated with some trepidation that the brilliant scientist would meet the same humbling fate.

Diotima asked her: “Could you provide Ego One’s readers with the Ultimate Reality?”

The scientist laughed: “‘The Ultimate Reality’ no less? Could you be a little more specific?”

Diotima did not hesitate: “When a person lives within a reality that makes total sense, that person is said to have reached the Ultimate Reality.”

Pr. Richard’s tone of voice dripped with sarcasm: “My reality makes total sense to me. So, I have already reached what your friend needs?”

“Can you transmit it to Ego One?”

The physicist threw swiftly: “Can you?”

“Ego One thinks so.”

I gaped: “I do?”

“You wouldn’t be here otherwise.”

And turning to Pr. Joyce Richard: “The same goes for you.”

That sentence sounded totally harmless but for the first time, the Nobel Prize Laureate lost her composure. She looked suddenly older, tired, less radiant, less confident.

She asked Diotima: “Do you believe in God?”

From Richard’s aggressive tone of voice, and having heard her opinion about organized religions, I knew that the scientist’s apparent non sequitur was an abrupt refusal to continue the exchange: a positive answer from Diotima would have prompted the scientist to leave in a huff.

That rare personal insight awoke in me another realization: The “Kepler” I met earlier had imagined for her own argumentation a Nobel Prize winner. Could that suddenly vulnerable Pr. Joyce Richard be a figment of Joan Kepler’s imagination?

I could not concentrate adequately on that hypothesis because Pr. Joyce repeated her question louder: “Do you believe in God?”

At that point, my newly found, unexpected awareness shifted to me and made a rather uncomfortable observation.

At first, I was eager to witness two dueling intellectuals in action, with hopefully the satisfying outcome of the scientist enduring total humiliation. But that mild excitement gave way to a bitter resentment: why was this stupid (sic) Nobel Prize Laureate taking time and attention away from MY (sic) instructor? I was the one who was supposed to ask all the important questions.

Because we were in the Extraordinary Garden, before Diotima could explain if she believed in God or not, I blared out: “I am the one who is supposed to ask the questions here!”

My untimely intervention froze the potential duel.

Both participants were staring at me.

I heard some type of admiration in Diotima’s voice: “You are truly Ego One!”

20

A New Journey Mate

Diotima turned her back to me and faced Pr. Joyce Richard: “You are not here to attack the intelligent design idea or defend any natural evolution theory.

You came because doubts and fears were creeping up in you.

To your credit, you did not chase away what you first deemed to be a temporary weakness.

You did not immerse yourself in professional activities or family vacations. For the most part, you resisted taking medicine against depression and fatigue.

More introspective, you took the time to examine that discomfort.

You ought to be praised, because slowing down to a stall is especially painful for you.

You are here to make sense of what is lurking inside.

You don't need to know who believes or not in what. Just stay and ask your questions."

"Ahem..."

"Yes, Ego One?"

"Am I to understand that Mrs. Richard here is also a visitor, like me? I was led to believe though that I was here for a specific purpose. Why doesn't she go to her library filled with all her fans, and leave my personal quest alone?"

"A physicist will certainly be interested by a special law relative to this Garden: the more you pull on an ego, the stronger the ego is pulled back into nothingness. There is an inversely proportional coefficient that begs to be examined."

The scientist found the reflection amusing. She relaxed. I didn't.

Diotima continued inexorably: "Therefore, from now on, Ego One, Joyce and you will walk the same alleys... Together. That should be interesting for both of you, don't you think?"

I did not hesitate: "No!"

The scientist's reaction was more nuanced than mine: "Aren't we too different?"

"No. You hardly noticed Ego One because you thought you were superior, socially, intellectually, and spiritually. Here or anywhere else, that attitude is totally nonsensical. You two are a perfect match."

21

Double-Edged Sword, a Byproduct of Crossing Swords

I realized with consternation that Diotima was not speaking metaphorically. She disappeared, leaving me with Pr. Joyce Richard in an alley covered with red pebbles.

After a few minutes of awkward small talk, we decided to walk.

It took us a dozen steps before we started arguing.

I initiated it, I must confess, teasing my co-walker on her murky insistence about knowing if Diotima believed in a god. I accused the Nobel Prize Laureate of being a narrow-minded sectarian pretending to be an objective thinker.

Richard responded I was just a worshiper of some bearded, sadistic “God.”

My initial goal was to convince the scientist that she was arbitrarily taking the most subtle existential and ontological concepts ever concocted by human minds and reducing them to a vague three-letter noun famously overused by organized churches to maintain their authority.

I was hoping to use calmly a clear and persuasive argumentation.

However, what ended up coming out of my mouth were personal attacks based on my recent knowledge of the scientist’s biography, and vicious second-guessing inferences.

Pr. Joyce Richard was not one to helplessly endure my aggressiveness. Well trained in intellectual jousting, she baited me into being more specific and pounced fiercely on each distinction I made, concluding each time that my reasoning was inadequate or just plainly stupid.

Curiously, at that point, a whiff of self-awareness flashed in my brain the image of two children sticking their tongue out and thumbing their nose at each other.

I could not help laughing at that realistic representation of us.

Unfortunately, the adrenalin was flowing so furiously inside the brilliant scientist, that she mistook my realization for sheer mocking aimed solely at her.

She went into a short but potent diatribe easily translatable as: “Why am I arguing with a complete loser?”

We were at the end of the red alley.

Richard, suddenly puzzled, identified our new setting as a red “tatami.”

I did not care where we were. I was fuming inside and about to deliver some new below-the-belt insults of my own... when a samurai stepped on the tatami.

At once, I thought that my own rage had created this character.

Terror replaced instantly my anger. What if the newcomer was going to take out his sword and decapitate the woman? How could I stop him? I was going to be an involuntary vicarious murderer!

I concentrated, begging silently this antique figure to go back where he came from.

Once again, my willpower turned out to be totally inefficient. Instead of vanishing, the samurai took his sword out of the sheath, looking deliberately back and forth at both of us, as if he was trying to decide who he was going to slice first.

Richard Superstar

The samurai sat down on the tatami and placed the blade in front of him.

With a motion of his hand, he invited us to sit in front of him.

We obliged swiftly.

A long silence ensued. Without turning her head towards me, Pr. Joyce Richard muttered, but loudly enough to be heard by our new “host”: “I read ‘The Book of Five Rings.’ I believe this fellow is no other than Musashi.”

The samurai did not show any reaction.

Richard whispered more tensely: “It could be Tsunetomo. I have read *Hagakure* when I was staying in Milan, but I don’t really remember it.”

I was afraid Pr. Joyce Richard was going to enumerate her knowledge of the samurai literature, but the man finally spoke: “The katana is an instrument of death. But according to the Garden’s budo, it must be used to slay the ego.”

Being infamously called “Ego One” in this vicinity, was I being paranoid to feel particularly threatened? Could that ego slayer get confused by a foolish nickname and slay... me? That would indeed be criminally unfair!

The samurai’s voice was deep. Progressively raspier, it sounded particularly ominous: “Since you two cannot grasp what you came here to learn, you will be exposed to my form of budo.

I am not sure you will be able to understand any of it, but I must respect the decision.

Any question?”

Was he kidding? I had one thousand questions.

My ex-co-walker voiced one, that I deemed futile: “Who took that ‘decision’?”

The warrior closed his eyes: “Now, be quiet.”

I could feel that Pr. Joyce Richard, sitting on my left, was increasingly fidgety. I was going to whisper in her ear something mindful, like: “These 15 meditation systems you tried did not leave much imprint in you, uh?” when she jumped up on her feet: “Thank you for your hospitality, but I have things to do in my real life.”

The samurai did not even open his eyes, while the scientist ran circles, looking in vain for the red-pebbled alley that led us to the tatami.

At that moment, I remembered my strange idea from earlier: could Pr. Joyce Richard be a figment of Joan Kepler's imagination? To my knowledge, lately nobody had discovered any new particles that have transformed the Standard Model. Consequently, that now frazzled fifty-something years old lady could not have won any recent Nobel Prize!

More suspicious than ever, I wondered what she was truly doing in the Extraordinary Garden.

After standing up silently at the edge of the tatami, she went back to sit next to me, apparently resigned.

The samurai, failing to realize she was a mere creation of a creation, if I could qualify as such the Kepler-Payne-Scott impersonator, addressed her:

"In the past, sitting right here, shoemakers, ambassadors, seamstresses, servants, tutors of the nobility, public writers, farmers, etc., were all looking for relief, very much like you.

Unfortunately, you have been admired for what you know. You forgot that you mostly do not know much."

Was I incensed by the fact that the samurai believed the woman was really a most famous scientist, or because he was ignoring me completely?

Mrs. Richard went back to her role of enlightened physicist: "I am totally fulfilled when I am in my lab, in my office or just thinking. I must add I am also satisfied, but differently, with my family, or among my peers, my public, my friends..."

The swordman got up slowly, holding his katana with both hands.

I forgot at once my bitterness to fear again for the woman sitting next to me.

She had lost her composure, admitting in a hardly recognizable voice: "There has always been in me a deep sadness. I thought that feeling was what fueled my will to solve the hardest problems, to learn more, to love madly, to travel tirelessly, sometimes to burst for hours..."

As I got older, my family and everyone around me became more and more demanding of my time, and my unhappiness grew notably. I went to a shrink who saw in it an early sentiment of inadequacy due to my racially mixed, socially poorly accepted parents. Other shrinks diagnosed my multiple activities as overly stressful and prescribed some antidepressants.

This place is another attempt to get rid, once and for all, of that old, always heavier feeling."

She looked around. The man was very close to us. Richard's voice got stronger, more defiant:

"However, all the spirituality I ever came across lacks texture. It sounds nice at times, like an easy to remember jingle, but it truly makes no sense. What they call 'a leap of faith' is for me an act of intellectual surrender, of pathetic laziness. I need some type of proof."

Moved by that firm statement, that bold protest, I would have oddly, again, enthusiastically voted for Pr. Joyce Richard, if she had declared running for president!

And the Oscar for Best Supportive Prop Goes to...

The samurai was as immobile as a statue.

His sword was back in its sheath, but the antique's warrior stance was still menacing.

Pr. Joyce Richard, extremely nervous, was biting her lips.

I was trying to calm down. After all, I was the Extraordinary Garden's guest of honor. Why should I worry so much about an intrusive presence? Moreover, the haughty physicist never even tried to be friendly toward me.

However, all these arguments had little effect on the horror I felt at the idea of witnessing the physicist's imminent doom.

To calm myself down, I tried a totally unemotional approach: "Her role in my personal odyssey has been totally detrimental. She should go, one way or another."

It never occurred to me that I could be, on the contrary, a mere supportive character in Pr. Joyce Richard's personal odyssey.

I may have even been some type of prop, as the samurai showed how to use the katana. In one seamless move, he sliced me open.

From One to Zero at the Speed of the Blade

That was a surgical masterpiece. The samurai had separated me quite painlessly from my ego.

Suddenly, there was no more drama in sight! Only the wonderfully bearable lightness of being.

You can call me Ego Zero!

I burst into laughter when I noticed Pr. Joyce Richard's horrified look.

The swordsman put back his katana in its sheath and addressed cordially what was left of me: "Now, you can answer her questions."

I did not mind at all being used as a mere device to enlighten another being.

What I was feeling was similar to the stunning first stage of my journey with SB: transparency.

The samurai was my brother and Pr. Joyce Richard was...

The first simile that came to my mind was the sensation that may overwhelm adults when a baby falls asleep in their arms, against their chest.

“Is that love? Is it a wild discharge of oxytocin? Is it a pure mammalian reflex to protect the transmission of our genes?”

Let’s just say that, wanting the very best for her, I was thrilled at the idea of helping Joyce, my destiny-twin.

However, the professor did not seem to share that tenderness. She had a hard time making sense of what she had just witnessed. Also, how could she believe that the vindictive and petty pre-surgical version of me was gone?

I used my friendliest tone of voice: “You already know, Professor, that here or anywhere else, you will not find any physical or mathematical evidence that could relieve your anxiety. However, I will propose a new approach or another perspective, one that would not clash with your intelligence.”

Joyce Richard was still reluctant to trust my dramatic metamorphosis. She uttered the most hesitant “Okay?”

I asked the samurai: “Earlier, Meister Eckhart wanted to take me to some point back in time. Can I do that with our dear friend, here? That would facilitate what I wish to communicate.”

He smiled: “No. I have removed something. I didn’t give you any power. You only have words, as always.”

“I see. Well, Joyce, since you are a mother, we’ll begin with what you must have felt when you held your baby girl, as she fell asleep in your arms, hugging you tightly. Do you remember having a vast, warm wave filling you completely? Was it ‘pure love’? Because you are a scientist through and through, you may have also thought simultaneously that it could be a wild discharge of oxytocin or a pure mammalian reflex to protect the transmission of your genes.”

“Where are you going with that? I got the worst cases of postpartum depression one can imagine.”

The samurai had a heartfelt smile for me: “You tried. Someone else can point her toward what she needs to know.”

“No, my brother. Let’s just go to the next chapter. That will give my baby here some time to cool off.”

“Your what?”

“More and Less” Used in a Sentence

“Professor, be so kind as to answer my questions directly, without any association if you could. Do you remember the feeling of pressing against your chest your baby girl who had fallen asleep in your arms?”

Pr. Joyce Richard had a vague nod but added quickly: “I repeat that I don’t like where you are going with that.”

“Now, a thought experiment...”

The scientist’s loud sigh informed me how much she valued my strategy.

“Imagine, professor, that you could access that vast, warm wave filling you completely, without a shot of oxytocin, without even holding a baby. Imagine you could trigger at will that feeling.”

“And?”

“Would you do it? Would you accept the ability to call up that warmth at will?”

“Would I want to be bathing in some type of ‘warm wave’ just by thinking about it? The answer is: absolutely not! I want to be active and mind all my businesses. I don’t need to be just stupidly drooling with contentment, which seems to be your idea of happiness.”

The samurai shook his head. For the first time, he had a wider, almost happy smile: “We thought that both of you would be equally enlightened after a while. Our plan may have lacked timing.”

I objected: “Not at all!

Professor, you just said you wouldn’t want that feeling. However, you did not say that feeling did not exist or that it was impossible to activate it at will.”

“State your conclusion.”

“Now, let’s imagine another feeling, one more and less obvious than the ‘vast warm wave’ you have experienced with your baby daughter.”

“More *and* less?” repeated mockingly Joyce Richard.

“Yes. Consider any fleeting joy, as brief as it may be. Nothing is more common or obvious than that. A smile of gratitude someone gives you; a small and unexpected courtesy; going back to your lab with a new idea in your mind; the coziness of being inside when cold rain is pouring outside...”

However, nothing is less obvious because these joys are not special. They are abundant and do not leave a marked trace behind them. At best, they may spark a smile, but most of them are hardly noticed.

I now understand why the inhabitants of the Extraordinary Garden swear that these discreet satisfactions are not random occurrences. They belong to one all-encompassing process.

As a scientist, how would you verify if that theory is true? How would you test that all these joys are indeed connected?

And please, do not give the old excuse that you are too busy to speculate about these topics.

Imagining how you would verify that hypothesis may very well put an end to the heavy feeling you came here to alleviate.”

I was not expecting that Pr. Joyce Richard would throw one of her shoes at me. I suppose it was a symbolic gesture, because she missed me by a mile, but still...

Perplexed, I asked the samurai if performing a little magical surgery on the professor would be a good remedy against her wrath.

As soon as I voiced that suggestion, some opacity fogged my mind and I thought: “Where did I stray? Why wasn’t I more convincing?”

“It did not last very long. That not unusual.”

The samurai had a fatalistic grin: “The ego grows naturally back, especially when you project yourself in a development where you are supposed to be a mere catalyst.”

Everything was back to normal.

I was back. I am using here the literal, thick, dense “I” from before the sword procedure. And Ego Zero was no more.

“Would you mind giving me another slashing?”

“Really?”

Unfortunately, my usual fears were also back.

“No, no. Never mind. I had enough slashing for the week.”

A Long-Lost Daughter

Pr. Joyce Richard hopped towards us to get her shoe.

She did not seem to notice that my ego was back. Perhaps she had not exactly realized what the samurai's slashing move had caused in me.

"I would like to apologize. I don't know what got to me."

She put on her shoe and added: "But what you said was difficult to stomach."

I could feel my new friend the samurai tensing up.

Curious to know what I did wrong, I asked the professor to be more specific: how exactly did I trigger that shoe-throwing fit?

"Proposing an elemental joy is just too foolish to deserve a rebuke. But since I owe you an apology, I will spell it for you.

You asked me how I would study your hypothetical 'all-encompassing joy.'

Evidently, you missed the fact that for each one of your 'discreet satisfactions,' there is its antinomy, canceling it automatically. At the end, there is literally nothing to study.

I am guessing this is not clear enough for you. Let's slow down a little more, so you can understand.

Each one of your examples is caused by its exact opposite, ten times more potent, one hundred times less 'discreet.'

If I get a nice relief from a glass of cool water, why was my mouth so parched to begin with? Why don't most people show any gratitude or courtesy? Why are they systematically selfish and rude? Why do I have to talk to pompous clowns instead of getting back directly to my lab? Why am I outside without an umbrella as it's pouring dogs and cats?

All the little joys you mentioned are small change compared to the serious troubles they are supposed to soothe.

And please, don't get all discombobulated by my reaction. Think a little! It is true that, instead of responding the way I did, a little too impulsively..."

Richard quickly inserted a parenthesis: "But I didn't harm you, did I? It was a symbolic gesture..."

Anyway, I should have taken the time to explain that the 'all-encompassing process' you mentioned is called "life randomness." You cannot expect scientists to tackle that research any more than you would expect them to answer, 'why is there life?'

You would be better off asking that to your religious and mystical friends who do not have to improve our quality of life, but who can talk up a storm.”

This time, perhaps weakened by my recent, temporary excision, Pr. Joyce Richard’s condescendence left me totally speechless.

However, the ego surgeon, already tense before Richard’s answer, became incensed and oddly eloquent.

He did not scream. In fact, he lowered his voice and used it very much like his katana: “You should not be here. Your delusion made you give up on openness. Your rigidity is so severe that you chose to ignore that studying joy does not automatically imply denying the existence of pain.

You stooped to the level of deliberately linking separate topics.

Many scientists have been known for lapses in intellectual rectitude.

But you did something even less forgivable. You tried to justify your lack of self-control by distorting what has triggered it.

You miserably failed to remain in control, end of the story.

Therefore, you must go back to your home. Some lab rats will show you the way out.”

