

HP

The Physics of Particulars

Tales of Exile

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PART I

EASY GLEANINGS

I) The Taking of the Name

Some people said that Elleya was from another planet.

I was not a great fan of that theory, since I usually prefer science to science fiction.

Speaking of which, someone else ventured a hypothesis even more outrageous: Elleya was from... the future!

All these notions were actually slightly less odd than what my next door neighbor adamantly defended: Elleya was a prophet. Since I had to run into that neighbor quite often, I discovered that he considered that Elleya was at the very least a human being endowed with celestial powers!

So, when it was time for my first meeting with Elleya, I was in a rather judgmental, almost belligerent mood.

Elleya diffused my negative humor with a smile: "What do people think when they look at us?"

Elleya's aspect was not at all what I was expecting. The surprise was such that, against all odds, I remained silent.

Courteously, Elleya continued the conversation: "They come to us with a certain image that we have very little chance to alter or dispel. Fortunately for me, I am not in that position, am I?"

Elleya had a little laugh. Then: "So, since you were kind enough to come for a little visit, let me ask you: what do you like"?

A few people were waiting for me, after my meeting with Elleya.

“You must have prepared a lot of questions, right? With which one did you start?”

Actually, I had not prepared anything. I was just curious to see who Elleya was.

A young woman recalled: “My very first question was really stupid. I asked Elleya directly what his/her true name was.” Elleya thought it was the funniest joke: ‘How about *Cousin?*’”

My next door neighbor would not have missed for the world being present at my first encounter with Elleya. He commented mercilessly: “Yeah, that was a silly question. Elleya would never answer it. Exactly like in the Bible. We cannot pronounce the name of the Lord.”

My friend Ben shook his head: “It is consistent with not having any preconceived notion when we meet someone. Elleya did say explicitly to you: ‘They come to us with a certain image that we have very little chance to alter,’ right?”

Someone behind me voiced: “In some cultures, knowing a person’s name means to own the person...”

Another voice echoed: “Knowing a person’s name means to have conquered that person...”

Ben’s wife, Layla, addressed me: “I saw her many times. Why do people keep on referring to her like some type of hermaphrodite? Wasn’t it obvious to you she is a woman?”

I hesitated: “Not really. The first time I heard this weird nickname, apparently composed with two Spanish pronouns, “el” and “ella,” I must say that I visualized immediately some type of hermaphrodite, with the attributes of both sexes... But in truth, when I finally was in the room with Elleya, it was a little bit as...”

After a few seconds: “I would say it was like when you cannot see if there is a man or a woman in the semi darkness, even though in this case, the room was well lit... Or, to use another comparison, when you are on the phone, and you are afraid to make a mistake by answering an ambiguous voice ‘Sir’ or ‘Ma’am.’”

Anyway, I do believe that calling anybody “Elleya” is kind of silly and even demeaning! Surely this nickname could not have come from him or her!”

Someone named “The Mayor” explained: “The Village was officially created thirty eight years ago, around Elleya. Before that, Elleya lived as a hermit, a few miles from what had been a small ghost town. The first true Villagers already knew him/her under that nickname.”

A teen age girl said: “In our history class, I learned that the writer Paul Abu claimed Elleya wanted originally to be called by the letter “Y,” as a pun on the question ‘why.’”

That hypothesis was not well received by the others.

“That is a childish story!”

“That Paul Abu ended up being a dodgy character.”

Ben concluded: “I read some contradictory theories about who Elleya really is. The main thing is that Elleya not only does not mind that name, but seems to have adopted it.”

Another woman turned toward me: “What else did Elleya tell you?”

I had to admit that we mostly talked about me.

II) Customer Service

At the North end of the village, there was a gift shop selling shirts, aprons, mugs, all decorated with some wise maxims.

Since there were no tourists that day, the shop was empty.

I found interesting a framed poster, beautifully hand-written in blue ink with the following sentence:

*“Do not leave anything
Do not take anything
Well centered within yourself and the world
Enjoy your time on earth.”*

I asked the lady at the counter if it was one of Elleya’s sayings.

She seemed oddly annoyed: “I suppose. Could be”

I learned later that the chubby, middle-aged woman was originally from Korea and that her name was Yoon.

“You are not going to buy it, of course. However, you just have read a very good precept. Were you to truly apply it, you would be as knowledgeable as Elleya. You might as well move back where you came from, and put that instruction to use.”

She seemed to have a certain gift for sarcasm.

I tried: “Why did you come here, Ma’am?”

I was tempted to smirk: “Certainly not to find wealth!”

She answered: “I haven’t spoken with Elleya yet. I’m expecting Elleya to acknowledge me.”

“She has to acknowledge you? Well, for what purpose?”

“Don’t you want to know if Elleya is a fraud? I do.”

“But you are in the Village, selling mementos from Elleya’s philosophy!”

“Do you really believe that my presence here reveals anything of who I am? How do you know if all these sayings are from Elleya’s philosophy? I may be the author of these sentences. Or anybody else, as a matter of fact! Spiritual knowledge cannot be transmitted. Did Elleya give you anything, yesterday? Of course, not! Did I? At least, the sentence you just read gave you something substantial, even though you could have found it in any book of any library of your hometown.”

I was certainly not prepared for such a curious encounter. I remained speechless which, in the *civilized world*, was a rather rare occurrence.

The storekeeper insisted with a cold smile: “Yeah, you might as well go back home, visit the library of your hometown, and pick one or two sentences like that. Then, just put them in practice. It will keep you out of trouble a lifetime or so, if you’re lucky.”

III) Science, Conscience and Consciousness

The Professor, born in Kenya, was obviously a professional speaker, as he broke the ice with a few jokes about the weather and life in the Village.

He glanced rarely at his notes. When he spoke, he would stare at the people in attendance:

“This is usually an introductory lecture for the tourists who come here to visit. However, since their bus could not make it today again because of the inclement weather, I would like to share with those who choose to stay, because it is warm enough inside, a paper that I have started to write last week and that I will eventually send to my *Alma Matter*’s presses. So, be warned: some of the elements I am going to summarize tonight may be considered a little... convoluted.

Most tourists come here in the hope to catch a glimpse of Elleya; or to be cured from some type of ailment. Usually, they are all curious about the secret of his/her longevity, and they would love to acquire magically the power capable to overcome physical and mental complications.

However, for most of us, the reason for our presence here is to *be* Elleya, no less; to think and feel as Elleya thinks and feels. The rest is obviously less relevant.”

A female voice quipped: “Professor, wouldn’t we all like to ‘acquire the power capable to overcome physical and mental complications?’”

The Kenyan Professor had a long and loud laugh: “Yes, Anna. But we, here, know that, as *magical* as the transmission may be, some studying and practicing are still required.”

Another listener casually interrupted the speaker: “The tourists remind me of one image from the Old Testament, and one from the New Testament. Let’s say that you are among the crowds gathered to listen to Jesus; or that you are among the people that Moses is about to free. “Any question,” Jesus or Moses asks? Someone says: “Yes. How do you do your tricks? The

multiplication of the bread, the healing of the blind, the burning bush, the parting of the waters..." As if Jesus or Moses were there to show tricks! That is what the tourists remind me of, with their questions!"

The Kenyan Professor uttered diplomatically: "These are two very original comparisons."

Someone else tried to redirect the lecture on its tracks: "Is your paper about the tourists, Professor?"

"No. In this paper, I am analyzing a personal episode that happened quite a few years ago.

I am afraid my hidden motivation is a cantankerous intellectual score-setting of sorts...

Be that as it may, I was then teaching in Switzerland. My department was, among other projects, involved in an international study of great scope.

It does seem relevant to summarize its nature, here.

Imagine that, studying the brain development, we find it convenient to split it in a "cognitive branch" and "an emotional branch."

My lab was exploring, at a biochemical level, some pathological processes occurring in the development of the "emotional mind," while the "cognitive mind" appeared unscathed. In layman's terms, the person affected can think rather straight, but feels very little.

At that moment, a friend of mine sent me the now famous *Times*' long article on Elleya, as a "physiological and a psychological rarity."

I am not one who is easily swayed by the exaggerations of the media about public figures. But in an exceptionally thoughtful interview, Elleya declared that the human mind has the mysterious ability to feel "*the interstitial consciousness through some mysterious vicariance processes.*"

What a sentence, so wonderfully tortuous! For me, I found it stunning at more than one level, since I happened to also study the vicariance process.

What on earth did this Elleya person mean, when he/she used this rather obscure term?

In the same interview, Elleya was asked about the "virtues" of such a shadowy *interstitial consciousness*, and why anyone should seek it. Elleya had this great, simple answer: "*It unifies, thus appeases.*"

That whole interview, a mixture of abstruse and then clear, plain ideas, had a remarkable effect on me. I was intrigued to the point of including Elleya in my immediate lists of topics to research!

You could say that, incredibly, a relatively mainstream article did change my life!”

Someone in the first row raised his hand: “You said that *vicariance* is a “rather obscure term.” Well, it is for me. What does it mean actually, Professor?”

“It is a term used primarily in biogeography where members of a species are separated because of a geological factor, for instance. After that rift, the members of the species evolve typically differently.

But in my field, we use the term *vicariance* when some type of cerebral incident forces the brain to adapt and compensate for a change or a loss. For example, on some people whose sense of depth is accidentally affected, we studied how other regions of the brain try to compensate for the missing or erroneous information it has to process.

Actually, I have no idea how Elleya came across that concept. But obviously Elleya adopted that term for his/her own study of the consciousness.

But let’s go back to the paper I am writing, which has really little to do with *vicariance*!

I was working at that very time with an eminent professor that we shall call Richard. He was a true master in designing irrefutable control procedures.

Pr. Richard was surprised and almost appalled by my sudden interest in Elleya. I gave him the *Times*’ infamous article to read. He scanned quickly through it, called it predictably “sensationalist,” and commented that a scientific mind should not pay attention to “so-called consciousness experiments.”

Of course, it was easy for him to point out that the word *experiment* used in the realm of pure introspection is a putrid oxymoron, since no obligatory control procedure could ever be designed in that *realm*!

To put it bluntly, a rational mind could never associate the terms *experiment* and *introspection*!

In the beginning, Pr. Richard’s negative reaction to my newfound interest for Elleya did not appear terribly noteworthy. For me, it was a mere difference of tastes. We had in our department one colleague who loved to paint ducks; another one loved to fish at sea, etc. Richard himself had a liking for rare wines and exotic foods. For him, I must have been diddling around with obscure “religiosities.”

However, as time went by, I noted that Pr. Richard had clearly more than a light shrug before my fascination for Elleya. He deeply disliked my genuine curiosity for Elleya's philosophy, assimilating it roughly to voodoo dancing and Ouija toying.

My paper will examine in details the possible reasons of his adverse reaction, somewhat illogically disproportionate.

Quite ironically, the centerpiece of my current paper, its hero really, Pr. Richard, adopted the aggressive stance of a purely "cognitive mind" that would be opposed to anything but its own reality, denying the existence of any "emotional mind."

Of course, Richard was at the time actually dutifully studying the "emotional mind" in a lab. But he was paradoxically acting as if he, himself, had hardly any!

Among the explanations for his attitude, I already mentioned that a researcher always deals with observable facts, deductions that can be experimentally copied and verified at will...

Science as we know it must be external to the researcher.

The exploration of our consciousness exists of course at various degrees since the dawn of humanity. In that domain, the researcher must be his or her own Guinea pig!

That premise is the opposite of "scientific," *sensu stricto*, or *sensu Richardo*, if you know Latin very well!"

The Kenyan Professor enjoyed thoroughly his joke. Then:

"But observing that something escapes our methodical measurements does not imply it does not exist.

It should not mean it is simply a figment of a dream or some type of *ethereal poem!*

Of course, we have currently various ways to observe the brain. All of them are obviously external to the researcher, who "objectively" (literally speaking, from subject to object) studies a certain form of consciousness... manipulated on a few undergraduate students in a lab, or on some people with known cerebral pathologies in a clinic...

But as I started to say, since the dawn of humanity, therefore for thousands of years, and long before the invention of these costly, sophisticated apparatuses measuring magnetic fields and

radio waves on someone else's brain, individuals dived directly inward to explore their own consciousness.

The results of these experiments are documented in the literatures of all our civilizations. But these *results* can hardly be "copied and verified at will."

Therefore, for the scientists like Pr. Richard, these types of "mind-diving" are literally... *pure literature!*

Scientifically speaking, they mean nothing.

However, for a human being in his integrity..."

The Kenyan professor stopped brusquely to let go off his famous, enormous laughter:

"Where am I going with all this vehemence? Don't you have the feeling that you are all wearing the mask of Pr. Richard, and that I am just yelling at you?"

His laugh was infectious.

Someone raised his hand:

"Maybe Pr. Richard was just a closet racist, and his dislike for your tastes was truly about the differences in your respective skin colors and cultural upbringings?"

"No, no. That would be horribly senseless and thoroughly uninteresting. No, I am focusing "my wrath" and my current paper on the likes of Pr. Richard for a more intriguing double irony.

The first one may be more personal for me, and less obvious for you. I have already mentioned that Pr. Richard was paid to devote his time and talent to study the pathologies resulting of a disequilibrium between a purely "cognitive mind" and the "emotional mind," where one is developing normally while the other one has some type of atrophy.

Pr. Richard could study that unbalance while not recognizing it... in himself, in a way!

And that first irony leads to the second one, so much broader that it concerns all of us:

Pr. Richard is half a man."

Another massive laugh tempered somewhat the corrosiveness of the sentence, followed with a light, but pointed: "Aren't we all?"

He explained: "A doctor addresses a patient. For all we know, they are of different species: one assesses, the other one endures... But down the road, the doctor gets sick and becomes a baffled patient..."

Here is another example... The young man makes fun of the old man stumbling down the street. Down the road, he will become the old man.

Same thing for this young lady who finds herself so superior because she's popular...

Half men, you see. Half men, we are all: unable to see further than the portion of reality we perceive!"

Someone in the public started: "So, a complete man..."

"Yes... You said it! A complete human being has to unify, as in '**I am**...'"

After a telling, marked pause: "**I am** this and that... I am both, and maybe also their opposites."

"Professor, are you writing your article with the hope that Pr. Richard would read it, one day, and amend his narrow-minded ways?"

The question, thrown in a teasing tone, was coming from the blond lady in the front row, who had intervened briefly earlier. It triggered again the Kenyan Professor's laughter:

"You know too well it does not work that way, Anna!

But let's all follow a thought experiment about that improbable realization, since we have a little bit of time.

Here is our dear Pr. Richard... He is designing on paper a perfect control experiment. Do you see him doing that?"

A woman, just behind me, asked: "I am not sure... What is a control experiment?"

"You are right. Who cares about that? We can just imagine him concentrated in front of his computer screen. Okay?"

His mind is completely filled. It is 100 per cent immersed in his topic.

By the way, let me shoot down in flame the absurd but fashionable concept of 'multitasking...'"

"Uh, Professor..."

"Yes, yes, thank you Anna. Another time, we'll prove that, even though our awareness scopes subtly a multitude of possibilities, it rolls on one sole track at one time..."

For now, let's have something happening suddenly, so that Pr. Richard's attention is diverted.

Let's make it a curious incident with a happy ending. There is an ear-splitting scream from someone who got very scared. It turns out to be a false alarm. People around are relieved. They share a good, somewhat nervous laugh.

The person who was so terrified finds miraculous that some "catastrophe" has been avoided.

Let's ask all the witnesses around what they thought, starting with... our friend, Pr. Richard.

He is back to his initial preoccupations, and dismisses our question: nothing happened; just a total waste of a handful of precious minutes.

We protest: "No, no, Professor. Your train of thoughts stopped and other parts of your brain took over. You were also relieved. In what extremes did your consciousness bounce?"

What would Pr. Richard answer us?

He would not. He may let off a smirk, unmistakably meaning "What are you talking about, you Ignoramus you? I know what part of the cortex takes over when there is an alarm signal. Do you?"

That does not sit well with you, does it? So, you counterattack, or rather, you insist:

"The person who got so scared eventually saw a wonderful cascade of events. She may have called it too hastily "a small miracle." However, why don't you even feel a whiff of this odd, admirable "symphony of chances?" Does your great concentration on mathematical formulas make you deaf and blind to wonderment?"

Actually, aren't you curious to see where your own consciousness went, Pr. Richard, for a fraction of a second? Where did it slip?"

Now, would Pr. Richard answer you, that time?"

Someone tried:

"Are you referring here to what you often like to call an "an interstitial consciousness," Professor? Do you mean that during that instant that distracted Pr. Richard, his mind went to a place he should study?"

The Kenyan Professor applauded.

"I love it! Let's say we submit to our dear Richard the possibility you have admirably suggested, my friend.

Better! You, my fellow researcher, are going to suggest it directly. Come here. You play your own role, and I play a darker skinned Pr. Richard!"

A tall, bearded man got up and joined the Kenyan Professor on the small stage. The man had a frozen smile on his face, certainly because of some nervousness, but he accepted the game with a good sense of humor.

The Kenyan Professor (with an affected voice): “What do you mean by this ridiculous *interstitial consciousness*?”

The Bearded Man: “Aren’t you curious to know what it could be? What if it is what other cultures call “Bliss,” or “Nirvana”?”

The pseudo-Pr. Richard: “Balderdash! If you want to make any sense, give me a procedure to track your so-called *interstitial consciousness*. Find a good calibration for a *normal consciousness*, and a reliable measurement when it jumps into your *interstitial* (smirk) *level*.”

The Bearded Man: “Well...”

The pseudo-Pr. Richard (colder): “Okay then, you better design a sound procedure, with several groups, including a few control groups. After a few months, or perhaps a couple of years, depending on our funding, you will plot some statistical results. Beware that I will shoot them down by finding a flaw in your procedure or in your control procedures.”

The Bearded Man showed his wit by asking politely: “If this procedure is too difficult, dear Pr. Richard, may I interest you in a meditation, a direct exploration of your own consciousness?”

The pseudo-Pr. Richard (even colder): Okay. Here I am. What am I supposed to see?”

He crossed his arms in defiance. There was little doubt that the pseudo-Pr. Richard was not willing to explore directly and introspectively his own mind.

A male voice, coming from the door behind me, asked: “Are you saying, Professor, that there cannot be any communication between the people like Elleya and those like Pr. Richard?”

A woman added her own question: “Are you saying that all the *orthodox scientists*, symbolized by Pr. Richard, are just “half-men,” or that we are all *half-men*?”

“We are fragmented, there is no doubt. We are all fragmented. Most of us do not know it. In my article, I will be addressing the category of people who are not only as fragmented as the next men, but who should really be, in their quality of scientists, more *conscious* if it.”

The Kenyan Professor found his conclusion very funny, as he laughed for a few seconds before thanking us for our “attentive presence.”

IV) Layla, Here and Here.

Layla was drinking a cup of tea while I was having my coffee, a much diluted beverage, undeserving of that name. Layla called it more ambiguously and maybe more appropriately “java brew.”

Layla was commenting, once again, some of the sentences Elleya gave her personally.

“Elleya told me to be wild in the sense that I did not need to study any texts. She knows it is not my nature. I am not an intellectual. She told me to be a mystic, strong, fierce. What is a mystic? She said it is someone who studies signs.

Every episode of my life should be a religious experience.

Religion is not to be bottled up in churches! It is here and here.”

Of course, Layla showed very deliberately her heart and her head. That theatrical gesture was her signature, so to speak.

She was indeed a passionate lady.

She chanted one of her numerous mottos: “Major existential crisis and minor incidents, as well as all moments of happiness, are nothing but clues!”

I had been living hardly a few months in the village, but I already knew quite well her beliefs, since she was of the talkative and exuberant type, to say the least.

Ben joined us at that moment. Ben and Layla looked, physically, like a wonderfully well matched couple. Ben was tall and quite handsome and Layla was stunningly beautiful. However,

at that stage of their relationship, they hardly seem to agree on anything, which made their daily life together a steep challenge.

For instance, when Layla mentioned that she was not an intellectual, the sentence was to be understood as a barb, a negative allusion to her husband.

The first time Ben introduced me to his wife, she asserted right away that she *despised* intellectuals. As Ben was shaking his head with a fatalistic smile, she shrugged: "I love him, in spite of the fact he pretends to be an intellectual!"

That day, as we were sipping our beverages in their minuscule "patio," Ben had a long look at both of us, and I wondered for a second if he could be... jealous? That would be very incongruous indeed! I shook off the thought and I switched to a light topic. I described my curious encounter with the strange shopkeeper in the souvenir store.

Ben smiled. Layla applauded: "That is a woman I want to know! Let's go there right now!"

Ben claimed he was busy. Besides, he knew the Korean lady and he did not really care to visit her in that shop.

Obviously, his potential absence did not seem to sadden Layla too much. She took joyfully my arm: "Let's go! I want to meet this lady. She may be a soulmate of mine!"

Hastily, I found an excuse to delay the visit.

I left, thinking I should talk to Ben about the uncomfortable feeling I had when he came in and stared at us.

V) Comparing Traumas

The first week of my arrival in the Village, I was summoned at the Mayor's home, since there was no formal City Hall.

The Mayor was an Afro-American gentleman in his seventies. I learned later that the main function of that "mayor" was to distribute various tasks to newcomers.

His "work charts" were not made with a software, but by hand, on large sheets of papers, richly colored, and adorned with his hieroglyphs.

Studying three dozen charts took him a long time. The Mayor did not ask me a single question about my qualifications or my tastes. He hardly looked at me, as he reminisced about his life.

I had to listen to many details of his turbulent youth in Washington DC.

After about forty five minutes, his story reached a turning point. The future "Mayor" of the Village was in his late twenties when he met a young lady: "She was of a different metal. She was a different animal altogether, one I had never seen before. At first, she looked naïve, easy to conquer. Damn! I was the game, she was the hunter, and I did not know it. I didn't stand a chance!"

Maybe because he was concentrated on his search to find me a position, the Mayor had a very monotonous tone, even when he pronounced exclamations like "Damn," or "I didn't stand a chance!"

He was not the smiling type, and even his quips were pronounced like by someone who does an inventory in a supermarket.

The young woman *of a different metal* became the mother of the Mayor's five children. She was a devoted Muslim. Later, the whole family observed rigorously that religion.

The Mayor got slightly more animated when he scribbled something in green: "I found your mission here. You will be in charge to keep that area clean."

He pointed at a circle covering a series of polygons representing blocks of houses.

"Me?"

"That is what we need, right now, more than anything else."

I was not happy at all. Without any transition, I referred to his story, snapping: "So, you just adopted a religion, just to be with a woman?"

For the first time, the Mayor paid some attention to me.

He hesitated, but chose to answer with the same neutral tone:

"I suppose you are right. Initially, I did convert because of a woman... Also, I remember that once, I was kind of close to despair... I did not know it, though. I was just getting in more and more troubles. My wife had me see a visiting imam she admired. He told me in private that "if God said to His prophet Mohammed, *"If it was not for you, I would not have created the skies,* that meant that God said it to all of us, and to you personally."

That sentence hit home, calmed me down, made me a believer. Yes, it did click, as I found I had a place on this planet. I needed that. It was long before I came to the Village..."

After a pause and another look at the "work chart" that showed where I was supposed to serve, he asked with the same even tone: "So you thought you would waltz in here and just teach or write, or perhaps become Elleya's right hand?"

"No, but I was not expecting to be assigned to a chore I don't want."

"What were you doing where you came from?"

"It does not matter. I was kicked out of my country."

"Didn't you hear me? Did you hear what I went through? So much violence and carnage and deaths compared to... an exile?"

I shrugged: "One cannot measure traumas with words. It would be like a kid bragging: 'My trauma is bigger than yours!'"

The Mayor had a little cough... or was it a strange laughter?

"You got a point, here."

He took his green pen, plus a purple one: “So, what would you want to do?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Well, the only thing I can tell you is that there won’t be a boss or a supervisor who’s going to check on you. You are responsible of that task, if you accept it, but we won’t kick you out and exile you somewhere else, if you do nothing.”

VI) Lurking Miseries, As They Are Taught In School

After my work, I often went to the *Shul*. It was a small house devoted to studying through discussions. Adjacent to the house, there was a large shed with books: the Village Library.

The *Shul* was opened at all times. It was really a wide room covered with many used rugs put haphazardly together. The luckiest people in attendance would find a pillow before sitting down on the floor. There was also an old, imposing armchair. The only “rule” of the *Shul* was that whoever sat on it would just assume the role of *discussion moderator*.

That afternoon, when I entered, I was surprised to see a dozen teenagers speaking loudly, laughing. My first reaction was to turn around and exit right away.

But the young girl who was on the moderator chair addressed me: “Please, sit with us. We are debating something and we need your opinion.”

The others thought it was very funny.

Actually, I had not seen many young people in the Village since I came in. My curiosity was stronger than the feeling of inadequacy. So, I introduced myself, and went to sit on a pillow, against the wall.

The moderator said: “This is the poem our teacher gave us for assignment.”

She read: "*Terrorized, they see their world on fire. They live in a universe cluttered with frights. Their land is doomed by Misfortune. In their landscape, one hundred types of miseries are lurking. They feel like preys scattered in the bush...*"

Another young girl added: “We have another excerpt: *Tossed in the tides of life, I don't know when I shall wake up from this dream*”.

“That is a class in gloom and doom?”

I thought my comment was witty and rather funny. However, the atmosphere, which was quite boisterous and joyous before my entrance, turned suddenly very silent.

A boy explained: “The assignment is to find what to do and what to say, before this massive despair”.

That time, I did not express sarcastically my surprise that their instructor – certainly not a science teacher! – would assume that these young people knew anything about this type of anguish.

“Paulo?”

A boy, who looked slightly older, had his hand up. He got up and said with a slight lisp: “I don’t know what caused their sadness, but I would tell them a story.”

“What kind of story?”

“It does not matter. It’s just to distract the person.”

I voiced my agreement: “As time is the great healer, it is reasonable to distract the distraught person’s mind.”

“It should be, at the very least, an optimistic story,” laughed a girl.

Another boy, who appeared to me like a very silly type when I entered, objected: “No, when I’m sad, I like to hear sadder things, like a gloomy music or horrible stuff that happened to others. That consoles me”.

Some giggling followed that opinion.

A group of four people entered the *Shul*. They looked quite astonished to see a young girl on the moderator chair and one sole adult listening to these teenagers.

Paulo continued: “Well, anyway, a story, any story, gives another point of view to the person who marinates inside a sad soup, and that is what counts.”

One of the adults, who just came in, a charismatic blond lady in her forties, asked what kind of “soup” was being discussed.

She heard only a couple of sentences from the moderator before giving this firm opinion: “You must make the sad person talk.”

A boy approved: “That sounds good. The people talk and empty their bag. But what if they don’t want to talk?”

The woman answered: “That’s outside the topic of your homework. You do not have to guess a degree of depression or a cause. You are just assigned to calm down the person.”

The boy insisted: “How can you calm down anybody?”

“By being calm.”

“Like what? Like not panicking? Or not appearing too emotional?”

“It is certainly better if you can make the person talk. Now, you know, since it is the premise of your homework, that the person “marinates inside a sad soup.”

How do you make anybody talk?

You ask questions, and you show sympathy...

The fact the person answers or not is not that important.

Your attitude is!”

The definitive tone of the person impressed the young people. Some even started taking notes.

The boy I had found arbitrarily “silly” objected: “You said that the fact the person answers or not is not important. I don’t agree. It is very important. It is essential that the depressed person *empties her bag.*”

The blond lady replied: “Sure, but if you get an answer, you cannot put too much stock into it. The fact the person did answer is an indication much greater than the content of the story the person is telling you.”

That time, the paradox was greeted with some skepticism by other teens.

The lady explained firmly: “You ask a question. The person may answer or not. If the person does not answer, it is an indication. If the person answers, it is an indication.

But you do not know if the answer is not a lie, a deformation, an exaggeration or a misunderstanding...

When you listen to the person, at this stage, you assess only what kind of help you can provide.

Who are you for the person? Before you can help anybody, you must know how much you can give. And you must be able to give more than who you are.”

An awkward silence followed. Personally, as fascinated as I was with the confident lady’s tone of voice and general demeanor, I was not sure of what her last sentences really meant.

She seemed to bask in that silence, before eventually continuing: “If the distraught person talks, I mentioned that it constitutes an indication, a precious sign, an extended hand, or maybe too light an anchor thrown in despair...

What is pronounced is secondary.

I said that you must give more than who you are.

What the person is going to voice will always reveal you. You will be automatically put on the spot.

Whether the person has an uncontrollable, savage joy, or a bottomless sadness, that attitude puts you in a certain position. It can affect you positively or negatively. You can empathize; you can be annoyed or even worst, be antagonistic or fearful...

That is why you must give your presence and nod: yes, you are here, at the person’s disposal, no matter what is said or not said.

You will have to freeze your tendency to judge. In that way, you must be more than who you define yourself to be.”

Until that point, the lady was not talking to anyone in particular. Suddenly, she locked eyes with the “silly” young man for a few seconds before looking away and continuing for everyone:

“Chances are that many of you are intent on *judging*. That is what you know. That is what makes you comfortable. You may be so full of yourself that you don’t even know it! Then, you’re not going to deflate anytime soon.

So, if anyone is spiritually drowning before you, refrain from giving way to your personal assessment; avoid applying your judgment of the person.

But do follow blindly the recipe I am going to propose. Afterwards, if you have some time, you should try to comprehend its causes and reasons...

So, remember that technique: you should stand next to the person.

There, you want to communicate “Tell me more.”

Whatever the person says or does not say, you want to communicate “Tell me more.”

First you will try to communicate that sentence without voicing it. With your body, your eyes, your appearance, you want to project “Tell me more.”

Then, if everything fails, you may enunciate softly “Tell me more,” without putting in your offer any pressure, any expectation...

So, to summarize, if one day you find yourself in the position of having to calm down a person who is emotionally overwhelmed, you should first calm down your impulse to rush toward the person or to run away from her. You must accept that the desperate person may talk, may lie or may be silent. You must be just there, completely present and open.”

The blond woman was so confident and persuasive, that I am fairly certain that everyone present in the *Shul* had the same thought: “I have a bit of a problem. Would you please help me?”

From one of the persons who came in with her, I learned that this woman’s name was Anna, and that she had been an eminent *therapist* in the *civilized world*.

VII) Rainbow Studies

My second meeting with Elleya started with a long but rather interesting wait in a small room, in the company of two other people and the Secretary.

I always thought that being the Secretary was a fairly good deal. In the Village, he was almost as respected as Elleya.

Actually one of the two other guests was such an expert in the Secretary's biography that I wondered if he had come to see him, rather than Elleya. He inexhaustibly asked lengthy questions starting with "Do you remember the time when..."

Each time, the Secretary answered directly, without apparent false modesty.

Eventually, I did ask the Secretary one question, a rather pointed one, I am afraid: "Are you proud that this gentleman knows so much about your life?"

"Proud?"

My question amused the Secretary: "I guess, I guess..."

The Secretary's Unofficial Biographer addressed me curtly: "The Secretary was not boasting, was he? I personally think his life is extremely informative and deserves to be known. Don't you?"

Before I could answer, the main door opened and the Korean lady who managed the souvenir store came in.

When she recognized me, she yelled in my direction, pointing at the Secretary: "You got to meet this man. That is very good. You will learn something, at long last!"

Ironically, she served me also the Secretary's biography.

According to her version, which the Secretary listened with a smile and an interested look, as if the story was new to him, he used to be a reputable professor, chairman of the Psychology Department of an Ivy League School.

He had met when Elleya was still his/her thirties, in "random circumstances." Their friendship was instantaneous, but still developed though long letters exchanged while their existences were ever so different...

The shopkeeper became a bit more tentative, as she approached the episode where the professor had a serious bout with cancer.

The Secretary's Unofficial Biographer took over, and asserted that the professor got tired of all the various medical treatments he had to endure for two years. He stopped everything and came to the Village.

Since then, he seemed to be in complete remission.

The other lady, who was also waiting to be received by Elleya, and who had not uttered a word until then, congratulated the Secretary.

She already knew that part of the story, usually an illustration of Elleya's supernatural powers.

The woman herself was in her sixties or in her seventies, and did not look very healthy.

She commented with a sad tone of voice: "As for me, I have seen four times Elleya... and nothing."

There was a long silence. I thought of asking what her ailment was.

How could the Secretary, or anyone else as a matter of fact, answer the lady's implicit, poignant question: "Why doesn't the charm work on me?"

The Secretary moved his seat, so he would face all of us, but slightly more the ailing lady: "When I came to visit Elleya, after another trying chemotherapy cycle, I had heard that quite a few people claimed to have been mysteriously cured in Elleya's presence. After all, Elleya was a friend I respected greatly.

At that point, I must confess I was personally desperate, broken. So, rather comically, the pseudo specialist in education, cognitive science, clinical psychology I was supposed to be, joined the flow of people wanting to see Elleya, and just groveled: "Can you do anything for me?"

The Secretary laughed wholeheartedly. I am not sure that could be called “comic relief,” but it was indeed a welcome relief for all the listeners of his story, even the ailing lady who also giggled.

The Secretary continued: “Elleya started by just asking me what my treatments were. Elleya wanted me to be thorough. I had to answer all his/her questions about the posology of each medicine; the effect it was supposed to have and its various side effects. Elleya asked me about the kindness or the curtness of the doctors, the nurses, the receptionists, the reactions of people around me... Elleya wanted to know what I thought during all the tedious hours I had to wait, and also during the days I could hardly function; the nights I could not sleep...

When did I doubt? When did I despair? What did I think of people who were healthy, “carefree”?

After that long, first meeting, I could not see Elleya for a few days. Then, when I eventually could, the series of questions resumed; some were repeated from the previous time, while others were new.

You know, I curiously forgot how many of these question-filled sessions we had, exactly.

Eventually, Elleya said: ‘What I can do, friend, is to make you think about one or two things.’”

The Secretary looked toward the hallway, as if Elleya was finally going to enter the room. But, realizing it was not the case, he lowered his voice, as if he was going to utter something confidential:

“You know how unassuming Elleya is. But he/she has an amazing gift as an analyst, a presence that makes you focus on whatever he/she subtly proposes.

Also, after all this time, I never asked Elleya if all the questions were deliberate. But my guess is that they contributed to shed an actual light on experiences that I deemed altogether horrific and that I jumbled and muddled into a misshapen nightmare.

Basically, if anyone in those days asked me how I was, the answer was simply: “I’m in hell!”

Whenever something as massive as a death sentence befalls on us, no matter if we have ten PhD’s in various fields or no education whatsoever, we find it absurdly unfair: *why me!*

But in the spotlight or the searchlight of Elleya ‘s questions, I was forced by my answers to look at the details of all my experiences. That way, I could, ever so slowly but more and more precisely, distinguish an epic fight of all my cells, my psyche, my friends and apparent foes...

Whether I wanted it or not, I had to acknowledge that I was trying to stand as tall as I could before an unforgiving disease.

Yes, it was a sluggish process to gather enough strength to glance at this “hell.” Then, I looked at it more and more carefully. And I was surprised to notice quite a few episodes of unexpected compassion and awkward beauty that I had buried under the dismay of having suddenly *a life without a future*.

I had to eventually acknowledge that I did not become a humongous amount of wasted life... I was a battlefield filled with heroic episodes...

My existence could seem pathetic to many, but no longer for me!

It became... epic!

The next few “sessions” with Elleya were more theoretical, because that is what I used to do, what made me feel comfortable...

So, Elleya allowed me to emerge ever so slightly from the thick fog of physical and mental pain where I had shriveled, so I could just recuperate my identity, if nothing else.

The same way human beings, in order to live, put aside the knowledge they are mortal, I considered the cancer as something that was, but then again, I **was** also, for the time being.”

I tried: “Is what you have just described the essence of Elleya’s magnetism? Is this how Elleya has cured so many people?”

The Secretary’s Unofficial Biographer obviously did not care for any of my interventions. He ignored that one, and asked the Secretary: “Elleya went with more “theoretical” sessions, you said. Do you mind sharing with us some examples of those? Why were they ‘theoretical’?”

The Secretary did not follow his admirer’s lead right away.

He had a big smile when he turned to me: “I find interesting that, while I have mentioned that I had avoided all these years knowing precisely if Elleya’s questions were deliberate, you, my friend, do not have the same odd scruple.

Perhaps I wanted to keep a powerful illusion of wonderment?

But you ask directly whether Elleya’s magnetism may be summarized by a certain, strong presence, and a series of appropriate questions.

Your interrogation seems justified.

However, its logics are trumped by the irrationality of the situation: there is a death sentence floating between Elleya and his/her listener. To illustrate it, I am going to ask you a practical question: have you ever addressed terminally ill people or people who think they are terminally ill?

Of course, you did. Almost everyone nowadays had that unfortunate experience. Before being one of these patients, I had decades of clinical experience behind me. Believe me; it is difficult to communicate with people in severe physical, mental, spiritual pain.

If *Elleya's magnetism* consists in successfully getting through to them, that is already some rare accomplishment, I would say. And if the sole secret of Elleya's reported healing power would be just a simple restoration of the identity of someone who, for months or years, had become some sort of living dead, that would constitute almost a literal miracle!"

The Secretary turned with a warm smile to the ailing lady. To his silence query, she nodded: "Elleya did ask me a lot of questions, also."

The Secretary laughed: "Yep. That is what Elleya does, right?"

It was time for the Secretary to answer his Unofficial Biographer:

"You are asking me for an example of the more "theoretical" sessions Elleya had with me, after all these beneficial Q&A sessions.

Well, as you know Elleya loves philosophical discussions. In those days, Elleya practiced that "sport" on a daily basis.

Once, at a round table organized by my school, a couple of years before I got sick, we had one of these friendly intellectual and spiritual jousts. I formulated then a very strong opinion about the concept of "Spiritual Awakening." I had denied its objective, timeless existence. My argument was certainly not a new one, but Elleya erroneously, but too kindly, attributed it to me. Elleya uses it nowadays frequently, calling it "The Second Axiom" or "The Secretary Axiom."

You have all heard it or a variation of it: "*Since everything in our brain constantly changes, someone who achieves a hypothetical state of total illumination cannot possibly keep it.*"

So, after all the question-filled sessions, Elleya, reminded me of my own assertion, all these years ago, and proposed: "Do you suppose, my friend, that a "Spiritual Awakening" could be assimilated to some type of "deliverance" from banal, everyday consciousness? Also, do you think that such "Spiritual Awakening" could occur at any moment?"

That day, I was feeling rather heavy about my condition, and these questions seemed very untimely.

However, out of respect for Elleya, I did try to give some type of elaborate answer: “That is exactly my point. Maybe the mind can conceive for a few seconds or even several minutes, possibly more, a perfect equilibrium between what is perceived of the reality, “what is inside,” and the reality, “what is outside.” In this perfect equilibrium, all the questions in the world must appear to have found their unspeakable but suddenly tangible answers... But, as certain as the choreography of synapses discharges depend on one million factors, the mind is bound to lose that state.”

Elleya seemed genuinely enthused by my logics. With his/her modesty you all know so well, Elleya suggested: “Is it possible at all that, instead of finding a state of “Spiritual Awakening,” your mind finds a way to adapt limberly to all the changes that will never stop occurring? In other words, what if the *nirvana*, if we can use that culturally broad term, was not an end-state for the mind, but the way to supplely and rather happily transition from, or melt into, one state to the next? What if, instead of fighting stoically the horde of mundane thoughts, we would ride with them, as they naturally transform, in our mind?”

That was all. Shortly after that meeting with Elleya, I went back to the *civilized world*, to a friend’s country house in the middle of nowhere, with almost no amenities.

My family feared I was acting in a suicidal way. But it was quite the opposite, actually.

The reason I wanted to avoid people, mostly well-meaning but too fearful, was that they could reflect my own anxieties in their eyes, their postures, their attitudes toward me.

I was immensely fortunate to be able to use a secluded place to examine Elleya’s question, which had magically awakened my curiosity.

So, I found appropriate to devote whatever number of hours I had left, to explore it.”

“How long did you stay there?”

The Secretary smiled: “It ended up being a rather long time, in fact. “The unknown number of hours” morphed into a couple of weeks, Then, I started commuting tediously between that house and the city, to receive a new, shorter cycle of treatments.”

I asked: “The question cured you indirectly, then? It gave you the energy to fight the disease?”

The Unofficial Biographer shrugged: “It was not the question! The research undertaken by the Secretary! That was what cured the Secretary!”

I replied: “Then again, it could have been just the new medical treatment?”

The Korean storekeeper jumped in this exchange, asserting she knew “exactly what was going on.”

But all of a sudden, she stopped and turned toward the ailing lady, as if the latter had intervened.

We all automatically looked at the sick woman, who had a little nervous laughter.

The shopkeeper insisted: “Did you say something?”

The lady hesitated. After a few seconds, she uttered: “Actually, I do have a question for you, Secretary.”

At that moment, Elleya opened the communication door.

Each one of us went to give a brief embrace. Then, the Secretary helped him/her sit down among us.

At that point, I noticed that the Korean lady had discreetly left.

Elleya addressed me first: “I saw you not so long ago, didn’t I? What is on your mind, friend?”

I took out a list of seven questions from my pocket. I knew I could only ask one, and I thought I would decide at the last second which one I would pick.

But this is what came out of my mouth: “I am sorry. There was a lady here that I had met once. She told me she wanted to be “acknowledged” by you. However, she left suddenly before she could introduce herself to you. Her reaction really puzzles me...”

My question seemed to put both Elleya and the Secretary in a very good mood.

It was the Secretary who answered me: “You could have asked me that one! Have you heard the sentence ‘*What I am, I don’t know it yet; what I know, I am not it anymore*’”

“No.”

Elleya, laughing, congratulated the Secretary: “That is such a great way to describe Yoon, my friend!”

Then, turning to me, Elleya explained: “Yoon will stay, one day, of course. I call her *the tightrope dancer*. I have the feeling she will always dance on her rope until the day I die!”

The Secretary found that sentence so funny that he had to dry his eyes from too much laughter.

I thought with some regret that my improvised question had been quite a waste!

Since I was allowed to stay and listen to the rest of the meeting, I was hoping that the other two guests had better queries.

The Unofficial Biographer said: “I came actually to see the Secretary. But since you allow me a question, here it is: ‘Do you think he has something to work on?’”

Elleya was genuinely puzzled: “Are you talking about the Secretary?”

“Yes”.

The Secretary asked Elleya the permission to answer. He placed himself in front of his admirer, and posed the following question: “Do you remember my story, where Elleya suggested that, instead of focusing too much on a definite “Spiritual Awakening,” I should consider a way to adapt limberly to all the changes that will never stop occurring?”

“I do remember, of course.”

“Well then, by definition that process has no end. “Working on it,” as you put it, cannot stop, can it?”

Elleya seemed tickled, as she addressed the Secretary: “*Working on it* seems to be a concept a bit misleading.

Anyway, did you vow to answer all the questions of my guests?”

Elleya’s obvious good mood did not stop as she turned to the ailing lady:

“I am glad you came.”

