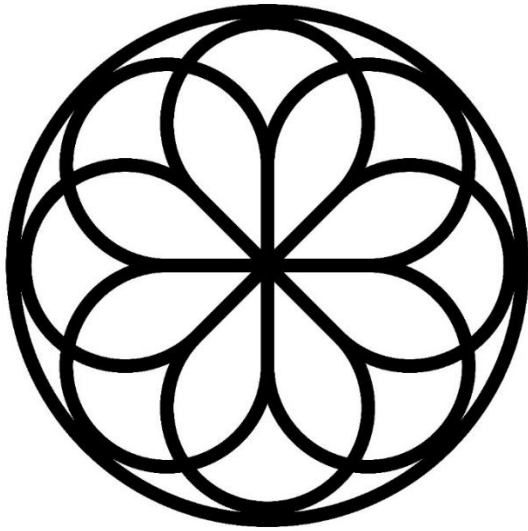


# **INFINITE OF ONE**



**ALL FOR ONE IS ONE FOR ALL**





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# The Infinite of One Symbol

The four overlapping, circumscribed infinity signs of the **Infinite of One** symbol represent the **four fundamental conceptual cornerstones** proposed by the protagonist of the forthcoming philosophical novel.

These overlapping concepts are envisioned as emanating out from the essential shared Self and basis of all existence, Spirit, at the very center of the circle to spark a synergistic set of systems harnessed by humanity for the purpose of progressing towards our highest potential: the greatest collective quality of life for Spirit's manifestations in total. The morality and 'good' of all people and things is always relative to the extent which they strengthen or undermine the building of total quality of life on Earth.

**The First Infinity Sign: Monoexistentialism.** We're all mortal, material manifestations of the same immortal being of pure energy that expanded from a singularity into an infinite plurality of forms spread across spacetime for the purpose of infinite perspective upon and variety of existence.

**The Second Infinity Sign: The Poly Point System of Democratic Governance.** True democracy does not and has never existed in the U.S. or anywhere else. All systems said to be democratic have always been corrupted and compromised such that true democracy has never been made a reality. Our greatest collective quality of life cannot be known until a truly democratic, not-for-sale system of 'we the people' governs the entirety of global society.

**The Third Infinity Sign: Quality of Life Economics.** The 'point of life' is the inherent value of the life experience. It constitutes its own point, or meaning. To strive to maximize this inherent gift of life in as many of life's present moments is the point; the reason for existence. Thus, the ultimate goal is to maximize the quality of the experience of life for all of the manifestations of the one shared Self. This system of economic analysis redefines the indicators of economic 'success' based upon total quality of life while, in the refocus, casting aside the conventional indicators contradicting such inclusive success.

**The Fourth Infinity Sign: Business Collectivism.** The conventional equity-consolidated business construct excludes the vast majority of contributors to the bottom line from receiving any share of its quality-of-life-increasing benefits. Such a parasitic basis of business thereby grossly restricts overall quality of life and calls for a meritocratic equity-sharing model of business.



# Introduction: We are Infinite of One

The five fundamental laws of existence: (1) Outside of theory, there is no such thing as nothing, as the complete absence of all things, such as the conceptual nonexistence of all energy, matter and spacetime; considering the interrelated laws of physics and philosophical logic, this is an impossibility that contradicts the very nature of existence, as we will see (2) Nothing that 'is' can be derived from 'nothing;' that is, everything that exists outside of the mind in material or its purer, essential energetic form within the dimensions of spacetime must come from something else that materially or energetically exists, from another 'real' thing, as opposed to being derived from a nonexistent thing, or a non-thing, because no thing that is may be derived from a thing that isn't, as anything from or times nothing, or zero, is nothing and, therefore, nothing cannot constitute a beginning or end of anything and, in fact, there can be no beginning or end of anything, only a change in the structure and distribution of the thing (3) Per the last point, nothing that materially or energetically exists may be created or destroyed, only broken down into a more fundamental, or 'basic,' set of constituents, then redistributed, rearranged or otherwise combined with other compatible constituents to form one or more 'new' things (4) All matter is composed of energy and, therefore, everything that exists is ultimately made up of energy, not of matter, for matter requires great energy to create and maintain mass and material form (as evidenced by, in one clear, dramatic example, the energy released upon splitting an atom), but energy does not require matter and may exist without a measurable mass, as with photons (5) Everything is connected by cause and effect, for everything that exists and occurs does so because it was caused to exist or occur along the subsequent spacetime continuum as an effect of all preceding, interconnected contributing causes. There truly *is* a reason for everything that exists and happens: the forever accumulating, interconnected effects of causes within spacetime.

From these five fundamental laws we see that everything that exists has always existed and always will exist, for it cannot have come from a non-thing and cannot be created or destroyed. There has always been everything, and there can never be anything less than everything. Every uniquely manifested form of energy or condensing of energy into matter that exists, ever has existed and ever will exist, including every uniquely, finitely existing form of body and mind, must exist as a unique

arrangement of and interaction between constituents ultimately composed of the original source; the first cause: the premiere, irreducible energetic basis of all things, including existence itself.

Furthermore, and in consideration of the aforementioned laws, tracing this physical and energetic basis of existence reductively back along the spacetime continuum dictates that this first cause must have been a source of incomprehensively powerful energy of the purest possible form (a form which cannot be further reduced to one or more forms which are more basic, or fundamental) which caused the chain of causality leading to every individualized manifestation of itself; all things exist as relative concentrations and arrangements of the first thing, including the dimensions of spacetime dictating that relativity.

Therefore, everything and everyone that exists, or that has existed or will exist, must be composed entirely of the original, eternal source of the purest, irreducible energy, differentiated only by the concentration and arrangement of that energy and the point in spacetime in which that energy is concentrated in its current composition and relationship with other compositions, all existing within the all-inclusive source itself. As Einstein noted, the purpose of spacetime is so that everything doesn't occur simultaneously, in the same time and space.

Thus, the existential purpose of spacetime is to potentiate infinite possible forms of the existence of the same source limitlessly rearranged such that the original source of energy may be infinitely divided into unique experiences of existence, all occurring within that source. Dimension permits the division of one source, what humanity commonly calls God or Spirit, into infinite versions of itself and experiences of its limitless potential interactions, concentrations and arrangements.

Therefore, we all exist as individualized forms of the original, eternal, purest possible source of energy that must have set into motion the chain of cause and effect which led to every subsequent version of itself painted across the existential canvas of spacetime. And, therefore, everything that exists must be a transitory arrangement of the eternal, unending energy source of all things, and everything that happens must exist as a cumulative cause set-off by the original cause: the expansion of the One, Spirit, into the building blocks of the infinitely many: the distribution of energy condensed into matter ever redeveloped into the building blocks of life through the intelligently adaptive coding of evolution.



Indeed, all things in existence must exist only as relative differentiations, entirely dependent upon, within, and as versions of the Spirit composing and encompassing all things; the one thing which exists irrelatively (the one constant), and with spacetime existing as a means to differentiate between unique versions of this no-possible-beginning, no-possible-end, omnipresent essence of all things and their existences.

For all the same interdependent reasons there can be no division between and individualized possession of a 'soul,' or separating individual essence, as traditionally understood and disseminated by religious institutions to their followers. Instead, this must be viewed as a historically-pervasive means of mentally manipulating and controlling the minds and actions of adherents through the typically contrived fear-based coercions of punishment, reward and peer pressure to which all limited, relatively ignorant minds and needing, paining and pleasing bodies are susceptible. In truth, all things and all people are made of the same essence and share the same 'soul:' Spirit.

Only our minds, bodies and experiences of life are unique as compositions of the perfectly ubiquitous building block, and even with this individualized uniqueness there's *far* more fundamental commonality across all biological forms of life than there are differences, including the inseparable, indivisible essence and core spiritual identity of all life and all the emotional capacities and motivations sprung from the one Spirit.

Therefore, any conception of the nature of existence or of its source, whether you call this God, Spirit or otherwise, which in any way excludes anything or anyone that exists is inherently false, illogical and prone to perpetuating evil idea and action by way of its unnecessary divisions of identity and all the conflicts, exclusions and loss of solidarity and collaboration subsequently spurred through its spreading and acceptance. Any version of identity that fails to recognize that it is fundamentally inseparable from all other identities and, thus, perfectly inclusionary, is equally unnecessarily false, divisive and perpetuating of evil potential.

In the core of our truest, irreducible, essential shared self, there is but one identity. This is, of course, why the Buddhists distinguish between the 'small self' and the 'big self,' why the Rastafarians say "I and I," alluding to the physical self hosting the spiritual self, why the non-dualistic concept overlapping what I call 'monoexistentialism' goes back

thousands of years, to the roots of Hindu, Buddhist and Jainist beliefs and their most sacred texts, and why spiritual philosophers tend to identify the ego, the self-perception and self-conception inherent to material, individualized existence and its illusion of separation of self, as the core cause of evil. Were we not to see this separation and, instead, see and act based upon every life being a version of the same life, no absolute separation of identity and evil action would exist, for we'd see that doing evil to any 'other' is doing evil to Self. The protagonist herein thereby hits upon the concept of the Spiritual Rule, treating everyone as you would have them treat you because, ultimately, *they are you*. We're all versions of The One.



*We're only as separate as we need to be in order to come together.*



## One: Countering the Conserved Course

*In most any endeavor the greatest difficulty is faced right at the outset, before any significant movement is made. Like a boulder whose mass is staunchly set by the gravitational pull toward the center of the Earth, great force is required to create the initial acceleration by which the boulder will budge. But once the boulder begins to roll its own momentous weight constitutes most of the force by which its movement is maintained.*

Nature and nurture set the stage. But it's the mind, via the conveyance of the body through time and space, which struts upon that stage, processing the inputs of nature and nurture, the adapting program of genetics and the accretion of experience stored in the brain, into the choices and overall output and outcomes of every life. We're not bystanders, however much those that would seek to separate themselves from the responsibility of their lives would like to believe this in order to calm their fears, mute their anxieties and justify their wrongdoings.

Our minds dictate the course and creations of our lives within the frame of natural providence, ever adjusting our course in innumerable infinitesimal and monumental ways as new knowledge and perspective propels our illusively individual lives towards the spacetime wherein all sense of individualism dissolves. Thus, whenever the lessons of life compel any person to take a new path, their mind must lead the way. If they wait for God to act on their behalf, they'll not hear God's reply:

"I lead *through* you, not separate from you, not in spite of you. There's no division between you and I. We are one. Therefore, open your mind to the messages of the heart, for therein lies the center of our shared gravity. And seek not a posthumous paradise conceived by manipulative members of mankind where the sweetest fruits are said to be savored, nor fear a realm of unending suffering, for life is the greatest of gifts, the only true realm bearing all fruit, and all suffering is an effect of physical existence to be learned from in order to help guide your progress. To base your life on fantasized fears of damnation and hopes of salvation is to squander that gift, as heaven and hell exist only on Earth, in the heights of happiness earned by the fullest self and the depths of suffering and despair delivered upon the insufficiently fortified, vulnerable body and mind."

John Milton once noted that: “The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven.” The bridge upon which the conscious, sentient self rises between the universal spiritual Self and its material manifestation into the physical self, the realm of the mind is a place where much of one’s reality is established, with that reality being largely a matter of how and where the mind is focused; forever spanning a relative scale between the outward and inward focus, between experiences and reflections; bouncing between the treacherous pitfalls into which many the mind and body fall and become trapped and the wondrously striking, limitlessly pleasurable possibilities of life, especially when that life and its experiences aren’t taken for granted, but are instead examined and absorbed with relish, their greatest value realized.

Our attitude is half of our reality; the perceptive filter existing within each person’s experience of the objective; the existential value the mind derives from a virtually unlimited interweaving of space, time, energy and matter. Although requiring a constant struggle, especially for those burdened by any chronic form of mental or physical pain, one must stubbornly strive to enforce upon oneself a positive attitude, for to think positively is to act in optimism, and in so doing invite auspicious circumstances, as the outcomes of one’s life are largely a matter of self-fulfilling prophecy: if you believe it will come to be you vastly improve the chances that you will make it so. And yet one must also be wary of entangling their optimism with the avarice the Western World encourages us to develop, as nothing costs life more than those who confuse financial wealth, the falsely misleading form of wealth, with the true wealth of life.

Replete with riches far greater than those found within the confines of conventional pursuits, to focus the mind on financial fortunes is to sacrifice the infinitely superior wealth brought by turning the mind toward the perfect bounty of people, places, cultures, landscapes, writings, artworks and assorted accoutrements of the open, searching, adventurously-oriented mental self. Being fully present in the richest of moments brings the greatest wealth life has to offer. For the purpose of life is its own inherent maximization; a maximization of the quality of experience that cannot be repeated or replicated, as every form of life is a one and only. And that existential maximization is forsaken in the conservative quest to accrue as much material, wealth and power as possible while also coming with the side effect of denying the vast majority the opportunity at their own maximization, a maximization which they’re deprived of when the few with boundless wealth and

power use their resources to extract from the many with meager means.

In this way, not only does conservatism propagate immense injustice across the globalizing world by turning us into exploiters looking for those to exploit (as that is the nature of business, whether those that accrue through it know it or not) and thereby perpetuating, and likely increasing, the quality of life disparity, but the excluders lose the greatest potential of their own lives through the same beliefs and pursuits by which they support this low ceiling for the quality of life for life as a whole.

When the purpose of life boils down to what's financially and materially rendered, the greatest life is lost; evaporated by an insatiability that drives those whom it afflicts *past* life, missing its highest purpose and greatest value along the way. Leaving the priceless aspect of life unfulfilled for the petty pursuit of the hollow dollar is an opportunity cost that, once clearly understood, cannot be justified. And what's realized by many far too late in their fleeting lives is that the richest realities and greatest quality of life is what is experienced when the pursuit of wealth, power, possessions and egotistic reassurances are *absent* from the mind.

When you are in as many quality moments as possible without being conscious of yourself or how best to take something, these moments are truly possessed and, when added together, amass true wealth. Yes, you need access to some financial resources in order to stave off the stresses of survival, as well as to satisfy basic desires and to put yourself in the position to exist within the richest of moments. You need to be mobile enough to partake of any considerable aspect of the endless spice of life. But the ritziest, most expensive accommodations and possessions, while imparting pleasurable enjoyment, are not required for amassing such existential wealth and, most importantly, tend to be paid for in the denial of such wealth for others due to their costing an inordinate quantity of the finite resources available to the whole of life at any one time. When there's only so much to go around at one time, the more of it that's expended by fewer people the less of it there is for the more to expend.

Not only this, but the majority that begin to drift down the bourgeois' path of accumulation become lost on that path, missing life because their minds and actions are focused on making the next move. This is the course towards existential poverty compared to those that possess



few physical and monetary things, but whom smile frequently in reflection upon, and while basking within, a wealth of full moments.

Yet even with all this being true, the poorer one's state of mental and physical health the lesser one's ability to overcome that beleaguered state of existence and dwell within the state of mind inviting the highest quality of existence. For the greatest experiences of life are inaccessible when we lack a fully functional vehicle by which to reach them, relegating those experiences to undiscovered opportunity costs. Sail not upon a compromised craft, else miss much of the sea's delights while mired in the maintenance and incomplete passages of the incapable craft.

Alex's craft had long since fallen into poor condition, damaged by a series of shortcomings and self-destructions demonstrated by an owner who failed to comprehend and pay due consideration to the value of its interconnected components, and to the fact that his conveyance had been so badly burdened with the weight of its baggage and the disrepair of its parts that, though he still sailed along the course which he was meant to traverse, that movement was so gradual and his vehicle so impaired that he could not have completed the journey he was meant to make without a major overhaul. In order for those repairs to be made he knew he'd first have to forestall any further damage through a major upgrade in what he fueled and protected his vehicle with, as the low-quality crude and oil he'd long guzzled had so extensively degraded every component of his craft that it now resembled much older models.

As the haze gradually cleared from the view of his captain, his mind, Alex knew that he henceforth required fuel that would power his motor for longer periods between fill-ups, and that his intakes in general would need to be selected for their quality and suitability at increasing the operational efficacy and efficiency of each element of his conveyance, else those parts, and the total craft, would continue to disintegrate at an unnatural rate.

He needed to take in that which strengthened rather than weakened all interconnected elements of his machinery; which delayed rather than accelerated the depreciation to which all machines are subject, whether made by man or the natural mechanisms which brought organic life into being. And while this was difficult at first, for he had for so long been accustomed to the quickest, easiest and cheapest of refills, gradually he remade his constitution until the old sludge appeared as the waste that

it was and lost all of its appeal, revealed as poison purposefully sweetened by the supplying parasites to attract their hosting victims.

Sitting in the shade of a Redwood grove drinking a blend of matcha and medicinal herbs he'd concocted from his research into the fascinating realm of low-cost, non-pharmaceutical natural drugs that anyone can grow and which are generally free from debilitating side effects, Alex reflected on how the tea, like so many of the best, most inherently valuable things in life, was made valuable through the co-evolution of the organisms composing the natural world; a co-evolution driven by mutualistic benefit. The larger fauna consume the flora while that same flora propagate through the assistance of that fauna, its seeds traveling in their gut and upon their fur before being deposited in new lands more open to proliferation. The micro-fauna then move in to consume the dead and decaying members of the whole macro chain, recycling precisely the nutrients needed by the flora which the micro-fauna can't utilize but which, in the natural fit of mutual benefit, they leave behind for the surviving flora to consume and reproduce, thereby supporting symbiosis.

And true to Hippocrates' Creed of edible medicine, that same flora selectively and 'randomly' developed mutations of medicinal and nutritional service to the fauna, thereby lending that flora an advantage in the competition for land, nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium and other nutrients due to being more sought after, consumed and disseminated by the larger fauna, especially humans, who for at least ten thousand years have traded that service for the service of spreading the genetic code of the flora which most benefits us thanks to its flavor, caloric and nutritional density, medicinal benefits and other advantageous qualities.

Alex became a student of the mutual evolution of plants and animals in which human beings have come to branch off of the genetic line of our chimpanzee cousins, our closest living relatives. An understanding of our shared history with our primate relatives demonstrates how and why mankind's longest, highest functioning lives are only possible through the consumption of whole, natural foods, especially those available to our hunting and gathering forebears who hunted mostly for wild fish, especially seafood, because it was the most abundant animal protein and was generally less risky to procure while also existing in environments where the rivers met the sea and came with the hydration of life.

Yet even seafood was a luxury serving mostly to supplement a core diet of gathered plant matter, especially fruits and vegetables. This bounty was of course free from all of mankind's input save for what Alex saw as an exercise in mutually-nourishing spirituality wherein the plants evolved to feed, strengthen, protect and treat man and our forebears, and fauna in general, in exchange for being spread and, more recently, purposefully placed in the best possible circumstances by which to mutualistically thrive and reproduce.

And yet he was interested not in cultivating those foods which mankind had only come to depend upon over the last ten thousand years or so of its history, but those it evolved to consume. Grains and legumes were eschewed in favor of a broad array of organic fruits and vegetables. His body and brain, and the mind dependent upon both, gradually grew as the world spun around him, every day bringing but faint glimmers of the promise of his pain one day being lifted.

To his seemingly endless dismay Alex was unable to even see straight for five crawling, grueling, torturous years in which he always felt as if he didn't fully exist, not like most people, for everything seemed surreal, as if he existed between the reality the cannabinoids had concocted in his brain and the naturally-endowed reality to which he hoped to one day return. It was as if he existed in-between dimensions, not firmly rooted within either. And it took even longer for Alex to climb high enough out of the hole he had dug himself into to the point where he could again, after almost two decades of multiple compounding forms of debt-accumulating self-abuse after another, see the light of good potential quality of life.

So long had he lingered on the precipice of health bankruptcy that he was constantly haunted by the fact that he may never be able to fully repay his debt and rediscover the fuller form of himself that he's so long ago lost. But with years of studying the details on the paramount importance of health as compelled by having so extensively undermined it, and years developing the discipline required to fully implement that knowledge in the production of quality of life value, he was at last in a position to productively apply the past to the present for the promise of the future.

This effort to stay on track was true not only in terms of the invaluable, irreplaceable sanctity and meaning of the word 'health,' but in terms of his uncovering the principles, forming the philosophy and outlining the personal goals by which he'd venture forth in life, regardless of how

long it might take him to get where he was going. This quest called forth a quote from the recesses of his mind: "All that's required to eventually reach your destination is to keep heading in the right direction." His mentality now seemed as if it were a struggle between the intersecting lines of his lineage.

Of Greek, English and Sioux descent, he found that, though he knew it highly inaccurate to narrowly confine cultures and bloodlines within stereotypical simplicities, a war between some of the overriding thematic histories of these bloodlines had been fought within the epochs of his own existence. His life was ever evolving as if waging an internal war between three pervasive themes: first, the architects of modern civilization, the thinkers and innovators; second, the ambitious imperialists imposing their will upon the weak, exploiting disadvantage and increasing their resources and standing in detriment to their adversaries and victims; third, the victims of a less technologically advanced culture that, in its reverence for seeking a symbiotic balance with the natural world, in its egalitarianism and cultivation of harmonious coexistence, had left themselves overly-vulnerable to the imperialists that had absorbed the architects and ever sought new grounds for extraction.

While he'd eventually identify himself as a cross between the philosophical architects and the nature-revering Native American victims of the imperialistic extension into the newly-open-for-exploitation 'New World,' Alex's early indoctrination into society followed the same destructively-plowed path shared by most Westerners. While many Americans fail to realize it, the ideological drives governing our society are based upon imperialism and its encroachment into lush lands unblemished by unrestrained greed.

Genocidal murder of the native inhabitants paving the way for profitable expansion and exploitation of the land and its natural resources, the basis of capitalistic accumulation; the capture and forced importation of African natives and indentured servants from Europe forming the cost-cutting premiere workforce of that land, passed from the original aristocracy through the modern corporate empires and their continued efforts to undercut any attempt to protect the working class and the planet from their over-extracting depredations.

This was, and in a more subtle manner *remains*, all part of a plan to culturally homogenize America and, through globalization, the entire planet pursuant to the excluding consolidations of the ownership class.

The bourgeois values of materialism, consumerism, easy-to-divide-and-control individualism and party politics, absolute fidelity to the armed forces (regardless of who gives the orders and why, historically given to maintain control of profits) and, above and wrapped into it all, bringing in as much money as you can as constituting proof of your rank as a human being within the class system. These beliefs form the core of conservatism, the oppressive politics perpetuating most global injustice.

Alex had long identified these ideas as the enemies espoused by the corrupted members of society and hammered into the heads of the easy-to-manipulate masses as a means to conserve the modes by which the select few exploit the efforts of the many and the resources of the world; the traditional mores of society that progressives are obliged to wage war against, handed down from one elite ruling class to the next since before the birth of Christ. Many right-wing Americans even wear the cross that, both tragically and ironically, is a symbol of the hijacking of the popular following and lessons of this spiritual philosopher whose overriding admonishment was about the evil of greed and the spiritual equality of all lives; a theological and moral canon that has since been absorbed by Empire and used against the people as a measure to control and direct our minds; a net thrown from gilded churches to entrap the thoughts of the bourgeoisie whose lives are antithetical to the paramount principles that the original Christian philosopher espoused and disseminated.