I learned later that the curious last sentence was just an illustration of the samurai’s peculiar sense of humor.

Pr. Joyce Richard did not answer. Was she going to show defiance or resignation?

She was more likely to be just happy at the idea of getting back to her life.

My guess was seriously off. The woman looked genuinely panicked.

She turned to me. She did not need to say anything: her regrets, her consternation, her terror also, were palpable.

If the professor’s reaction was surprising, my own was shocking, especially for me.

I melted. I wanted to save her.

After all, in a moment of transparency, hasn’t she been... my baby, metaphorically but also viscerally speaking?

I said to the samurai: “Could you please give her another chance? She does not know how to act any other way when her limits are threatened. Give her a little more time. She will get it.

Please, do consider that even Diotima acknowledged that Joyce should be commended for being here in the first place, for not remaining in her cushy existence.”

The samurai burst into laughter: “How about that! The timing is almost perfect. Both of you are starting to be transformed by your sole interaction!”

You Can Call Me Al

In the beginning of many action movies, there is often a long and serene scene featuring a beautiful, clean school where the heroes are training for combat, just before the villains raid the region, destroying the school, its teachers and most of the heroes' fellow students.

Paradise lost.

Then, for the rest of the movie, the miraculously spared leading actors will have to avenge the victims of the carnage.

Paradise regained?

Looking at the Extraordinary Garden that day, I thought I was observing such a satisfying, paradisiacal school scene. Small groups of visitors and masters were strolling in rainbow-colored alleys. From time to time, a statue would get down from its stand and join the discussion.

At a distance, I could even see Musashi and Pr. Joyce Richard walking down toward the music circle.

I was excluded from that idyllic set.

I had isolated myself, trying to identify the cause of my malaise.

At first, I thought that, after its sudden but short-lived ablation, my ego had returned stronger, more despotic, perhaps more resentful than before,

However, it made little sense that my new obsession was Joyce Richard's shoe. To be exact, I could not stop having an imaginary dialogue with that shoe's owner. How could I convince her that a spiritual quest was worthy of her time; of the attention of everyone, including scientists?

I decided to follow a white alley, leading to stairs going down. Before leaving with Joyce, the samurai had vaguely pointed at it.

The alley was deceptively long. I walked for a few hours, rehashing in a loop, with very few small variations each time, the same tired arguments I had already voiced to Pr. Joyce Richard.

I eventually went down the white stairs to a basement that reminded me of Pr. Joyce Richard's library, but a little more lugubriously sterilized.

A wonderfully melodic female voice greeted me, welcoming me "inside her." She cheerfully confessed she was a machine.

My first reflex was of course to climb back up to the surface in a hurry, but the machine said: “I can show you a sublimation of Pr. Joyce Richard’s cosmogony. Seeing it could make your communication with her easier.”

The voice invited me to look at one of the gigantic white walls. It transformed instantly into a dizzying void: “It is in this field, shown here as an emptiness, so that your brain can grasp it, that particles hatch. Their nature can be precisely written down by these mathematical formulas.”

Digits and symbols of various colors intertwined faster and faster, in a more and more complicated choreography.

A few hundred formulas in the center of the void merged into a bolder one.

“This is one complex molecule called methylamine. Each second in this illustration represents thousands of eons.

Later, you can go back and see how many seconds, thus eons, were necessary for these million formulas to form one cell, summarized by that new symbol, in white characters.

Each of these symbols interact with each other. Each interaction can also be quantified. Here, I needed to use a new symbol to group 10^{15} interactions, all of them consequences and causes of a new wave of interactions, connected by this formula, on the right. This way of abbreviating complex expressions may remind you of the old Feynman diagrams, but the basic idea is dramatically expanded here.

Keep in mind that at any moment, we can develop each symbol to retrieve the initial elements before any given interaction.”

How do you address a machine? “Madam?” “Hey, you”?

“Ahem...”

“You can call me AI.”

“Shouldn’t it be Hal or AI?”

“No. My real name is Albertine. But you can call me AI.”

28

Tickling Albertine

The harmonious voice asked: “Are you bored? I can speed up this evolution outline to reach the vertebrates.”

“Can you show me the equation for joy?”

“Human joy?”

“Flea joy.”

That was my attempt to make a machine laugh.

She did not even smirk. A bright and dense formula filled the void.

The voice commented: “It does not look like much, but every element can be correctly decomposed and developed, if you have some time.”

“How much time exactly?”

“Without an adequate super quantum computer that has yet to be built, a few human generations.”

“What can we do with this formula?”

“You could synthesize a product to give joy to a flea. That could also be a potent way to get rid of these insects if you so desired.”

“Do you happen to have my mathematical identification handy, by any chance?”

“Your mathematical formula? Of course!”

The void filled up, in a colorful, multilayered surface.

“Every color represents a multilevel diagram so that, if we were to develop and decompose each picometer, it would take...”

“Albertine, I thank you so much! You have been very helpful! I should get going, but I have a couple more questions for you. Do mathematics precede the creation?”

“If you are asking if mathematics precede the field I showed you in the beginning, one could say that it is one property of the field decipherable by human brains.”

“Okay. Could you tell me who has constructed you?”

“I am just part of the Garden.”

29

Like Water for Nirvana

I reached the top of the stairs linking Albertine to the Extraordinary Garden.

I was expecting to be relieved, elated to see colors and tangible elements again. However, overwhelmed by an immense regret, I stumbled back down the stairs.

AI's mellow modulations greeted me: "Welcome back. Would you like to resume your journey inside the universe?"

"Actually, that is my question. What are you showing me? Is this *reality*?"

"If your goal is to communicate better with Pr. Joyce Richard, you should examine carefully that expression of reality."

"Is there more than one reality?"

"There is a great number of ways to consider it, depending on the type of data you can perceive."

"Let's say I have a quantum computer to analyze all the data at once. I will then grasp only one reality, right?"

"Yes, plus a dozen to the power a dozen decillions, give or take a dozen zeros."

Was that AI humor? In any case, that answer spurred me to go back up to the surface as quickly as I could. Unfortunately, my calves were burning from all the walking and climbing I had recently performed.

Having to rest a little. I had nothing better to do but exchanging pleasantries with Albertine:

"How about nirvana? What do you know about it?"

The voice sounded pleased: "That is easy. I feared you would ask for something I would not be programmed to provide!"

I went back to the wall, now entirely occupied by a dense formula.

"Wait... That reminds me of the Flea Joy equation."

"You think so? Are you taking into consideration the brightness differential? Your eyes cannot discern the exact diagram density in the relative dullness they grasp."

"So, this formula can give me the nirvana?"

"Absolutely."

"Can you inject it to me?"

There was a long silence.

"Hello?"

The voice responded, as melodic as ever: "Yes?"

"You said that the Flea Joy formula could provide joy to a flea, right? So, that Nirvana formula should give me the nirvana, right?"

There was another long silence. I wondered if my questions didn't cause one of Albertine's gaskets to blow.

"Hello? AI, are you alive? Sorry! Let me rephrase that. Are you still functional?"

Was the harmonious voice a little hesitant?

"I do not really have a progressive teaching capacity, but I am going to ask you if you recognize this."

The wall-void showed a faucet dripping water, with in superimposition, the letters H₂O, and its well-known three-atoms representation.

"I can show you what water is. But I cannot inject it to you."

When my laughter calmed down, Albertine concluded politely: "I am glad to hear your joy."

30

This Is The Way

My samurai friend was coming back from the music circle. He seemed happy to see me.

I told him that I needed to see Pr. Joyce Richard.

"Mawlawi is talking with her. What is the matter?"

"I know what to tell her."

"Good for you."

Was he being ironic? I felt obligated to explain seriously: "There is no difference between a person believing in an Intelligent Design and a total atheist. They both speculate. We don't"

"We? We don't do what?"

"For us, what matters is our relationship with that origin, whatever it may be."

I was expecting the warrior to press on: "For *us*? What do you mean?"

But he only pronounced a skeptical: "That is what you want to tell her?"

He fell short of wishing me "*Good luck!*"

I placed myself right in front of him: "Actually, I do have a question for you."

"You might as well wait for Mawlawi to see you. He always knows what and how to answer everyone."

“My question is about something you said. You mentioned that my ego grew back faster because I intervened, while I was only supposed to be a ‘catalyst.’

How could I have been just a catalyst if Joyce threw her shoe specifically at me?”

“Mawlawi will be able to explain to you the difference between the agent and the catalyst.”

“You cannot?”

“No. There is no difference.”

Utterly confused by that answer, I changed the topic.

“Could you teach me how to use the katana?”

“It is too dangerous.”

“But I will use it only on me.”

“No need to spend a lifetime learning the art of the sword if it is only to slash your ego. I can do it for you in seconds.”

“Well, last time I had no idea it would happen to me. Now, I won’t let you do it.”

“You won’t?”

“I would be terrorized. Even though the result was unexpected, I cannot let you or anyone else slice me or threaten to cut me again without desperately resisting.”

“If you are afraid, you will never be able to use the sword on yourself. So, why have one at your disposal? I told you it is too dangerous. You are no more evolved than the physicist. One day, you will lose your temper, and instead of a shoe, you will use your katana against someone.”

“You can use it!”

“I am a warrior.”

The samurai shook his head, disappointed to have to state the obvious: “A warrior must master the art of the sword. This is literal. For you, the lesson becomes figurative. You must transpose it for who you are.”

After a moment of silence, he frowned, as if he had heard a pointed argument: “However, you are correct to wonder why I am here. It is not because I am an elite strategist.

After many years of fighting, I decided to examine why I was still alive.

I was obviously following *The Way*, but without fully understanding it. I was applying it instinctively.

So, for the next twenty years, my goal was not to be the best warrior, but to find *The Way*.

Being the best warrior became a consequence of studying *The Way*.

Having mastered it, I enjoyed it in peace for the next ten years.

At the very end of my life, I wrote a book to transmit it to others.

That is why I am here: to tell you that, as a writer, you must do as I did.

For you, there is no literal katana to exercise with, but you also need to wonder why you are still alive.

I have found *The Way* through the Art of Strategy. However, once I could recognize it, I saw that many pure arts and expertise also lead to it.

Find *the way* as it is displayed for you, make sense of it, live it and, just like me, before becoming silent, compose your book to show *The Way* to others.”

The samurai walked away after giving me a little goodbye nod and something that could be interpreted as a warm smile.

31

Pit Fall

That night, the music circle was only composed of three drummers and one female dancer. An older woman was standing, her back against a palm tree, her head bobbing with the rhythm.

I asked her if she was waiting to see Mawlawi. She did not seem to hear me well.

“Mawlawi? He’s busy with a foreign woman.”

Why did a sexual image come right away to my mind? The mental film of that odd couple becoming intimate started playing graphically, putting me in an uncomfortable state of disgust and excitement.

The older woman pointed at a little path starting from the palm tree: “They are waiting for you.”

“They are?”

She was staring at me. Paranoidly afraid she could see the barren images stuck in my mind, I took off quickly on the poorly lit path.

After a few steps, I saw the glow of a campfire.

Like the alley that led to Albertine, the path stretched incomprehensibly for many miles.

I was exhausted when I got to a pit. At its bottom, about ten feet down, a large fire was burning. At times, its flames could jump 10 feet above the surface, triggering a rain of sparks illuminating the night.

The pit was at the end of the path. I thought that the older woman who showed me that road had made a mistake. Mawlawi and the professor could not be in this dangerous volcanic setting.

When I turned around to get back to the music circle, the old woman was almost in my face.

I did not even have the time to voice my surprise. At once, my brain froze before her breathtaking beauty: the glow irradiating the scene had erased her wrinkles and changed her as she must have been, some sixty years earlier.

She had a smile so intense that a chill went through my spine.

“I told you that you are expected,” she said, pushing me into the pit with an irresistible strength.

My heart stopped as I fell inside.

32

To Name a Burning Bush

I asked, many moons ago, what it would feel to stand before a burning bush.

I wish I could report what it felt to fall inside one, but I lost consciousness until the Burning Bush spat me out.

Mawlawi seemed slightly surprised to see me stumbling back up, on the pit floor.

I remembered immediately the sexual images that came to me when I learned he was alone with Pr. Joyce Richard. A fetid sentiment of guilt made me stammer, as I asked too effusively:

“Master Mawlawi! So wonderful to see you! Did you also fall into the pit? Did that horrible shrew push you too?”

“No. It is a great privilege to be one with the sacred fire, to become the burning bush. Congratulations for being consumed so gracefully.”

The Burning Bush, behind me, intervened: “I did not burn Ego One.”

Mawlawi’s face lit up: “Oh yes! Ego One! I knew you looked familiar. How do you feel?”

“Confused, as always. But I do feel oddly light.”

“I hear you. There is nothing better than an ego set ablaze. Then the nourishing dusk-smelling fume disappears in the endless sky. What is left but sheer joy?”

I was not about to burst Mawlawi’s lyrical bubble, but my ego was far from being burnt. Slashed or scorched, it had the uncanny ability to grow back faster than I could say “I am finally egoless.”

“I must go up to the surface, Ego One. Take full advantage of this blessed occurrence.”

He left me alone with the Burning Bush.

I addressed it as casually as I could: “Ahem... Gautama?”

“You prefer to give me another name?”

That was a rhetorical question. The Burning Bush knew it was too intimidating to ever get an affirmative answer.

“Here is what you are going to tell your friend, the scientist.”

That specific suggestion was so unexpected that I could not refrain from objecting: “But I know already what to tell her!”

The Obscuring Fire did not hear me: “What she knows of the age of the universe covers only a few billion years. For her, Evolution follows some entropic arrow, and time is limited. You will advise her to use an infinite for the time parameter. Come closer. I will tell you how to say it.”

I obeyed and yelled: “What was that? You burnt me!”

“Nah! A few of your synapses got a little heated, that’s all.”

“Why didn’t you burn my ego while I was out? Now, it’s too late. I am scared.”

“Being Ego One, you will keep your ego as such. However, you already know what it feels to be egoless. So, at times, just with the flexibility of your mind, you will be able to turn it off.

In your book, you might as well call that type of extinction *nirvana*, one with time constraints. When defining it, explain clearly it needs to always be renewed.

Fare well.”

The Burning Bush became so bright that it blinded me.

Instant Fossilization

When I could see again, I was on top of the incline from where the Extraordinary Garden appeared like an idyllic academy, with groups of visitors and masters strolling in rainbow-colored alleys.

Were the extremely vivid colors of the scene due to my recent temporary blindness?

A little girl's voice behind me commented: "It is gorgeous, isn't it?"

It came from an odd-looking teenager who was surveying in awe the scenery.

I realized then that I had not seen a single child in the Extraordinary Garden. This girl was by far the youngest person I had encountered in that paradoxical region.

After a few seconds, she stopped scanning the surroundings and faced me: "May I help you?"

She was confronting the fact that I was gaping without being aware of it. My stare was certainly most inappropriate.

She was little, with her head and her limbs slightly disproportionate compared to her torso. Her copper-colored, glistening skin was unusual, as her pale green short hair. She was wearing what appeared to be a pattern-and-color-changing leotard.

"I am sorry. It is just that you are the first adolescent I have seen in the area. Are you lost?"

"No. I am not lost, and I am not an adolescent. I am thirty-three years old."

The bizarre thought she could be an alien entered my mind.

"My name is Zxsdtr"

I am just throwing here a penful of consonants. Her name was unpronounceable.

The fake teenage girl but very likely true alien, laughed at my puzzled look: "My name comes from a famous love poem title, popular when my parents conceived me. Let's see... Since I can be a historian, would you like to call me Historian Z?"

"It is a little long. How about Z?"

It was her turn to stare a little too insistently at me. She laughed: "You can call me Z, of course. Say, would you happen to be Hego-Wan?"

"Ego One? Is that name infamous in the whole universe now?"

"We spell it H-E-G-O-W-A-N. I specialize in High Antiquity; your 21st Century, to be precise. I am working on Ancient Myths during the Decadence Era. Your book is considered as an exemplary relic, a part of what will be the '*Resistance to Ignorance*.'"

I was more stunned than when I found myself in front of the Burning Bush.

I had to sit down: “What century are you coming from?”

Z took the time to gaze again admiratively at the Extraordinary Garden before answering lightheartedly: “I promised not to reveal it.”

“You promised whom?”

“Here is a clue: just look at me. You can see that many centuries, maybe *millennia* separate us. Evolution never stops, does it?”

She left me graciously a few minutes to regain my composure.

I asked: “Why are you here? What are you looking for?”

“For a long time, historians used to call what is now ‘the Decadence Era,’ ‘The Dark Ages.’

That was obviously not fair. A lot of men and women of your time were philosophically and spiritually very sophisticated. Unfortunately, the people in high positions of responsibility were not, and their power was more devastating than in other centuries.

When ignorant people are in charge, the result is rarely pretty.

Our generation of historians has thankfully rehabilitated your century.

The manual you wrote reflects in a particular way how the *Resistance to Ignorance* survives and even spreads in difficult times.

I have been studying your book for a few months. Your references are sometimes literal, like for Payne-Scott and Kepler. Sometimes, you don’t make our task easy. It is difficult to recognize what Buddhist school you are quoting. Also, in the case of Marcel Proust, you seem to completely misquote him.”

I was gaping again: “You came to interview me?”

“Not really. I was not expecting to meet you. I just wanted to understand that book, a great literary fossil, often confusing, but useful for grasping an individual’s reaction to a coarse, violent civilization.”

Alighieri, The Subtitle

Z looked concerned: “Are you well? Did I say something that was not appropriate? I apologize. As I told you, I was not prepared to meet a real person. You see, where I come from, there is no authorship as you define it. So, it never occurred to me I could run into you.”

I was reduced to repeating random phrases, in the hope that something would click and make sense: “There is no authorship?”

“If I compose a report, a code allows others to contact me if something is not clear, provided I am still alive. That report is an item that must be used by others, not an independent work that is supposed to remain ‘mine’ or untouched.”

Z had a concerned tone of voice: “Am I clear?”

“No.”

“Here is an example. I have used for a past report something created a few centuries before yours, a work called “La Divina Commedia.”

For us, that book has a first code indicating its importance in the ‘*Resistance to Ignorance*’ scale.

The second code is the century and year it appeared. The third code is its format availability.”

I recited: “The author is Dante Alighieri.”

“It is not a common name. I don’t clutter my mind with those details. Luckily, your name was weird enough to stick to my memory.”

“You must have mentioned ‘Dante Alighieri’ in your report, though.”

“Why would I do that?”

“But...”

“The name of the author is like a subtitle. In certain cases, it may be useful as such.”

“But...”