The broken woman started to cry softly: “Nothing works.”

For what seemed to be a very long time, we only heard the discreet sniffing. From my seat, I could not see Elleya’s face.

“How many times did we see each other, my sister?”

“Four times.”

“The first time, I asked some questions.”

“You did. And you told me a story... You... You told me the story of Emil Something.”

“Émile Coué. Yes, this interesting pharmacist who tried to cure some veterans of World War One who were deeply affected with PTS... before people had any notion of any Post Traumatic Syndrome! In those days, his healing method was called *autosuggestion*.”

“During our second and the third encounter, after you asked me many more questions, you explained to me the evolution of Mr. Emil’s method to the most sophisticated treatments for PTS...”

“Not the most sophisticated, though. I am not a doctor. I only glean some information here and there. In my humble experience, though, a person does not only have to face just a serious physiological disease, but also the traumatism of learning about its severity.

Simply put, when someone goes to a doctor who announces some terrible news, the strength of the disease seems to be increased tenfold at least. Why? Because the sick person just got hit with a trauma of the worse type: a death sentence, no less...

You can ask our good brother, the Secretary. He has so many examples to illustrate it!

So, it appears to me that addressing the traumatic stress of learning the news not only soothes the dreadful impact of that announcement on the patient, but curiously has often some positive effect on the disease itself!”

“Well, not for me.”

“And for your fourth visit...”

“You told me about the meaning of miraculous healings in the Bible and in different other traditions. However, you explained to me they were not to be taken literally, but...”

She shook her head, unable to finish her sentence.

“So I did!”

Elleya turned toward the Secretary:

“What do you think? During the four visits of my friend, we talked about all these traumatisms that are assailing us, and some possible happy outcomes, inaccurately labelled *miraculous*.”

The Secretary nodded, and waited patiently for Elleya to continue:

“Yes, everything in us, ideas and fears and regrets... everything bumps and bounces like... If you allow me that image, like a flustered pet rabbit lost in a wild, dark forest.

If the danger may lurk, there are also an abundance of shadows exaggeratedly dark; and boisterous sounds that are... mere snores!

Can we take the time to stop and discern what surrounds us?

I see it is not always possible, is it?”

“It is not always possible,” echoed the Secretary, compliantly.

“Then, how foolish would it be to insist?”

So, it is time to take a shortcut and to talk about our personal powers, wouldn't you say?”

“It is time, certainly!”

“The Jakob Böhme's method?”

“It is exactly what just popped in my head! The Jakob Böhme's method! Would you like me to find it, with your personal comments?”

“It must be in the blue folder. I prefer to find it myself, with my friend's assistance, here. Who knows what else we can discover in that folder?”

Elleya asked the lady to help him/her go back to the office.

As they slowly made their way out, with Elleya holding tightly the lady's arm, we heard that exchange:

“Do you happen to know Jakob Böhme?”

“I know the name. He's a doctor, right?”

“He was a 17th century shoemaker who wrote about some type of spiritual alchemy...”

Once the door was closed, the Secretary told us: “Elleya has never read a whole book by Jakob Böhme. One day, I was in Yoon's store. I bought a beautifully decorated parchment. It was actually so stunning that I hardly paid any attention to the saying she had painted. Yoon has the habit to write and decorate sentences she likes and attribute them to Elleya, in the hope to sell them to the tourists. Usually, the sayings are quite well-know. They can even be a little trite...

But Elleya read carefully the text, painted in dark blue, thick, shiny ink.

It said: "It is not necessary for this man to search any further; for he is himself the essence of all essences. That is why, since at his creation he diverted himself from his original order and thus awoke in himself another source. He thus only needs to reenter his original order and his original source, and be reborn again. He must also extinguish the source of anger that he awoke and stirred in himself and which bred good and evil. So, he must learn how to resist the wrath, walk in softness toward the source of light and love."

Elleya loved that text. Like everything that Elleya finds outstanding, he/she repeated it liberally, most often with a few mild personal variations. Elleya discovered a couple of these variations to be extremely efficient on certain people.”

“How so?”

“Well, the first time they hear it, the listeners usually do not know how that rather unclear quote could possibly concern them. In any case, the words “anger” and “wrath” surely cannot apply to them!

Elleya has a way of insisting timidly, as with regrets, that frequently brings some doubt: could there be some hidden frustration or some anger inside them?”

At that point, I found appropriate to intervene. I did not anticipate my supposition would lead to a rather lively response.

“So, when you say that the sentence is “efficient,” you imply that there are no “magical’ or “electromagnetic” vibes coming from Elleya? Everything stems from the mind “efficiently” swayed, with discreet suggestions?”

The Secretary snapped: “What is it with this persistent desire to bring what has a great multitude of layers, of dimensions... to a flat, prosaic, narrow plan?”

When you see an incredible sunset or a particularly intense double rainbow, do you see magic or a physical phenomenon?

You know very well, my friend, that it is both a magical and a physical phenomenon!

Both visions are absolutely nonexclusive. On the contrary! They complete each other!

A mathematical mind that cannot cry before a most beautiful song and a fearful, superstitious mind that cannot think and analyze, are equally crippled.”

The Secretary smiled, and I could swear he had a little wink, but that type of friendly signal was not really consistent with his vehement reaction.

He continued: “What Elleya calls the *Jakob Böhme’s Method* is a pointed, personal commentary of the text you have heard. It had a few very good results in the past...”

“Why hasn’t Elleya used that “method” during the first meetings with this sick lady?”

“Obviously, the communication between them did not go through so smoothly. Because of the infamous Fourth Axiom, errors are our lot.

We must try, without ever losing hope, but without ever taking for granted that communication will ever flow easily between two people.

Chances are that it will not. But who cares? We will always devote ourselves to awaken concepts that may be dormant within people who are suffering. Sometimes, with one word, one image, the concepts come to life, come to reality... and it is as beautiful as copper turning into gold.”

I smiled: “Jakob Böhme was an alchemist, indeed.”

The Secretary gave me a friendly tap on my arm: “A spiritual alchemist, yes.

The fact that communication is difficult is like knowing we are mortal: this knowledge will never stop us!”

He concluded with a warm smile: “Speaking of being mortal, keep in mind that the best miracle and the very best medicine can only delay and soften, hopefully beautifully, an ineluctable ending...”

VIII) Love Versus The Simple Transmission Of Genes

In our youth, Ben and I were studying in the same college for a couple of years. Our majors were different, but we shared one language class, and were on the baseball team together.

He was a bright young man, a physical presence, and I must say, he was known to be very successful with women.

When, more than twenty years later, I ran into him in the Village, I recognized him at once.

Ben had moved willingly to the Village, some four years before I was exiled there. The move was actually to humor his much younger wife, Layla, whom he had just married, and who wanted to become a disciple of Elleya.

I learned quickly that the term *disciple* was somewhat taboo in the Village. The fact that Layla was so adamant to use it seemed like an odd act of defiance!

Elleya, finding intolerable and deeply misleading the classical pairing “master/disciple,” refused to have any disciple. So, the Villagers “moved to be near Elleya,” but technically, officially, none of them “wanted to be Elleya’s disciple”... except Layla, apparently.

I was remembering these details as I went to see Ben at one of his three jobs, in the “Garage,” a large complex, repairing and “studying” anything mechanical, electrical, technological...

My mind wandered back to our college days. I wondered what my feelings towards him were exactly, and if I was ever envious of his multiple talents. Strangely, the only really negative

memory that came to me was a great but disproportionate resentment stemming from a single episode that happened when we were on the baseball team.

I promised myself to analyze why something apparently benign would stay with me for such a long time.

The image of Ben finishing his work on the brakes of an old truck was an astonishing spectacle for me.

After he graduated from college, I had lost sight of him, but I knew that Ben had been a successful “intellectual,” not an oxymoron if one knows, as Ben did, how to parlay his education, his fantastic memory, his good looks and a gift for networking, into a lucrative job in the mass media.

Seeing him in the Village’s Garage, with his hands dirty, was indeed somewhat shocking, and I could not help wondering what kind of spell did that Lady Layla cast on him?

Piotr, the responsible on duty of the Garage, hardly acknowledged my presence. He asked Ben to stay and help him finish some other repair on the old truck.

I had come especially to talk to Ben about his possible jealousy towards my relationship with Layla. So, I voiced loudly my disappointment. Surely, this Piotr person would let him leave, as it was already rather late. And besides, it was not as if his job security depended on working extra hours!

But Ben did not even try to convince his supervisor: “Sorry, buddy. I must help Piotr, if he says the truck has to be ready for tomorrow. I will take a break, though. You can tell me what is on your mind”.

Piotr was a big, balding bearded man who never smiled and always wore a frown on his forehead. He was, to say the least, the intimidating type.

When Ben and I sat on a bench, in the back of the shop, Piotr came to join us.

“I can buy a few minutes of rest myself,” he grunted.

Ben asked me: “So, what is it? Tell me.”

“It can wait.”

I was not about to talk about Ben’s personal life in front of a stranger.

Ben insisted: “Just tell me what it is about, the general headline.”

“Never mind.”

Piotr dropped the following sentence, with what sounded like sheer contempt: “It is about your wife, Ben.”

How did he know?

Ben read my surprise on my face and laughed: “Yep, Piotr knows about cars and men, among many other things. I would have loved to observe that man in the *civilized world*. He does look like an old-fashioned butcher, but he has an amazing brain!”

Piotr’s did not show any emotions whatsoever before Ben’s rather ambiguous compliment.

Ben asked me: “Is Piotr correct?”

I nodded. Ben voiced my own curiosity: “How did you know, Piotr?”

He answered with what could appear to be... disdain: “I have never seen your visitor, but he is obviously a good friend of yours. Why would he come here, suddenly, while he could have met you at your place? Of course, he did not want to be heard by your wife!”

I shrugged: “Your conclusion is not that logical. What if I wanted to discuss something very personal to me and if I did not want anyone else, like you, sir, or Layla, to be part of that conversation?”

Piotr nodded inconclusively. However Ben laughed: “Scoreboard, my friend!”

Piotr frowned a little more, that time to show his incomprehension: “Scoreboard?”

“It is an expression from our college days. No matter what are the objections or the excuses given by someone who has lost a game, we can always reply: “*Look at the scoreboard: you have lost!*” In this instance, no matter what he says about your logics or absence thereof, you got it right, Piotr! He has to deal with it!”

Ben’s ferocious joy may have found a tortuous link to my vague resentment dating from our baseball years.

That prompted me to forget my scruples and any tact to blurt out: “For the last three times at least, I felt some uneasiness when I was with you and Layla. Would there be in you any... I would not say *jealousy*, but perhaps... *distrust* towards me?”

Ben’s good humor disappeared at once: “What are you talking about?”

His voice was so forced that even Ben knew it had revealed more than a mere surprise.

Piotr summarized: “Yep, jealousy is a bitch, isn’t it?”

Ben, much later, told me that he could not help but marvel at Piotr interactions with people. Piotr knew, and maybe cultivated, his gruff approach. When he gave directly his opinion, the people in his sight would usually hesitate to react too vehemently. Piotr was an imposing presence.

However, an absence of answer did not mean an agreement, and Ben noticed that Piotr would never insist.

Ben had a sad sigh: “I hate it.”

Was he still referring to *jealousy*?

After a few seconds, he added: “I know all the theories. There is no jealousy of others, only a vacuum in the self, etc. I could write a book... or half a library on the topic. Does it help?”

Nope! I am at that point of impotence that I almost long to be like Sophocles who declared to someone asking him if he could still "entertain" a woman in his old age: *I'm glad to have escaped love, as if I had escaped from an abusive and ferocious warden.*

I tried meditating; even running and painting! One look at Layla and all my resolutions melt away. All my fine intellectual constructs crumble. I don’t have a grip on the situation, and I have no idea why. It makes no sense.

Of course, I have always despised vapid, sappy unrequited love stories.

Then again, I am truly lost.”

Piotr sighed, but only because his sitting position seemed uncomfortable. He leaned back, turning toward the truck they were repairing. I thought he was about to get up, grumbling: “Enough small talk. Let’s get back to work!”

But he remained in the same position, his eyes half closed.

Ben continued. He gave the description of a blond woman who used to be an eminent psychoanalyst, before moving to the Village, Anna Soertke: “Do you know her? Well, I even went to see her secretly about that problem. Actually, ironically, Layla thought I had an affair with her. But I did not want to tell her that I was seeing that woman because of my debilitating passion for her!”

I asked: “Was Layla jealous of that other woman?”

“I suppose, but I am not totally sure. According to Layla, I could do anything I wanted...”

Here, I am quoting her words: “You can do anything you want if your heart is genuinely filled with the terror of the profane overawed by the hallowed!”

Ben addressed me: “You recognize her style, right?”

And to Piotr: “You see the type?”

Anyway, I don’t know if she was jealous or not, because she commented that I was incapable to really explore my feelings, and that I could not do much but just debasing love and even sex with another woman!

The result is that, at the end, I had to grovel for us to try to stay together...”

He laughed: “What a mess!”

Piotr dropped the following conclusion: “You are so serious!”

That sentence was quite ironic, coming from someone who never even smiled.

Piotr got up slowly. The pause was over.

“Just tell Layla that you are seeing this Anna-analyst because you are lost. And don’t forget to laugh about it. Why would you be all “intellectual,” all macho about it? Be at least a *ridiculous* intellectual, and you will score some points with her. For some women, showing your weaknesses is sexier than showing off. I don’t know your wife, but I don’t think you guys are talking the same language. Instead of being the man who has all the solutions, show something real: you are pathetic at times because you don’t know how to react in front of her unpredictability.”

During the whole tirade, Piotr did not have a shadow of a smile, even when he stressed the words “Anna-analyst.”

Without any transition, using the same stern tone, he pointed at the truck: “Anyway, do you think you can help me finish the transmission tonight?”

That evening, I decided to wait for Ben.

I was so impressed with his honesty about jealousy and his relationship with Layla, that I got inspired to revisit my own odd resentment towards him, apparently stemming from an episode in the baseball field, some twenty years ago.

As I was reflecting about that incident, my mind jumped to the first time I saw Layla alone. When I arrived in the Village, as I felt quite lost, I used to hang out a lot with Ben and his wife.

One evening, after work, I swung by their place. Ben was not there yet.

Layla, the effusive and talkative type, made me wait for him. She prepared a tea for her, and, since the Village had almost no coffee, some ersatz she concocted herself and proudly called “java brew” for me.

Layla said: “One thing that fascinates me is the passion in the life of the seekers. Of course, since the *Song of Songs*, and the *Sufi poetry*, everyone and their sister think all this is obvious and trite. It is not. It is very far from being obvious. A work of love is hard work.

If you have only one motto, make it this sentence from Farid ud dîn 'Attar's *Elahi Namesh*:

"If the lover lives one day, it is like a candle

That means in the tears and the fire"

But what interests me more than the formulation of a mysterious and powerful currant, is the sexuality of it.”

I did not know what she meant. So, I carefully and silently waited for some clarification. It came quickly with a torrid stare and the same fervent tone of voice she had used to recite Attar's sentence:

"When nothing exists without You, then O God, what is this commotion?

What are those bewitching fairies like?

Nods, winks, flirtation... what is all that?

Where have the garden and the rose come from?

What is the cloud? What is the wind?"

I wondered with a slight panic what to respond to that.

Thankfully, Layla had a little laugh: “It is just a poem I like. You have noticed, my dear friend, that I have used the words: “I like the sexuality of true love.”

Do you remember when you were in love? Were you truly in love with someone specific or did you just give in to the feeling of being in love?"

I hesitated. She continued: “The sap, the blood comes from the feeling, and irradiates the body. That is the *sexuality* of love. Our natural instinct, the one that makes the species go on, is to mate as quickly as possible with the beloved... as if love was so unidimensional!”

She got very close to me: “Who is patient and curious enough to let that sap, that blood become lava in our veins?”

Very few people, wouldn't you say?

In the *civilized world*, we could choose between being part of a conservative couple; or being what they called foolishly “free spirits,” sleeping with whoever we want. These options are two poor variations of one monochromatic mood.

Here, in the Village, we can study extremes. And love is an extreme path.”

I drew slightly back and suggested: “You got married to Ben to explore this feeling. Fortunately, you have in him someone who is very sensitive.”

“You are right! However, our dynamic is not favorable to extreme sentiments.”

“You can change your dynamic.”

“I am married, but I still fall in love constantly. Why? Just to be in love. Being in love is literally a divine current, as in *beyond human*. It is dizzying.

Our first passion is given to us in a form outside of us. But after that first emotion, thriving to cultivate passion becomes our lot, our curse and our blessing.

It is an everyday ascetism.

Now, in my particular dynamic with my husband, Ben does a lot of shrugging and avoiding, while I demand more and more.

I would say for instance: “If we abandon ourselves to love, we are exploring the divine, no less!” And Ben would answer: “No need to look for any divine. Reality is great. Reality suffices.” And we try to convince each other...”

“I am not sure I understand, when you say *I am married, but I still fall in love constantly.*”

“Isn't it obvious? When you are married, there is tenderness, complicity, understanding, trust, and some negative projections coming from every day's grindings. It is love, of course, but it is not *falling in love*, anymore. Falling is scary. It will scar you.

It is not trembling *in the tears and the fire.*”

“Ben can understand that, Layla. I am sure.”

“Of course he can. And he does! Although, he is luckier than me, as he... still *trembles* very naturally!

The insurmountable problem is that he denies it with all his might!”

Eventually, Ben’s long day at the shop was over.

He was surprised to see that I had waited for him.

We had to walk about thirty minutes in the night to go back to his place. He looked very tired, and I decided not to talk about my puzzling and childish feeling, dating from our youth and that had stayed with me for more than twenty years.

Actually, Ben still wanted to talk about Layla: “Piotr’s advice sounded good on the surface, but he doesn’t really know what’s going on. It’s not like I don’t talk openly with Layla. She knows very well my weaknesses. I am not sure she does not take a sadistic pleasure in pushing the envelope.”

We walked in silence for a couple of minutes and, with a morose tone of voice, he added:

“Anyway, if you came to see me at the shop, it is for a specific reason... You wanted to tell me you’re in love with Layla.”

“What? No! I came because I had the feeling you were suspicious there was something ambiguous between Layla and me, and that is a very uncomfortable!”

“Yeah?”

My sincere denial was met with the coldest skepticism.

Ben asked: “What do you think of Layla?”

Ben’s tone of voice was even, but his step got even faster. I struggled to keep up, while looking for an answer that would not be a stock: “She is just nice. A little “original” in her thinking, of course, but that’s all.”

I chose to buy a few seconds: “She is wonderful...”

But before I had the time to insist compellingly: “*But, I would never think of her in an ambiguous way,*” Ben replied: “Of course she is. She said she was in love with you.”

I stopped in my tracks. I could not even let out the obvious squeal: “She did what?”

Ben was already way ahead of me. Instead of running after him, I went back to my place, repeating as a mantra Ben's sentence from earlier: "What a mess!"

IX) Analogies Unlimited

Early in the morning, I went to the building they called the *Church*, which was also open day and night. Contrary to most public places in the Village, it was relatively warm because of the constant care of the two keepers, an odd Colombian couple composed of an older lady and a much younger, effeminate man.

The lady was affable. She only made small talk and always appeared very busy, keeping the place clean and comfortable. Her companion was much more effusive. He trumpeted his love for gossiping, and tried hard to prove it, with the most mundane stories. However, he seemed always in a joyous mood, and contributed to make the Church a very welcoming place.

That morning, only three people were praying or meditating in the Church.

I could not do either, as the Layla/Ben conundrum was cluttering my mind.

I stayed there, trying to reflect; watching absentmindedly the Colombian lady coming in and out, a broom and a duster in her hand.

The strangest thought entered my sleepy mind: maybe everyone in the Village was as wise as Elleya?

I decided to test that rather whimsical theory. When a tall, distinguished, older African man, who was just behind me, got up, I followed him.

Luckily, the rain had abated. I approached the gentleman and asked bluntly for his advice.

He pointed at a dry bench in the covered porch, where we sat. I summarized my situation with Ben and Layla, without giving their names, just in case he would happen to know them.

The gentleman did not appear the least surprised by my request and my story. He asked me to follow him to the adjacent little house where the Colombian keepers lived and, to my horror, told them what my problem was.

My situation was turning from bad to worse, as the self-proclaimed Village gossip champion showed a merry interest for my problem.

I begged him to be discreet, and the young man had a little, perhaps slightly evil laugh: “My lips are sealed.”

The lady said some commonplaces about the frailty of human nature, and her companion told us a horrible, bloody story of jealousy he witnessed when he was in the *civilized world*.

So much for everyone being as wise as Elleya, I thought.

The distinguished gentleman nodded, as if our host’s tale was relevant, and concluded for me: “The lady in your story has all my sympathy. She places her sight at a higher level.”

I was about to leave, but the Colombian lady had an inspiration:

“Jealousy is like someone who wants to say something but cannot.”

She turned to her young partner: “You know, jealousy is really like *La Princesa Mulatta de Cartagena*.”

The young man appeared thoroughly flabbergasted. He obviously did not know what she meant. He explained for us:

“*La Princesa Mulatta de Cartagena* was a famous TV series in our country and in all of Latin America. And guess what? We were behind it.”

The African gentleman smiled: “Is this one of your tall tales?”

“No, it is true. I am not sure why *mi querida* thought about it now, but we should be considered the true creators of the show.”

The lady had a sad smile: “Our names are not even in the credits.”

“There was this guy who was a neighbor of ours. He had written for his company of nonprofessional actors a comedy set in the 18th century, *La Princesa Mulatta de Cartagena*. His great idea was to pitch his play to TV producers, so they would help him transform his comedy into a sitcom. There was a problem, though. He was the only one who laughed at the lines he had written. His jokes were actually so pathetic that *mi querida* had a great idea.”

“The situations he found so funny would actually make us cringe. Even the puns were horrible.”

“The gags were painfully bad; often rather cruel, actually!”

“So we said: ‘Why don’t you make your play as a drama, full of betrayals? Make it a soap opera!’”

“I swear, the author’s name was Hugo. He was an acquaintance of ours, really. So, Hugo kept very much the same lines, changed the order of the episodes, added a few knives and some screaming, and *voilà!* He sold *La Princesa Mulatta de Cartagena* as a drama, and became rich, thanks to us. Did he ever thank us?”

I intervened: “It is a shame this Hugo guy was so ungrateful, but what is the connection between this *Princesa* and the jealousy question?”

The Columbian young man turned to his partner: “That is true, *mi querida*. Why did you think about *La Princesa Mulatta de Cartagena* when we were talking about our friend’s problem with that couple?”

“Well, *mi chulo*, the lines of the sitcom were exactly the same as in the soap opera. The tone was just different. I think that if we transpose the jealousy, we’ll get...”

“A soap opera?”

“No.”

“A sitcom?”

“No, what I am saying is that if we transpose the jealousy, we get the pure passion his female friend needs. He must tell his male friend, the jealous guy, to feel and say exactly the same things, but as a lover, not as a jealous man.”

The distinguished gentleman I initially had arbitrarily addressed applauded. He loved the analogy.

The Columbian man hugged his partner: “You are a genius, *querida!*”

The three of them turned toward me, obviously exuberantly proud to have solved my problem.

I considered thanking them warmly and running away as fast as I could. But, unfortunately, what came out was:

“Wait... You want my friend to feel and say exactly the same things he felt and said when he considered himself a poor, impotent, jealous idiot, but he has to pretend that he is now a passionate lover? How does that work?”

Both men appeared as shocked as if they heard the worse insults. However, the lady did not seem too surprised by my question. She had an appeasing smile: “As Mr. Samuel told you: *your lady*

friend places her sight at a higher level. Your male friend is not at her level, but he knows the text. He just needs to change the tone of his feeling.”

I shrugged: “If you could say to anyone afflicted with any type of compulsive behavior “Just change the tone of your feeling,” you would eliminate any need for psychologists!”

The older lady appeared absolutely unaffected by my sarcastic retort. She answered calmly: “Yes. The solution is so simple, you see? You tell them not to change the text they found, or they think they have created. You just tell them to transpose the tone. Instead of seeing themselves as victims of the other one’s meanness or of the circumstances, they stand tall, as true heroes.”

“It works like a charm,” confirmed her companion.

“I can believe it,” agreed Mr. Samuel.

X) Jealousy Finally Defeated?

I asked several people about the *Fourth Axiom*. I had heard pronounced that phrase in different occasions. It was certainly linked to human errors, but I was not sure why the famous *errare humanum est* would become some “Fourth Axiom” in the Village. Besides, what could be the first three “Axioms”?

I received many identical answers indicating it was indeed a local variation of “To err is human.” But no one knew why it was called the *Fourth Axiom*.

One afternoon, I went to the *Shul*. A dozen people were already gathered. Thankfully, they found interesting the topic of the *Fourth Axiom*. I got that time a few far-fetched interpretations, hardly plausible.

A young man had eventually the idea to go and pose the question to Philomena, the person responsible, among other things, to organize the presentations for the tourists and all the lectures at the Hall.

Philomena was originally from Ghana. Because of her functions, everybody knew her in the Village. Also, I must confess that I had noticed the great beauty and distinction of that young mother of three.

Philomena was an efficient coordinator. Her knowledge of the Village, and its geographical, political, spiritual history was unique.

She was also, with the Mayor, the official archivist of the Village.

Instead of sending her reply to our questions about the *Fourth Axiom* with the youngster who had dashed from the *Shul* to the Commune, Philomena surprised us by coming in person, with her two younger children.

While she was running most of the Village lectures, she seldom spoke in public, except to replace someone on the fly. It was the first time I heard her calm, engaging voice:

“The term *Axioms* was originally coined facetiously by Elleya and used later quite often by the Secretary, to criticize some prejudices carefully, almost religiously cultivated by the *civilized world*.

Very early on, Paul Abu wrote them down as if they were his own analysis, in his infamous bestseller *New Era of Philosophy*. Of course, we all know that Mr. Abu did a lot of harm to the Village. However, he had unwillingly contributed to the Village’s very ephemeral global fame.

It is difficult to imagine it today, but for a couple of years, the Village was a fashionable cultural topic in the *civilized world*. The Village was the theme or the background of articles, books, documentaries and even a couple of novels. A very bad romantic comedy, *The Rainbow Village*, taking place there, was a helpless flop.

The Four Axioms, like any fad, were repeated by a minority for a while; and then, they disappeared. However, in the Village, the *Fourth Axiom* remained in our vernacular. Originally, it was the non-transmissibility of spiritual knowledge. But nowadays, it is used as a pompous, thus facetious way to say “Sorry, my fault!”

For the record, the *Axioms* that the rather despicable Paul Abu has paradoxically helped ink as pseudo spiritual rules were actually just general bullet-point titles for philosophical discussions.

The First Axiom is the *duality paradox*. The Second Axiom is the *ever changing nature of the universe*. The Third Axiom is the *mutual reflection between the universe and the consciousness*. And I have already mentioned that the Forth Axiom is the *non-transmissibility of spiritual knowledge*.

So, to summarize, I should repeat that only the *Fourth Axiom* survived in the Village, and not unscathed, since most people use a strange variation of the original meaning.

Many of you know that one of our most distinguished Villagers uses even today the original meaning of the expression quite liberally. Yes, the Secretary always loves to talk about the *non-transmissibility*, or rather the **direct** *non-transmissibility of any spiritual knowledge*. That is indeed a mouthful, and we can understand that during his lectures, he has adopted the more succinct term *Fourth Axiom*.”

A lady, who had given us a very different interpretation of the *Fourth Axiom*, before Philomena's arrival, seemed annoyed to learn that the expression she thought she knew well came indirectly from Paul Abu, an author she had not read but she claimed to personally despise.

She questioned the validity of Philomena's explanation. Then, apparently still in a foul mood, she segued to condemning vehemently any truth behind the supposed original meaning of the *Fourth Axiom*. That *non-transmissibility of any spiritual knowledge* was absolutely not established, as far as she was concerned. On the contrary! She claimed to be the living proof of a direct spiritual transmission, since she was the recipient of her own master's precious teaching.

A very animated debate ensued.

Philomena did not seem interested in taking part in it. She decided her role was fulfilled, and bid good night to the assembly.

However, her two children had fallen asleep, and she needed some help to carry them back to the Commune.

As I was closer to the door, I naturally offered my services.

I knew from our Colombian chief-gossiper that Philomena had her three children from three different fathers. She lived presently in a sort of big ranch named the *Commune*.

I have mentioned that Philomena was a fascinating young woman. I would even venture that she was a bit of a "star" in the Village!

As a ploy to know her better, I decided on the way back to her place, to run by her the Layla/Ben conundrum.

The *Commune* was located on the other side of the village. After the quiet early evening walk, I felt completely bewildered in the brightly lit common room, with high ceiling echoing all kinds of noises, screams of children, loud adult voices trying to be heard distinctly...

I remained motionless, a frozen smile on my face, a four year old on my lap, while her mother (I supposed it was her mother) tried to have a conversation with me. I could not understand a single word she was saying.

Eventually, Philomena came back. She led me back out. We walked for a quarter of a mile, to the very small house where Philomena's mother lived.

We sat as close to the fireplace as we could, and Philomena repeated my question to our hostess, a most beautiful and young looking woman in her own rights.

Philomena's mother summarized: "So, you want to know how to solve this love triangle, infected by some form of jealousy?"

The mother and the daughter seemed united by an extraordinary tight bond. I found freakish that they appeared so completely in tune that they shared very much the same soft laughter!

"That is your lucky day. We are specialists in the field of jealousy!"

"Yes, we were forced to study it very thoroughly. But first, here is a question for you: is jealousy something transmitted hereditarily, or is it cultural?"

I answered firmly: "It is cultural; there is absolutely no doubt about it".

"I am not a jealous person. My daughter Philomena has not one ounce of jealousy in her".

"That does not prove any heredity!"

"Well, a sociopath is not able to feel any empathy. Nowadays, science explains it as a "brain deficiency." Does this deficiency have any hereditary elements?"

I actually knew quite a bit about the neurological disorders causing the inability to feel any empathy.

I waited for Philomena's mother to draw an unverified parallel between two very different phenomena (jealousy and pathological sociopathy), in order to pounce mercilessly on her contradictions.

She continued, pointing at her daughter: "Imagine this young, very warm and loving woman in a universe where visionless machismo and jealousy are the norm. She could not fathom why people would act absurdly antagonistically towards her.

For instance, if you were living as a couple with her, and that you suddenly had the weird idea to make a move on me, she would encourage you, saying something like: "Mom has not had sex for a bit of time. That would be great!"

The problem is that, rather logically, she would not see any harm in sharing an intimate moment with your best friend or your brother."

"Or your sister," laughed Philomena.

"The point is that she could not even envision you could be hurt, in that case.

After the fact, she would hear you scream: “Why on earth did you sleep with my best friend?” And she would think that you are either a very sick or a very selfish person.”

Philomena protested, still with her little laughter: “No quite, Mother!”

“It sounds lighthearted when I am talking about it tonight. In reality, in the *civilized world*, most of the time, the clashes were unbearable.

That is why I decided to come to the Village with her and my grandchildren.”

“Mom did not do it solely for my sake. She was extremely curious of Elleya.”

Mother and daughter shared another discreet, bonding laughter.

Philomena commented: “So, my mother drew her famous and shocking parallel between a sociopath and my total lack of understanding for people crippled with jealousy!

Well, I don’t know if a sociopath would be able to acquire a sense of empathy in our Village. But for me, here, I did learn how hurt and fear could often be the roots of the foul reactions of others. I got a sense of what jealous people felt, while before, my mother was not exaggerating: I did believe they were just profoundly sick.

In the *civilized world*, I was compassionate enough towards the weak and the needy. I learned here to be compassionate towards fearful people who could easily become unpredictable!

It seems very counterintuitive to feel compassion for people who appear belligerent.

I did learn to be more patient. Of course, jealousy is... let’s say *a nasty attack of acute unawareness...*”

She hesitated after that tortuous formulation. Her mother encouraged her with a discreet smile. She continued:

“So, I guess I had the extremely good fortune to be born, or to have been educated, immune to that weird torment. Nonetheless, I eventually had to recognize that we have to reassure people with that condition, to open them to other perspectives... Treating them with total disrespect was not the best way to show a different point of view.”

I may have kept a dumbfounded look on my face for too long, because Philomena gave me a friendly little tap on my arm:

“You may think you have before you the most harmonious mother-daughter tandem of all times, Exiled. I can assure you it has not been too often the case. But Mother has taught me one thing well. I can do whatever I want, make all the discoveries and the errors I need to make. But when I fall, I am supposed to find why I was so off.

So, in the Village, I learned to look at others slightly differently, which automatically changed also my vision of myself. And I must repeat this idea, maybe banal for you, but it struck me as a pure revelation, an illumination: why should we be compassionate towards the weak and the needy that appear pathetic, and not towards the weak and the needy that are shouting and gesticulating?”

Her mother added: “If you think about it, it is always the same problem: how to offer a view that is not what a majority of people is used to, or take for granted? Philomena found herself very much in the same predicament as Elleya. When someone sectarian, aggressive, ill-informed comes to see him/her, Elleya is not impatient. But you can be certain it is always a challenge to transform that person’s arbitrary aversion into even the slightest element of curiosity, let alone of doubt or sympathy!”

Philomena gave that personal example: “The father of my youngest child came to see me in the Village. He repeated here what he used to tell me in the *civilized world*: “You don’t love me as much as I do. Let me be everything to you. I’ll prove to you I can be everything. Do it for our daughter who needs her father!”

I told him that verse: *The reality of love is that you give everything to your beloved, so what is left to you and of you, is nothing.*

Unfortunately, my man reminded me I had previously used that exact verse to illustrate this vision of a relationship: “If you love someone, you want the happiness of the beloved. That means that you accept that your beloved goes with another person if it makes her feel happy...”

But that time, I had said the sentence not for him but for me. I wanted to love totally, and he was part of my love.

He had some difficulties to understand I was asking him to define what would be the limits he would assess to my love for him...”

At that point, I had disconnected. I had no idea what Philomena meant when she asked her lover to *assess love and its limits!*

Her mother noticed that silent incomprehension right away. She interrupted her daughter to explain: “Philomena said to the young man: ‘I want to love you completely. Just tell me how I should love you; what are the conditions of that love.’”

Philomena imitated comically a male voice: “I want you to love me exclusively.”

Her mother imitated exaggeratedly her daughter’s voice: “You want me to be exclusive to you, sexually? If I only sleep with you, it would mean I love you more?”

Philomena (with the male voice): “Obviously!”

Philomena’s mother (with her daughter’s voice): “But now, if I make love with someone else, you would feel that I do not love you?”

Philomena (with the male voice): “Of Course. You would not love me!”

Philomena’s mother (with her daughter’s voice): “How would you know, objectively, if I went with another man or not, if I display with complete sincerity and passion that I am totally in love with you?”

Philomena (with her normal voice): “It took a few hours, with plenty of hugging and reassuring... until he understood the multiple nuances of loving someone. We went through the repetitive variations on the concept of “decency” (“That is not *decent!*”) and ended with what my intimacy symbolized for him. He had a glimpse of what he was truly covering up.”

Her mother interrupted: “Now, that glimpse is worthless if one does not jump on it, enlarging it as widely as possible. Philomena did not let go. What jealousy was covering up eventually appeared in bright light to her man, as a *revelation, an illumination.*

Anyway, one conversation here had more effect than many months of non-stop arguing in the *civilized world*”.

But Philomena was so amused by the image of “enlarging what he was covering up,” that she repeated it, with her loudest laughter.

Soon, her mother joined her: “How silly can you be?”

I was wondering what was so funny, and what I had missed, when Philomena’s mother addressed me, still laughing: “Sorry, my friend... Do you feel excluded?”

I did not know what to answer. I just shook my head, as a vague denial.

My hostess observed: “That is precisely the problem, you see? The feeling that real life, that all the fun and excitement pass you by. Others have it, not you!”

And in a certain way, jealousy is just that. Philomena’s man was terribly upset because his imagination was presenting him in a loop that another man was having something eluding him”.

“At least, he saw he could not call *love* that feeling of desperate estrangement from *real life.*”

There was a rather long silence. Philomena’s mother focused on her *tea ceremony*, while her daughter seemed lost in her thoughts.

Suddenly, she addressed me, as if she had a new idea:

“My mother called what happened to my man a *revelation, an illumination*. If you remember, she used the same terms to describe the widening of my perspective, in the Village.

You may be interested to know that in his case, it was an intellectual acceptance, not an *illumination*. That meant that the next time he would wonder where I am and start imagining me with someone else, he would hurt almost as much as before our great, “illuminating” conversation.

So, what is his only hope?”

I was not sure if the question was directed to me, or if it was a cue for her mother to give the answer.

After a few seconds, Philomena decided to provide herself that conclusion:

“His only hope is to examine what jealousy was covering up: really, his incapacity to feel life, his own life!”

Philomena’s mother asked me: “Do you know how he can achieve that?”

Philomena scolded: “Mom, I can’t believe you!”

“Sorry.”

And again, the two women found the “joke” irresistible.

Perplexed, I smiled politely.

XI) Should I Stay Or Should I Go, Now?

The people in the Village were frequently known only by some odd nicknames, not by their first and last names. I don't think anyone ever asked me for mine. The Mayor called me "Exiled," and the awkward qualifier remained with me!

For instance, I heard someone calling my next door neighbor *The Religious*, which I thought was not a very fitting label. I would have called him "Literal Mind." One of his friends nicknamed him "Zlatiborean," which was rather difficult to pronounce for me, but it made some sense since he was born in a village in the Zlatibor region. His wife called him "Ducky." I usually greeted him as "Hi, Neighbor!"

One week, the village buzzed with the name "The Returner."

Three days of farewell were organized in his (new) name. After six years in the Village, the man was going to officially return to the *civilized world*.

Such a departure was actually a very rare occurrence, and I was curious to know what made him decide to leave the Village. So I went, along with more than five hundred people, to the Hall, where he was going to address the community.

The Returner may have been called in the past *The Frenchman*, for he had a rather thick accent. What struck me was his sad smile when he spoke of his six years in the Village. He concluded a short speech of gratitude towards the other inhabitants, with his rationale for leaving:

“When I was in the *civilized world*, I was truly miserable. The region where I lived was infested with religious extremists, some Catholics, some Muslims, all spewing hatred. There were also quite a few atheists, claiming to be scientific and intellectual, but who were as exclusive and intolerant as the worse fanatics. For most of my life, I often felt isolated, as in (and I quote one of my favorite authors):

“Ordinary men look bright and intelligent, while I alone seem to be benighted. They look full of discrimination, while I alone am dull and confused. I seem to be carried about as on the sea, drifting as if I had nowhere to rest. All men have their spheres of action, while I alone seem dull and incapable, like a rude borderer. (Thus) I alone am different from other men, but I value the Tao”.

When I came here, all that changed. I was with my brethren. I recognized myself in them. We had the same preoccupations; we understood and respected our differences.

But progressively, a doubt grew in me.

It started with the realization that here, I am protected from a nastier reality.

Now, how can we qualify *reality*? It makes no sense, since we are here to explore *the ultimate reality*.

If a reality has to be “protected,” how could it be *ultimate*?

I can phrase the same question slightly differently: “If I am reaching in the Village *the ultimate reality*, it certainly has to remain *ultimate* in the *civilized world*.”

So, going back to the *civilized world* will serve as *the ultimate test*!

To tell you the truth, I am wary of my level of spiritual comfort in the Village. Here, I am afraid to be like a drunkard who feels good only after a few glasses of booze. Isn't the Village the “few glasses” I drink night and day?”

A woman said: “Returner, you might as well change your name for “Stayer,” I am telling you. You are overthinking that one. You know who you are? You are like someone who goes to a feast where he is invited, and he refuses to eat because a lot of people are still hungry in this world!”

The Returner answered: “Your argument works in my favor, actually. I don't pretend to be such a saint that I would ever wait for the *civilized world* to become the *enlightened world* to enjoy what I have discovered here.

But if I am invited to the feast when I live in the Village, but not when I live in the *civilized world*, that means I am not worthy of an invitation to any spiritual feast!”

I could feel that The Returner was by now more defensive. He hardened his tone:

“I am going to tell you something even more bothersome. The Village is becoming a community, almost a Church or a sect! These structures are by definition exclusive: us versus the others. Don’t you feel *superior* to the tourists who are coming here? This feeling of superiority, or at least, to be different, is the beginning of the end, for a spirituality resting on the concept of unicity.”

“What did Elleya say about your decision to go back?”

The Returner hesitated noticeably before answering: “Of course, Elleya wished me all the best. Then, Elleya said something difficult to interpret. I thought it was not completely timely in regard to my situation. Elleya has many things in his/her mind, of course....

But I remember almost literally his/her comment, since it did not make so much sense to me, back then: “The *Society Factor* is essential. There is no real misfortune where there is no social destitution, in one form or another - or fear of such destitution... Apparently, you want to go back to see if your spirituality can adapt to any surrounding. What you will find could be actually just a study on *the society factor*.”

As you see then, what Elleya said was certainly wise, but not really relevant to my decision.”

Someone shouted: “Elleya’s commentary is not difficult to interpret at all. You are going back to the *civilized world* for the wrong reasons.”

Someone else echoed: “You are a bit masochistic and a bit egocentric, because you miss the feeling of being the only one “who knows” in a world of ignorance!”

The Returner must have been as surprised as I was about the criticisms coming from all these people who were supposed to have come as well-wishers.

He replied: “Being here or in the *civilized world* are the same. Over there, they say very stupid things, usually. Here, you all say very wise things that I truly love. However, if we are to know the *ultimate reality*, it transcends wise words as well as foolish words.

And I am going to tell you something else. Here, we are all reassured, spiritually warm and cozy. I see this as a real and insidious spiritual danger. You are purring in front of the fireplace called the Village. I prefer to roam in the wild, you see? While I don’t blame you for staying, why would you blame me for leaving?”

XII) Where It Is Revealed That Elleya And Pr. Richard Were Twins

Like many Villagers, I made a habit to attend as much as I could the Kenyan Professor's lectures. He was a regular "Village Representative," at the Hall, always extending graciously his conferences to the tourists for us, his unofficial followers. He also frequented quite a bit the *Shul*. And now and then, he was invited to give an *Evening Lecture at the Hall*, an event always well attended.

A few weeks went by without any signs of the erudite Villager.

I knew he had an office, or some type of lab, in the large Garage Compound, one of the rare places in the Village with some Internet access. I was rather curious to see what type of facility the Village could give the renowned scientist.

If I had been a couple of times in the Garage where Piotr and Ben worked, I was not prepared to navigate in the "Compound," just behind it, a bizarre labyrinth of small, old buildings and bigger, ugly mobile homes. It took me a whole hour to find the Kenyan Professor in a vast warehouse filled with computers and printers that he shared with other "researchers."

The professor seemed at the same time surprised to have a visitor, and oddly embarrassed. He explained: "I am keeping to myself these days. I am preoccupied. As a matter of fact..."