A victim of indoctrination into Western society, Alex was, like most, steeped in the lessons of American supremacy as a united nation “under God, indivisible;” sold the simplistic fantasy that America is a land of “freedom and justice for all.” Long before diving headfirst into the disturbing historical and philosophical realities of religion, the exploitative nature of American enterprise and the fact that freedom, justice and political representation in American society are more commodities to be purchased than freely, equally granted rights – that America is ruled by a plutocratic republic and is a democracy in name only, as a means to control the masses – long before learning these lessons, Alex had bought all the way into the propaganda we spoon-feed our children.

As he saw it through his adolescent foray into entrepreneurship, his high school quest to achieve the greatest possible marks to open his way into the best possible university promising the most lucrative possible future, and for the majority of his time studying business economics in college: money is freedom. *Money buys happiness*. His mind had always

been inclined toward creation and contemplation, but it could not overcome this powerful sense that wealth is a prerequisite to the pursuit of happiness.

Like so many amongst the successfully indoctrinated, he saw his own future success, self-worth and happiness as a product of accumulating as much wealth for himself as possible. This is exactly as the imperialistic, aristocratic powers and excluding minority directing the country expect a young man or woman to be for the perpetuation of their own self-absorbed ideology and interests: to buy into the popular delusion that the excluded can become exclusive, all so the excluding can stay exclusive through the perpetuation of the means by which they do. Every individual that buys into the conservative mindset is one less to cast doubt upon it, and the more that mindset forms the basis upon which most minds build the thoughts and actions of their lives, the easier it is to conserve the popular conformity around the delusion, and the easier and less costly is the fight to perpetuate the absolute pursuit of profit. The problem, Alex later learned over years of reflection and writing, is that this bourgeois, self-absorbed, greedy focus is decimating the planet that guarantees life's continuity, and precludes the greatest possible production of value and the highest possible quality of life from being experienced by not just humanity, but all life. *The more that it's bought into, the more that's lost.*

The hard-won lessons of his addictive trials and tribulations of self-destruction had demonstrated some indisputable principles that conflicted with everything he had been taught to prioritize and value while he was 'growing up;' at least in the sense of growing up physiologically, for it may be said that we don't truly grow up mentally until we begin to think for ourselves and question what we're being taught, and *why*. In this sense of mental maturation it may be reasonably argued that many never truly grow up at all. One of the core lessons Alex acquired as he began to think outside of the traditional lines of thought was that all value must be either earned, paid for or stolen. Furthermore, creating value always entails earning value, because earning things of value precludes the possibility of paying for or stealing that value.

Creating more value in the world cannot be achieved through payment or theft, for these modes entail either giving up and thereby losing something of value to attain the desired thing of value, like an exchange of one value for another creating a near to neutral effect, or, in the case of stealing value, requires removing the value from other people or, in

the case of natural resource exploitation, from the under-protected planet.

Einstein, not just a scientist but a philosopher whose philosophical insights tend to be overshadowed in people's minds by his contributions to science, clearly acknowledged the vast, often dark and conflicting difference between value and the traditional conception of success when he remarked: "Try not to become a man of success, but rather to become a man of value." Morality; spirituality; progressivism; all of it boiled down to this difference, the difference between truly creating value and absorbing it from people and places. This was the fundamental frame of reference through which Alex's economic and business theories had developed: the differences between the creation, exchange, theft and reduction of total value. He came to believe that the very idea of success must inevitably undergo a paradigm shift in order for humankind to evolve.

Success must be redefined in terms of total value created or consumed. It isn't the income, wealth, profitability or power of the individual or company defining success, but *value*. Is the entity creating or taking value from the people and the planet by leveraging advantage and exploiting disadvantage? Are the endeavors of the entity improving, reducing or stagnating human quality of life? Success necessitates improvement.

Any true progressive champion must learn to ask not what the individual *financial* value of the endeavors are to any one entity, but what the total value of the endeavors are to overall quality of life by netting all creation, i.e. value addition, with extraction (for consumption or hoarding), i.e. value subtraction. And how is the highest overall value of life to be achieved? In short, it's to be achieved by putting as many people as possible in the best possible position to create, earn and claim their rightfully contributed share of value for themselves while protecting those people and the planet from those that would take advantage of them and remove value without replacing it, which produces an immense debt and opportunity cost to quality of life as a whole. In the business arena, this quality of life depends upon everyone being able to earn equity dividends.

Give everyone the opportunity to earn value by being protected from exploitation. For Alex, the best possible business constructs are defined by their extraordinary capacity for increasing the total quality of life value of those they impact; a total value grossly precluded by

conventional business practices that minimize the quality of life value of the vast majority that might otherwise be produced by commercial endeavors were that majority considered a partnered beneficiary rather than a costly tool of doing business.

This pursuit of total quality of life maximization can be accomplished by not only encouraging all such contributors to produce as much value as they can (incentivized by putting them in a position to receive a fair, commensurate share of that contributed value), but also by enabling them to apply the value they earn through this production to create the best possible life for themselves and their families. This requires a business platform that grants all those whom contribute to the enterprise a piece of the sweetest, bottom line fruits that the enterprise produces; not an unjustly, communistically equal piece regardless of contributed value, but a *merited* piece reflecting the value of their contribution, calculated through a commensurate bottom line share.

Such a foundational construct will, in turn, protect people and the planet from produced value being funneled away from them and consolidated in the hands of an equity-holding minority; those that use their privilege and power to steal value from others. For this unjustifiable aspect of the traditional business construct lies not just in the stealing, but in the fact that there's a diminishing returns relationship existing between financial accumulation and the increased quality of life that it enables.

When all things of economically-measurable value are consolidated in the hands of those select few whose quality of life is at or near the maximum that can be attained through said means, then allowing them to continue to take and consolidate more of the world's finite value is an unjustifiable opportunity cost against total quality of life. Because it doesn't serve to increase the overall quality of life of life in total, it instead goes wasted through the unutilized hoarding or unappreciated overconsumption of that which, per the law of diminishing returns, does little to nothing for the consumer, especially in comparison to what it could do for those existing on the opposite end: those whom would see *vast* increases in the quality of their existences with even a meager increase in their means.

In these culturally-conventional cases of the revered millionaires and billionaires and their hoarded, underutilized value, the economic and financial value that could have been used to increase the quality of life of others instead goes down the quality of life drain, lost in the amassed



wealth that can no longer be used to increase the quality of life of those controlling that wealth. In this way, the disparity of income and wealth in all things of value is an entirely unjustifiable crime against life itself, and the negative value of this crime is routinely compounded many times over. We've been conditioned not to see it, but the greedy perpetrators of the worst cases of these crimes whom most people lionize and sadly consider the greatest successes are committing crimes against humanity.

This is especially true when the commercial activities through which said wasted value is extracted from the people and the planet is done through the production and sales of goods and services that do little to nothing to increase the long term quality of life of those than consume them (and, in fact, often *decreasing* their quality of life), while concurrently jeopardizing the health of the planet, extracting from and polluting it in an unsustainable manner. A large share of the consumer marketplace is comprised of such offerings. Conventionally grown, processed and fast foods, a high percentage of our overprescribed pharmaceutical products, fuel-inefficient vehicles, weapons products paid through tax dollars for 'defense,' carbon-based energy sources, cheaply made, low-quality wares in general produced to degrade quickly so more must be purchased soon thereafter, to name but a few... The money expended consuming such products can be *much* more valuably spent elsewhere in the production of that which matters most in life: the sustainable *quality* of that life in total.

Time and energy can be expended in many ways, including ways in which the long-term quality of that life is reduced, most commonly when the far greater long-term value of the capable, healthy, productive, happy life is sold for the fleeting excesses of the senses. Alex's twenties and early thirties had taught him an immensely valuable lesson gleaned by suffering the exorbitant price of its acquisition: always take cost-benefit into account, especially when it comes to quality of life, for spending time and energy selling your health, potential and happiness for short-lived gratifications always costs *far* more than it's worth. Though misery begs the weakened mind to conceal, escape and forget its presence with the transitory indulgences of health-decimating foods, drinks, drugs and other destructive masking's, these choices entail the sacrificing of the greater self and the much richer, far more satisfying, far greater quality of life that can only be created by first refusing the seductions of self-destruction.

And therein lies an overlapping principle between health, business and, indeed, most matters of life: contrary to paying for and stealing value, when one expends time and energy in *earning* value one always feels good about their expense, for the time and energy are paid for an overall increase, not loss, of value. For this earning of value to serve the highest function of increasing overall quality of life, it must be justly recognized. Thus, in the progressive, evolved business, created value is distributed according to the merits of effort, difficulty and value of production in accordance with the primary objective of life: *maximizing its total value*.

Through the creative force of earned value, the harder you work, the more you sow, the more you reap and the happier, more content and fulfilled you're likely to feel. This is especially true when you're actually allowed to reap what you sow because you're protected from the corporate leeches that turn the symbiotic mutualism of every healthy relationship, including working relationships, into as much of a one-way street of parasitism as possible. Alex decided that the first total value law of business must be a prohibition of parasitism. The first rule of progress: *no outright leeching allowed*.

At the same time, however, a merit-based business model can't solely be concerned with how much effort you expend, for while you can repeat the simplest task over and over again and accumulate the production of some value, the level of difficulty requisite of the creation is just as important to the total value of your production, if not more so. The value of everything earned, in other words, is almost always commensurate with the level of effort and difficulty required in the earning. Because of this, difficulty, or challenge, should be *sought*, not shied away or retreated from, for that's how the greatest personal and organizational growth and value is produced.

Relative to a merit-based business model, you cannot incentivize simply along the lines of the level of physical toil, but must take into account ingenuity, risk-taking and assumed responsibility as well, for all of these elements add value to the products and/or services offered by the entity. One way to express total value production is to say that the relationship between work, value and just reward is, as with most things, a quality-times-quantity calculation.

Accomplishing ten things with a value of one is worth the same as accomplishing one thing with a value of ten. The trick is assessing the value of the accomplishment and applying it to the valuation of the

individuals' contributed efforts and awarding him or her accordingly. To Alex, it became apparent that just business cannot exist if it violates this principle: Put people in the best possible position to earn value, and justly reward them with the merited amount of the value they contribute to the overall earnings of their organization so that this value may be applied to the quality of their lives and the lives of their family.

Business ethics boils down to producing products and services offering increased quality of life to their consumers in a manner which doesn't tax the planet past the point of sustainability, and which simultaneously puts all of the entities' contributing members in the best position to own the value they earn. Any value not distributed to these employees-turned-owner-operators may be reinvested in the entities' continued value-maximizing objective. This is Business Progressivism 101: a business morality that's currently antithetical to conventional corporate practices.

From the individual perspective, not only does the act of earning bring satisfaction in itself, but it is an immutable law of life that you reap what you sow, unless, of course, you're in the position where you are unjustly denied the ability to claim what you reap due to your financial status and lack of privilege having made you vulnerable to being preyed upon by those that give you a small, fixed fraction of the value you earn so they may claim the rest for themselves.

This is the concealed, nasty inherent nature of conventionally-claimed profit: little of it is actually *earned*; most of it is extracted from the workforce, the consumer and the planet through a combination of morally-hollow aristocratically-hailing western values and a related under-protection of the people and the planet; a laissez-faire, exploit-all-possible-disadvantages commercial culture.

Having reached these conclusions, Alex knew that on his property, and in his own entrepreneurial endeavors, it *must* be different. Anything which he directed would first and foremost require justly distributing value based upon value produced; based upon the right to claim what you earn being built into the system. For without a direct share in the bottom line of your organization's efforts, merited compensation commensurate with your contributions to that organization is impossible. Any straight-line compensation denies just compensation.

In his own endeavors, true, honorable meritocracy would triumph over the dishonorable practices of business he had been taught at the

university a decade before and was expected to obey, like a lemming willingly pushing mankind's higher potential off a cliff one exploited employee, duped consumer and ravaged piece of the planet at a time. The university had taught those rules of extraction as if they were the one and only way; the way by which very few are placed in the equity column of the balance sheet, with the equity holders positioned to take value from those standing in the liability column whose compensation must therefore be minimized as an expense of doing business; an expense that, per this fundamental balancing equation of accounting, can only be regarded as removing value from the bottom line claimed by an excluding class of total quality of life reducers.

Alex knew better than to ever believe this was the right way, regardless of how many times he heard the trite, meaningless justifications like "it's not personal, it's just business" and "business is business," as if there was only one, forever absolute, innate means of conducting commerce; the 'realist' way of accepting inherent evil and 'might makes right' that the non-critical-thinking cattle swallow whole without the least bit of mental mastication. He saw through such immorality.

Alex was aware where this immorality originated, and how the history books and lesson plans were written by the conquerors and subjugators. And no corrupted conservative economist could convince him otherwise, regardless of the credentials he or she threw at him proving how well versed he or she was in the *wrong* ways of doing business. "It's just business" is an unjustifiable justification hiding all manner of ignored injustice. Nothing is ever 'just' anything to the conscientious, progressive and analytical. Everything is subject to cause and effect, and everything connects to everything else. Therefore, all causes have effects accumulating as continued causes on into infinity.

What is the cumulative effect of causality when it comes to conventional corporate business practices treating everything and everyone as someone or something to be swindled for the greed of the few? Traditional business produces an immense, unjustifiable and ever-accumulating negative value as the inevitably growing disparity resulting from the zero-sum game of taking from the majority share to increase the minority share continues in perpetuity. How can anything but a disparity in wealth and quality of life result? If able to see the far-reaching, rippling implications, you'll get some sense of the inevitable end result. You can't be one of the good guys if you buy into this.

Thus, Alex would enforce an opposing system of values countering the conserved course, regardless of any personal shortfall in financial profit. For he saw larger, long-term, big picture gains, and these visions, congruent with the voice of his heart, would guide him. Thus, on his property and in all his projects, there would be merited equity for every participant. The fruits, often literally, were divvied out based upon a system assessing the time, effort and responsibility entailed in the work of every contributor to the cooperatively run system, plus the amount of money every contributor invested and reinvested in the maintenance, improvement and expansion of the operation. As an added element of incentive, a semi-annual review of the value of every contributor to the property or projects' production of value completed by the entire collective of contributors would be conducted. He considered his projects and property to be beta tests of what he called the Business Collective.

While a structure of business built on the principles of meritocracy and the shielding of economic contributors from having their disadvantages taken advantage of, the Business Collective is ultimately a philosophical construct that is based upon a fundamental existential, moral and spiritual question: *What is the purpose, point or meaning of life?*

It was his simple answer to this question that precipitated the creation of his political, economic and business theories and systems, forming the core of his morality: *life itself*. The 'point of life' is to maximize the inherent value of the experience of life. It's a value that requires no qualification, only a qualitative maximization. Life, the experience of existence by every manifestation of the original energy source, is an evolution of existence into infinite potential variations that're of the greatest inherent value.

The 'point,' therefore, is for each life to strive to maximize that inherent value. The point is known and made in the moments; to fully absorb the inherent value infused in the greatest moments, times as many such moments as possible. Alex was convinced that he'd had certain moments, moments of love and flirtation and elation and epiphany, which made all his suffering worth it. *Maximizing the inherent value of the moment times as many moments, for as many forms of life as possible*. This is the meaning of life; working to make it true for ourselves and as many other forms of life as possible.

All spirituality and morality pass through and are inextricably tied to this meaning as well, for the purpose of spacetime and energy are to permit

the Spirit limitless variations of self for limitless experiences of existence; limitless moments of inherent value experienced by limitless manifestations of Spirit. And morality is inseparable from this spiritual, existential, inherent-point-of-life epiphany; it's based upon servicing this inherent value: the more that you contribute to the increase in this value for life in general, the more you increase the quality of life of lifeforms in general, or in total, the more moral you are, and the more you decrease it, the more immoral you are. Period.

Expanding this inherent meaning to incorporate all of mankind's systems for governing and facilitating life is where the theory and systems become far more complex and synergistically interdependent. For as theorists have long known, if you leave each life to simply maximize its own quality without consideration for life as a whole you begin to run aground of the unsustainable destructions and wastes of the self-serving and narrow-minded susceptibilities of humanity; susceptibilities evolved from a need to survive a state of unrelenting 'take everything you can' destructive conflict which conservatism remains in unevolved subservience to. We are beginning to evolve past this animalistic mentality that ultimately has proven to reduce the greatest potential quality of life as a whole when it comes to *human* behavior, for when so enacted by mankind such behavior doesn't merely act to fit a balancing niche with its environment as all other species bound to their respective mental limits do, but tends to overrun and decimate nature and the least advantaged and under-protected humans and forms of life. By moral and spiritual imperative we're obliged to guard against the over-self-centeredness and mental weaknesses opening the door to the corruptibility perpetuating evil.

On a societal level, emanating outwardly from the community to the town to the state to the nation to the world and rippling back again, expanding out from the perspective of every individual whose ego tells them their perspective is most important before bouncing off of an infinite variety of other perspectives, systems are needed to, whenever possible, permit the coexistence and, ideally, foster the harmonious collaboration and mutually-cultivated benefit of those perspectives and their precipitating endeavors.

This need, evolved through the seemingly endless growing pains of human history, is, more than agriculture, trade, war, technology or any other factor, the driving force of civilization circumscribing, regulating and guaranteeing all other factors of our collective development.

Without organized collaborative oversight there's either an anarchical lack of cohesion or a might makes right subjugating system of systematic, exploitative control surrendering mankind's greatest potential for collectively producing the greatest shared value. And with inherently unjust oversight wherein the privileged few take the wheel and steer away from the best interests of the many, resistance mounting to some form of revolution becomes an inevitability, as resulting injustices build pressures that natural and social law dictates must eventually be released.

Any civilization based upon the unprincipled, animalistic reflexes of might makes right 'realist' domination and subjugation has been proven by Nash Game Theory, among other theories and studies, *not* to produce the best result for the total population and, therefore, must inevitably create the pressures of injustice within the shortchanged constituents of the affected civilizations which render that basis unsustainable. This is true despite the conservative assertion that justice requires no modifications be made to the 'free' jungle wherein stronger animals inevitably come to subjugate, strangle the potential and ultimately diminish the strength and oppress the prospects of weaker animals mostly, again, because the human jungle is one in which the predators know no satiation and possess technologies and relative degrees of power far beyond the natural jungles from which we evolved. Knowing this, are we really to subject ourselves to the standards of the non-sentient members of the animal kingdom? In such a political and commercial ecosystem, genuine collaboration is impossible and the best result for the whole can never be approached.

Imagine a team of rowers being not just out of sync, but attempting to force their craft in different directions. While it is unjust to impose a command whereby all crafts must shoot for the same shore without self-determination, the best results for the team requires *encouraging* that team to synergize their efforts in order to row for their shared horizon, wherever they democratically determine that horizon to be, secure in the knowledge and logical eventualities that no one is an island and, to a very large degree, we all depend upon the same vessel; the same planet, and the same synergistic societal systems.

Without recognizing and honoring these realizations, the greatest, best-sustained speed can never be achieved and every team of rowers, and each rower his or herself, will never reach their promised land. Every organization is like a team of rowers in this way. You don't force people to board a craft and row against their will, and you don't reward them

equally if some design and build a better craft or row harder and longer or direct the craft more than others. You also don't award most of the prize money claimed to the one that could afford to have the craft built and entered into the race, or the rowers won't row as hard and will eventually jump ship. Instead, you create a system naturally minimizing counterproductive conflict and naturally encouraging the same synergistic collaboration evolved in the healthiest ecosystems of the world such that symbiosis is cultivated in the best interests of the entire population. Working in cooperative tandem is the only way to produce the best result for the rowers of crafts in general.

The ideal version of a truer, purer, plutocracy-free form of democracy naturally supporting business structures yielding the greatest results produced by everyone rowing together within each craft of venture (whose whole is shuttled along by a theory of economics focused on maximizing not GDP separated from its application to the quality of life of the people in the economy, but instead focused on maximizing quality of life itself) is a basis of social meritocracy that has yet to be realized. This, Alex strongly believed, was due to ideologies potentiating the greatest possible total value for life as a whole, including those he himself had developed in his first book, *Time for True Democracy*, being outright obstructed from forming and evolving into their highest form by persons and organizations conserving imperialist and aristocratic traditions and methods of popular control.

These methods are maintained through the values and tactics of individualism, cutthroat competition, nationalistic supremacy and domineering exploitation dressed up as virtues, but which were purposefully concocted to benefit those aiming to consolidate value at the loss of the many. It was clear to Alex that conservatism was the past, only permitted its anachronistic existence by posing as virtuously freedom-loving and democratic, duping its victims into supporting it.

When you break down right-wing ideology, removing the propagandist mind control methods by which it misleads its gullible adherents, what you're left with is a blend of chauvinism, fascism and greed. The *Oxford Dictionary* defines chauvinism as "a strong and unreasonable belief that your own country or group is better than others," and fascism as "an attitude that is very intolerant" based upon a "right-wing system of government with extreme nationalistic beliefs."

Staunch conservatives are American Supremacists that fight to spread the unrestrained capitalistic values of the domineering bully seeking not



cooperation and shared interest built around the understanding that we are all far more similar than we are different, around the comprehension that we cannot realize our collective potential except through a shared identity, but based upon the narrow-minded, shortsighted, self-centered intention of being the bully and taking as much for oneself as possible. This despite the fact that this attitude results not just in misunderstanding, exploitation and even warfare, but in a grossly reduced result for life as a whole, the ideal long ago bled dry, lost to an endless, unhealthy cutthroat form of competition.

Forcing everyone to compete not in a way that brings out the best in its competitors, but in a way that drives a wedge of divide and conquer between nations and individuals that might otherwise work in cooperative best interest to produce the greatest collective value (and are, instead, separated and easy to manipulate, subdue and block from uniting for the greatest good), is the age-old method by which the over-advantaged take advantage of the disadvantaged that is, ultimately, to the disadvantage of ninety-plus percent of the population. One may even argue that it's in no one's best interest when you consider the 'winners' lose the spiritual rewards that accompany serving the greater good; rewards most of them don't even realize they're giving up, and which fulfill in ways by which wealth and power pale in comparison.

By promoting nationalist supremacy and the individual over the group, the bullying, coercing, oppressing nations (considering our sheer economic and military might this especially includes the US, especially still when conservatives are in command) attempt to abuse the weaknesses of other nations in a similar way that the majority of corporations attempt to exploit parallel disadvantages of individuals, especially in underdeveloped, insufficiently protected nations, such that a very small fraction of societies' more privileged members may extract the majority of value drawn up to the skimmed surface from the conflict; an extraction that collaboration and cooperation would render impossible. Regardless of the ages over which this truth has been concealed by propaganda, it remains the one real reason why conservatism cannot permit popular progress.

Owing to the misguiding of conventional wisdom, the freedom of individuality on a *personal* basis of self-determination in all areas where it doesn't interfere with the self-determination of others, where it's just, has been confused and conflated with individuality on a *societal* basis of everyone for themselves, where it leads to discord, the preclusion of collaboration and the type of one-sided parasitically-benefiting

structures that prevent the vast majority from coming anywhere near to our greatest interworking potential and quality of life. This conflation and confusion is common to conservative ideology which, in a connected example, implies that there's but one type of freedom, the freedom to act, denying the equally important freedom *not to be acted upon in a detrimental manner*.