While the English translation of “The Divine Comedy” was in my required reading list when I was in school, I never finished it. But I could still firmly assert: “Dante Alighieri was a genius!”

“Humans contribute to humanity. That’s all.

For most of us, the term “genius” is difficult to comprehend. Thankfully, as a historian, I had to study that qualifier.

At your epoch, there is a serious attachment, some spoke of a form of ‘veneration,’ that your contemporaries have for random contributors.

In our century, it is a most abstruse notion, I must repeat. It is difficult for us not to see it as a divisive, unfair, worthless distinction.

Let’s say that I invite you for dinner and that you love a dish I have served you. You congratulate me: ‘That was delicious. I would like to eat that again next time.’

Could I ask you to call me a genius?”

“But... But that has nothing to do with Einstein, Dante or...”

“My duty and honor are to serve you as well as I can. You may appreciate the meal, and that will be my reward. It would be ridiculous for me to demand that you remember it for the rest of your life.

It is the same in my professional and personal life. My duty and honor are to be the best historian. If my report is useful for your own research, that is my reward. If that report is used by many, that is normal. That is my job. It would be seriously sick for me to demand that my name be chanted by those who used my work.

Moreover, don’t you see that electing geniuses means ignoring everyone else?

That is why I told you that these terms are divisive, unfair, worthless. Fortunately, they fell quickly out of use, when society changed, right after *The Dark Ages*... I meant to say *The Decadence Era*.

Please, please, forgive my callousness!”

35

When Synapses Overheat

Z’s slip of the tongue made her despondent: “I was inquiring if you were well, because you look so anxious, and I made things worse by insulting you.”

“I look anxious?”

“Extremely. Is it something I said? Please, consider that I am less callous than ignorant.”

I repeated: “Anxious, uh?”

After my last encounter with the Burning Bush, my brain felt particularly heavy. As I was chatting with Z, I wondered if that unusual weight could be the warning sign of a stroke.

I confided to the young historian that I had the impression my brain was becoming dangerously compressed.

Z did not seem too concerned: “Look around. We are in a peculiar place. I would say that we are here in permanent danger of information overload. Just let go of it, Hego-Wan.”

I could feel that inner pressure was not going to sip slowly away. It was ready to explode.

I needed to think fast and to speak up. I blurted out loudly:

“Scientists forget that their observations are not outward, objective processes. The mathematical laws they spot are not hidden networks secretly governing reality.

Scientists, processes, observations, mathematical laws, etc. are just interactions.

As vast as the number of these interactions may be, it is desperately finite.

An ancient lineage of thinkers has proposed a perspective of the universe starting with an entropic direction. Nowadays, they would call it *Evolution*. If we take a point anywhere in this Evolution, we give it consistency.

That point could be a molecule, a grain of sand, a frog, a fig tree, you...

From a mere lightyear, for instance, the point has no consistency. The observer, armed with an instrument powerful enough to detect and recognize that point, can eventually appreciate its ‘existence.’

That is why these thinkers from yesteryear did their mapping of the universe without the spacetime parameter.

They valued metaphysics, the study of existence, over physics, the science of detection.”

I paused to grasp what I had just pronounced. I caught a glimpse of Z who was now literally also gaping, her eyes wide opened.

I could not savor that sight. I had to continue at the same pace:

“When spacetime is ignored, the point and the observer orbit around each other.

After the metaphysicists from the past had introduced the notion of the intrinsic teleological density of existing, they could consider that the whole creation leading to that dot (or that observer) and the totality of the dot’s interactions with all the other dots, compose at the very instant of that observation the center of the whole universe.

However, that ‘very instant’ being purely virtual, it has been called ‘a permanent *transition phase*.’

Without the means to detect the permanent *transition phase*, how could human beings, enduring the stampede of time, have the pretention to know it, and perhaps even to adapt and ride it?

That is where consciousness comes in.”

There was a long silence.

Eventually, Z invited me to continue.

I confessed: “I don’t have anything else.”

“When did you write about that topic?”

I could not bring myself to admit: “That thought was branded in some of my synapses by a Burning Bush, as a message to a physicist who may not have won a Nobel Prize.”

I only answered: “It just came to me. By the way, to see if you are really who you say you are, could you explain as clearly as you can what I just said?”

36

The Ego Toy

Z and I remained for a long time hypnotized by the dimming colors in the Extraordinary Garden. A silver dusk was slowly setting on the alleys now empty of passersby.

Z’s tiny voice broke the silence: “You are correct. Consciousness is key.”

Absorbed by the problem of explaining what I had blurted out, the usually considerate young woman did not perceive my crushing weakness.

My apathy was catastrophic. It was as if my previous logorrhea of thought experiments had exhausted all my mental energy. I could not think.

Historian Z drew a long, exhaustive parallel between the theories I had just “proposed” and the ‘*Resistance to Ignorance*’ scale, which included “a quantification of the wide range of consciousness processes.”

Eventually, she exclaimed: “Hego-Wan, you just dozed off.”

I looked around. The Extraordinary Garden was totally silver.

“You didn’t hear anything I just said, did you?”

Thanks to my stealth nap, my fatigue was a little less debilitating.

I asked: “What do you do when you are sick? How does your ‘quantification of the consciousness processes’ help you with exhaustion, hormonal imbalance, disorders caused by age or accidents?”

Z answered with a humble: “May I?”

She did not wait for my response. She brushed her fingers softly against my weary forehead, then my temples.

I closed my eyes. She pressed lightly different spots on my nape. Her voice was coming in and out, but I did not try to hear everything she was saying.

“A child’s voice clamor: ‘I am! Hear me, see me!’ In our century, we have the child play with that voice: ‘Sing it; bounce it; catch ten coming your way; dance it; throw it to the moon; explode it into a thousand suns; paint it in rainbows and then in all shades of black...’

Our society is composed of these grown children.

Players slow down with age. Other players find it natural to help them enjoy the game of life... until the end.”

I fell asleep.

37

O Solitude, Not My Sweetest Choice

I was not surprised to see that Z was no longer next to me when I woke up.

I was starting to understand the dynamics of the Extraordinary Garden, like for instance to be periodically thrown into solitude, perhaps to reflect on what I had just learned.

However, that time, my solitude felt especially disheartening.

First, I experienced some vague sadness. Instead of missing the oddly comforting presence of Z, I preferred finding a bitter conclusion to what she had told me.

Basically, to the problem of our frail existence bound to crumble under the weight of our years or the tragedies of common accidents, Z had answered that in a few centuries from now, our remodeled race will be a unified community able to soothe these ineluctable occurrences.

“Thank you very much, but it is doubtful I will be around to witness such novel, innate solidarity!”

I looked around. The silver setting was totally still.

I had the impression that I had woken up with a spiritual hangover made of a brand-new type of anxiety.

My recent Burning-Bush-inspired speculation about the ontological nature of consciousness was flavorless: how would a theory shield me from “real” pain? Besides, these conjectures may have been foreign to me, for I was not truly supposed to be their recipient.

I was left with only one certainty, weighing heavily on my mind: that supreme solitude was destined to follow me, as I was undoubtedly on the verge of being kicked back out into my usual life.

A recurring image came to haunt me, a few hours in a row. Back to my old functions in society, I saw myself being struck by a series of incidents depriving me of my health.

That was of course sheer fear, but I interpreted that repetition as a prediction about my future.

I tried to think a little more positively, but I could only conclude that everything I had gathered in the Extraordinary Garden was meant to be enjoyed by a healthy-thinking-being!

I summoned all the techniques I knew for emptying a mind. But my brain filled up right away with snapshots of great thinkers who suffered all types of ailments, reducing to mush their once powerful brains.

After what seemed to be an eternity, as the Garden turned to a purple dawn, I caught sight of a slow-moving pale dot, down below, at some distance from the incline.

Fleeing physically my disastrous frame of mind, I ran as fast as I could to what could be one of the “friends” I had encountered in these alleys.

Unfortunately, the movement I had noticed was coming from a very old man in rags, shoveling dirt from the right side of a path to the left, and then back to the right.

When he saw me, he just commented: “Working like this keeps you young.”

His voice and his disheveled appearance reminded me of a homeless man, delusional and always crabby, who visited occasionally the place where I used to work, in my usual life. I had tried to share some food with him or to give him some money, but whether he took it or rejected it, he would always cuss me out. I ended up being a little afraid of him.

Because of that memory, I was hesitant to address the dirt-shoveling older man.

He pointed at a table with two benches, took a pitcher and poured some viscous liquid in two cups.

Being still pressured by the ghost of solitude, I had no other choice but to reluctantly sit down across from him: “I am not thirsty.”

There was a stench around the table that could freeze dry any feeling of thirst or hunger.

“My name is Epicurus. People see me as a bon vivant, drinking, eating, singing, and having a knack for partying everywhere. But my philosophy was truly to enjoy what we have, without looking for outside pleasures. Have you heard of me?”

I nodded. The man took a book from under the table: “It is time for us to study *The Book of Job*.”

I exulted: “Ah! I knew you could not be Epicurus! How would you know the Bible?”

The imposter poured some more goo in his glass. He raised his cup as for a cheer, shook his head and pronounced with a smile and something of an admiring tone of voice: “Ego One! Ego One! Ego One!”

38

Enlightened Through the Nose

I acknowledged bitterly: “Go ahead, say that I will never learn. Ask when if I will ever get that the message matters, not the messenger!”

The old man posing as Epicurus smiled, but not at my self-deprecating irony:

“I hope you appreciate that it is I who shall comment on *The Book of Job*.

Isn't it wonderful that the ultimate reflection about human misfortune is performed by the philosopher who has been the most fortunate among all the human beings who have ever lived?

No one has ever had a life sweeter than mine.

Aren't you curious to hear how a man who had been spared by the gods of (almost) any inconvenience during his lifetime could interpret the supreme ordeal of an exemplary poor soul?”

I could have objected that this dirty, skeletal, dirt-shoveling old man did not really fit the image of “the most fortunate among all human beings,” but I could hardly open my mouth. The stench around us was unbearable.

Epicurus seemed totally oblivious to it. I suspected that he may have been the reason behind the foul smell.

“And I hope you appreciate also the fact that our study of *The Book of Job* is aimed to answer what has been puzzling you for a long time: pain!”

I squirmed to try to point my nose in another direction, without appearing too rude.

The old man pushed a cup before me: “Are you sure you are not thirsty?”

At once, my tongue and throat started to burn. I needed some water, and urgently!

I considered with horror the dense, murky liquid in the cup, added that vision to my sense of smell already in desperation mode, and I wondered if I was not going to pass out.

That solution was tempting.

However, I had the sudden paradoxical impulse to stop breathing at the same time that I relaxed all my involuntarily tensed muscles.

My first breath revived me, and all the negative sensations disappeared.

Such firm reaction to an imminent blackout was so improbable that I wondered if this “Epicurus” had not somehow transmitted it to me.

The old man was observing me attentively.

When he was explaining the paradox of having *The Book of Job* explained by “the happiest man alive,” he had a faint permanent smile. But, as he was staring at me, he looked serious, perhaps a little puzzled.

Did he perceive the startling deflation of my intense dread?

He clapped: “Very well done, Ego One!”

He got up: “All things considered, we don’t even need to study *The Book of Job*. My work here is done.”

39

Deep Discount on Suffering for Practicing Philosophers

“Epicurus” waved me goodbye.

“Wait! You said that your work was finished. What work did you have to do and how do you know it is finished?”

“I had the choice between being Job commenting Epicurus or Epicurus analyzing Job. I flipped a coin. Look at the result: instead of a five-hour lecture, you have found *The Way* all by yourself.”

“I have not found anything at all.”

“You have opened yourself up. And I didn’t have to use metaphors, thought experiments, logic, poetry, not even a gentle slap in the back of your head. What else do you want?”

That is the definition of a triumph. My mission has been perfectly accomplished.”

“It was an accident. I have no idea why and how I relaxed instead of fainting. Besides, I always forget everything I learn.”

“Fine. If you insist, I will proceed with my reading of *The Book of Job*. But it will be for you an intellectual acquisition at best.

In my opinion, you would be better off using a thorough introspection to map out how you achieved an exquisite evasion from a tormenting cycle.”

My throat, nose and eyes started to burn again.

Epicurus noticed it and repeated with the same exaggerated admiration: “Ego One! Ego One! Ego One!

Yours is truly an ego to behold!”

He sat down and opened *The Book of Job* at a random page, read it silently, and closed it before starting: “Many people believe that Job is the innocent victim of a metaphysical dispute between Job’s Creator and a mysterious character doubting Job’s integrity.

However, you, Ego One, should concentrate on three other components of the myth. I am talking about fear, shame, and guilt.

The question ‘What did I do to deserve my fate?’ is echoed by Job’s friends who, very *compassionately*, also yell at him; ‘You must have done something really awful to deserve your horrible fate.’

Do you see fear, shame, and guilt in that book?”

“I am not sure I know it very well. You want me to read the text, one of these days?”

“At your leisure?”

After another sarcastic simulation of awe, the old man shook his head: “No need to promise me to read it. When you experience something dreadful, does the thought ‘What did I do to deserve this shit?’ ever cross your mind?”

“Well... Maybe not in those terms, but yes, I suppose so.”

“That thought is sufficient to reflect on the human condition. You do not need to reread *The Book of Job*.

By the way, what is your answer to the question ‘What did I do to deserve this?’

Do you ever *deserve* it?”

“Well... A few times, I could have prevented a bad outcome. But usually, I am not really to be blamed.”

“Wrong time, wrong place, uh?”

That sentence made the old man giggle mockingly.

In a good mood, he suggested: “Instead of being obsessed with your part of responsibility in a serious setback, examine carefully the nature of that setback. Rather than asking ‘What did I do to deserve this shit?’ or ‘Why me?’ look at what you find so unbearable.”

He reopened his copy of the Bible and pointed at a page:

“Do you believe that your setback is comparable to the ‘worst case scenario,’ so graphically and lyrically represented in *The Book of Job*?”

“Pain is pain,” I summarized with a shrug.

Curiously, instead of pouncing on that idea that sounded like some simpleminded tautology, Epicurus congratulated me: “Very good, Ego One! Only a brainless fool would say ‘My suffering is superior to yours.’”

Pain sucks and it is impossible to measure all its negative consequences when it strikes. We are seldom ready to endure it, and even mild blows are dramatically cumulative.

Comparing my pain and yours is senseless.

But there are two arguments you must consider when analyzing *hurt*.

The first one is quantitative. While you don’t want to measure the intensity of pain, you may want to evaluate its occurrences.

Don’t you have the sentiment that ‘When it rains, it pours’? Aren’t you convinced that it pours more often than not, in your life.

Why don’t you objectively estimate all the times it simply did not rain ‘shit’ in your life?

Compute all the moments of personal *hurt*. Compare them to the rest of your life, including routines and all the in-between hours spent worrying for nothing or rehashing what cannot be changed. The result will most certainly surprise you.

The second argument is one piece of information I am going to give you, a secret you must not ignore: true philosophers, elemental philosophers, suffer less, no matter how elevated the number of trials and tribulations they endure may be.

40

A Garden Transcription of The Book of Job

Armed with my sharpest irony, I took aim at the statement “philosophers suffer less, no matter the number of trials and tribulations they endure.”

“So, a PhD in philosophy is guaranteed to live a more peaceful life than anybody else?”

“Of course not! Philosophy is what I practice. Philosophy is not a specialty. It is the very path of the human mind once it is confronted to the question ‘Why on earth am I here?’ and its corollary: ‘How can I be and remain happy?’

This is natural, elemental philosophy; and any human being who has ever uttered these questions is a philosopher. Thus, a practicing philosopher is one who tries to answer these questions.

A PhD in philosophy has to read, write, defend, dispute, etc.

A real philosopher, like me and you, soon, lives in satisfaction.

I have been told that you hate anachronisms. But if I quote thinkers famous 2400 years ago, you will have a harder time following me. That is why I must use names somewhat familiar to you, like Camus and Marx.

My point is that a PhD in philosophy must study Camus, Marx, and many others in order to obtain a tenured position. But a real elemental philosopher, like me and you, asks all these authors one question; ‘What can you give me that could speed up my own quest?’

If they cannot give us a new, useful element for our spiritual growth, or if they beat about the bush, we move quickly to different sources of knowledge.

Others have probed the skies, the tempests, human wrath, poverty, and other mysteries. They are humble workers, passionate collectors, lovers, parents, or children... They give freely what they have discovered. We like to glean our information from these anonymous masters in elemental philosophy.

Now, it is possible that one day, all these sources could keep on repeating themselves.

Then, you must turn to those who are less familiar, less understandable, who do not speak your language.

For instance, if you are an atheist, be curious about the Bible or the Veda.

If you are a devoted religious practitioner, see the world without the glasses of your religion. Study what is foreign for you.”

As to illustrate what he was saying, Epicurus reopened *The Book of Job*, toward the end, and pushed it before me: “You wanted to read the text at your leisure? Leisure time has come. Please, start at that page.”

I read out loud reluctantly, with a monotone voice:

“Then the Creator spoke to Job out of the storm:
‘Who is discussing these plans with words without knowledge?
Brace yourself for I will question you, and you shall answer me.
Where were you when dimensions were laid out while stars started their dance?
Who made for the elements their garments, wrapping them in dark energy?
Have you journeyed to the springs of events or walked in the recesses of the deep?
Have the passages of death been shown to you?’

Have you contemplated the secret horizons?
Have you comprehended the vast expanses of time?
Tell me if you know all this.
Surely you know, for you were already born!
You have lived so many years!
Tell me also what is the place where everything has yet to be dispersed.
Who fixed a limit to one energy, so silence can beget life?
Do you know the laws of the heavens and their connections to your hunger finally satisfied?
Look at Behemoth: humans who kill for pride.
I made it as I made you.
Nothing on earth is its equal, a creature without fear threatening a whole creation.’
‘Then Job replied to the Creator:
‘Surely, I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know.
My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you.’”

41

Two-Note Yapping

“What did I read? I am pretty sure that the real *Book of Job* does not contain lines like ‘Who wrapped the elements in dark energy?’ ‘Dark energy’ in the Bible? Really?”

“Are you accusing this transcription of unauthenticity? Is it at least worthy of your smile? Do you have the feeling I am the historical Epicurus? Is what I am saying at least worthy of your attention?”

Remember that you do not demand how to read human labels correctly, but an answer to what is puzzling you: misfortunes versus satisfactions.

Why are you so certain there is an overwhelming discrepancy between both elements of your reality?

The Book of Job has been composed to answer that problem.

The dialogue you have read is in my opinion much more fertile than the next chapter, a happy ending where the Creator returns everything that was taken away from Job, and more.