He gave some convoluted examples of various, vague plans he had in mind.

It took me a few questions to understand that he was also thinking of moving back to the *civilized world* in order to pursue these projects.

Two eminent inhabitants of the Village were thinking of moving back to the *civilized world*? That was totally unheard of!

Was there some type of an epidemic?

I did not know exactly how to ask diplomatically the Professor about his reasons for leaving the Village. I tried: "Last time I saw you, you were writing a paper on the "*Pr. Richard's Syndrome*." Did you finish it?"

"No, I didn't."

He pointed at three big yellow binders on the table: "I got sidetracked... By the way, did you know that it takes more than two weeks for the Village to receive the current issues of the magazines *Nature* or *Science*? We are back one century, when it comes to communications!"

I remained speechless before that observation, coming apparently out of the blue.

The three thick yellow binders were labeled with boldfaced characters: *The Science of Nescience*. The professor opened one, marked "II," and looked for a certain page.

I hesitated: "Can't you get the magazines on line?"

He shrugged: "What I am saying is that we are certainly not equipped for any type of research."

He pushed the binder towards me, opened at a page in the middle of it, but entitled "Table of Contents."

The bulleted list read:

- "1) Consciousness processes and mirror neurons.
- 2) Consciousness processes and the Insular Cortex.
- 3) Main other mirroring areas (with controlled experiments).
- 4) Relevant other areas (preliminary experiments and main theories).
- 5) Relevant other areas (Biochemical background and developments).
- 6) Spindle Neurons and the Qualia Misnomer."

While I read the page with my eyebrows undoubtedly showing an extreme perplexity, the Professor said: "I would like to support my observations and commentaries on other researchers' works. I have some exciting ideas for new collaborations with various labs.

These ideas are truly different, as the distance from the *civilized world* gave me a fresh perspective on many problems.

However, from here, I cannot do anything!"

He paused for a few seconds. Then, he pronounced: "I am useless..."

Realizing the sentence sounded a little dramatic, he had a livelier tone of voice: "Don't misunderstand me. When I am saying that, I am not even speaking as a scientist, but as an inhabitant of the Village."

He laughed wholeheartedly, perhaps because of the panicked expression he may have read on my face?

He straightened up. His transformation was astounding. Suddenly, I had before me again the relaxed, amicable lecturer I loved to hear, and not the apparently torn man I had encountered in that messy warehouse.

"Here is the deal, and it is a big deal, indeed! You think that all I want to do is study some specific cognitive processes; to observe the affected areas of the brain (and the body) involved in them."

The Professor was getting progressively more animated: "If it was only that! There is much more. We are talking about projects at a *global scale*!

You know well, because you heard me saying it quite often, that a revised epistemology is necessary to guide contemporary science.

It is quite urgent, and I have some ideas on how to gather the necessary forces to achieve that "political" revolution. Without it, you are very aware of all the dramatic confusions that can occur in our daily existence, since science and technology affect every aspect of it.

Science, thus society, is at the mercy of its lower class of citizens: a loose and wide network of greedy, powerful, egotistical people, linked by temporary, volatile alliances. They can promote an inhumane "technological society." They can also use science and technology to spew global threats and terror on humanity...

Scientists must take the time to be humanists and philosophers if they don't want their work to be phagocyted by the most insensitive and brutal parties, supporting pseudo-ideologies built on insane, absurd bigotry, isolationism...

Now, bringing a little conscious and *consciousness* in the societal arena is not all. We need to bring that also in the campuses and in the labs!

So, you see what is awaiting me in the *civilized world*?”

By then, the Kenyan Professor was completely enthusiastic.

I stared blankly at the binder open in front of me, trying to find something half-intelligent to answer.

The Professor mistook that gaze for some silent interest. He flipped through the pages of the binder:

“You are more interested in pure science than in my revolutionary epistemology for a new society, aren’t you?

I hear you. My field is such a privileged one, since I study mainly consciousness!

So, because you went through the trouble to come here to visit me, I am glad to answer your curiosity. Let me give you an idea of one of the things I want to pursue in a *real* lab, in the *civilized world*.

Let’s say that you are a willing subject for one of my studies.”

The Professor found in its binder the chapter titled “Experiments 4-2a to 4-2e.”

“Let’s say that, with your permission, I am connecting you to a bunch of devices monitoring your brain functions. Now, I am flashing before you several visual and auditive puzzles. This study is focusing on the consciousness you have of yourself.

Your responses will correspond to various levels of introspection.

But, my dear friend, you cannot imagine how complex the introspection mechanisms are, in the brain.”

The Kenyan Professor lets himself fall down on a chair to illustrate his helplessness: “Can you imagine how arduous it is to design anything in the Village?”

With a dramatic, almost imploring tone, he continued: “Introspection cannot be studied with one experiment. It cannot be covered in a chapter, or in a whole thesis. It is a whole field of research by itself!”

I tried: “But, Professor, more than once, you objected yourself that the Vedic commentators, Heraclitus or maybe even some Desert Fathers did not need all these pricey apparatuses to study the consciousness! And they were certainly introspective!”

I was pleased to hear the Professor yell excitedly: “Yes! Yes! You are so right, my friend! Your judicious remark leads us to another strong argument, a devastatingly powerful argument in fact, in favor of my going back to the *civilized world*.”

To do so, since you have mentioned our beloved Pr. Richard in the beginning of your visit, we are going now to free you of these imaginary electrodes, and take Pr. Richard as our Guinea pig.

His specialty, which is to design control tests, is the definition of an *introspective* process.

Also, you and I can agree that Elleya is the most introspective human being we know.

Are Pr. Richard and Elleya spiritual siblings?

You are smiling. But strictly speaking, Pr. Richard has a very strong introspective safeguard system. That gift allows him to build incredibly complex control experiments.

Elleya’s introspective system is undoubtedly as strong as the Professor’s.

So, obviously, in Richard’s case, the safeguard system deploys as an instrument to modify something outwardly; while in Elleya’s case, it is shunned inward to feed other cerebral pathways...

What we want is to examine this possible dichotomy at a neurobiological level. Through some specific experiments...”

The Kenyan Professor tapped the third yellow binder with its finger.

“Here, you will find some other experiments designed to explore the luxuriant field of introspection, and possibly deduct what makes Pr. Richard and what makes Elleya.

How do you like that perspective?”

I cleared my throat.

Thankfully, the Professor was not expecting an answer. He continued:

“Yes, I know! You are still waiting patiently for me to respond to your judicious argument about the Veda or Heraclitus.

Specifically, you want to know why I have a folder filled with past or prospective, complex experiments in labs, instead of notes that I should have brought back from my personal introspections!

You are pointing at the fact I seem to favor an external study of introspection over the logically direct, internal, personal introspection!

You must be rightfully shocked by that paradox.

I can only plead arbitrary, overwhelming laziness and... incapacity!"

The professor had a curious, fatalistic smile and a little shrug. He stared at me, as if he wanted to make sure he was formulating exactly what I had in mind:

"I am going to repeat what shocks you to no end, while you are too polite to throw it to my face.

Here I am, eager to study the different neuronal pathways of two "introspection processes."

How am I going to proceed?

Am I going to be exploring my own consciousness, as Elleya does so famously or, as you are stressing, like the Veda or Heraclitus describe it?

Or am I going to choose an indirect, external method, like Pr. Richard would?"

Was I supposed to answer his question?

He did it for me, once again:

"There is a sentence I used to repeat: "The reason for our presence here, in the Village, is to *be* Elleya, no less; to think and feel as Elleya thinks and feels. The rest is obviously less relevant."

When I came in the Village, there was little doubt for me that Elleya has reached some sort of "interstitial consciousness," which I could even fathom within my own consciousness, my own... introspection! I may have determined at some point, like Elleya, that this process *unifies, thus appeases*.

Well, for the longest time now, every waking moment of my life, I want to **prove** the nature of such *interstitial consciousness*. I do not especially desire to *feel* it, to *experience* it, nor to possibly *keep* it!

Presently, I am one million lightyears closer from Pr. Richard than I am from Elleya.

Therefore, I believe that my place is with the Pr. Richards of this world, not in the Village."

XIII) Where Jealousy Is Shown Like A Toothless, Old Lioness

I opened my door and saw my friend Ben. Before I could even greet him, Layla, his wife, literally shoved him inside my apartment. She entered and stated firmly: “Enough of this nonsense. You guys are going to tell me what is going on.”

As I started some normal welcoming procedures, Layla stopped me: “No small talk! Why aren’t you coming to our place anymore?”

I glanced at Ben’s irate demeanor and I had the feeling that nothing constructive was likely to happen during that unexpected visit.

After a short, but convincing negotiation, they eventually sat down and accepted some light lemonade.

“Small talk” being forbidden, I had the good fortune to surprise them by narrating my visit to Philomena and her mother.

As I was giving some colorful details about the young woman who was so incapable of even conceiving the idea of jealousy that her mother had to take her to the Village, so she could learn to be more compassionate toward the less fortunate folks struggling with possessive love, my two friends’ belligerent posture softened noticeably.

However, when I got to the comparison the mother made between Philomena and Elleya, where both have to convince “sectarian, aggressive, ill-informed people” that *what is different may not be evil, but just new to them*, Ben objected vehemently:

“What is *new* is seldom very revolutionary. Here, I am not sure that Philomena represents *anything new!* Does she really believe she is some type of mutant, embodying the future humanity, just because she is devoid of any jealousy?”

What she feels is just natural, comfortable to her and a minority like her. She gives an arbitrary moral scope to something that is just a trait of her personality.

It is an easy intellectual justification that allows her to dismiss a psychological problem that has complex roots. I am not even mentioning that some research links jealousy to a natural reaction to protect the survival of one's particular genome..."

Layla responded: "Sure! *Its complex psychological roots* are called "egocentrism and possessiveness"! And if you want to protect your alpha male genome, why don't you just kill all the other males around your female?"

Before my friends could really jump into a new round of argumentation, I intervened swiftly:

"At the end of our conversation, a curious incident happened. The mother and the daughter shared some kind of private joke. I sensed, without being sure, it may have been of a sexual nature. In any case, I was excluded from the joke. Philomena's mother spotted my embarrassment so quickly that I wondered if both of them did not plant deliberately that doubt in me.

Anyway, in that instance, what mattered was that I was not feeling jealous per say, but only slightly excluded.

Philomena's mother pounced immediately on that sentiment: "This is the root of jealousy, the feeling that real life, or all the fun and excitement are passing you by. Others have it, but you do not! Jealousy is just the unbearable realization that others are enjoying what you want. It is the expression of an insupportable impotence."

How was *love* ever associated with that putrid feeling?"

I had to add right away: "Philomena's mother never used the adjective *putrid*, actually. Its violence comes from me."

Layla smirked: "Violence against us, then?"

The couple remained silent for a few seconds. Ben started: "Well, linking jealousy to a feeling of existential impotence is not really new..."

He felt Layla's irate gaze on him and admitted quickly: "But, it does ring true. Your conversation with Philomena and her mother was certainly most interesting."

His wife repeated the adjective with an appreciative smile.

She eventually asked for tea. The rest of the visit was spent in soothing, regular *small talk*, as Layla seemed to have forgotten her initial question about me not visiting them anymore. Or

maybe the fact I had tackled right away the topic of jealousy was an indirect but telling enough answer to her question?

XIV) Colored Road Maps

I showed up at the Returner's place at the worst possible time. The woman who opened the door was in tears. I apologized and was about to leave, but she stopped me: "I have to go to work, anyway..."

The Returner recognized me: "You want to know more about the reasons of my return to the *civilized world*, leaving behind everything that is dear to me?"

I summarized my visit to the Kenyan professor, who also wanted to get back to the *civilized world*. Moreover, I had found myself caught in a strange love triangle from which I was very much tempted to run away, and as fast as I could...

The Returner concluded: "So, you are here to hear more arguments in favor of my position. Perhaps, you want us to go back to the *civilized world* together. It is always good to have a friend in a harsh environment..."

All right, let me ask you to consider these points... Elleya is not young. He/she does not move well anymore. Imagine what will become of the Village, once Elleya dies."

My host paused a few seconds to let me digest the thought, before asserting:

"The Village was formed progressively around Elleya. Without Elleya, for some times, people will certainly stay, trying to maintain everything as before. And then?"

I was not sure the Returner's argument was totally valid.

I had met so many amazing inhabitants of the Village, people perhaps at the very level of Elleya, with also an outstanding charisma, that I doubted the Village would just crumble after Elleya's departure.

However, I did not raise that objection out loud, and the Returner continued his reasoning: "Don't get me wrong. I love Elleya. However, you know of course that whatever Elleya's existential secret is, that secret cannot be directly transmitted. Therefore, why stay here? We might as well discover it by ourselves... anywhere, right?"

That time, I could not help initiating the following exchange:

"You believe that the *ultimate reality* as you said, the goal we must all reach, is an individual experience?"

"Yes. Nothing is more individual. The Village does not make anyone reach the *ultimate reality*."

"You are not a hermit. Therefore, plenty of times you will have to interact with other people for your subsistence?"

"Actions and interactions are vital to reach the *ultimate reality*!"

"Is there any advantage to be in a place where these interactions are focusing on trivial topics? Actually, these trivial topics could start with a constant and unfair criticism of you and me! Often, in the *civilized world*, we find ourselves on the spot. People over there love to take aim at anyone who is slightly different; who does not vote for *their* candidates, or who doesn't go to *their* churches..."

"Wait... What are you talking about?"

"Well, I am talking about the *civilized world*, of course. What interest is there to be exposed to mistrust, alienation, intolerance?"

Confronted to different ideas and people, the *civilized world* has proven to be prompt to create denunciations, inquisitions, jihads, pogroms, concentration camps and other genocides...

In the Village, there is hardly any deep misunderstanding about who you are... Wouldn't you prefer to be among people talking passionately, but peacefully about the *ultimate reality*... even if they cannot hand it *literally* to you?"

The Returner had a little smirk. It was certainly not the first time he heard that argument. Perhaps the lady who seemed so affected by his departure had voiced it, just a few minutes before I did?

He went back stubbornly to his own point, and expended on it once again, with a couple of variations:

“You see, the problem with the Mahayana Buddhism, the Hinayana, the Catholicism, the Zoroastrianism, the Hermetism, the Kabbalah... whatever you care to follow... The problem is that they will give you some roadmaps with different signs, a different scale, various colors... But the maps can hardly be just admired. You must go on the journey. However, even if you follow the map inch by inch, the best the map can do is to get you to an edge. Then, you have to jump.”

I mentioned to the Returner that he had not really answered my previous objection: what was the value of obstinately choosing a hostile environment to go on such a journey?

The Returner was intent to have the last word, anyway: “You can jump anywhere to grab “the Pearl.” Some will choose to dive in a pond, in their own backyard. I find more logical, maybe even truer, to go to the high sea and face the tempests of the *civilized world*... to make that *dive!*”

XV) And The Cat Jumped in a *Solipsist* World

One day, I felt so sick that I had to drag myself to the “Hospital,” an austere building that reminded me of my old elementary school, back in my hometown.

At the entrance, I was received by... the Mayor? He inquired about my symptoms. Because of the pain, I could hardly think straight, but I could not help asking: “Are you a doctor?”

“No. They always need help, here. Patients need company, of course. You know that!”

Actually, at the time I did not care much...

The doctor (or whoever was the person who took care of me) was a very friendly lady, quite young, who determined I did not need to be taken urgently to the *civilized world*.

I stayed in the Hospital three nights. Each day, my condition improved markedly, with a mixture of medicine from the *civilized world* and of strange foods, not very tasty, I must say.

As one could expect in the Village, the Hospital had very limited medical equipment. They did run some blood and urine tests, which surprised me, since I was not expecting that much technology there.

The great mystery for me was to guess who was an actual doctor, who was a nurse, a qualified assistant or a simple aid. For instance, the first night, I suddenly experienced a series of violent abdominal pains. The person keeping a watchful eye on the sick called a lady who I believed was a doctor, as she calmly gave me a shot and prepared a perfusion. But the pain subsided rapidly, as another lady came to check on me and on what the woman had done. She congratulated my savior: “You did well.”

While the equipment of the facility was antiquated and obviously insufficient, the “staff” was exceptionally abundant. Numerous volunteers, “nurses” and “doctors,” all wearing a white smock, seemed to rotate harmoniously. All in all, my natural skepticism disappeared quickly, and I did have the cozy feeling of being in very good hands.

During my stay in the Hospital, I noticed a young man who was there obviously full time. His name or nickname was Djalma. I assumed wrongly it was a female forename, like Alma.

As he usually worked in the upper floors, I had limited interactions with him. But I noted he would greet me and everyone else very effusively, as if we had known each other forever.

He was remarkable, not only because of his warm demeanor, but because his features were perfectly regular. He had what I thought to be a “classical beauty.”

Before I was released from the hospital, one of the ladies in a white smock lectured me on the medicine I had to take, and the diet I was supposed to follow. The tall, cinnamon-skinned, handsome Djalma came by, distracted my nurse-or-doctor with a peck on the cheek. He had a friendly pat on my shoulder and joked that I should not let her boss me around.

As I was staring at him walking away, quite fascinated by his charisma, the lady smirked: “Interested?”

“What? No!”

Instead of being amused by her cursory deduction, her odd question triggered in me a vehement need to assert that I was not gay.

The lady sensed her question, maybe a simple joke, had not been well received at all. She explained hastily: “Djalma lives with a woman...”

The lady hesitated, misread my persistent frown and fueled my bad mood with her next assumption: “Are you sad because Djalma is straight?”

I concentrated on trying not to raise my voice when I replied: “I find this person *interesting*. Why on earth would you assume I am interested in him in a sexual way? And why would you assume I am gay?”

I was about to accuse her of projecting her own sexual desires on the young man. But the woman appeared sincerely sorry about the misunderstanding. She apologized profusely, and had this curious excuse: “I thought you looked at him as if he was feminine.”

Since I did find him feminine, her conclusion left me speechless.

The next day, Djalma came to visit me at my place.

After I got over my surprise, I asked if it was the lady who had released me from the hospital, who had sent him.

“Yes, of course. She is supposed to follow up on you. But she could not free herself, and she asked me to replace her. I hope you do not mind. Tomorrow, I am sure she will come.”

“Are you a doctor?”

Djalma had a long look at me before laughing: “Of course I am. I have twenty years of experience at least.”

That was indeed a joke, since he seemed to be in his late twenties.

“I have almost always been a doctor. I am blessed...”

Speaking of which...”

He spent the next few minutes examining me and “making sure I was still healing at a good pace.”

He congratulated me pleasantly, as if I was a force of nature.

I asked: “Are you going back to the hospital, now?”

“No. I am going back home.”

“Where is that?”

Of course, it was some very banal small talk. Djalma decided I wanted some company. He sat down and asked for some tea.

Very relaxed, Djalma said: “I live little ways from here, on the other side of the Village.” He described the area of Philomena’s Commune.

I asked if he knew Philomena. He laughed wholeheartedly: “Sure! She’s my daughter.”

Either the young man had a weird sense of humor, or he was plainly delusional, as he must have been younger than Philomena.

“It is a joke we have overused, but maybe you haven’t heard it yet? No, Philomena’s mother and I have been a couple for two years. So, technically, Philomena is my daughter.”

“She’s... a very beautiful lady.”

Djalma knew I was referring to Philomena's mother. Somehow, that sentence was for me a euphemism to express: "Isn't she at least 25 years older than you?"

Fortunately, he took the compliment literally: "Yes, she is fantastic."

He looked at me with amusement and continued: "Most people see in her a physical phenomenon, a woman who has a body that does not age! That is to be enjoyed, indeed..."

His smile widened noticeably.

"But she has an incredible mind, or rather, a radiant soul. I cannot tell you how fortunate I am to be with her!"

I did not have to encourage him to get more details. He was naturally the exuberant type:

"Like most people here, I came to be around Elleya. That was about five or six years ago. And I love the fact I moved here and that I got to know Elleya. However, it is truly when I met Philomena's mother that everything really fell into place for me.

Between you and me, it is as if I have won the jackpot; the spiritual jackpot; a one in a lifetime opportunity. It is like being with a sexy female Elleya with whom I can make love!"

Djalma laughed at what must have been my flabbergasted look: "Too much information, uh?"

"I did find Philomena's mother quite extraordinary. But can you tell me why you would compare her to Elleya?"

"I can certainly do that! But it won't make much sense, unless you know why I came here, in the Village. We have to start from the beginning, in my homeland, where I lived very happily until..."

Djalma took off his shoes and leaned back, illustrating we could be there for the long haul.

I assured him I was up for it.

"All right, Exiled, it is your decision! I have already mentioned I have always been blessed. I feel life. You kind of know me: I don't brag. I am not shy either. I tell things as I see them.

For instance, a wonderful musician from my hometown wrote a song about me, and the lyrics said *I was dancing my life.*"

With a very melodic voice, he sang a couple of verses in Portuguese, accompanying himself with a slow hand clapping. Then:

“Literally, I was also a good dancer. I have always been incredibly blessed. What can I say? I felt life, you see?”

But people around me were not as blessed. Day after day after day, that fact was being hammered onto me. Even worse! A lot of people were in obvious misery.

And I wondered about all the blessings I had, while some of the people I really cared about were miserable.

One day, one of my girlfriends, an adventurous young woman, very smart, beautiful, funny, full of life... tried to commit suicide. Her attempt failed, but she maimed herself.

After, she did not want to see me anymore.

That is when I came to the Village.

I always wanted to share my blessings. But before I could do that, I needed to *understand* why I couldn't.

They say a big smile and good vibes can change the mood of a whole street. I did hear, actually, that my smile and my love for life and for people kind of sent good vibes all over my neighborhood... Maybe when I was a kid, it was truly the case?

But in the long run, people looked at me like... a starving beggar would look at a filthy rich billionaire who does not give a single penny of his fortune. And since I could not share my blessings in those days, I was like a stinky, stingy billionaire who started to feel guilty, and more and more miserable, also.

So, I came here, in the Village, like others go to school. I opened my ears and my mind.

It was a struggle, I must say. This whole introspection thing, in order to know the nature of who we are... That did not come easily, for me.

Even Elleya told me I should forget about it. I was completely losing my “*joie de vivre*.”

Yeah, the introspection stuff was difficult for me. For instance, I could watch myself with or without complacency. I could do that. I could notice things in me. But there was one point that drove me crazy. I could try to observe all that stuff in me. But it was still me who perceived it, right? Therefore, the introspection or the meditation was not about anything else but me. I could say for instance: “I feel myself connected to the universe.” But in truth, I was not connected to the universe but to my idea of the universe... Therefore I was forever connected to me and only me.

That, brother, is what I could never solve! That is what drove me crazy.”

“That, and the fact you could not really share your *joie de vivre*.”

“You got it!”

“Until Philomena’s mother came along.”

“Yes.”

“Would you mind now telling me what she taught you? I am sincerely curious to know how she went around the solipsistic paradox of the person who thinks about his own consciousness.”

“For one, she did not use the word ‘solipsistic.’”

Djalma stopped me from replying to his pointed joke: “What I mean is that what she said freed me of my frustration. Considering your question, I doubt her ways could work on you. You are much more intellectual than me.”

I protested that I was the opposite of an intellectual. .

Djalma nodded: “Well, if you want, I can tell you what worked for me. Do not complain if it doesn’t mean much for you...”

After I agreed, he recounted:

“My beloved asked me: *Describe your reality.*

She did it on various situations. The first time, she was walking with me on the long road back from the Hospital, and I was extremely tired. So, she said: *Describe your reality.*

Once, she asked the same question right after we made wonderful love. Another time, she asked it in the middle of the night, as she woke me up. I told her the dream she had interrupted. Another night, she woke me up from a deep sleep and I felt just a tremendous fatigue.

Once, she asked the question after a particularly good meal. Another time, it was in Philomena’s Commune, when I was responsible of watching the kids. I remember very well how I was so damn exhausted and not in the best mood!

Once, the “*Describe your reality*” came when I was more than tipsy with alcohol. And let’s not forget the time when we thought we were facing a case of leprosy at the Hospital, and that I had been exposed to it. When she asked “*Describe your reality,*” I did explode. That was not the moment!

But she stuck with the question *Describe your reality...*

Should I continue?”

I nodded, waiting for the outcome of that tale, a conclusion actually rather predictable, I thought.

“After a few days, my beloved said: “All these moments of consciousness were your reality. Each moment was your total reality. One was not superior to the other.” That is what she said.”

Djalma stopped so I could appreciate the sentence.

He was actually not expecting much from me in this instance, as he was obviously thinking I had an overly *intellectual*, thus rather sterile mind. So he repeated after a few seconds:

“*One was not superior to the other.* That meant that all these moments of reality existed equally for me. They were 100 per cent my reality. Do you see what that means?”

“Uh, I suppose, yes.”

“That means that when I woke up from a dream or from no dream; when I was elated or exhausted; tipsy or focused on a difficult problem; anxious or happy... I could say: “Well, now I feel that way, but usually, I feel differently...”

You would say the same thing, right? Most people would say something like: “*This was how I felt then, but there are a lot of variations.*”

What is remarkable is that all these *realities* are not remarkable!

You like these paradoxes, don't you Exiled? I knew you would.

But actually, they are remarkable and outstanding... while being more or less unimpressive!

When I am recounting them - I am talking about those *realities* - to my beloved or to you, I relive them to a certain degree, with some lingering intensity: they were **my** reality, then. They counted for me. They were then *remarkable*. But if I put them in perspective, let's say after an incredible surgery in which I played a major role, they were not that noteworthy at all.

They were not really *defining* moments, right?

So, my lover broke through when I realized that my reality, which is truly my life, was in a way **wasted**... I insist on this term “wasted,” as a series of non-very-remarkable events, which somehow counted as much as the most remarkable ones, when they happened.

How could I live *non-very-remarkable events*, if they were 100 per cent my reality, thus my life?

So, you wonder now how my lover and mentor *broke through* this conundrum, actually not once but twice...

Or maybe it was one process, but in two stages? I am not sure.

The first time, her “*Describe your reality*” led me to the realization that whatever I was going to say was always going to be a tale, a fable...

The reality, in which I had participated with *100 per cent of my being*, was always going to be out of synch with what I would be describing, even one minute after the fact...”

Djalma hesitated. He laughed, slightly embarrassed, confessing he had lost the thread of his own demonstration.

I had actually already heard a few variations of what he had described of these vagaries of a mind, or of a consciousness.

At that point, I had disconnected from Djalma’s attempts to recapture and share enthusiastically his inner breakthroughs, led by Philomena’s mother’s wisdom. Moreover, he was sadly right: her *method* could not be very effective on me!

Even worse! During the next couple of minutes, instead of listening to him, I tried to remember what school of philosophy had first analyzed the gap between an experience as it is perceived and its recount. Was it the same that posed that the representation of a reality in a consciousness has no objectivity, thus no real link to any *objective reality*?

Djalma, who did not notice he had lost me, concluded firmly:

“That was the first step: I had to have the consciousness to be “all in,” while the whole universe cannot be anything but “all in” at the same instant.”

He waited for my reaction.

I could not imagine what led to his last sentence, pronounced with an obvious satisfaction.

In any case, I could easily improvise an objection: “What you are saying takes you back to your frustration, when you understood that, instead of being connected to the universe, you were truly connected to your idea of the universe, therefore to you, and always you... Want it or not, whatever you know is just intellectual!”

Djalma opened his eyes wide.

I realized that my objection, while theoretically defensible, may have been absolutely unrelated to whatever his point was.

I tried a quick but rather safe recovery: “You mentioned a second level, Djalma...”

I had obviously thrown him off his train of thoughts. I doubled up my attempt by aiming at his undeniable weakness: “How did Philomena’s mother succeed in getting through to you?”

That was indeed a better question, as it brought a big smile back to Djalma's face:

"Yes, this extraordinary woman, with a tremendous patience, took the time to revisit each one of my answers to her infamous *Describe your reality!*

You, *The Real Mr. Intellectual* wouldn't have needed that stage, I'm sure. For me, what my lover made me understand intellectually was not enough. I needed some type of true realization, an opening of the mind, an illumination!

How did she do it? First, you must know that she was able to use a powerful catalyst to transform words and concepts into a true realization within me.

That catalyst was my love for this woman; or rather, my complete trust in her.

Think about it. How can we trust completely? How many times, after your childhood, did you trust fully anybody?

Trust is an act of love, a jump towards the unknown, isn't it?

Yes, it appears clearly to me that my trust in her was what allowed me to realize, *to make a reality* out of what I am going to tell you.

Her relentless *Describe your reality* helped me see different stages. In one stage, I was completely in the moment. I was acting, reacting, being... Then, my mind qualified the situation. It was that *processed* reality that became the reality I was conscious of.

In your opinion, how can one erase the sliver of *automatic interpretation* between what *is* and what one perceives?"

My opinion was that Philomena's mother was not able to erase *durably* that hard-to-define "sliver." But I thought it would be more tactful if, instead of answering directly, I would just hint that Philomena's mother intuition was already debated by 19th century philosophers.

Djalma tried also to keep an even tone, when he remarked: "I was not around in the 19th century."

To avoid aggravating my misjudgment, I made my voice even more conciliatory, almost syrupy when I repeated my usual claim:

"Okay, but whatever Philomena's mother showed you was still intellectual! Let me remind you that you were initially struggling with using introspection. Then, you had the intuition that there is a little gap between reality and the interpretation of reality. All this is an intellectual knowledge. You were not any closer to experiencing directly a pure reality!"

It was the second time in less than five minutes I was voicing the same idea, and for the second time, Djalma was again the image of total stupefaction: “But I just told you that my lover succeeded in making me actually erase *the sliver of automatic interpretation!*”

He seemed to give up on his own argumentation.

He relaxed his posture, erased instantly that mask of stupefaction, replacing it with a little smile. He used a less vehement, lower pitched tone of voice to continue:

“Well, let’s say that I finally understood what to look for. Besides, my beloved pointed at the time I was “dancing my life.” There was a model for me to get back to. She made me relax, instead of trying too hard to interpret what I was feeling.”

“If I understand you well, after years of questioning yourself in the Village, of going through prayers, meditations, listening to sermons and advices, you went back to who you were initially?”

Djalma knew I was implying that the whole journey looked like a total waste of time.

Curiously, the noun “Ulysses” came suddenly to me.

As I was about to expand out loud on the concept of the *eternal return* that had suddenly popped in my mind, my neighbor’s young cat barged in, from my own closet it seemed!

Djalma burst into laughter and started chasing playfully the cat. He picked him up and calmed him down surprisingly fast. The purring cat stayed on his lap.

Djalma, all smiles, was again the image of total joy: “What were we saying?”

I lied: “I forgot.”

I had to acknowledge the following bottom line: no matter what his interpretation of his “discovery” was, the young man before me did enjoy life thoroughly, and not only *intellectually*.

It did look as if he was truly dancing his life again!

A voice in my head smirked: “*Scoreboard, my friend!*”

From a stage of golden innocence, he went through trying to *understand*... Then, somehow, he went back to a stage of innocence. Perhaps that journey was necessary for him to come to terms with who he was and how he could truly heal others?

Perhaps that final stage of innocence could never have been reached without leaving the first one?

In the meantime, I could ask myself if I would personally like to *feel*, to experience, to *have* Djalma's connection to reality, as it appeared to me.

The answer was unequivocally: *Absolutely!*

Scoreboard, my friend!

XVI) New and Improved Spiritual Mastery?

It was an important event. Elleya had announced almost at the last minute he/she was going to give a rare lecture at the Hall.

Of course, the venue was quickly packed, and without any delay, Elleya was helped on stage. The Secretary was sitting in the first row.

Elleya quipped: “Are you kidding me?”

For some reasons, a spotlight was on Elleya, which he/she always hated. It was quickly turned off, as the public thought it was a premeditated gag.

That set the tone for a curious lecture, almost a comedic exercise on a strange theme, quite typical of Elleya’s preoccupations in those days: “Is love an electrical discharge of a few regions in the brain? Nope! **Correlation is not causation!**”

A very witty and rather corrosive Elleya took some wide and wild jabs at “the scientific orthodoxy,” while being more self-deprecating than ever: “My last three examples are arbitrary, you will say. But they have the superb advantage to allow me to repeat at least three more times... Come on, you know it! That’s right! We all love our new motto: ***Correlation is not causation.***”

Elleya continued: “Any human being must choose his or her cosmogony. During the last few minutes, did I appear critical of a certain *scientific orthodoxy*, as we like to call it?”

You all know very well that I love the ever-changing scientific cosmogonies. My point is that the exploration of the universe by the Sciences is thrilling, indeed. However, the largest Hadron collider in the universe will hardly ever explain why and how our masters found the peace of mind we so desire.

Saying that, we deliberately expose ourselves to a scientist's traditional shrug:

“What does the study of particles have to do with your peace of mind?”

Allow me to answer today without any embarrassment that disdainful shrug, so it becomes a shared shiver of excitement: it has to do with the beauty of thinking.

Ha, the scientists think they are pure empiricists, while we, *metaphysicians*, are mere dreamers. I actually see it as quite the opposite. We, metaphysicians, are striving to reach the limits of our minds through our everyday experiences, while *they* are just paralyzed by an epistemological terror. They would deny it fiercely, since they have no idea about the concept of epistemology.

Yes, this is a low blow, and I apologize for it.

Let's go back to our rational. Now, what is the beauty of thinking we all share so intimately?

We can observe the mysterious choreography of particles leading to the creation of galaxies **and** of the *brain processes* observing the said choreography!

It is our privilege, perhaps even our strange duty, to study each step of the choreography. How keen is that sense of observation, for the most scientific among us! However, it is our salvation to have the perspective to consider it in awe.

Our strength as *metaphysicians* is to be unable of tunnel vision, since we are too ignorant for any narrow specialization. So, we do not blush when we marvel before the most outstanding paradoxes offered to us.”

Elleya made the weirdest attempt to have a childish voice:

“Dear *Orthodox Scientist* caricature, tell us one of your epic and purely material cosmogonies.’

‘Very well, my mindless children! Once upon a time, there was a dumb Big Bang which, after billions of years of boorish random collisions, created inadvertently a sentient *thing*, a mind able to think of the Big Bang’

‘And also a brain capable of inhaling or secreting total bliss, Mr. *Orthodox Scientist Caricature...*’

‘What a silly thing to say!’

‘What a happy ending! The dumb Big Bang became a spiritual event *in the making!*’”

Elleya went back to his/her normal voice to muse lightly:

“Although, when we measure how much energy a human brain consumes, we should all agree that, from a strictly entropic point of view, it is quite a thorough waste, for a purely physical

Evolution Process to create a *thing* whose special purpose seems to be able to fathom the theory of evolution.”

Elleya nodded and concluded sarcastically:

“But far from us to project an *intention* to purely statistical laws, right? It would be foolish and irrational... As foolish and irrational, by the way, as imagining the dense Big Bang laying inadvertently, like a pure evolutionary fart, a sentient being thinking the Big Bang!

I see, right there, an endless and unbreakable loop of arguments that no PhD will ever solve.

So, let’s just say that scientists and metaphysicians are now part of this strange cosmogony currently called Evolution of the Universe. Both types have been created equals, as they will disappear in a flash. But their gazes are oh so different!

Now, did we answer what *the study of particles has to do with our peace of mind?*”

Elleya paused to giggle and taste the paradox he/she apparently found ineffable.

Then, once again, the speaker apologized apparently humbly: “That argument was not very useful, was it? Just so pleasurable...”

A voice remarked: “What if in a few years, the Hadron collider does tell us what the origin of the universe is?”

“Yes, I will certainly give another lecture on that topic in due time, provided I am still alive and understandable.

However, I would like to stress that proving a chronology, as satisfactory has it may seem, hardly enhances the human condition.”

Elleya made a face: “Is the last sentence clear? I don’t think so. It must be murkier than ever, if I am able to notice it.

Okay, then! Since I am on this stage, I am going to play the role of the tyrant, master of the whole Earth, who just had a stroke that wiped out all his/her memory.

I summon two persons, who appear to be held in high esteem by my people, and I ask them what on Earth we’re doing on this Earth, since what I am seeing around me does not make a whole of sense.

The first one declares that we are all created from the whim of Zeus.

I ask to see some example, and perhaps a few proofs; and the advisor starts giving me an odd genealogy I can’t quite follow.

The second person tells me that we are all a transitory stage in the trajectory of some particles...

I ask again for examples and proofs; and that advisor clears his throat: "Well, let's start in the 16th century..."

I don't quite follow his mathematical summaries.

Each baby born on this Earth is like that tyrant: "Tell me where we are."

But whatever cosmology and chronology the baby assimilates, the next question is infallibly: "And what am I supposed to do?"

Now, did I successfully convince you that a chronology, even an intellectually satisfactory one, hardly enhances the human condition?"

Elleya seemed to find his question outrageously funny. His/her laughter was actually very infectious.

When he/she could stop his/her giggles:

"I spent too much time proving what must seem obvious to most of you, and I apologize for that.

It was lovely to have once again the opportunity to share my discoveries with you.

To conclude, I will pick this wonderful mention of the Hadron collider, and dream with you that someone could conceive one Collider at the level of our consciousness! Instead of showing the energy becoming matter, it would show our most liminal act just transforming into being... Or vice versa?

In the meantime, we can keep busy, by breathing philosophy and being attentive to each other.

Breathing philosophy is what a conformist scientist lacks, or deprives himself of, while we are able to consider all cosmogonies like all philosophies: *a wisp of knowledge in a meadow of the unknown*, shall we say?

That is how we deal with what escapes us: the right dosage of curiosity, poetry, delight for sciences, and the tool of nescience."

The lecture was over. I raised my hand.

The Secretary intervened: "Sorry, Exiled! Tonight, we are going to limit the length for the gathering around Elleya. However, after Elleya goes back to rest, I propose we stay and continue together with our commentaries."

Elleya laughed: "One question is not going to do me in. I'll return home after his question."

I said: “With all due respect, Master, I heard the Kenyan Professor give a very similar lecture on the topic *Correlation is not causation*. And he frequently uses the concept of *nescience*. Why did these topics inspire you?”

Of course, my intervention reflected a certain disappointment. During the whole lecture, I had the feeling I was listening to the Kenyan Professor’s voice, or even Piotr’s.

I wanted to hear Elleya’s genuine voice, not the Professor fending off his nemesis, the *Pr. Richards* of this world!

However, as soon as I finished my reproach, poorly dissimulated in the form of a question, I regretted it, fearing the implied criticism would sound too offensive.

Elleya did start with a stern tone of voice: “My friend, nobody told you I take great offense to be called *Master*? I don’t feel like being exposed to more ridicule!”

Fortunately, Elleya quickly segued quite enthusiastically: “But I am glad you have noticed! The Professor’s denunciation of narrow-minded modern scientists, with this exquisite version of *Correlation is not causation*, reflects exactly my personal line of thinking. Of course, I needed to transpose it, since I don’t have a fraction of the Professor’s knowledge and acumen. I am so glad and grateful to have learned these concepts from him! Imagine how long it would have taken me to come up with them on my own!”

A few moments later, Elleya took his/her leave. One third of the audience also left the venue.

But the conversation continued, with the Secretary taking the role of the moderator.

Someone said: “Did I understand well? Elleya is grateful to be learning things? At his/her level of wisdom, Elleya would be still learning?”

A woman that I saw in Philomena’s Commune answered with a personal story: “I had to leave the Village and stay for five years in the *civilized world*, before I could move back here for good. When I saw Elleya after all that time, we talked for more than one hour. Then, it occurred to me that I did almost all the talking, while Elleya just commiserated with me. I eventually inquired: “How about you? How have you been? How are you?” Elleya answered with the biggest smile: ‘Well, let me ask you... Don’t you have the feeling that I have improved spiritually?’”

Everybody laughed at that story.

A voice asked: “Could Elleya have been serious? Can Elleya improve spiritually?”

Many people refuted vociferously such an idea: “It was just said in jest!”

About fifty people raised their hands. Our moderator asked if any of these contributors thought it was not a joke, and therefore that Elleya did have to improve.

Only five hands remained up. The Secretary pointed to his left:

“Let’s start here, with Ms. Holmes.”

“Before I give my opinion, I would like to know what you think, Secretary: Can Elleya improve, spiritually?”

“Well, to answer you, let’s go back briefly to Exiled’s remark about Elleya repeating something the Professor had already said.

Nowadays, what Elleya researches actively in books and in lectures, may be less how to have a more profound spirituality than how to better communicate certain ideas and concepts.

Elleya has or has not found the ultimate reality. That depends on your own opinion on the matter. However, Elleya is still puzzled by the vagaries of communication. When Elleya comes across a clear enunciation of an idea, very much like *Correlation is not causation*, he/she is elated, and always exclaims, as you have heard: ‘How many months would I have devoted to thinking and writing, without coming close to finding that brilliant formula?’”

Here is what Ms. Holmes had to say about Elleya needing to *improve*, like anyone else.

She started from a reference to one of the favorite topics of both the Kenyan Professor and the Secretary:

“Everything seems to be localized in the brain. Thus, the superior stages of spiritual knowledge, or of experiencing the *ultimate reality*, if such things exist, are then also located in the brain. But the brain is influenced by pain, hormones, interactions with others, external conditions such as the sun, the cold, etc. Therefore, it is logical to think that Elleya’s brain has to adjust to these ever-changing conditions. Even if we believe that Elleya has found the way to always get back to this *ultimate reality*, he/she may need some adjustment time to get back to it. A shorter *adjustment time* may have been what Elleya called *spiritual improvement*?”

A man directly on the left of Ms. Holmes countered: “If you consider, as you said, that everything is in the brain, including the *ultimate consciousness*, you cannot ignore the plasticity of the brain. You all know from the Kenyan Professor’s lectures that some areas of the brain can develop when exercised. The Professor quotes the very famous example of the *structural changes of the hippocampi of taxi drivers*, who are using a lot their navigational skills. Therefore, we can assume that people like Elleya develop parts of the brain related to some *inner navigational skills*. Therefore, once the area in the brain is fully developed, there is very little that can affect it. Thus, Elleya was just joking with the question about improving...”

That debate went on for a couple of hours. Of course, nobody had a definite argument to convince the other side.

XVII) Who Will Be Chairman of The Self-Doubt Department?

The tourist bus came only once a day, and only when the weather allowed it. Some Villagers remembered the times when four full busloads of people invaded the streets for a walking tour of the center and then, a packed Hall.

Near the Station, there was the Café, serving different types of teas, a dark brew falsely called *café de olla*, and a couple of soups *du jour*.

The tourists could stroll down to the end of the main street, and enter Yoon's souvenir shop and the "Museum."

The Café, the souvenir shop and the Museum were some halfhearted attempts of the Village to make a little bit of money.

The donation box at the exit of the little shack called *The Altar* may have brought more income than the three aforementioned places together.

The day I moved to the Village, I had to access it through the tourist bus.

It was a sunny day in June, and the bus was almost full. When we boarded it, we were presented with a video highlighting our visit. After a rather uncomfortable, long bus ride, we were greeted by four inhabitants of the Village who took the visitors to a tour that included the Altar, the Museum, and the possibility of a stop at the Café and at Yoon's store...