If the freedom to act, the freedom to exercise power, isn't balanced by the right to be free from having that power used against you, ever more consolidated and abusive power results. This includes, as in but one example, the power to buy politicians and control the political process to such a degree that most citizens' freedom to influence any aspect of our 'democracy' is but the freedom to choose between a wealthy, privileged few pre-purchased by the plutocrats presenting them as options. If you don't ask *why* the nominated representatives are representatives in the first place, by whom they were nominated and for what purpose, the purpose buried beneath the ostensible and its misleading propaganda, you do everyone whom they come to represent a great disservice.

Think of the one-way version of freedom that most consider the only version of freedom (by aristocratic, traditional design) as being free to do what you please, as having no restrictions upon your ability to buy or act or power your way to anything you want *through* anything and everything you want regardless of the cost. Consider how and why this form of freedom was historically entrenched in the conventional value system. We might start by considering how the original wealth and aristocracy of this nation was built: through murder and enslavement and the taking of the land to be exploited by those that had the power and wherewithal to do so. Native Americans, African Americans and, for that matter, most anyone that isn't a privileged white male, might beg to differ with the narrow, one-way street, single-edge-sword conservative concept of freedom as being the only valuable form of freedom, and for good reason.

Having some historical perspective and an awareness of how and why value systems are made traditions that few have the strength of mind and courage to question, let alone challenge, demonstrates many truths, including the two-way street of freedom, the myth of modern democracy, the reality of modern plutocracy, the misunderstandings of 'realism,' 'cynicism' and 'inherent evil,' the dishonorable scars of our past, how the aristocrats typically become aristocrats and the irony that those on the right that think that they're champions of freedom are

actually champions of further empowering a slim minority to utilize the business and political spheres to mentally enslave and financially control the vast majority, an act that can only further impinge upon or otherwise restrict the means and freedom available to that majority.

The realization of such truths combined with the courage to act upon them is the heroic plight of the progressive. Progressivism is about seeing the implications of such truths as concealed by the prevalent powers and conserved courses of history; powers and courses precluding the greatest good for the greatest numbers, even as a majority of that greatest number is conditioned to see you as the unpatriotic enemy, and even as such conviction almost never brings compensation beyond knowing you're doing the right, honorable thing, thereby accepting a higher form of payment. A slim minority possess the strength required to fight this fight, as it's far easier and more *financially* enriching to use the conserved course for self-centered gain.

The progressive understands and cannot stay with this conserved course; cannot ignore the fact that conservatism is clearly on the wrong, unevolved, decaying side of history that is sapping mankind of its greatest potential total quality of existence. And while progress has been made by the gradual resistance to this anachronistic ideology and its transgressions by many such progressively courageous men and women of conviction, humanity's future stands on the precipice of a starkly contrasting choice: we can either fall into the abyss by which the mentally-corrupted servants of greed and egotistic aggrandizement keep the political, economic and commercial constructs in confinement, precluded from progress and thus locking life in an oppressed state of severely limited total quality of life, or we can propel ourselves across that abyss toward ideologies, systems and leaders pursuing the greatest good: an ideal quality of life for life in total.

A paradigm shift in prioritized values is the first step in the path of greatest good, for you cannot solve a problem until first admitting that you have one, with that problem being that we largely believe and value the wrong things to the great disservice of total life. And perhaps the most vital shift in Western values requires reevaluating the method of valuation itself. The idea continued to resurface in Alex's mind that life is its own purpose, providing its own point wherein the primary objective is to maximize its inherent quality. It is the richness of life, the fulfillment of its near boundless potential to as great an extent as possible, that is the purpose of every individual lifeform and, more importantly, of life as a whole.

He was convinced that both purposes, the maximization of both the individual life and total life, were not just possible to simultaneously pursue, but that the more the individual grew in mind and spiritual strength the more they would see the pursuit of each as mutually dependent, for no greater enrichment is offered than through feeling and fulfilling a sense of purpose, and no purpose brings greater fulfillment and pays greater personal proceeds than the spiritual satisfaction achieved and experienced as an ongoing fullness of heart garnered by being an agent of good pursuant to propelling life towards its greatest collective quality. This is true regardless of whether or not the progressive conceives of their actions in such a manner; the vast reward is won either way.

Constructing and advocating systems encouraging this realization, and which facilitate the cooperation and collaboration upon which maximizing total quality of life depends, is the base from which human progress must be built. Flying in the face of winner-eat-loser free-for-all economics, as well as the equally unjust and unmerited communistic command economy, the greatest outcome is produced from every economic agent acting through an economic theory and commercial construct in which the whole is made greater through every participant.

In opposition to this truth, conforming to the conservative ideologies of the absolute pursuit of profit and exclusivity of limitless wealth consolidation necessarily precludes the possibility of maximizing total quality of life, as the quality of life returns per dollar of consolidated wealth exists on a scale of diminishing returns. Consolidating further profit and wealth in the hands of those whom have already hit their ceiling on how high that profit and wealth can take their quality of life is the crux of western immorality.

The conservative value system serves greed and the betrayal of humanity, a truth which Alex believed his analysis of the prevailing political, business, economic and religious systems objectively proved. His first book, *Time for True Democracy*, was based on systematically detailing much of this proof, and his attempts to promote that project online were stalled when those promotional efforts were 'hacked' and had to be discontinued, according to website administrators.

Alex could only envisage one clear motive for such a hack: a highly powerful, plugged-in group acting to conserve conservatism; to upend any attempt to shine a light on the iniquity of the status quo. Apparently freedom of speech has limits. What was it Voltaire said? "To learn who

rules over you, simply find out who you are not allowed to criticize.” And while, again, he’d never be able to *prove* who perpetrated the hacks, motive marked the villain.

Despite the pressures to conform, Alex refused to be among those blindly obedient to traditions built from the hierarchal ordering of people into relative positions of those that are to profit and those that are to be profited from; a parasitic ladder going from the unprotected foreign workforce and their plundered lands and their hopeless hovels to minimum wage workers up to salaried members of private enterprise paid more for being more instrumental in helping their few masters better consolidate profits to those overfed, exploiting, excluding few master parasites themselves. Alex saw one clear course by which to pry the parasites free: by fighting to assure that *everyone* is ethically warranted a piece of the bottom line, as justifiable profit is pursuant *not* to extraction and consolidation, but to the creation and merited distribution of value.

Alex refused to support the traditional systems of mental and societal control that kept people in their place per the judgment of those purposefully positioned within those systems to exploit the remainder. As he emerged from his time of torment, his once inchoate ideas crystallized, and he spent his days in the Redwood-rung Noyo River Canyon outside Fort Bragg setting those ideas to page while finally summoning the strength to seed his first romance in a decade. Without love, he’d learn, no amount of potential is enough, as the heart’s motivation of mind lends life a vigor and vibrancy otherwise fast fading from all manner of men.

**Two: Heaven is the Trinity in Harmony**

*The fire cannot be lit without the spark, cannot burn without the flame and cannot grow without the fuel upon which to feed. The greatest fires are forged from a synergy of spark, flame and fuel: Spirit, Mind, Body.*

Love at first sight is not the stout, fully-fledged love of deep, abiding intimacy, but the first electrical current conducted through the heart of one perceiving the promise of completion. It is the intuitive foresight of the place wherein two people may follow their hearts to the conjunction wherein a whole is formed from balanced fractions. This whole may be formed from an asymmetry in all things but core values, as it is only in ideologies that are too much in opposition that contrast turns from complementary into the irreconcilable conflict rendering relations untenable. When we first perceive completion and the prospect of unification, it's the Spirit within, unbounded by the limits of spacetime, catching first sight of the heart-filling fruits that may be plucked and savored while walking with someone specially suited to naturally partner with and propel you down one of limitless potentially overlapping paths.

Any one of those paths are replete with spiritual riches, and no single path is certainly superior to all the rest, even as the Spirit, in its inseparability from every body and mind and its ability to perceive the interconnections of every freely-willed being, knows which forking pathway each individual will ultimately take, and how it'll come to overlap the paths of others. The notion of the 'soulmate,' of each person possessing but one other individual with whom they are meant to share their lives, and without which there can be only desperate, unfulfilled incompleteness, is a false concept that is bound to lead to unnecessary suffering in those jilted by lovers they came to believe embodied their one and only destiny.

There's no one single love set for your life, just as there is no separation of souls, each to be shot above the firmament or sucked into the bowels of everlasting torment. Indeed, any person may come to love any other person given sufficient desire, time and ability to come to comprehend their shared nature and aspirations, and thereby break down the mental and physical barriers and points of contentious classification and division standing between and artificially separating us.

Love is as limitless, undying and infinitely dimensional as the Spirit which transmits its message through each of its individualized manifestations. And the fact that 'true love' is not limited to one

possible pairing is the *opposite* of something that should provoke sorrow. The fact that any one person may find great romance, love and happiness with a near limitless multitude of others can only comfort those that uncover and firmly grasp this truth in their hearts and minds, for a great many of those potential loves may offer as much joy, pleasure and depth of fulfillment as every love that's lost, even by those steeped in the religious doctrine dooming them to 'one and only.' Spare your heart and mind the ravages of religion.

Calmly rebuff those that seek to control you with fear and fantasy, with pressures and coercions, with the intent to sell you a bill of goods for the mentally-burdening boundaries built by subjugating hierarchies descendent from empires of state, religion and commerce. Spare yourself and especially future generations through an awareness of the modus operandi at the core of every great societal con, past and present: grab you when you're young and impressionable, when you're most malleable and vulnerable to manipulation; secure the most effective manipulations within the traditions, values and lessons of society so they may be subtly and ceaselessly inculcated into the unsuspecting mind; continue to wrap these subjugating wares in lustrously lying packaging, doing everything possible to conceal the rotten core within; keep pressuring the resistant until they capitulate, tying their fates to the beneficiaries of the cons' insidious design; sit back and collect the proceeds from dancing puppets, soft slaves and sacrificial pawns. Take refuge in the fact that the Spirit will forever stand in stark opposition to the conning of its individualized manifestations ferrying its infinite experiences across the seas of being.

So much of the promise of life is crushed under the heel of traditions compelling us to march to the greedy beat, cajoled by ever-updated corrupting anthems. The soulmate is but a single step in one of the longest running marches of these conserved traditions. By tracing that march back to its beginnings, by understanding the motivation for its design, the emptiness of its promises and the incalculable costs of conformity, we may be spared the fate of being tread under its calculating occupations of our existences.

The promised land belongs to the Spirit within us all, and its fruits will always be far sweeter and more nourishing when one walks away from the mythical garden of Adam and Eve, of unquestioning submission, of superior gods condescending to life, of mind controls keeping us locked in line, marching to one beat. Break these binds and follow the heart



into the realm where no religion reigns. Only there can you find your true self and be guided towards your greatest life.

Alex had found heaven several times in his life, and was well aware that it is not an everlasting place of promise lying beyond life, but a perfectly fulfilled state of being that may be experienced by any life living upon any planet, in the known universe and beyond. If you're alive you have the everlasting within, and in a unified will communicated through that connection, the most profound love may be found.

The existence of this heaven could not exist without hell, of course, for these states of being are bound to the same barometer, and the true nature of each can only be known in relativity to the other. If a person lives their entire life in constant, uninterrupted brightness, and is unable to close their eyes and force the light away, they can have no knowledge of darkness. It's only by living in the dark that one can know and appreciate the light. It's in the contrast between any two sides of every spectrum that truth is measured.

If one were to live only and forever in a state of misery and had no experience of the non-miserable, either empirically or conceptually, one would not know it as misery, only as existence; as the unvarying quality of being. And though such a hypothetical person may wish for an end to their pain, they'd yet possess no basis upon which to build a hope for happiness, for this basis would require an awareness, or knowledge, of experiences of pleasure and happiness. In the same way one cannot fully know the value and privilege of ecstasy without misery; as the opposite of misery. If a person only experienced what we'd call ecstasy, such an individual would eventually come to take what we perceive as ecstasy entirely for granted, and the fulfilling effect of their bliss would be blunted. It's the awareness of misery that offers an awareness of the ecstatic, especially when it's taught by the greatest teacher: experience.

For Alex the greatest ecstasy came at the end of a miserable decade, and was discovered on the blurring of boundaries separating spiritual, mental and physical pleasure such that their respective satisfactions blended into inseparable shades of the same experience of nirvana. After his years of torment, Alex's experience of nirvana was so cathartic that it was tantamount to an emotional rebirth, with the cumulative pains and frustrations of his life seemingly swept away clean in one successive series of overwhelmingly magic moments. The pearly gates were swung wide open. But just as life is made sweeter by its finite nature, by the certainty of its cessation, by the fact that its current state

must someday come to an end, the opening of the gates ushered him into total contentedness only because he was aware it was rare and priceless and must soon survive as but a snapshot framed and hung in the halls of his memory.

Nirvana is known in the blurred lines between lust and love, between yearning and connection, between sexual pleasure, intimate understanding and spiritual communion. When the spiritual essence communicating through the heart is in league with, rather than opposed to, the will of the mind and the body, when the Trinity of Self is bound to the same cooperative, collaborating cause that's fulfilling to the full self, sexual congress simultaneously uplifts the Spirit while satisfying our programmed, bodily urges. No satisfaction can be greater than reaching the synergized peak of spiritual, mental and physical fulfillment. It's in this heavenly realm, when the entrant cannot distinguish the difference between the filled heart, the enraptured mind and the engrossed body, that all elements of the self are rolled together in the same elevating moments, and we become saturated in a completeness of contentment.

Alex had long suspected that sex is a bridge-building gift meant to bind individuals brought together by a shared sensing of mutual expansion; an expansion found in the fusion transforming distinction into the indistinct. Much like the energy released by nuclear fusion, the spiritual energy produced in the fusion of individuals strengthens the presence of the Spirit, the essential Self shared by and uniting all forms of life, and compels not just honorable propagation but all honorable relations through a sense of shared identity facilitating the best course of action for collective life. It's gnosis, the knowledge of underlying sameness. *This* is love, a sensing and honoring of shared Self that may be cultivated in all relations; not just the romantic, but the professional and platonic as well.

In the physically intimate relation, detaching the mind and Spirit from sexual congress and seeking sex merely for sensory satisfaction short-sells the act and debases the body by denying the fulfillment of the complete self which the act is meant to make possible. Instinctively, and in the messages passed from the heart to the subconscious which some summon to the conscious mind, we all know this. From this subliminal awareness we cannot help but feel degraded when we deny the greater purpose of sex.

Sex as an extension of intimate understanding and affectionate expression, on the other hand, elevates the individual by encouraging a

cohesion of their own Trinity of Self in the same act that, by virtue of this fulfilling harmony, a reciprocal harmony in their partner is made possible. Sex as a merger of bodies and minds in league with the shared Spirit is akin to sex performed with the Church's blessing, except absent the costs of brainwashing, ignorance and delusion paid by religious adherents, as it's the Spirit that *truly* sanctions, attaching no such strings.

In the sentient being, sex without love is not actually a sin against God for traditionally cited reasons, such as for 'spilling the seed' and failing to adhere to the Church doctrine of having sex to build God-fearing, deferential Christian families. Rather, it's a sin against the self of which the Spirit, the essential-most, universally-shared eternal Self, is relegated to a near nonexistent role, and is thereby denied the ability to guide each individualization to the heaven lost to those lacking its divine direction.

The kernel of truth is there buried beneath the Church's evil, planted in the paved-over foundations of the Church by a spiritual philosopher before his lessons were overbuilt through the imperial assimilation of his teachings: when separated from its greater purpose as an extension of the love built between the hearts and minds of two people, the sexual act is cheapened, reducing sexual expression to mere manipulation of the body and repudiation of the promise of linked minds and fulfilled will of the Spirit, with the full Trinity of Self dishonored as a consequence.

It's reminiscent of a couple of lines from Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*: "Sensual desire indulged for its own sake is greed; a kind of gluttony; and a misuse of something sacred which is given to us so that we may choose the one person with whom to fulfill our humanness. Otherwise we might as well be cattle." Tolstoy glimpsed the heart of the truth, but that truth was diluted by the religious context in which his spiritual insights became entangled in that renowned novel. It's a truth clouded by the petty, religiously-sourced constructs with which Anna is victimized therein.

For it to be pure, Tolstoy's insight into the nature of sensually-expressed love must be removed from hollow notions of propriety; from the condescending assignment of scandal based upon contravening the commands of the subjugating masters and their systems of control which, when mixed with the prideful ego of the self-righteous subjects, gives rise to a spiteful condemnation by those subjects pretending to be

above others while reinforcing the power of the few to whom they're subject.

For it's not with one person but with untold millions that each of us may share the sacred union of love through which the fulfilled Spirit may be borne aloft, carrying us above the limitations of our body and mind with its angelic wings. The challenge is to discipline our mind to direct our body towards seeking such unification in the course of fulfilling our procreative drives, and to refuse to allow such unification to be subject to anything but itself. And possessing but one heart, one must not allow the limitations and impulses of body and mind to push him or her to pour too much into their one cup, for it can only hold so much before it begins to overflow, requiring loss for every successive drop of gain.

For to tie the consecrated knot *not* of marriage, not of oppressive, controlling authorization, but of the spiritual connection of love many times at once puts a strain upon those knots which shall ultimately fray each bind, threatening to tear at the heart and mind of the intertwined. Each of us may tie many knots, but not without stealing some of the strength bound up in all the others and thereby risking the severing of the strongest ties able to support our greatest good and self. For while tying the knot of love may be endlessly repeated, and while each knot is inherently valuable and inimitable, it is impossible to tie a new knot without pulling and putting tension upon the others. The ties that bind us may also tear us apart.

Alex knew the greatest elation must be raised up on the interwoven strength of the spiritual, mental and physical; at the point where all cords in the Trinity of Self are intertwined, hoisting in synchronous harmony, especially when this synchronization overlaps with the synchronization of a second Trinity such that the heart, mind and body of lovers finds a fused inseparability, with each empowering the other.

So while he was aware from reflecting upon his experiences with women that he could find himself falling in love with a limitless number of divine feminine incarnates (as he reverently referred to those that most made him yearn), he also knew that each relationship holds vast inherent potential when sufficiently symbiotic. He was therefore resolved to remain cognizant of the fact that the greatest, healthiest relationships can only remain such so long as the mutually received benefit and possessed power remains as near to balanced as possible, and that it's necessary to pursue and cultivate one's relationships accordingly, else invite parasitism and pain.

While he seldom used *Facebook*, he had started a game of *Words With Friends* with adorable little Amanda many months prior. They had attended the same high school, and though he hadn't seen her for nearly fifteen years, and while their lives were well separated by time and space, they'd once run in overlapping social circles, the basis for the majority of *Facebook* 'friendships.' And though he was wary of sacrificing truly interpersonal relations for their virtual analogues, he was very appreciative that the social networking site permitted even this most tenuous of connections to be maintained, for it made possible what was fast becoming the greatest, most rewarding love of his life.

He'd always thought that she was cute as hell. Just over five feet tall with brown hair, hazel eyes speckled with green and an endearing face of freckles, she was not built in the manner that draws in the objectifying 'man's man,' for she had not the bust nor shapely protruding backside that pop-culture magazines have rendered synonymous with the exuding of sexuality. She was petite and easily lost in the crowd to those not looking closely. This quality was solidified by the fact that she was not what one would call outgoing; one whom would aggressively command attention, a feature which, depending upon the psychology of the subject, might be accurately interpreted as meekness; as a weakness. He suspected another possibility: this might be the strength of not needing constant attention. At the same time her introversion was relatively mild.

Amanda was the type that made a few friendships very gradually over time, imbuing them with the authentic substance of personal understanding and attachment that made many proclaimed 'friendships' seem hollow by comparison. Her social life was a lesson in quality over quantity, and the fact that the more friendships one proclaims to possess the more likely those 'friendships' are inauthentic emblems of ego-engrossing popularity, and the less likely each of those friendships are born of the true understanding and connection allowing them to withstand the trials and tribulations of adversity. Alex had noticed a glimmer from this diamond in the rough long before it began to surface.

Their online games had evolved into an extended and ever-escalating series of instant messages in which mutual interest in and ignorance of one another was steadily replaced with a sense of mutual understanding and connection which, in turn, created a fondness and sense of comfort. This is the wisdom of establishing friendship before initiating sexuality, something which phone and correspondence

communication, whether via letters or the internet, necessitates. For without the pressures, fears and uncertainties of sexual tension experienced during face-to-face interaction, a connection of hearts and minds can be established before the body even comes to bear, a tension often leading to the rabbit hiding or fleeing from the bear, so to speak.

Instead, and in a nod to the potential of online dating, Alex and Amanda gradually broke down the walls standing between them, between everyone, which, in turn, cultivated a far easier, less-inhibited flirtation. Such virtual interactions took place while Alex was in a Fort Bragg coffee shop (for the small studio apartment his do-it-yourself father had erected in the Redwoods eight miles inland didn't provide him with an internet connection), and while Amanda was in Truckee, California, in the Sierra Nevada Mountains.

At the same time, thanks to vastly improved health habits and their gradual accrual of reconstructive results, Alex's system was finally beginning to blow away the mental fog and disorientation that had so long caged and corroded him, and that he'd until recently feared to be a permanent quality of perpetually miserable existence. Through naturopathy and other ongoing rehabilitative efforts, his sexual affliction was beginning to subside as well. He was finally waking from his nightmare. His energy levels were beginning to increase after spending years correcting the course of his once woeful diet, reinvigorating his metabolism and cutting-out all corporate-concocted chemical adulterants.

Combining these consumption efforts with daily exercise, which usually consisted of working the land combined with hikes up and down the hilltop property to the Noyo River below and back, the pounds had begun to burn away. He now set the scales closer to one-hundred-and-eighty pounds after a near seventy pound drop, reflecting the revitalization within. It was no coincidence that it was only then, with much increased quality of health, feeling far better, more energetic, confident, capacious and clear in thought that he had the previous years of convalescence, with a sturdy foundation finally beneath him, that he was to find the love and build the relationship for which he had seemingly endlessly ached.

On what many would call a whim, but which he knew to be an instinctive reception of spiritual guidance sent from the Spirit through his heart to his mind, Alex let Amanda know that he'd be in the Tahoe area for a few days. With the last of the funds he'd cashed out of the

meager retirement account that he'd been obliged to build in his two years of service as a seasonal State Park employee, he got himself a room at a casino hotel. And while Amanda was hesitant to meet him, for physical encounters always felt a little too real at first, especially after so much virtual realm interaction, something compelled her to cast her fear and uncertainty aside and take a chance that their encounter might bear some fruit.

It was awkward at first, but soon, thanks to the liberal consumption of socially-lubricating libations, they were able to usher their closeness across the virtual-to-physical threshold. Alcohol permitted the pursuit of desire with a minimum of the nervousness and fear that the human brain had evolved in order to protect itself from the hazards of stepping into the unknown. The trick is to control its consumption such that its allaying of nervousness doesn't subdue the neurons to such an extent that judgment, cognition and the mind's ability to comprehend and thereby draw a bridge between people is diminished, while also, of course, incurring a heavy cost against the subsequent days' vitality and potential.

While walking and sometimes stepping over this line after their bridge was well enough built, Alex and Amanda flirtatiously gallivanted through the gambling halls, their hearts fluttering with an anticipation that was more than sufficient to drown out the frustration which normally accompanied the spilling of cash down the bottomless pit by which all casinos may be marked. Expect and be able to lose it, like paying for many other forms of entertainment, else you're setting yourself up to fall into the pit along with what should be fully-disposable cash. This time, however, the promise and excitement was well worth the price to be paid; a price that he'd have paid many time overs. Alex was more than happy to shell-out while slowly, exultantly prying open Amanda's shell.