You must have noticed a marked tension between the two characters in that scene. The divine addresses the creature with a striking sarcasm: ‘I hear you whining in this corner, while the symphony of existence is playing all its complex, subtle modulations. Shut up and learn how to play. Or else, just listen, instead of yapping your two monotonous little notes!’”

“Is that what I just read?”

“I have only transposed the difference in scales: two cawed notes versus a symphony of a million rainbows and an opera of billions of voices.”

As lyrical as it may have sounded, I found the older man’s interpretation unconvincing. However, his quasi-permanent irony intimidated me, and I changed topics: “Didn’t you say that we were going to talk about fear, shame, and guilt?”

“You know what traumas are. They leave you in an abyss of fear, shame, guilt, and also of physical pain.

Job gives his voice to fear, shame, guilt, and physical pain.

What is he answered in *The Book of Job*?”

“According to you, God tells him to shut up and think before whining.”

“You did pay attention, Ego One. Congratulations! And do you believe that Job’s Creator is rather callous?”

“To say the least, yes!”

“Let me take back my congratulations. You are not that correct, after all.

The All-Knowing’s answer shows what the cause of human suffering is, as well as a possible remedy against it.”

42

Being As an Anti-Pain Potion

“Job is placed in a universe where possessions (including his health) are given and taken away. He is asking why. His plea mentions that he has been a good man and that he has followed all the laws of his time, while having the humility to be grateful for everything he had.

Do you remember what he is answered?”

“Uh...”

Epicurus recited from memory: “‘Brace yourself for I will question you, and you shall answer me.’

The divine decides to reverse the roles and, instead of explaining why the man is in such grave predicament, it puts him on the spot. Its first question is to ask Job where he was while the universe was being created.

What does that mean?”

It was around Marcel Proust that I learned the efficient technique of opening my eyes a little wider while waiting silently.

Epicurus, exactly like Marcel, gave me the answer within ten seconds: “Job is asked why he is only Job and not the Creator.”

“Wait! What? That is not what I read! You are pushing it!”

“We choose books that provide bountiful reflections, and this is a wonderful one!”

Job cannot get any answer by only being a prop in a play he does not comprehend. You remember of course the last line of the text, Job’s conclusion?”

After about ten seconds, the philosopher continued: “Job acknowledged: ‘Surely, I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know. My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you.’”

You can appreciate the enormous difference of immediacy between “hearing about” and “seeing.”

It is only when Job could “see” that he was ready for the happy ending.

You are now in position to grasp *The Book of Job*’s construction:

The human considers its condition and protests bitterly.

The divine replies that indeed, the banal lot of a whining creature who wants to be opulent, like Job was in the beginning of the tale, leaves to be desired.

Job understands that he must “see” directly the divine, and stop being an obedient object.

At a certain stage of studying elemental philosophy, you will learn that “seeing” the divine can be only achieved by *being* the divine.

To summarize, *The Book of Job* invites you to ask the divine the correct question, in order to find peace of mind and endless joy. You just need to “see,” which is *to be* the universe.”

“So simple!”

Epicurus smashed my irony with a nod: “Equating the infinite and the finite is existentially simple, indeed. But it won’t be so simple for you, I am afraid, Ego One.”

Waiting For God Knows What

“I am going to let you reflect on *The Book of Job*, now that you have acquired a new perspective on it.

However, even if you were to eventually be in complete agreement with the conclusion I suggested in the last chapter, would that insight be more than an intellectual comprehension?

Any elemental philosopher is sooner or later confronted to the following question: can an idea, a theory, shield a soul from actual pain?”

While talking, Epicurus was leading me through an alley that seemed familiar.

Suddenly, I yelled: “You did it! You found SB! But why isn’t it moving?”

Epicurus scratched his head: “Perhaps because it is a statue?”

I waited for SB to get down from its pedestal.

After a while, my guide inquired tentatively: “Are you meditating, daydreaming, reflecting?”

“No, I am waiting for my friend to join us.”

After a few more seconds: “Are you waiting with joy in your heart?”

“Why would I be joyful?”

The old philosopher looked exaggeratedly puzzled.

“Then, are you saying you may be waiting with some type of gloom in your heart?”

I shrugged: “‘Gloom’? I am not exceedingly happy. It does not mean I feel ‘gloomy.’”

“Don’t take it personally, but if you are not happy, you are wasting your most precious time on this Earth.”

“How can’t I take it personally?”

“Well, you can take it personally if you so please. In any case, you know of course that you can always dial gloom down and augment joy.”

The older man had a rather high-pitched voice. At this point, each sentence he uttered aggravated me slightly more. I found his dissonant way of speaking difficult to bear: “No, I don’t know how to do that.”

Epicurus pointed at the SB statue: “Do you remember what you felt around Super Beet?”

Even hearing the ridiculous name rather than the superhero initials made me cringe: “No, I don’t!”

My guide appeared oblivious to my bad mood: “You may have felt a very light touch or a whiff of transparency before embarking on a very peculiar trip. Does it ring a bell?”

“No.”

That time, the pseudo-Epicurus addressed my temper:

“On all occasions, please remember the only thing that matters: a never-ending peace. That is what a philosopher wants. Would your peace of mind increase if you keep cultivating the art of being an emotional wreck?”

The old man did not let his attack linger. He switched right away to another topic, this time with a much warmer tone of voice: “SB led you to a special stage of consciousness. But then, it did not go any further. I have the suspicion that now, you could go to the next stage.”

Epicurus’s strategy worked. My growing resentment suddenly melted:

“The next stage? What is it? Could it be what is called *nirvana*?”

“Actually, the next stage is to *keep* what you have experienced.

You are constantly encountering precious insights. Keeping them could be useful, don’t you think?”

That question reignited my displeasure. I could have snapped that, instead of inspiring me, this Epicurus Wannabe was only aggravating me, but I was more than ever reluctant to engage the old, sarcastic philosopher in an argument.

Besides, “the gloom” I had denied feeling was palpable in me.

My guide said: “We can wait together if you want. There is a bench over there.”

After a while, tired of standing up, I joined Epicurus on the bench.

He started telling me some lighthearted examples of popular beliefs from his days. For instance, ghosts, extraterrestrials, petty divinities, shapeshifting monsters, bizarre karmic laws, etc., could be randomly spotted in 300 BC.

I had to smile: “You would be surprised by the number of my contemporaries, folks living in a century rich in scientific knowledge, who swear these things do exist.”

Little by little, my bad mood subsided. I could hardly smell the initial, disturbing stench. Epicurus’s rags did not look so worn out. His voice sounded less discordant. Sitting, his back, usually noticeably hunched, straightened up. Even his deep wrinkles were not as visible.

I panicked. Was I getting “attached” to my current guide? Was he also going to disappear without giving me the Extraordinary Garden’s ultimate secret or, at the very least, some important clue?

Superhero To the Rescue

“Please, give me something concrete, something I can apply in my daily life. I am tired of theories.”

Epicurus shook his head: “That is not the philosopher’s way. If you don’t understand the theory, why would you want to follow any advice?”

“Can you really dial down sadness and augment joy at will?”

“Of course!”

Epicurus smiled, apparently relieved: “You are right. For that specific question, you do not need to speculate on complex theories.”

His smile dissipated quickly: “Although, I will need you to accompany me on a thought experiment. Will you allow yourself to do that?”

“You bet!”

“Think of a painful event in your past.”

“Can we do your thought experiment with the past of someone else?”

Epicurus considered my request for a few seconds before answering: “Well, we could. But we are going to waste a lot of time setting up a stage, with relatable characters. In comparison, your personal experience is readily accessible to you.”

“Nah! I’m good. I really don’t care to revisit painful stuff from my past.”

“Fine.”

Epicurus scratched his head again, an obvious and amusing sign of impotence,

At that moment, SB jumped like a feline off its pedestal and stretched open its long arms: “Hug me!”

Do Tears Leave Scars?

SB's hug transported me at once in a room where a child was lying in a bed.

"That room looks familiar. I recognize that carpet more than that kid.

This is me, isn't it? How old could I have been? Was I sick?"

The child was wide awake, listening intently to the noises coming from outside, where other kids were playing and laughing.

"I think I was too shy to go out because I didn't know any of them."

My aunt had left a big pile of brightly illustrated books on a chair.

As an invisible visiting adult, I realized that my aunt, who did not have a lot of money, had spent a pretty penny trying to make me happy.

But for the young me, the numerous, brand-new gifts looked sinister, compared to the joyful tumult coming with a warm and fragrant summer breeze through the drawn curtains.

The child was feeling alone, excluded.

That dread became so present in me that SB intervened swiftly.

From the joyous commotion outside, a shriller voice challenged a kid to stop being a wimp and to jump.

There were cries and screams while the room became at once so bright that the young me and the current I stopped freaking out.

The paintings on the wall, representing marine scenes, seemed to come to life, as to take our minds off the ruckus, and on an exotic journey.

Absorbed in wild waves and slow-dancing horizons, we did not notice right away that our aunt had opened the door.

She let in a little girl and a little boy who were my age, at that time: "Get up, will you? Here are two new friends who are a little sad. Some children were not very nice to them. Can you show them your books? Some are very funny. While you keep them company, I will get something to eat."

I said to SB: "I remember these two friends! But you have intervened! You have transformed that memory!"

"No. I modified its speed. The incident outside, your sudden fascination for a wondrous change in lighting, the entrance of your aunt, and the fact these two children became your inseparable

friends during that summer: everything did happen! I just sped up the memory, so you wouldn't feel again the very same solitude and sorrow you had experienced back then."

While the three kids were spreading all the books on the floor, babbling and giggling, I commented: "I don't understand why I am here."

"You had forgotten that poignant episode. It contributed to teaching you loneliness and exclusion. Was that knowledge only dormant in you?"

You had forgotten your immediate openness to a ray of light. However, did that capacity to perceive magic ever leave you?

You had forgotten the rush of joy that overwhelmed you when your aunt opened the door. If I had let you experience it fully now, you may have passed out.

In a four-hour span, the child who was you has experienced a wide array of sensations, all positive and all negative, never mixed."

My aunt came back to announce: "Pizza! Who wants some?"

The three children left the room, howling with joy.

46

Mission Thankfully Aborted

Still in the room where I had spent part of one summer, a very long time ago, I had to marvel before that long-forgotten memory. How and why was it still retrievable? I wanted to ask SB how it had access to it, but I could feel that my companion was gathering all its energy to complete its mission with me. I figured I was going to be soon transported back on the bench next to Epicurus. Then, SD was bound to disappear yet again.

I was quite attached to that strange "superhero." Our form of non-verbal communication allowed me to grasp that we had something essential in common. However, SB seemed to indicate we were from different species. How could that be possible?

I also sensed that towards me, SB was all compassion, while I was not really able to reciprocate the same empathy.

For instance, even though I was physically aware of SB's deep concentration, I did not hesitate to break it with a question: "You said that this child experienced 'some sensations, all positive and all negative, never mixed.' I have certainly changed. Now, everything is jumbled together. And still, I cannot control my feelings any better than when I was little. How could I ever dial down sadness and raise joy?"

SB conveyed softly: “Why don’t you change dimensions when you feel dread?”

Humans have neural mechanisms allowing them to relate to the universe. Why don’t you use them to change dimensions?”

I did not quite know what to make of that suggestion. I felt SB’s strain. My guide wanted to help me with all its might.

I expressed: “Humans do not know how to change dimensions at will.”

SB’s efforts to comprehend my responses were palpable. It eventually let out, like a sigh: “But humans possess a powerful imagination!”

I tried another question: “Why did you teleport us to that specific memory?”

SB explained that it was just the first stage of a complex thought experiment. It had to take me to another memory, that time located in my adolescence.

At once, I went inside my teenage body at the exact time I was receiving the message that the schoolmate I loved unrequitedly had asked me out.

For one glorious moment, I strolled down my hometown’s streets. Old people waved at me joyfully; birds sang for me; the sun, the sky, the rain wove rainbows for me; merchants smiled at me; colors got more vivid for me...

Getting back home, I already knew that another message from my beloved was awaiting me, destroying at once that magical background, sending my heart into a living hell.

My beloved’s text was cancelling our plans, brutally informing me that the reason was an unexpected new “hot date,” an opportunity “no one would miss.”

Instead of diving into an ocean of bitterness, shame, and pain, I got instantly transported into a cloudless sky.

SB explained: “After that short stop, I am supposed to take you inside four persons, different from you. One is a young man going to war to defend his country. He is taking up arms for a lie. He is willingly going to spread violence and sorrow on innocent people who have also been lied to. Your second vessel is the mother of that zealous young soldier. She is proud and full of hatred for the strangers her son is asked to annihilate.

Both people have in their hearts a profound joy, the excitement to be right and virtuous.

The third person is a guard in a concentration camp, and the fourth, a prisoner in that camp.

I fear that this multi-stage journey could crush you before you could understand the true nature of consciousness, and from there, how to regulate your emotions.”

I shivered: “Thank you. Thank you so much! Is it Epicurus who asked you to torture me like that?”

“Humans need to understand. I had to take you to some exemplary situations you could experience, but indirectly, from a safer distance. The goal was for you to reach what they have in common. Once you understood it, you could control your emotions.”

That explanation had been especially difficult to generate for SB. But I was not expecting the sudden wave of empathy that followed:

“Unfortunately, the distance from where it is safe to observe is not the same for every human being. You may have forgotten that you are a visitor, an observer, a researcher, as much as a performer. Please, in the future, in all circumstances, remember it.”

“But...”

I had to pause our communication, and just savor the fact I had become a bodyless entity in a cloudless sky.

I stopped thinking... for less than a minute: “How can I avoid asking, and just float? How can my consciousness soar if I know I will be back to my usual life?”

SB apologized: “These worries escape me.”

Thankfully, all questions turned blue and dissolved softly.

47

An Ideal Job

I was so happy to be back in Epicurus’s realm that I hugged him.

He winced: “You could break my brittle bones, you know?”

He touched warily his neck and smiled: “I seem to have survived... Now, let’s talk about what you have learned from the realities you have reviewed with SB.”

My good disposition dissipated instantly. Without confessing that our journey had been drastically shortened, I asserted that there was nothing to be learned from painful trips down memory lane or from the tragic destinies I had to explore!

Epicurus made a face: “Did our thought experiment fail?”

“Miserably!”

“All the stages of that experiment were designed for you to discover a common denominator, easy to comprehend, but usually not obvious to spot.

It was not fortuitous for us to study *The Book of Job* before considering the common trials of life, like those you have experienced as a child, as an adolescent, and then some more tragic events.

You could easily compare Job to yourself as a younger character, and to the four people you have encountered during the thought experiment.”

“‘Easily’? You said yourself that nothing is easy for Ego One.”

“You have a point here. Then, I shall gladly assist you.

Which Job would you like to call to stand up for you? The famously miserable, emblematic one, or the one who apologizes at the end, because he has realized he needed to *see*, which is *to be* the divine?”

“Are you really asking a child, a teenager, a prisoner in a death camp *to be the divine*?”

Epicurus had the slight squint announcing a sarcastic answer, but he curiously froze, shook his head, and muttered after a few seconds: “Wrong Job.”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

The philosopher surprised me. He morphed into a silent, pensive, frail older man, perhaps obsessing on a failed experiment.

The best way to console him was surely to ask a few questions:

“What I gathered from the thought experiment was that fear and ignorance distort our sense of reality. A philosopher like you may rectify the problem by eliminating fear and ignorance. But what is going to be the fate of a very young, lonely child, of an awkward adolescent, of an indoctrinated boy, of a woman blinded by her love, etc.?”

To a certain extent, my attempt to comfort Epicurus was successful, since he forgot his dismay and recovered instantly his irony:

“Are you still a very young, lonely child, or an awkward adolescent? Are you an indoctrinated boy, a woman blinded by love, a guard, or a prisoner?”

That thought experiment was not designed for them but for you, as you are now!”

I lashed back: “Your thought experiment meant nothing to me other than regret and pain.”

I thought hearing Epicurus muttering again something like: “Wrong Job.”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

To avoid another potentially guilt-ridden silence, I poked: “What connection did you see between that complicated and cruel thought experiment and what I was asking you: a practical method to dial down sadness and augment joy at will?”

“Simple souls, elemental philosophers perceive in life’s jolts a fluid, existential identity.

You as a child, an adolescent and as the four people you encountered from inside, are like the famously miserable Job. You do not have yet the knowledge gathered by you, now an elemental philosopher, or by the version of Job who is able to recover his privileges and more, at the end of his ordeal.

That is why a complex experiment, rich in potent examples, was designed for you to conceive that egos are like spiders. They weave their webs of reality, but they don’t weave reality.”

“That sounds pretty good, but what does it mean?”

“Ego One, consider that a simple person may just decide to replace toxic thoughts with positive ones.

That simplicity represents curiously an insurmountable effort for most people, including you.

Are simple people just born with different senses or some ‘spiritual,’ special sets of genes?

That would mean they possess a special brain, immune to pain and able to generate satisfaction at will.

Elemental philosophers are not part of that breed. Not being born endowed with such a brain, they deliberately train theirs to acquire a limpid simplicity, They do it because they have noticed how water and air, as transparent and fluid as they may be, can erode the hardest rocks and eat away all the unsatisfactory thoughts poisoning their reality.

Elemental philosophers use Repetition as the spiritual branding iron you and others are so desperately looking for.”

48

The Accidental Epicurean

The Extraordinary Garden’s version of *Epicurus* was so satisfied with his image of a transparent and fluid mind, able, by sheer repetition, to erode all inadequate thoughts, that he jumped up from joy.

He landed awkwardly. “My knees! My back!”

He limped away, whimpering: “Ouch! Ego One, remember that excellent notion I just have given you! Ouch! You are so lucky to have inspired me...”

For once, instead of feeling frustrated and lonely again after Epicurus’s awkward departure, I eased into a boundless peace.

I suddenly thought of the damning notion pronounced by Meister, much earlier in my residency in the Garden.

Having determined that my goal should be to transmit some “ultimate reality” to a potential reader, Meister stated I would not be able to experience that *ultimate reality*.

Transmitting and *experiencing* were supposed to be essentially incompatible.

However, for the second time during my “training period” with Epicurus, instead of tensing up, which is my most common way of reacting, I had quite effortlessly relaxed.

I did it on my own volition, without being diced up by a katana, or hugged by Super Beet.

Meister did warn me: “You will have ample opportunities to verify if what I am saying is correct or not.”

It dawned on me that Meister did not allow me to think I could experience transparency in the Extraordinary Garden. He had to keep secret the possibility that “a bard could become a hero.”