The visit was to end at the Hall for a short presentation and a Q&A session.

Of course, that first time, I missed all these activities, as I was the only immigrant in the bus.

But later, I took a great liking to attend, like many inhabitants actually, the Q&A sessions. I went to the Hall a couple of times a week to listen to the “Representative of the Day.”

Usually the tourists asked a few generic questions. But the answers were always very specific and led frequently to the most interesting debates, which continued long after the tourists had to board their return bus.

One day, the Village Representative happened to be Anna Soertke.

Anna Soertke was the lady who had intervened at the *Shul*, the day a group of teenagers held a debate about helping a person who felt gloom everywhere and all the time. Her insight and her charisma impressed everyone who attended that gathering, including yours truly of course.

Her name was actually fairly well-known in the Village, as she seemed to have a great influence on its administration. Also, it was her that Ben went to see when he was struggling with his relationship with Layla.

As the Village Representative of the day, Anna Soertke gave a quick summary of what the Village meant for her, philosophically speaking, and started answering the tourists’ questions right away.

The first one was about the Village food supplies. It gave the tone for others questions about our technical equipment, the criminality rate, our judicial system, if we had one, etc.

When someone asked whether we could watch the movies released by the big international distributing companies, Anna Soertke answered: “The Village is by no mean a carefully designed politically and financially viable entity. It was put together haphazardly. Compared to yours, our way of life is certainly much less comfortable. You may actually wonder why anyone would choose to live here.”

She laughed. One tourist threw right back at her: “Why did you choose to live here, you personally?”

“I first came here for what appeared to be a purely technical or professional reason, if you can believe that.

You are all aware about the stories circulating of spontaneous healings taking place in the Village. A few years ago, these stories were actually quite abundant in the *civilized world* media.

Since one of my specializations was to study the placebo effect, I came here to observe closely the “reality” of these healings. Basically, I wanted to see if the general atmosphere in the Village

was particularly conducive to concentrating a certain type of *expectancy effect* I had been studying since my graduate years...

I came here originally for a ten day stay, to observe and interview some Villagers who were supposed to have been cured when they moved here. One of them was called *The Secretary*.

I recognized him as a very famous professor in my field of psychology. Naturally, his presence in the Village as a recovering cancer patient intrigued me a little more. Soon, I centered my investigation around him. The man was kind enough to tell me his story and answer all my questions.

You can say that it was then the Secretary who “unwillingly” made me snap out of my theoretical goal, of my *intellectual fixation*.

So, during my first days here, I was very much like the person who has just asked about everyday chores instead of wondering ‘Is there here anything I can benefit from; anything useful for my own life?’”

Anna was a very skilled speaker. She could change quite efficiently and at will her tone of voice to appear more or less firm or, on the contrary, extremely personal. She adopted the latter effect for the following general statement:

“*Snapping out* of our *train* of thoughts, of what obsesses us, which is always literally a runaway *train*, is an extremely rare occurrence. It is no small wonder that the Secretary could achieve that feat, especially on someone as driven as I was when I came in, with my recorder and my notebooks.”

After a brief intervention by a couple of tourists, Anna continued:

“Who is that man? In the Village, everyone knows the Secretary. He is not only always eloquent and convincing. He has what I would call an “elegant mind.”

However, it is not his distinction that made me, as I said, *snap out* of my compulsivity, and stay in the Village, widening immensely the scope of my research, so it could consciously include...me.”

“So, what made you stay was this *Secretary’s* personal story?”

“Indeed.”

A few tourists wanted to know the details of that story. Anna obliged, after a tactical pause:

“The Secretary is not the type to tell you who he is, with a positive biography, listing his academic accomplishments, or a gloomier one, giving the progression of the disease in his body.

He does wait for a specific question. Then, he almost never answers directly such a question. He always starts with an introduction, like painting an elaborate background for his answer, or drawing a strange simile with another situation or another person...

Impatient listeners invariably mistake his thoughtful responses for a weird mental lapse, an unnecessary tangent, as if any reply should be a couple of syllables, or else they lose interest.

These unfortunately weeded-out listeners miss out on the fact that a good question has deep ramifications. The Secretary's careful introductions show some respect to the person who asks.

For instance, when I alluded, as delicately as I could to what "happened to him in the Village," he began with a generalization about... reading!

This is what he said:

'I always read books and articles the same way: *Any reader knows that his favorite pages concern him and only him.* It is as if the writer, through time, place, sometimes through a different language, is addressing directly and personally the reader.

Here, after a few weeks, I had the feeling that the things that were said in the Village were pronounced for my exclusive benefit! I was still quite sick at the time, but I got enthused about certain things I was hearing. They stimulated greatly my intellectual and, I would say, my *existential* curiosity. I decided to devote my remaining days on this Earth to explore that peculiar path. The remaining days of remission became weeks, months and years...'

I remember clearly this quip by the Secretary: 'Was my disease so bored with my repetitive "spiritual" quest that it has vanished? Am I currently living in symbiosis with the disease? Who knows? What counts is that *this peculiar path*, that newfound curiosity and personal research became my private garden.'

The Secretary's words, but also his openness, his gratitude towards life with all its different and quite uneven shades, especially for someone who at some point, heard rather distinctly a death sentence pronounced by an oncologist, were indeed very intriguing for me, at various levels.

But what prompted me to stay for good was that the qualities I just enumerated (*openness*, a stubborn but all-encompassing *gratitude towards life* in spite of *all its uneven shades*) seemed wide-spread in the whole Village, and shared by people of very different cultural background; people who had no connection to the academic language I had in common with the Secretary.

In a strangely parallel way, the Secretary's reading metaphor applied to me. *Like a text read by millions before me, but resonating distinctively within me*, it appeared that, instead of being solely the material for a professional paper, all the interviews I was collecting, all the facts I was observing around me... *were in reality gathered for my personal, exclusive benefit. They stimulated greatly my intellectual or, we can say, my existential curiosity.*

I hope you will be puzzled enough by the expression I stole from the Secretary. What could be an *intellectual curiosity*, versus an *existential curiosity*?

My personal interpretation of it, if you allow me to use a trivial comparison, is that an intellectual curiosity says “I feel I could eat a little something in a couple of hours.” The *existential* curiosity cries: ‘I am pouncing on it to devour it at once!’”

A tourist asked Anna Soertke: “What happened to your study of the placebo effect? Did you completely abandon it?”

“Actually, I did not. I discovered that this gentleman here, in the last row, had some incredible insights on the topic, at a neurophysiological level. I had the honor of adding my own findings to one chapter of his book, *The Science of Nescience*.

Is it actually still the title of your book, Professor?”

Everyone turned to the Kenyan Professor who answered with his famous, thundering laughter:

“Your chapter, Anna, is the only one that I did not revise at least four times, like all the others. At this rate, the book is going to be ready in ten years. I did not even have time to think whether I should change that bloody, awkward title!”

At the end of the lecture, I went to see the Kenyan Professor, and asked him directly: “So, are you postponing your return to the *civilized world*?”

He looked at me carefully, as to understand the meaning of my question.

I had to remind him of our conversation in his office. Didn’t he say that he felt *one million lightyears closer from Pr. Richard than from Elleya*?

“Sure, I did. Actually, that was and will remain a great new topic of research for a long time.

We can marvel about the serendipity of it all!

Why did I suddenly want to go back to what I knew best?

‘Because, you may answer, at that point, I **doubted** I could accomplish anything practical, spiritual, philosophical in the Village.’

Right? You found rather logical for me to go back to the *civilized world*. After all, I **doubted** that any good could come out of the Village, for me. Am I right?”

For once, the Professor was actually expecting an answer from me.

It did come, after a few seconds of reflection, in the form of a bland: “Uh, I suppose, yes.”

“Why did that **doubt** become suddenly a reality in my mind? That **doubt** seemed, just a few days earlier, not temporary dormant, but forever innocuous! In other words, there was no **doubt** whatsoever. It did not exist!

Let me repeat that beautiful question, Exiled: *Why did that **doubt** become suddenly a reality in my mind?*

That is the difference between you, an inquisitive mind, and me, used to be slightly more analytical. You ponder about this “why,” while I am hit with a scrumptiously scientific “How!”

HOW is the National Anthem of all scientists!”

The Kenyan Professor was, by then laughing wholeheartedly. His tone became pressing:

“So, suddenly, I am confronted with this striking question: ‘HOW did **doubt**, from a non-existent stage, come to the forefront of my reality?’

For two weeks, almost without stopping, I wrote a groundbreaking (if I may say so myself) chapter on *doubting*: in what part of the brain does it occur; what areas it affects and how it operates...

Isn't it amazing that, with all my work on introspection, I had never seriously thought of really exploring the wonderful bout of self-doubt?

It happens to be an unexpectedly rich element in my field of study!

Of course, a real research facility, some top-notch associates, etc. are still desperately needed to mine efficiently that vein. But if you could come to the Garage Compound, I would love to run by you my new theories on the phenomenal process of introspection, this time approached from the angle of a *sudden, always violent blizzard of doubts.*”

XVII A Perpendicular History of Time

The very next evening, the Hall featured a lecture by Piotr, one of the people in charge of the Garage Compound.

Ben had the highest admiration for Piotr's "practical intelligence." He could understand and solve most mechanical and electrical problems in a record time...

After my first encounter with Piotr in the Garage, I was as curious as Ben to know about his philosophy.

Piotr did not look like any of the speakers at the Hall. He was a mountain of a man, the image of a Hun who would never smile. Even his tone of voice was gruff:

"Tonight, we are going to talk about Time.

People live typically in a chronological time. They are born, they die. In between, they weave a biography."

I found the verb *to weave* somewhat amusing. It did not really match the practical-minded Piotr.

That was the beginning of a series of surprises:

"Described like that, the human life is a depressing event, for the sole reason that humans are conscious of their limited time on Earth.

It is said that *knowing we're gonna die* is the origin of philosophy. For non-philosophers, it is just a loudly ticking, unstoppable clock, marking that the end of the game is not that far.

If a being lives without a consciousness of an end, it lives, period; while human beings share their lives with that most cumbersome roommate: the knowledge of their certain demise.

So, we evolve in the intellectual dimension where time is synonym of decay and death.

Why am I saying it is an *intellectual dimension*, if we all know that it is our stern reality, therefore our sole dimension?

I won't insult your *intellect* by reminding you that everything is *intellectual*. So, let's avoid wasting our precious *time*, and just think of another *intellectual dimension*.

Yes, we'll just think, since it is what we do at each moment of our life.

And we are going to imagine a non-chronological dimension. It is indeed much less intuitive but it is not that difficult.

Sometimes, "intuitive" is used to just cover what we know and take for granted. Shallow minds rely on pure intuition, the root of all superstitions."

Piotr heard some rumors of disapproval, which was extremely rare at the Hall, as the audience is required to be as broadminded as possible. But in the Village, quite a few people cultivated the "intuitive sense," very much like some *sixth sense*.

The idea of having a mysterious *sixth sense* was indeed rather appealing, and I personally wanted to probe their theories at some point, but never got around to doing it.

Piotr just ignored completely these grumblings, and continued evenly:

"In this dimension, I consider that at this *very instant*, I am the point of convergence of all the instants of my past *AND* all the instants of my life to come.

Here, the most important parameter and the most subtle also, is that all the connections to and from that *here and now* have truly no direction.

The ever-changing universe has frozen in an improbable snapshot where we can appreciate that non-directionality. It is like a line someone else drew. Did the person draw it from right to left or left to right? That information is not given.

So, that *here and now* does not descend towards my future, and if my memory is filled with events from my past, they have the reality of dreams. Well, I can also dream my future...

Essentially, in these specific coordinates of that particular dimension, the *here and now* is void of strict *causality*! It is in the center of a network of consequences and causes, once again, without any direction.

Let me illustrate that paradox, because thinking a dimension is an exercise that could be superior to any prayer or any meditation.”

Another wave of skepticism could be heard, but apparently not by Piotr, who continued steadily:

“The Big Band precedes the birth of our galaxy. But the birth of our galaxy figures in one of all the possibilities expressed in the Big Bang. As soon as our galaxy is, it loses its chronological polarity... since it is. The Big Bang and the birth of a galaxy become just connected events.

I must insist that such a way of thinking does require a little practice. Our minds evolve in a clearly Euclidean universe. You, my audience tonight, may be reluctant to start these intellectual meanderings, wondering how useful they could be.

Let me suggest that if humanity builds some new technologies, it naturally uses them. If humanity approaches new ways of thinking the universe, it naturally thinks them.

In order to think life and death and time, we do not need to have a PhD in philosophy. Nor do we need one in quantum physics or in astrophysics to brush our minds against the representations of unthinkable models, since they are truly mathematical, and not firmly imaginable.

Do not misunderstand me. I do not recommend that some artistic blur replaces what appeared clear and certain in a strict Euclidean model. What we are aiming for is for our minds to become more extreme. Even the apparent opposition between the two physics (quantic and relativist) leads us to conceiving that *reality* encompasses naturally these physics and more...

Let's use a telling shortcut, quite different from the Cartesian “I think, therefore I am.”

For us...”

After a strategic pause, Piotr stressed exaggeratedly:

“*We are what we think.*”

And after another pause:

“So, let's push the limits of our thinking, shall we?”

Let's go back to our grand scale comparison, with the Big Bang and the Milky Way.

For a linear chronology, obviously, the Big Bang precedes the Milky Way.

If we make the Milky Way our system of reference, and if we once again freeze a particular coordinate in spacetime, we see the galaxy somewhere between the Big Bang and the Milky Way's own disappearance. Three connected dots: a *single* event in that "snapshot!"

Of course, since you are a linear-thinking addict, you will protest that millions of galaxies exist. If we suppress the Milky Way (and its disappearance), the Big Bang still exists. If we suppress the Big Bang, nothing exists.

But you are forgetting that we are considering the Milky Way already created, and in a certain stage of its evolution. We said that "as soon as our galaxy is, it loses its chronological polarity... since it is." In that plan of reality, no chronological information is given. The coordinates do not go from one event to the next. We just observe that the Big Bang is simply connected to our galaxy and to our galaxy's disappearance.

At that point in spacetime, everything stops in an unattainable but not unthinkable "image freeze." What we "see" is the Big Bang, the Milky Way, its disappearance interconnected. They are all equally necessary in that point in spacetime since *they are* that point in spacetime.

I see that most of you consider that reasoning way too simplistic. I would of course agree with you. And I would even go one notch further in this childish simplification, with this silly riddle: *For the Milky Way to be created we need a Big Bang. Therefore, the Milky Way is the cause of the Big Bang.*"

After a long, noisy sigh, perhaps used as some type of snicker of self-mockery, Piotr continued:

"At this stage, we can now replace the Milky Way by an ant on this Earth, or by you and me. The whole history of the universe that has preceded you and the whole future history of the universe after your disappearance... meet at this point."

Piots stopped. However, his body posture did not change. He was going to continue his lecture. He seemed to be silently searching for something in the single page in front of him.

His tone was exactly the same when he curiously referred to the Mayor:

"You have all heard the Mayor telling the story that made him a believer: "*God said to His prophet Mohammed, 'If it was not for you, I would not have created the skies,'*" which meant, for the Mayor, that God situated all of us in regard to all of the Creation as the origin and the result...

If you think carefully about it, we just said the same thing without ever using the words "God" and "Creation." We talked about the connection of two or more events in the universe."

That last sentence was uttered differently. The tone was perceptibly more tentative.

Actually, the Mayor was in attendance. He grumbled something, but not loudly enough to be distinctly heard from where I was sitting. But he did not seem to care too much for Piotr's comparison.

This time, Piotr obviously heard the murmur coming from his public.

Later, in a private conversation with Ben, he regretted to have flinched; not to have confronted that disagreement and analyzed methodically why the parallel between two mental representations, two projections... was completely coherent, and even necessary. He lamented to have missed an opportunity to defend a "relativist perspective" of a beautiful Koranic sentence.

But during his lecture at the Hall, after a little hesitation, Piotr just cleared his throat, as to get back to firmer intellectual grounds.

He actually raised his voice:

"There is another way to talk about tonight's topic. We can distinguish between two Times.

Time is a central element in the Laws of Physics. It is measurable and to a certain extent, it can be used, since it figures in mathematical equations.

Laws of Physics cannot be felt, as Galileo can attest. They are measured, therefore communicated.

But Time has another nature. It lives in our psyche.

To paraphrase Galileo, if *mathematics is the language used to write the universe*, mathematics has a hard time describing the human psyche, which is able to analyze, contemplate, extrapolate, dream, meditate... So, Time inside the human psyche loses automatically its mathematical expressivity. If it can be explored, it can hardly be integrated in a communicable equation any better than any other abstract notion, like *beauty, empathy, gloom, love...*

How can we study the *mental time*, the Time lodged in our psyche?

Once again, we must have recourse to more thought experiments, realizing they are just controlled delusions that cannot prove much, since whatever we will encounter will not be quantified, therefore communicated and reproduced at will.

They are nonetheless useful because, and we must repeat it tirelessly, thinking is what humans do, and thinking boldly is what we need.

In the previous thought experiment, we imagined events situated in one plan where causality could not be inferred.

In this one...”

Piotr tilted his head as if he was looking at some cue cards on his right. Of course, there was nothing of the sort, but the odd lecturer had suddenly a monotonous tone, as if he was reading very fast a legal disclaimer:

“Some people chant, pray, meditate, circumambulate in a certain setting... After, they bellow about a “sacred present,” a “divine presence,” an illumination where “Time stood still...”

Now, others, like me, have great difficulties with these ideas. I do have an intellectual understanding about their literal meanings, but I find them all very... foggy.”

After that awkward introduction, Piotr went back to his normal tone, which suddenly seemed more personal!

“So, I go on a thought experiment. I plot in my mind some type of “perpendicular time.”

What is it? I define it. I compare it to the horizontal, chronological time. I give it attributes, properties... I would calculate it, but instead, I am doing something else, something that is going to shock you...

I look around me!

I look around me as if I could feel that *perpendicularity* in this very plane of existence. And for one instant or more, my reality seems somehow altered.

It does not last, since an intellectual representation tends to dissipate with the harsh tugging of reality.

But can anyone prove that this impression is essentially different from feeling a “sacred present” or a “divine presence”?

No need to answer, here...

What matters is that we think, that we *reflect*, we *explore*.

Thinking Time is not a futile exercise, because we are addressing an important element of our reality, a *bias* affecting the very subjective perception of our existence. And when we think deeply about it, when we question it in a new way – new as in a new perspective for us – we *affect* it. And our reality, our perception of our existence somehow shifts ever so slightly... or quite drastically, if we are so lucky!

We obviously do not affect the physical Time, as a person sitting next to us with a stopwatch, observing us in deep thoughts, could attest: “Nothing has changed; you have affected nothing at all.”

However, we did affect our mental Time, the one underlining our biography, great generator of anxiety, among other complications...”

After a short pause:

“I must acknowledge again that you may be more inclined to meditate *Time* in a religious manner, in a Buddhist or a Christian, or another “*spiritual*” paradigm.

I may actually be willing to consider that, somehow, some religious approaches could allow their least literal followers to durably *alter* the Euclidean Time, in their minds!

Their more literal worshipers and their least imaginative ones, those prisoners of sadly predictable thesis-antithesis-synthesis techniques of reflection, will never even fathom what we are talking about. Because there must be some form of shattering of the usual parameters, before we could access and refine the notions of Time, Love, Death, etc. already sketched in us.”

Piotr let out another noisy sigh that I interpreted again as some form of smirk.

He looked around him. Many people had their hands raised.

His eyes went back to his sheet of paper, as he spoke even more firmly:

“I am going to save you some time and ask myself the question that must drive you crazy: what is the use of training a mind to jump into a non-Euclidean dimension, if the body remains in it, in the dimension of *decay and death*? Like the person with a stopwatch next to me who says “you did not affect anything,” my own body ages and decays even if I could literally set forever my mind to think in a relativist mode.

So, indeed, what’s the use?

For me, I have already said it. It is simple but convincing enough: thinking is what humans do. Thinking boldly could actually relieve the most serious anxieties. There is nothing magical to it: thinking is an existential modifier.”

Piotr who had been mostly staring at the one scribbled page in front of him, looked directly at his audience to pronounce:

“If you are figuring that I am advising to put on pink or blue colored glasses to filter the reality, you have not really followed tonight’s lecture. No! Our method is to choose a *dimension* where we can project the *here and now* in order to *feel* it.

Using that empirical and arbitrary method certainly exposes me to your intellectual skepticism, or even contempt.

Here is my first line of defense: the system of reference is the only thing that matters in science as well as in any mental process.

I like physics. So I am bound to use an old cliché to illustrate what I just said: Newton's Laws of Gravity works very well for our everyday experience, less well at the level of particles.

If I had the patience, I would gather hundreds of examples in the fields of psychology, philosophy, sociology, even politics... to illustrate for you that it is the system of reference that determines any truth. Change the system of reference and the *truth*, as some type of immutable conclusion, becomes automatically inconsistent.

How can we choose a system of reference for *Time*, considering its dual nature?

It is not that important, if we keep in mind the relativity of whatever we choose; the absence of "objectivity" of our choice.

I mentioned earlier a *perpendicularity*, to oppose to the linear time. Why and why not a *perpendicularity*? But then again, it has not escaped your awareness that I have deliberately chosen the first person, singular, when I added: "I looked around me," trying to discern that *perpendicularity* in my reality.

That is how I can *feel* an abstraction. Not with my sense of vision or my hearing, actually, but by projecting the new intellectual *dimension* I have formatted, onto what I perceive of the reality."

Then, with an oddly warmer, more personal tone of voice which, at this stage, was quite unsettling for his listeners:

"In these waters, I must acknowledge that I do not swim very well at all. Just the words "*what I perceive of the reality*" can make any rational mind very queasy.

I would personally be in a world of despair – I am using these words without any embarrassment or exaggeration – if in this Village, people like the Kenyan Professor did not try to bridge the gap between a classical, scientific research, always resting on controllable, measurable, reproducible data... and "spiritual" *projections*, such as the *inner time*; or the *inner vacuum*..."

After a short pause, Piotr went back to his neutral lecturing of voice:

“Now, let’s just conclude by reviewing what time is. It has a lovely, mathematical, physical nature. And it has a tricky *meta*-physical projection also; where we use *meta* as a pun for its translation inside our psyche.

The fact that this *inner* time cannot be included as a variable in any mathematical equation paralyzes most contemporary thinkers. But here, many Villagers observe that if Time has several dimensions, then a human being should be interested in traveling them all.

So, in this lecture, we examined the inner time. Contrary to the “objective” one, studied in Physics, the inner time can be intellectually deformed and then, *projected* in our reality.

The deformation of the inner time is done in a specific, arbitrary *system of reference*. Human beings are given, as a default setting, so to speak, a chronological, Euclidean Time.

Willing to depart from it and explore other intellectual confines, I imagined a *perpendicularly* time. Some religions like to contemplate a *divine time*, or an *eternal time*. One day, I heard Elleya say something like: “*Time in its entirety is absorbed in this very Instant.*”

So, here we are, exploring, maybe imagining, Time as *perpendicular, divine, eternal, Instantly Absorbed, etc.* And then, we must project that mental notion onto our *reality*, which is altogether another *system of reference*.

To project a system of reference onto another system of reference forces us to reposition constantly both systems.

I have the feeling that if I ever accomplish a total correspondence between these systems, I would become one of the accomplished mystics you guys comment at length at the Hall... and who mean nothing to me!”

During a longer pause, Piotr took the page he had in front of him, looked carefully at it, as to make sure he had not forgotten anything, folded it and put it in his pocket.

He was going to step down and leave, but many people yelled they had questions.

He said coldly: “I don’t take questions.”

Then, a little less curtly: “I don’t, because I told you already all my answers.

My topic was not solely the *physical, measurable, mathematical time*. That part could be easily be presented by anyone, of course. That was not my purpose for being here tonight.

And now, for the representation of Time in our psyche, the only message I had for you was that rubbing our minds to great questions is... *time* adequately spent.”

That could have been as good a conclusion as any.

Actually, I felt a curious need to think thoroughly about what I had just heard about these confusing *systems of reference*.

But Piotr unwillingly spoiled himself this unexpected intellectual excitement.

Instead of leaving his listeners on a cerebral cliffhanger, he catered to a certain gratefulness and sense of guilt towards them.

He changed his tone of voice, trying to make it again slightly more personal in order to offer some odd “confessions:”

“When I was in the *civilized world*, I studied what they called the *exact sciences*, and just ignored *human sciences*.

I really despised philosophy, as a matter of fact. In my school, we called it *mental masturbation!*

However, in the Village, I had to revise that arbitrary judgment. Basically, here, I accepted the validity of asking questions, knowing that any potential answers will be temporary, conditional, contingent...

To the simple synonymy between *how* and *exact sciences*, I admitted it was pertinent to ask a *why*, corresponding to *philosophy*, as it is practiced in the Village.

I “switched camp and allegiance” the evening I found irresistible a Kenyan Professor’s quip, where he mocked a famous biologist who had shoved his theories and conclusions into the field of philosophy and spirituality. The Professor said:

‘Your PhD only means you are a data collector. If you want to think, reflect and philosophize, leave your degree at the door. You are just like anyone else, no more, no less.’

So, now I allow myself to insert philosophical questions to *exact sciences* topics. However, I must admit to be far from any type of satisfactory synthesis within my own existence.

So, on the topic of the *representation of Time in our psyche*, I presented you tonight with the *problem* and my hypothesis, which is not permanently confirmed in my own psyche.

So, since your guess is as good as mine and nothing can be verified, does anyone have another Time to propose, different than the *linear, perpendicular, divine, eternal* or “*Instantly Absorbed?*”

The hands that were raised dropped at once.

Piotr nodded: “Thank you for listening.”

Most of the audience stayed in the Hall after Piotr’s swift departure, commenting on what they had just heard.

Some people behind me were just amused: Piotr was indeed a special character.

Ben claimed rather loudly, so he could be distinctly overheard, that he was very impressed with the lecture.

Layla was more skeptical. For her, these intellectual *acrobatics*, these “stunts,” lacked purpose and soul.

She had this sudden idea: “You know what? I should really have a few conversations with your friend Piotr. He has a tremendous mind and an astonishing curiosity, but he’s so dry! I’m sure that nobody ever showed him how to tap on his natural poetry. Your friend should learn how to think more about love. That will dwarf time, vacuum and all the galaxies of the universe!”

I was almost facing Ben, and I saw his smile transform into a frozen, thin line. His enthusiastic demeanor disappeared at once, as he shrugged: “No. I know Piotr. He’s not going to accept your sermons, Layla.”

I could not help thinking: “Could the demon of jealousy be still lurking around?”

“Please? If you please...”

A man with a booming voice, standing at the speaker podium, brought some quiet back to the Hall.

That man had moved to the Village a couple of months after me and got the name “Newcomer Marte,” which may have implied the presence of some other *Martes* around us.

He addressed the audience: “Our speaker made some interesting points, but I fear he has confused various important concepts. But his confusion is secondary to a bigger contradiction, a huge no-no. He said that it did not matter what system of reference we could choose. He must know that such a position prevents not only any rational discussion, but also any true communication!”

Layla jumped up: “That is not at all what Piotr said. First of all, he did not “confuse any important concepts.” He linked them. Secondly, acknowledging that one single system of reference does not fit everything in the *inner* world does not mean that any truth goes, not the least!

Some intellectuals I know would phrase it like that: ‘You must define your paradigm, since there is no mathematical paradigm in the *inner* scale.’”

She glared quickly but pointedly at Ben before continuing: “I find it admirable that someone like Piotr, who has some type of weird resistance to *spirituality*, tries so hard to explore that part of his mind through logical thinking.

What Piotr has said, as I understood it, was that any path to explore one’s reality and *inner reality* is acceptable, provided we don’t elevate any result to the level of an objective proof. Everything has to remain *relative* or, to put in my humble, simple vocabulary, it has to remain *personal*.”

Newcomer Marte used his strong, beautiful voice to attempt a rebuttal of Layla’s intervention. He went back to expose the confusions perpetrated by Piotr, and asserted notably that a thought experiment will never lead to any type of contemplation of a spiritual nature.

According to him, thought experiments and contemplation were two different, irreconcilable mental processes.

At some point, he swerved abruptly to an interesting ellipse, which I actually wrote down, possibly to use in another context: “They say it is difficult to worship a concept. We may add: ‘It is difficult to conceptualize a meditation.’”

Layla decided the stage was not meant for tenderfoots in the Village. So, she left her seat to join Newcomer Marte. Facing him and the audience at the same time, she went on the attack:

“With all due respect, who made you an arbiter for deciding what thought process is worthy to be called ‘contemplation of a spiritual nature?’”

She did not leave him the opportunity to answer:

“I am going to give you a gift, for you and for everyone gathered here, a few verses you might enjoy:

“Your heart must be free from anthropomorphism as well as from agnosticism, indifferent to interpretations and exegeses.

Sometimes immaterial and transcendent, sometimes held down by the ties of this earth;

*Sometimes conscious, **sometimes not,***

*Knowing the two states in order to reach perfection within one state **and** within the other state.”*

Can you tell me in what century these verse were written? Was the author a psychologist, a philosopher, a bishop, maybe...?"

That time, she turned completely to the audience, preventing again any possible reply from Newcomer Marte:

"One or two centuries ago, the most enlightened scholars used to compare the concepts of "God," "good and evil," "virtues"... as they were pronounced in various centuries and places.

Nowadays, people like Piotr or the Kenyan Professor, and others elsewhere, compare ancient and contemporary "systems of references," looking for correspondences and translations rather than superiorities and inferiorities. These *enlightened* people also consider the historical patterns of human findings in all civilizations, with all their trials and errors.

They include, of course, the glut of scientific observations, conscious that one decade from now, some will transform into flawed theories, others into rudimentary ones, while a few may unexpectedly blossom into classical theorems!

In the meantime, make no mistake! Their goal is not to get to the best encyclopedic definition of a concept, but to widen its scope, to *relativize* it.

Piotr talked about *Time*. One of these days, someone else will talk about *joy*, comparing a so-called *mystical joy* to other types, described in literature, sociology, psychology...

And one listener, after such a lecture could very well be intellectually stimulated... only to be personally hit with a great bliss, making him or her sing and cry... The tremor of that experience would then dwarf all the previous intellectual discussions about *joy*.

Then, that person may wonder: *why talk at all?*

I used to think that people like Piotr were quite *useless*. For me, what mattered was the experience, not babbling about it.

But now, I realize that I was missing something extremely important.

Can we say that Piotr is an *intellectual*? Well, if you think, as I used to, that *intellectuals* are boasting to teach some type of pure wisdom, you will be gravely disappointed. What they do is *examine and communicate*. They are masters in trying to put in words what is extremely difficult to transmit from one human being to another.

I noticed that some people with a superior knowledge of the mind, like Elleya, strive to learn from *intellectuals* new tools for communication!

They are more than necessary! Think of my previous example of the listener who *feels* a tremendous joy. How would he or she relay it? He or she needs a clear voice.

Relatively recently, I kind of begrudgingly came to terms with this truth. I have almost always believed and professed that the inner way and the true, liberating philosophy are absolutely not intellectual; that “intellectuals” are a vacuous breed, very much full of themselves. However, they do know how to analyze, to define, to refute... and we need to acquire some of their techniques and arguments in order to explain who we are, thus to better communicate!

We are not just *isolated souls*. Or rather, we are *isolated souls*, and at the very the same time, we are like a cell of our society.

As rebellious as I want to be, if I eat, drink, have shelter, I do depend on other *cells*.

Jesus did not have an exclusive dialogue with his Father. Shakyamuni did not remain under the Bodhi Tree. Both of them went to their brothers.

That is why intellectuals with a very open mind, like Piotr and of course the Kenyan Professor are also essential.”

Ben whispered in my ear: “She is not kidding when she said she always hated intellectuals... like me. I had to eat so much crap. Now, listen to Ms. Compromise!”

I remarked, admiringly: “In a way, she sounds much more *intellectual* than you! But what is even more remarkable is that she went to war for someone she found ‘lacking purpose and soul.’ Imagine what she would do for someone she loves unconditionally!”

Ben shrugged.

Layla concluded before going back to her seat: “By the way, I quoted earlier some wonderful verses...

“Your heart must be free from anthropomorphism as well as from agnosticism, indifferent to interpretations and exegeses.

Sometimes immaterial and transcendent, sometimes held down by the ties of this earth;

*Sometimes conscious, **sometimes not**...”*

You may have recognized a translation from a 13th century Sufi poet.”

XVIII Asceticism And Sex

The day after Piotr's lecture, I finally went to visit Ben and Layla at their place:

"How long has it been?"

"At least a couple of months," answered Layla.

"Six weeks, I guess," said Ben.

"A lot has happened between us."

Ben proposed: "You know what? It may be better for you, buddy, to listen to Layla's version first. I'll give you mine some other time."

Layla replied firmly: "Nope! You are staying. As Anna Soertke would say, every day is a good day and an opportunity to know what the other one is thinking. Moreover, we need a catalyst for our communication, and Exiled is the best catalyst I can think of... Well, with all due respect, the second best catalyst, as you will hear."

I was much less enthusiastic. I could not help thinking that six weeks away from Ben and Layla's dynamics were not that long, although I did miss my two best friends in the Village; especially Layla, I can confess in these pages.

The *second best catalyst* had to endure an endless loop of "You start telling him. No, you start..."

I ended up intervening: "Layla, will you do us the favor?"

Of course, that prompted Ben to speak up first: "Well, Layla is right. A lot did happen in this short time. First, I was so fed up of not being able to control these negative feelings..."

“Jealousy,” clarified Layla, stressing carefully each syllable.

“I was so frustrated that I did decide to break up, although the thought of not being with Layla was equally unbearable. Our last recourse was to see Anna Soertke, but that time, together.”

“I accepted, even though I did not put a lot of stock in that meeting. But I was wrong. You should ask Mrs. Soertke for the transcript of that exchange,” suggested Layla.

“Yes, it was *textbook*... Thankfully, such a transcript does not exist!”

“Basically, during one single session, I understood Ben’s suffering at the same time that he understood my own. Actually, I had no idea that there was so much pain between both of us, as the only things I was truly conscious of, during all these months or maybe these years of turmoil, were my frustration, my anger, his impatience, his pedantry...”

“Yes, that realization was unexpected for both of us. I must add that I don’t agree with the terms *impatience* and *pedantry*. But I did see that I had become... a coward! However, thanks to our mediator, Anna, I did not dwell on it. I became intent on dealing, on reacting upon this sudden and less than flattering realization.”

“And I saw what a bitch I could be. But if that meeting was a small wonder, it did not magically erase our differences. We were only willing to address them.”

“I guess it would have been actually easier to separate, instead of choosing what we decided to do: holding each other’s hand to jump into something we were not really prepared for.”

“We said to each other: ‘You are not tied up to me. I allow you to explore and travel where you want. Will you be coming back to me?’”

“We both swore “Yes!” Very quickly, I went back to my youthful ways. Quite compulsively, I had in mind to sleep with as many women I could in the Village. In fact, my second experience happened to be with a woman with whom I had a wonderful sexual chemistry.”

“Ben’s sexuality is direct. Mine meanders here and here.”

Layla’s philosophy was always centered on the “here and here,” as she would touch intently her heart and her head.

“Making love is smiling, laughing, caressing, playing, kissing...”

Ben smiled: “Yes, my sexuality is certainly more direct!”

Layla shrugged: “Men are impatient.”

“Lots of women too, Layla. They want to feel physical pleasure, and they can be much more impatient and direct than me!”

“You seem to imply that I am not also into physical pleasure! You know very well that I am! But some people make love like they are giving a rock concert performance. For me, it’s...”

“A Mozart piano concerto,” interrupted Ben, indeed well-versed in Layla’s metaphors.

Layla tried a new comparison, in order to surprise her husband, maybe:

“Or a bestselling detective novel for Ben, compared to *À la recherche du temps perdu*, for me... Anyway, while Ben was reliving sexually his adolescence and his youth, I was wondering what I should be exploring.

So, I went to see Elleya. It was not the first time she told me something like “*Where a person places her reality, what she stares at... that is her world, her god, her everything...*” But that time, transposing that concept into my own situation seemed obvious.

What I wanted was to love, not a special person, or a quantity of different persons. It is common to use the expression *to be in love with love*. Well, for me, love is such a divine, supernatural force, that it is almost a sin to reduce it to what people usually do to it!

I wanted love’s asceticism.

So, after seeing Elleya, I made up my mind. I was going to *fall* in love and live in a *fallen* state.

I was going to fall in love with too young a man and his devastating smile; with an older woman who had the most courageous life; with a saffron- smooth skinned, beautiful girl; with a singer whose voice one time broke and moved me, from then on...

But if I could fall in love for a smile, the color of his or her hair, a scent... why would I not *fall* also for hazy or even grey landscapes, for the color of the ground, a glimmer in the clouds, the whispers of the trees at dusk? Why wouldn’t I equally fall in love for everything that reveals itself to my hesitant soul, when I wake up, each morning? Why wouldn’t I fall in love, every time I am miraculously saved from the nightmarish ghouls of uncertainty, and from all the confused fears coming from my ancestors?

So, that is what I was finally pushed to do: to forever *fall* in love; to be transported, to smile and laugh when the beloved would be near. But how would I cry and hope, when the beloved would go away!

I would try to savor that darkest blizzard. If my beloved would want to be with me, I would be transported in Heaven, dancing and playing...

And if my beloved would happen to be impatient and not willing to flirt, dance, play, I would see that my heart breaks into pieces, only for a greater consolation from Eternal Love, which mysteriously dries tears and heals wounds.”

“In the meantime, I fucked my head off,” concluded Ben.

That bluntness horrified me, but I was even more shocked to see both Ben and Layla laughing with a complicity I had never seen between them.

XIX) Are Orgasms Considered In a Tenure Track?

Fate followed curiously the very topic of the boundaries within a couple, as I received the visit of Djalma soon after my reconnection with Ben and Layla.

After exchanging a few pleasantries, Djalma asked me if I would be interested in spending a few nights with Philomena's mother, who curiously happened to like me.

In the *civilized world's* big cities where I had spent most of my life, the rhythm of daily events seemed chaotic. In the Village, the tempo appeared much slower of course, but also much more *implacable*, so to speak, as if great bewilderments were always waiting to pounce on its inhabitants.

Djalma summarized for me his routine. Work, the *Music Temple*, the *Church* and a variety of other social activities filled his days. But recently, he had to take on a lot of night shifts at the Hospital. As for Philomena's mother, her own usual workload had also increased, since her daughter had to travel to the *civilized world*, for some emergency, leaving her with many more time-consuming responsibilities.

Djalma concluded: "When I stay at the hospital, I am able to have a little physical tenderness from some colleagues, here and there. But my beloved does not have that luxury; hence, her request. If she did not ask you herself, it is because she is very much stuck at the Commune these days. And since you are on my way to the Hospital..."

I shook my head and summed up the situation with incredulity: "Philomena's mother told you to ask me if we could have some *physical tenderness*, while you are not available?"

“We hardly see each other, these days! She and I talked about it. Actually, I was the first to mention your name. She agreed right away. There is something in you she likes a lot.

Anyway, I am already late for my shift. If you are free some nights after 9 PM, go to our place. If you see me there, it'll be great to visit with you, my brother. If I'm at the Hospital, which is most likely, just make yourself comfortable.”

Djalma hugged me goodbye.

My first night with Philomena's mother was far from what I expected.

As I went to her place I could not help thinking of Ben and Layla. I must confess I was very much ready for some sexual intimacy and, when Philomena's mother opened her door, Ben's direct approach looked quite reasonable and appealing to me.

However, my hostess made me some tea, asked me about my life, and if I had solved the *jealousy conundrum*, as that was my preoccupation when we met, the first time.

She seemed to be indeed a woman sharing Layla's *rulebook* of love, where the physical part had to be preceded by a lot of *here* (the heart) *and here* (the head). *Ben's way* took naturally a backseat.

I have thought for a very long time about the way to describe that first night with Philomena's mother. Just a few lines were too difficult to write for me. And a whole, detailed chapter could appear incongruous in this “Physics of Particulars.”

I decided that my next book would be devoted in its entirety to that single night, with each chapter centered on one surprise.

In the meantime, here is an episode that happened technically at the very end of the night, bridging into the next few days.

At that point of my first night with Philomena's mother, I happened to be very relaxed and in an excellent mood.

I playfully quoted what Djalma told me once: being (intimate) with Philomena's mother was “like being with a sexy Elleya with whom he could make love!”

I found the sentence very funny. But my hostess asked without a shadow of a smile: “What does that reveal?”

As I was carefully choosing my words about her sex-appeal, she answered herself: “It reveals Djalma’s perception.”

“I guess. Okay.”

“Do you know the proverb: *When the disciple is ready, the master suddenly appears?*”

“Of course!”

“Well, understood literally, it is not a very inspiring saying. It would put the disciple in the frustrating position of remaining in some form of lookout for the master: “Am I ready, now? Where are you?”

No, the proverb means that when the disciple is ready, he or she can understand. The master may come or not, since the one who understands becomes in some ways like the master.”

Slightly tired, and still in a more lighthearted frame of mind, I needed some clarification.

She obliged: “Think about Djalma. He was so open, so ready to understand what he was looking for, that spending a night with me was like spending the night with Elleya. Elleya is not known for any sexual prowess, but for spiritually enlightening his/her listeners. Therefore, the comparison tells you that Djalma could have spent the night with a man, a woman, a complete stranger... As open as he was, he would have found the same conclusion.

I am going to tell you something more radical. If that night, Djalma had not spent the night with anyone, he would have claimed that God, or a supernatural light, had appeared to him!”

The next morning seemed to me truly *enchanted*. I naturally held Philomena’s mother responsible for the phenomenal beauty I perceived all around me.

Objectively, it was a sad, rainy morning. And since my own, questionable spirituality could not have transmuted that gloomy setting into any type of *magical* place, Djalma’s beloved companion was undoubtedly the cause of it!

Unfortunately, she had already left for the Commune.

I had to wait a couple of days before I could mention to her *the wondrous morning after*.

By then, Philomena's mother did not know what I was talking about: "Sorry, Exiled, but I don't understand what has puzzled you so much. Don't take it the wrong way: I have a very fond memory of our time together, of course..."

"Basically, you were saying that whatever we feel comes from us, never from the other one."

"Did I say that?"

I explained that the morning after our first night together, I felt something... exceptional and rare!

Curiously, a variation on a biblical image came to me, as I tried to define that sensation:

"I remember that a poet, whose name I have unfortunately forgotten, compared his own poetry to the "Dance of David," where David would dance and make a fool of himself, but *for God's delight*. Well, let's say that *the wondrous morning after*, I felt like dancing in the grey and rainy Village, which looked to me like a quarter of Heaven!

And God knows I never, ever dance! You were responsible for this! No matter what you said, it did not come from me, but from you!"