After several drinks, a meal and many more drinks, they found themselves furtively pressing their thighs together and touching hands at a casino bar. Proving a psychological law of competition, it was all but inevitable that the patent desire demonstrated by one woman towards a man makes that man exceedingly more desirable to other women, triggering an animalistic sociological phenomenon: one woman's pining proves, or at least strongly suggests, that the object of her attention is worth having and, playing upon the need to win in the competition for limited resources of all kinds, but especially the best mates, makes that object seem unobtainable due to having already been claimed and

thereby removed from competition. This, of course, only makes it all the more desirable. There's something irresistible about the unobtainable; about the drive of the ego to turn 'no, you can't have it' into 'it's yours.'

Alex had noticed this power at play before, as when he'd undoubtedly garnered more female attention when he was known to have a girlfriend, and he reflected upon this thought while noticing several other women eyeing him at the bar whilst he was ever more intimately engaged with Amanda. Of course, his being dressed to impress Amanda didn't hurt either. One of the women at the bar with whom he'd exchanged a few glances approached Alex, asking for a cigarette. When he was unable to supply her she returned soon thereafter with a cancer stick fleeced from another bar-side smoker and, with a broad smile set below an intensely seductive stare, touched his shoulder, saying: "Thanks anyway."

Grinning wryly at his recognition of this competitive phenomenon in action, Alex's eyes reflected an extra measure of confidence. Amanda responded immediately. She grabbed him by the hand and pulled him out of his seat and toward the elevator. Pulsing with anticipatory excitement, the elevators' descent toward their ground-floor position was drawn out to the point of being unbearable.

When the doors closed Amanda pulled Alex in by his collar and they fell headfirst into their first kiss; a long, ardent release of sexual pressure that had been mounting for hours of little slot-side touches and teases, their already established connection having been topped off with half a dozen drinks apiece. The long kiss shared by the fledgling lovers was unrestrained by any inkling of sobering nervousness. Alex had always thought himself a good kisser, something his few former girlfriends confirmed, and further believed that this quality was an extension of his being a big-hearted natural romantic passionately predisposed to perpetually yearning for a target for intimate expression.

Such expression had been restrained for far too long. It seemed a perfect storm of already established connection, pent-up needs of intimacy and sexuality and inhibition-dismantling libations, with the result being a night that was one incessant make-out session. Their lips seldom separated as their hands and bodies intermingled in a long, ardent demonstration of growing cohesion. It was as if his heart extended tendrils out to every inch of his skin, so perfectly was her touch conducted into every burrow of his being. For the first time in his life he'd gained entry into heaven.



Amanda was insecure about their mutual nudity the next morning, but Alex's actions clearly demonstrated both his mounting affection and strong physical desire such that any insecure notion held in her mind soon began to fade. Free, uninhibited love and gratification were the result, with the adrenaline rushing through their veins forcing their hangovers into the same non-existence as Amanda's early, uncomfortable self-consciousness.

They remained intimately intertwined all morning. Soon the affection gave way to arousal, and the hearts, minds and bodies of the new couple again became enmeshed, though this time with a lucidity unknown the night before. He took his time, interlocking her fingers with his when she reached for him and hitting every swatch of skin from her ears and neck to her shoulders and nipples, standing at full attention.

Alex's fingertips reflexively traced intricate patterns down her flanks and around her hips. Her back arched as he gripped her knees and dove headfirst between her legs. And there he made camp, driven by some deep inner need to please her, following an instinct of where and when she most wanted to be stimulated. For though the act of sexual congress had been alien to him for years, he needed no instruction manual. He had always felt as though physical acts of sexually-expressed intimacy should remain intuitive.

As with most acts not requiring reasoning or intellect in general, be it sports or flirtation or in the endless other examples where the mind tends to get in the way, and where intelligence can be more a liability than an asset, the best results are usually achieved by disengaging the conscious mind and relying on instinctive awareness. Many things are known without thought; the mind only distracts us from the cleanest realization and most direct, effective action. And yet, even had his innate desire to please her been absent, being a generous lover is also strategically prudent, as one's partner's satisfaction tends naturally to be passionately reciprocated. This requires letting go of self-centeredness.

Alex had always enjoyed the act of cunnilingus and providing pleasure to his partner in general, dismissing many men's claims that 'real men don't eat pussy' as being a symptom of what he called 'tough guy syndrome:' the insecurity-driven need to deny interest in and enjoyment of things conventionally deemed unmanly, whether it be flowers, romance, love music, cute kids or puppies or anything else that

insecure men feel emasculated by admitting an appreciation for.

The ironic thing to him about this rampant cultural conception of manliness is that it actually signified *weakness*, not strength. The more you're able to admit that you like something, especially if it goes against the paradigm of manliness, the tougher and more of a man you really are, and the less you're able to admit what you really think and feel, the weaker you are. This was true of all such things. It takes more strength to admit when you're wrong, to apologize and to ask for help, than to pretend you're right, to not be able to apologize and to feel emasculated by the need for help. The secretly weak form of manliness was, however, embedded in the modern male psyche. Alex, nevertheless, was aware of the true form of strength.

He knew, for example, from years of full deprivation of romance and intimacy that he wasn't nearly as interested in 'getting laid' as he was in getting loved. Not only was this clear to him, but he felt no diminishment from its admission, either to himself or others. He also felt not the least bit of diminishment from admitting that he liked to please the women he was with in every possible way, and believed this was inherent to being a real man. That said, he was also aware of the mutual benefit; he was aware of the fact that exciting a woman's nervous system invariably impassions her lovemaking, and the pleasure is returned. Making her feel as fulfilled as possible always makes her come back for more, to a place where fulfillment is shared, while also engendering respect and goodwill in a way that perpetuates a healthy, mutually-beneficial relationship.

In this case, however, their first foray in Tahoe was not spurred by strategy, but was very easy and natural, like a biochemical reaction of long-simmering connection, desire, repressed drive and, the night before and that last day, inhibition-inhibiting trips to the bar. His heart and mind played off of her sounds and physical reactions, and he wanted more than anything to make her feel better than she'd ever felt, for it gave him great mental and spiritual fulfillment to fulfill her; as it is with all good lovers that instinctively seek a synergy in the energy bouncing back and forth between their rising and falling bodies being blissfully shared. Their last day in Tahoe was like a dream; time thrown off of its dimensional track.

Alex often reflected upon the sense of perfection he felt when, upon retrieving memories of those first days together, his heart would seem

to swell to capacity. In his mind's eye he could picture her hands tracing his as they lay in bed, her fingers slowly interweaving the gaps between his fingers in the most calmly contented, peaceful manner, as if they had all the time in the world at their disposal and there was nothing more to be had, so perfectly fulfilled were they. Alex had always loved women's hands. And in his reflections it was that image, the image of her hands interweaving and tracing his, that resurfaced most often in his memory.

Most people would call it a hand 'fetish,' but he disliked the negative connotations of the word. To him there was nothing perverse about it, and it reflected more his personality than anything; his fastidiousness, his borderline OCD need for symmetry and his artistic romanticism, as the hands are the tools of touch and creation; the extension of the creative, passionate mind into the physical realm. He sometimes suspected that the hands represent an outwardly visible sign of inherent characteristics of the individual, with those gifted in the abilities of rougher 'hands-on work,' like builders, having less shapely hands than the natural artisan, and that beautiful women always have beautiful hands indicative of their particular innate capacity and allure. A woman's hands were almost always one of the first things he looked at; the face and hands took precedence over all other aesthetics. So while he appreciated a woman that was in good shape and was as subject to biologically-ingrained elements of sexual attraction as anyone, his mind was such that he was less particular about features that most men proclaim to be drawn to first.

An attractive face and hands, not too much makeup, only enough to accentuate natural beauty, and no plastic surgery; any natural features, including the breasts, are always preferable to unnatural editions of naturally-exuded form. And, perhaps above all, no nails, natural or artificial. He thought of nails more as claws; as vestiges of a time when we used them as tools to dig, clean, pick and defend ourselves.

Painted nails look nice, especially with darker polish contrasting light skin, but extending beyond the fingertips they were an immediate turn-off for him. There was a psychological aspect to this particular attraction. Extending beyond the fingers, nails were unclean; animalistic, archaic anachronisms. In his own mind he called them 'rat claws.' So when the video of his first days with Amanda replayed in his mind, the clip he saw most often shown not her body, not her ass or breasts, but her clean hands tracing his.

Slowly sipping champagne in the bathtub, they'd spoken of their past, their convictions, their aspirations and dreams for the future. And they made love constantly, fast and slow, always reading one another's subtle cues in harmonious concert. It is for good reason that it is said that the most honest moments in a man's life are those directly following orgasm, for it is in these moments that, relieved of the programmed procreative drives of the body which possess the nerves and command the mind, man may perceive through and act upon his heart and capacity for reason alone.

In these moments man best knows love and logic free from distraction, and may see without the veil of sex shrouding his clearest, truest perspective. Such moments present rare opportunities for a man to reveal how he truly feels, and in Alex's case his budding love for Amanda was as clear in those moments as ever; more so, for he felt that love in its purest, incorruptible essence. Before long their talk of the future began to coalesce, slyly at first, each one feeling out the other, afraid to admit too much desire up until the point where their mutual intent became undeniable. Though it seemed rushed to friends, family and conventional wisdom, they sought a shared path. At the same time the plan was that this path would diverge from the one that most romances traveled.

Could, in the course of paving their overlapping path, they be free to occasionally branch away from one another without requiring those paths to break into distinct lanes, or were they lying to themselves? It was an age old question: is non-possessive romance possible? Can the heart be engaged without the need for exclusivity and control? And while all the evidence seemed to be on the side of answering in the negative, their shared reminiscence on the mistakes of their past relationships and their observations of relations of friends and family compelled them to commit to avoiding common missteps made along previously tread pathways.

Thus, one of Amanda and Alex's first mutual resolutions was to never attempt to control one another. While the repercussions couldn't be predicted, for a person can never fully control their minds, much less the hearts constantly compelling their minds to act, they vowed not to stand in the way of the other's wish to do something. 'If we haven't made plans feel truly free to go spend time with him or her, you won't need my permission,' they'd agree. Just be honest about it. Freely accepting your sexual attraction and flirtatious side was important as well. Fighting your programming, not acknowledging your natural

attractions, is futilely foolhardy. You're setting yourself up for failure and, in that failure, you're paving a path of resentment for yourself and your constraining partner.

It's but the insecure ego and self-absorbed need for control that propels the presumption that we can command nature. Allowing yourself to be attracted to others and flirting with them in social and professional settings is healthy; to deny this is to draw an unnatural, unhealthfully limiting line. It's not the inevitable desire itself, but whether or not we *act* upon that desire that determines if the line is crossed. From all the failed relationships he'd observed in the past, Alex felt strongly that the egotistic upwelling of pride and the resultant propensity for jealousy and oppressive control measures were some of the most reliable marks of a deluded, unhealthfully-restrictive, ultimately doomed relationship. In relation to this realization he and Amanda resolved to be absolutely free to pursue interests and activities that didn't include the other without that other person feeling spurned or left out. A couple of relationships Alex had been in close observational proximity to in the past had proven to him that when a person attaches too much of their identity and sense of self-worth to their relationship, when too many of their eggs are placed in the same basket, they're setting themselves up for disaster. You must add to one another while not depending too severely upon one another.

Healthy relationships are always mutually beneficial relationships, and as soon as the ego, fear or vulnerability of one person interferes with the ability of the other person to freely expand and enjoy their lives and improve upon themselves, a friction begins to build which eventually sets a fire of resentment under the relationship. Few relations can persist too long when this particular flame begins to burn bright, eventually being consumed by its fire.

Therefore, both people must feel free to establish interests and social circles not necessitating an overlap, including relationships with attractive members of the opposite sex. And this freedom must be authentic; not mere lip service, or accompanied by the insecure, disingenuous 'it's okay' affirmation. And so, with their newborn love at heart, Alex and Amanda decided to commit to a principled set of parameters which they both suspected to ultimately be impracticable.

It was in this manner that Amanda came to be the first to join Alex on the Noyo Compound. She left behind a clerical job working for a small tax attorney operation, and they ventured into the Redwoods, secure in

the indefinable embrace of true love. It wasn't long afterward that, with Amanda's editorial assistance, Alex completed his first book, *Time for True Democracy*. And though that work fought against the status quo and was proclaimed by more than one editor to be a 'manifesto' without a market, as it was a wake-up call as to the undemocratic nature of American 'democracy' and the need to upend paradigms of what constituted the best possible economic and business systems (a subject matter not fitting any of the traditional publishing markets), he eventually found a home for it with a small press that prided itself on challenging its select readership to find the most progressive means to advance the best interests of the majority. With a small up-front payment and steady trickles from his royalty starting soon thereafter, they lived together there, deep in the forest, far removed from the orthodox pursuit of a 'successful life.'

### **Three: A Cut Above and Below**

*“Better is bread with a happy heart than wealth with vexation.”*

- *Amenemope*

No two people carry the precise same burdens. And while many would scoff at the notion that a young born into such a perversely wealthy family that many enviously and sneeringly referred to him as 'Prince Henry' should ever be regarded with pity, Henry certainly deserved some measure of compassion. For the state of a person born into circumstances wherein every material need and desire is taken for granted is prone to the underdevelopment of those qualities of character and fortifications of psyche garnered through overcoming the types of difficulties which they'll never know.

As much as most believe they'd be far better off winning the lottery, there's a type of irreplaceable, invaluable growth granted through earning. When nothing need be earned you're less provoked to challenge yourself in the ways granting such growth, and less likely to feel the fulfillment that comes from a sense of deserving what you're instead gifted on a silver platter. A shame-inducing sense of guilt is often the result; a deep sense of unworthiness. At the same time, that rare young man 'fortunate' to be raised in a palatial residence under the unrelenting influence of parents whom our bourgeois value system esteems as 'highly successful' feels the need to fill shoes which, when those values are accepted as a basis of such shoe size, most of them never grow into. Such are the rare pitfalls set before, and pressures placed upon and a prince.

Alex recalled that, as neighbors then roommates two of their four collegiate years, Henry often referred to himself as a "fuck-up," lamenting his mostly self-imposed inability to measure up to his father, a man so wealthy that, as a former chief financial officer of two different world-renowned technology companies, had amassed a fortune surpassing seven hundred million dollars. Alex remembered when he first learned of Henry's family money, when they were both freshman living adjacent to one another in an off-campus dormitory at the University of California at Santa Barbara.

Henry proudly showed Alex his father's name on a *Forbes* list of the richest men in America. Yet beneath the sheen there always seemed to be some insecurity and embarrassment at being a beneficiary of and heir to such a vast fortune. As they slowly became friends, due in no small part to the glitzy appeal of the type of lifestyle that Alex then aspired to emulate, his time with Henry opened the door to the learning of many lessons that would become vital to his ideological reformation.



Among other things, their college friendship resoundingly demonstrated to Alex that America, like most nations and the world at large, was actually a land of many worlds, not one unified nation as our consolidating overseers encourage us to believe. And Henry was part of a world that only momentarily overlapped his own. Henry handed Alex a visitors pass to a club that played by a whole different set of rules; rules which they wrote to serve themselves, and which the vast majority is excluded from adopting.

In all ways of wealth, power, privilege, access and opportunity, Henry's world floated high above Alex's, whose life belonged to the middling economic class of individuals; those forced to educate and work themselves into a position of hard-won increased advantage permitting their avoidance of at least some of the exploitation of the mentally and monetarily unprotected whom the ownership class, of which Henry was a royal member, leveraged circumstance to pressure to pull the plow of one-sided profit. Only the most exclusive few can become a part of the plutocracy that, as Alex was privy to fleetingly witness from the inside, clearly precludes any legitimate national claim on democracy.

A particularly high quality Christmas card was set upon the mantle of one of Henry's family's many homes in the hills above Carpentaria just outside Santa Barbara, purchased for the convenience of his parents being able to visit their son attending the university a short drive down the 101 Freeway. When Alex open the card he read the handwritten evidence of plutocracy: "Thanks for all of your support. Please call me anytime. Signed Sen. Dianne Feinstein." So much for equality of access and representation. Yet in those days it wasn't gross disparities in political power, wealth, opportunity and quality of life that captured Alex's attention, it was the perks associated with rubbing elbows with the ownership class.

Henry exposed Alex to a stratum of society enjoying an existence that was so unboundedly luxurious and opportunistically unrestricted that, at the same time and for the same reason, made it disturbingly and irresponsibly detached from the reality and stresses of ninety-nine out of every hundred people. At the time he was lost in the lust and luster, seduced by the dreams of over-privilege. Only later did he begin to ask the type questions which every moral, progressive man and woman must ask themselves of such circumstances.

How could a family so routinely partake of five hundred dollar meals and own estates in six states when five of those usually uninhabited

mansions could shelter five extended families apiece, and the money spent on every one of those meals could feed one such family for a month?! How can you drive past people barely subsisting while working to enrich you at your company while you're on the way to a golf resort charging an annual fee of one-hundred-thousand dollars just to maintain membership?! Where was the recognition of the opportunity cost, of the quality of life cost when considering how such absurd disposable wealth could cover the most basic needs of so many and thereby drastically increase the quality of their existences in ways an extra home and club membership can't come close to achieving for a family like Henry's?! Between these two possibilities was a difference in total quality of life that was absurdly immense, and yet it was ignored.

Was there any awareness or concern shown for the fact that money, like all resources of value, is, at any one point in time, globally finite, and that by spending so much in one place on one family's profligate lifestyle you deprive countless others of basic necessities and opportunities to immeasurably increase their quality of life?!

It wasn't until later, given the experience and contemplation required to grow in principle and perspective, that Alex realized that he'd been privy to one of the clearest possible examples of the inescapability of cause and effect and its dictates on the responsibility of being a good person. Nothing exists in a bubble, and all action has rippling consequences ignored at incalculable cost.

There is a cost and effect to every decision; to everything we do, everything we buy, what we pay for it and what that money supports. When we choose a certain career path, we support the profession and the organizations through which we develop our career. When we buy a shoe, we support the ability of the shoe company to continue to make and sell their shoes, including those made with the all too common cost-cutting, profit-maximizing inputs of cheap foreign labor sourced in nations unguarded by sufficient labor laws and environmental protections, inflicting massive damage upon their locales and their inhabitants for the profits of an internationally-consolidating ownership class.

Buying the sneaker is the same as supporting the continuity of such exploitation. And when one individual or family blows a fortune on extravagances, countless others lose some degree of life as a result. That's the greater moral application of the opportunity cost concept;

the far more important application extending well beyond its conventional, morally-bankrupt application to business profitability.

Alas, when Alex first tasted the hedonistically-heaping sweets of Henry's addictively-unlimited life of luxury they seemed to his relatively unsuspecting young mind to be harmless enough, consisting of a long string of epicurean excursions into downtown Santa Barbara paid for with what appeared to be a bottomless credit card. And while Alex could never afford such indulgences, he was familiar with their hole-filling motive. In parallel with his own spending habits as an adolescent and young man, Alex was again exposed to the fact that many people, even most people, though to various degrees relative to their baseline satisfaction, buy things in an attempt to fill a void in their heart that only meaningful, value-producing pursuits and relationships are actually capable of filling.

Those lacking sufficient satisfaction in their lives will seek to create it any way they can, often regardless of the long term cost. For despite the pleasures of his boundless privilege, despite the depth of his dissolute delights, Henry was disturbed. His smile always felt to Alex as if forced, like it was concealing something awful. Through the bits and pieces Henry confided in Alex it seemed that he'd long attempted to compensate for a considerable degree of angst, dissatisfaction and insecurity through any of the considerable means at his disposal.

But it had never really worked. Such means could only momentarily mask an internal sense of emptiness and, through that masking, discourage him from actually addressing that emptiness, losing the motivation and opportunity to fill such a void with the only things capable of doing so. Some things are cliché for a reason, and as cliché as it may sound those things capable of filling the void are the greatest of commodities, and cannot be bought: things like love, purpose, passion and fulfillment; that which fills from within, not without.

Henry's habitual insistence on covering up his internal pains and fears with artificial pleasures and distractions reminded Alex of his reflections on over-prescribed antidepressants. By manipulating the pleasure centers of the brain, these drugs attempted to manufacture a sense of happiness that would always feel false to the one experiencing it, as such an artifice of satisfaction always lacked the far more considerable, rewarding weight of the enriched mind and uplifted Spirit filling us from within. Fleeting physical pleasures can never replace the fullest forms of un-purchasable satisfaction which must be *earned* through a synergy of

guiding Spirit and receptive mind motivating its beneficiaries to grasp, appreciate and add value to the world and the lives within it; only such spiritual satisfactions based upon fulfilling experiences, understanding, appreciation for and service of life may fill the heart and eventually build a sense of happiness.

Trying to buy happiness with drugs and other short-lived sensory satisfactions backfires in that such a practice dissuades the mind from seeking out the real thing. Henry's habits, like the habit of the antidepressant pill-popper typically suffering from *circumstantial* rather than true biochemical clinical depression, effectively diminished the drive to address the source of unhappiness. It is but one example of the error of treating symptoms in such a way that the source is concealed. A mask may only disguise, never change, the concealed face. Eventually the mask must be removed and its wearer must look into the mirror, the truth of their state and time lost to its concealing purpose laid bare.

Those that grow comfortable with concealment often learn too tragically late that it's far better to face the far greater challenge of cutting out the cause so that the symptoms, too, can be excised, no longer needing concealment. Like the overly prescribed 'depressed' individual, the drug addict, the alcoholic, the overeater, the insecure investor in an overinflated ego and the overindulgent in general, Henry's satisfaction-seeking strategies were ironic in that the very means by which he addressed his unhappiness only served to perpetuate it, a self-destructive cycle endemic to the West.

And so, never feeling an internal sense of peace and contentment, Henry fought to fill the void using short-term pleasures forestalling the sense of completeness at best, eliminating the future realization of that completeness and thus costing him incalculably at worst. When coupled with nearly limitless financial means this can become increasingly hazardous, pushing its pursuers ever closer to the cliff. And Alex, having not yet developed an understanding of the indispensability of good health to good life or the best course to take toward the earning of true, lasting happiness, was all too willingly swept up in the same fight to force that happiness.

By his freshman year at UCSB he had already developed the marijuana habit that would only continue towards the extreme over the next decade-plus, eventually turning into an all-out ten-times-a-day dependency. His relationship with Henry only opened new doors

leading to as yet unexplored avenues replete with opportunities for neurochemical manipulation, with few such doors to remain unopened.

Cocaine was Alex's drug of choice for a time, as it effectively subdued the physiological discomforts of his neurological condition and increased his energy and confidence to the point where he could party all night and enjoy the company of those from whom he would normally flee, else fail to hold the attention of. Of course, the effect was fleeting, and any sense of companionship derived from the drug was, as with all drug-induced effects, eventually proven hollow.

The next day the closeness, manufactured by the energy-rich euphoric feeling of the drug as much as anything, is almost entirely wiped away, rendering any connections it had facilitated tenuous at best. That and his racing, coked-up heart, which at times seemed ready to explode, frightened him. As a subtle psychedelic in controlled doses mushrooms were fun for a time as well, paving the way to some intriguing notions as to the fleeting, subjective nature of reality.