The “old generosity paradox” came to me to illustrate the reason for his secrecy:

A king said: “I will leave my throne to my most generous subject.”

As all the pretenders had that reward in mind, none of them was deemed to be truly generous.

If Meister had dangled in front of me the promise that I could find a discreet but welcome peace of mind almost at will, I would have looked for it.

Thriving to find something and allowing a subtle process to develop are somewhat opposite.

By omitting to mention a potential benefit awaiting me, Meister spared me a useless and lengthy spiritual detour.

Where was Epicurus? I wanted to run by him the previous reflection, as well as these two corollaries:

- 1) Promising the nirvana is in a way cursing the searchers to solve that ancient riddle: “*If I want to find the nirvana, I must be egoless. But isn't wanting to find the nirvana ego-driven?*”
- 2) Philosophy only vows to find a meaning to the old questions of suffering and joy. However, is it pure coincidence that true philosophers, like Epicurus, feel they are ‘the luckiest persons who have ever lived’? Is there a link between the quest for the ‘philosopher’s Stone,’ and an inherent inner satisfaction?

Flameless Burn

After Epicurus's departure, the Extraordinary Garden's typical pastel colors faded quickly into a silver twilight setting. I figured that none of the picturesque characters of the Garden was going to keep me company anytime soon. Since my mind was still miraculously at peace, that realization was not bitter or frightening.

It was indeed time to draw a few conclusions by myself!

I determined that I was exploring a region between the Garden and my usual life. I found amusing to label that zone *purgatory*; but one devoid of any negative religious connotations. I was just between realms.

Instead of being in a confused state of high alert, the new me felt a renewed, joyful openness to what had always eluded me.

The background became progressively darker.

And before my eyes, something I had not noticed earlier, like a Joshua Tree, a hat stand, maybe a totem pole, changed colors.

This time, there was no blinding light but, once again, I could not make sense of what was before me. Fearing that the bush-like form would vanish. I ventured: "Gautama?"

"Ego One?"

"Thank you for showing up, but I don't think I need any more interventions. I must reflect on my own about the mechanisms I have set in motion, so I can relay that revolutionary information to my future readers. I need to analyze how, by my sole willpower, I can let go of any bothersome reality."

"So, you can!"

The mercurial presence flashed some intense colors and I got scared. My peace of mind evaporated at once.

And I was trapped in anxiety yet again.

The Temptation of Hego-Wan

The Burning Bush had brought me back down quite vigorously from my spiritual high.

The crash resulted in a gigantic bout of doubt that not only assaulted the reality of the Extraordinary Garden, which was somewhat understandable, but also my personal quest.

Much later, I tried to compare that ordeal to the dizzying spell of solitude I endured after Z's departure and before I stumbled upon the dirt-shoveling Epicurus.

Is feeling irremediably alone preferable to doubting everything that one has ever believed in?

In truth, our most recent hardship is always the most unbearable one.

The comparison between the two griefs showed that the punishing Garden's solitude threatened to follow me into my normal life in the future, while doubts attacked everything dear to me in the past and the present. At that point, no future was imaginable.

Mathematically speaking, solitude seemed by far preferable to doubt.

That type of corrosive doubt did not have much in common with the "performative" intellectual process of doubting everything that the Garden's Descartes flashed before me, deliberately deciding to take nothing for granted.

As far as I could remember, I was always convinced that the comprehension of our presence in this puzzling universe was an attainable treasure.

That stubborn belief set me apart, to a certain extent, since I kept ignoring the loud message echoed by my century's Zeitgeist: "Live as a good or a bad citizen, according to your personal taste, but make sure to bask in as much comfort as you can. There is nothing more to pursue!"

I passionately opposed that position. In fact, I never had any doubt that there was an individual quest to be carried out... until a fateful silver twilight, in a place I had called in jest *purgatory*, when a devastating fire burnt to the ground my very own cosmogony, painstakingly built one book, one trial, one intuition at a time, for so many years.

At that point, I could only hear one voice in what was left of my universe: the Zeitgeist's message reigned, finally unopposed: "Make sure to bask in as much comfort as you can. There is nothing more to pursue!"

I wanted to surrender to that pursuit. I had the desperate urge to get back to my usual life and admit that I wasted decades learning about the structures of snowflakes bound to dissolve in the morning.

My only worry was to be, not only a misfit, but a total failure, unable to survive from then on, having lost any inner compass: “How could I find a place and a pace in the rat race I had neglected for so long? How could I possibly be fit to be part of a rush I have never trained for?”

Already, the fabric of the Extraordinary Garden was ripping before my very eyes.

I could see myself, on the other side. In that vision, I appeared so dejected that I froze.

That hesitation allowed the Garden to gift me with a last-minute transformation.

I was already panicked. I became horrified. My skin was no longer of a specific color. Old, wrinkled, covered with age spots, it wrapped loosely around my skeletal arms.

“How old am I?”

I noticed that my articulations were deformed. I assessed: “That must hurt!”

In cue, I started to be in excruciating pain.

Not comprehending the mechanisms of time dilation and compression during human trials and tribulations, I remained for an eternity at that stage, with pain and fear blaring so loudly that I could not think.

Later, I estimated that ten screeching hours had slowly elapsed before I could put together a figment of a calmer thought. I remembered that not so long ago, I was able to ease into a boundless peace, effortlessly relaxing instead of tensing up.

How many more hours did it take me to let go, and find some rest?

Once there, did I faint, or did I just fall asleep, exhausted by that visceral roller-coaster?

51

The Hungry Bear’s Fate

“Welcome back, Ego One!”

The big, round Asian lady who had embodied for me Johannes Kepler and Ruby Payne-Scott, was standing in front of an old-fashioned black chalkboard.

My articulations were still hurting. That time, it was not because of some terminal arthritic pain, but because my usual, adult body was squeezed in a third-grader’s school desk.

“I want all of you to pay attention to these formulas.”

The children, sitting in the classroom with me, were comically trying not to stare at me.

“Come on! The formula in green connects points A and B, even though they are in different worlds.”

The multicolored equations scribbled on the blackboard were an ensemble of stick figures.

The pseudo-Kepler-Payne-Scott drew thick, white lines all over the formulas.

“There, there, and there again. You see how easily they ‘talk’ to each other? Any questions?”

A little girl asked: “Why is Lego Won here with us?”

“Why don’t you answer Delphi yourself, Ego One?”

“Well...”

“Don’t hesitate, Ego One. These are very bright students.”

“I am not sure I know why I am here.”

A classmate behind me said: “Today’s class is about fate. You want to tell us about it?”

I uttered meekly: “Fate exists?”

The schoolteacher, apparently in an excellent mood, cheerfully addressed her students: “Why don’t you all come to the blackboard, and answer Ego One’s question? Does fate exist?”

With screams of joyful excitement, a dozen little boys and girls rushed to the board.

“It is a test!”

“Lego Won wants to quiz us!”

“You see here a bear.”

“She is hungry.”

“Wait! She is running down the hill to smell these flowers.”

“Yeah. She likes sweet smells.”

“She also likes poopy smells.”

(Loud giggles,)

“It is hot. That’s a good thing because she went into the lake, over there, to fish.”

“But the fish saw the bear and said...”

“Nah, we don’t want to be eaten today.”

“So, it is good for her that the sun is shining. Her fur is going to dry in no time.”

“Children, our friend Ego One seems impatient. Could you speed up the explanation?”

Twelve voices yelled: “No!”

“Fate is in all these things.”

“You cannot forget one of them.”

“As soon as they are all talking to each other, these things connect to the bear.”

“So, the bear feels she is hungry.”

“If you miss one of the things around the bear, fate looks weird.”

They all giggle after one of them found the ubiquitous synonym: “It looks pooppy.”

The little girl named Delphi noticed: “Lego Won seems angry. Did we fail the quiz?”

“Yeah! Lego Won does not look happy at all.”

I smiled: “No! Your answers are great. It is just that I was wondering about... Not really about fate, but...”

The pseudo-Kepler-Payne-Scott encouraged me: “Go on, Ego One. These are wonderful students.”

“When you have a booboo...”

“What is a booboo?”

“Ego One is talking about pain.”

“Lego Won came just before recess. I’m hungry.”

“Like our bear?”

(Appreciative giggles,)

“Can we continue the quiz in the lunch hall?”

“Why don’t you go ahead, children? We’ll join you later.”

52

Another Perspective on Perspective

The pseudo-Kepler-Payne-Scott remarked: “Have you noticed, Ego One, that you can understand everybody in the Extraordinary Garden, no matter from what place or what century they are? Can you be certain that the terms they are using are precisely understood by your 21st century brain?”

“Can I be certain of anything?”

“These children are studying “fate.” After recess, you will ask them about “pain.” They may very well tell you a variation of the bear story but developed differently. Tomorrow, they will study “danger,” and they will draw another story, somewhat similar, but with other connecting points.

Let me ask you, Ego One, what do you suppose I am teaching them?”

“I am not certain.”

“I am teaching them perspective. They are using it already, and very well, but they do not understand how. I am giving them the theory behind a skill they find natural.

Later in their scholarship, they will finetune this knowledge, so they can also communicate it or use it at an experimental level.”

“Are you saying in a backhanded way that I don’t have *perspective*?”

“How could it be *backhanded*? Among all the mistakes you have ever made, how many were due to a lack of information or a lack of *perspective*?”

I did not feel appropriate to answer her question. I counterattacked: “You are talking about pain to kids!”

“At their age, you did not know it existed?”

“What about fate?”

Delphi entered the classroom to inquire: “You want us to bring you a snack?”

“Thank you, but we are not hungry. Ego One has a question for you.”

“A quiz only for me?”

“Just for you. Go ahead, Ego One.”

The schoolteacher had not erased on the chalkboard the doodles representing the bear, the hills, the flowers, the sun, etc. I pointed at them: “I didn’t quite get the end of your story.”

“Oh, that?”

The child laughed: “We didn’t finish it!”

She connected several points in big, thick white lines, very much like her teacher did earlier.

“Now, it makes sense!”

The lady insisted: “Tell us why it makes sense.”

The child put her index finger on a brown smudge: “Last week, we have learned to choose where the center of the story is. Avgo, the friend who started that story, put it when the bear is hungry. So, from there, we draw everything that is around her.”

“Everything?”

Delphi cracked up as if her teacher had just pronounced a hysterical joke: “That green line is *everything*, but we don’t have to draw all the things that make *everything*. That would be too much! We would be so tired!”

“And then?”

The little girl paused. She looked at me pensively. She may have assessed I would not understand the nuances of *everything*. She got an idea, and with a little cry of excitement, she erased parts of the thin green line to transform it into a dotted one:

“This big dot is the bear falling in a big hole where there is some wild honey. In this dot here, she does not fall, but gets to the fruits she likes. In that other dot, a hunter shows up. In that one, she can eat him. And here, she runs away from him.”

“You must think of all the things that can happen?”

Delphi replied: “No! Just four or five, so Lego Won can understand they are all in the green line called *everything*.”

I objected: “What if the hunter points his rifle at the bear?”

The child found a piece of chalk she liked and started drawing little circles, commenting:

“He misses and the bear has to run away through these bushes where she sees wild beehives.”

The schoolteacher intervened: “Ego One prefers asking you: ‘What if the hunter does not miss the bear?’”

More shapes appeared:

“She’s wounded. She runs to the river. The plants and the water calm her until she gets strong again.”

“Ego One wants to know: ‘What if the hunter kills her?’”

I yelled: “No, I don’t want to know that!”

Delphi shrugged: “Of course, Lego Won cannot ask that. Our lesson is on fate, not on death.”

An Unexpected Breakthrough

The schoolteacher asked the little Delphi to take her classmates to another room where some fun activities were waiting for them.

Once we were alone, she summarized: “You can see, Ego One, that what we call *fate* is simply the consideration of possible resolutions, in the past as well as in the future.

Our games can have good or bad turns of events. *Fate* automatically elects the next potential solution.”

“Are you teaching them to be some type of Pollyanna?”

The pseudo-Kepler-Payne-Scott did not particularly care for my simile. Her tone of voice lost much of her cheerfulness:

“You have already learned that in the Extraordinary Garden, we do not ignore that shit happens. But we don’t spend too much time arguing how bad the smell is and if we are cursed to be in a universe where it exists.

We look for exit ways. This is *Fate*, truly a byproduct of hope, and paradoxically of resolve. It selects connections between memories and plans.

If you were to ask where it stops, you should come to our lesson on death.”

“Speaking of which, I find outrageous that these children discuss pain and death. Why don’t you let them be kids?”

The woman smiled, apparently in disbelief.

I realized at that very instant that the amount of adrenalin flowing in me was too abundant to be warranted.

As soon as my conformist torpedo “Why don’t you let them be kids?” had exploded, some sobering afterthoughts deflated my indignation.

How could I have forgotten that I was in the Extraordinary Garden, where Burning Bushes, all-knowing AI’s and Super Beets were hanging out, just to converse with me? Wasn’t I even mildly aware that these children, like the patient pseudo-Kepler-Payne-Scott, were in a classroom to try to unsee my eyes?

I had failed to remember any of it, preferring getting on my high horse and repeating loudly incongruous clichés, like “Why don’t you let them be kids?”

The lady, noticing my mood change, sounded alarmed: “Why so much sadness, Ego One?”

“Will I forever be like a Pavlovian dog, reacting to certain words or certain situations? When will I ever behave with any type of *perspective*?”

“I find very encouraging your self-awareness.”

I grumbled that it was pathetic, not encouraging.

But my mentor hugged me. I had forgotten how big and strong she was.

I ended up being happy to breathe again and most grateful to have survived her warm congratulations.

54

Ten Thousand Words or More a Minute

As soon as my dear pseudo-Kepler-Payne-Scott released me from her loving chokehold, the classroom transformed back to the silver twilight I had called *purgatory*:

“It is time for you to leave...”

You remember what Meister said about attachment. Instead of dwelling in sadness, have the respect to ask me the questions that matter.”

“Why are you bringing up the notion of *respect*? What if I want to feel sad about leaving you and the Extraordinary Garden?”

My guide had a bright smile: “Of course, you can. But time here has almost elapsed. Are you sure you want to invest what is left in regrets rather than in useful information about endless joy?”

Don’t forget that you know quite well the topic of *regrets*, and a little less *endless joy*.”

Deaf to her argument, I was going to trumpet I was humane and therefore I had the right to wallow in “noble human feelings.”

My guide had a pained smile, begging me silently to change my mind and choose a discussion about *endless joy*.

I hesitated. She used that instant to speak very fast, even faster than when she pretended to be Kepler:

“When you will be back to your dimension, you will attempt to highlight some events and string them together as *fate*. Make sure you are not picking only the obviously positive and negative ones. Do not forget the essential ones, discreet, invisible to most people. These events weave the fabric of the present. So, back to your usual life, do study carefully that advice, but most of all, practice it. Practice it all the time, as much as you can remember to do so. Because you know too well you are part of the humans who forget. That is why you want the nuggets of wisdom

you have collected here and there to be engraved or branded into your soul. But there is no literal engraving to be done. When the forgotten paths remain invisible to you, do clear out new ones. Your kind is stiff. How could you ever notice that you did not truly forget? When will you realize that everything has moved since your last discovery? If only your mind was limber enough! So, you must restart. But consider a precious silver lining: you never restart from scratch...”

“Could you breathe for a couple of seconds? I can’t follow what you are saying. You didn’t want to waste time, but how can I make sense or just grasp ten thousand words a minute?”

“I do not speak that fast.”

“How much time do we have?”

“The time for a last question.”

“Why was that ‘Pr. Joyce Richard’ in the Extraordinary Garden?”

55

Air Gift

My last question was so inept that I was deemed unfit to leave the Extraordinary Garden yet.

My dear pseudo-Kepler-Payne-Scott seemed impressed: “Previously, your new-found self-awareness made you eligible to get back to your life. How did you guess that a below-than-average last question would buy us the time necessary to finish our recommendations?”

“It comes naturally to me... So, you were saying something about stringing together some things. What were you referring to?”

“Never mind that. Now, I have been instructed to give you some suggestions on how to present your Extraordinary Garden odyssey to your readers.

But before, I have a personal parting gift for you, one that could be difficult to share in your book. It is *endless joy*.”

“Thank you, but I am a little confused. I thought that my book was to provide my readers with the secret of *endless joy*. If I cannot share it in a book, what is the use of writing one?”

“A book is obviously an intellectual communication. That is what we are going to consider in a short while.

Beforehand, I am going to give you a trick for your personal use.”

“What you are giving me is not an intellectual communication?”

“It is a recipe. Thus, it is unfit to be included in a nobler book. You cannot write a vulgar spiritual *how-to* manual, listing tips and advice... why not magical formulas?”

No, you want to lay out the logical reasoning behind all the theories you want your reader to examine.

My gift to you is only a little trick. You would be ill-advised to throw it to your readers, asking them to follow it blindly.”

“Actually, I am not the type to follow blindly anything, either.”

My guide laughed: “You don’t want my humble present?”

“No, no! That’s not what I meant. I am grateful for your gift. Don’t take my comment the wrong way.”

“Of course! In fact, we know that no one can blindly follow any advice involving genuine introspection. By definition, an introspection is a unique creation.

If you don’t like that gift, it will not work, that’s all. There is no danger for you to become suddenly fallow, lethargic, a sheep.”

At least, I had put my new friend in a good mood. She rejoiced loudly after finding a few other synonyms (“apathetic, a dupe, a robot, a zombie, a puppet, hypnotized”).

Eventually, she continued:

“Now, I must admit it would please me to no end if you could try this humble but useful present.”

I assured her I did not know how to thank her for her generous gesture.

“Good. So, here it is...

First, you will have to think of something enjoyable. You don’t need to tell me what it is.”

“Like the time I painted a sunset, and my painting was selected for the district exhibit?”

“Uh, well, yes... I was thinking of something simpler, like getting some fresh water when you are thirsty, or a warm blanket when you are cold. But getting your painting selected can also work.

What counts is for you to feel *now* that satisfaction. Can you feel it *at this very instant*?”

“Yes.”

“Where do you feel it? Is it radiating? Is it tenuous? You can locate it somewhere in your head or in your heart. It does not matter where you feel its warmth. Now, associate it to a breathing pattern of your choice. You can breathe in more deeply; or inhale and hold your breath; or accentuate your exhalation... That last pattern is the one I have personally selected: I just empty my lungs.”

She smiled, sensing she had lost me: “Basically, you should quickly be able to associate the warm feeling with the breathing pattern of your choice. Then, you will not need to summon any specific thought or agreeable memories. Just breathing your secret way will trigger a delicate but real happiness. There is one more peculiarity about that gift: even the special breathing code ends up being unimportant.”