She appeared sincerely stumped.

The first words she pronounced were: "Theresa de Avila."

It was my turn to appear stumped!

I had to wait another 24 hours before we could resume our conversation.

Philomena's mother apologized: "Yesterday, after I finished what I had to do, I tried to get a picture of Bernini's famous statue of Theresa de Avila, but I could not access the Internet at the right time."

Smug, I boasted: "I know that sculpture very well. One of my professors, at my university, did a memorable lecture about it.

The sculpture showed very well, almost graphically, Theresa's condition."

"What do you mean by *her condition*?"

I had to laugh: "I really have no idea how Theresa de Avila could come to your mind when I mentioned our first night together!"

"What do you remember of the sculpture?"

“It illustrates very well the infamous description where she saw an angel.”

“An angel of fire.”

“In the angel’s hand, there was a sword.”

“Also of fire.”

“And he stabbed her several times. And she was in great pain and pleasure at the same time. Bernini depicted marvelously the image of a woman’s rapture.

For our professor, there was no ambiguity: the sculpture was about physical pleasure; a purely sexual impulse overwhelming the saint lady’s body, but thwarted by the crushing weight of the Church taboos and guilt. For him, Theresa was an intelligent, sensitive and sensuous woman confronted to the castrating ignorance of the men of her time. Her poetry testifies of a repressed feminine sexuality.”

Philomena’s mother did not seem the least impressed by the feminist interpretation of my professor... nor by my knowledge of the topic, and my rather precise memory of a class attended some twenty years earlier!

“Although I could not find the picture of Bernini’s sculpture, I tried to memorize for you her famous lines:

“He thrusted the iron’s point into my heart and pierced my very entrails. He left me all on fire with a great love of God. The pain was so great, that it made me moan; and yet so surpassing was the sweetness of this excessive pain.”

I pounced triumphantly: “You see? It is exactly what my teacher was saying about a *repressed feminine sexuality!*”

Philomena’s mother shook her head: “Theresa stressed it was a spiritual feeling, even though the body **also** experienced it.”

“She wouldn’t be conscious it was a repressed sexual experience, would she?”

“I grant you, Exiled, that your professor’s conclusion sounds reasonable. However, his personal explanation deprives us completely of something that could be the chore of Theresa’s experience. His is an interpretation, and just that. If it happens to be a partial reading of something incredibly difficult to express, your professor arbitrarily brushed it off: for him, the *whole* experience finds its roots in a deep, literally hysterical, sexual frustration.

It is convenient for him to find that clear, societal, simple cause to Theresa’s lyrical expression of a spiritual dimension she may have reached.”

“I don’t see why it would be *convenient for him*. After all, if you cannot find a more accurate one, I’m not sure why you are so dismissive about my professor’s interpretation, by far much more plausible than any other analysis of her text.”

Philomena’s mother proposed: “What if her extraordinary emotion came from another cause?”

“Like a real Angel of God, a Seraphim, maybe?”

My sarcasm was thick enough.

“Perhaps, yes... Or perhaps it was another perception of her reality? What if, with what she called “her faith,” she had opened so wide her heart and her mind, her sense of self, that she had the impression that the entire universe (a universe she deemed divine, since she was a nun) was entering her consciousness?

Of course, her definition of *consciousness* was not exactly the concept we understand today...

So Theresa may have experienced her *consciousness*, which she may very well have felt and named *her heart or her inside*; overwhelmed by the dazzling reality, which she may have felt and called *divine*.”

It felt good to use more cool sarcasm: “Speaking of arbitrary interpretation...”

“You mean that I am also speculating? Who does not? Your professor is not Theresa, is he?”

Do you think he knows her because he has read some random translation of a few lines she wrote many centuries before we were born; or because he contemplated a sculpture made almost one century after the saint’s death?”

I shrugged: “Your guess is as good as mine or his.”

“I don’t think so. We established that Theresa may have experienced what she called *her heart or her inside* overwhelmed by the dazzling reality she called *divine*.”

“We established it?”

“The image of the angel with the sword is a classical illustration for her era, a striking simile for something infinitely disturbing, but sacred.

Be more Theresa than your professor, Exiled! Be Theresa, and as her, you are going to pray. But your prayer is not a vocalization of sacred texts. It is an ascent.

Also, you are a woman. Don’t fantasize right away on a repressed sexuality. More prosaically, you happen to have some intelligible preoccupations. Surely a couple of troubling or tragic memories, come to your mind, still unsettled... They can be accompanied by a certain anxiety due to a Bishop of the Inquisition who has read literally, erroneously your poems and accuses

you unjustly, ominously. By sheer association, you recall that some opponents to your projects for opening a new monastery have slandered your intentions. Plus you may have some uncomfortable, physical ailment...

Now, you are a woman of flesh and bones, of pains and concerns. Of course, you are much more, and during your prayer, you will turn off one by one all these “demons,” and even your physical pain. But there is no electrical switch for doing so, but a swirling abandonment, a progressive disappearance... At a certain stage, the *dazzling reality*, we imagined, overwhelms you. And you use all the liturgical images you know, in order to describe to others something you do not quite understand or know. You have to call it “God,” or, if you are not sure, something divine...”

“Like an angel?”

“Well, would you be more comfortable if, rather than using the image of an angel, you would declare that God has dissolved your being into Him; that God (*the universe as you perceived it*) had overwhelmed your consciousness (*entered your heart, your entrails...*)?”

Wouldn't it be a formulation even more scandalous that the fire angel and his sword?

Anyway, you must always be reminded that the expression of what you are experiencing has to be painted with elements gathered by a 16th century nun. You, Exiled, and your professor are the beneficiaries of five centuries of global philosophical terminologies...

Then, you will perhaps admit that your poem is reflecting the tipping of your consciousness into a profound realization that is about to change your entire life?”

“Could we go back to talking about Theresa as herself, and not as me being her?”

“Fine! What I wanted you to see is that Theresa de Avila is describing essentially something impossible to communicate.

Since it is *impossible to communicate*, your professor is going to pounce on something easier to grasp, located at the periphery of what Theresa is recounting. What he says may not be wrong. It is just incomplete... and spiritually almost irrelevant...”

Philomena's mother paused, maybe to calm herself down a little? She concentrated in her “tea ceremony.”

The magical feeling that she had originally triggered, and that prompted the curious parallel with Theresa de Avila seemed very distant, and no longer pertinent. I was by then less grateful about a wondrous time seemingly provoked by Philomena's mother, and rather resentful about her callous treatment of my beloved college professor, Dr. Paul.

I could hardly wait for the end of the “ceremony” to counterattack:

“You said that my professor was not Theresa. Neither are you! The fact you are a woman does not make you more knowledgeable about a 16th century nun...

And actually, the image of the moaning nun transpierced by a sword of fire is still more sexual than spiritual, no matter what you’re saying.”

Philomena’s mother took her time to answer. Her tone of voice was lower, her rhythm slower.

It did cross my mind that it was the tone she used sometimes with her grandchildren.

“Well yes, we are closer to Theresa than your professor.”

She knew her answer with that weird “we” would irritate me. She continued:

“All I said was that your professor lived a few centuries after Theresa wrote these lines. He had a man’s body, was afflicted with a well-meaning but rather literal mind. And in front of an admirable account of a spiritual experience, he only saw a hysterical incident, some type of repressed, physical orgasm, hormonally induced, and catalyzed by the surrounding male chauvinism, totally prevailing, in her days.

But could he fathom that Theresa’s consciousness, so wide opened to another dimension, may have caused also a physical reaction in herself, rather than the opposite, as your professor inferred?”

I repeated with a harsher tone:

“Seriously? The fact you are a woman would give you the certitude that your speculations are closer to the truth than someone who has spent a lifetime studying that topic?”

“Well, Theresa was not only a woman from another century. She had also trained her mind or her brain, if you prefer, in a way quite unfamiliar to your professor...”

I hardly listened to her answer to launch:

“Yeah? You would be more familiar than he was, about a 16th century Carmelite nun? Where did you get that familiarity?”

“You know my way of seeing reality; my own *philosophy*, as we say in the Village. A couple of times, I have used some daring images to describe it. Are you positive, Exiled, that your college professor, reading a few lines describing these images, wouldn’t have seen in them a sex-starved author?”

I could not help laughing at the incongruity of that argument.

Philomena’s mother did not stop:

“How does your professor make love?”

“What?”

“Can a delightful presence set him close to a physical orgasm? Is he able to experience a wide variety of different orgasms in a row?”

Oh, I forgot. For him, these things do not exist. They are triggered by female hysteria, aren't they?

Why are you laughing now, Exiled?”

“Forgive me. That is just funny; almost ridiculous. Only women can talk about women? What else? We should prohibit any man to become gynecologist!”

“Well, when we study a text, we can certainly be aware of the circumstances surrounding its creation. But for philosophical, spiritual matters, there is another learning process involved, more experiential.

I do project the text into the tapestry of my own experience. That is what counts. My reflection about Theresa de Avila is not aimed at boasting a peculiar knowledge of who she was, but at acquiring a better knowledge of myself.

I let her words, her images, even the sculpture of Bernini induce new shapes in my mind.

I will never have a PhD in 16th Century History. But I do listen to Theresa's teaching. What they open in me may not be what she meant to show, but there is nonetheless a tear in me, an opening. I am not a specialist in Carmelite spirituality. I am a specialist in my spiritual discoveries. Did your professor follow Theresa to ascend to his very own mediation? Did he use her poems and what she called her *prayer* like a flashlight to roam around his own Tenebrae?”

After a few minutes of silence, I thought out loud:

“In a way, you think like Piotr.”

“Who is Piotr?”

A few hours later, Philomena's mother woke up and asked me: “Why aren't you sleeping, now, Exiled?”

“I am still not convinced about your interpretation of Theresa de Avila...”

However, I am still completely baffled by the fact that Theresa de Avila came to your mind, when I told you that being with you was... magical. Djalma and I agree on that.

Still, what on earth is the connection, here?"

With a sleepy voice, Philomena's mother answered: "Isn't it obvious? I have already mentioned that, if I was not there that famous night, if you had been by yourselves, you (and I could say the same thing for Djalma) were so open that you would have had a sensation very much like Theresa de Avila described."

"You are surely joking."

"Not at all! If I participated to your experience, it was only because of our interaction. Clearly, it was not because of me, but because of me in your mind, heart, hope... You somehow allowed the *magical moment* to happen.

I can give you a rather tactless proof.

You don't mind?

Well, I slept with many more men... who did not feel at all what you have described. Therefore, your part in it cannot be diminished. It has to come to the forefront to explain the *magical moment* between us.

You would be gravely mistaken in seeing in that *moment* something external to you. If it was literally *the spell of a good witch*, please consider that you did anoint me *good witch*.

So, it also came from you.

That is why I can say with confidence that you could have opened up the same way with anyone or any circumstance. You could have felt an angel of fire, killing you softly and terribly..."

"So, any incident would have triggered that rare emotion? It is just my openness that would make it *extraordinary*? I certainly don't agree with that."

I was about to defend my point, but Philomena's mother begged me: "Fine. Will you allow me to rest a bit? I have a very early day, tomorrow."

XX) Public Speaking Sparring

About three weeks prior to giving my own lecture at the *Hall at Night*, I started to go to the *Shul* on a daily basis. I had decided it was there that I could find the true pulse of the Village.

Unfortunately for me, the regulars I met during that period of time were mostly interested in technical aspects of meditation, like the repetition exercises, the breathing disciplines. There was also a fierce wave of debates on vegetarianism versus carnism, etc.

None of it was extremely inspiring for my presentation or even my own interests.

But there were also some exchanges that I found most intriguing. I ended up not using any of them directly for my lecture, but I took nonetheless a great amount of notes that I revisited later, and that helped me answer some personal questions...

For instance, one day, before 7 AM, a man working in the community farm asked the three people in the room for the permission to read a few lines:

“In the region of the intellect, there is a mental vision where, without any discursive process, there is a coincidence of unity and multiplicity; of the dot and the line; of the center and the circle... It is the opposition of opposites...”

Plato, saw a unique Being, an ontological unicity... He spotted the One in Itself in a passive state, so to speak. He separated and took away everything from the One. Contemplated in such a way, the One is not being and not nothingness. It is not even One. Moreover, saying that “The One is One” is not accurate, since the copula “is” cannot be applied to the One. No formulation is ever appropriate, since it always refers to an alterity or a duality, which are inappropriate for the One.

Thus, the Principle of all beings and states of being are unqualifiable, since it does not identify solely with any being or state of being. Therefore, it cannot be called the Principle, which can be named. It will always precede anything namable. That is why we must deny that It is, as well as It is not, as It precedes anything that can be thought."

The man asked what we thought of that text. A woman sighed:

"It is a difficult piece. We should listen to it a few times. I would prefer to read it, rather than listening to it, actually."

The other person in attendance, a young, athletic man found it very obscure, and thus, useless.

I said, half-jokingly: "I bet it is a 20th century Western intellectual commentator of some Hinduist sacred books!"

The man shook his head: "It is a 15th century German Cardinal, Nicolaus of Cusa."

"Interesting! I have never even heard his name. But why did you read us these paragraphs?"

"If I had to describe my own vision of the universe in its entirety, I would have written exactly that text."

His three listeners echoed a couple of non-committal "Interesting, indeed!"

The man explained, slightly more hesitantly: "I discovered recently a couple of books of this rather little-known theologian. I read them with great anticipation.

Now, I cannot make sense of the great admiration I feel for the lines I just have read you and that I know by heart... and the deep disgust for his other opinions expressed in these two books, really narrow-minded and racist theories not worthy of anyone's time."

The four of us engaged then into an animated conversation on the following topic: one thinker can have a brilliant idea, but can also err in the common mistakes of his time and place...

Our ambivalent admirer of Nicolaus of Cusa reflected at the end: "This theologian could approach with his meditation the sublime limits of *a consciousness*, as I see it. However, when he came back *in the century*, as they say, and in his case, *in his century*, he went back to the blindness of his time, in regard of the essential equality of men...

I wonder if we are not, currently, in this very century, committing the same errors, when we go back to our everyday lives. Don't we err the same way, no matter how deep our... meditation could have been?

In other words, a reflection, a meditation, a spiritual experience mean nothing if we look around and notice that we are still surrounded, but not extremely bothered by the injustices of our time.”

I did not care for his conclusion, and refuted it right away: if we were to wait for a world without injustice to explore one’s spirituality, we can forget about any spirituality!

The young man and the woman seemed more on the fence and just repeated a few more of these “Interesting, indeed!”

The Ambivalent Admirer of Nicolaus of Cusa was not the belligerent type. He listened to me, looking even more indecisive.

I eventually found with a compromise: “A stupid statement does not invalidate a wise one, uttered by the same person. Also, the existence of current injustices should not be an indictment against our spiritual discoveries.”

The Nicolaus of Cusa’s Ambivalent Admirer voiced his agreement.

However, just before I left the *Shul*, he whispered in my ear: “A spiritual experience means nothing if we are surrounded, and not infinitely bothered by the injustices of our time.

Finding the pot of gold is fine and dandy. But what will you do with it? Some will keep it and spend it all for their comfort. Nicolaus of Cusa shared it solely with people of his close family. I guess I would rather share it with all my human brothers and sisters.

However, I don’t know how.”

The next day, I went to the *Shul* late in the afternoon. There were about fifteen people of all ages, and the moderator was, oddly enough, the youngest of them. He may have been 16 or 17 years old. He had the participants tell a typical element of the *civilized world* they were glad not to have to face, in the Village.

The topic was a very successful one, as everyone was engaged. The young man had a talent for asking questions, perhaps sometimes naïve, but leading to elaborate answers.

One person, because of a negative experience, associated the *civilized world* with physical violence; several others with a desperate solitude and the dreadful indifference of neighbors and passerby; a few with deception...

A lady, who, I learned later, was the moderator's mother, said: "I will not miss the *civilized world's* conformism."

That remark seemed to puzzle her own son.

She explained: "My nephews wanted to have certain sneakers. If you asked them, they were being *original* in their choice! Like all the most popular boys in the school!

I do not miss fashion, gossips, reality TV... Actually, the expression *reality* TV has always baffled me. All of TV, all the media, even the news... can be called *distorted* reality, in a way."

She turned toward the moderator: "But we came here when you were still a child, and now, growing up in the Village, you could care less about sneakers, as long as your shoes do not have a hole in their sole... In class, you are taught math and sciences, but philosophy, also. You play basketball and volleyball, but you love to debate with your "political team." When you listen to music, you are hardly influenced by commercials and hype from who knows what..."

Someone objected: "Your son is influenced, nonetheless. Maybe not by TV or magazines, or the social networks... But don't think he is only 'his own person.'"

An older woman said that sentence, perhaps a quote: "*But the things come into existence only when our neighbor confirms them with a smile. And what he does not envy, we forget them oh so easily!*"

I noticed that, at the *Shul*, one of the most illustrated themes, maybe one of the most popular, and all things considered, the least debated or controversial, was the formidable prevalence of the *diversity of perspectives*. I heard it referred a couple of times as *the Rashomon paradox*, although no one remembered exactly the Ryūnosuke Akutagawa's story. Basically, one single event is perceived differently by the various people who have witnessed it. Their account of the event could be actually in complete opposition, even though none of the participants had the feeling to be lying.

Once, a Village Builder (a worker in the construction field), who used to make films in the *civilized world*, found an original variation on that topic:

"A man came to me once, when I was an efficient producer/director. He told me how distraught he was when a certain character died in one of my movies. He saw the reality we presented him while, when I went back to my experience of the character, that was for me a couple of verbal fights in the writer's room, a tedious struggle to find the right actor, the affair the actor playing that character had with one of the stand-ins and the problems that followed, the character's swan song requiring an incredible number of useless takes, the elimination of the whole sequence in

the second edited version, its rebirth in the final cut... Not one of my memories of that character's death was truly related to the emotion mentioned by that fan.

That, in my opinion, describes well what reality is. The character is not solely defined by what the fan describes or what I remember of it. It is his vision, mine, and certainly more..."

I thought that variation on *the Rashomon paradox* was a compelling one.

However, a young woman took suddenly the movie topic to another direction:

"Once, I saw a very upsetting film about animals. There was a dog massacre that, to this day, haunts my nightmares. I hate when filmmaking aims at that type of manipulation.

I was so upset that my dad bought the complete DVD, so I could watch a segment about the special effects in the movie, and how none of the trained dogs was injured. They even showed a fight scene where dogs were just playing. But the scene, shown at a different speed, with plenty of fake blood and superimposed horrible growls, transformed it into an unbearable carnage.

In my opinion, that renders the action of the filmmakers even more despicable. They transformed a playful scene among dogs in order to upset us by the vision of a massacre. Why playing with the viewer's emotions?"

The Village Builder answered quickly: "What is a good storyteller? It is someone who can take you into his or her description. You don't want to listen to something that bores you, do you?"

"If the storyteller wants me to listen to a good story and uses his talent to hook me, that is art. But if the storyteller just wants to scare me gratuitously; or if he tries to reduce me into becoming a macabre voyeur, that is just an evil, useless manipulation."

Someone intervened: "Life is upsetting. If a scene in the movie is upsetting, it is just because we know it can happen in reality."

"As you said, life is upsetting. Why do we need to be upset in our spare time?"

Someone else responded, perhaps facetiously: "If you can master the painful feelings raised in you by a movie, perhaps it can help you in real life?"

The moderator of the day took seriously the previous question. She added enthusiastically: "The viewer is following the reality on the screen while having his or her own reality. Isn't it a great example of the multiplicity of what we perceive, which is truly how we define ourselves at any given moment? We may see several things displayed by the film, while being with the person on the right or on the left, a noise behind, some food we're eating, a thought that comes to us... Of course, our consciousness wants to focus on one thing at a time. But what if you could take it all in, at once?"

Another person agreed, reminding us again of *the Rashomon Paradox*, and stressing the fact that cinema illustrates wonderfully that multiplicity of perspectives.

A woman had a slightly more critical take: “The accumulation of the same situations in the movies and in real life, makes us somewhat jaded.

‘Are you a newlywed elated in your bliss? The world has seen many others. The world has seen an infinite number of nuptial feats’”

A visibly older woman replied: “Yet, if you cannot see the newness of each instant, life will seem to you quite pathetic.”

The Village Builder addressed the young, sensitive woman who had criticized the art of cinema: “In my opinion, your exaggerated reaction needs to be addressed and discussed, not what has provoked it.”

As the moderator sensed the debate was going to become personal, she intervened: “A child looks in awe at the magician who makes a rabbit appear in front of her. Now, he makes a tiger appear. If the child is scared, and cries, is the trick a success?”

The ex-cinematographer answered without any hesitation “Yes!”
Others disagreed.

Initially, I reluctantly made a note about this bearded man, with a brown turban on his head, who was sitting alone in the *Shul*, very late one night.

At the time, I thought that what he said was moderately puzzling and completely uninteresting for my upcoming lecture at the Hall.

However that rather insignificant encounter led to a mystifying development with one of my dearest friends, something I ought to analyze more thoroughly some day.

That night, I started the conversation by asking this elderly, apparently taciturn gentleman a lighthearted: “So, you cannot sleep either?”

“I don’t have to sleep.”

“No? How is it possible?”

“In our brain, there are also receptors absorbing the subtle waves coming from what has preceded by an eternity the Big Bang and what will remain after the end of times.”

“Really? Could you repeat that, actually?”

“In my estimation, the receptors are located at the crux of stressed awareness, poetical sentience, deep sleep, common reality plus what is on the fringes of the perception of that said common reality. So, when the subtle-waves receptors are on, you don’t need a real sleep.

These receptors open a channel to what I call the Void.

Some in the past did not see any receptors but the Void recognizing, thus becoming the Void.

Hence, my question for you: does it devour you or do you indeed absorb it?”

Did the strange man mistake the baffled look on my face for some vibrant intellectual interest?

He continued: “And I have another question for you. What is deep sleep when you mix it with what surrounds you?”

I couldn’t help letting out a little smirk: “That is just impossible. If you are in deep sleep, you are not conscious of what surrounds you.”

“No, no! That, my young friend, is the Void and its Inseparable Membrane of Potential and Action. Nothing is stable, not even the Void, since it is part of the process of Being or, to say it more carefully, of *Becoming*.”

I tried to humor him: “These are indeed excellent questions!”

And I left soon after.

What was more interesting happened a few days later, when I jokingly told Djalma and Philomena’s mother about my encounter with that strange turbaned man at the *shul*.

I finished with this succinct conclusion: “What a nutcase!”

Djalma had me describing very precisely the weird fellow.

Afterwards, my friends looked at each other. It appeared to me that Djalma was ready to burst into laughter, but he did not dare because of Philomena’s mother curiously stern demeanor.

Djalma only repeated with a fake neutral tone: “A nutcase, uh? You really think so?”

And Philomena’s mother changed quickly the topic of the conversation.

Of course, my curiosity had awakened. A few days later, I brought to Djalma's attention the topic of the turbaned man, and asked him if I had imagined that Philomena's mother appeared somewhat uncomfortable.

Djalma gave me the long version of an answer:

"You know that my beloved does not go any longer to the *Hall At Night*, even though her own daughter is in charge of it. One day, Philomena asked me to help her. That night, your friend, this very gentleman, whose name could be something like Djadawah, talked about Epicurus and his "ascetic" way of being, truly at the antipodes of what the shallow seekers of pleasures called "Epicurean," in the *civilized world*. I can't remember exactly what terms he used. Was it something like "Syrenaiques," "Ataraxia," maybe, or "Aponia?"

Do you recognize any of these words, Exiled?"

"No, but I can guaranty you that this guy at the *shul*, was not Epicurean. His nonsense had nothing to do with Epicurus's philosophy."

Djalma shook his head: "You can be a specialist of Epicurus, while your personal philosophy is not strictly Epicurean, Exiled!

Anyway, this Djadawah talked about *ataraxia* or *aponia*, or whatever obscure word on "ia"... so beautifully, and it sounded so much like something my beloved would say, that I invited him home."

"You did?"

"Yeah! Something strange happened, then. My beloved made her usual tea ceremony and our guest seemed happy and grateful.

Then, politely, she said: 'Djalma was impressed by your philosophy. Do you mind telling me about it?' He answered with modesty that he was, as I told you Exiled, just talking about Epicurus, not about his own philosophy, although he was very indebted to the Greek philosopher.

Of course, my beloved asked him about *his* personal philosophy.

At that point, it was very late, and my day had been very strenuous.

So, I dozed off. And when I woke up, I was surprised to see my beloved like I had never seen her. She was more than upset. She was a little like... panicked."

"Panickeed? And you're going to tell me that you slept through the whole thing and even today, you have no idea about what he told her?"

“Exactly. Later, when I asked her, she sidestepped: ‘Nothing happened. He talked vaguely about things I did not understand. Consequently, I can’t remember much of it...’

But now, Exiled, you have met the guy, and he told you something he didn’t say during his lecture on Epicurus. Suppose that he not only talked about the Void, but that he showed it somehow, to my beloved...”

“How could he do such thing?”

“You are more intellectual than my beloved, Exiled. She’s wired differently. Let’s just imagine that she could fathom a glimmer of the Void that Djadawah pointed at...”

“Okay... But why would she freak out?”

“She was not expecting it.”

I was far from being convinced. Djalma proposed:

“Suppose I tell you that you will find yourself in a place of total darkness where you would lose your sense of gravity. You understand the concept, but when you are in the dark room without light or gravity, you cannot help but panic before you get back your bearings, somehow.”

I protested: “Your beloved would not panic, Djalma!”

He smiled:

“Why not? Do you think she’s perfect? She is, of course. But perfection is very overvalued for ever-changing human beings.”

Considering Djalma loud laughter, he may have been joking.

XXI) Rise and Fall Of A New Citizen

I stopped going to the *Shul* three days before my scheduled lecture at the Hall. Then, I spent my time learning by heart what I wanted to say, so I would not have to look at my notes.

In the *civilized world*, I had a couple of opportunities to speak in front of rather large audiences. Talking in the casual setting of the Village should not have been as intimidating, but I felt actually very nervous, as if I going to “fake” knowing my topic, which was a little silly, since I was truly the world’s best specialist in the field of... my own experience!

I arrived early on the little stage in the Hall. I saw with some anxiety my listeners filing in. There were many people I knew well, including my infamous next door neighbor, Djalma, Ben and Layla. However, I did not see Philomena, her mother nor Piotr.

The room was a little more than half full when I started a few commonplaces as introductory jokes.

Then, I explained honestly that I was not sure whether my topic deserved a public platform: “I heard here many very interesting lectures. Some were philosophical, some technical, and some were imaginative, lyrical, poetical... Mine is just the testimony of someone who has been called “Exiled” since the first day of his arrival here, exactly one year ago. It is an anniversary lecture I feel compelled to offer, and I am very grateful that you came to hear it.

Some people here wanted me to evoke my experience in the *civilized world* as a *whistleblower*. For them, I will just mention as quickly as I can that my situation was rather difficult, and the term *whistleblower* hardly accounts for all the trials I had to endure. I must admit it did provide me with a somewhat controversial and very brief moment of fame. But my memories of those days are marred with anxiety, stress, distress...

What mattered is that at one point, I caught a wonderful break. At the time, I did not see it as such, of course. Someone in the government of my country showed unexpectedly some sympathy for my situation. I did doubt his intentions, back then, but I reluctantly decided to accept his indirect help, as the lesser of many evils.

That was how I came here. Retrospectively, this State Secretary may have been an angel who transformed the course of my life for the better.”

I suddenly thought that my next door neighbor was in attendance, and I added quickly that it was a joke, or at the very least, a figure of speech, not to be taken literally. But I knew I was already doomed to hear my neighbor’s vehement correction: the State Secretary was indeed *an angel in the flesh!*

I continued: “Before I left to come here, I gathered a maximum of information about the Village. I studied it, analyzed it, since it was what I did, in the *civilized world*... Not grasping who Elleya really was, I thought I was just going to some type of Spartan sect, leaving peacefully and frugally in a relatively autonomous enclave, situated in a politically unstable country, far away from everything I knew.

That was the extent of what I was expecting to find here.

I must say that I had the good fortune to meet here a friend from college. He and his wife helped me understand where I had landed.

The fact I was placed in the position of having to ask questions, and not being able to correlate most of the answers I was receiving with my own cultural system of reference, was something very new to me.

I was, so to speak, some type of anthropologist who had not studied that science! And the goal of such *anthropology* was my own understanding of my surroundings, and soon enough, the understanding of... *me*, of all topics!

What is the most basic philosophical truth we all carry within us? It is of course that “Death is the gauge of all human horizons.”

Here, I learned that *consciousness is the gauge of all human horizons*.

I also learned that exploring one’s consciousness was the *national pastime*, in the Village. However, that was far from being just an *intellectual* process! I see now that thinking about “reality” can be an exercise in lightness, as if the searcher wanted that intellectual process to be ethereal, almost inexistent.

But in the beginning, I was very much “probing” the topic with a sledgehammer, if I may say so...”

I am skipping here a few questionable, self-deprecating jokes to get to the more theoretical part of my reflection:

“The most introspective people examine their own beliefs, which they have spent many years refining. But in fact, most of these beliefs were given at various stages of their cultural development. What is truly theirs, *ours*; *mine*?”

In the Village, introspection is natural, expected, which is not unanticipated since all its inhabitants came here in search of some *inner truth*. I must say I had never been in such a place where people would casually link banal pleasantries to pouring out their heart, soul, intellect, or engage in the strangest exchanges...

Of-the-cuff questions and remarks around me or directly addressed to me led me to analyze more systematically my way of looking at things. That was indeed a type of introspection I was not used to.

The fact I chose the word *sledgehammer* for *examining my own beliefs* tells you that the process was in my case rather intense, or extremely unsettling, to say the least.

However, I must say that at some point, there is a dark joy in ripping apart what we once believed to be *universal truths*.

For instance, in the *civilized world*, I declared myself to be an atheist.

Here, I had to learn that the word *God* was to be considered like a multivalent concept, as difficult to grasp as the most subtle physical paradoxes in the universe. That term was truly at the antipodes of the Manichean Being that atheists love to ridicule, and who does not seem to have any other preoccupation than arbitrarily infringing on everybody's lives!

Recognizing that I had, at a rather young age, haphazardly eliminated from my intellectual scope a myriad of thinkers who have all used that poorly defined term (*God*), was extremely disconcerting.

What was I supposed to do, then? Was I to go back to all the authors I disregarded for using *that word*, and double check to see whether they meant the unidimensional, arbitrary *Manichean Being*; or did they use a term encompassing a very sophisticated concept, hard to intellectually grasp at once?

I am sorry to insist, but this realization has been one of the most drastic intellectual experiences of my life. Actually, “one of the most drastic intellectual experiences” is sugar-coating it. For me, it was a defining experience, an intellectual catastrophe!

I must repeat that, for most of my adult life, a mainstay of my belief system was that anyone who ever pronounced the word *God* was clearly admitting living in a cave of ignorance. And how did I make fun of that person, as I also defined myself to have a special talent for sarcastic intellectual demolition!

I realize here that most of you are looking at me like adults looking at a child who has just accomplished some primary rite of passage, and who is boasting about it as if it had never been done in the history of mankind.

However, I do believe that I am entitled to marvel about that specific accomplishment. How did it happen? You, inhabitants of the Village, may have forgotten that, in the *civilized world*, one embraces a school of thoughts and gets an automatic tenure in it. In the *civilized world*, it is extremely rare to hear anyone acknowledging: “You know, for twenty or thirty years, I believed (*this or that*) so strongly that I fought tirelessly for it. But today, I see that I was partially or totally wrong. I am ready to see how I can straighten my ways.”

This is what I have been forced to do, here. And it was somewhat painful.

However here, in the Village, we hear as a mantra that no change comes easy. We learn also that when one is troubled, a solution is not that far.

Some openness is necessary, though.

I thought for a long time how I could explain to the old *me*, or to my fellow atheists from the *civilized world*, how the word *God* could be considered like a rich, multivalent concept.

In this very Hall, I heard a conference about Democritus that helped me to formulate such explanation, I believe.

According to the lecturer, Democritus created the word *atom* originally as a concept very far from the modern definition we all know. The Democritus’s *atom* may have been *an energy born from the void*. However, after Aristotle’s personal interpretation of Democritus, the *atom* became the smaller **material** element. And to this day, the term *atom* is used very much as the quasi-antonym of what its creator had in mind!

That example made me imagine some hypothetical genius from yesteryears that would have solved experimentally the relationship between the self and reality. Through some awesome process, he or she would transmute reality and the self into each other so instantaneously that they could appear identical!

Since he or she was a genius, he or she was able to design a formula capable to communicate that process to an attentive reader.

Now, of course, that formula could not be mathematical. If it were, its communication would spread exponentially like wildfire, and act as some type of mutation in the human society. I was going to say “the human species!”

No, the formula would just be a step-by-step description of the genius’s own path. Of course, all the terms of the formula had to be relatively clear to the reader.

So, the *Genius from Yesteryears* enumerated broadly the different parameters necessary to resolve the paradox reality/self. One of them had to be *the origin of all creation*, very much like any thinker arbitrary starts: “Let’s have an initial point A...”

In order to shorten that *origin of all creation*, the *Genius from Yesteryears* used the term *God* which, in his days, did not have any type of negative connotation.

Now, I imagine that the formula of this *hypothetical genius* landed in the *civilized world*, and right on my lap, as I would be still living there as a striving member of the government of my country, and the proud atheist I have always been. Curious, I would open the manuscript and I would certainly find the first introductory pages quite exciting... until I would stumble on the term “God.”

At that point, instead of seeing it as the speculative parameter meaning the *origin of all creation*, I would automatically replace the written word by “*Manichean Being who does not have any other preoccupation but arbitrarily infringing on human beings’ lives.*”

By choosing that definition above any other ones, the secret that the *Genius from Yesteryears* tried to communicate would be instantly erased for me.”

I heard Layla’s voice approving my demonstration. I was not sure her enthusiasm was shared by anyone else in the Hall, but it did relax me.

I continued: “So, for my first year anniversary in the Village, I would like to assess what is left of what I held so dearly for certain in the *civilized world*, after my raw *sledgehammer* editing.

Among the rubbles, next to the old, unidimensional, grey letters spelling the word “God,” one could recognize terms like *love, jealousy, faithfulness, culture and intellectualism, comfort, prestige, respect, generosity...*

All these concepts were progressively given to me as I was growing up in the *civilized world*. I did have the feeling that I had painted them with my own personal colors.

But here they are, in the shambles of my old system of references!”

I proceeded to thank everyone who made me question that *old system of references*. My list included more than a dozen names, starting with Elleya and the Secretary, and including the ambivalent Yoon, and of course Ben, Layla, Djalma, Philomena and her mother, etc.

As a conclusion, I recited that poem:

*The world is filled with beauty, but for a blind man what an absurdity!
If on your way, you become clear-sighted, you shall realize your own beauty.
If your heart would free itself from its prison, from each cell of your body one
hundred rose gardens would bloom.
Even if you were made of dry dust, then each atom of this dust would outshine the
moon and the sun.
Your body and your soul are blind if you are not able to see within each atom, a
constellation of good fortune...*

“Of course, I do not really *feel* that each atom of *my* brain *outshines the moon and the sun...* However, there is a glow that I do not recall seeing in the *civilized world*.

Several people, including Ben and Layla, and also my next door neighbor, congratulated me very kindly, after my lecture.

As we all left the Hall, I had the surprise to see The Returner, standing in front of me. I actually did mention his name in the list of people who helped my understanding of the Village.

“You did not go back to the *civilized world!*”

“No, I did not.”

“I guess you should have another name, at some point.”

He smiled: “There is no rush. We are all returning from one thing or another. It was in a way the topic of your lecture, Exiled: how concepts may drastically change their meaning, with time and new circumstances...”

The Returner did not seem to mind that there was a little group of people listening to our conversation, and to his personal reasons for not leaving the Village:

“Do you remember the last time we saw each other? It was just after I had an argument with my girlfriend, the umpteenth variation on the theme: “If you must search some interior truth, why would you deliberately choose a difficult place (the *civilized world*) rather than a more comfortable one (the Village)?” My point was that anything acquired in comfort has less meaning than what is learned, engraved in and by adverse circumstances.

Well, as I was waiting for an answer from one of my contacts in the *civilized world*, so I could have a couple of job interviews lined up right upon my arrival, my girlfriend, the woman you met briefly, went to ask Elleya for advice. After that, she stopped visiting me.

So, naturally, I did go to see my girlfriend, and told her how relieved I was that these endless dramas had finally ceased, just on time for my departure.”

“Why did you go to see her?”

That rather direct question came from Layla.

The Returner nodded: “I just went, without wondering about it, really.”

“Yep, you went to see her, and you were doomed to stay, Returner.”

Layla tapped him on the shoulder, with an ironic affection.

A woman, who was standing next to Ben, had a high pitched “What?”

She obviously had not understood that exchange between The Returner and Layla.

The Returner continued: “My girlfriend told me that Elleya had her bury her love for me.”

“How did Elleya do that?”

“That was fascinating indeed, since Elleya is not known to ever be so direct. I did ask my girlfriend for some details.

Actually, Elleya had only inquired about my girlfriend’s past loves. It seemed that it was enough to give her some perspective... leading to the decision to really break up with me.”

“How so?”

The Returner did not seem annoyed by all these questions, coming mainly from the women around us. He laughed:

“You want the specifics of my girlfriend’s past love life?”

“If you don’t mind...”

“Okay. One was an athletic “son of the South” filled with joy and life. She had also a very wealthy lover. Another one was an older gentleman, a violin maker of great reputation... Elleya asked what these three and I also, had in common.”

“I can answer that!”

The Returner looked at Layla with an amused skepticism: “You can?”

“Sure. What these men had in common was... your girlfriend! Actually, not only her, but her longing for love. It did not matter if one had a mustache; if the other one was better endowed financially or physically... What counted was the woman. And Elleya had reset with a few simple questions her immense dreaming and loving powers.”

The Returner nodded: “I wouldn’t have put it quite in those terms, but yes, my girlfriend had suddenly decided that I belonged to her past. And that was when I realized it is a place I don’t want to be.”

“Of course, you don’t!”

That quip, accompanied with a venomous, mocking little smirk, came from Ben, of all people!

The Returner nodded with a hesitant smile: “So, I stayed. If you ask me, I am very lucky.”

“Your girlfriend is the forgiving type.”

That conclusion was uttered with another remarkably identical *venomous, mocking little smirk*, that time, by the woman standing next to Ben.

Her name was Daphne. She was Ben’s new girlfriend.

The information was given to me later that night, by Layla, whom I walked back to her place, while Ben went to Daphne’s home.

“How do you feel about the situation, Layla?”

The question was far from being a form of small talk while my hostess was preparing the ersatz of coffee, “the java brew like in the good old days.”

Actually, Layla seemed more at peace than she ever was. She answered me with a question:

“What do you feel about our situation, Exiled?”

“I think that Ben got the short end of that deal.”

“Not really. But he always seems satisfied with elementary answers to the Mystery.”

I knew she was talking about “Love as an *ascetic path*,” as she had described it many times, in flowery or curiously ominous terms.

She mused: “I see love as a burning sword...”

I was about to interrupt her, and ask her if she had seen Philomena’s mother lately. Wasn’t she referring also to the image of Theresa de Avila’s angel with his sword?

But I got distracted by her tone of voice. If her diatribe was as passionate as ever, her rhythm was different, less rushed and compulsive. In the past, one had the feeling she wanted to place a maximum of words in a minimum amount of time. The “new” Layla had a curious drawl of... wonderment, perhaps?

She explained:

“I say “burning,” because its steel is not solid but in fusion. *Love* is supposed to link two individuals in one extreme splendor, but the edge of that blade is made of liquid solitude!”

Layla’s tone was indeed as fervent as ever. I decided that her speech was not the only element that was transformed. Was I imagining another form of radiance in her?

I decided that her eyes had a different light in them. Or maybe she had slowed down her eyes movements, usually as astonishingly fast as her speech.

Anyway, I found her... even more fascinating than before.

Layla interpreted my puzzled attention to her voice and her demeanor as a renewed interest for her views and descriptions. She continued with a recharged lyrical energy: “How do we express an extreme emotion? With tears? As a man, you don’t trust these expressions from something murky, lurking inside, do you? And you would be right, you know?”

When tears do mix with the dust of our smaller volitions, we end up with some clay, or mud, that is not a thing of beauty. Sadly, we are transformed into selfish statuettes screaming from the pain of having our souls infected by the germs of pettiness, greed...

However, tears can be the diamond notes of a soul that cannot contain the fullness of what she feels.”

Layla grabbed my arm: “Don’t get stumped by my words. I know they are trite, unimaginative, dull... But beware that there is something beyond them; something real that deserves to be grasped!”

Filled with hope, she stared into my eyes.

She let suddenly go of my arm, as her gaze showed a little recoil.

What did she see?

She said softly: “Don’t follow Ben’s path, my dearest friend. I love you, you know that, but if you must follow his ways, it should not be with me, Exiled. That would be too ironic; perhaps predictable; maybe even pathetic...”

I claimed with too loud a laughter that she had lost me, and that I did not understand what she meant.

As I went back to my place that night, I realized that a couple of hours after I had been congratulated as a new full-fledged citizen of the Village, initiated in its esoteric philosophies, in its spiritualities, I was reminded I was still indeed a true beginner.

And I had to wonder, by the way, what was that weird dynamic I had with the women of this Village! Why would I become all over again, in their company, some type of teenage boy mesmerized by adult women?

And that night, I longed to have my own *Daphne*.

XXII) An Anchorite's Frantic Life

One may think that the spirituality of someone who chose to live away from his brethren would rub the wrong way the very sedentary citizens of the Village.

But all the Villagers were just extremely curious and respectful of the man called the Anchorite.

The local legends seem to agree about his arrival in the Village, a very long time ago. He wanted to be near Elleya.

After that fact, many stories circulated about his reasons for leaving the community in order to stay in total solitude.

Some of these tales were oddly juicy, with some awkward love triangles... Others cited a brutal spiritual Revelation...

I naturally gave more credit to Philomena's version: he had decided that the structure around Elleya was not satisfactory for a genuine *researcher of the truth*.

So, he went to the Lower Blue Mountains, which were way outside of the Village grounds. He usually reappeared two to six times a year, went directly to see Elleya, and left right after, without even spending one night in the Village.

That time, the Anchorite did not come strictly for his usual visit. Breaking his routine, he went first to the Hall where he found a few people, and reported to them that the inhabitants of the border towns were extremely concerned: drastic changes were about to happen around the Village.

However, his very peculiar, alarmist message did not find much echo. A couple of people, who were keeping abreast with the news, objected that there was indeed some political turmoil in the region, after the most recent elections, but nothing dramatically out of the ordinary. Besides, the local and the international media thought the instability was due to the transition, and it was bound to subside soon.

Later, the Mayor tried to reassure the Anchorite: the inhabitants of the border towns, who were indeed very much in the *civilized world*, loved to stir panic.