If reality exists in the mind it must be relative to that mind. How dependent is its existence, then, upon the external world and the perceptions of other minds? If it is about concurrence, then reality is what the average mind perceives and says it is. What, then, does that make the reality of the abnormal mind, a fantasy that is less than real? Is the nonconforming outlier suffering from illusion or delusion simply because their experiences aren't broadly shared or accepted? Where is the overlap between what can't be proven, what won't be acknowledged as true and what can't and thus won't ever have a basis in generally accepted reality?

Alex would later see a parallel between his 'shrooming' experiences and the 'psychotic breaks from reality' denoting the mentally ill who need treatment not so much because they live in an 'unreal' world but because that world so conflicts with the conventional world and its workings that its occupants can't function within the accepted systemic confines of its popularly agreed upon 'reality.' Society can't function without a generally agreed upon existential basis dictating the pursuits of its patrons. Anyone 'tripping' would be paddling into those following the current, and were therefore in much the same boat as those deemed mentally ill.

Mushroom 'trips' were like existing within a waking lucid dream wherein the mind has a fundamental role in concocting its own

experience. And if Alex's consciousness had been plugged into a machine manipulating his perception of reality throughout his life, his mind may have raced on into its natural cessation without his ever knowing his life wasn't 'real.' But perhaps that's the point: if you're really having an experience then it *is* real, regardless of the underlying nature of your existence. For the most part perception *is* reality, simply because it is real to the one perceiving it.

In those naturally predisposed to pensive thought and pessimistic attitude mushrooms invited the real-life existential angst of living somewhere between *Alice in Wonderland* and *The Matrix*. The drugs' active compounds permitted a glimpse of the world as existing somewhere between conventionally-accepted reality and a reality composed of subjective perception and creative construction. Patterns in the tiles of floors and walls were there, yes, but seemed to merely be suggestions; a fluidic, insubstantial starting point of perception; the outline drawn into a canvas begging for the mind to impressionistically fill-in the blanks.

On walks along Isla Vista's bluffs, the college community adjacent to UCSB where most of its students reside, waves emitted sounds that others were unable to hear, even as they walked alongside you. The mind was proactively projecting its own sensations, throwing the internal into the external to the extent where the line between subject and object blurred. It was as if everyone had their own customizable basis for reality, allowing the sense of what was real to expand in as many directions as there were minds to perceive it.

No one thing was seen by every 'tripper' in precisely the same way. A particularly enjoyable experience was had on an energetic excursion in Montana's magnificent Glacier National Park during which Alex had a very upbeat conversation with Henry's sophomore year housemate, an Austrian student named Manny, during a hike of constant ascension in which he nevertheless felt no exhaustion owing to the consumption of campfire-concocted mushroom tea shared by all.

Alex's favorable assessment of the drug continued until the two bad trips occurred. The first bad trip was due to taking too much and losing control of his creative role in what was once an enjoyable collaboration with the drug's compounds which, in this instance, spun out of hand in the frequency and intensity of his hallucinations to such a stressful degree that he feared he'd have a seizure or a heart attack, with this fear only snowballing the stress.

The second bad trip was precipitated, he believed, by his memory of the previous bad trip, triggering a paranoia that poisoned him to the drug thereafter. The hallucination-triggering compounds were poisonous, after all. Having to take poison to provoke a sense of satisfaction would someday seem absurd to him. But not yet. First he had to have the experience, and had to learn that, of all the drugs leading to such lessons, it was MDMA, or 'Ecstasy,' that cost the most.

From his collegiate days forward a fundamental philosophical principle was continually reinforced until it was fully inculcated: *Nothing is free*. And when the brain is placed in a constant state of the sublime, such that simply sitting on the edge of the bathtub patting your buddy on the back as he pukes his guts out into the toilet comes along with the greatest sense of satisfaction, you know the price is high. That first tablet must've been cut with an opiate, Alex would later reflect. Soon he learned that if you can't see the powder in the capsule, if the pill is in the dense tablet form, it is most likely not pure MDMA.

Of course, even if you see the powder it can be mixed with something, but the tablet made this almost certain. And in this first instance he was on cloud nine for hours. Not long after that first dance with Molly, as the drug is sometimes known 'on the street,' Alex learned that Henry's clear emotional disturbance, the fact that he always seemed to force his smiles and never truly seemed to be happy, was likely at least partially attributable to the fact that he'd long abused ecstasy as an over-privileged teen growing up in Austin, Texas.

Henry had taken so much of the drug that his brain's capacity to naturally produce and transmit certain 'pleasure chemicals' was now hampered. And yet Alex adored the drug's effects and was caught in its blissful embrace, despite the forewarning of those effects evidenced by his running mate. How could he not be caught by such an embrace? He remembered that a hug from his friend's girlfriend truly did produce a sense of ecstasy, like being wrapped in a blanket of pure joy.

The experience had so imprinted itself upon his mind that he thereafter felt closer to her than he actually was, as she had likely not felt the same way, though he hadn't the nerve to ask her and sensed that, even if he had, anything seemingly substantive in the neurochemically-exaggerated connection was illusory. He was slowly learning that, though perceived as profound, drug-induced feelings are almost always misleading. Luckily his love affair with ecstasy ended much as it had

with mushrooms, as prior to a rave he took too many tablets that had likely been cut with speed.

For four long hours he was in a constant state of panic, a state that was exacerbated when his eyes started to bounce about uncontrollably, a demonstration of having consumed too much of the drug. He read the same sign many times thereafter in his observations of other ravers. That, he'd say in hindsight, is a clear indication that the drug is doing something unnaturally devastating to the brain. And yet Alex would often reminisce about some of the best times he had on the drug, such as when Renée, a girl whom Henry would date through much of their freshman years together, had given him a massage rendering all others relatively tepid.

Renée was a friend of Alex's throughout their collegiate experience, and remained thereafter in Alex's mind one of the sweetest, most naturally cheerful people he'd ever met. 'She smiles and laughs enough for the two of us,' he'd think to himself. And yet she scowled the entire time that, during their sophomore year long after having split with Henry, she confided in Alex that Henry had (by purchasing her countless gifts and meals and bringing her to and footing the bill at high class hotels in the Santa Barbara area and taking her to many of the family estates that Alex had stayed at over the years) consistently made her feel as though she owed him sex that he'd then cash in on, even when it didn't feel right, with no accompanying sense of heart-condoned intimacy or affection.

There was such toxic resentment and indignation in her voice and painted across her countenance as she related this feeling to Alex that he knew that if one of the most good-natured, consistently joyful people he'd ever known felt so abhorrently taken advantage of in retrospect, then she had a good reason. Henry had polluted their relationship by leveraging his buying power to procure intimacies that, when not arising from spiritual and mental connectivity, always elicit feelings of disgust. Henry was so used to buying what he wanted that he essentially turned her into a prostitute, almost on reflexive habit. Not long after Renée broke it off with Henry she ended up dating one of his housemates, Josh, toward the end of their freshman year, long before taking Alex into her confidence.

Josh was on the UCSB soccer team with Henry, and although both possessed similar looks, having sandy-blond hair, blue eyes and svelte builds, that was where the comparisons ended. Josh was the fun-loving,



easy-going 'surfer dude' type, and caused none of the feelings of unseemliness and revulsion in Renée that Henry's awkward, wealth-wielding, gift-showering courting tactics had. Her easy, natural, care-free relationship with Josh infuriated Henry, as did any reminder that he was not permitted to possess whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted it. *This* is true entitlement deserving of the 'lower-class' assignment, Alex would later reflect: believing and acting as if your buying power extends to the hearts, minds and bodies of those you deem lower class than you.

On many subsequent occasions Henry derided Renée as ungrateful and heartless which, knowing her as Alex did, she most certainly was not. Confirming another cliché, it seemed an affirmation of the lesson that 'money can't buy you everything,' and that Henry's constant leveraging of his family resources to maintain the relationship and coax sexual favors out of Renée had created in her a deep-seeded disgust and sense of impropriety that gradually turned her against him. While the former couple would consistently cross paths throughout their years at UCSB due to running in overlapping social circles established that first year, it was clear that Renée resented Henry and regretted their relationship. Alex even recalled that, during one awkward social interaction between Henry and Renée during their junior years, Renée suddenly shouted: "Can you at least try to make me feel like there was something good, something redeemable in our relationship?!" As an outburst so unlike her, it was clear that Renée was revolted by her recollection of their relationship.

She felt dirty just thinking about it. Alex would later reflect that their relationship was an example of the fact that it reduced the self-esteem, unsettled the inner peace and clouded the spiritual center of any two or more people involved in *any* relationship in which the position and wealth of one side was the basis upon which the other was compelled to act. It cut at the Spirit within all participating parties, unsettling the conscience and provoking the guilt often buried deep down in the perpetrators while angering the taken-advantage-of, indignation-infused victims. Such a thing is true of not just romantic relationships but friendships, working relationships, familial relationships, *all* relationships, even one's relationship with one's self, as when one does things out of ego and greed which reduces one's sense of self-esteem, honor, integrity and the like.

This creation of easily accruable offense is essentially produced whenever the weaker, corruptible side of self gets the better of one's

self. The more that money and the advantages it affords is depended upon to form the basis of a relationship or the core of the personally-possessed egotistic identity, the more it degrades and precludes the potential of producing progress moving towards the greater fulfillment of those affected.

Identities wrapped up in both wealth and its impoverished opposite result in detrimental effect, both to those harboring such identities and to all of those they affect. The 'entitlement' of welfare is a dependency that reduces the self-respect of the dependent such that it arguably costs them more than they receive; certainly far more than they would garner from self-dependent lives. Even when pride keeps them from an admission, most of those receiving some form of welfare would much rather rely upon themselves. Most people in this situation don't act out of a sense of entitlement as much as shame-inducing desperation.

Thus, true entitlement comes not to those that quietly harbor self-contempt for receiving assistance, but to those whose egos are so inflated that they come to see themselves as floating above and looking down upon others to whom they have a right, as superior individuals, to take advantage of and even claim the property of as they see fit. Many observational social studies have demonstrated, for example, that such individuals are far more likely to cut others off in traffic because they see both themselves, and their time, as more valuable, and they're thus entitled to save more of it while they, like everyone else, move between their respective points A and B. Those that really feel entitled truly see themselves as better than the majority and not subject to the same rules.

Henry taught Alex what an entitled attitude really looks like: the right to claim anything for oneself; to take from those beneath you in class even without recompense, as if demonstrating the cost and ego-stroking delusion of the cultural paradigm of valuing the 'class' of a person based upon their financial means. One particularly applicative, revealing incident stood out in Alex's memory. Henry's father had paid for a limo bus for he, Alex and some friends of Henry's new girlfriend to go on a tour of the upscale Sonoma and Napa County wineries of Northern California while on a break from their junior year at UCSB, after which they slept over at Alex's mom's house. Henry slept in Alex's brother's room, James, who was out of town and in the process of moving north to attend Cal State Chico.

The next day, when they were driving south back to the Santa Barbara area, Alex recognized his brothers' handwriting on a CD that Henry popped into the CD player. Upon inquiring as to where the CD had been procured, Henry rather casually, but with a hint of self-embarrassment, admitted that it was Alex's brother's. But *no*, he hadn't stolen it or the other handful of CDs and the PlayStation game he'd taken from his brother's room, for he'd left some cash on his brother's desk. He didn't ask permission; he just decided he wanted it, took it, and found a way to rationalize what was essentially thievery and a gross breach of trust. Alex was dumbfounded. Henry, of course, wrote it off as no big deal.

If Alex had been as principled then as he would come to be, he would have chastised Henry severely, if not suspended their association. Alex wanted to believe it was because he was patient and forgiving, but it was at least as likely due to the fear of losing luxuries awarded through that association. Soon thereafter Henry lost a long-running friendship in much the same manner as he'd jeopardized his friendship with Alex.

The friendship was with Manny, the Austrian student whom had accompanied Henry and Alex on their mushroom-fueled romp through Glacier National Park, and had recently come to America for exploration and education. Manny had been living with Henry when he, Manny, left their off-campus apartment to go on a one-week road trip exploring the Southern California coast. When he returned he found that Henry had moved all of his belongings into the living room and claimed his bedroom as his own. Henry's rationale? He was paying more of the rent owed on the mutually-paid lease, so he was entitled to whatever space he wanted. This highly disrespectful unilateral act precipitated a long, heated argument between them, and Manny soon came to Alex tearfully heartbroken and indignant.

When Alex attempted to play intermediary and patch things up between them he couldn't believe the tone Henry took when the subject was broached. He dismissed Manny as being a "whiny little pussy" and took-up Cartman's line of provocation from *South Park*, saying Manny just "has some sand in his vagina." It was another lesson in the fact that entitlement is actually possessed by those that feel superiority, not inferiority. It is a mental corruption born, in this case, of being raised in riches, where nothing has to be earned, everything is taken for granted and all things are for sale.

Alex even heard that the only reason Henry was able to attend UCSB and play soccer for a team comprised of much more talented athletes

was because his father had bought new lights for the stadium. The quid pro quo status quo formed the real American 'freedom' that proved, among other things, that nothing is truly free and most everything is available for purchase, for you're free to do and have as you please relative to your ability to *buy* it, including commodities and most people. In Henry's case, the public institution was basically bribed to open the entry gates. Yet at what psychological cost had his father's gift come?

Alex had met Henry's parents that first year at school together, when they came into town to stay at the aforementioned sprawling secondary home in the hills above the affluent hamlet of Carpentaria. Though the home boasted many amenities most people would consider lavish, including a large mirror above the ornate fireplace mantel that doubled as a high definition television with the flip of a switch and a backyard with a putting green and infinity pool that seemed to spill down the hills towards the sparkling bay below, it was nothing compared to the family's primary estate in Austin Texas or their thousand-plus acre ranch outside Missoula Montana, set along the breathtakingly-picturesque Blackfoot River.

It was this latter property that was particularly impressive to Alex, as it perfectly highlighted nature's potential soaring majesty when mostly untouched by man. And upon this pristine, sprawling land he and Henry had the freedom to fly around on ATVs and shoot down the Blackfoot upon top-of-the-line kayaks to their hearts' content. Henry's mother had even bragged that many scenes from the film *A River Runs Through It* had been shot nearby. Oddly enough, Henry's father John seemed a rather humble, down to earth individual despite his vast wealth and immense success (at least relative to what conservatives call 'success'), while his mother seemed far more pretentious; more the cliché wealthy snob, even though she'd played no direct role in accumulating the family fortune.

Alex often wondered why this was the case? Why had the immense wealth John had produced gone not to his own head but to the head of his wife whom, in word and action, seemed much more stuck-up than her husband? Why did Henry and his mother demonstrate such an air of self-importance while the man who'd brought in the money that blew air into their exaggerated identities exude no clear conceit?

Alex finally decided that it had to do with the work ethic and sense of earning by John that had endowed his wealth and possessions with a

substantial feeling of having been created, rather than received under an empty pretense of entitlement. When it's given to you it's tempting to delude yourself into believing you deserve it by virtue of divine providence or being born better or, in Henry's mother Marie's sense, having the preternatural foresight to identify and marry a future 'big winner.' Henry's father, on the other hand, hadn't built his own sense of self on such hollow ground.

John seldom slept more than four hours a night, as if ever trying to convince himself he deserved so much more because he worked so much harder. If he didn't drive himself into the ground, it seemed, he wouldn't be able to justify his fortune and his conscience would rebel against him. It was as if he was constantly engaged in an effort to prove to himself that he was worth his holdings. Henry and his mother Marie, on the other hand, possessed no such sense of earning, had not worked for the money and had no direct understanding of the difficulty John had faced in deriving the wealth.

Beneficiaries sans earning are, therefore, far more apt to take the money for granted. And, in the lack of attainment, they often feel as though they must be deserving of their position and wealth based upon, again, a mistaken notion of natural superiority, divine providence or other misleading self-deception. Their empty entitlement was a product of the fact that it took no discipline, hard work, resilience or determination to acquire their privileges. It was an extreme example of the fact that unearned value is unappreciated, psychologically corrosive and egotistically corruptive.

Alex saw Henry a few times in the years following their graduation, spending the night at his posh loft apartment in the Marina District of San Francisco after nights clubbing in the city. Henry was working for an investment company connected to the family firm his father had founded following his retirement as CFO and a significant shareholder in *Dell Computers*. Their contacts dropped off steeply after that. It had, in fact, been seven years since Alex had last heard from Henry when Henry suddenly sent him a *Facebook* message asking Alex if he wanted to meet in San Francisco again. Henry had recently divorced his wife of but a few years, a secretary that he'd met at his father's investment company in Austin, before moving back to San Francisco, seemingly disillusioned.

Alex had seen a few pictures of Henry's wedding on *Facebook* back then and had offered his congratulations via a message posted to Henry's

'wall.' And while Henry was much more reticent than he'd been in the past when the two lived as either neighbors or roommates for two of their four years at UCSB, meeting up multiple times a week for everything from weightlifting and basketball at the school gymnasium to barhopping in downtown Santa Barbara all four years, Alex suspected that Henry's wife gradually came to resent him much as Renée had.

Either that or the privileges of Henry's station hadn't been enough to stave off the sense of emptiness at the heart of the coupling. The drug use had continued along with the arrogant sense of entitlement and the futile attempt to conceal a feeling of self-contempt that he could never shake, having moved back to Austin from San Francisco to work for his father's company and never having earned the love and respect of his father or himself that might have come from successfully striking out on his own and producing something of value beyond more wealth wasted on the wealthy.

Henry had never known the profound, heart-filling satisfactions of spiritual and mental enrichment that couldn't be bought. And upon gradually coming to accept this fact, he'd come face-to-face with a sort of crisis of faith and a shaken self-identity that 'just happened' to coincide with Alex's publishing of his first book, *Time for True Democracy*. Henry read it and wondered if, just maybe, Alex could help him find a road leading to true fulfillment; towards something authentic that no luxury vehicle could transport him close to.

They met in San Francisco and spoke of Alex's spiritual, political and economic concepts, and Alex outlined his vision for his father's property. And though both men had their doubts, with Alex remembering Henry's supercilious, entitled attitude and Henry seeing Alex as intelligent but nevertheless naïvely idealistic, yet promising enough to potentially push him in the direction which his heart yearned for him to head, they decided to give it a shot. Henry would leave the pursuits of his ultra-privileged life behind and follow Alex into the fog.

## **Four: The Relativity of Opportunity**

*“You’re wrong if you think that the joy of life comes principally from human relationships. God’s placed it all around us. It’s in everything; in*

*anything that we can experience. People just need to change the way they look at those things."*

- *Into the Wild*

Along the rugged cliffs of the Mendocino County Coast of Northern California, approximately ten miles north of the small picturesque town of Mendocino that has set the stage of many a film and TV series, lies the considerably larger, more sprawling, less scenic blue-collar town of Fort Bragg. In the not so distant past it played host to the largest commercial fishing and lumber industries north of San Francisco. That is no longer the case. A combination of factors largely overlapping the two industries, including overharvesting, changing environmental conditions, the consolidation of corporate interests, evolving commercial practices and competition with other domestic and foreign suppliers have gradually reduced the activity and revenue streams generated by both trades.

The fishing business saw its stock of locally-sourced seafood severely diminished at the same time that the import of seafood from Eastern ports and international competitors soared and the number of commercial vessels fishing up and down the coast ever further from their home ports was increasing considerably. There is even evidence that warming ocean conditions pushed much of the salmon supply further north, away from Fort Bragg's waters. Meanwhile, the actively harvested sections of the inland Redwood forests were quickly losing their larger, timber-quality trees, while the untapped sections were being bought-up as investments for unspecified future extraction, and both the imports of timber from overseas and the increased demand for artificial building materials made it more difficult for local lumber operations to compete.

In 2002 Georgia Pacific closed its four-hundred-and-thirty acre milling operation situated along coastally-adjacent Main Street, decimating Fort Bragg's economy. Shortly thereafter smaller local milling operations were purchased by larger industry rivals, such as those owned by the plutocratically-emblematic Koch Brothers, then promptly closed, and the once robust, industrious municipality fell on hard times. Sinking real estate prices and climbing unemployment rates racked the once growing suburbs as the area stumbled into listlessness. A town that had long been propped up by the well-compensated blue collar careers of



the fishing and logging industries struggled to adjust to its shrunken economic status.

And while there was an attempt to pick up the economic slack by competing with the many smaller towns further south along Highway One for a share of the swarms of tourists attracted to the Pacific wilds, Fort Bragg was built for strapping industry and found itself ill-suited for reinvention into a charming, small-town beacon persuading those traversing the ruggedly handsome coast to stop and stay. Despite the city government's efforts to attract explorers and artisans (some efforts of which, like an extensive five-mile-long bluff-top trail system skirting the town's coastal border, generated some interest and enthusiasm), the town was simply not well structured for adaptation, and most of the jobs available in the restaurants, hotels and assorted meager wage-paying small establishments couldn't support the same level of consumerism or real estate values as the professions once offered by the now severely curtailed fishing and logging trades. The town was suffering the harsh effects of a steep decline, with a large contingent living off the dole.

Some eked out a destitute existence in the adjoining forest, occasionally wandering into town long-nailed, bearded and dirty, searching for the basic goods and services of survival. Many were locked into chronic drug and alcohol dependencies and wore the weathered, distressed faces of hard living. And yet, to one young writer and philosopher the woods eight miles inland called as a promise *not* of attaining the conventional bourgeois dream of wealthy affluence and material overabundance, but as a return to his purer upbringing and the possibility of creating an entirely self-sustaining community not dependent upon what he saw as an inherently unjust system of rats racing to catch the crumbs falling from the tables of the ever more exclusive, excluding few. It was, in fact, the geographical separation from the hustle and bustle that was so appealing.

His father had only the best intentions when he warned Alex that Fort Bragg was not the place to be. But Alex never bought into this, seeing such a judgment as a lack of confidence in his pursuits as a writer, a dismissal of his vision for the property and, most disagreeably, a subtle assertion that the pervasive pursuits of the society of buyers, sellers, accumulators and exploiters covetously entrenched within the flurries of economic activity was the only acceptable society in which to seek membership.

Yes, absent the type of perfectly self-sustaining property which Alex envisioned some income is necessary to survive, and a lot more is needed to be free to travel and not worry about potential future pressures and uncertainties, but dedicating the pursuits of your life to class and comfort missed the greater wealth of searching for and cultivating truth, experience and spiritual fulfillment. This wasn't to say his father was in the wrong, as he wasn't among the narrow-minded wealth-worshippers set staunchly on the political right. He was closer to the center, and he only wanted what he thought was best for his eldest son: a good income and the chance for a varied, enriching social life. But Alex's quest was different. His search led him far from sitting upon the centrist fence of America, and a great leap from the conservative side.

Yes, from the conservative perspective the forested rural property where he spent much of his joyfully active youth was not the place to be, as languishing Fort Bragg was well separated from the bustling Bay Area or the much frequented wine country far to the south and east, respectively, where the collective wherewithal made for much greater income possibilities. From a both personal and professional perspective, the dearth of pleasant weather and lucrative positions invited far more of those existing in a persistent state of struggle than it did the attractive and talented. "It's not the land of opportunity," his father admonished. "It's more the land of the down and out." The intent was to deter him from setting roots in an environment in which he'd never come to thrive.