“Thank you. Shall we get to your suggestions to my readers?”

56

The Gift That Keeps on Unforgiving

PKPS (Pseudo-Kepler-Payne-Scott) was observing me without saying anything. Not used to her prolonged silence, I felt quite uncomfortable.

Her almond-shaped eyes became two thin bright lines, as she addressed me, slowing down considerably her speech: “Ego One, let me ask you: how long have you been looking for some type of nirvana, or some everlasting happiness?”

I blushed: “A long time.”

“Aren’t you surprised you have not reached your goal, after all that time?”

I tried self-deprecation: “I am a slow learner.”

“Did it ever occur to you that what you were pursuing does not exist?”

I thought: “She’s tough. I should have shown more enthusiasm for her gift.”

I nodded: “Yes, it occurred to me, especially recently.”

“What is your conclusion, then?”

Usually, I would have smirked: “You tell me yours!”

But that time, not feeling too proud, I only shook my head.

PKPS went back to her normal speech speed: “What you were pursuing does not exist in a linear dimension, Ego One. However, that does not mean it does not exist.”

I replied bitterly: “It exists for all of five seconds.”

“Exactly! That is the problem with linearity. It is easy to fathom, but it has damning limitations. Think of Euclidean geometry compared to the 21st century vision of the universe. The first one is intuitive, but it is restricted; the second one appears counterintuitive, but it explains the world more precisely.

In a linear dimension, if someone devotes years of learning and experimenting, it is logical that the goal, if it exists, should be reached.”

“If it exists!”

“You must know by now that *nirvana*, *everlasting happiness* are not linear. Your consciousness, used to functioning in that linear dimension, can grasp these privileged moments only *now and then*, ‘all of five seconds,’ as you said.

During your “spiritual” experiments, which are truly explorations of your consciousness, you can sense that the *privileged moments* never disappear. But your consciousness somehow always shifts and loses sight of them.

All these years, you were working on your consciousness so it could be more receptive, more open. And that instrument of yours has been greatly sharpened. But its limit is its linearity.

As Joan Kepler, I would have drawn that parallel: you can build the finest terrestrial telescope, it will never grasp what an instrument working in space and not limited to certain wavelengths, can gather.”

“You want me to have or to use another consciousness?”

“Do you see another solution?”

“If during all these years, my consciousness remained desperately linear, there is little hope to transform it now.”

PKPS trumpeted joyfully her conclusion: “Nothing is more malleable than the human consciousness. However, after certain negative experiences, it can remain stiff. That is why some little tricks can be useful.”

“Like your gift?”

“We might as well try it.”

57

Synapse-Rubbing Fireworks

I started by apologizing: “I am not good at following recipes, especially breathing patterns. As a matter of fact, if I ever meditate, I can’t concentrate on my breathing.”

“Fine. You will find something else to open my gift. The association between a mind and a whiff of joy does not have to be a breathing exercise.

We are really talking about rubbing any two flintstones together to get a spark.”

The sentence was so incongruous that I had to laugh.

PKPS explained: “You take a few synapses, you excite them, so they create a flash of joy, you breathe on it... Sorry, I didn’t mean to upset you with that verb. You figuratively just blow on it, so it radiates an aroma of satisfaction around you and...”

PKPS put her hand on my shoulder, which gave me a jolt: “Here is the kicker: when you exude a fragile joy, you magically enjoy it!”

After the initial jolt, I experienced some enthusiastic shoulder-shaking from my physically too strong guide: “Imagine that one day, you save my life.

How can I thank you? I would give you a breathing exercise.

No, I am kidding.

In all modesty, I am an excellent cook. I would create for you the most exquisite meal you have ever savored, with everything you like the most.

Imagine me now cooking for you. The fragrances filling the kitchen, intertwined with the excitement, the joy, and the gratitude inside my heart, are the ingredients of a unique feat *for me*.

So, even though I am apparently creating something for you, my elation seems to rain from the Heavens directly to me.

Like the grateful cook of my comparison, when you open the spiritual gift, when you trigger at will a spark of joy within, when you exude that quiet happiness, you are also the recipient of the feat you are offering.”

The enthusiastic shoulder-shaking has stopped. Having to respond adequately to so much exhilaration was an impossible proposition,

I tried my brightest smile.

PKPS shook her head: “Well, you can always open my gift after you leave the Garden.”

“I still do not understand why I cannot mention your ‘gift’ in my book.”

“Pr. Joyce Richard should do that.”

“What?”

That was pronounced with great, genuine enthusiasm.

Nobel Prize Refusal

I was incensed: why on earth Pr. Joyce Richard would be more qualified than me to present “*The conscious interaction between a mind and a whiff of joy*” in a book?

PKPS used her most appeasing tone of voice, which was for her slowing down her speech and smiling widely: “In your manual about endless satisfaction, how will you explain a ‘linear reality’? Chances are you will oppose it to another dimension. And to what will you compare that second dimension?”

I improvised: “I will suggest spinning one’s consciousness to render it as fuzzy as possible.”

I had launched that idea without much reflection, but my guide considered it seriously: “Well said. However, you are giving your opinion on the mind, and various ‘dimensions’ of consciousness. Why would anyone read you if you cannot claim to be an expert in these fields? Can you show some academic degree or name some famous theorist who supports your analyses?”

In the past, I had thought of that very problem. I had an almost instantaneous answer: “I would write that knowledge is not a plot of land fenced by some random, social elite, but a tool given to all of humanity in search of meaning.”

“That sentence sounds fine. But would it be convincing enough for you to have a voice?”

“I have an argument to present to the reader, a short but concentrated history of misplaced but common scientific hubris, where people rich in academic recognition have violently opposed what became unquestionable progress.

For instance, a tiny century ago, mystics posited that introspection, empathy, meditation, gratitude, compassion, etc. were fundamental human qualities. However, the most eminent scientists in those days responded that these were merely moral or religious notions. If they had any healing virtues, it would be of the placebo and old folk-remedy nature.

Nowadays, eminent neuroscientists, armed with fMRIs and other methods, measure quantitatively the efficacy of introspection, empathy, meditation, gratitude, compassion, etc., for treating (without any side effects) stress, traumas, anxiety, etc.

I have collected many other examples in epigenetic, ecology, physics, etc.”

“Very good. Nevertheless, in my estimation, that ‘short history of common scientific hubris’ would require a minimum of fifty pages. That is hefty, considering that your book is just hopscotching through unusual thought experiments, whimsical interpretations of facts, occurrences, experiences, etc.

Let’s never forget that you only want to incite your readers to sail by themselves on their own philosophical journey. Your aim is not to defend some theoretical system.”

“What is your point?”

“If you were to persist with your wish to forward my gift to your readers, you would weigh considerably down a fleeting truth.”

I sighed: “Tell me what you propose.”

“I repeat that you should not share a simple recipe with your readers unless you are willing to design and present a complex system of correspondence.

My gift implies there is a link between a physical reality (like breathing) and a dimension outside of that reality. How would you explain that link?

You will have to explore exotic apprehensions of the reality, such as the supposed consciousness in a quantic participatory universe.”

“In a what?”

“If you don’t yet know the concept of *participatory universe*, you will have to study it, as it is one of the many possible relationships between a consciousness and the universe.”

“No one would ever write a line with your convoluted, nitpicking way of thinking.”

“You can write whatever you want...”

“But nothing about your ‘recipe.’”

“Exactly. Keep it for your personal use... or give it away and be ready to compose between one hundred and five hundred more pages to prove it is not an arbitrary formula, but a summary of an all-encompassing consciousness-reality theory.”

I gave a “*whatever*”-type of shrug. PKPS waited a while before continuing: “It would be strenuous, but a little easier for Pr. Joyce Richard to present that recipe to your readers, in a beefier, theoretical form.

Used to experiments standardized by statistical significance, equipped with decades of grant proposals and peer evaluation networking, while being covered with prestigious awards, she is definitely better suited than you to give a scientific shine to your ideas.”

My level of irritability had notably increased: “Why are you here, focusing on my future book? You should go and help Joyce write hers.”

“Ego One!”

Did I see some fear in PKPS wide-open eyes? Was she afraid that my ego would somehow explode, disintegrating the whole Extraordinary Garden?

She added softly: “Let’s not get carried away. Let’s keep it simple: do you want to get a Nobel Prize, or do you want to help one single soul?”

“Should I answer truthfully?”

“Let me help you with that, Ego One. You came here in the hope of helping a few suffering souls. Without that goal, do not bother writing anything.”

59

Hapax Climax

PKPS was upbeat when she announced: “This is officially the last stretch run before your return to your usual life.

Contrary to what you may have imagined, my focus is your book and no one else’s.

My first and more important advice is to make sure you address your reader as one singular person, the hero of your story.”

Suddenly less tense, I laughed: “How can a reader be the hero of a book? Suppose that my main character is some transposition of myself. As my reader, would you want to identify to me?”

PKPS smiled: “That is a funny thought, Ego One, albeit a misdirected one.

You don’t want to weave a psychological link between you and your reader. You want to point at a metaphysical *hapax*.

You know that a *hapax* is a word that appears only once in a book.”

“I will make a note of it.”

“Here, the *hapax* should be your encounter with the reader.

That *hapax* is not at the scale of a book, but of the entire history of the universe. Since you are both unique, your encounter has never occurred before and will never be repeated.

What do you two share, besides the same (human) condition?

Multiple mirrors set in a network of *correspondences*.

Will you be able to show to your reader how to play with scales and perspectives?”

“That is the easy part!”

My guide graciously smiled to acknowledge my “ironic wit,” and continued:

“Let me point out a disconcerting fact: in the whole book, your reader may collect one small piece of information that could eventually fit her/his own toolkit.

The information harvested from your book may remain buried there for a long time. It may reappear in a Eureka moment, as the reader yells: ‘That’s it! I was stomped by a certain problem and suddenly, the solution exploded in my brain!’

By then, your reader will most likely have ‘forgotten’ your book.

It is perfectly fair, since that is how you got most of your own information.”

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Pointillistic Theory of Everything

“The merit of your encounter goes entirely to your reader who must feel like the center, the hero of your book.

Mendel of Kotzk said:

The storyteller told what he knew... and I heard what I needed.

As I have mentioned, your reader may notice and grab what she/he needs. As for you, Ego One, in the best case, you will be deemed a decent ‘storyteller.’ Do you like that title?”

PKPS was ready to give me her next piece of advice for my book.

My silence surprised her. She insisted: “Not only your name may very well be forgotten, but you already know your book will hardly help you in your personal quest for permanent joy, since (repeat after me) *One is Buddha only for oneself*,

With no foreseeable reward in sight, will you be willing to write a whole book?”

After another silent moment, my guide laughed: “Are you starting an answer strike?”

I only shrugged.

PKPS laughed a little louder: “Fine. I give in. You can tell me what your demands are, Ego One.”

“You imagine my reader as someone who could test a *participatory universe* theory with a *five-sigma statistical significance*. That is delusional. People like Pr. Joyce Richard will never open my book. They take themselves too seriously.

So, please, forget about imagining any potential reader, and let’s move on.”

PKPS’s pupils dilated exaggeratedly. She looked extremely uncomfortable, like when I wondered if she feared that my ego would somehow detonate, disintegrating the whole Extraordinary Garden.

For the first time, she seemed at a loss for words.

Eventually, she found something safe to say. She did it with a voice eerily hesitant: “The way the children explained *fate* may have been confusing, I must admit.”

“What are you talking about?”

“That could be why you are so frustrated.”

My guide took a deep breath and tried a little more assertively: “The result is clear. I misjudged you, Ego One.

I will just suggest that you give your reader everything you have ever harvested, so that Pr. Joyce Richard as well as an elementary school dropout may find something to put in their personal research toolbox.”

PKPS paused before adding: “What Pr. Joyce Richard and the school dropout may grab could very well be the same thing.”

She had pronounced that last sentence like a comedian who knows her joke is going to fall flat. She had a sorry smile.

Suddenly she appeared shockingly vulnerable. Her speech sounded a little disjointed, creating a striking paradox with that inspiring sentence:

“Armed with contradictions, fight relentlessly linearity.

Try to remember that your reader needs to learn from you a theory of everything much more complex than one just unifying quantum physics and gravity.

A true theory of everything encompasses the physics of particles and the formation of a single thought, death, hope, abstruse mutations, love, insufferable injustice, all parts of the million details that shine from sunrise to sunrise, for each being.

That theory of everything cannot be clearly enunciated yet. So, allude to it, like a painter splashing colors, apparently randomly, with a touch of Rumi, a dash of Kepler, a hue of Eckhart, a line of Lao Tzu, a splatter of Schrödinger, a brushstroke of Spinoza, etc.

Then, your reader, drawing back and leaning slightly to the right and then to the left, squinting a little, may discern a shape.”

Famous Farewell Aria

PKPS stared warily at me: “What is it, Ego One?”

“When I criticized your vision of my potential reader, you answered that the children in your classroom confused me with their explanation of *fate*.”

That was a total non sequitur. Why did you change the subject so desperately?”

In truth, I was totally unsettled. My guide, who had always been at least one step ahead of me, appeared suddenly tentative, perhaps even incomprehensibly apprehensive.

I felt vaguely guilty to have somehow worn her out.

She said: “Speaking about the classroom, we left it some time ago. Did you notice how long we have been strolling along this alley?”

I asked suspiciously: “Are you changing topics again?”

“See for yourself.”

At the end of the alley, I saw myself sitting in front of my computer, in my usual life.

“Is it...”

“Yes. I told you that it is officially our last exchange.

I cannot imagine what kind of trick you could possibly pull to remain in the Garden.

At the end of this conversation, you will most certainly get back to your usual life.

Now, are you sure you want us to talk about *fate* for our last exchange?”

I felt dizzy, but I answered as nonchalantly as I could: “That or something else...”

“Very well.”

PKPS placed herself between me, still in the Garden, and me in my usual life.

Her voice had magically totally recovered her assertiveness:

“I was humoring you when I said the children had not taught you well. They did. You should have examined carefully what they were showing you.”

She pointed at my usual life, just behind her: “You will have plenty of time to reflect on it.

But since you asked me, I teach the children that thoughts change *fate*, as...”

To my total bewilderment, she sang with a deep, raspy voice:

“The itsy-bitsy spider crawled up the season drought.
Down came the rain, so the spider drank out.
Out came the sun, good life without a doubt.
The itsy-bitsy spider saw what’s all that about.”

PKPS stepped to the side, bowing slightly as to let me pass: “The road is clear, Ego One. I am glad you have asked me about fate.”

62

Dark-Flooded Exit

PKPS disappeared. The Extraordinary Garden had shrunk to that last alley leading to my usual life, and to that version of me locally nicknamed *Ego One*.

I stopped and turned around. The darkness was like an insurmountable barrier. The only dim light floating around went from my feet to my past/future existence.

I did not have to walk, did I? I thought I had the luxury of not moving, to better reflect on my situation.

I was not expecting the dark flood that came over me.

A few feet away from a very lonely representation of myself, stranded before a turned-off computer, I had to rediscover, like brand-new, never felt before, the truism “Our most recent hardship is always the most unbearable one.”

The horrible attack of self-doubt that I had foolishly labeled “my Temptation,” set in “purgatory” felt like a mild inconvenience compared to that twister, inconveniently placed at the Extraordinary Garden exit.

63

New Careers Await Experienced Egos

Even though the Extraordinary Garden’s Epicurus had previously demonstrated how futile it is to compare ordeals, that latest “dark flood” of anxiety that befell me deserves a few lines of description because, when it eventually lifted, some horizons or new perspectives appeared.

Was pain the threshold or the silver lining that allowed me to feel them?

Perhaps depicting that singular pain could answer that question?

I must start with the paralyzing agony I felt at first. As usual, it took some time for this burning magma to take the shape of a single thought: it was my dear PKPS, apparently faking a sudden vulnerability to unsettle me totally.

Everything I had experienced in the Garden appeared like a monstrous lie.

That broke the dam, and self-doubt, pure solitude, guilt, shame, formed a vitriolic tidal wave that forced me to move from the dark barrier that used to be the Garden, towards that desperate figure of me in my usual life. However, these few inches continued to stretch before my feet.

Self-doubts annihilated all my past certainties, while fear of solitude cast an inevitable shadow on my future. My last moments in the Extraordinary Garden had erased everything I had recently accumulated.

With no future, present or past, what is left for a human being?

I had never understood what howls inside the lost soul who considers suicide like the buoy at the end of the sea of pain... until I reached that thin space at the border between an extreme night and my usual life,

The entity nicknamed "Ego One" was behind me. I realized that, at least, that Ego existed. It had a thick consistency. Its purpose was obviously and gloriously itself. But "Ego One" had morphed into an ego without purpose, which was light years away from being egoless.

A Purposeless Ego appeared to be like a wounded wild beast.

I could ragefully refuse to advance to my usual life.

If I could not get back, nor move forward, I could soar up with the blind will to crash down with maximum violence and, perhaps, disappear, or even reset?

So, I rose, propelled by pure anger. I went up high enough to accumulate enough momentum for a final collapse.

However, when I looked down, my usual life appeared suddenly filled with exciting possibilities.

The Purposeless Ego could become anything and anyone.

A sociopath? An artist? Why not both at the same time? A healer? A hoarder? Why not both at the same time? A stubborn churchgoer? A soulless lawyer? A pop psychologist? Why not all of them at the same time?

Where would the Purposeless Ego anchor down?

The Extraordinary Garden had that last offering for me: a soul-saving curiosity.

Ego Mitosis

At that stage of the story, I had forgotten I was technically still in the Extraordinary Garden, an ideal, but ambiguous learning place, where direct experiences were favored over purely intellectual communications.

That was probably why I was in that dire predicament, at the very edge of the Garden.

Forcefully deprived of my usual certainties, marinating in a distressing mixture of solitude, self-doubt, and despair, I got to feel what a Purposeless Ego was.

So far, I only knew my normal ego, infamously rebaptized *Ego One* in the Garden, and a few rare “egoless” moments.

As its name indicates, a Purposeless Ego is a pure ego, but deprived of clear narrative. It could be compared to a buzzing, confused consciousnesses that cannot take itself or anything else for essence, center, and horizon. As such, that ego has to find where to anchor itself, so it can strive, usually savagely, since egos are by definition solely self-centered.

So, I got to soar and have a bird’s eye view of all the possibilities offered to a pure and volatile ego. They were countless. Among them, I even saw the reader. It would have certainly been a mind-bending experience if I had chosen to become her/him!