Fatalistically, the Mayor concluded: "Even if the threat is real, there is not much we can do."

The Anchorite went to visit Elleya. But afterwards, instead of leaving right away, he went curiously back to the Hall. I happened to be there, as I wanted to listen to the *Lecturer of the Day*, after the departure of the tourist bus.

I was imagining a white-bearded man with a black frock. But the Anchorite was a small and skinny, bald Black man, wearing large, colorful clothes that appeared to be too light for the Mountains cold weather.

As he sat in the last row, not very far from where I was, I could see his feverish stare, his bloodshot eyes... and I thought that the solitude, the lack of regular food and the weather may have played a number on his mental sanity.

The lecturer, during his introduction for the tourists had quoted this sentence:

"It is so 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. Is there one man who is not, at any time, in the middle of dreaming himself? Aren't all men dreaming and inventing their existence, every minute of their days?"

Now that the tourists were gone, the lecturer continued and replaced the word "poetry" with *philosophy*: all men are natural philosophers.

Someone pointed the Anchorite to the speaker, who naturally asked him respectfully for his opinion in the matter.

The little man got up to answer. I was expecting to hear a high-pitched, trembling voice, a little creepy, maybe. But the Anchorite had a low, melodic tone: “I am sorry, sir. I must confess that my mind is preoccupied, and I did not pay enough attention to the topic.”

“Are you preoccupied because of the political instability that may threaten us?”

“Yes. I guess it could be the last time I see all of you, and this Village.”

Even though the Anchorite was not really a member of the Village, that announcement felt very unsettling.

A woman asked him to explain why he would say such a thing.

The Anchorite looked carefully at her, then at the thirty or so people gathered in the Hall.

Eventually, he said something that did not seem to be connected to the question, therefore confirming that his mind may have been fried by the *solitude, the lack of food and the weather*: “When I wake up, in what I called my *cell in the Mountains*, a cave really, I acknowledge all the elements of my dreams, all my morning pains and also my fears.

Now, my dear, young friends: why would a hermit have fears?

Listen carefully, dear, young friends: when you wake up with fears, you don’t shake them off, do you? You acknowledge them.

So, by acknowledging my fears, I feel alive.

Realizing I am alive, I do like you do: we greet our day.

As I greet the day, my mind opens up like a flower in the late spring, while fears dissipate like the nocturnal clouds.

You feel life and I feel life. The difference between us is that contrary to you, I am not one solitude among other solitudes. How do I know it? I purge myself of all fears until I become part of a Presence. I actually do not get up until I become part of it.

Then, what can we do, but let the Presence shine; or perhaps burn in it...

Yes, yes, it burns ever so brightly that it is high noon in all seasons, and time for an improvised feat!

So, I go and fetch some food, and I compose a song.

I walk, wander around, get distracted. I refocus, get sidetracked. I discover something incredible, and I wonder if it is new or if it is something I had forgotten. So, naturally, I cannot fully enjoy it, while I am puzzled by so little.

I realize how silly I could be, and I laugh and the whole world laughs with me...

I know the question you really want to ask me. It is not about the Presence, nor the things I discover, nor the songs I compose...

No, you wonder if I can find any food around my *cell in the Mountains*.

Many people ask me that question. But, my dear, young friends, I already said I would not get up of all my fears had not dissipated. \

Therefore, of course, the feast is always ready for me.

My days are so full, you see?"

As off-the-wall and maybe as intriguing as that the Anchorite's digression was, the woman stuck to her question. She insisted:

"If you came here to warn us, should we be worried? What do you think we should do about the uncertain situation around us?"

"You see, that is why I told you about my mornings and my days... That is why I suggested a way to wrangle tenebrous clouds. Should you be worried in the future, please, do remember what the Anchorite told you.

Besides, rest assured I keep you in my mind. What? Just because you would be a few dozen miles away, you would not be part of my life and its fullness? How absurd! Elleya taught you much. But think about it! You may need the Anchorite's testimony if one day, you find yourself away from the Village.

Remember my words: life is opulent. Life is abundant. When the inner life is sumptuous, so is the whole universe."

Then, the Anchorite went to the door, turned around and added: "You are part of an anchorite's happiness, and I thank you for it."

That was some dramatic exit!

The woman who had asked the question ran after him and invited him for dinner.

She told us later that the Anchorite had a wonderful smile in response to her invitation, but he apologized: rabbits and birds would be worried if he were late to go back to his cell in the Mountains.

XXIII) Supercharged Tedium

I went to the Mayor's "office" to get a new job, that time at the Farm. After we discussed what position was needed there, the Mayor told me that he had gone the previous night to a packed Hall, to hear the Ambassador's report, a worrisome state of affairs for the country surrounding the Village, thus affecting us greatly.

Who was this Ambassador?

The fact I had never heard about her before startled the Mayor:

"How could you be in the Village for that long without knowing who the Ambassador is? She's the most capable person; someone essential for our Village. Personally, I have no idea how she's able to do what she does."

"What does she do exactly?"

The Mayor had a sweeping, dramatic gesture and dropped this enigmatic sentence: "Elleya calls her 'Master.'"

There was an important gathering at the Commune, to celebrate Philomena's return from her obligations in the *civilized world*.

As usual, I felt quite lost in the crowd of children of all ages, parents, grand-parents, visitors...

Philomena eventually saw me and rescued me. She started to summarize her stay in the *civilized world* while guiding me to the kitchen.

Philomena's mother was there, cooking with two young men, nicknamed Washboard and Snowboy (sic!) and a rather tall and big woman with very short grey hair.

"Won't you help us, Exiled?"

Philomena introduced everyone. The lady was none other than the Ambassadors!

As they put me in charge of shaping some type of small pancakes, I thought I had an appropriate topic of conversation: "So, Ambassadors, the Anchorite was right? We should be worried about the political situation outside our borders?"

Philomena's mother intervened: "Before anything, Exiled, you must know that the Ambassadors was in the middle of answering Snowboy and Washboard.

Guys, tell quickly Exiled what happened in this kitchen, so far."

Washboard explained sheepishly: "I don't know much about politics. But since the Ambassadors is so seldom among us, I had a question."

The Mayor was right. The two young men's attitude toward the Ambassadors with almost exaggeratingly respectful, very much like when the younger Villagers addressed Elleya or the Secretary.

However, suddenly, the other boy turned toward Washboard, and threw this curt accusation: "That was not a question!"

The Ambassadors tried to deflect the visibly upset young man's pointed remark:

"Come on, Snowboy, repeat your poem. It was so excellent that Exiled must know it."

"It is not really my poem. My grandma gave it to me, so I could show it to you, Ambassadors."

He turned ostensibly his back to his friend, pulled a paper from his pocket and read:

"Dismiss cares and be utterly clear of heart. Like the face of a mirror without image and picture. When it becomes clear of images, all images are contained in it."

The Ambassadors exclaimed: "What a magnificent sentence!"

Snowboy explained: "The Ambassadors started to comment it. But just before you came, *Mr. Exiled*, Washboard here said he had a question. But that was not a question!"

"Of course, it was!"

"Yeah, the most insulting one you could think of!"

Philomena's mother laughed: "Perhaps Washboard's formulation of the question was a little blunt. But I doubt the Ambassadors was insulted."

The Ambassador observed joyfully:

"What a great timing! Snowboy had a spiritual quote. Upon hearing my comment as a spiritual master, Washboard said: 'Remind me why they call you a spiritual master, by the way!'"

Philomena's mother joined the Ambassador loud laughter.

"That was great!"

"No! That was insulting," repeated Snowboy.

It was time for the Ambassador to take the little pancakes I was molding, and dip them carefully in the liquid mixture she had just made, for eventually placing them on a tray destined for the oven.

While doing it, she said to the boys:

"You see, being a spiritual master is not like being your math teacher or your sports coach. It is not either like being named president or judge, which would imply having an authority the others may respect or question.

The fact I am considered here as a spiritual master is more important for me than for you, actually. In order to understand that, you must remember my other title, *the Ambassador*.

You have learned in your history classes that many people have represented successfully a minority, a city, a party, a country, a cause... They were all sincere and some would even sacrifice their lives for the people they represented.

So, at some point, a long time ago, I took on representing the Village. But I was also a spiritual master, according to Elleya and the people who had sent me abroad. Therefore, being a *spiritual master* meant I represented not only the Village, but also all of the spiritual humanity, which is all of humanity.

Do you understand?"

Snowboy and Washboard looked at each other with uncertainty, but nodded. Visibly, they needed some clarification.

The Ambassador obliged: "You know that I was representing the Village in front of the rest of humanity. But because I was also a *spiritual master* I was also representing all of humanity.

So, you see in what schizophrenic position I found myself by bearing the titles of *Ambassador* and of *spiritual master* at the same time?"

Snowboy, Washboard (and I) nodded hesitantly.

The Ambassadors continued: “The most important element about being a spiritual master was that I was not one. That goes without saying if you just compare me to Elleya; or when you listened to my comment to Snowboy’s quote.”

Here, she had to share another good laugh with Philomena’s mother.

Then, she went back to her explanation: “But the beauty of it is that I could potentially become a spiritual master!

Think about it! Don’t you wonder why Elleya called me one day “Master”?

Snowboy, Washboard and I proposed three variations on the theme “Elleya must have perceived your wisdom, Ambassador!”

She appeared stumped: “The wisdom Elleya saw in me?

I hate to contradict you, but what Elleya must have seen in me is...”

The mature lady had a childish yelp, as if she had a sudden inspiration to define what Elleya saw in her:

“What happened just before you came, Exiled, illustrates perfectly why Elleya called me “Master.”

Snowboy recited his poem. The boys were expecting me to explain it. That is what a regular master does, right?

But if you remember my answer, it was not very analytical, not really inspirational... I just said that I knew already more or less that poem, and that I had sadly forgotten it, even though it is one of the most beautiful precept ever communicated to men. It refers to the stage when our being in the moment is so transparent that it mirrors truly what is inside and outside.

That is what Elleya saw in me: someone who can marvel! I cannot teach a lick, but I am a sucker for learning. At my best, I can repeat what I have learned and marvel about it, without deforming it too much.

So, let me repeat what Elleya recognized in me: my curiosity is above average.”

The Ambassador turned to her friend, Philomena’s mother:

“I was going to say that my curiosity is infinite. “Infinite” is ridiculously too strong, isn’t it?”

“I like it. Personally, I have never seen anyone as constantly open to learning as you.”

The Ambassador displayed the most radiant grin. It may have also shown the greatest pride...

“You see? If being a *spiritual master* is being infinitely open to learning, I am not a fraud!

Besides, I did realize that one becomes a *spiritual master* from one minute to the next, improving constantly without ever reaching the end of that journey.

According to that theory, which I firmly believe to be true, a master who would stop evolving would sclerose and die, spiritually speaking, of course.

I am not dead, I am happy to report! When Snowboy recited his poem, it did impact me as if I had never heard it. It was, **again**, the most significant jewel of wisdom I had ever known.

According to that definition, being a *spiritual master* makes me ask all of humanity all kinds of questions. That is how being at the same time both an ambadress and a spiritual master, is absolutely not a schizophrenic proposition. You see now that these two functions are, on the contrary, completely synergetic.”

The Ambadress laughed so hard, that I wondered if her whole tirade was not just said in jest.

An equally puzzled Washboard asked:

“So, Elleya had to make you a spiritual master in order for you to be the Village Ambadress?”

“Exactly!”

Much later that night, the Ambadress and I went back to Philomena’s mother’s place.

The two women appeared to be like two sisters, with different skin colors. Even though the Ambadress was her elder by about fifteen years, she kept asking a multitude of questions to her “younger sister,” with some type of odd deference.

In a way, their relationship reminded me a little of Philomena’s mother with her own daughter, except that the Ambadress was playing the role of a much less crafty and a much more candid or, paradoxically, a much more juvenile Philomena!

Eventually, the Ambadress took out of her bag a small 20-page notebook, very much like the old elementary school notebooks of my youth.

She announced with a big smile: “Number 84. Your personal book is almost complete. I am running out of pages. Go ahead, Sis.”

Philomena's mother looked quite satisfied: "Thanks. Here is the first one: "*He who can say every day: "I lived!" when his sky is covered with dark clouds as when the sun is warm and bright, such a man is his own master, and he lives happy.*"

The Ambassador smiled: "I like it a lot. But I may have ten variations of that idea in other books."

"Of course. I have another one. Let's try: "*There is no object, creature, god, power, etc., that we love for itself... It is always for the love of ourselves: the self. It is the self, truly, that we must consider, that we must listen to, that we must think. It is only in being conscious of the self that we know everything that exists*"

The Ambassador had a sigh, and an explicit "Wow!"

Philomena's mother had to dictate entirely the quote while her friend wrote it down scrupulously.

Was she retaining sentences so that she could pronounce them later, in due time, as most *spiritual masters* usually do?

A very long silence followed, accompanying the different stages of the little tea ritual, dear to Philomena's mother.

After the tea ceremony, I was about to bid goodbye to the two friends, but Philomena's mother addressed me: "Let me ask you. Do you believe in your heart that the Ambassador is a real spiritual master?"

I was not about to answer negatively that question! My friend knew it and pressed: "Why then do you think she's a master?"

The Ambassador took pity on me, and answered herself: "I said I am always learning. That is a quality, and may very well be all my mastery."

Philomena's mother continued: "There is more. Elleya **is**. The Ambassador **does**."

The older woman had a loud laugh: "Sure! As if Elleya does nothing!"

I had never seen Philomena's mother so embarrassed.

That time, her laughter was nervous, as she protested: "That is not what I meant..."

"Of course not!"

"All right! Just tell Exiled what I meant, then."

“Who knows what you mean, Sister? You make no sense.”

I was following the exchange with an uncertain smile: did the Ambassador’s sarcasm hurt Philomena’s mother’s feelings?

But the latter addressed me seriously, almost sternly:

“I really don’t want for you to be shortchanged, Exiled. You have in front of you as real a spiritual master as you will ever meet.”

Her tone of voice did not impact her friend’s good mood:

“Are you trying to scare your guest? Exile is going to believe I possess otherworldly talents, while you and I know it is not the case.

You see, I explore tirelessly things others take for granted. That’s about it.”

“Give Exile an example.”

“Sure. You must know tedium, right?”

The question was for me. I repeated the word, drawing a blank on what appeared like a non-sequitur of galactic proportion.

She explained; “Yes. For instance, Snowboy, a very young man, is sometimes asked to do the same chore as the day before, and the day before, and he thinks that his life is boring and has no meaning. He wants actions and changes.

Now, consider someone my age! My life has been four or five times longer than his. I did the same chores not two or three days in a row but, if we add them up, a few months or years in a row!”

I found appropriate to object: “Your life is the contrary of tedious. You travel a lot. Your life is a constant diversity of people and places!”

She commented to her friend: “Exiled is right. I should remember that!”

Back to me: “Instead, often, I stupidly get up with some aches and struggle to hurry to some meeting, where one person or another forces on me a few half-truths that I must deflect as gently but as efficiently as I can, as if they were new and original. You are right. Instead of marveling about my luck, I am tempted to coil, cringe and ready myself to crawl against an overwhelming potential tedium.

However, that is what I have discovered; what makes me perhaps also worthy of the title of *spiritual master*. Consider it, please.

Tedium is our ocean to conquer, our treasure to unearth, our *burning bush*.”

Philomena’s mother laughed wholeheartedly: “Did you really say *burning bush*?”

The Ambassadors did not appear swayed by her friend’s irony. She continued with enthusiasm, grabbing my arm: “So, now you know that we are talking about common, banal, oxymoronic tedium, one of our most familiar companions, right?”

Now that we are clear on what tedium is, I am asking you: what do you do with it?”

I attempted a somewhat imaginative answer: “I study it?”

“How would you do that? I am really curious to know.”

I mumbled some clichés.

The Ambassador rescued me swiftly: “I must tell you, Exiled, I wouldn’t be able to study it. I don’t really have the brains for it. But the way I have found may very well be kind of similar...”

This is what I do: I *dissolve* in it.”

Philomena’s mother quipped: “If you can’t beat it, join it?”

“Well, here, it is not an act of helplessness, but an honest curiosity: *how could we feel any tedium when we know that our life is so short?* That makes no sense. There must be something hiding there. And there is!”

Philomena’s mother asked: “How do you dissolve in *tedium*?”

The Ambassador turned toward me: “How would you dissolve?”

Sensing my predictable wavering, she added:

“Anyway, if you can dissolve in the tedium, what could stop you from relating the exact same way to all of reality?”

I finally reacted, although my intervention was far from being groundbreaking: “I am not sure about the concept of dissolving. You said that feeling the tedium makes no sense. How could dissolving in it be more logical, let alone more beneficial?”

“Why wouldn’t you spend a few moments visiting it? A certain school of thoughts used to observe: “They tell you that you must see this Roman statue, this Celtic forest, this Museum of Modern Art,” and you make a point to do it. Maybe these become items of your personal *Bucket List*?”

Why wouldn’t you take some time to *stay inside*?”

Well, I can imagine that the concept of *dissolving* may sound a little counterintuitive to you. May I suggest something less drastic? You could for instance *let go*. When you perceive *tedium*, and it will come sooner rather than later, try to breathe it with some amiability, as if you did not hate it; or if you were not scared of it; or even as if you had never met it, really.

You will see, at the very least, that greeting tedium is not lethal.

I was talking of *staying inside*. My grandmother used to repeat that all the problems in the world come from not being able to stay in one's own bedroom."

Philomena's mother teased her again: "Your grandmother? Really? Was she the very *stoic* granny who told you to visit a *Celtic forest*?"

"Well, let's go back to a supposedly bored Snowboy. What will he be tempted to do? Chances are that he will struggle desperately to go out and "have fun." He anxiously seeks a stream of newness, rhythm, beat, *life*...

However, anytime that we do not accept to stay inside (of ourselves), and deal with the *tedium*, we go out (*and* outside of ourselves), and we miss out on some invaluable lessons."

"Give Exiled an example of some *invaluable lesson*."

The Ambassador had an oddly panicked yelp: "How? How can I describe that when we look inward, there is an ocean of burning creation like hot lava bursting out, leaving an infinite highway of concrete situations and memories, as it solidifies?"

Philomena's mother laughed as if her friend had just uttered a clever pun:

"Sister, why don't you go back to the Snowboy example, for Exile?"

But the Ambassador was still filled with the momentum of her *volcanic* comparison:

"Instead of *staying in*, our impatience pushes us onto the realm of uncertainty. How do we draw durable conclusions from external events, escaping our control, for the most part?"

But many mysteries are located inside..."

Philomena's mother was intent to go back to the Snowboy example:

She addressed me: "Do you remember what we said about the jealousy of Philomena's man? He could not stand the idea that someone else was enjoying what he thought was eluding him.

In our sister's example, Snowboy does not stay inside because he has the feeling that *life* is going on without him.

Unfortunately, he cannot see that life springs in him, through him, with an intensity, a violence that are dramatically buffered during Snowboy's usual "hanging out" activities."

The Ambassador appreciated: "Well put, sis, once again! You explained beautifully that outrageous *hot lava bursting out* image."

Then, to my intention, with a melancholic smile: "What a bittersweet feeling for us to see Washboard, Snowboy and all our younger and older brothers rip their soles, their souls on hazy roads, not paying enough attention to basic questioning, recurrent wondering, and ingenuous marveling..."

Although today, they had questions for us! How blessed can we be!"

She turned to Philomena's mother: "Did you see? The two boys had questions!"

She went instantaneously from excitement to puzzlement: "Were you the one who gave me that definition: "*Philosophy is questioning the commonplaces in our lives?*"

Philomena's mother answered with the following quote she knew by heart: "*The Buddha, who is able to emanate in countless forms, does so in order to liberate beings through the illumination and demonstration of the Dharma.*"

My fatigue delayed the expression of a logical disbelief: "Wait. What are you guys taking about? What is the connection between one question and that answer?"

Before I could even utter it, the two friends started arguing with great vehemence.

It took me a few moments to understand that Philomena's mother wanted to replace the word *Buddha* with *Philosophy*, while for the Ambassador, the sentence focused on the *Countless forms*, which meant for her 'here and now.'"

"You are smiling, Exiled," noticed Philomena's mother.

I had this firm answer, enhanced with my most ironic grin: "You both have some interesting interpretations of a Buddhist quote. However, I doubt that a practicing Buddhist would agree with them. Why are you using Buddhist concepts in an argument which has nothing to do with Buddha and the Dharma?"

The Ambassador did not seem to take my criticism too much to heart: "We don't analyze what the word "*God*" or "*Buddha*" meant in a specific historical context, written or pronounced by a certain thinker! We just translate them immediately in what we have experienced so far. Sometimes, the words find an unexpected, striking resonance in us."

Philomena's mother added: "These sentences are solely for our own edification. We don't collect them for a future debate with a specialist of this or that school of Buddhism.

The Ambassador's tone was warmer, more personal when she remarked: "For you, Exiled, these words may not resonate the same way. That is normal. You did not share exactly the same trials, and the same history, really.

In this Village we are all what Germans called "Private Denkers," we think for our own edification, and not to be academic."

Philomena's mother exaggerated her admiring tone of voice: "*Private Denkers?* You really want to impress my friend, the Exiled, don't you?"

The Ambassador giggled: "Of course, I do." And more seriously:

"Before we strayed in that discussion, we were talking about *tedium*. Allow me to insist, as an alleged *spiritual master*: when you open up to the *tedium*, your mind is more immune to distractions, and your contemplations pierce deeper than in any lotus asana or in any mediation."

Philomena's mother teased again her *sister*: "Are you really saying that *tedium* is superior to yoga or meditation?"

The Ambassador s laughed: "For me, there is no doubt! *Dissolving* or opening to the *tedium* is a sublime way to cut through the regular buzzing of things and thoughts."

My fatigue swallowed quite a few lines of the dialogue between the two friends. A shrill, thrilled cry, coming from a very deferential Ambassador, brought quickly my attention back to what Philomena's mother was saying:

"That *regular buzzing* is not a light phenomenon. I see it as an implacable force. Our mind, in our everyday life, must obey that law of gravity, an attraction to the self. That force is essential. It allows a human being to be grounded and, or to put it bluntly, to live, basically."

The Ambassador had another overstressed squeal: "What a wonderful image! A gravity pull toward the self!"

She took her notebook: "Wait! Let me write it down!"

Philomena's mother added: "Yes, we live with it and in it. However, it does not mean we do not also strive for a most subtle state of being. We can breathe a more ethereal air, can't we?"

The Ambassador agreed enthusiastically.

There was another tea ceremony. The storm outside sounded quite ominous at this hour of the night. I accepted Philomena's mother's invitation to relax with a warm blanket until the rain subsided.

When I woke up, the two friends were still talking in a low voice. I did not move from my sofa and, rather indiscreetly, I listened in.

What was I expecting to hear?

I realized with a slight disappointment that their conversation was still philosophical. I was tempted to tune off the voices and resume my slumber, but I could not. I kept on wondering if I could learn something special from an exchange that was not meant to include me.

Their topic was especially taxing for my sleepy brain. They were discussing the *emptiness of the mind*. I imagined their exchange very much like some bizarre tennis practice where the two *sisters* would switch from a single game where they would go against each other, to a double, where they would be on the same side, helping each other in total synchronicity.

For instance, the two friends had opposite views on the ways to approach *nothingness* during an "inner exploration."

However, they joined forces against some strict Cartesianism: "If a fanatic of the most stringent *cogito ergo sum* type stops thinking, would he disappear?"

"The spiritual *emptiness* is in no way a clinical flat-lining..."

The sedative effect of their conversation was brutally interrupted when the two women started to argue about... the Kenyan Professor! I could not believe my ears. Philomena's mother, one of the deepest, genuine thinkers I had ever met was being critical of the Professor, another one of my current intellectual idols!

The Ambassadors had started the heated exchange when she mentioned that she went to see the Professor about a project concerning the future of the Village. However, at the end of the conversation, the Ambassador could not resist asking him about a subject that had nothing to do with anything: the *vestibular system*!

Of course, Philomena's mother (and I, from my couch, but silently) shouted: "What?"

As a regular listener of the Kenyan Professor's lectures, I was curiously well-aware of that peculiar topic, dear to the Professor, who called it a "real 6th sense."

As a specialist on the broad topic of the consciousness as it could be mapped in the brain, the Kenyan Professor shared with us some of his knowledge about the importance of this system, notably in the fascinating out-of-body experiences.

Some time ago, the Ambassadors had written down in one of her little notebooks a theory saying there was a connection between the *vestibular system*, essential to the perception of self-motion and... *empathy*, which is a special perception of others!

During her mission in the *civilized world*, she had imagined in her spare times, a person having an out-of-body experience, but not because of any pathology of the *vestibular system* or of any other cerebral area involved in that sensation. In that particular “thought experiment,” the person could see herself in the ceiling, looking down at herself and at the doctor who is monitoring the experience, next to her. That scene would have then three points of view.

The Ambassadors wanted the Kenyan Professor to tell her if that person, having an out-of-body experience, could hypothetically feel, almost at will, these three perceptions. Of course, they would not come to her at once. But the mind of her “Guinea Pig” would be able to move relatively effortlessly from one point of view to the other, without giving any priority to any of them...

At that moment, Philomena’s mother, strangely, “lost it.” She accused her friend to let her mind being invaded by scientific speculations, not scientific explanations. She personally hated the useless pretention of the Kenyan Professor and of a large current of “pseudo-scientists” who claimed to be able to bridge the intellectual gap between science and what is called spirituality or mysticism.

At that point, Philomena’s mother used a technical formula so foreign to her usual way of expressing herself that I thought I did not hear her well: “What he (the Kenyan Professor) is saying, and what you are naively repeating, has nothing to do with any scientific demonstration. You cannot prove to a strict, rigid structuralist that there is a necessity for a deeper introspection. Therefore, all your efforts to have neurosciences attest anything to support the necessity for self-exploration of a consciousness is just a big waste of time and energy.”

I straightened up from the couch, ready to jump in the discussion and defend the Kenyan Professor... and also to ask why on earth she would use the word “structuralist,” and what exactly did she mean?

Philomena’s mother saw me, and I was surprised to hear her switch instantaneously from her combative tone of voice to a lighthearted, cheerful: “Look who is back!”

The Ambadress acknowledged my return with a little smile, but she could not wait to answer her *sister*: “Since when do you disagree that some people can change mental **dimensions** at will? Someone like Elleya develops various areas of consciousness, therefore various areas of the brain... Why are you suddenly opposed to naming the areas of the brain involved in what you call a *deeper introspection*?”

Philomena’s mother had recuperated her sweet smile: “Who do you want to convince, by naming the areas in the brain affected by a special consciousness? The problem is that introspective people don’t need that demonstration; and the people I called “structuralists,” and who just look strictly at what can be understood and apprehended, thus denying all the rest as nonexistent, these people, by definition, cannot be convinced.”

I did not pay any attention to her last argument. I just intervened with a vehement tirade, maybe inspired a little bit by Piotr: if we have an inquisitive brain; if we have exact sciences... we must use them, indeed! It is our human duty! Maybe science will never define satisfactorily Elleya’s path. But giving up trying to define it would be as reprehensible as giving up on exploring our own consciousness, just because the results will never be transmissible!”

Philomena’s mother had a fatalistic nod.

Did she see the error of her position?

The Ambadress got up to hug her.

Philomena’s mother had a bright smile. She reflected:

“Then again, why did I get so upset?”

She turned to me: “You see, Exiled, I still believe in what I said to my sister...”

But the fact I got upset in front of two dear friends is much more significant than what I had in mind initially, no matter how correct it may have been.”

The Ambadress gasped and took her little notebook: “Oh, my! Let me write down what has just happened!”

In so doing, her eyes caught a note, in the previous page. She seemed to instantaneously forget her initial excitement, as she read silently the whole passage.

She seemed confused and had again her deferential tone of voice, as she asked her friend: “So, can we say that *tedium*, when entered, is related to a spiritual *nothingness*?”

Without missing a beat, Philomena’s mother answered: “I suppose, yes, in the sense that when you “dilute in tedium,” as you say, you are somehow experiencing the void of the self.”

The Ambassadors turned towards me: “What do you think of the notion of *void of the self*, of *Nothingness*?”

I told them my honest opinion: “You guys make me dizzy! You have talked the whole night about all that. Aren’t you tired of talking?”

The Ambassadors sighed: “Yes, yes, we are physically tired. But when you think of these things, it gives you wings, doesn’t it?”

By the way, I always fall asleep thinking about one good item I learned during the day. Most often than not, that item is truly so exciting that it leads me to new thoughts, and I am suddenly wide awake!”

The two friends found the image very funny. When her laughter abated, the Ambassador continued:

“So, here is the one item I suggest for you to think about, before you fall asleep, Exile... What people call *tedium* or *renunciation* sounds to most people underwhelming.

But I, a *spiritual master* according to Elleya, promise you that the heroes of the Iliad and the Odyssey, Gilgamesh and Enkidu, Sinbad, the most epic episodes in the Bible, Jason and the Argonauts, James Bond and Indiana Jones, or any young popular music band... none of them ever had more thrilling, novel experiences than you, when you open up to *tedium* or *renunciation*!”

The Ambassador had a compelling tone of voice and appeared very serious.

However, Philomena’s mother laughed wholeheartedly, as if the tirade was a nice pleasantry to bid “good night.”

A couple of hours later, Philomena’s mother and I left the Ambassador sound asleep, as we walked down to the crossroad. She was returning to the Commune and I was going directly to the Farm.

Of course, we talked about her *sister*. My friend knew I was intrigued by her, but as always, somewhat suspicious about the whole *spiritual master* bit.

Philomena’s mother smiled: “She was a little subdued, yesterday...”

By the way, you must have thought, considering her excitement, that she has just discovered the concept of *tedium*, last night. That was not quite the case.

My sister discovers endlessly what she calls ‘treasures hidden in plain view.’”

Philomena’s mother laughed: “She does not suffer from dementia, though. She keeps her mind receptive, almost like a baby’s, truly.

The last time she talked about that concept of *tedium*, she claimed that for her, the “Holly Spirit” and the “Dharma” could be, in some circumstances and contexts, other names for *tedium!*”

Philomena’s mother concluded with a tone of admiration and deference I had never heard from her: “My sister is a spiritual master because, I mentioned it before, her actions are her meditations. She does not see a difference between people, *between actions*. She throws herself completely in everything she does, like filling out a long, official document; going to a mandatory reception; intervening in a debate; waiting forever in a small office where a security guard treats her like a third-class citizen; researching the whole night some local legal intricacy to help a hotel employee who told her of some administrative problems; leading a meditation... Everything and everyone is pure life.

Do you think, Exiled, that it is a natural gift she was born with? Or is it something she acquired?”

XXIV) Flute Therapy

The Ambadress stayed about two more weeks in the Village. During the first week, she spent most of her time in the Kenyan Professor's "lab." But it was apparently no longer to discuss her ruminations about the vestibular system, or what cerebral process would transform *tedium* into some *spiritual entry to an ecstatic reality*... It was more prosaically to have very intense exchanges, around the clock, with numerous personalities from the *civilized world*.

Obviously, their virtual presences were not enough and soon, the Kenyan Professor left the Village for the *civilized world*, while the Ambadress met with many influential Villagers.

The Mayor and Philomena, in particular, were very involved in setting up an exceptional General Reunion, not at the Hall, but in the Compound where the Garage was located. There, a special installation could accommodate a lot more people.

Very early on, my next door neighbor told me that the General Reunion was about evacuating the Village. That was so preposterous, that I refused to believe it. Then again, he was not his usual enthusiastic, almost lunatic self, when he announced that news. He had a somber look and he suddenly hugged me with a mighty, literally choking strength.

The next few days, the rumor was confirmed by people I considered very reliable.

Inexplicably, I started to sink in what may have been the deepest depression of my life. It worsened every day, to the point that, the day of the exceptional General Reunion, I could not even get out of bed.

It was Djalma who noticed my absence, and who came to visit me, the day after the General Reunion.

While I remained taciturn, refusing to eat the food he had brought me, Djalma talked about various episodes that happened recently at the Hospital. Soon, I noticed his elocution was slower and more difficult to understand. He was falling asleep while talking!

Mercilessly, I woke him up: “What happened at the Reunion?”

Djalma did not even realize he had dozed off: “I told you! I am one of the counselors.”

“Counselors for what?”

“The traumatism of the Evacuation.”

A few very long seconds elapsed. Djalma was about to fall asleep again.

That time, I did not mean to prevent him from doing so. The word *Evacuation* had hit full force all the mysterious processes that were brewing inside of me for days... and I just burst into tears.

Djalma held me. He tried, jokingly: “If I were a betting man, you would be the last man I would have put my money on for having that type of reaction. You are the *Exiled*. You should care less about the Evacuation than all these other people who **chose** to move here.”

When I could talk, I admitted: “Yes, I don’t know what’s happening to me.”

“Maybe you were already on a huge roller coaster for many months or many years, in your motherland, before moving here. Maybe you did not expect much from your exile in the Village. Against all odds, you felt suddenly very comfortable, here. And just when you did decide to call it officially *home*, you had to hear you have to go back into exile!”

Hearing these words, I could not hold back another bout of intense emotions.

Djalma concluded: “It is a trauma, definitely... Luckily for you, I have been named a counselor!”

He had a bright smile.

Yes, I was very lucky indeed.

Almost all the 10 000 citizens of the Village were present at the General Reunion, where various speakers described the situation in details and from various points of view.

In short, the country around the Village was in political and economic disarray. The instability was such that the inhabitants of the Southern regions, fearing for their lives, were abandoning their homes, fleeing to the Northern parts, or even abroad.

The Village's economy rested mainly on a meek tourist industry, scarce commercial trades, and the financial help from donors in the *civilized world*, most of them solicited by the Ambassadors.

All these windfalls had stopped. In spite of months of efforts, the Ambassador had not been able to keep the Village's political neutral status unaffected by the surrounding turmoil.

Our meager reserves, even with the most severe rationing, would not feed our 10 000 inhabitants for much more than a couple of months.

At the General Reunion, the Ambassador spoke last.

Today, as I am writing these lines, I do feel of course a great regret for not having been in attendance; although I am not sure I could have stomached the first part of the meeting, with all the bleak depictions of our situation.

But it seems that the Ambassador's address was one for the ages, as everyone, at the end, rose, cheered and eventually left almost serene, perhaps totally reassured.

From what I gathered, she spoke of the brotherhood of all the Villagers; of the strength that Elleya had given them through the years. It was time to show that Elleya had not taught them only theoretically, and that the Village was a true place of spiritual peace. But the spiritual universe was not a mere Village! It spread throughout Human History, wearing the outfits of paupers, of philosophers, of poets, of heroes... speaking different tongues, using new and old concepts, preaching the sacredness of a mind open at the same time to the widest universe and to the self as *sanctum sanctorum*...

The Ambassador asked if Elleya ever taught the blasphemy of thinking the Village was some type of Holly Land. Of course not! The Villagers were there to gather information for their specie (sic)! It was about time for them to share whatever they had found with their brothers abroad!

The Ambassadors could have stopped after that stirring speech about the universality of what the Villagers had learned and who they really were. However she stayed, waiting for the enthusiasm she had provoked to abate.

When she spoke again, the Ambassador's tempo was much slower.

I was told by many witnesses that, at that instant, they feared the announcement of some more somber news.

But it was quite the opposite. Having explained why the Evacuation was not the end of the world, the Ambassador hinted that the Villagers may find themselves with more interesting choices than they ever thought or feared ...

Mixing a mysterious optimism with the most practical advice, she poked efficiently her audience's attention.

All her listeners had to be psychologically and physically prepared for what was going to happen in the next few weeks.

She cautioned pointedly the Villagers that any change is always a potential traumatism, even a change for the better.

What could be "a change for the better," in that case?

"A miraculous labor of love, a practical masterpiece, chiseled by the Kenyan Professor," she hinted. "The Professor was very close to giving an unexpected option to the Villagers."

Again and again, the Ambassador hammered that it was mandatory for everyone to prepare as much as possible for the imminent "transition," whatever it may be.

She asked for volunteers to help with that task.

Apparently, 9 999 people volunteered.

After the General Reunion, the Ambassador left for what she estimated to be a two to three week absence. In the meantime, we were all supposed to resume our activities as regularly as we could.

Personally, I tried to work at the Farm, but I was not very productive.

Since we had no specific departure date or schedule, some packing started, apparently without frenzy. Counseling booths were set up everywhere in the Village. At some point, I wondered if there were more counselors than Villagers in need of counseling.

I must say that the love flowing in the Village was palpable.

It reminded me of the obituaries where everyone says only positive things about the departed. And one can only wonder why this kindness, this appreciation are solely running so liberally in the proximity of death? Why aren't they as tangible in everyday life?

One person who needed some counseling was indeed yours truly. However, it should not come as a great surprise that I did not seek any.

I did not want to see any of my friends, not even Philomena and her mother, Ben, Layla, etc.

Luckily for me, Djalma was aware and concerned about my depression. Even though he was even more overworked than ever, he tried his best to visit me once a day.

Eventually, Djalma performed a true *tour de force*. He managed to take almost a whole day off work, in order to stay with me. That happened to be the amount of time necessary for him to coax me into seeing one of the three curators of the *Music Temple*.

His name was Nitish, and he was "his best friend," although I knew Djalma had a few dozen best friends. I think I may have even been one of them, actually.

At the time, I was too morose to realize it, let alone to appreciate it, but Djalma did change my life, that very day.

The *Music Temple* was located rather far from the Village center. It was basically one huge room, with a decent acoustic, filled with instruments. Anyone could grab one instrument and play, or *jam* with the instrumentalists already there.

In the beginning of my stay in the Village, I went a couple of times to check out that curious concept, but I witnessed both times some incredibly painful cacophonies, and I left quickly.

Djalma, a percussionist and a singer (“and a dancer, since music becomes movement within me,” he would promptly add), used to go as often as he could to the *Music Temple*. There, he befriended quickly the “curators,” basically the people in charge of the maintenance of the instruments. Nitish, a Biral native, became “his best friend,” without saying much, since they did not speak the same language; and without even communicating directly through the music, as Nitish never *jammed* with anyone.

During our walk to the *Music Temple*, I did object to my guide: “How on earth could he be your best friend if he speaks only Urdu?”

Djalma laughed: “As if love needs words!”

I must have felt already a little better, since that sentence did awake some sarcasm in me: “Love? Nothing less?”

“You feel it all the time, don’t you, my brother?”

I had a skeptical shrug. Djalma said, laughing: “You feel it, I know... with me, with Philomena, with Philomena’s mother, with your friend Layla...”

As I remained silent, he commented: “Yep, you feel it, but you don’t allow it to sing, to dance within you. That is why it must be a tad more difficult to be you, my brother... Anyway, Nitish speaks to me in Urdu. I speak in Portuguese. What is the problem? Besides, when he plays his flute, he is a healer. That is why I want you to meet him.”

Contrary to what I imagined, Nitish appeared to be a very young man. He was actually in his thirties, but his features and his body gave him the appearance of a teenage boy. Djalma introduced us. As announced, he gave a long speech in Portuguese; Nitish answered with a few welcoming words in Urdu. They hugged and Djalma left me in the *Music Temple*.

A group of young girls of different ethnicities, but remarkably equally tone-deaf, were making an intolerable ruckus with all the percussions lying around.

Nitish had me sit against a wall. Turned halfway between me and the girls, he took his flute and started to play. That was far from being any type of *jamm*ing, as the mournful sound of his bansuri rose above the magma of asynchronous banging. And soon, from where I was sitting, I had the eerie impression that the flute was *taming* the percussions, forcing them into an arrhythmic, complex, astonishing chorus!

At first, I did wonder if it was my imagination, or if the girls were slowing down their drumming as to shadow as much as they could the Indian flute. But I forgot quickly that question, and I just began to sink in that odd but mesmerizing musical ensemble.

My depression had played a number on my regular sleep, and my fatigue was deep. I may have been slightly dozing off, when my brain showed me that the girls, who could not see distinctly the flutist, since he was not facing them, were being irresistibly attracted by this “reincarnation of Krishna.”

Krishna and the love of the Gopis...

During many of the lectures I attended at the Hall, and sometimes in the course of some exchanges at the *Shul*, I heard a considerable amount of “ecstatic” accounts. They seemed to have been triggered by a sunset, love, wine, the whiff of a buried memory, a forgotten taste, a color, a sentence, a voice, a surprise, a lecture, a painting, a strange vision, a dream...

But I don't recall anyone mentioning among all these various causes of singular spiritual experiences... a state of depression!

Or was it a certain type of music exploding during a moment of depression?

Anyway, *Krishna and the love of the Gopis* were suddenly as real as anything in the *Music Temple*.

My poor, exhausted brain could not bear straddling two realities.

I clutched the floor pillow next to me and *Krishna and the love of the Gopis* disappeared reluctantly.

But suddenly, out of the blue, my irony when Djalma had pronounced the word “love” to define his relationship with the Indian flutist, came back to shame me. His answer was carried by the sound of the flute: “Of course, it is love!”

Every time I recall my depression and that first visit to the *Music Temple*, the weird episode of *Krishna and the love of the Gopis* bursting into my reality, puzzles me seemingly more and more. At first, I just wondered why that memory of a curious “mental lapse” (or was it some *troubled* hallucination?) was regularly coming back to me, and with extreme intensity. But little by little, I felt a growing, multifaceted regret: why did I recoil before the perspective of “straddling two realities”? Why didn't I “let go,” as the Ambassador had advised to do?

I did fail to “dive and dissolve.”

I had resisted, maybe out of fear: could one lose one’s mind by *letting go*?

In any case, that day, I made a desperate, conscious effort to “go back to *reality*,” even though that *reality* was not very engaging for me, at the time.

And, since I had closed myself to an unknown, mythical dimension, my *retribution* was the rather predictable feeling of the impotence of being *left outside*.

But my “common,” literal dimension was thankfully filled with Nitish’s presence. He stood then right in front of me, *playing also for me*! I was not outside. I was the listener, the witness, almost the dedicatee of that rare, magical concert.

I closed again my eyes, and *Krishna and the love of the Gopis* flickered at quite a mental distance.

So, Nitish’s flute summoned once again a blurrier image of *Krishna and the love of the Gopis*. And once again, I got too cowardly to enter it (or *to dissolve in it*, as the Ambadress said.)

My stubborn refusal to enter a spiritual dimension led again to a curious consequence: a limbo where the drumming girls and the flutist Nitish had lost their identities.

Who were they?

That time, *Krishna and the Gopis* were reduced to a beam of uncomfortable, vindictive, raw sexuality, the type that could float around you without engulfing you.

I suppose that “vision” of what was happening in the *Music Temple* was coming from deep inside me. It was an image of one irresistible man surrounded by smooth-skinned, sensual young lionesses.

Since I doubted I could ever be that *irresistible man*, I tried frantically to resist a predictable, diffuse feeling of insecurity; of *being excluded*, of, once again, being *left outside*.

It was not the comforting thought of Elleya; or any of the speakers at the Hall, who came to my mind to rescue me.