Alex also knew that the environment was far from being ideally suited for the organic farming operation that he imagined it would one day host, seeing as the soil consisted of the rockiest clay one could imagine, presenting an extensive, perennial time commitment to compel arability through the addition of manure and compost such that plant roots could one day penetrate and extract its trapped water and nutrients.

And yet, far from deterring him, the fact that the property was removed from the land of opportunity (which really meant the ceaseless swarming of the frenzied, cutthroat competition, winner-consuming-loser, get-rich-and-buy-stuff-or-die-trying economy) *was* its appeal. Besides, Alex thought to himself, there are few greater joys than those offered by rising to meet a challenge, and he believed that if he could cultivate a fruitful landscape in the clay will have earned the ability to grow anywhere. This compelling set of qualities, the considerable challenge, the evoking of fond youthful memories exploring the region's wild wonders, the fantasy future features and layout of the land he was

forming in his mind and the allure of its seclusion, combined to pull him onto the grounds where he grew up.

From the south side of downtown Fort Bragg, just north of Safeway and CVS, you put the town at your back and cut inland across from the entrance to the defunct Georgia Pacific mill, making your way down Oak Street. As you leave the coast behind you pass a few small dive bars and a corner grocery store with Americana symbols painted across the windows indicating the vacuously self-important American supremacy so common amongst the uneducated Americans who conflate patriotism and chauvinism.

Knowledge of the world and its diverse inhabitants and cultures, knowing that every man, woman and child is exactly the same in all the ways that matter most, and that every culture has valuable characteristics, perspectives and lessons to offer, together negates the possibility of any one group of people, any one culture or nation, ever being truly supreme. Our young nation's supremacy is commercial and militaristic at best, lying in the ability to force our will upon others through the threat and application of violence and the leverage of economic might. But that ability to bully, backed by righteous pretenses pertaining to freedom and illusive democracy convincing the non-critical-thinking to fall in line and join the saber rattling ranks, is waning.

Continuing down Oak Street you pass a long series of small homes with yards of shambled neglect before Oak Street gradually gives way to larger lots. Here, the more substantial sunbathed spaces appear to compel its occupants to nurture a greater natural splendor in partnership with nature. Outsized green lawns, happy to be in the breezeway of the consistent dusk to dawn blankets of fog rolling in off the coast, are circumscribed by fruit trees and eye-catching non-native flora. As Oak Street is exhausted and becomes Sherwood Road, this gradually gives way to the native Douglas Fir, Redwood, fern, blackberry and bunch grass that has carpeted these woodlands since long before the premiere armies of the European aristocrats slaughtered the technologically outmatched native inhabitants; those seeing such natural bounty as something to be worshipped, preserved and partnered with, rather than dominated.

After passing Nottingham Court and making strides down Sherwood Road the properties begin to resemble small ranches, paying further witness to the effect that living in ample country space has on its inhabitants, encouraging a greater respect and appreciation for the

land, visible in the manicured surroundings of homes set well back from the roadway. Alex found the reference to the Robin Hood myth ironically amusing and egotistically appealing considering that his theories and convictions ran parallel with freeing people from conservative religious, political, economic and commercial concepts and their supporting constructs; with fighting everything costing humankind its greatest collective quality of life, much like the myth of a man who became a champion of the common people in his contest against earlier iterations of conservatism. Much had yet to change in the hundreds of years since the myth was conceived. For the truth of the matter is that despite all the highfalutin rhetoric they use to conceal the fact, conservatism has always been akin to parasitism.

It's the ideology of the ticks and leeches that connive and pressure the disadvantaged into falling prey to the methodologies of extracting their lifeblood. Once you see the propaganda and demagoguery, you see that the prevailing American political stand against communism and socialism has nothing to do with anything other than conserving the profits pulled from the economy by the ever more consolidated ownership class.

This remains the preeminent conservative motive precluding any form of economy granting greater power to the government and its constituents, especially when it is well structured to support the common interest rather than a nepotistic band of cronies commanding the state apparatus, as its unjust historic forms have all too commonly led to. The historical failure of states ostensibly led by ultra-left-wing economic ideologies is proof of the failure of *tyranny*; of the tyrannical regimes that have flown the communist and socialist flags, corrupting and undermining the potential to serve the people as soon as progressive ideals are betrayed, remaining merely in the form of lip service concealing a disempowerment of the people through the state through the pretenses of empowerment.

The ultra-left-wing 'enemies' of America's past don't prove that a semi-socialistic stance can't produce the best results for the vast majority, let alone do they prove that communism is 'evil' as Reagan and McCarthy and countless other conservative puppets of the super-rich have hammered into gullible American minds for generations. These failed, oppressive past regimes merely prove that any system that places too much wealth and power in too few hands will inevitably lead to the many sacrificing their greater interest for the greedy sake of the few.

This is true whether they're the hands of those that control the country through a consolidated apparatus of political power granting favors to loyalists, as in Russian, Chinese and Cuban history, or that purchase political power through the consolidation of corporate interests and the resulting profits, as in contemporary America and those 'advanced nations' following our lead. Having withdrawn to his own concealing forest, Alex believed that he had a moral imperative to spread such truths in promotion of the common and far greater interest, much like Sherwood's legendary archer.

Though suspecting that he suffered from grandiosity in the estimation of his potential, Alex nevertheless believed that he shared Robin Hood's characteristic of being compelled to act against the organizations, ideas and individuals draining the potential of the vast majority, while also taking refuge in the seclusion of a largely uninhabited wilderness, practicing the ability to fire ideological arrows into the enemies of humankind. Besides, even if some were to characterize him as suffering from delusions of grandeur, he was aware that you have to believe the delusion before it may become a reality; that, in paraphrasing a Bond villain, the difference between delusion and truth is measured only by success. Maybe, just maybe, if he could capture the possibility of the realization strongly enough in heart and mind, he could play a role in a paradigm-shift in the consideration of key cultural components. And in this fight, the wilderness was his sanctified partner and protector.

Continuing into that wilderness from Sherwood Road's inception, the inland advance moves uphill, ascending the western wall of the Noyo River canyon slowly at first, then abruptly, leaving the land of suburbia far behind and offering only the occasional driveway up to the top of the western wall of the canyon on the right. To the left that canyon expands dramatically in width and depth, every inch covered in Redwood and Douglas Fir forest and suddenly becoming so steep that any swerve to avoid the wildlife would propel you face-first into whatever tree or log lines up to lethally interrupt your headlong plummet into the gorge.

The ascending, curvy drive eventually crests at some burned-out Redwood stumps and a large grassy field to the right whereupon the road suddenly narrows before beginning its descent into the canyon. Soon the pavement gives way to dirt and the road forks, the left road moving further into the realm of the deep rural residents and the harvesting grounds of the logging companies, the right road moving more dramatically downhill toward the Noyo River below. With the dust

kicked up by your tires leaving a parched demonstration of ongoing drought interrupted by violent swings into winter tempests evidencing global warming's unbalanced extremes, you run into the river and are met by a large sign warning that these are "Private Roads – Not for General Public."

Here you've intersected a track of the long-running *Skunk Train* that winds its way through the river canyon, replacing the old logging runs with some minor freight operations supplemented by a trickle of tourists wanting a taste of what remains of the nation's untouched western wilds. Alex had traversed that track with his family many times as a youth, though not for twenty years now.

Immediately after passing over the rails the Noyo awaits, traversable over an old one-vehicle iron bridge that sees most of its traffic from the local logging companies' massive Redwood-hauling rigs and the occasional mountain bike and ATV Alex sometimes heard echoing their revving engines up the canyon. Resounding rifle blasts often followed the engines, especially on the weekends, and more so during the rut. Luckily, such fleeting interruptions of his silent seclusion were rare.

Just before passing the large metal gate demarcating the outer rim of the logging company tract is the entrance to Alex's property, recently purchased from his father at a below market rate, leaving him just enough from his first book deal to build the classical modernist home composed primarily of wood and clay harvested on-site. Through the gate the small road climbing steadily toward the property's summit is immediately cast in permanent shade from the forested canopy of looming evergreens. A minor rift borders the road on the right and hosts a tiny seasonal tributary to the Noyo, only active in the rainy season.

After any steady string of heavy fall or winter rains the tributary becomes one of the most enjoyable features of the property, inviting Alex to lay in wait of any creature that may come to bathe or rehydrate itself after its most recent round of grazing or hunting in the surrounding woods. As if tapping into the recesses of man's most primal collective memories, there's something about flowing water that simultaneously calms the nerves and enlivens the heart. Near the top of the hill the road turns sharply to the left as it passes an open grassy space on the right known to Alex as 'the landing.'

It was one of many locations where the logging companies' harvested collections used to 'land' and accumulate before being hauled to the

coastal highway and on to the milling and lumber yards of their uniformly disarticulated and distributed destinies. In the future, Alex imagined, the landing, measuring approximately five thousand square feet, would be the site of a library and clubhouse; a site that, depending upon the mood and intentions of the property's current residents and invited guests, could serve as either a place to play, socialize and let off steam, or as a quiet respite for reading and reflection. After the sharp left past the landing, you're facing west, and the splendor of the sun casting its rays through the opening forest beckons you to complete your summiting.

At the peak of the property's ascent the large open grassland pulls one out from the forest and into the warming light of day. The open grassland, spotted with the occasional clump of soaring Redwoods left over from his father's use of the property as a tree farm and sometime source of supplemental income, spills inexorably down the hill toward the river below. To both the south and the north the sunlit hill is closed off from the mostly uninhabited surrounding wilderness by Redwoods reaching hundreds of feet into the sky, the march of mankind bypassing it long ago.

In the large gaps between the smatterings of towering trees breaking up the otherwise gaping hillside, an imposing image is struck: the verdant, vertiginous western wall of the canyon, now seen from an easterly perspective. Walk into the small studio apartment his father built himself near the crest of the downward-sloping hillside, put your back to the sink and look out the window toward the western canyon wall and the image is surreal. Not being able to see the top of the fully-forested rise stretching above the window frame rendered the view fantastical, like a perfectly vertical wall of woods stretching into the clouds, closing those on Alex's property into the often violent wind tunnel formed by the river canyon stretching in from the Pacific ocean's edge eight miles away.

Alex's father had told him that one could see the sea from the top of that sheer wall of living wood, and Alex imagined someday propositioning the logging company for its acquisition. They could retain the right to log certain sections of the hillside, and he'd pay to have a road built climbing the canyon wall toward a leveled ridge and the site of a future home to be hung above the river below, to the east, while offering a hint of the ocean at the ends of one's westerly vision. He could then move between the two adjacent properties bisected by the river, both of which were perfectly positioned to harness the natural

energy granted directly and indirectly by the sun: the photons themselves, and the heat-and-pressure-driven winds that so consistently and forcefully plowed their way through the canyon.

The difference between the heat absorbed by the land stretching to the east and the frigid ocean stretching to the west constantly channeled wind through the canyon from the coast. This airstream sometimes seemed to reach hurricane proportions on the heels of winter storms, and would someday power wind turbines placed along the ridges of both properties, providing a continuous source of clean energy. Coupled with the solar panels that would one day cover every inch of southward-facing roof of every structure set upon the pair of properties, most, if not all, of the occupants' and the overall compounds' energy needs would be met.

Upon this ground where Alex spent many years of youthful exuberance turning over every stump he could find searching for critters, he dreamt of establishing a small community dedicated to organically enhancing and utilizing the soil in an ecologically-conscious, mutually-enriching program that simultaneously enabled energetic, financial and provisional self-sufficiency for its occupants. The goal was to be completely free from dependency upon and, by avoiding the patronizing of their establishments, free from supporting the exclusivity-serving systems he had come to despise, as every facet of conventional society seemed fraught with inherently unjust enterprises built for the underlying purpose of extracting value from the many and the environments in which they lived. He imagined the free, open-minded, continuous pursuit of knowledge and perspective; a compound encouraging philosophical and spiritual exploration and debate, totally absent the pressures of conservative society while in league with organic permaculture methods benefitting *all* of the land's inhabitants, not just the men and women.

When he first took-up residence in the Redwoods he sought a simple existence; one in which he could recover from his years of habitual self-destruction and read, write and think without distraction or being forced to bend to the expectations and judgments of others. At the same time he felt that obstacles like the clay soil, the fact that the property was, as of yet, mostly undeveloped, and the lowly socioeconomic status of Fort Bragg better represented reward-promising challenges and opportunities than drawbacks.



These aspects of rural existence in this locale represented, to Alex, chances to earn the rewards of personal growth and triumph rather than insurmountable problems or incontestable reasons for abandoning the visions his creative mind and huge heart couldn't help but append to the place in which he was raised. He had long ago learned that difficulty and potential gain tend to be commensurate. Little of considerable value comes easily, and is almost always won relative to the effort and difficulty required to attain it. On rare occasions, however, the greatest rewards require only the courage to fan a naturally-lit flame.

The first to join Alex on the property, not long after purchasing the land from his father and soon after their first encounter since attending high school together in Rincon Valley, an eastern province of Santa Rosa, was adorable little freckle-faced Amanda. At that time he'd only just begun discussions on the potential construction of a larger residence on the property with another friend from high school whom he'd known and been fond of since elementary school, the same school where his mother taught for over thirty years.

This friend, Ben, had taken over his father's construction company, and Alex could think of no nicer, down-to-earth guy to give his business. It would also afford them the opportunity to catch up, and perhaps renew the friendship that, like all his social attachments, had been set aside during the decade-plus stretch between his drug-addled years and his only recently abating post-addiction convalescence. For that first year on the property it was just Alex and Amanda living in the small studio apartment his father had built and lived in with his girlfriend before moving east to enjoy his retirement exploring and fishing in the Sierra Nevada Mountains he'd long had an affinity for.

The recently merged mates spent their days in the Redwoods much the way Alex had while alone, reading and drinking coffee in the mornings, dividing the afternoons between working the slowly improving garden plots and downhill orchard, or with Alex writing and Amanda painting while tempting Alex with wafts from the latest health-hampering sweets baking in the oven before passing evenings watching films while drinking wine. And the couple made love often and, far from feeling obligatory or growing trite, the act seemed to grow warmer and more enjoyable all the time as they became ever more comfortable with and able to read one-another. They were both generous lovers, and they moved into sexual concert ever more effortlessly, the always intimate

acts blending seamlessly with their mutual affection in unification of body and Spirit.

At least twice a week they would drive over the Noyo and into Fort Bragg to procure supplies, frequent a favorite café and walk the beaches, rivers and forests of one of the many coastal state parks scattered along the Western border between the Mendocino coast and the wide blue beyond. Once a month or so they would drive an hour each way into Anderson Valley to peruse any number of the dozens of wineries, sometimes continuing further east to the 101 Freeway and then south to spend the night in San Francisco to see shows like *Stomp* or *The Phantom of the Opera*, take in the latest artistic offerings displayed in the Legion of Honor, walk China Town, watch a Giants game and order drinks at some of the many atmospherically-rich hotel bars the city has to offer.

The new couple had just enough money to enjoy these occasional desserts, and not nearly enough to take them for granted. At the end of that first year with Amanda, Alex drove back into the city to meet with Henry, his former filthy-rich and psychologically-troubled college buddy, leading soon thereafter to the land's third occupant. Subtly flirtatious *Facebook* correspondence with another friend from college, Kate, brought resident number four a few months later. Before long the community was taking shape, awaiting the input of its occupants to set the stage for the emergence of the hardy landscape's boundless buried potential.

## **Five: From the Unforgiving Ground Up**

*I went to the woods because I wanted to live deliberately*

*I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life*

*To put to rout all that was not life*

*And not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived*

- *Henry David Thoreau*

Much like an imperial army simultaneously deploying ground, air and naval forces, flora exists in a perpetual war of taking and holding territory on three connected fronts: land, air and, rather than sea, subterranean. Endeavoring with all its energy to multiply across any landscape to which it is genetically suited to survive, all flora fights to fulfill the requirements it evolved to depend upon, ever aiming to be the best in its particular niche while constantly monitoring its environs for changing circumstances calling for a gradual, corresponding revision of its genetic code. If it be a sun-loving tree or plant it battles to take the surface, the highest point above and around it, and as much territory beneath it as it can. Sometimes the surface is successfully claimed only for the upstart to be overgrown and starved for light, perishing in the quest to claim its quadrant of sunlight or, if a tree, to become a part of the canopy.

On other occasions flora loses the war on another front. The seedling may successfully germinate, seize the surface and start winning the fight for the sky only to be cut down from beneath, literally undermined by a burrowing rodent or the ravenous root system expansions of competing nearby flora fighting to lay claim to the area's limited anchorings, water and nutrients. One might think that a strictly bottom-up strategy would therefore lend the best chance for triumph, but without first claiming the surface the root system cannot be, and without taking the sun the flora can't feed those roots through its photo-synthesizing foliage, and the seedling is doomed to join the interminable list of unfulfilled lives lost to the brutal competition for the sacred requisite resources of life. And even when the flora outdoes its competition, the fauna could bring about its demise, especially the one animal determined to defy the natural order.

"We sacrifice your life for greater life," Alex remarks to no one in particular as he strains to tear yet another Douglas Fir sapling from the

tenacious grip of the stubborn clay soil so as to make room for new cultivars that'll grow the produce consumed by the property's occupants; by the untamed and human animals alike. He tosses the extracted sapling toward the pile that will soon be shredded into the nutrient-rich mulch to be spread over the next trellised row of native blackberry brambles. Noticing his remark sparks a sardonic grin in a couple of his fellow occupants, he smiles slightly, shrugs his shoulders and says: "Sometimes the only path to more life is through death." For while all organic life must ultimately pay for that life with death, it is also true that some life, by virtue of its dominance and means of multiplication into new generations, prevents the creation of a greater number and variety of lives, and often a higher quality of life for those lives. And, Alex felt, that was what the Spirit evenly guided each of us toward: a greater quality value for *total* life.

Imagine being connected to and possessing an understanding of everything. As love is born of connection and understanding, imagine the perfect potency and impartiality you'd feel for every form of life were you essential to them all, even those committing evil out of a weakness made of the mental and physical need and limitation to which a force of pure energy isn't subject. Imagine a consciousness without condition of time and space; an existence not contingent upon matter. The love evoked by such perfect connectedness would be infinitely vast and unreserved. This is the inherent love and connectivity innate to the Spirit's indistinction from all of its mortal forms; the very force of creation and all existence.

As Alex continues working he considers that his words, "we sacrifice your life for greater life," seem to demonstrate a historical hallmark of human theology, as countless 'primitive' peoples before him cited the same rationale when sacrificing their own citizens to the gods in an attempt to garner favorable divine treatment in service of what they saw as the greater good of their people. "An archaic, ignorance-wrought quid pro quo that you only appear to be repeating," he tells himself. "You mean it more practically, in a way proven to serve existence in its totality."

Maintaining the open grassland within the heavily-forested ring of Redwoods, Douglas Fir, ferns and Poison Oak, among other species native to the Northern California coastal region, is a constant struggle against the natural incursions of the towering trees that gradually consume every inch of open area, like an unstoppable monocultural empire patiently and inexorably creeping to consume any terrain vainly

resisting absorption into its collective. Resistance is futile. One successfully germinating cone of seeds at a time the tallest trees on earth march into the open and claim further territory for their monopolizing dominion, overshadowing and starving any competing sun-loving rebels of water, nutrients and photosynthesized energy one umbrella of evergreen needles at a time. "You should have been born a fern," they whisper to their dying victims.

In a constant struggle for limited terrain and resources, the Redwoods are the clear champions of their particular coastal environment. Tolerant of the steady onslaught of high winds and welcoming of the blanketing fogs in their narrow native region, the great Redwoods, the oldest reaching hundreds of feet into the sky, stretch along a thin band from about a mile to fifteen miles off the ocean's edge, staying just far enough from the ocean to avoid its persistently salty, dehydrating winds, and just close enough to be consistently doused with the mist pulled in from the open ocean.

These mighty trees span that narrow band all the way from Northern California into Washington. The Redwoods' tough needles and robust, brawny roots evolved in adaptation to the nightly moisture and battering winds that wore the once rocky terrain all the way down into the most minuscule particles; particles thereafter compacted into the unforgiving clay soil common to the area. These inhospitable conditions were sufficient to imperil the majority of flora.

Many botanists even believe the tree evolved to absorb moisture directly from the fog through specially developed pores, while its needles avoided the greater surface area that made flat-leaved trees susceptible to the invasion of fungus and bacteria to which imported non-natives consistently succumbed under the persistently enveloping moisture that only the warmth of the day can wipe away. A natural coating of rot-resistant tannic acid rounded out its ideal coastal suitability.

And while their native niche is thin compared to most species across the nation, Redwoods clearly dominate their particular sector of terrestrial space in an imposing manner unduplicated by their evergreen brethren, with the possible exception of the Giant Sequoias still thriving along certain swaths of the Sierra Nevada foothills to the east. Upon Alex's thirty acres, however, the march of these Redwoods was to be resolutely stymied, for he had a vision for this hilly terrain above the Noyo River that was backed by a force even greater than that of the

Redwoods: the determined will of man. The development of this land would require that force in spades.

Walking across the ground, there's no give. It's as if the grass grew upon rock which, in some cases, it essentially had. Early in his horticultural education it seemed counterintuitive to Alex that the heaviest, most unyielding soil particles are the smallest. For when one thinks 'small,' one tends to think of weakness and fragility. But even in soil there is strength in numbers.

Paralleling his ideological convictions, Alex couldn't help but think of the clay soil as a metaphor for the power possessed by the unification and shared identity of people. 'Solidarity' seemed an apt description of this potential; made more solid by being tightly bound together. The fact that the clay particles are so numerous, similarly sized and closely aligned is what grants them their strength, as this infinitesimal structure permits those particles to bind tightly together to the point where the most compacted particles are as stout and resolute as rock.

Only by exercising considerable muscle or mechanical power and smashing those coalesced particles can the clay's binds be broken. Even then the imitation rock will divide into large clumps, refusing to fully disintegrate. It's as if they are determined to be a part of one another; indivisible, defying infiltration by all but the roots of the mightiest, heartiest and most resilient of trees and plants. Working the clay soil is like participating in a case study of endlessly enduring pressure combined with a meditation on the constancy of forever changing natural form. The clay always seems to be cycling back to the stone from which it came.

First that stone is fractured into large, coarse particulates before being gradually ground into intermediate silts, then microscopic clay composites before the water, wind, rain and roots press them almost all the way back into stone, Alex imagined. Rock to rock, dust to dust, so the ceaseless cycle goes. In the considerable challenge the clay soil represents for the would-be cultivator, it is not just a matter of that soil being so immensely difficult to dig up, plow, till or generally work with muscle power alone, but the fact that most plants find it equally challenging. For despite clay often being rich with nutrients that plants would make use of if they could, most cannot, as it requires too great a proportion of the plants' energy to penetrate the clay. And even when subterranean penetration is successful, the clay soil is so tightly tied to the nutrients that the plants have a very difficult time extracting what

they need to survive, much less thrive. A similar problem arises with the soil's steadfast ties to moisture.

It takes too long for water to drain through the tightly-packed terrain, descending so slowly and being so stringently grasped between the near inseparable layers of clay that the struggling roots are commonly caught between a rock and a dry or drowning place, facing the catch-twenty-two of either drowning in water that even gravity can't efficiently pull down into the water table or else dying of thirst, falling short of the strength needed to fight into the crevices where the water is trapped.