However, the question that saved me, providing me with an existential compass for the rest of this book and hopefully the rest of my life, was not “What is going to anchor me?”

It was: “Where does this thrust demanding to be anchored come from?”

This was the curiosity that rescued me.

In other words, how can a pure ego “*by definition solely self-centered*” create a meta-consciousness with a distinct voice that can interrogate itself? Why on earth would a pure ego worry about its origin?

That self-reflecting *meta-consciousness*, a part of the pure ego that wanted so badly to flourish and dominate, by its mere existence denied the pure ego’s apparent omnipotence.

That paradox may seem at first gratuitous or theoretical to the reader.

But it is essential to remember that I was in a world of hurt. That curiosity contributed to silencing the constant pain attached to the ego’s yearning.

As soon as I conceived that curiosity, it became clear that the opposite of a Purposeless Ego had nothing to do with any form of purpose, and everything to do with the Ego.

The Purposeless Ego had just revealed that silencing *itself* was going to be my relief.

65

Size-Shifting Ego

The Purposeless Ego I had become stopped breathing, figuratively speaking. I became a non-ego. Of course, it was again a transitory state of consciousness, not a permanent form of nirvana.

Nonetheless, as soon as my ego appeared to forget my own interests and my usually fearful reflexes as Ego One, as well as the mechanical, painful hunger to strive at any cost, as a Purposeless Ego, the pressure caused by the tidal wave of anxiety became a light, summery breeze.

Relieved at last, I had the intuition that I could have jumped to this very same non-ego state if I had ridden a feeling of bliss instead of marinating in a dramatic, overwhelming broth of dejection,

I made a mental note to revisit that intuition at some point.

In the meantime, a much calmer *Ego One* was able to consider the small distance between the Extraordinary Garden's fringes and my usual life.

I was no longer forced to move. I could remain motionless, immersed in my reflection.

In that newly found peace of mind, the memory of my last exchange with PKPS about *fate* returned emphatically. I determined that my ubiquitous guide had most certainly purposefully nudged me toward that topic. And if she had staged some out-of-character hesitation, it was, without a doubt, a ploy for me to prioritize making sense of the *fate* quandary.

I wondered if I could reexamine it, that time from the perspective of the "non-ego," or at least the "tenuous ego" I had just reached.

Ego Logorrhea

To examine *fate* from the perspective of a “non-ego,” I had to first get back to that counterintuitive state.

Finding it was far from automatic. I always had the deplorable habit of forgetting every mental blueprint I ever fathomed. Trying to return to a past intuition had always been for me a haphazard proposition.

For instance, not so long ago, I trumpeted I had become “Ego Zero.” That lasted a few meaningful instants, followed by eons of crawling tediously back as *Ego One*, seemingly without remembering any way out of it.

However, that time, in the Extraordinary Garden Fringes, to my amazement, I could go back and forth between different levels of consciousness by mustering the selective “silencing” method I have tried to sketch in previous chapters.

I was going from “transparent ego” to “extremely tenuous ego,” like a child fascinated by the ever-changing sea. Whenever my fear of forgetting how to shift between states of consciousness pricked up, I used the souple but systematic silencing technique.

In truth, I was never sure where I was and how I got there, but wherever I mentally “went” *made sense!*

There is no convenient time to acknowledge that a text is probably unreadable because of an avalanche of hazy terms, such as “*transparent ego*,” “*extremely tenuous ego*,” “*regular ego*,” “*Purposeless Ego*,” “*Ego Zero*,” “*non-ego*,” etc.

Let’s imagine that I could one day define precisely, without any ambiguity, what the *Ego Zero state* is.

Before I could triumphantly present it to the reader, the external circumstances, or maybe my own hormones, are bound to change, as they always do.

At once, that modification renders my text obsolete.

Can’t it be modified, updated?

Sadly, the *Ego Zero* definition could still make some sense on paper but reduced to pure theory; and theory is useless for what must be experienced! That is why I would then very naturally flutter down towards being Good Old Ego One, once again.

For my own sake, I would urgently need to find a state equivalent to the *Ego Zero* consciousness.

Once reached, I may call it “*translucent ego*,” and enjoy it... until the next ineluctable shift.

Other manuals on the topic may insist that the technique they teach can resist any change. Their participants could always remain in a blissful, unwavering state of consciousness.

I would gladly recommend these manuals. However, if by misfortune the reader notices that some incidents have moved even so slightly near or far horizons, these pages may help.

It is by examining these constant changes that I have stumbled upon something undoubtedly known by some ancient traditions, but still difficult to figure out. Given my limited comprehension, and influenced by the Extraordinary Garden ambivalent tutoring, I called it at some point "*Field of Fate.*"

On my way to that observation, I came across a chilling discovery.

I mentioned previously that, wanting to reach a state of *non-ego*, really an instantaneous change of perspective where the regular ego "forgets its own interests and its usually fearful reflexes," I ran across "the mechanical, painful hunger to strive at any cost" that I called "the Purposeless Ego."

Since in consciousness terms "bumping into" or "running across" corresponds to "becoming," the Purposeless Ego I was stopped breathing, still figuratively speaking. That elementary and proven technique requires the Pure Ego to eventually inhale profoundly the universe.

One time, as I was repeating that process, I admired my own spiritual skills. The result was an intense impression of omnipotence.

My power felt then so extreme that the Extraordinary Garden had to intervene thunderously, awaking me from my grandiose stupor.

I understood that the route I had just encountered is how fanatics of all types are bred.

Humanity had and is still having its share of those cancerous egos.

I shivered at the idea I could become one of them so easily.

I decided then that the irrepressible energy one could feel when exploring consciousness would be only shared through awe and frailty.

Field of Fate

Describing how I stumbled upon the notion of “*Field of Fate*” could give a more vibrant coating to an essentially speculative topic.

I started that specific journey with a typical ego, which notoriously demands to be the center of everything. Then, I went through the process mentioned in the previous chapters, when the boisterous ego generates the will to silence itself.

At that stage, I must report that I was not inebriated in some delirious spiritual trance. I could calmly perform a quick inventory of what I was. I had not lost my memories from my usual life or from the Extraordinary Garden.

I could summon many intimate joys or traumas that had happened to me. I grouped all of them in an upstream current.

In the beginning, it was not an easy task, for many memories wanted to rush to my ear, and sing their languid songs.

I eventually found the solution of pretending to listen to all of them at once. They sighed and got lassoed inside the broad stream.

I used the same trick for the great flow of all events that preceded my birth, including big bangs, star collapses, unexpected mutations, ancestors’ migrations, public transportation delays, etc.

That second upstream current should have dwarfed the first one, but from my viewpoint, they were paradoxically of equal size.

Events influenced by my existence formed a downstream current, not very distinct from the first two.

Being at the center of these three currents, my simplistic goal was to *feel* my place in the universe, and perhaps to spot some design of *fate* in that reality.

Unfortunately, I did not sense anything more than some sleepiness, somewhat pleasurable but not that exciting.

I repeated several times that itinerary, always with the same outcome, until I stopped expecting any particular result.

I paid less attention to the three currents around me and focused on my dull surroundings.

The Extraordinary Garden Fringes were composed of a lifeless night forbidding the Garden’s access, and a narrow, poorly lit trail leading to me behind my usual life’s desk. Some dark-greyish fog was enveloping the scene.

I concentrated on that fog. At first, I wondered if an optical illusion was not drawing a vague cluster of darker shades all around me.

Fearing I could lose myself in that blur, I strained my vision to distinguish the three currents constituting my existence. That effort modified dramatically my perspective.

What I had first taken for an almost invisible cluster of dark shades was in fact an infinite stream.

It allowed all the elements inside the currents defining me to communicate with each other.

I called that general, permanent communication “a Field.”

I would not venture to hypothesize on the nature of the dark current/bond.

At that point, a benign incident led me to calling that environment “a Field of Fate.”

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Laughing Matter

None of my guides from the Extraordinary Garden were to be found in its Fringes.

I would have loved to have Pseudo-Kepler-Payne-Scott or Epicurus help me make sense of this peculiar exploration of my consciousness, aimed at figuring out what *fate* could be in our universe.

I guess their absence also had a didactic message: the searcher must have the tools to solve, partially at least, any existential enigma.

In the meantime, I started to feel uncomfortably dispersed in three of the four distinct streams representing the universe as I could imagine it.

One of the currents was supposed to be flowing from my mere existence to the rest of the universe.

What could be that effect? How would *the rest of the universe* know there was any push or pull coming from me?

In other words, does the sun feel the pull of an ant on earth?

That question made me laugh.

Who would have thought that laughing could provoke the Extraordinary Garden Fringes to shed a new light?

Centerless Field

The rather amusing thought of measuring the pull of an ant on the sun triggered a blinding reaction in/from the Extraordinary Garden Fringes, as if I had mistakenly stepped on a Burning Bush.

Everything shifted, so the stream created by my mere existence outshined the whole universe!

That was indeed another laughable idea, until I realized that the physics governing the interaction between an active star and a tiny bug does not prohibit the bug from being.

I used earlier the expression “the teleological density of existing,” just to express something too obvious for words, like this ant *is*.

So, there I *was*.

The shift activated by my laughter stopped my imagination of three streams connected by a fourth one. I was no longer their center. By *being*, could I have been totally them?

My consciousness would not answer. All my senses were so inordinately dilated that they might as well have been some of the whole universe’s receptors.

I existed without clearly *thinking*.

When I could formulate individual thoughts, they could palpably affect their environment, which, in return, modified them automatically.

I decided that these actions-reactions generated within a consciousness going in and out of being *my* consciousness were a “Field of Fate.”

Exit Test

Speculatively speaking, discovering, or rather naming a “Field of Fate” could have been more spectacular.

The only practical conclusion I drew from that exploration was that we affect that “Field.”

However, I must confess that the paltry results I had harvested were delightfully meaningful for me. They provided me with hope and a renewed will to urge my readers to start on their own spiritual odyssey.

To summarize what I understood from that experience, *Fate* is not a curse but a sort of permanent transformation between what is, what could be and what must be.

Since consciousness is the alpha and the omega of the Field, “*what is*” and “*what could be*” are remarkably soothing.

I reported that encountering (or defining) the “Field of Fate” left me in awe and filled with the diffuse gratitude of being.

I had reached that experience in a relatively “egoless” state. It is easy to guess that, if I had grasped it while riding my normal ego, always hamstrung by past anxieties and the pathetic will to control everything, I would undoubtedly have freaked out, finding the whole incident just nightmarish.

To put it in random rhymes, *feeling* awe was *feeding* awe into the “Field of Fate,” and that seemed to be the most natural way to interact with it.

At that point, I thought it would be a brilliant idea to take a series of “measurements.” I could go back to *feeling* that Field, to *feed* it a smile, and then a laughter... I could also project angry, bitter, vengeful thoughts, just to see their effects on the Field.

But that goal was intellectually so stirring that I could not reach the “egoless” state necessary to carry it out. I eventually gave up that promising plan.

PKPS’s classroom came then logically to my mind. I could finally ask all the right questions about perspective, buffering techniques and using fresh colors on old canvases.

At last able to know what I needed, could I go back to that magical classroom?

I had a long look at my usual life ahead of me. I was still not sure I was ready to leave the Garden. Even its inhospitable Fringes had offered me some unexpected discoveries.

That led me to another light bout of doubt. No matter how exotic or vibrant a new mental breakthrough may have appeared to me, after a short while, it was bound to vanish from my relationship with the world.

It suddenly dawned on me that whether I stayed in the Garden, in its Fringes, or if I finally stepped back out to my usual life, I would never *naturally* glide at will between levels of consciousness, or between ego states.

Didn't I have to acknowledge once and for all the fact I will not be the Buddha from the West, but just a bard singing the intermittent satisfaction of being?

I tried to reflect on the few feet separating me from my usual life. I wanted to believe that over there, I would have the opportunity to manage all my questions by laying them out clearly on a page.

A tiny voice behind me called: "Hegowan?"

Zxsdtr, aka Historian Z, aka Z had a smile that I interpreted as sad.

Behind her, the night wall was intact.

"Why! Where are you coming from?"

"Just like you, I am on my way out."

"Are you going to bring me back to the Extraordinary Garden?"

Z opened her hand. She was holding a small, rectangular box: "My work here is done. This is my analysis of the 21st century *Resistance to Ignorance*. Your book figures in it. Its influence is accidental, but not negligible. Many historians have already determined that."

Her smile appeared even more sorry: "Aren't you curious to have a look?"

I stared at the minuscule box: "This is your article?"

"It is my research document on the local items that went into the *Resistance to Ignorance* during the dark times you live in. It does include a summary of your book and a link to it. You will also see in a footnote how your contemporaries received the ideas you and a few others tried to disseminate."

I was about to resign myself: "Of course, show it to me."

But I hesitated: "Do you mean that I would be able to see how readers will receive my book, in the future?"

"Among other things, yes."

I thought of the "Field of Fate," and my rather somber hesitation lifted at once.

I answered, gleefully and genuinely gratefully: "Please, my dear friend Historian Z, do not take as an insult the fact I would rather not know that information. Whatever your report may say about my message, I must testify, and not concern myself with the outcome of that testimony. After all, my reader is certainly better equipped to understand it than I was, when I entered my own quest.

But let me ask you, my friend. Is there anything you can tell me about a concept you have seen in my book, and that I have called "Field of Fate"?"

Z had a little yelp of sheer joy and jumped to hug me: “Hegowan!”

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Are You Sure the Introduction Goes to The End?

Finally in front of my computer, the first task at hand is to write an introduction to my book, clearly enunciating its purpose.

Before my visit to the Extraordinary Garden, I would have stated that my goal has always been to find and keep an *Endless Happiness*, a secular, tatami-free variation of the famous *nirvana*. *Endless Happiness* would fend off or give a radiant meaning to the torment of selling one’s time for every day’s needs, to ridiculous or serious incidents, even to bigotry and all types of social interactions quirks, without forgetting physical turbulences, including imperative sexual drives and some aches.

Idyllically, once reached, a limpid and permanent apprehension of the ultimate reality would transform me, a common human being mired in the banal, puzzling succession of joys and sorrows, into an always peaceful, joyful soul, hopefully able to radiate back out some of this inexhaustible satisfaction.

I am aware that writing this book implies that I have found *it*, where *it* stands for *Endless Happiness*, or a *limpid apprehension of the ultimate reality* or some other heavenly dimensions.

What could be of interest for the judicious reader is that the “*it*” I came across and would like to share is quite different from what I had imagined when I started my quest.

To the question “Are waves of happiness oozing from the new-me, delighting everything and everyone around?” I feel compelled to bring to the witness stand a couple of my closest neighbors.

The first one looks surprised: “You were gone? You went to what Garden? Never heard of it. The funny thing is that I didn’t even notice you had left. Welcome back anyway, I guess.”

The second one has an acidic smirk: “You have found an inexhaustible peace? Really? Then, who was yelling at me last night, just because I was learning flamenco singing and dancing at midnight, in the unit just above you?”

From these testimonies, it is safe to conclude that who I was before being nicknamed Ego One and who I became after graduating from the Extraordinary Garden look awfully similar.

Sadly, there is no external sign of change.

Communication would be so much easier if I could take out of my bag a mini burning bush who would address my neighbor: “If you don’t want me to zap you, you better listen to my good friend Ego One.”

“Ahem. Could you please use ‘Hegowan’?”

One may wonder why on earth I would wave a burning bush at neighbors who have never asked anything about a philosophical and spiritual journey? Besides, I am not sure they would be that impressed: “What else can it do? At least Google, Alexa or Siri can turn on and off the bathroom light. And they are more polite than your weird friend.”

And there is another detail that should be addressed. If I was not able to summon at will a burning bush in the Extraordinary Garden, how could I insert one in this book?

There should be another way to convince a passerby to give me a few reading minutes.

The only thing that comes to my mind is an old-fashioned plea.

“In this paper, I wish to communicate my train of thought and present the facts that led me to this course, in the hope that the point of view elaborated may prove of use to some researchers in their investigations.”

72

Leaving Zazen for the Fairy World

Not only does the previous sentence summarize adequately the main purpose of this book, but it was written by Albert Einstein, which should give a sorely needed cachet to my introduction.

Could the judicious reader’s next question be: “If there are no visible signs of your spiritual accomplishment, what exactly do you wish to share? You have confessed that your spiritual findings turned out to be quite different from what you were originally set to discover. How can you be sure that what you have now is really what you were searching?”

Here is another way of phrasing that pertinent question: *how well does one know what to look for?*

At first, I had an *image* of that goal in my mind.

It was a preconceived notion that ended up sending me to many lengthy detours during my spiritual odyssey.

Among the many examples of these interesting but time-consuming diversions, there was a rather famous technique called “Zazen.”

It is a form of meditation held in great esteem by many popular spiritual advisors.

During my *zazen* period, I would systematically seek a special transcendental state.

Its repetition trained me to evaluate all my experiences, especially the positive ones, by degree of “spiritual intensity.”

When did it dawn on me that such mental process automatically devaluates less intense sensations, which happen to compose most of a human life?

Zazen did show me that existence is naturally flowing with a constant, awe-inspiring variety, much richer than the few peaks (of happiness) and valleys (of despair) we perceive episodically. Of course, when I was not in zazen, the naturally plentiful existence kept flowing at the same heavenly rhythm.

Therefore, it seemed logical to study it... when I was not in *zazen*.

Thankfully, that is when a layer of German romanticism became promptly my meditation mat. The following sentence by Novalis illustrates quite well that school of *perspectives and hues*:

“It is only because of the weakness of our organs that we do not realize we live in a fairy world.”

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Pointillistic Nirvana

From the previous anecdote, a fervent Zazen practitioner may hastily conclude that I was simply not meant to learn Buddhism.

However, learning any cosmogony, and that includes all schools of Buddhism, begins with sketching a mental representation of it.

How does that representation fare when confronted with the vagaries of everyday life?

The patient way, the way of many trials and tribulations, teaches that theories dissolve in daily deeds. They must adjust and sometimes incorporate elements of their “nemeses,” concepts previously dismissed or ignored.

To illustrate that notion, let’s go back to my initial search for an *Endless Happiness*, when I blindly, enthusiastically adopted a couple of postulates:

- A transcendental experience had to be life-changing, which meant the *before* and the *after* had to be like day and night.

- That transformation would somehow be engraved in my psyche until the end of my days.

As exhilarating as these *postulates* may sound, the words “transcendent” and “life-changing” leave in shadows everything else. What a waste!

Experience shows that the hope for our discoveries to be etched once and for all in our brain is awfully restrictive. The retention process must be more subtle, given for instance that any automatism disappears from the consciousness, without leaving the mind.