It was the figure of Layla that flashed out of nowhere to save me at once.

I could hear her natural lyricism scolding me: “From what could you be excluded? From a basic and magnificent cosmic feat? If it is cosmic, how can it exclude you?”

How could you give in to petty fears, grudging timidities, stale and trivial envies... when the Emperor came to only visit you, dispensing inconceivably grand treasures before you?

Won't you open up, even a little?

Will you chose to only lament, like a sick person who would refuse vehemently to see a doctor?"

I wished Layla could have been near me. I would have asked her: "I think I am starting to get the notion of the sacred love you are always defending and searching. Isn't it like a force pushing you out of yourself? But that it is the case and if that type of love triumphs, don't you run the risk to be expelled far away from who you have been all these years? And then, won't you find yourself disconcerted, lost, and ready to lose your mind?"

Actually the image of *Krishna and the love of the Gopis* came from Layla. Who else?

In her home with Ben, she had made her own "altar" in a corner of their bedroom. She had dragged an old stump on which she had put small cardboard cutouts of book covers and of famous paintings. For background, she had glued a 10 inch by 12 inch painting, representing a feminine Black Krishna, playing his flute, surrounded, by graceful young women, some dancing, others just sitting, listening intently.

Layla had written down, just below the colorful picture, the following sentence, with a beautiful calligraphy: "*Every day, I shall grow younger. I will be a grey-haired Gopi losing her mind, breathing the air Krishna's flute has shaped. At night, I will drink His wine with the other Gopis, my Sisters, whose names are Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya and Diotima.*"

When she presented me her altar, she gave me a long lecture on *Krishna and the love of the Gopis*. That symbol contained at least six potent secrets: "How the One loves the multiple; how the multiple strives to unify in the One; what is the nature of that Magnet; how the Sound disseminates from the Nothingness; how the Instant is eternally full of vigor; in what Sources Beauty blooms endlessly..."

I felt better. I opened my eyes and my ears in time to witness the end of the concert. Nitish was playing so fast, so powerfully, that the girls had stopped.

At the end of a dizzying crescendo that took over the whole temple, the young percussionists stood up and applauded.

I think I cried... again; “like a young girl,” is the expression that came to me.

Some other musicians came in.

Nitish waved at me: he wanted us to leave to temple. Outside, it was already dark, except for the pale orange line of the recently disappeared sun.

The young Indian handed me a simple wooden flute. He completely ignored my apologies about my musical awkwardness, and started to play one long, single note on his bansuri. Obviously, he wanted me to do the same on my wooden flute. Reluctantly, I played one note, and held it as long as I could.

Nitish’s note and mine became two vibrations.

Nitish played around my one note, then my two notes, then my clumsy improvisations, to create an astonishing duet.

Eventually, Nitish pointed at the glow of the moon behind the white clouds. He wanted to change the mood. He played lighter notes. I tried to follow him. He nodded: we understood each other.

I went to my *music therapy session* every day of the week.

After ten days, I wrote in my notes: “*I have the feeling that I am learning a lot, maybe more in a few days than in one year in the Village or a lifetime in the civilized world...*”

I am living a miracle, as music gives me a bridge to a new reality. And that reality encompasses the whole universe. All of a sudden, I live in an enchanted, radiant dimension...”

I do recall that, back then, each time I felt heavyhearted, I quickly grabbed the flute Nitish had given me.

Since then, I did try to reflect on that *magical* healing. I must acknowledge that the size of my sample test (my own, limited, singular case) does not allow me to assert that the bansuri’s special vibrations could have any universal curative power!

However, I mentioned that *music gave me a bridge to a new reality*. I believe it gave me a new or renewed sense of the *present*, maybe through the sounds and my breathing filtered by the flute, without forgetting, of course, Nitish’s catalytic tutelage.

My past history also visited these *musical sessions*, reconciling me with my own life. It came intermittently, by flashes of odd and forgotten, seemingly random memories.

Present and past somehow worked as a dam, protecting me from a future, cluttered with anxieties. But how long could a perception of one's life last, without the notion of... a personal future?

The answer came soon enough. One day, I found Nitish outside of the *Music Temple*. The door was open and inside, a virtuoso female cellist was playing Bach's unaccompanied cello suites. The room was full and, of course, no one dared *jamming* with the soloist.

Nitish's eyes were full of tears. For the first time, he looked lost, helpless. When he saw me, he whispered some sentences in Urdu. I wanted desperately to guess their meaning, but nothing came to me.

That frustration stopped my two-week long euphoria!

The magic was gone, just like that!

Our "conversation" resumed after the cellist finished her recital. Nitish appeared still quite moved. He was usually a man of few words. That night, he spoke in his native language for a long time. I believe he also recited some poems, as the rhythm and the alliteration of his sentences changed once in a while.

Eventually, he asked me a question and obviously waited for an answer.

Inside of me, the "dam" protecting me from any anxiety for the future was starting to leak. Outside, instead of my newly found brother, I had in front of me an incomprehensible fellow who just spoke a foreign language.\

However, Nitish did not move, as if he was intent on knowing my response to an unintelligible interrogation.

It took me a long time to find anything positive to utter:

"I thought for the last few days that your music had an almost miraculous healing power. Tonight, I kind of realize that I was not completely right. I see now that I did not learn more in the *Music Temple* than anywhere else. I needed all my trials and tribulations in the *civilized world*, my slow *coming of age* in the Village, and even my recent depression, in order to be touched by your music...

Without all this turmoil, maybe your flute would have sounded just sweet, or maybe even boring to me?"

Nitish kept silent as if he was pondering my answer. He had a little smile.

The next day, the Kenyan Professor and the Ambassadors returned in the Village, with half a dozen strangers.

And life as we knew it in the Village stopped.

PART II

SHEER SHARING

XXV) A Brief History of Villages

Nine years after the Evacuation, I had to travel back to my homeland. Even though the political climate had changed so much that I was no longer barred from entering the country, I made my stay as brief as I possibly could.

It just so happened that the day before my departure from the capital city, I met for lunch a childhood friend in the luxurious hotel where he was participating at a symposium.

The hotel was known for its many conference rooms. I noticed the full, extensive four-day program on “*Evolution in Sciences. Evolution in Society*,” organized by an association named AANS. For some reasons, that acronym was associated in my memory with an eminent inhabitant of the Village!

I recognized the name of the person who, that very day, was giving a lecture on “New Findings in Fronto-Insular Spindle Neurons.”

That title seemed quite foreboding for a convention that appeared centered on the general and inviting theme of sciences and society. However, the main conference room where it was taking place had to accommodate many more guests than the 400 seats it had.

The security was quite exceptional for a simple scientific meeting, and I was not allowed to wait directly outside of the room, since I did not have a professional pass.

Eventually, from a distance, I could see a frail man with his hair completely white and an awkward mustard-color suit, in the center of a large entourage of colleagues and journalists. I wondered if it was indeed the Kenyan Professor. If he was, he had grown an unbecoming white beard, lost a lot of weight and somehow, shrank a bit!

I tried to get closer to him. At some point, I thought he was looking in my direction, and I waved desperately, but my windmill maneuvers attracted only the attention of a security guard.

The group left for the reception room.

I was writing a note that I hoped to somehow get to the Professor, when I heard a woman near me saying goodbye to her friend in the language of my new adoptive country in the *civilized world*. Since she had obviously just attended the lecture, I introduced myself to her: “I am a great admirer of the Professor. Would you mind telling me how his conference was, tonight?”

She laughed. She appeared very much in the mood to share her experience, especially in her mother tongue: “It was a riot, as always. He started naturally with the work of his Swiss team

But the tone of his presentation changed when he decided to give us a report on the states of consciousness of the individuals affected by these anomalies.

He asked us how we would appreciate a *state of consciousness*. He humored us: “Through physical measurements of course! But also, whenever possible, understandably, through direct observations and interviews of the subjects...”

These interviews were actually for him an opportunity to deviate from the strict technical data that are expected in these studies.

Actually, I guess that nowadays, everyone in the audience, *expects* these astonishing detours from the Professor as much, if not more, as any of his *strict technical data*!

So, after some rigorous quantitative results, he revealed some “exploratory probes” performed through the gradual presentation of various types of music, paintings, sculptures... as well as sentences like “Should we ridicule evil?” “Can a murderer love the same type of music as you?” “Can you think of a virtue?” “Can one sustain beauty?”

How could these questions be relevant to his demonstration of the plasticity and the multiplicity of the neuronal pathways he is studying? Does he pose them to relax the participants? Or are the questions just meant to startle the scientists who are eventually going to examine his results?

That is what makes the Professor such a polarizing figure: he gives himself the right to “provide a jolt” to what he calls “the ‘dormant’ humanity in his peers,” not only in the public arena, but in his professional papers!”

The lady who was briefing me on the Kenyan Professor’s lecture became at that moment even more animated: “I am a biochemist. I laughed out loud one day, reading a very serious

communication by the Professor on certain “secondary chemical influences on neurotransmitters and the various pathologies possibly associated to them.” He had concluded his paper with a short “compendium” of new researches on “brain therapies” susceptible to affect remarkably these negative influences. He detailed a series of complex theoretical processes, defined with a few interesting neologisms... only to reveal at the very end that these state of the art new therapies were in fact practiced for many centuries as... spiritual or *moral* exercises in many cultures around the world!”

I encouraged my enthusiastic informant by laughing loudly with her. She resumed her account

“This time again, the Professor broke down the house, as he went back to his original interviews of people who had some frontal areas of the brain more or less seriously affected, and compared them to official statements made by politicians, known scientists, entertainers...

Who is sane? Who is not?

At that point, no one even questioned how he got to the following conclusion:

“Since the dawn of humanity, general love and care for our young would have had measurable effects on certain neuronal clusters and pathways, and therefore on the neurotransmitters we all love and cherish. It is more than obvious that all of our specie would have profited from this simple, cultural change! At a global level, that would have meant a reduction by about 90 per cent of violent crimes and concentration camps, harsh capitalism and gulags, bad TV series and teen idols, racism, tabloids and a whole range of acts of exclusion...”

That time, the friendly and voluble researcher may have found a little exaggerated my good mood, which was echoing too loudly the end of her report. But I was not laughing to encourage her anymore, but because what she was saying described undoubtedly one of my dearest masters.

She was about to leave, but she suddenly changed her mind and asked me if I wanted to be introduced to the Professor, whom she knew well.

The Professor looked at me carefully. He hesitated: “Exiled?”

We hugged. “My brother! What happened to you? You must lead a comfortable life, now! You could lose a few pounds!”

“You need to gain a few, yourself. You do look pitifully overworked.”

He had his famous laughter.

He turned to the group who was leading him to the dinner organized by the AANS: “I know we are already late, but I need a few moments to greet my brother here. This young man helped me so many times! Once, I was in bad shape and he asked me the right questions to get me out of my funk.”

“I did?”

In the months preceding the Evacuation, the Kenyan Professor worked with another famous African scientist, a Nobel Prize recipient, and the dean of a university that had a satellite campus in an African State Wild Park. With the Ambassador and some influential people from the host African country, they developed an international project of exceptional scope called “Live Ecosociology Studies”

In other terms, all these people had found, just at the Northern limits of the State Wild Park, on the acreage under the supervision of the University researchers, a place to relocate the Village!

About eight thousand Villagers moved to Africa, in a place called rather unimaginatively *The New Village*, which was supposed to be completely self-sustainable, while the Farm of the original Village could only feed a few families.

I was among the two thousands Village expatriates, its *diaspora*, so to speak. As for the Kenyan Professor, he moved back to Switzerland, but traveled often to the New Village he had helped “built,” with the Ambassador.

The Kenyan Professor had embraced joyfully his new positions and responsibilities, after the Evacuation. He claimed he was presently the happiest man on earth. Of course, he admitted loudly he had never reached the goal he had set up for himself, when he first moved from the *civilized world* to the Original Village, which was to “**be** Elleya.”

He was again a scientist, and also the author of a non-fiction, controversial best seller, entitled *The New Specie and the Science of Nescience*. He also found the time to write several provocative articles on ethics and a variety of societal topics. He was a lecturer invited to speak not only about neurophysiology, but also and especially about tolerance and global peace, since the *New Specie* was essentially a totally tolerant humanity.

And last but not least, he took over for the Ambassador to represent the New Village.

XXVI) Baby Bath Water Throwing Basics

A couple of days after my return from my motherland to my new homeland, I received a manuscript sent by the Kenyan Professor. I thought it was one of the books he had written. But curiously, it was a PhD thesis defended by a certain Amanda Johyson, published five years earlier, entitled: “A Teleological View of the New Village.”

The first thing I did was to look up the definition of “teleological,” and right after, to wonder why anybody would use that adjective in any title, academic or not...

Amanda Johyson was a student in Sociology who, at that time, had just obtained her Master Degree from the university which was involved in the organization of the new settlement. Being there at the very beginning of the New Village, she documented carefully its development, focusing on its interactions with the indigenous population and with the existing local political and academic structures in place.

The future Dr. Johyson, in her introduction, affirmed that the Original Village was built around Elleya, almost in spite of him/her. Since Elleya, the Secretary and less than thirty people remained in that Original Village, the New Village faced the challenge of redefining its identity.

At that point in my reading of the thesis, I thought rather fondly about my ex-next-door-neighbor. I remembered that he used to trumpet gloriously the comparison between the future New Villagers, among whom he was supposed to be, and the Jews after the destruction of the Temple!

However, at the last moment, he and his family chose to move back to Serbia, where they became quite prosperous, I heard.

Amanda Johyson summarized the initial, inevitable economic and technical difficulties encountered by the settlers in just a few paragraphs, illustrated by a couple of charts, and some striking facts, like “*During the first two years, a majority of Villagers lived in tents.*”

The first conclusion drawn by the author was that the New Village had its own survival as its immediate goal. “*Its identity was to live... and expand, if that expansion meant an increase chance of survival.*”

At the end of a second long, arid chapter, filled with academic jargon and references to obscure other PhD's in various fields, the graduate student quoted this quite peculiar illustration of the New Village's disposition during the “settlement phase”: “It was as if the ascetic members of a very orthodox, devout monastery, decided one day to stop their religious routine in order to devote all their time building a cathedral. As they knew nothing about architecture, and all the techniques of construction, they studied night and day, becoming masons, bricklayers, sculptors, engineers, etc.”

According to the sociologist, the New Villagers became farmers, agronomists, specialists of hydraulic systems... They cleverly incorporated the traditional elements they quickly learned from the surrounding villages, and the academic resources at their disposal.

I read twice the main chapter of the thesis with disbelief. It stated that, from the first day of its settlement, the New Village tried to spread its influence to the whole surrounding region. Amanda Johyson interviewed a great numbers of men and women of all ages, living in traditional villages, some located 300 miles away from the New Village, who considered themselves as part of the New Village!

The reasons the New Village extended into this larger community seemed obvious to Ms. Johyson, It was a case of “*economic and cultural symbiosis, where the New Village allowed, by its dynamic but noninvasive, non-aggressive presence, a smooth transformation of the traditional, preexisting structures.*”

In her last chapter, the author projected into the next two decades the model of development she had just dissected. She deducted that, barring any local political and economic catastrophe

reminiscent of the one that provoked the Evacuation, the New Village could expand exponentially and “*imprint the national identity of the host country.*”

For many days, “*A Teleological View of the New Village,*” was very present in my mind. Why did the Kenyan Professor want me to read it? It was, I thought, a worrisome account presenting the New Village as some sort of mysteriously thriving sociological entity, phagocytizing all the elements it encountered in its wake.

There was no mention of any type of spirituality, or philosophy in its development.

Ioana, my business partner, called me into our office. Usually, she would do something so formal only to talk about her Church and her Charities, and see how much I was willing to “invest” in both.

She had the typical sweet smile she always had when she was working for her *protégés*, destitute men and women, animals, plants or forgotten landmarks she was intent on helping, that particular month. But that time, I was being one of them in her eyes, as she asked with a worried tone of voice: “Our colleagues and friends, and your family asked me to see what’s going on with you.”

I shrugged: “Nothing is going on. You have known me for many years. We see each other all the time. Your niece is my wife. Nothing has changed. So, why this sudden concern about me?”

Ioana answered with a convoluted question that took me by surprise: “You came here as the mysterious man from the Village; the one they called *Exiled*. You were very interested in our lifestyle, so much so that you *married* into it.

After all these years, did the *Exiled* in you finally wake up?”

After a rather long reflection, I acknowledged: “Let’s say that it is the Village that woke up in me...”

I really loved Ioana, not only because she was my business partner and the “godmother” of my marriage, but because she was a kind soul, down to earth, who had the outstanding natural gift, among many virtues, of being capable of listening without judging.

I elaborated on my previous answer, for her understanding as much as for my own: “I don’t think I ever told you that, when I landed in the Village, I gathered a lot of information I was not quite ready to receive. In a way, I had been literally sideswiped by my stay in the Village.

When the Evacuation happened, I was of course not happy at all to be separated from all the people that intrigued me so much, and that I eventually grew to love dearly. But I actually did not mind having some physical and temporal distance to assimilate fourteen unexpected months that blindsided my existence.”

“So, you led an exemplary, peaceful life. You worked six to twelve hours a day in our shop, adopted my niece’s four children, and you seemed to dissolve in a nice routine. You are very well respected here. People look for your company, your advice... At a personal level, I deeply value your presence in my life...”

“You used the word *dissolved!*”

“I shouldn’t have?”

“Well... Believe it or not, it was almost a *sacred* verb in the Village! It is strange to hear you say that I may have *dissolved* inside a certain way of life...”

Anyway, I have of course my share of ups and downs, as you know, with our work, with the kids, etc. But I have also... Or rather, *I had* also a center: the experience of my life in the Village.

All the notes I took and a myriad of little snippets of memories, sentences, reflections, intuitions... Born during my stay in the Village, they would come to me now and then, corresponding often exactly, miraculously it seemed, to this or that circumstance of my existence here.

The Village was like a vague but undeniable source of strength in me.”

“So, why are you are saying all that in the past tense?”

“I have just learned what the New Village has become. It seemed to have lost its amazing spiritual and philosophical foundation.”

That statement left Ioana speechless. Her sweet smile flickered and disappeared.

She vaguely knew that the New Village was located somewhere in Africa. Nobody in the *civilized world* made a big deal of its existence, anymore. A few journalists did initially report

the strange concept of “Live Ecosociology Studies” that led to the creation of the New Village. But nine years later, that very mild element of curiosity had waned to the point of being just some type of cultural “cult” curiosity.

Ioana opened her mouth a couple of times, to comment on what seemed to distress me. But she could not utter a word. Obviously, she could not fathom what was going on in my mind. I actually hardly understood it clearly myself!

Ioana was such a transparent person! She was visibly making a commendable, immense intellectual effort.

It was impossible not to melt before the older lady’s concentrated frown. I was about to beg her to forget about the doubts I had just mentioned, but she suddenly burst into a radiant: “I know!”

“You do?”

“Yes, yes, I do. I had a friend who was married for sixteen years.”

“Yes?”

I must confess I was not too excited at the idea of learning about some middle-life crisis of one of her middle-class friends.

“So, after all that time and two children, her husband left her for a younger woman. Okay, okay, it is sad, but it happens! But now, listen to that! After one whole year, I noticed that my friend was still very, very bitter and resentful. So, what did I advise her to do?”

“You advised her to take a good divorce lawyer?”

“No. She was a good friend of mine. So, I did an album of pictures that were taken when I was with her and her husband. I had all these pictures of them – at the birth of her children; at all the birthdays where I was invited; also during the weekends we had spent together, etc.”

I smiled. My older friend was definitely marching at her own beat!

“You showed her a photo album basically of her husband, Ioana? I bet your album was not received too well.”

“You can say that again! It was not easy, but after a while, she did understand my point. Actually, you have summarized very well the problem. She had an automatic negative reaction, seeing the image of her husband. But I made her see something much more important in the background of each picture: herself. All these years, there was joy, happiness and love. And those were real.”

“You don’t know that, Ioana. The guy could very well have had a lot of mistresses before leaving his wife. All these pictures could just have reflected a dreadful, total lie.”

“That has nothing to do with anything. No, I know that my friend was feeling happiness and love during all that time. Even if her husband was the most horrible serial womanizer in the world, she did not know it. What she felt was real and beautiful.

It was a great shame watching her paint in disgusting colors some wonderful memories.”

Ioana knew I did not get what that story had to do with the Village.

She continued with a steep non-sequitur: “My father loved a singer named Swinging Brandon. One day, there was a huge sex scandal involving that Swinging Brandon guy and a teenage boy. My father, who was notoriously homophobic, destroyed all the records he had of Swinging Brandon, and never listened again to any of his songs.”

“Yeah, actually that does remind me of my own reaction to... William Turner, the 18th century British painter! His paintings were truly my first artistic emotion. At a young age, I swore by him until, when I was in my twenties, I was given a biography of him. In that book, his personality appeared so off-putting that I could not see his art the same way, anymore.”

“Yes, yes! That is precisely my point, partner! What a waste! What confusion! It is something like “throwing the baby out with the bathwater,” as they say in your country, I believe. You are not asked to live with Mr. Turner and all his burdens. You have the luxury to simply recognize he was a painter who touched you, at some point, and who made you see life differently.

The same was true for my father. By singing along Swinging Brandon, he was not being an accomplice of an act he despised!

These two cases are kind of obvious, aren’t they? It was really more difficult for my friend, who had a hard time seeing that, during these 16 years of marriage, the happiness she had felt was real; as well as her love. The fact that the man who initiated these heavenly feelings was not perfect should not cast any shadow on the brighter side of herself and on some radiant, excessively precious moments.

Of course, there is a time for mourning past happiness. I would even say... *past routines!* That is natural. But what is not natural is that this bitterness, this resentment could spoil a big chunk of your past, which is... your life, no less!”

“It is difficult to separate the man or his work, from his actions, Ioana.”

As soon as I pronounced that very general objection, its rebuttal popped automatically in my own mind.

In college, I had stumbled on an episode that puzzled me quite a bit, at the time.

A panel of students asked our Dean, who had written many reference books in Comparative Literature, why, in his writings, he quoted so often Schopenhauer and Heidegger; and why he had confessed loving Richard Wagner's music.

The panel's point was that these people were famously anti-Semitic, while the professor, whose father was a Rabbi, was also an eminent erudite in Hebrew Studies, and a fervent, practicing Jew.

The Dean laughed: "I am not asking these people to answer me on topics about which they are clueless. People attach too much importance about who said what. For me, what matters is who listens. I am the one listening, here; and if I gather a couple of thoughts that are going to impact what I am working on, and what I am thinking about, I personally could care less if they come from a radiologist, a janitor, a hairdresser or a politician whose views I usually despise..."

Not aware of my little internal debate about the arbitrary statement "*It is difficult to separate the man or his work from his actions,*" Ioana concluded her own train of thoughts: "In my opinion, you should not care if the New Village is becoming materialistic or even fascist. The Village you knew personally was not all these dreadful things, and that is what counts."

I could not help smiling and congratulating her: "As usual, you are right."

She replied fatalistically: "You see?"

XXVII) Baby Bath Water Throwing; Advanced Techniques

A couple of weeks went by. I had gone back to my routine. While I had to acknowledge that intellectually, Ioana was completely right, something in me was still out of sync.

Of course, my older, gentle friend had expressed something I strongly believed in: if *someone* utters a truth or a beautiful verse, never heard before, the fact that this *someone* was a good or a bad person does not affect the veracity or the beauty of the inspiration.

However, since I had read Amanda Johyson's thesis on the New Village, the shock I felt had been replaced by an overwhelming doubt, that no logical argument could shake off.

It was not only as if I had somehow philosophically, spiritually erred for fourteen months of my life in the Village, but also as if everything I had lived since the Evacuation was based on an error, or maybe a lie!

That malaise spilled into my current life, as I started to constantly question my work, my adopted family and my other *relationships* (I was even reluctant to call them "friends").

That late afternoon, I was in the office, catching up with some paperwork, when Ioana entered, slightly out-of-breath: there was a customer she could not understand, and she asked me to help.

The situation did not seem to justify her "panic," or rather the bizarre excitement she could not help displaying.

So, I went to the main room where Ioana pointed feverishly at a man, sitting by himself at a table, facing the street, hence, with his back turned to us.

"Sir?"

He looked up.

Nitish had indeed changed in nine years, but his gaze had the same intensity.

The surprise was such that, much later, Ioana told me she did not know I had this type of yelp in me!

Nitish had the brightest smile. He jumped up; we hugged.

He had no accent whatsoever when he said: “It is so nice to see you, Exiled! I must first congratulate you on your new life.”

“You... You learned our language so well!”

“Thank you. I don’t have much merit, though. I learned it in elementary school.”

“But you could only spoke Urdu, in the Village.”

He had a “Yes?” that sounded like an unsure “So?”

“You could understand everything?”

“Yes.”

He was calmly staring at me. He had a big smile:

“Do you remember our encounter, and how you came to see me every day, in the Village, shortly before the Evacuation?”

That last question did not register with me.

The elation to see my friend had sunk in the ocean of all the doubts that had been violently brewing in me for the past few weeks.

Instantaneously, I found myself simmering with disappointment and anger: so, everything was indeed a lie, a gigantic lie; and I had the horrible proof of it before my very eyes!

Nitish felt the change in me. We both forgot his question about my daily visits to the *Music Temple* before the Evacuation.

After a few seconds of awkward silence, he asked me to sit down with him at the table.

His voice seemed oddly higher than what I remembered of his Urdu conversations, but it was still melodic, as he added tones usually absent in our language:

“When I came in the Village, I left a very good situation...

Do you remember our common *best friend* Djalma? You know, when he reminisced about his golden youth, full of rhythms and smiles and dance?

Well, my situation in my native city was equivalent, in a way. I was considered a prodigy. The son of a respected, admired priest and scholar, I was literally treated like a prince of music and wisdom. The essential difference between Djalma and me, beyond our respective cultures, was that he went to the Village because he had lost his natural optimism. I lost my optimism when I was dragged to the Village.”

Finally, I snapped a little out of my intense resentment: “You were dragged to the Village?”

“That is correct. I did not want to be part of the Village. So, I initially excluded myself by the language.

I actually learned a lot about communication, that way. In the best cases, like with Djalma and you, our *language*, our *way to communicate*, was an ensemble of intonations, attitudes, gestures... that was probably even clearer than knowing the meaning of specific words and idioms.”

“It did help that you understood everything that was said... The magic was not that otherworldly, was it?”

“When I felt more comfortable in the Village, after many months, much more than a year, certainly, I continued nonetheless this new way of *communicating*, a very addictive approach, as it is.

I will not convince you that I sincerely saw in it a novel, more authentic bond with my fellow Villagers. But let me ask you something: how did you understand me in the Village, when I was only speaking Urdu?”

I shrugged. Suddenly, I remembered very clearly that day in the Village, after the cellist’s concert, when Nitish and I “dialogued,” he in Urdu and I in a language that he had mastered completely. If that was not deceptive, what was?

Just before blurting out my disappointment, I looked at him directly in his eyes. Instantly, I was brought back to the cellist’s concert, but that time, to the image of him crying his eyes out. He could not have faked that emotion.

Somehow, a tiny voice, mumbling something about throwing the baby out with the bathwater came to me, out of nowhere.

Nitish took advantage of my hesitation to assert firmly: “Not only you understood me when I was speaking Urdu, but our communication helped you cure the depression you felt, perhaps much more efficiently that just with more familiar, intelligible words of encouragement.

That was also *our* reality. Did the fact that I had dissimulated I spoke your language diminish in any way the relief you felt during our musical duets?"

The word "depression" greatly deflated my anger. Suddenly, the similarity between these two disheartened conditions, - the one in the Village, before the Evacuation and my current one - hit me.

Was I prone to depression? At that moment, it appeared rather clearly to me that both feelings of despair were curiously linked to the Village. Both times, I lost my inner balance when I feared I was losing the Village!

I did not voice that realization. Actually, I was not sure what to do with it. I kind of apprehensively expected Nitish to pounce on my silence and soon, to also pronounce something involving *a baby* and *some bathwater*.

But he was patiently waiting for my answer to his question.

So, I eventually just grumbled: "How come you are here, Nitish?"

"Ask your partner, Mrs. Ioana."

Incredulous, I just repeated the name.

We both looked back toward the kitchen door. Ioana who was staring at us, turned around quickly and tried to appear busy. It was so childish coming from this older lady that Nitish and I had to smile.

The flutist said: "From what I know about you, you are blessed with the gift of meeting remarkable people. Your business partner is an extraordinary soul."

"Do you count yourself among these remarkable people?"

As soon as uttered the question, I had a most uncomfortable thought: when was I going to calm down... and be less resentful?

Nitish smiled: "I did meet also some remarkable people, indeed! And, yes, I do have a master, an amazing being who actually did not have any!"

My understanding may have been affected by my ugly mood: "He didn't have any... what?"

"My master never came across anybody with the position of Elleya, the Secretary, Philomena or her mother, Djalma and so many others..."

And again, I could not stop myself from adding with the most biting tone at my disposal: "He has met you, though."

“Forgive me to correct you, but from my perspective what mattered is that I met him. I was the one dying from thirst. Not him.

But let me take you back to my city, where I told you that, from a very young age, I was incredibly well respected. People always came from quite far to see my father, who was a famous erudite in sacred texts. Soon, because of my music, even more people came to see me!”

Nitish paused briefly, as to immerse himself in his personal memories...

“One day, a good friend of mine asked me for a big favor. So, I accepted to go and play for a child, gravely ill, in the poor Eastern Quarters.

These Quarters had a very bad reputation. The general wretchedness over there was so great that its inhabitants were said to be turning into wolves and snakes in order to survive.

So, that day, I wore the poorest and dirtiest clothes I could find, and I hid carefully my superb flute in these rags.

I was so scared that I remember reciting popular prayers I usually found too literal and rather puerile during our walk, and all the way to our destination!

But we arrived safely to a decrepit, crowded, noisy building, in the middle of a filthy, narrow street infested by stray dogs.

Without asking too many questions to the boy or his mother, I grabbed my beautiful, custom made bansuri and I immediately started to play.

As usual, that instrument calmed me down, and soon, my inane panic melted. I transformed thankfully back into a human being sharing the sacred gift of music.

In the beginning, my listeners were only the mother and the child, our common friend who had convinced me to come, and the attendant of the old building, an apparently very simple man who was generous enough to let these tenants stay for free in his own poor apartment.

So, I played a long time for them. And when I finished, a few hundred people were gathered outside the building, attracted by the sound of my flute.

They all cheered.

I said some humble words, but I was very proud, I guess, as if I had tamed by myself wolves and snakes!

But truthfully, all along, there were only humble people, starved for beauty... and there were no fierce animals whatsoever, other than bugs and rats, maybe!

Several people said afterwards, that the music was magical and could very well make the child's terrible disease disappear. That was a very common belief, in those days.

While the mother was thanking me profusely, I saw the building attendant, next to the child, pointing at my friend. Even though the man was speaking in a very low voice, I could hear him saying to his sick, little guest:

“You see this man? Yes, your Mother’s good friend? He went to see the Flutist, who is also a Master Teacher of the Scriptures, and he told him that there was a Little Abdul who had been sick for a long time. But Little Abdul was so brave that the sickness could never erase the spark in his eyes and the smile on his face.

And the Master Flutist, like everybody who hears about Little Abdul, said: “My, oh my! Let me meet Little Abdul!”

And your Mom’s friend said: “All right, Master Flutist, I’ll ask his Mom.”

The Master Flutist, the man who just played so beautifully, said: “But what should I say? It is not polite to inquire directly how Little Abdul can be so brave before the disease. Although, that is what I need to know! What should I say? He does not know me!”

So, your Mother’s friend answered: “Play some music. Maybe Little Abdul will like it, and then, maybe he’ll tell you something.”

The child asked the older man; “Maamoon, what should I tell the Master Flutist, who came all this way to see me?”

“Tell him you are happy to meet him. That is why he came and why he played for so long and so beautifully.”

Nitish had to stop a few seconds, as to gather himself: “I am telling you, Exiled. I was in tears when I turned around.

And I took immediately that building attendant for my spiritual master.

He had never been to any temple; he did not know my father and our followers; he hardly knew one or two verses of the Vedas and of the Quran.

If I was so reluctant to move to the Village, it was because I did not want to leave his presence.”

Maybe more than the story itself, the emotion that was intermittently breaking Nitish’s voice, puzzled me.

To break the silence that followed, I found this lighter question: “You went to visit often this Maamoon?”

“*Maamoon* means *Uncle*. It was a term of endearment used by the child.”

Nitish had a bright smile: “However, you are right. *Maamoon* is a perfect name for him.”

“You chose him for your master after that visit to *Little Abdul*?”

“As you know, Exiled, we ask questions. We look for answers. We have books of philosophers, poets, entire mythologies we can question. Then, we listen to doctors, specialists, scholars, exceptional people...

But who did *Maamoon* see? Where did he find the courage to keep questioning life, in the lower depths of the Eastern Quarters, where injustice and misery are hourly occurrences? How did he find answers in simple gestures, in smiles, in small reliefs? How did he not wilt or harden like so many men, before hunger and insecurity?

I saw him and I marveled. Some look for miracles to really believe in something. I am not different. I had before my very eyes a simple, strong person, irradiating just a nurturing calm, an eternally burning glimmer of hope. He never pronounced a definitive truth, like Elleya could, and so eloquently. But he taught me how to be more genuine, more transparent, and more respectful...”

I thought that Nitish may have projected into a very average individual some spiritual qualities he wanted to encounter. However, I only objected: “It is a nice story, Nitish. But why did you tell it to me now, if I may ask?”

“As I said, you have a gift for meeting remarkable people, Exiled. You are lucky. Mrs. Ioana reminds me of my master.”

I could not repress my laughter. It may have been a little forced, after all the rollercoaster of emotions I had to ride, that night. But it was a welcome “comic relief”: the little grandmother, the fervent and conservative churchgoer, always wearing grey or dark blue clothes, who had worked as a servant for an old-money family for forty years, inheriting from them the money necessary to open our teahouse, had many wonderful qualities, but she was definitely not a spiritual master!

Nitish did not insist. He did not ask me what I found so hilarious. He just continued: “Mrs. Ioana wrote to the Kenyan Professor.”

My joyous mood vanished at once: “She did what?”

“She asked him in a letter why he gave you a thesis by Amanda Johyson, about the New Village; a book that appeared to be very pessimistic, and that had a dreadful effect on you. The Professor, being terribly busy these days, asked me, your friend from the Village, to come and see you.”

I was overwhelmed.

Nitish finished his tea and asked for more hot water. He was giving me some time to gather myself.

Eventually, I asked: “You live in the New Village?”

“I do. I am still one of the *Music Temple* keepers, among other functions.”

“What functions?”

“The New Village has a structure very different from the Original Village. Even though there are more than fifteen times more inhabitants, we all have a lot of work to do, in various fields.”

“The New Village wants to expand at any cost. I don’t see how you can agree with any type of expansionism.”

“I do not understand why you are saying that.”

“Never mind! Let me ask you about the people I knew in the Village.”

“Well, Djalma is presently looking back at his days in the Original Village like a time of leisure and idleness. He is not only tremendously busy at the Hospital, but he is a single dad of two children and, as you can imagine, a wonderful father, indeed.

Let’s see who else... I can tell you that our “lighthouses,” how we call them now, are the Kenyan Professor and the Ambassadors. Neither of them has the spiritual and philosophical charisma of Elleya or the Secretary. But they have a beneficial, steady influence on the New Villagers.

Yoon, whom you know well, is extremely popular. She has actually a little bit of Elleya’s aura. People claim she has healing powers.

Philomena is a very important, dynamic part of a vast group responsible for our educational structure. When Amanda Johyson wrote her thesis, she devoted a small chapter to it. Now, we have a truly efficient teaching network. If there is any real expansion, it is in this domain. I would say that all our resources go towards education.”

“I don’t understand why the Kenyan Professor sent me a thesis that hardly talks about that part, and not at all about the philosophy and spirituality in the New Village!”

Nitish looked at me attentively: “The thesis illustrated rather well our historical beginnings as an economically viable organization. It never pretended to analyze in depth the philosophical currents in the New Village. The Kenyan Professor assumed you were informed about those, maybe by some of your old friends who are still in the New Village.”

Embarrassed, I shook my head: “You must wonder why I never tried to contact any of my dear friends from the Village.”

My tone of voice was obviously no longer distant or sarcastic.

“It is not difficult to figure it out, Exiled. Do not forget I participated once in your healing.

Pain, I see, dear friend, is very much ingrained in you. You are an extremely sensitive soul. You may have to find a meaning to your pain, at some point.

People keep paying the same debt for so long that they forget it has been paid in full... And besides, the *plaintive* is dead!”

He laughed, as if it was a good, irresistible pun.

I tried also in jest: “Too bad you don’t have your flute with you.”

“I have yours too.”

He moved the chair next to him, and took two flute cases, hidden by the tablecloth.

He handed me one, similar to the one he gave me, nine years ago.

“Play first.”

I looked around us. It was almost closing time. On that particular weekday, only one table was still occupied, and the patrons were paying Gilda, our young waitress.

I wanted to object that there was our background classical music playing in the teahouse, but Nitish put his flute to his lips and with his eyes, signaled me to start, as he used to do, in the Village.

I was indeed very self-conscious.

But the touch of the wooden flute operated like a weird magic wand. Suddenly, the remaining clients, our assistant in the kitchen, Gilda, Ioana... were not mere vague and opaque “others;” or potentially judgmental ears... They were forming like a human web.

Nitish and the music were going to insert my *individuality* into it.

I held one note, then a couple more. The background music magically stopped.

Everyone present in the teahouse listened.

We did not play together very long. When Nitish started his first grand improvisation, the sound was so superb that my breath could not follow. I started to cry like I think I never cried before...

Or maybe I did cry like that, once before. Was it in the Village, just before Djalma took me for the first time to the *Music Temple*?

Nitish accompanied my sorrow with his solo.

Suddenly, Ioana was there, holding me.

I was blessed indeed; essentially ungrateful, but blessed.

XXVIII) Book Report

Nabena, my 13 years old younger stepdaughter, dropped my first draft of “The Physics of Particulars” on the kitchen table, with this laconic comment: “I didn’t know you were so complicated.”

That rough draft was very far from her list of required readings at school, and the fantasy novels she loved to read compulsively. I was actually flabbergasted she had asked to look at my manuscript.

“Do you have any questions?”

She shook her head. In the best of worlds, she would have opened up to the universe I was attempting to describe, with ten thousand pertinent questions leading to some contemporary *Socratic dialogues*...

But Nabena had only a few words of advice for me: “You should write much more about Layla. I like her. And you should write more also about Elleya. And, if she was a woman, why would you say “he/she” about her? That is confusing.”

I had a noncommittal answer.

She insisted: “Actually, your book is very confusing. My teacher always uses the word “verbose” when he corrects our papers. Don’t take it the wrong way, but I guess you are that, and some!

You know what you should do? Some of the people you are talking about could be good characters for a normal book. You can write a series of chapters... let’s say one chapter per person. You can skip what they say. Actually, when they talk, I know it is you preaching, not them.”

“How am I preaching? I never mention any of these topics to you or to the family!”

“Yeah? Whatever... Anyway, the first chapter should be on Layla. She’s your best character. The second chapter could be on Elleya, if you make her more interesting. Like, you should talk much more about the miracles she did. After, I’m not sure if you should write the story of your friend, the flutist, or about the Brazilian Guy... Or maybe you make the Brazilian Guy more of a womanizer, no?”

I must confess I was not expecting that type of reaction from Nabena. I answered a bit curtly:

“Okay, but I don’t really like biographies.”

“Why not? It’s like writing a longer paper on someone. Right now, something is missing in your book. The only way to improve your descriptions of these people is for you to go to the New Village and interview them one by one. And you asked them for some juicy stuff.

I guess you won’t see Elleya. She must be dead, no?

Anyway, I can tell you for sure that people are more interested in reading personal stories than all the concepts and ideas you repeat pages after pages, after pages....”

“A biography is essentially a gathering of facts and dates. It remains obviously external to the person and does not say much about what counts: the inner discoveries of the person...”

Nabena shrugged: “Whatever... Anyway, you know I am right when I am telling you to go wherever the New Village is, and to interview them one by one.”

“Tell me what questions I should ask them.”

While Nabena was assertively giving me her list of queries for “*my characters*,” including their childhoods, youths, first loves, etc., I could not help wondering when she would start looking for her very own “Village.”

Of course, she was already too old not to have been exposed to fear and uncertainty. Questions already abounded all around her, indeed.

The little I knew of her universe was one of shifty but always bright distractions. She still did not fully fathom the ever-changing nature of reality. In her world, *good* and *bad* existed in poles that never mixed. The future harbored so many unlimited potentials that miracles were possible, and even probable. Certitudes were transmitted by her best friends, influential schoolmates, and some chosen, famous people she admired infinitely!

No matter how sheltered her family could keep her, more interrogations were going to poke at her, and more likely to disturb her greatly.

That is our curse but also, potentially, our nobility, our *salvation!*

How was she going to respond to the common *existential* questions, where “existential” is always a quite literal adjective?

How was she going to react to the sound of an inevitable, phenomenal inner solitude?

She would most probably try to cover it, imitating everyone around her.

She was going to walk a tightrope above despair, most certainly getting a job, reinventing love, success, respect, family... She would then confront small and big challenges every day, like an unprepared but stubborn knight, never even realizing that billions of souls before her wore the same colors and waved the same banners.

But what if one day, she would decide that there is more to life than what popular culture, advertising or the neighbors find desirable? What if she meets someone like Layla? What if she becomes someone like Layla? What if suddenly, she is intrigued by what is the center of this very “Physics of Particulars”?

Nabena had a suspicion: “Are you listening to me?”

“Yes, yes.”

After a short pause, she had a more hesitant tone of voice: “Why don’t you want to live in the New Village? Personally, I would go.”

“The Village is here and here.”

I displayed the old, grandiose, slow double gesture of Layla, pointing to my head and my heart. I added: “You have your own version of it.”

“Like I will also be Exiled?”

That was her youthful version of sarcasm.

“Yes, you will.”

“I will be thrown in the Village?”

“Not an actual one, maybe; but yes, you will be invited to a place of self-questioning. Maybe you will just swing by. Maybe you will be pushed in, and stay there just enough time to run back out, pretending afterwards that nothing had happened. Maybe you will stay there for a long time?”

I had lost Nabena. I concluded quickly:

“Anyway, I suppose you will eventually come back from it.”

“Like you did?”

She was referring literally to the actual Village.

I did not insist.

“Like I did...”

I could not believe my luck when the next day, Nabena approached again the topic of my manuscript. She did it casually, with her particular edge, asking if I had started to write Layla’s biography.

She was not surprised when I gave her my excuse: I had at least another book project to write, after “The Physics of Particulars.”

I did not tell her that, some time ago, I had decided to describe in a whole manuscript, my first night with Philomena’s mother!