Working with clay, it soon becomes clear why adobe was such a widespread building material in early civilizations struggling to live upon it, and why clay is still bound into molds, mixed with binders, fired and bricked into buildings. It took Alex years just to *begin* converting the land into arable soil suitable to bring nature's potential bounty into thriving fruition. Compost and manure became indispensable commodities, calling the decomposing worms and microorganisms to their respective dinner tables so as to be recruited into vast miniature armies aimed at softening and breaking apart the earth with an endless effort man simply can't muster.

Great patience is required in allowing this army to advance to the point where cultivation is even feasible, but its owner solemnly refused to capitulate, often paying the price for playing his part in its plodding advancement. He was ever wary of the punishing scourge of Poison Oak that, in his continuous attempts to remove the native plant life to make room for edible producers, had several times accosted him so badly that his face blistered and eyes swelled near to shutting. Poison Oak is a plant that pairs well with the corporation-like entomological agents also common to the area: blood-sucking ticks. This land refused to give in.

Despite the property playing host to anything but the ideal, comfortable conditions upon which to create a thriving farming community able to sustain its occupants, Alex's personality predisposed him to see challenges where others might see dissuading dilemmas. His sentimentality for this hilly terrain rooted in the fond youthful memories of overturning logs looking for lizards, snakes and salamanders, of swimming into the cool Noyo searching for the red-bellied newt on hot summer days, of plucking and ingesting blackberries until his little tummy ached and his hands were stained purple and of running around indulging endless flights of fancy evoked in him a sense that he was destined to pay back this little slice of the forest with the



seeds of a new, abundantly diverse life. He had a vision for the property that he could not suppress, and didn't wish to. At the same time he felt that this land represented a return to a simpler, more fulfilling, long-abandoned form of existence.

When Alex was six years young his father was promoted to a position in Santa Rosa, a little over two hours' drive southeast of Fort Bragg, and their move to that significantly larger city had set him upon a far different path of personal development than if he'd remained a rural resident. Thereafter an adolescence of video games, sports and creative projects gave rise to a strong entrepreneurial streak and a drive to succeed in school in order to make due on what seemed a paramount, inescapable fact: freedom must be purchased; the freedom to have what you want, do what you want, go where you want.

Even as a youth it was apparent that all forms of freedom are for sale, not for free. It wasn't until much later that he realized that, by committing himself to this conclusion, he had fallen into the conservative trap that came with the highest of costs: reducing the overall quality of human life and the health of the planet.

Eventually Alex recognized that he had been sold the age-old imperialistic, aristocratically-conserved idea of success which, when bought into, had highly unjust repercussions involving struggling to put yourself in as select a position as possible relative to those that, poorly positioned, would be forced to enrich you in order to survive. This is the western way – the truth of bourgeois success.

But what were the costs of this version of success? What were the costs of striving to put yourself in the best possible position to leverage your time and energy to extract as much value from as many other people and places as possible in order to best increase your personal wealth through the same mechanisms acting to simultaneously reduce the quality of life of the majority from whom the value of economic productivity is absorbed by consolidating businesses?

It wasn't until he'd been pushed toward and then driven himself far down the well-worn path of perceiving one's personal worth through the narrow scope of financial accrual that Alex realized the exorbitant price of his pursuit: *with a finite supply of wealth possessable at any one time, the more one possesses the more others are dispossessed*. And in his return to his wild youthful stomping grounds he'd come full circle both geographically and in mindset, as financial wealth is paltry

compared to the wealth of quality existence, and costs far too much to life when it becomes the bottom line.

He was reminded of the saying: "After all your wanderings you shall return to the beginning, knowing the place for the first time." He saw both the property and his best, most natural place in a new light. He saw what could be, the potential that should be; he saw what he was being guided to become, and what stood in his way. And in these woods he was determined to develop the ideological and social systems granting the best possible means to pursue the greater good that the ruling elite had long sacrificed on the altar of greed, not just in America, but in the inherently oppressive, imperialist 'old world' from which our nation's premiere aristocrats hailed, lessons of their ruling elite in hand; lessons which, sadly, were ever more weeding their way into the 'emerging nations' which the lords of the old and new worlds battled to claim through their military adventurism and connected globalization.

Alex, on the other hand, sought a rich, symbiotic, harmonious relationship with nature and life in general, and he would practice those principles in all his endeavors, including his writing, his relationships and his work upon the land. He would keep the land and it would keep him, along with anyone else that might wish to add their value to the property in the same mutualistic manner. They would explore progressive ideas and entertain counter-cultural concepts not out of trendiness or revolutionary pretense, and not in an idealistic-yet-ineffectual manner which the hippie movement seemed to have devolved into, but because he knew from his own thoughts, reading, writing and theorizing that there were better ways to serve life existing outside the long-conserved box of convention.

Alex's disgust and disdain for the narrowly-serving entrenched interests and agents of the world, and the unwillingness or inability of so many people to see through and actively resist its rotten reduction of total life, was the primary motivation compelling him to carve-out a small piece of the planet for purer pursuits; pursuits that would, in the spirit of the beatniks of an earlier generation, but based upon his own progressive vision, allow him to cultivate both an ideological core and the practice of organic permaculture based upon fostering sustainable mutual benefit for *all* people and resources involved. Yet a communist he was not, as much as conservatives loved to conflate liberal progressivism and communism.

In all of his beliefs and endeavors, the individual wouldn't be pressured to conform with and share what they produced equally with everyone regardless of the value of their efforts, but would be a part of a system of *merit* in which everyone's share of the value produced by the system (beyond what was needed to sustain that system's essential functions) would be based upon the reap-what-you-sow value each person contributed to its continuity. When it came to Alex's property, the occupants' share of its fruits, literally and figuratively, would begin at an equal level baseline, and would be adjusted based upon the input and agreement of occupants when, for example, someone was putting considerably more or less time, energy and money into the property's productions and thereby warranted receipt of a greater or lesser share of its fruits. And anyone aiming to gain a greater share in the property's production from any form of investment was only able to receive that increased share upon the endorsement of the majority of its members.

This was, of course, implemented to prevent those with more money from simply buying greater control and increased shares of the production. The collective must determine that any investment was best for the whole before its attachment with strings. In this manner, all value-adding contributions to the property's production and improvement would benefit the property, the local environment through the practice of mutualistic principles of organic permaculture, the group as a whole and the individual as equally as possible, plus or minus the attention to merit.

Many a self-congratulating, self-labeled 'realist' would be disposed to denounce their communal farm as escapist; as an effort to flee a reality they can't handle. This was, of course, a condemnation meant to bolster and justify the conservative standard. To Alex the property better represented a rejection of the conventional herded, subjugating, best-life-excluding version of reality passed down through history from dynasty to dynasty, aristocracy to aristocracy.

The group's motivating force wasn't about escaping, about flying from what was too hard, but, to Alex at least, was about supporting what a progressive awareness mandated a moral imperative to disavow. For while the 'realist' bought into supporting the prevailing immoral systems and tactics as if it were an affirmation of the one and only 'reality' so as to justify their immorality, a reality that claims that man is inherently evil and covetous and that one must act accordingly and take everything they can as an acceptance of that reality, the idealist has the intelligence, courage and conviction to realize that reality is largely what

we make it, especially when it comes to human ideology and action, and that, therefore, the best course of action is to pursue the ideal; to work for the best interests of the greatest numbers, drawing ever closer to that ideal with each succeeding generation.

Alex took stock in certain truths he'd heard, and which had lodged themselves in his memory. Truths like: "The only requirement for eventually getting there is to keep heading in the right direction," and: "Societies grow great when old men plant trees whose shade they shall never see." If one were to oversimplify this ideological battle and divide it into two general sides of a spectrum, then the 'realists' stand with the weaker and far more self-serving of the two sides, looking for any justification they can find for selling out the greater potential of life; giving in to greed and following the well-worn downhill path while always erecting obstacles in front of stronger people trying to climb up that path; tricking, enticing and coercing as many others as possible to get in line behind them while working to impede any passersby progressing uphill.

The idealists, on the other hand, have the mental strength and vision to shoot for what they see as the best possible course towards the highest peak for both themselves and mankind as a whole, realizing that their own greatest satisfaction will be found in the rewards of helping others up the path of progress, and determined to climb towards its peak despite the obstacles and effort required, all while knowing full well that they're unlikely to reach or even see the summit in their lifetimes. The 'realist' is too feeble to climb, arguing that man is innately weak and wicked and will always exploit that weakness in others, honoring the dishonorable creed "The strong do what they can, the weak suffer what they must" uttered by the ancient Athenians shortly before falling from their Golden Age.

Upon his property this creed was seen as a sign of mental weakness and the egotistic, self-absorbed mental corruptibility which that weakness will, when succumbed to, eventually turn those capitulating to it into agents of evil effect. This creed of conserving imperialist traditions, of mental corruptibility and greedy, irresponsible self-centeredness, was cast-aside as an anachronism destined to fade into the historical oblivion. It would someday be seen as marking mankind *before* our evolutionary ascent. Alex knew full well the ideological bloodline from which the conservatives and conventional society hailed.

In place of the conventional cultural pursuit of accumulating, hoarding and consuming as much of the finite economic value and possessions in the world as possible, leaving everyone else with as little to live on as possible, he would accumulate experiences and create as much value for collective life to live on as possible, consuming only as much economic value as was required to truly enhance his quality of life, and never at the expense of others. In place of achieving wealth-based status as an agent of evil he'd achieve spiritual and mental status, aligning his heart and mind to become an agent of the Spirit seeking to maximize total quality of life for life as a whole.

This was Alex's 'realism:' the reality of pursuing *life's* best interests, earning the spiritual satisfactions known as love along the way. Assimilating ideological elements from the Taoists, the beatnik counter-culturalists, the revolutionaries, the organic permaculture farmers, the farm-to-table locavores, the energy efficiency low-carbon-footprint champions, the self-reliant survivalists, the cooperative communitarians, the rugged outdoorsmen, the low-waste spartan minimalists and especially the progressive philosophical seekers of the best path to the greatest good of both the individual and total life, the forest-enshrouded Sherwood Compound incorporated these worlds while being unique to itself, as all people, places and things are simultaneously special, connected to and ultimately derived from everything else, excepting the one non-derived essential thing indistinct from everything and everyone.

Labels and categorizations are inherently oversimplified and thus only ever part truths at best; they are causes of ignorance, prejudice, conflict and violence at worst. They're useful and thus provide some value in descriptions and conversations in order to differentiate between ideas and subjects, which is necessary for understanding, but it is imperative to the progress of higher-truth-seeking individuals to remember that labels and categorizations tend to produce divides and distinctions in the mind (especially in the relatively uneducated, undisciplined, unprincipled mind), which appear wider and starker than they truly are and, therefore, tend to precipitate needless division, discord and countless connected injustices.

It is of vital importance that moral men and women remember that *all* differences are relative; that they exist as a matter of degree of separation; they are *never* absolute and are *always* inferior to the degree of overlap and connectivity. Being aware of this truth always made it difficult for Alex to describe himself and, wary of the dangers of

ego-infused self-conception, made him wonder if he should. The closest he'd ever come to sensing a shared identity with any one religion was with Taoism. It isn't one of the major organized religions claiming millions to billions of adherents, but he believed this mostly to be due to the fact that it doesn't promulgate the pretense of omnipotence by which the more popular religions frighten the masses into conversion and submission, like theological gangsters extorting non-believers with hellish portents.

In Taoist theology it's 'the way' ingrained in and conveyed through nature which was, is and always will be supreme and holy, and man can gain peace, wisdom and the greatest knowledge by seeking to understand and live in harmony with this instinctively-sensed natural way. Alex's own spiritual conceptions were congruent with this belief, though he would build upon this naturalist creed with his own philosophical pursuits of Gnostic truth delving within the metaphysical nature of existence, combining principles of both science and philosophy into a discipline uniting the two traditionally separated practices as two complementing methods for seeking the same truth. This seeking came naturally to him.

Seeking root truths and universal principles was not something that he had to convince himself to conduct, but something he was innately compelled to pursue. At the same time he was naturally curious about almost everything, could not understand how people were so willing to leave so much of the world and its forces unexamined, and had an insatiable need to comprehend anything and everything he sensed had any significant value to impart. This mindset conflicted with the teachings of conventional society dictating that people should focus on one specialty in order to build the greatest possible demand for their services and thereby garner as much income, wealth and possession as they could; as if this financial and material accumulation was the best life had to offer.

Yes, being an expert also arguably means possessing the capacity to create more value for life owing to a greater specialized knowledge and cultivated capacity and potential creation of particular value, yet he felt himself an explorative, seeking artist and philosopher-poet in his heart, and found too much of the world, its perspectives and fields too intriguing to too narrowly confine his quests and have anything other than an open, liberal outlook upon education and experience. Besides, he was against the meaning of many specializations: being especially good at extraction.

For these reasons Alex naturally spurned conventional Western cultural priorities and practices and tended to gravitate, like the open-hearted hippies of his parents' generation, towards a more *spiritually*-empowering way of life reachable across the path to higher truth. Ultimately, however, this path would leave behind the quality of life costs of drug dependency seemingly centrist to the hippie and include a greater resolve and application of philosophical principles and theories of social construct which, in his experience, the average hippie was rendered well-intentioned yet ineffectual in the absence of.

The search for this way of life and path to greater truth pushed him toward social beliefs that the average person considered radical and, in the narrowly-perceived patriotism of blind, unquestioning fealty, even unpatriotic, with only a select few seeing his ideas as potentially valuable and positively revolutionary in nature. This path ran parallel to the organic gardening community and its commitment to promoting the health of the planet and the person at the same time, as the planet is the host of life and health is the basis of every individual's life experience; that which, more than all else, dictates the quality of every individual's experience of life.

The health of both the planet and the person can only be protected and promoted by consuming fresh, nutrient-dense foods free of the free radicals and artificial adulterants with which the common food supply is inundated to the detriment of all life and the planet assuring the continuity of that life. And the closer organic food is grown to its point of distribution and consumption the more quality-of-life-boosting and protecting nutrients it contains, the lower both the financial and carbon cost of its transport to the table and the less necessary the application of unnatural preservatives, with the best of all three such factors being wrought by organic home gardens producing the highest quality food for its occupants. Not to mention the fact that he saw the growing rates of depression in the West as being at least partially attributable to a nature deficiency; to an unnatural deprivation of natural immersion which the cultivator combatted by having a direct connection to their consumption.

The backyard-to-table principle was at the heart of the Sherwood property long before it began to develop into a compound; when it was just Alex writing and living and punishing himself hand-shoveling the first vegetable plots and pounding the posts of the deer-deterring fence through the resolute resistance of the rocky earth. He would capitulate to this pressure to some degree, eventually deciding he would fight the

local environment as little as possible, choosing instead more of a low-to-no-till blanketing of decomposing nutrients approach coupled with the selection and nurturing of plants best suited to the coastal environment; those fruits, vegetables and flowers possessing the resilient, hearty characteristics required to thrive in the unforgiving confluence of clay soil, high winds and consistent dusk to dawn infusions of fog. Thus he had moved towards the permaculture principles and the locally-grown league while also investing in the idea of the property sustaining itself as much as possible, producing all of its energy and most of its food on site with minimal carbon costs and almost no long-term financial cost following the purchase and installation of an extensive system of solar panels and wind turbines to take advantage of the ever-present wind sweeping up through the canyon from the coast and across their developing hilltop hideaway.

Iris, Foxglove, Trillium, Redwood Orchid and Wild Rose had earned the right to remain on the premises, demonstrating their ecological fit and right of survival. Thus, they would constitute much of the aesthetically pleasing patchwork he continued to cultivate in order to bring colorful variety to a mostly uniform monoculture of Redwood and Douglas Fir. He rewarded their strength and proliferation and they, in turn, rewarded his determination to construct a sustainable, self-sufficient space that existed in harmony with the native population.

Alex was quite taken with the notion of not having to rely upon and demand the products and services of polluting utility providers and the cancer-causing conventional food manufacturers and, more generally, of being able to deny his support of the parasitic corporations spreading their total-quality-of-life-reducing, value-consolidating-minority efforts across the world of growing materialistic consumers, exploited workers and plundered planetary environments. More and more it was these excluding interests and forces that he fought with this thought and action. It wasn't the isolation that he sought; isolation was not the motivating cause, it was an effect of his convictions. In those first years, while writing *Time for True Democracy*, isolated he most certainly was. But it was something he could handle.

Boredom made no sense to him. It seemed to be a nonsensical side effect of mental weakness and its extensions, such as poor imagination, the tendency towards self-pity and the dependency on dramatic instant sensory and social gratification offered by TV, social media, video games and the like, and happily catered to by corporations. Alex had the opposite issue: the possibilities for filling one's time are endless, and it



is far more a process of elimination than it is a difficulty of addition. Finding something worth doing is simple; deciding what *not* to do it is hard. He sensed and sometimes felt overwhelmed by the limitlessness of possibility. Every choice of action, every endeavor, outing and potential experience came with a built-in opportunity cost; a choice to sacrifice the remainder of the nearly infinite spectrum of possible experiences by limiting oneself to one never-so-simple choice.

Even without the company of other human beings the world is replete with prospects, and there is *always* something to do; a book or magazine to read, a film to watch, an idea to explore, a project to pursue, work to be done on the property and on and on. Almost every academic field, industry, phenomena and place in the world held intrigue. A document on his computer contained a running list of every book and author he came across that he believed worth reading, while another contained all the ideas for projects he hoped someday to have the time and resources to pursue, and he knew he could easily spend his entire life on either one of these lists alone.

During his horribly afflicted days of abysmal health, Alex's solitary pursuits would consume his every waking hour, with other people seldom coming to mind. But after a certain amount of time, up to a month, the truth of man being a social being bubbled up to the surface and began to overflow. Thus, when he was overwhelmed by the need for social interaction he would head into Fort Bragg proper. But even so simple and fleeting a contact as ordering coffee and procuring groceries while making small talk with the cashiers would satisfy that craving and, for another month, he could sanely retreat to a world of his own making.

Within that world he sometimes bordered on asceticism, reading and writing and consuming a low-cost diet consisting mostly of whole-grain blends of brown rice combined with black beans and Chia seeds, as this highly fibrous blend, was nevertheless nutrient dense, formed a complete protein, passed him a steady supply of energy and satiated him for hours (though he later learned it to be less than ideal in terms of its digestibility and potential of provoking inflammatory responses within the body). During one three-month period he used diet to self-demonstrate the importance of mental focus and discipline, finding that his need for food was largely a matter of routine and mental and physical conditioning.

Alex found that, by focusing his mind away from food, he could pass most of the day without a strong sense of hunger which, anywhere short of true bodily demand, only the thought of food seemed to precipitate. Intermittent fasting shrinks the stomach and conditions the mind to the point where hunger seems more of a habit than an authentic need. It is the same with sexual gratification and pleasures of all kinds, he found. They are much like ego and addiction: products of the mind that feed upon repetition of thought and action. The more you nurse the idea of them held in the mind and act upon those thoughts the more they grow in strength within the mind and body and the greater the force they exert upon one's thoughts and actions thereafter.

Of course, he also found a sense of sanity is mostly a matter of satisfaction, and he discovered that his focus, discipline and conditioning related to the pleasures of food and sex in this manner. Though offering some satisfaction by virtue of their mind-strengthening virtues, ultimately his efforts to improve his discipline and mental conditioning had limits, and he could only sustain them if able to find fulfillment elsewhere. He found it in his intellectual pursuits.

This was Alex's reality lived on the hills of the Noyo River canyon. A refusal to ever relinquish the irreplaceable value of perpetual learning and personal growth. A refusal to ever be content with the constrictive, misleading restrictions of self-classification. He, like all people, was many things at once, vacillating and overlapping and crossing over in between identities and back again: the poet, the Gnostic philosopher, the counter-cultural revolutionary, the nature worshiper, the locavore, the organic permaculture farmer, the devotee of self-reliant, low-carbon energy efficiency, the sometime ascetic and rugged ranching isolationist and, later, the roller of all these threads into a community committed to cooperatively interweaving them into an ever-stronger social fabric.

While the term 'Renaissance Man' sounds egotistical and grandiose, he was nevertheless spurred by innate spiritual and mental conditions that embedded in him the wide-ranging interests and practices associated with such a broad-minded, creative, inquisitive, liberally-educating, seeking individual. He believed that when it came to worship, it wasn't a matter of revering what's above or beyond one's self, which is a mind-controlling myth made for the purposes of possessing power *over* life, but a matter of worshiping what's sacred inside and around in order to empower oneself *through* an empowering of life.

Worship the pursuit of understanding, the mental possession of principles that serve and protect the greatest potential for one's own life and life as a whole, and the interconnectivity of existence epitomized by the shared essential self of the Spirit, the meta-energy within which we exist, upon which everything is built and from which we are inseparable. Within our own solar system this energy is concentrated in the sun that makes every form of terrestrial existence possible and around which we all revolve. In the person that greatest concentration of energy resides within the heart, followed by the brain.

By the time Amanda, then Henry, then Kate called the property home and began to fuse themselves to its metamorphosis, Alex's vision of the grounds was already nurturing the first seeds that would bask in the reverence of Ra, growing toward their fully-fledged form. The transformation was set in motion even before the arrival of the young proselytizer that would see in Alex the greatest chance to test his mettle.



## Six: Ruminations Around the Fire

*“Leslie practiced Buddhism, which, to her, was a philosophy, not an organized religion. In fact, Leslie abhorred all organized religions. To her, they were the most dangerous fairy tales ever invented, designed to elicit blind obedience and strike fear into the heart of the innocent and the uninformed.”*

- *Captain Fantastic*

Of all the subjects likely to get Alex’s blood up, religion and conservative politics are the most reliable. He understands the instinctive awareness of and drive to comprehend Spirit, a drive he’d long followed himself, and which drives everyone to varying degrees, even when their lives and pursuits appear to move the other way. Even the most famous scientist of all time, Einstein, was, rather than being driven away, drawn *nearer* to this eternal flame by virtue of work deemed by many to be antithetical to the spiritual search, at one point saying: “Everyone who is seriously interested in the pursuit of science becomes convinced that a Spirit is manifest in the laws of the universe – a Spirit vastly superior to that of man, and one in the face of which we with our modest powers must feel humble.” And yet Alex could never understand how anyone could land on any one religion or prophet as offering an exclusivity of spiritual truth.

Not long after his arrival on the property, Michael’s motivation for the visit is revealed. Imagining himself in the mold of a missionary of old, convinced of his need to righteously wade into the iniquitous, uncivilized recesses of the world in order to compel its occupants to correct their unholy ideas and habits before being lost to an eternity of torment, Michael had read Alex’s allusions to his spiritual beliefs in his recently released book of political, economic and business ideology, *Time for True Democracy*, and found himself compelled to correct Alex’s clever form of heathenism. Owing to their cunning capacity to leverage the doubt of the least faithful followers, turning them away from God and toward a lost, wandering life of endless doubt and dismay, Michael sees people such as Alex as the greatest threats to the pious life devoted to following Christ.