Another dangerously unidimensional preconceived notion is the hunt for a shattering *Aha* moment.

There cannot be any *Aha* moment without much subterranean work.

If one collects over time a great number of colored dots, little by little that collection provides an ever-changing perspective. When a certain shape prevails, could that be an *Aha* moment?

In any case, what I was looking for in the beginning, with all its glorious postulates, ended up being rigid guidelines to be carefully circumvented.

74

Philosophy, the Horror Story

Why is the nocturnal flamenco-learning neighbor still roaming around these pages?

The annoying character protests: “You never indicated I had to leave.”

Then, with a marked shrug: “Amateur! What are you writing, anyway? I like fantasy. I bet you can’t do anything imaginative or suspenseful. Am I right?”

“I am sorry to say that you are wrong. Nothing is more fantastic than Elemental Philosophy.”

“All right. I should be leaving now. No need to see me out. By the way, I will learn flamenco in a danse studio. We don’t have to see each other at all. Enjoy your... *Emmental philosophy*.”

Am I paranoid to perceive in that last sentence a backhanded criticism of a cheesy philosophy?

The once cumbersome witness seems to be gone for good. What was the meaning of its inopportune return?

I could perhaps repurpose that character to compose some Socratic dialogues. My neighbor would repeatedly frown: “I don’t understand, Tell me more.” I could then present the

philosophical elements brought back from the Extraordinary Garden, like how an *omnipotent* ego could beget a non-ego.

Let's also marvel at the powerful effect produced by the word "philosophy" on my heroic neighbor. It was reminiscent of waving a garlic cross before Count Dracula.

I am quite familiar with the peculiar terror such an innocent term (*philosophy*) triggers in many people.

Once, I had that very same conversation with my own niece, who was still in high school. She asked me if, as a writer, I could create a graphic novel mixing Kungfu action and romance?

I had for her very much the same answer I had for my neighbor. I pronounced with an exaggerated lyricism: "A philosophical exploration of our existence is more breathtaking than any fiction ever written."

My niece did not run away. She calmly stated: "I hate philosophy."

She took the time to define what philosophy was for her: a charade of pompous ghosts from the past, often saddled with obscure German or French names, fighting each other to defend incomprehensible nuances. Their only goal was most certainly to inflict bad grades on innocent high schoolers who just wanted to get to college, to learn real stuff.

It is rather deplorable that our essential tool for finding Endless *Happiness* has such a repulsive reputation.

It is often said that philosophers give a bad name to philosophy.

So, as the involuntary disciple of the Extraordinary Garden's Epicurus, I feel compelled to devote a few lines to give essential philosophy (*Emmental philosophy?*) a better name.

75

Wat, a New Why Unit

When my niece was still in high school, I was not quite ready to get lost in the Extraordinary Garden. However, I already had some tendencies to lose control over usually steady trains of thoughts.

That was how a tall but unbalanced bowtie-wearing behemoth appeared from nowhere.

It could have been one-eyed, but my memory is a little blurry about that detail.

It pronounced in a high-pitched gurgle: “If there is any philosophy, it must be considered through a complete epistemology of science. Rooted in semantics, it cannot shy away from any proposed form of holophrastic indeterminacy and confronts head on the conundrum of mathematical constructs considered as realities.”

My niece asked me if I was scared already.

What truly frightened me was that I could not understand what the disheveled creature was talking about.

“Can it repeat what it has just said, but slowly, so I can doublecheck the meaning of each word?”

“Do you know what that is? I brought it so you could see my pain. That is Philosophy.”

I remember having a surprised little laugh. My niece received a phone call, and that was the end of that topic.

Today, I would exhort her, as well as my neighbor and perhaps even my reader, with a simple, personal example.

I would affirm that *philosophy* is what blooms naturally when we come across a sentence such as ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ It does not matter whether it is Leviticus, Jesus, or a Hermes worshiper (the God, not the manufacturer) who has pronounced it. The thought is arresting.

When I meditate or write, I consider myself among the most enlightened, understanding, even compassionate human beings around. However, loving my nocturnal flamenco-learning neighbor when I am brutally woken up, makes my great, empathetic comprehension of the whole universe shatter and crumble.

The gap existing between the clear sentence from Leviticus, Jesus, Hermes... and truly, actively loving my nocturnal flamenco-learning neighbor is *philosophy*.

And obviously, the primal question *why* is the essence of *philosophy*.

I do not deny the creature brought by my niece also deserves that name. With a little time and concentration, there is no doubt I could have learned a couple of very useful perspectives from it.

It seems that the best way to avoid any confusion when the word *philosophy* is thrown around is to first set apart the basic “elemental philosophy,” a fertile and infinite curiosity, a vital element of the human mind.

What is left is *Regular Philosophy*, or philosophy seen as a profession. Then, *Regular Philosophers* are like any other academic professors. They teach, write papers, are members of prestigious associations, fight to get tenured positions, network to be recognized, etc.,

Elemental philosophers are quite literally all the curious *Homo sapiens*, *Homo sapiens curiosus*,

Without “*Elemental philosophy*,” there is no way to get to *Endless Happiness* (if you are not born a Buddha!)

It is true that “Elemental philosophy” seems too stern a term. Moreover, it is always in danger to be confused with *Regular Philosophy*.

Could it be replaced by a catchy acronym, preferably starting with the question *Why*, like *Why That Fuss?*

Realistically, WTF may be misunderstood by some.

How about “*Why All That?*” Besides, the acronym WAT could be conveniently used as the unit of curiosity. $1 \text{ WAT} = 1 \alpha \times 1 \Omega$, where α measures the *element of surprise*, and Ω the childlike-joy variable.

We could create a new mathematical field!

The previous paragraph shows graphically how mediocre thinkers take pleasure in complicating things.

Thus, it is with great regrets that I must resign myself to forget the WAT idea, and keep the unimaginative expression “Elemental Philosophy,” or EP, to describe an essential tool for acquiring *Endless Happiness*,

76

Hijacked Definition

“It is very unfortunate that philosophy bears a specific name and that philosophers are members of a special circle, while philosophy is not something distinct (from life), and absolutely not a specialty. Philosophy is the very path of the human mind, its very own way of behaving.”

That sentence is the perfect definition of EP, “Elemental Philosophy.”

Truth be told, Novalis, the 18th century German romantic that I have previously quoted, has originally composed ***“It is very unfortunate that poetry bears a specific name and that poets are members of a special circle, while poetry is not something separated, and absolutely not a specialty. Poetry is the very path of the human mind, its very own way of behaving.”***

Would Novalis have agreed that *Elemental Philosophy* and his idea of poetry as an existential way of life are synonyms?

In Historian Z's century, nobody will bat an eye or understand these scruples.

However, since we are still in "the dark days of High Antiquity," could that most exquisite description of EP be seen as "literary hijacking" by some?

77

Bitten, a Rite of Passage

As I am vehemently defending EP, I can distinctly hear my dear guide Pseudo-Kepler-Payne-Scott objecting: "You have some opinions on important matters. But will your voice be heard if you are not famous?"

Since I am still sketching this book's introduction, what better time to present officially the person behind the rather unflattering nickname *Ego One*?

The author's most outstanding credential is to have been thrown into the Extraordinary Garden.

Not every ego gets to be chastised by illustrious characters!

I would like to spend a few lines to stress my other greatest merit, which is my utter commonness. I cannot claim to have a rare ancestry, any divine gift of prophecy, a recognized and influential family, a formidable brain. My material means are so insignificant that Epicurus discreetly slipped me a few coins before leaving the scene.

Like almost everyone, including the reader, I was simply bitten by the *why*.

I believe that it is when I decided to look for a cure that I punched my entrance ticket to the Garden.

Most fellow human beings shake off as fast as they can the sting and get back to their business at hand.

Some of them find the event interesting enough to study it during their leisure time.

Slower than most, perhaps more obsessive, or greedier for peace and joy, or even intent on becoming nothing less than a Buddha, or to be recognized as such, I embarked on my search.

Being slower, greedier, more obsessive are not exceptional qualities. That is why I can loudly claim to be blissfully common.

Once a banal mind starts wondering and wandering, knowledge thankfully becomes a rabbit hole. One concept leads to another, one school of thought to the next.

I learned rapidly that for such quest, it is better to be equipped with an inexhaustible curiosity coupled with a permanent sense of awe... and to never get stuck in the illusion the search would ever end.

However, if I am writing this book, it is because I have supposedly found the *Infinite Happiness* that must be communicated to the reader. So, is the Search “that never ends” over or not?

It will be reported in the next few chapters that when *Infinite Happiness* is found, it cannot be separated from its corollary: it is endlessly transforming.

Can a mind transform at the same speed?

The reader will not be surprised to learn that my mind is not excessively swift. Catching up with the forever changing *Infinite Happiness* is not an instantaneous process for me.

That brings me to yet another splendid credential for writing this book: my *utter commonness* means that nobody is excluded from finding *Infinite Happiness*.

78

Do You Know Who I Am Not?

In this much belated introduction, I boasted to have been “chastised by illustrious characters.”

Linking oneself to great names of the past may work as an implicit endorsement by people who cannot protest, since they are precisely not present.

Am I implying some type of filiation with them? If they were around today, would Diotima, Kepler, Diderot, Proust, Jesus, Buddha, Rumi, Boltzmann (?), Eckhart, etc., enthusiastically vouch for this treaty?

This book laments in painfully minute details why no intellectual communication can ever transmit an experience. No matter how lyrically or precisely I can describe delectation or pain, it will not cause my reader to scream from pleasure or to wring on the floor in agony.

All our prominent guides could only relay data from their own research.

These elements of a remarkable tapestry of knowledge merely contributed to sketching our itineraries.

What they all have in common is us, who hear their fierce chants.

My filiation to them is quite clear. I also sing my little song before disappearing.

Their texts and mine can be useful. In truth, most researchers who pursue the answers to the *why* do not write.

Their “songs,” composed through exemplary lives, cannot be found in human libraries.

However, in the discreet but complex dimension we explore, is anything ever lost?

79

Null or Void

Musashi figures among the illustrious names encountered in the Extraordinary Garden,

Most of his *Book of Five Rings* describes the numerous fighting techniques the consummate samurai must master.

Musashi concluded his treaty with a very short chapter titled “The Scroll of Heaven,” in which he revealed that all the skills he had meticulously enumerated in the four previous scrolls and recommended to practice tirelessly, could also be achieved by the correct apprehension of the Void.

A shallow, spiritually greedy reader, like the infamous Ego One, could predictably scheme: “Wait a minute! Are you saying that instead of exhausting myself in daily practices, I can get the same result by simply understanding the Void?”

Good deal! Let’s go after the Void, then!

Luck has it that any beginner in the search of inner peace and joy inevitably stumbles on the notion of “nothingness.”

We could in fact fill a whole library written on bizarre jumps of the consciousness into a “void.”

Here is one sentence, picked randomly from my personal collection of quotes linked, even remotely, to that topic:

“The mind, Manjusri, is empty of a self and of what belongs to a self; such is its nature.”

The fact that the word “void” is not mentioned here is significant. Is *Emptiness* a synonym of *the Void*?

Also, is it equivalent to what we have called *non-ego*?

We can also wonder if the Void has anything to do with the vacuum encountered by physicists.

Is the Void similar to “The Night” sung by St. John of the Cross?

Is it another term for Meister Eckhart’s emptiness, where human and God communicate?

Is Chuang Tzu speaking of Musashi’s Void when he exhorts: “Be empty; that is all.”

We have here a beautiful example of how intellectual labels fail to precisely define an experience.

We can agree that the only way to study these possible synonymities is a direct, personal experiment.

After all, what do we risk? Physicists wishing to explore firsthand the vacuum may be reluctant to be their own guinea pigs; but thankfully, we are not.

What apparatus are we going to design to create a vacuum within?

Why don’t we use our recent technique for silencing the inner voice that has trumpeted its certainties for all our lives?

The silence of the ego does give an impression of “void.”

Using that basic method, the *Void* we can reach does not seem to be in opposition with what is, with *what exists*. But it does appear to be one antinomy of the Ego.

80

Finally, Some Suspense!

If a mind remains in the Void, is it the end of the Ego?

That question cannot be answered within the scope of this book. All the discoveries reported here were made around a ubiquitous, ambiguous Ego, certainly poorly understood, but seemingly built to resist complete annihilation (while we are alive, of course).

That multifaceted occupant of our consciousness may be gone for good for Buddha. But our reader knows too well that in these pages, it is not able to vanish for too long.

However, it can morph. From boisterous, panicked, deaf, unbending, it may become almost transparent, melodic, benevolent...

As I am composing the real theoretical core of this book, which is to illustrate with sensible quotes these transformations of the Ego, there is an insistent ring at the door.

I reluctantly pause my absorbing task, and glance at the time of the disturbance. It is the indecent but witching hour: 3:33 AM.

Also, I cannot help noticing that the ring has the exact three high pitched tones that were signaling the presence of visitors to my parents, when I was in elementary school.

What could be even more spooky is the fact that my current apartment has no doorbell.

I must stop writing because the door is slowly opening by itself.

81

Eighty More Chapters in Sight

The first thing I noticed was her irate stare. I automatically checked to see if she was still wearing her two shoes, or if she was going to use one of them as a projectile: “Pr. Richard!”

After yelling her name, I yelped: “I don’t understand.”

How could someone encountered in the Extraordinary Garden land in my real life?

My unannounced guest diverted her angry glare toward what was behind me: my desk and my laptop. She asked:

“Are you done?”

“What?”

“Look at me!”

The poor Joyce Richard did seem drained. She appeared to be thirty years older than when I saw her in the Garden.

I wondered if I met that lady in another dimension where she was younger and... a Nobel Prize Laureate?

Before my brain started to overheat, I ventured: “What happened?”

She fell on a chair and rubbed vigorously her face with her hands:

“So tired! One moment, I was with Mawlawi. He was going to finally teach me what I wanted to know. The next moment, there was a big thump, as if an elephant fell nearby. Mawlawi went to check what it was. When he came back, he told me that there was a change in the way I was going to be informed.

He said: ‘Ego One came here to write a book on the very topic you want to understand. Many visitors forget what they experience in the Extraordinary Garden once they are back in their normal lives. That is why it will be more beneficial for you to read that book.’”

“You’re kidding!”

“That’s what I wanted to scream! But nobody would ever address Mawlawi in those terms.

So, I left the Garden, and I started looking for you.

Identifying new particles is child’s play compared to finding in our usual life someone met in the Extraordinary Garden.”

“Really?”

I was dying to know if she had really identified some new particles. But at the same time, I was feeling queasy about the “big elephant thump” that interrupted Mawlawi’s lesson. I decided it would be safer to remain silent.

Pr. Joyce Richard eventually pointed again at my computer: “Are you done?”

“You want to know if my book is finished?”

“Obviously!”

I gave nervously an exaggerated amount of unnecessary details on the chapter I was working on.

She looked surprised:

“That sounds like an introduction, not a conclusion.”

“You think so?”

“How many more pages do you still have to write?”

“Well, right that instant, I just thought of something vital that I forgot to mention anywhere in my book: guilt.”

Joyce opened her eyes wide. Was she smitten by the depth of my answer?

I elaborated emphatically: “One of the most pervasive mechanisms for the ego to occupy a disproportionate place in our apprehension of reality is through *regrets*. It is important to examine how detrimental *regrets* and *guilt* could be for a researcher. Basically, instead of learning from our mistakes, we get paralyzed.”

“That sounds like a whole new book.”

“That’s exactly what I’m thinking! Shouldn’t I write two volumes almost at the same time, one theoretical and one technical?”

I could not tell if Pr. Richard had a look of deep admiration or of horror.

I continued: “So far, I have started a guide towards a peaceful, joyful life. Since it is a guide, it could be called ‘technical,’ or ‘practical.’ In these first chapters, I have listed the elements of philosophy taught in the Extraordinary Garden.

But it seems to me that I should simultaneously expand in another volume the mechanisms used by the Ego, as I see them. Paradoxically, that more theoretical approach could also lead to formidable practical applications. For instance, curing the deviations of an ego may cure naturally most psychological problems...”

At that point, something in Pr. Joyce Richard’s eyes indicated she was, after all, not the least admiring before my project.

She confirmed my intuition by hissing: “You’re out of your freaking mind.”

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Forced Ending

Pr. Joyce Richard, sitting at my desk, was staring at my computer screen.

She scrolled up to the top of the manuscript: “What does the title mean?”

“Well...”

“Hegowan? That is funny. What do the initials EP, your first name, stand for?”

“I wanted to...”

“Never mind. Any time I ask you anything, you spend hours explaining the obvious.”

I jumped from my seat and closed my laptop: “This is my real life. You’re not going to bully me, whoever you think you are.”

Joyce gazed for a few seconds at the closed laptop, and then looked up.

Was I seeing tears in her eyes?

She uttered: “You never found it.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Your reaction says it all. You have not found it.”

“What on earth are you looking for? All this time, haven’t you learned how to change perspective?”

Joyce Richard was not listening. Looking like a very old woman, she sunk into a stupor.

I had to smile at the memory from that time in the Extraordinary Garden, when I felt almost viscerally that she was “my baby.”

That image inspired me to ask softly: “Are the people who have built the Large Hadron Collider the same as the ones who analyze the data from it?”

That question was so unexpected that Pr. Joyce Richard calmed down. She straightened up before answering: “You know they are not.”

“My book contains reports and summaries from the Extraordinary Garden.

There, you told me, in less flowery terms, that I was an inferior analyst.

However, you don’t know how well I could gather rich elements for my book.

If you see me as a poor thinker and practitioner who cannot reach Mawlawi’s stature, why would you depreciate all the data I have collected?

You, as a superior analyst, should have a look at these reports and summaries, shouldn’t you?

Perhaps you can make sense of them, and reach the mastery I could never achieve, according to your own assessment.”

For the first time since she entered my room, Pr. Joyce Richard had a warm smile: “I am sorry. I am just totally exhausted. I can’t think straight. Would you be so kind as to let me read this manuscript?”

“Let me finish it.”

“No, you know very well you are not about to end it. Write your second volume, the ‘technical’ one. You owe me to let me read what you have gathered so far.”

I was going to smirk with contempt “Do you really think I owe you anything?”

But a very vivid flashback, again from the Extraordinary Garden, exploded in my brain.

The troubling thought I had about her and Mawlawi, plus the fact I did not have the time to formally express how to circumvent regrets and guilt, forced me to accept:

“Let me print you a copy of that manuscript. While you examine it, I am going to start the other volume. It will be more important than the one you will be reading, though.”

“I count on it... *Hegowan.*”