Nabena’s real question came after she jokingly scolded me about my “procrastination”: “Okay, so you came back from the Village, and I think you said you don’t want to go back to the New Village because it is ‘here and here?’”

She pointed at my head and my heart.

“Yes.”

“What does it mean? Really... did you make up everything? Did you actually go to the place you are calling *the Village*?”

“There are several layers of reality in every fact, every event. Can you see that?”

I knew my answer was way too theoretical. I guess it was just an instinctive ploy to temporize: I was absolutely not prepared to talk to a teenage girl about philosophical topics that seemed, as far as I could see, several light-years away from her everyday concerns.

She repeated:

“Do I see that? I don’t know. No, I really don’t think so. Do you mean that everybody can spin the facts, like a lawyer or a politician?”

Actually, I did find the pertinence of Nabena's questions, that day, quite stunning. However, before I could congratulate her, she made a face and demanded with impatience: "Can you at least give me a simple explanation anyone could understand!"

Even though Nabena showed some irritation because I had not answered her question about the reality of the Village, she was still curious about it.

I had to appreciate the fact that she did not simply forget about my obscure manuscript, the slightly "off" stepdad, who meant well, but who was not there altogether, like all her friends' dads, it seemed...

So, ready or not to address a 13 years old girl who had lived so far mostly a comfortable, protected existence, and who did not know many classical philosophers, I had to answer that precious curiosity!

It appeared to me appropriate to explain the *different layers of common reality* by telling her a couple of ancient initiatory tales: "Would you like to listen to a story that took place a few centuries ago, in India: the odyssey of the little Cinder Boy?"

Nabena looked at me with horror: did I think she would still be into fairy tales?

She replied "No. You're going to confuse me again. You know what? Just tell me your personal story, so I can understand what the Village is for you."

"All right, then. I was a rather good student in high school and in college.

Is that a good beginning?"

"No. It is clear, but it is not interesting."

I must say that I had never noticed Nabena's edge before. Maybe she had discovered or developed sarcasm only recently?

I tried to entice her:

"I am going to reveal something you are not expecting from me. I was very close to becoming one of the ten most important people in my fatherland's government."

If I had told her I could have been one of the leading pop stars or actors of my native country, she might have been impressed. My boastful hook about *my fatherland's government* got me a polite: "Okay."

I continued: “I was still in my twenties, but I knew some very influential people who helped me land a fantastic job at the State Secretary’s office. There, I got lucky and became in a record time very close to the State Secretary herself.

After a few short years, even though I professed some strong philosophical and political beliefs, I quickly became entangled in a scandal of influences...”

“And then, you were kicked out of your country. You became “Exiled,” right?”

“What matters is that, during and after my tenure in office, I witnessed a lot of injustices. Sometimes, I was not proud of my own action, at the very moment I was making a choice!

Anyway, at the end, I became more lost than just stateless. Frequently, I doubted I had any moral compass left.

That is what you must remember.”

“I must remember that you were lost?”

“Doubting is questioning. It is a very important intellectual process.”

“Okay, but try not to use big words.”

“Well, now imagine that, instead of all the turns, twists, and all the turmoil that led me to the Village, my political success would have continued in my homeland. I would have become, after a couple of years perhaps the youngest Minister of State on record. My responsibilities would be have been tremendous, as well as my fame and my power.

Then, I would never have spent fourteen months redefining who I was, and becoming who I am now!”

I saw in my stepdaughter’s eyes her shocked incomprehension.

I stopped: “Sorry. I was not clear enough?”

“No. Are you saying that becoming a pastry chef in a small town of another country is better than being one of the most powerful persons in your own country?”

“I am not only a pastry chef, sweetie. I know who I am one thousand times better than if I were a mere political figure.”

“You know yourself?”

“That is what human beings must strive to do.”

She started a high pitched, vehement: “I’m going to tell you something...”

Somehow, she succeeded to censure what was going to be undoubtedly too strong an opinion about my choices, and possibly my mental sanity.

She eventually only dropped a less antagonistic but still rather damning: “That’s not a reason for thinking that being a pastry chef is better than being a Chief of State who could do a lot of good things for many people! And besides, what does it mean to know oneself? I know myself, and I don’t use it as an excuse.”

Since I was living with Nabena, and even though her inner life was indeed and will always be veiled to me, I still had the advantage of being aware of many salient details of her recent biography:

“Well, do you find okay that Star (her beloved pet) had to die? And why did this girl Amanda get you in trouble? Why did you feel so crumby, in those circumstances? Why did the world seem so gloomy? And I kind of remember a very unsettling incident with this boy, Gerard, I believe...”

Nabena blushed: “All these things have nothing to do with anything.”

“Knowing oneself means understanding one’s own reactions. It means, if you think about it, truly understanding where you stand in the universe, at every moment.”

She denied that statement forcefully, repeating a couple more times: “All this has nothing to do with it!”

How could I insist? She was not a Villager for whom any discussion was as opportunity to learn. I concluded with a conciliatory tone:

“Well, my point is that all these events, even when they are tender or painful, are not purely negative. These episodes will always occur over and over again, under different forms and disguises... for each one of us.

All the ambiguous, sometimes heart-pounding circumstances that led me to be kicked out of my country... but also for you, Star’s departure, the helplessness you feel now and then... those are incidents that will become good or bad memories...

But in truth, for the Villagers for instance, those dramatic circumstances are also enigmas, mysteries that should be examined, so they can be correctly understood and confronted, in the future.

Even the positive circumstances, all our joys and pleasures, must not only be enjoyed, but probed very much the same way, since all the enjoyments *end!* And when they end, all joys and pleasures are not different from all the trials our existence, small and big, that need to be put into question.”

At the end of almost each one of my sentences, Nabena repeated it or paraphrased it, but in the negative form: “No, it does not turn into... No, it does not always...”

She became even more adamant when I hinted we must also probe joyful, *positive circumstances*.

I could not resist asking her: “Do we enjoy truly, fully? Why must a joy end? Is there something like an eternal happiness?”

We have a short lifetime to know all the answers...”

This time, Nabena cut my off: “We don’t have to know all the answers.”

Not having the Socratic wit to ask the correct questions that could eventually lead to some elevated truth, I just nodded and refrained from carrying on the argument.

And speaking of Socrates, I had the feeling I did make quite a mess of a potentially fruitful exchange with my young and remarkably inquisitive stepdaughter.

The conversation, I thought, was sadly over. But Nabena had an inspiration:

“You are saying you are better off now than if you had stayed in your homeland, because “you know yourself better.” How so? How do you know yourself better? I saw you being affected by a lot of things. You are not that much in control of your own emotions, either.”

“Maybe, but in the Village, I did receive all the elements to know myself better. What does it mean if you feel I have failed nonetheless?”

Nabena took the time to reflect before answering:

“Maybe the instructions you received were bad?”

She ventured again after a few seconds:

“Or maybe knowing oneself is impossible?”

Finally, with a wide smile:

“Or maybe you were just a very bad student?”

“I am sincerely impressed with your three very good guesses!

Let’s go over what you just said. You wondered if knowing oneself is even possible.

Let me ask you: how would you verify if it is possible or not? As you said, you cannot trust my comprehension of things, nor my iffy testimony.

So, you cannot send me to the Village a second time, if the first time did not convince you. Therefore, there is only one solution! You must inquire yourself, and see whether what was taught in the Village was valid!”

Nabena did not pay any attention to my answer. She had found an ideal retort and quipped enthusiastically:

“Actually, out of my three guesses, it is more likely that you were just a bad student!”

I admitted: “Chances are that you will be a much better student than me, considering I started when I was much older than you and therefore much more rigid in my thinking.

Also, you noted I was not much in control. Therefore I don’t have much to show for, do I? The only thing I can pride myself, really, is to be still respecting the process of asking questions. That is my ultimate accomplishment, even if I don’t capture the answers that others may reach.”

“Yeah?” She had a little pout that meant unequivocally: “Asking questions without being able to answering them is no accomplishment at all, in my book!”

XXIX) Superman Can Wish Upon More Stars

A couple of days later, Nabena teased me again about her project for me to go to the New Village, in order to formally interview my friends, especially Layla and Djalma.

I thought that was some sort of game and I played along.

She added lightly: “When you go, make sure to take me with you.”

I realized that Nabena was somewhat serious about wanting to visit the New Village.

I was tempted to tell her that by her curiosity, she had already entered it, but I decided it would be a little too confusing an answer.

I improvised: “You remember that in my manuscript, there was a debate with Philomena’s mother around the trite expression “When the disciple is ready, the master comes”? Her interpretation was that the student, who is the person who wonders, must ready herself. Then, the master, which is truly *the answer*, comes naturally.”

Nabena laughed: “Must you always give huge lectures? I just asked you to take me when you go to the New Village!”

“Exactly! When I go there, I’ll be very busy. You will be by yourself. I cannot be a tour guide.”

“Okay, that’s great! I will meet whoever I’ll meet, like you did.”

“We are not going there to be tourists, listen to a conference, buy a memento, take two pictures and leave. We will be ‘explorers.’”

“Great! When are we going?”

“Wait. I believe you still have a touristic mentality. Let’s wait for you to ask the right questions before even considering such a journey.”

“How about you? Before you got there, you never had to ask any question. You got exiled! You were just dropped there.”

“It is not your case, now, is it?”

The curt reply startled Nabena.

It took her a few seconds to counterattack sarcastically: “What now? I need to “learn to ask the right questions?” Okay. I’ll ask. You’re going to quiz me once a week about what is a *right question*? What will it be? Pop quizzes? Tests with an open book?”

“No need for all that...”

“I don’t understand why I must have another teacher, and at home this time! Do you have your teaching credentials from the Village, or something?”

“Why do you want to go to the Village?”

Without missing a beat, Nabena’s answer exploded: “To get away from my life and most of you!”

“Most of me?”

She had a little squeal of frustration.

Once again, my unprepared attempt to get Nabena on the path of basic philosophical topics had not been very productive, to say the least.

Moreover, at that point, I could not help feeling some impatience, certainly caused by my own failure to guide adequately a young mind, unexpectedly inquisitive. I asked myself impatiently why I would ever want to take her anywhere with her attitude!

However, I only sighed: “How would you get away from your life if you travel with it?”

“What?”

“You don’t need to answer. It is a rhetorical question.”

“Rhetorical, my...”

Nabena struggled to find an innocuous word.

Eventually, she yelled: “My foot!”

Nabena's way to move past our recent, slightly tense exchange was to get me to pick her up at a gymnastics practice the following week, and to tell me on the way back home: "Quiz me now. I'm ready."

I was quite surprised and thoroughly thrilled to see that our astonishing dialogue was still on.

I played along: "Okay, then. Here is our first quiz..."

As I was proofreading my manuscript, I came across that quote that expresses wonderfully what I have discovered in the Village:

"Here is the nature of (the) Tao. It is vague; it is confusing, eluding our senses. Inside of it, there are forms and the essence of things. How dark and obscure it is! Its name was never passed on. How do I know? By the Tao."

Now, I know it is not fair to be exposed out of the blue to an uncommon quote. And I am not expecting you to explain it. But you can always ask... the right questions!"

Nabena made me repeat the quote twice. With her sharpest, sarcastic tone of voice, she poked: "So, you are Taoist or something, now?"

"You can replace "Tao" with whatever represents for you 'the ultimate essence of everything.'"

"Like God?"

"If you feel comfortable with that word, yes. In this context, I personally don't mind keeping the term "Tao," or perhaps "The Origin of everything."

But anyway, I must repeat that you can always choose to ask a question rather than give an explanation."

After a few seconds, Nabena shrugged: "I have no idea of what you're talking about."

"See?"

She understood at once that my smiling "See?" was a wink, meaning roughly: "You, young lady, failed the first test. So, don't expect a trip to the New Village anytime soon."

The young girl was not amused.

I knew she had some temper, but I did wonder if, in the last few months, some hormones had not added some strength to it.

Or perhaps it was simply my own blend of didacticism that aggravated her markedly?

After her little outburst and a few seconds of silent rumination, Nabena remarked: “I did not see anywhere in your manuscript anything about Tao. That is not fair. It’s like a teacher preparing us for a final on algebra, only to give us a test on trigonometry.”

“I told you that you can replace “Tao” with anything you have discovered in yourself.”

Nabena just shook her head.

Once again, we had hit an impasse. The conclusion was, once again, quite clear: the quote that came to my mind was absolutely not appropriate to the situation. Consequently and obviously, I was not equipped for any type of spiritual give and take with a teenage girl... or perhaps with anyone else, of any age!

But Nabena surprised me, as always. She asked in an overly polite manner:

“Help me, then. Tell me how I should have answered or asked.”

“Well, for instance, if it is *vague; confusing, eluding our senses*, why and how can we look for it?

And also, if the person uttered these words, was it to appear mysterious and wise, or was he attempting to communicate something paradoxical, difficult to grasp by the sole language?”

Nabena nodded: “Okay. I could have asked these questions. I got it now. Give me your answer, then.”

“Also, there is this curious and most interesting *How do I know? By the Tao*. The answer does seem arbitrary, like a tautology. But in the realm of our consciousness, it does make sense: “If I know it, it is because it is there, albeit we don’t have its name, its definition!”

After a few seconds of silence, I apologized sincerely: the abrupt Taoist quote was truly a poor choice for learning to ask judicious questions.

Nabena sighed: “You know what we are? We are *stuck in the mud*.”

I was very familiar with that expression that she liked to repeat often, with some colorful variations on the word “mud.” And if we were *stuck in the mud* (or in anything more foul-smelling), I was certainly responsible for it.

Nabena was going, quite justifiably, to close herself up.

A new sizeable non sequitur, as incongruous as the previous, ill-fated Taoist quote, came to my mind. Having nothing to lose, I asked the young girl:

“What does Superman see?”

“What?”

“He sees X-rays, right?”

“What?”

“We, humans, can only see the visible light, which is a little portion of a bigger spectrum. But Superman, contrary to us, can see stars emitting X-rays. Okay?”

“What?”

“The same way Superman can see stars emitting X-rays, the Villagers can perceive a special reality that escapes most people in the *civilized world*. Once you acquire that sense, I will take you to the New Village with me.”

“You are... You’re kidding, right?”

“Yes.”

XXX) With A Side Order Of Nirvana To Go, Please

Superman's X-ray vision did puzzle Nabena. The next day, she came at the Tea Salon just before closing time, so we could go home together. She asked:

"The Villagers have a different perception of reality, like Superman? So, it is like a sixth sense?"

"The way I see it, it is more like... Let's say that one day, you happen to be very tired and depressed. Have you ever felt that way? You know, like you don't feel like doing anything; and everything seems bleak to you?"

I waited for her to nod before continuing: "Did you notice that everything then seems flat, somber, unidimensional?"

Okay. Now, imagine yourself the very next day, or even a couple hours after feeling so crummy. You suddenly get the news you were specially selected by someone who noticed your talents, for a rare, exciting vacation, totally paid for. And you could take with you your very best friends.

You are so happy you want to sing and dance. You look around: everything bursts with promising, almost magical, colorful possibilities. Everything is truly multidimensional!

You see what I mean? That is the sense I am talking about. You felt it, right? But can you imagine that some people could have it perhaps in permanence?

Or better! If you get in a crummy mood, it triggers the special, multidimensional sense, and you feel as happy as always."

The very same night, after dinner, Nabena asked me: “You’re saying that some people are never depressed? They can see everything like... bright and shiny? You’re saying that in the Village, everybody had that sense?”

Before I could find a semi-affirmative answer, destined to tease her curiosity, Nabena added with a pressing tone: “Tell me the truth, Dad.”

When was the last time she called me directly *Dad*? Nabena was signaling how fragile she felt, at that moment. Sensing she could be profoundly influenced, she was literally asking: “Please, sir, don’t you send me on a wild goose chase for the rest of my life!”

That was, at least, how I understood her plea.

“Okay, honey, I am going to tell you the truth. Now, allow me to add a short disclaimer. I must tell you that in the Village, that word, “truth,” was considered as... *sacred* as many others like “God” or “Love.” But *sacred* meant *elusive*. Grasping one of these concepts was *becoming* the concept, so to speak...

But when you are asking me for the truth, what you expect from me is just honesty. So, I will try to be as sincere as I possibly can.

Now, this is my experience and solely my experience. Thus, it is my truth and solely my truth...

I will try not to boast, to overstate or beat about the bush. However, I will tell you the steps I had to go through to get to a conclusion only if you ask me to. Do you understand what I am saying?”

“Sure.”

“I would like to find an example... It is like when you have a complex math problem in school. You say: “I don’t get it!” And a friend of yours intervenes: “Look! Here is the result I have found.” So, you wonder: “Is it correct?” But the tricky part is that there is no official answer key available for you!

How would you know if it is correct? So, you ask your friend: ‘Show me all the steps you took. Are you using the right axiom? Let me first double check that in the workbook.’”

I insisted quite heavy-handedly: “This is only the result I have found, and you’ll have to check all my step-by-step processes, okay?”

“Okay.”

“All right... For me, at the end of many experiences, I have decided that there is and there is no defining moment.”

“Dad! Here you go again! You promised not to beat around the bush!”

“Just let me finish. You can ask me all your questions afterwards... If you interject right away, I am going to run intellectually all over the place, defending this or that point of view... That is not what we need.

I just want to give you my results as I encountered them. Then, we have all the time in the world to discuss them, and even, for you, to annihilate them, if you want.”

“Okay. I promise not to interrupt. I’ll even take notes, so I won’t forget what I’ll ask at the end of your story. But just don’t throw complicated stuff at me, so I don’t have to write all the time!”

I restarted, rather satisfied to have potentially at my disposal the great feat of suggesting some provocative ideas without being untimely interrupted:

“The question is to know whether someone can see in all the events happening within his or her existence, a hidden reality, where some ultimate beauty is always present. Do we agree?”

Well, how does this person get to see that *special reality*? Does it explode like a thunderbolt that rips apart our “veils of ignorance”? And when does this *defining moment* happen?

Here is the paradoxical secret I have discovered, and that you found off-putting, the first time I uttered it: *there is and there is no defining moment*.

Once, I did ask Layla, whom you seem to like, about the *defining moment*. It was for her something like an illumination.

As I wanted her to give me an example of such *illumination*, Layla decided to simplify it for me: “It is like Gautama Buddha who, after realizing that misery, arbitrariness and injustice reign over the human world, went to a forest and opened up to the Nirvana.”

That is an illumination; that is a *defining moment*. So, little Nabena, according to Layla and many others, the *special reality* we are looking for will happen during or after an *illumination*!

In other words, for Layla (and these other people), the *defining moment* where we see through all of reality an endless, overwhelming, profound, translucent beauty... is no other than Buddha’s Nirvana!

That is a tall order, isn’t it? Besides, believe it or not, that type of characterization, instead of helping me in any way, hindered my personal search for a *defining moment*!

Even though you have passed the age of listening to extraordinary tales, let’s examine this particular image of Gautama who went to a forest, had his illumination and became the Buddha.

First, let’s see why Gautama went to a forest.

The most common legend shows him as a prince, sheltered of all human miseries by his family. So, at some point, the young Prince Gautama had to have a glimpse at poverty, despair, injustice, but also sickness and death...

These miseries, he discovered after a while, are not linked to a rank in the society, where paupers are marked by an inexorable, dreadful fate and noblemen would be spared. These *miseries* are... simply the human condition.

At what age do we realize the absurdity of a universe *that will continue without us*, because we will wilt, most likely in pain... and die?

At what age did you, Nabena?"

Not expecting such a question, she made a funny face. I had to laugh:

"Some claim that this defining intuition comes very early. They say it may strike even the newborn baby! Others support that it happens much later in life, maybe during another unforgiving, primordial *defining moment*...

Chances are that this intuition bursts at a different age for each person, probably after being exposed to an accumulation of more or less dramatic hints.

And one night, perhaps, it woke you up and it dawned on you, like a dark, dizzying revelation: my parents will end up leaving (me), and I will eventually also disappear from this place...

So, in order for you not to be thrown in a permanent, incapacitating anguish, you had to bury that intuition.

Most people actually bury it extremely deeply. Keep that in mind, Nabena!

Let's go back to Gautama, who left his cozy palace to become aware of the human sufferings.

So, according to this summary of the legend, he had to question why human beings had to live an absurd life ending with death, after experiencing various degrees of pain. Quite distressed, Gautama went into the forest and, under a famous Tree, he found the Illumination.

Usually, we imagine that Nirvana is something like a sudden understanding of the whole universe; and most notably of the reasons we are to hurt, time and time over, and then die...

And this knowledge could be somehow linked to an eternal bliss!

Actually, what is the difference between Gautama and you, or me, or every human being ever to appear on this Earth?

One small detail, it seems... He was a prince sheltered by his royal parents from all the evidences of Suffering, while we buried that knowledge or that intuition all the same, in order to be able to go on living.

At some point though, Gautama went out to look at it directly, and decided to find an explanation for it.

But on the contrary, most of us do not especially care to exhume it, let alone to stare at it.

We must *go on*, and we do so by ignoring what we have once interred within ourselves.

That “unconscious act” (hidden to the consciousness) was necessary, you see, so we all could busy ourselves with “having a life,” filled with common “discoveries and excitements.”

What happened to me, in the Village, Nabena? You guessed it. I was confronted to what I had *buried* somewhere in me. The awareness of the absurdity of a life naturally ending in decay and death came back to me, among many troublesome interrogations.

So, I looked for an end to all troubles; for a meaning, the understanding of everything. Or maybe I just looked... for eternal bliss! In short, I looked for... Nirvana!

Not an especially meditative person, I dove in all kinds of meditations, under the tutelage of some of the special Villagers I had encountered... so much so that, at times, I thought I had found it!

But it never stayed with me for very long.

Of course, I blamed my lack of fortitude and of authentic spirituality, for inexorably losing it.

But what is the most important is that, after a while, some of the questions I learned to pose in the Village, made me rethink what an Illumination should be. There was something in the common vision of a *sudden understanding of the whole universe* that did not quite “*fit*.”

When Layla gave me her definition of a *defining moment*, I went to look for it.

Naturally, I did try to imagine what could be that illumination.

But here is a curious problem, Nabena: *imagining an illumination* sets the mind in a certain direction that has very little to do with a new perception of the reality.

Imagining *an illumination* essentially misdirects the mind.

In the Village, everybody studies *philosophies*. They comment on spiritualities and religions.

I learned there that the root of the word *Religion*, which led feeble minds to inquisitions, pogroms, genocides... is *religare*, which is to *bind*.

Literal men just want to bind all of humanity to the one doctrine they have chosen.

Subtle men want to bind all the elements of their own lives into a plausible, *blissful* unity..."

But when Layla, whom I admired sincerely, gave me her definition of the *defining moment*, this term ended being divisive: how about all the moments that are not *defining moments*?

The next time we could talk, Nabena reminded me:

"Do you remember that I asked you if the inhabitants of the Village had a different perception of reality, like Superman who could see X-rays?"

"Yes. Then, we wondered how we would acquire that new perception of our reality.

Most people, including Layla, seem to think we must strive to get to a *defining moment* that would be like an illumination, or even... some type of *Nirvana*.

However, Nabena, at some point, I came to realize that this theory, which seemed quite plausible and that was very popular in the Village, did not really make sense to me.

As I was going against the grain, in a spiritual sense, I went over what was first a certain malaise, and then a more personal theory. I tried to justify it to myself, actually. Oddly enough, I had recourse to some logics.

I know, it sounds quite unbelievable since I don't have the reputation to be an extremely logical fellow in our family!

But one way or another, I had to reflect and see why I was, in some way, rejecting the notion that a *different perception of reality* had to be linked to some type of illumination.

Here is my demonstration. Tell me if it makes sense.

After everything, there is an “after,” right?

We have learned very early on that “the only thing that never changes is change!”

Therefore, after the Nirvana, there must be an after-Nirvana.

And also, there was without a doubt a “before-Nirvana.” It must have been a special occurrence, since it actually led to... Nirvana! Therefore, it is a threshold of tremendous importance that we should study thoroughly, don't you think?

Nabena objected that a *Nirvana* is supposed to be eternal; and there is by definition nothing after “eternal.”

It was indeed a very astute observation. I countered with a familiar retort: “Did Buddha preach the ‘Good Law’ before or after reaching his Nirvana?”

“Uh... After, I guess.”

“I rest my case: there was then technically an after-Nirvana!

Of course, Nabena could have opposed that once Buddha had reached the Nirvana, all was Nirvana; and when he preached, he was still in Nirvana. Thus, there was technically no after-Nirvana!

But she didn't, probably because these types of debates were new to her. In any case, that allowed me to continue my demonstration which, *for my purpose* was still valid:

“So, Nirvana has to be sandwiched between a “before” and an “after.”

The “before,” must we repeat, is special because it leads to the Nirvana, and the “after” is as special because it leads, among other things, to the communication by the Buddha.

Did anyone interview the Buddha to ask him if his *defining moment* was for him the Nirvana itself, or the essential “before-Nirvana,” or the necessary “after-Nirvana”?

What if all three moments were equally *defining moments*?

Don't you think that possibility is the most plausible?

Moreover, if you imagine Buddha in Nirvana, it would be extremely doubtful he would see a “before” and an “after.” Everything would be most likely unified in his mind.

You did notice out loud and very accurately, Nabena, that *Nirvana* is supposed to be eternal, which has no before or after, by definition.

So, why is it that for Buddha, the before-Nirvana and the after-Nirvana are totally one with the Nirvana, while it is not the case for you and me, the observers outside of his Nirvana?

You realize of course that it must be because we *think* about it. We are not in Nirvana!

And when we *think about it*, we would sell intuitively all the “before” and all the “after” for a fraction of Nirvana, if we can use that figure of speech!

Now, listen to an obvious solution for that frustrating intellectual paradox: Nirvana was always there, without any before or after.

Let me repeat that, honey: *Nirvana*, a dimension that escapes our intellect, *was always there, without any before or after*.

When Buddha entered it, he became it.

Gautama, as a human being, with a body and a life forever caught in the turmoil of his mortal dimension, is still chronologically within a *before* and an *after*.

Filled with compassion for his brethren, he could communicate to them the *before* and the *after*.

But *inside*, Gautama was part of another dimension... No! More appropriately speaking, he *became* another dimension, *eternal* in the sense it escaped all chronology, understood by a human being.

That is why the *defining moment* had to be located outside of any definition!”

In my mind, I had just explained the thought that *there is and there is no defining moment*.

I concluded with excitement:

“Therefore, seen from this perspective, the Nirvana is not an explosion revealing a new reality to a baffled consciousness. It is rather a subtle paradox where Gautama, you, me... eliminate any before-or-after-Nirvana. Gautama, you, me... are in Nirvana. We do not reach anything. We become consciously part of everything.”

I tried to guess and answer the cause for Nabena’s marked frown before she could voice it:

“I know, Nabena! You have already complained that I was not a practicing Taoist. And, of course, I am not a practicing Buddhist.

But our quest is not to be *orthodox* or *heterodox* in any school of thoughts.

Our goal was and remains to ultimately enter a bearable or even *blissful* reality... It is to perceive, like Superman who could *see* stars emitting X-rays, *the essence of that reality*, if it exists.

We just went with an image proposed by Layla who implied it would come to us as an *illumination*. And we just had to explore that notion.”

Nabena remained speechless. Fearing, with good reasons, that I went really too far, I chose not to probe her silence. I segued as lightly as I could:

“Can you imagine that the admirable Layla gave me a definition that **hindered** my personal quest?

Now, is what I am saying to you presently going to hinder your personal quest?

Of course, it will!

But on the positive side, when I realized the intrinsic falsehood of a Nirvana sandwiched between a “before” and an “after,” that was actually a *defining moment*, because it relaxed my mind into a new level of openness.

It does not stop there. You see, in my research, the research cannot stop. There will never be a stage when I could say: ‘I got it, and have it forever.’”

Curiously, Nabena’s frown disappeared.

Instead of being horrified by the concept of embarking for a treasure hunt where the treasure can never be reached, her posture became suddenly noticeably more relaxed.

I could easily guess I had lost her for good.

However, I was rather surprised by her silence and wondered if she was not choosing carefully the best way to lash out like she never did before.

I tried a desperate move to distract her long enough to conclude my demonstration:

“Here is the equivalent of Superman’s x-ray vision for you, Nabena.

Everything that happens to you is processed by *Nabena’s intellect*.

In the Village, what constitutes *Nabena’s intellect* would have become looser, very much like the bonds of the atoms get looser, as an element goes from solid to liquid, to gas and to plasma. In physics, the element is the same. And *Nabena’s intellect* remains the same. However, *Nabena’s intellect* is potentially “infinitely” limber, adapting to all the changes of the universe it perceives. And then, your consciousness does not privilege, nor seek any moment since it can adapt and enjoy all of them... Potentially.

In other words, as they said in the Village, *there is just life that goes as we are ...*”

Finally, Nabena dropped a modest, therefore unexpected: “All right.”

She thanked me and left the room.

The next few days, Nabena did not look for my company. On the other hand, she did not avoid me, either. She just seemed to have gone back to the business of being a teenage girl in high school, with real problems, such as declining grades in Chemistry, this boy and that girlfriend; her periods and other hormonal tumults...

She appeared to gravitate again a few light-years away from the “Physics of Particulars.”

I must confess that for a few weeks, I had found very poetical that my younger stepdaughter could suddenly become my “spiritual daughter.”

That idyllic little dream lasted long enough, actually.

But *my spiritual princess charming was yet to come!* In truth I was most certainly the one who made her run away, when she came so close to the *enchanted library* I was dying to show her.

I concluded that *my spiritual princess charming* could be actually Nabena... in a few years.

For a long time, I found some solace in repeating the excuse that I was not really prepared to communicate the “Physics of Particulars” to a young reader or listener.

But, then again, for whom was I writing *The Physics of Particulars*?

That is when I decided to rewrite again *The Physics of Particulars*.

ADDENDUM:

By

NABENA NATTERGAL

XXXI) Nabena's Voice, Here

It is somewhat ironic that the manuscript of the "Physics of Particulars" is finished by the last person mentioned by the author, long after he went on to his last exile.

I wish I could be the spiritual princess charming he was jokingly imagining or, in an odd way, predicting. But, I am truly only his... most literal editor!

After deciding in his last line to rewrite The Physics of Particulars, my stepfather stopped it abruptly, and started the composition of his defining novel, Floating Bridges.

More than eight hundred pages of The Physics of Particulars were stored in two plastic bins, untouched for more than one decade.

When I eventually came across them, I felt understandably a special fondness for them, and the urge to share a work I find most important.

Editing The Physics of Particulars has been, I must confess, an arduous process.

When I was 14, as it has been aforementioned, I did read its skeleton version, divided in 12 chapters of three to five pages each.

In the plastic bins, I found ten times more pages of new chapters, personal notes and quotes, most of them typed, but many just handwritten. I actually had to transcribe quite a few of these pages, marked with a red, compelling mark "To Copy," boldly underlined by the author.

Of course, even though I certainly had forgotten a lot of the original draft, having read it helped me considerably in putting together this edition.

“There are several layers of reality in every fact, every event.”

My stepfather loved to repeat that sentence. And it came back to me very naturally when I read the pages where I was mentioned.

As I recall, when I was in Eighth Grade, I did ask my stepfather to have a look at this first draft of The Physics of Particulars. The reader might infer that I may have felt mysteriously drawn to a spiritual reading “several light-years away from my everyday concerns!”

It was hardly the case. The author has omitted to reveal that he had lobbied in a funny, almost goofy way, for me and all the members of our family to read it! Only I and Aunt Ioana actually did. I remember that I scanned through it quite fast, with an amused curiosity, skipping altogether the difficult parts.

Afterwards, I must confirm that I gave him back his manuscript, with the commentary he has noted in his book: “I didn’t know you were so complicated.” I asked a couple of questions, which were answered in a very specific and convoluted manner, impossible to understand for me, at that time.

But the extended conversations he reported in the three chapters where I am featured, hardly happened. I had to come to terms with the fact that I had somehow become... some type of didactic character!

Basically, editing my stepfather’s book consisted in sorting and eliminating repeated pages, numerous entire paragraphs copied in his Floating Bridges, and all his “rough ideas and literal quotes,” that I may post online at some point, or gather in a separate printed compendium.

It was a time-consuming labor, to be sure. At the end, only two pieces, obviously written to be eventually part of The Physics of Particulars did not really fit the relatively clear design of the opus.

The first one was a draft of an unfinished chapter, not numbered nor titled, featuring Ioana.

I am fairly certain it was a part of an expanded chapter that he rewrote several times, eventually eliminating the title and a long introduction. In my opinion, he was going to develop it into the formal conclusion he never got to refine.

In any case, I am copying it as is, with the unimaginative “title” Untitled I.

As for the second piece of writing I am adding here, Untitled II, it is a mere collection of names, and not much else, unfortunately. I am sure my stepfather intended to update it before expanding it in a full Bibliography, with explanations and notes...

XXXII) Untitled I

The misunderstanding appeared to be settled, and I wanted to explain to Ioana how much she meant to me.

After all, I was not a professional writer who wanted to be judged on his talent, but a mere spiritual sightseer who was putting together his traveling log for other voyagers to have a look, during their own journey.

Ioana seemed relieved. She asked me if I wanted it to become widely read and if I would not mind being famous.

The idea amused me so much that Ioana frowned: wasn't I trying too hard to show some (false) modesty?

I explained: "Realistically, my dear friend, do compare "The Physics of Particulars" to any *best seller*, in fiction and nonfiction. Look at its structure, its topics...

No, what I can hope is for someone, somewhere, to have a one-on-one dialogue with this book. Since it is written, and that I may not be around for that person's possible questions, my lines and answers will be always the same. However, maybe the reader could use them to bring some type of ferment for his/her own reflections? It is the best I can hope for."

Somehow, Ioana doubted the sincerity of my answer. Many people in our town found me usually well-meaning, but a little too brash. During the first few years of my residency among them, I may have used a little too liberally some sarcastic criticisms whenever I noticed around me a conformism a little too heavy, or even reactionary and self-righteous.

It took for my new family a couple of years of heavy tutelage to have me eventually use a more diplomatic and actually a more efficient way to temper and modify ever so slightly some old traditions I found particularly unfair, in my adoptive city.

However, Ioana kept seeing me as some sort of reckless “radical,” albeit deep down, good at heart.

That could have been why my new found literary “humility” felt suspicious to her.

I told her the story of Nitish’s master, whom I erroneously called “Maamoon.” The sweet “Uncle” knew something he could not formulate any better than the brilliant Kenyan Professor. If Nitish named him his master and the most extraordinary human being he had ever met, it was not because the simple man could teach, as any master would, but because Nitish recognized him as a model.

Most people, looking at “Maamoon,” would see in him only an awkward man, a little simpleminded, easy to fool. But he became maybe the discreet savior of many little boys and their mothers, and the secret master of one young, erudite nobleman.

Ioana did not see my point. She asked me if I was comparing myself (or my book) to Maamoon.

“Maybe... Well, in any case, I am certainly comparing you to Maamoon!”

Ioana did not appear to be tremendously pleased, let alone flattered, by my answer. She made a funny face:

“You are not serious enough. You ended up being a pastry chef who dabbled with writing. Who will *glean* anything from you... and from me, since you said you wrote a few lines about me?”

I may have been transformed into a statue of supreme stupefaction for maybe a whole minute, or more. I was very far from expecting such a pointed comment from one of the sweetest person I had ever met.

Eventually, I wondered whether there was not another misunderstanding somewhere in our communication. I started explaining, once again, slowly and as clearly as I could why I had mentioned Nitish’s master.

Ioana interrupted me: “I know. There is no misunderstanding, other than you, trying hard not to hear me: if you don’t branch out, who is going to read you? How can the Village, Nitish, his master, and I survive *oblivion*, as you call it?”

That unexpected blow to my head shook me. I felt a sudden vacuum around my miserable efforts to build ‘The Physics of Particulars.’ Ioana’s point was indeed well taken. Was I expecting some

mysterious force to save my testimony from *oblivion*? I had to acknowledge that it was highly unlikely that I would ever take any practical, positive steps to set that book in a position to have any echo among my fellow journeyers in life.

Ioana quoted the sentence I had just uttered: “Maybe the reader could use (my book) as some food for his/her own reflections? It is the best I can hope for.”

She commented: “You must aim at much more! Do it for the people you are describing, for the ideas they entrusted you.”

Curiously, it cost Ioana all her energy and more to gather so much firmness, for what she thought was my own good. I noticed that her frown was wavering, her lips were trembling, as when she was about to cry, and her face turned bright-red. She extended her hand, touched my arm, as if to say: “Did I hurt you, my dear? I really didn’t mean to, you know?”

That vision made me snap out of my bout of self-pity. I had to reassure my older, dearest friend at once!

“Of course I had a plan!” She should not worry about it!

As always, when in doubt, I referred to the Village. I started confidently the following story, while, truthfully, I was not sure how it would answer Ioana’s sharp concerns.

“There was this man, Rayshad, who was working at the Farm. I enjoyed going to the lectures he gave regularly at the *Hall at Night*. As he had been himself a painter and an art teacher in the *civilized world*, he would talk passionately about his favorite paintings and sculptures. I appreciated and admired his lyricism.

I wrote carefully down this one anecdote, in order to use it for my own purpose, as a very good illustration.

That particular story started oddly not with one of the special works Rayshad revered, but with one he did not like initially, and that ended up affecting him *viscerally*.

Everybody, nowadays, adores Van Gogh. But not our lecturer who...”

Ioana interrupted me. I feared she was going to ask me not to stray so widely from answering her heartfelt reproach. But she only remarked: “I kind of know that name. It is famous enough. But I have never seen any of his paintings.”

I hesitated. That interruption had actually increased my dear friend’s agitation. I continued resolutely:

“It doesn’t really matter. The point is that the teller of the story...”

“That is how you write, isn’t it?”

“Excuse me?”

“You... You always go on these detours, and...”

“And I lose my reader? It is definitely a flaw, Ioana, you are right.

But here, you are my friend who is listening to me, and not my reader, right?”

Ioana had a relieved little laughter:

“You are right, Exiled! So, this man, Rayshad, did not like... a painter named Van Gogh?”

“In those days, in the very reputable European Art School where he was studying, Van Gogh was like a God, and Rayshad felt a little like a heretic, for having some kind of aversion against his paintings.

But Rayshad kept these feelings for himself. He actually did not dwell too much on it. Wasn’t it just a case of *personal tastes*?

One day, one of his classmates conceived the idea to have a small room where each wall would have a blown-up projection of the masterpieces Van Gogh painted when he was committed to a “lunatic asylum.”

And when Rayshad visited that peculiar project, he suddenly found himself facing the famous *Starry Night*, and he had that *visceral* reaction to it. The movements of the stars, the moon, the sky, the cypress... made him physically ill! Can you imagine a painting capable of doing that to its viewer?”

Ioana had another little laughter. She shook her head: “Exiled, I love your stories from the Village. But I don’t think there is any connection between what I have told you about your negligent attitude towards your own book, ‘The Physics of Particulars,’ and this man, Rayshad.”

Honestly, that connection was rather dim in my own mind. Nonetheless, since I had started telling that memory, I was actually curious to see if I could bridge that gap!

I used a confident tone of voice to continue:

“I am getting there, my friend...”

What you must know is that generations after generations of people have been influenced by this incredibly famous masterpiece.

However, this *Starry Night* was curiously considered as some type of “failure” by the painter himself.

Van Gogh was not a great, popular success in his days, to say the least.

Now, Rayshad, our Village lecturer, explained that an exhibit by a painter named Monticelli gave Van Gogh his taste for colors. But Monticelli himself was not held in high esteem by the art world of his time, and he died also in poverty.

Rayshad had a theory that another painter, whose name I forgot, a man who was an officer in the French Colony of Algeria, had only one exhibit in Marseilles, just before he died. That exhibit may have influenced Monticelli, who influenced Van Gogh, who painted but never sold *Starry Night*.

If one day someone would buy in some flea market a painting of this French officer, who died in the 1850's, and compare it to the invaluable Van Gogh's *Starry Night*, he or she would not find any logical connection them. However, there is a filiation, a *genealogy* between them.

And so is our legacy..."

Ioana had an incredulous look on her expressive face:

"What are you saying, exactly?"

"I am saying that, want it or not, *The Physics of Particulars* is part of a spiritual *genealogy*."

Ioana frowned. That time, she was not especially upset. She was just trying to understand my point.

She asked tentatively: "Are you saying that this Van Gogh's masterpiece was only recognized as invaluable only after the painter passed away?"

"Yes."

"And you don't mind, when you pass on, my son, not knowing if your book will be part of a *spiritual genealogy*, or if it is destined to *oblivion* and will never be read by anyone?"

"You see, dear Ioana, the *Physics of Particulars* indicates that the *spiritual genealogy* follows all the ecstasies of what is, which is literally eternal. Wasn't I superbly rewarded already by having a whiff of that?"

Ioana stood up with an agility completely unexpected for a woman her age, and hugged me: "If you don't have any regret, I do love it!"

XXXIII) Untitled II

The last time I saw Elleya, I revealed I was taking a great amount of notes on the Village. I had already the title of the future compilation: “The Physics of Particulars.”

Elleya, politely amused by that title, gave me a few typed pages containing quotes from Lao-tzu, Rûmî, Chouang tzu, Master Eckhart, some Muslim Oral Traditions, Chen-Fou, Raphaël Cohen, Lilian Silburn, Angelus Silesius, Jacob Böhme, Sophocles, Abdullah al-Quraïch, Simone Weil, Michel Leiris, Vladimir Jankelevitch, Gaston Bachelard, Farid ud-dîn 'Attar, Novalis, R.M. Rilke, Horacius, the Brhad-Aranyaka Upanishad, the Sûtra of the Three Bodies experience...

“Insert those in your book, Exiled. You must know them already, don't you? They are precious, don't you think? They can help your readers, I believe.”

Later, I learned that Elleya had never read extensively half of the writers on that list. However, these quotes that Elleya had mysteriously *gleaned* during his/her own search, had counted for our founder. So, I did include all of them in this manuscript.

When I was correcting the first draft of the “Physics of Particulars,” I noticed that during my exposure to the Village's peculiar hue(s) of spirituality, I heard with great interest at the *Shul* or at the Hall, some special lecturers very influenced by Plato, Epicure, the Stoics, Nietzsche, Confucius, Ibn Arabi, Plotinus, The Bhagavad Gita, the Pre-Socratics, the Bible, etc. I am certain that some of these ideas have sifted through the manuscript.

I would like here to recognize and acknowledge more precisely these sources...

XXXIV) Afterword

My stepfather loved unconditionally his nickname, "Exiled."

He would repeat enthusiastically, tirelessly:

Aren't all exiled from somewhere?

Maybe we are exiled from where we were destined to be?

Aren't we all the Ash Boys and the Cinder Girls from the Tale, all predestined to inherit a Kingdom?

Some people in exile wilt; some forget completely their native motherland; some do not, but are forever forlorn, inconsolable...

Other people, like Elleya, address their exile as their mother..."