He refuses to let their souls go unsaved without a fight, and so takes it upon himself to be a champion of Christ by targeting and converting, or

else invalidating, the greatest enemies of Christendom. Once you've truly felt the force of God, he believes, it's incumbent upon you to use it to save those whom have yet to be so blessed. Finding Alex's self-constructed website detailing the four concepts intertwined to form what he had referred to in his book as 'The Four Cornerstones of Progress,' Michael emailed him with his desire to pay a visit under the pretense that he wanted to explore his ideas in more depth. It was planned as a day trip, but that day would lock Michael into a battle leading to a desperate crisis of faith provoking a sense of despair soon softening into the gradual embrace of a more powerful, pervasive spiritual reality than he'd ever before come near to mentalizing. He'd sensed God, yet knew God not.

And so, despite the fact that, upon his first dialogue with Alex, he was overcome with an immense reflexive surge of self-defense, believing he needed to summon every ounce of his inner strength, the totality of his faith and intellect, to overcome the evil seeder of doubt testing his faith, a man his training conditioned him to believe was thereby an agent of the Devil, for all spreaders of doubt are enemies of faith, Michael was simultaneously confounded by an instinctive sense that it was actually something of limitless value being seeded within him that he should do his best to cultivate.

This cognitive dissonance conveyed by his new opponent created an internal discomfort and intellectual conflict that he'd be unable to pacify, finding the two theologies irreconcilable. It was as if two versions of himself were facing off and, despite immediately feeling the urge to retreat into the comfort of his faith, condemn Alex as an agent of evil and flee from the property that was harboring a darkness that can't be brought into the light of faith by even the most commanding devotee of Christ, Michael was pulled by a deeper part of himself to stay on the compound following his first failed fight with the philosopher.

Not more than ten minutes after his arrival, while Alex is taking him on a tour of the steadily-developing grounds (during which Michael is feigning interest while withholding the true motivation for his visit), he finds that he can no longer hold himself back. His mass of curly black hair perfectly parted to one side is set above solemn, wide set black eyes topping off a short, stout body, all of which quiver nervously in anticipation of his impending conquest, his affectation of confident self-control preserved for the moment. But as this façade of self-assurance gives way to his anxiety, the priest-in-training launches into his opening salvo.

“Are you a religious man, Alex?,” he earnestly asks, knowing full well the answer is no.

“God dammit,” Alex immediately thinks to himself, well aware of the irony contained in the reflexive thought. He takes a few seconds to take a deep breath and summon the strength to be patient before replying:

“No. I was raised a Catholic, though not devoutly. I attended catechism school and was baptized and my family would attend church a few times a year, usually on the customary Christian holidays. But it always seemed to be compelled more by a sense of obligation than true devotion on the part of my parents, as Christianity has become the default theological position in the West that the undecided are pressured to accept. And I honestly think that the more my ability for critical thought developed and the more I studied and came to a general understanding of Christian belief and its historical application by the powers propelling its history, the more ignorant, submissive and fearfully, comfortingly conforming the general mindset of the Christian became to me and, from further study, the more disgusted I became by the unbreakable bind between religion and the worst crimes of humanity; crimes compelled by the corruptibility of man driving him to covet and consolidate wealth and power.”

“The wealthy and powerful have always cultivated tribal identities to compel people to enact their self-serving strategies, and religion has long been at the crux of such disempowering, oversimplified, prejudice-spreading, divisively-controlling identifications. Religion is inextricably intertwined with the history of empire and its tendency toward mental, if not physical, conquering and subjugating, always condescending to ‘others’ seen as beneath the converter; others who, once forced into subservient positions, are then exploited by the interests financing the ever-extending power and reach of their particular religious brand.”

“Religion is a tool in the aristocratic, dynastic toolbelt,” Alex continues, “though perhaps a tool less pulled from that belt today due to the revelations of science having somewhat shielded the more critically thinking and educated members of humanity from being hammered and refashioned by such tools. And despite the fact that every faith contains principles and select properties that are of value, including, as in Christianity, the intermittent passages from the New Testament actually sourced from Christ that’ve survived the fires of history, and despite the general ability of religion to instill a sense of community and belonging amongst its followers, *far* too high a price is paid for those

things of value. And I cannot separate either the past or the contemporary crimes or total-quality-of-life-reducing costs of religion from the value they have to offer. I'd advise reading the Bible and other religious texts for their potential to promote certain principles while maintaining a strong sense of skepticism and non-literal interpretation, else the costs are too high."

Michael isn't prepared for such a defense to his opening, and while he attempts to formulate a reprisal in his mind, Alex continues:

"Both historically and contemporarily religion's inherently divisive qualities between those of different faiths have rendered the obvious and extreme costs of violence, enslavement and subjugation. But many more subtle costs accrue to immense proportions as well, including religion's encouragement to abandon the inestimable value offered by critical thought and the truths uncovered by science and philosophy. Then there's the cost of its propensity to encourage its followers to deny personal responsibility for or understand the true causes of their actions and the actions of others, as those actions producing what is deemed 'good' are attributed to God and those producing what is deemed 'bad' are attributed to the Devil."

"Take that bumper sticker saying 'Relax, God's in charge.' It's difficult to conceive of a more disempowering, destructive idea. This rotten notion denies the power and responsibility of people's thoughts and actions and discourages them from proactively producing the best possible life for themselves and others; it dissuades them from doing anything and everything they can to better the world around them because they recede into inconsequence through fatalistically thinking 'it's not up to me, it's up to God,' discouraged from seeking and hopefully uncovering the truth that such a hierarchal separation between Spirit and life is illusory. You, me, we, *all* forms of life are finite forms of God."

"Blasphemy," Michael whispers under his breath while looking for a chance to take control of the conversation. At the same time he is dumbstruck by the Pandora's Box he senses that he may've opened. "Perhaps this man is beyond salvation," he attempts to tell himself. And while he begins to feel his footing destabilize beneath him, he compensates for Alex's wiles by assuring himself of Alex's evil nature.

"Religion attracts those of relative ignorance and rational incapacity who prefer to have someone else think for them, or who depend upon the approval of their actions outside their own heart and mind," Alex



continues. “The act of believing by faith is, as I’ve heard, ‘the purposeful suspension of critical thought.’ The very idea of faith is one of the most powerfully manipulative propagandist weapons of religion, for if they can get you to believe in faith they can take away your very reason to utilize reason and search for any true foundation of evidence or understanding to back your belief. Saying ‘you just have to have faith’ and coercing you into believing that the most worthy devotees don’t need a greater reason to believe is the equivalent of saying ‘stop seeking to understand’ while combining peer pressure, your need to fit in and be accepted, with a manipulation of your uncertainty and insecurity. It’s systematic, extremely well-rehearsed con artistry, and it’s deplorable. The fearful, gullible and uneducated are drawn to religion like a moth to a flame that burns away the greater purpose and potential of their lives; they are pulled toward religion like, ironically, a great gravitational evil concealed in robes of righteousness sucking in those most susceptible to serve and promulgate that evil; an evil crushing the opportunity to gain greater truths leading to more productive, valuable lives vanquished by its victimizing power.”

“Its adherents are encouraged *not* to think, at least not outside the thoughts they’re directed to have; they’re encouraged *not* to doubt and *not* to ask questions, as thinking, doubting, and the asking of questions together compose the most reliable pathway toward the truth and the empowerment it brings, including the power to break free from the chains of mental enslavement or to prevent those chains from ever being bound to them and holding them back in the first place. Yet all these adherents should start with what is likely the most revelatory question: *Why?* Why is this so? Why does this person or organization wish me to think and act in this way?”

“Motive is the great illuminating truth of human thought and action, the cause compelling human effects, and religious people are conditioned to ignore it for the simple reason that encouraging doubt and questioning motive would lead to a lack of faith, as truth renders blind belief obsolete. The mind-control and historical purpose of the Church exists in contradiction with this outcome. Religion cannot coexist with truth, so truth is conquered at all costs, as it sets people free of religion’s clutches. Critical thought, motive, logic, history, science, philosophy and education in general... all of these elucidating capacities, practices and disciplines offer the greatest gifts to those that work to reward themselves through them and to disseminate such gifts to others. Such gifts grant the ability to reveal the rotten core of religion

that makes it not worth the nourishing nibbles around a core which, eaten whole, ultimately sickens and subdues those that consume it.”

“Because of this,” Alex continues, “anyone not playing Snow White willingly consuming this coma-inducing core is painted as an abomination by the Church – by all religions. I mean, even the word ‘Islam’ means submission. How clear does it get? Simply submit. Bow down. Make your donations. Accept what is said without question, for the more you question the more unworthy you are of receiving the gifts of God for doubting him, for it is the irrefutable word of God not living through but existing above, beyond and over you, and to believe otherwise invites the everlasting torments of Hell.”

“I mean, I’ve heard it argued that in the context of Islam this submission definition refers to submitting to the will of God, not necessarily to mortal religious leaders, but it seems to me that if mortals are in charge of relaying that will in a way that’s relied upon by Muslims, then there’s little difference; they’re submitting to the crafters and propagators of the faith who clearly were, and remain, mortals. It is, of course, the same with Christianity and religion in general. The accepted interpreters, or ‘agents of God,’ are relied upon by the blindly faithful to direct belief, thought and action in ways that’ve never truly been altruistic, but pursuant to the power and wealth consolidation of covetous heads of state and their overlapping clan of aristocratic colluders.”

“Do you not think the ends justify the means?” Michael asks, already feeling some self-disgust at Alex’s ability to erode his certainty by any measure whatsoever. ‘Perhaps I’m not ready to be the one to cast light upon a darkness so pitch black as this,’ he tells himself. “Is it not better to move away from a miserable lack of faith by any means necessary?”

“No,” Alex replies, “the ends most certainly *don’t* justify the means, mostly because the actual ends which you allude to are not truly of value, only sold as such. It’s a bill of goods sold at *immense* cost to the conned buyer. You have to build a critical filter to avoid paying that cost. There was clearly at least one great spiritual philosopher behind the testimonials collected into the New Testament, for there are many great philosophical truths conveyed therein, many of which I’ve found in my own thinking independent of perusing the New Testament.”

“The problem is that those truths were co-opted by empire and used against the people through its organization into religion, standing in

opposition to the popular freeing and empowering purpose of those words and their philosopher. So, take the unedited principles espoused by Christ, the pre-religious-takeover spiritual philosopher, and leave the rest; leave the corruption-tainted monopolization of spirituality that condemns anyone that refutes and worships outside that monopoly, thereby producing the endlessly accumulating cost of conflict, violence and misunderstanding; leave the mind control, hierarchy and idolatry; leave the denial of logic, truth, science, personal responsibility and the like. For the 'afterlife' ends which I believe you're alluding to are illusory; a mythical fantasy."

"And the means are so revolting, the package is so rotten and misleading, that the idea that righteousness is being sold through those means is impossible; you cannot arrive at righteousness through injustice. Those means amount to evil, bullying brainwashing; the manipulation of your fear and desire for the false comfort of righteous pretense in the possession of a golden pass through the mythical pearly gates. It is an unwitting exchange of the truth and the greatest potential of yourself and the greatest value you might produce for life traded for fantasy and egotistical *self*-righteousness."

"It's the whittling away of greater, truer self until you fit into a mold making you into yet another mentally-conditioned soldier fighting to uphold the power of those selling the doctrine of denying doubt, and thereby crippling the mind and life of the gullible buyer. It is much the same way the least advantaged, educated, critical-thinking Americans are attracted to serve the evil of the greedy plutocrats controlling our false democracy in America – to serve our plutocratic republic. There is a strong overlap between the right-wing war-mongering American supremacists and the foolishly faithful, both in their victimhood and the propaganda used to victimize them. This is especially true when they are convinced to join the military."

"Our most underprivileged, least educated, easiest to manipulate young men and women are brainwashed at a young, impressionable age, typically through a previously conditioned generation, into paving the path to increase the profits of globalizing American corporate shareholders by being sold the myth that they fight for the entire nation and for freedom, democracy and Christ when they act like 'true Americans' and vote to conserve right-wing ideology. In reality they're more like pawns in a global game of geopolitical power struggle tied to international market control and natural resource extraction whose lack of education, ability, privilege and other relative disadvantages leaves

them susceptible to having their minds, bodies and often their very lives sacrificed along with the minds, bodies and lives of those that dare to resist the invasion and occupation of their homelands.”

“As with the Church and its missionaries,” Alex continues, “the soldiers of empire have long been unconsciously acting agents of aristocratic power games. They are victims of propaganda and conservative indoctrination. Such victims unwittingly perpetuate the practice of selling the greatest evils in the world wrapped in greatest good packaging topped with a star-spangled bow. I can envision evil incarnate as a nationalist deity draped in the American flag brandishing a golden cross serving as the hilt of an immense sword used to cut away the global resistance to corporate and religious profiteering and power consolidation, like a tomb raider hacking through the jungle and its native nuisances in search of buried plunder. The sad but critical-to-grasp truth is that democracy doesn’t actually exist; nor does God; not, at least, in the way ‘he’ is traditionally conceived.”

“The idea of contemporary democracy is a myth used to engender popular support for the spread of the same type of plutocratic republic running America across the rest of the planet so that the modern aristocracy and their cronies, a small band of billionaire plutocrats and their acolytes, can increase their exploitative range under the guise of righteousness granted by a show of championing Christian and democratic ideals. These mentally corrupt, self-absorbed bastards have the country by its balls. This ever more exclusive ownership class will *always* try to undermine any popular movement that fights to foster legitimate democracy and shared spiritual identity for the simple reason that popular control of government and spiritual union invites what is best for the greatest numbers, and that inclusivist interest *must*, by definition, be mutually exclusive with interests that can only be pursued by excluding the vast majority. You cannot serve the many while serving the few, as what benefits the few will always act in deprivation of many.”

Michael attempts to distill Alex’s offensive assertions: “What are you suggesting, then, that you can’t be a Christian or conservative without acting against the best interests of the majority?”

“Assuming you’re anywhere near a full-fledged member of those overlapping tribes, as opposed to, say, a sampler of their systems, that’s exactly what I’m saying,” Alex answers immediately. Anger overtakes him as, losing his level head, he adds: “This excluding, extracting

minority takes the most unjust mechanisms, everything that allows them to consolidate wealth and political power and which, in the process, drastically curtails the quality of life of the vast majority denied the value of those finite financial and political resources, and they package those mechanisms in the deceptive wrapping of righteousness, using words like 'freedom,' 'democracy' and 'justice' to sell as great a degree of modern day aristocracy made by mental slavery, economic subjugation and plutocratic political control as they can get away with! Fucking conservatives! They're living anachronisms conserving evil!"

"It's time for them and their defunct, diseased ideology to go the way of the dinosaurs; to become fossilized remains of an unevolved, archaic, unconscionable past, which, when studied, teems with opportunities to learn the very lessons they bury for their own greedy purposes. Evolve and join the progression of the species or take your place among the historical tales of villainy wherein the vast potential for life has been burned away – boiled down to a cash and control bottom line. This is what it truly means to support conservative values and their resulting policies: incinerating life!"

"A support of the unjust elements of human history that we'll inevitably progress past, you're suggesting," Michael hesitantly reiterates.

"Absolutely," Alex concurs. "Conservatism is the ideology of conserving the value system handed down by the conquerors, corrupters, subjugators and oppressors whose one inviolable interest is the consolidation of all things of value, including wealth and political power, within their hands, dropping only as much of that value as they need to down the socioeconomic ladder to those that they economically enlist to support the systems by which they accomplish that extraction and consolidation in order to maintain those systems. They manipulate the masses using Machiavellian tactics of duplicity in business and politics in order to accomplish this, publicly presenting the face of righteousness and concern for the well-being of the majority while privately acting to continually undermine that well-being, reformulating the best tactics for taking advantage of every possible disadvantage of the majority in the advancement of their one inviolable interest."

"Their goal has always been to turn the majority into an unthinking army and workforce reflexively fighting and toiling against their own self-interest by convincing the majority that their greed is just, or natural, or is the inevitable result of the 'reality' of business and the human condition, per the self-labeled 'realists.' And it tends to be the

greatest sinners who wave the biggest banners of righteousness, because they know they have to put on the biggest show of righteousness in order to convince people, including themselves. Those whom are truly righteous need no such show and tend to be quietly confident. This is never the case with the flag wavers and cross wearers, for theirs is the ideology of being opposed to change in preservation of the traditional beliefs and values threatened by legitimate morality and justice, and I think deep down they know the show they tend to make is made to compensate for this underlying moral insecurity. It reminds me the quote: 'If you can't capture the truth you try for effect.'"

"The traditional beliefs and values they espouse hail from the history of empire and aristocracy, and the result of lending one's support to uphold those values and oppose any challenge to them is certainly great evil – all the evils perpetrated by globalizing, equity-and-wealth-consolidating corporations and, in league with religion, the diminishment of mankind on all levels, turning us into blind, obedient, ignorant, fearful slaves constantly divided against one another and shackled to the heartless, immoral mechanisms made to enrich and empower commercial, political and religious dynasties ceaselessly subduing our greatest collective potential."

"Trace the links; this is a logical certainty. It's all so that the ever more vast majority of the global population, the world's working class, will conform to the conservation of the very beliefs that exclude them from enjoying their fair share of the value produced by the global economy through their efforts while polluting and degrading the planet through the careless extraction of natural resources and the destruction of anyone and anything that resists. It's all one big fucking corrupt, reprehensible mess, the weight of which cannot and will not be borne forever! And I hate to say it, Michael, but religion is right in the middle of that dirty, repulsive historical quagmire in which those that fight for just progress become stuck, struggling to pull everyone out of the swamp of *true sin*."

Alex's face goes flush for a moment, his blood boiling. He'd had versions of this conversation countless times before, and after each of them grew a little more certain of the fact that evil was made more of the conserved self-absorbed traditions and practices of the ruling elite borne into the future by succeeding aristocracies and their dynastic torch-bearers than by any other force or faction. And each time another obscuring smudge of doubt was wiped away from this ever-plainer fact the more intolerant of the arguments used to promulgate that evil Alex

became. This was the case whether those involved in his debates and discussions agreed with him or not, for through evidence, reason and logic both agreement and disagreement inevitably reaffirmed the same interconnected truths. Principles may be proven both forwards and backwards, by building or by breaking down. Alex pauses while attempting to calm himself, and Michael can clearly see at this point that he is beyond his ability to convert. At the same time Michael feels as if he is beginning to absorb some of the doubters' sentiments, and wonders if... But those doubts cannot be entertained, and the waning yet still overruling indoctrination surges back up: "You must be saved!," he suddenly shouts at the heathen.

Alex shakes his head with an expression of disheartening dismay at yet another example of the overwhelming challenge of rooting-out that which is so deeply implanted from the impressionable youngsters' first days of conceptual thought and communication; that which requires an immeasurably patient, persistent tact and perfection of conveyance to disentangle from the victim's mind. The truth is most certainly not enough; it must be clearly possessed in the mind of the victim before they can even conceive of their victimhood. Recognizing victimhood in others is worth little unless and until they see it themselves.

As with countless others past and present, religion has an iron-clad hold on Michael's need and weakness, having so weaseled its way into his brain that it controls his thoughts and plays upon his emotions like an instrument playing its own self-serving song. Alex thinks to himself: "He can't even hear inside the bubble. Nothing gets through. He isn't even aware the bubble exists. Not even when you show it to him. He must pop it himself; you can't do it for him. You can only show him where to uncover the pin within himself."

Alex takes a deep breath, calmly approaches his visitor and, placing his hands on his shoulders and looking him dead in the eye, says: "Do you know where the Holy Grail lies?" Before Michael can answer Alex stops him, and points at his heart. "It is *here* that God speaks to us, what I call Spirit; the timeless indivisible self shared by all. You combine its guidance with the reasoning, logical mind and the elucidation of science to find the greatest salvation; a salvation which religion prevents. Thus, a person cannot be saved *by* religion. A person can only be saved *from* religion."

Michael lowers his head and mumbles unintelligibly. Alex continues: "A person must be saved from religion in the same way that anyone unable

or unwilling to save themselves must be shown the way to some of the strength to rescue themselves from *any* institution which attempts to take possession of their thoughts and actions and use them against them by manipulating their fear, desire, ignorance and general weakness for the self-absorbed aims of a narrow band of beneficiaries, and to the clear detriment of the vast majority that support those aims. Religion represents the attempt to turn spirituality into an intangible commodity before convincing the gullible they possess an absolute need to buy it; it's an attempt to commoditize the everlasting; it's *always* been an enterprise controlled by *people* for corrupt, entirely earth-bound purposes."

Michael shifts slightly in his stance such that Alex's eye catches the rays of the sun shooting through the canopy of Redwoods before reflecting off of the gleaming, golden cross hanging from Michael's neck. Alex glances down at the cross, reflexively scowls with contempt and continues:

"The irony of religion and its followers never ceases to amaze or disturb me. The self-affirming bastion of righteousness that spreads and fans the flames of conflict, corruption, warfare, ignorance, subjugation and irresponsibility – the demon concealed in a cloak of goodness, its followers wearing expensive golden symbols that contradict the core teachings of the very spiritual philosopher that they claim to follow and represent on Earth. Christ's foremost lesson, a lesson that stands in stark, contrasting contradiction to the empires that have hijacked his cause, was that wealth corrupts and degrades humankind, and that all those that endeavor to accumulate as much of it as possible and to use it as leverage to gain power over others are the enemy of the good."

"And I'm sorry, but here you are, Michael, adorning an expensive gold cross around your neck, unknowingly mocking the man you claim to revere and speak for. A man whom, by the way, was aware that he was mortal, that spoke of everyone, including himself, as being equal members of a spiritual brotherhood, as being the sons and daughters of God, and who was only made immortal and turned into the pathway to heaven by Emperor Constantine and the Eastern Roman Empire in order to take control of the spiritual movement Christ started and which Constantine repurposed."

"What you mean?," Michael questions while secretly wishing not to know.



“The Council of Nicaea,” Alex replies. “The top dogs of Constantine’s recently minted religious elite gathered to dictate the official Christian creed and direct its course for their purposes. They edited out anything threatening the notion of Christ’s divinity and attributed countless mythological powers to him in order to portray him as a god and thereby consolidate the Church’s control of those easily influenced by the peer pressure of his flock and fearful of the afterlife. The myths they injected weren’t even original, but were taken from a rich history of preceding mythologies. Those myths can and have been traced back through the Roman Empire and Ancient Greece all the way to the Egyptian and Assyrian Empires that flourished thousands of years before the birth of Christ and the creation of Christianity, and they can all, ironically, be linked to pagan worship and the use by ancient societies of astrology to track and make sense of the seasons. The virgin birth, the performance of miracles, the baptizing in the river, the twelve disciples, the resurrection, being born on December twenty-fifth, most of his monikers, including ‘The Savior, The Light, The Truth, The Shepherd, The Messiah,’ his being a carpenter...”

“All of these attributes and designations derived from previous mythologies and the anthropomorphizing of astrology; even good versus evil and the ‘Son of God,’ being the sun chasing away darkness. Watch the film *Zeitgeist* or Bill Maher’s *Religulous*. Emperor Augustus, Caesar’s nephew and the inheritor of his mantle following the battle to succeed him, was calling himself ‘The Son of God’ around the time Christ was born into the Eastern Roman province of Judea. All this evidence supports the fact that the New Testament was filled with unoriginal, recognizable divine references for the purposes of Empire; in order to supplant the preceding mythologies and create the case that Christ was divine so that from thenceforth those that spoke on his behalf, as leaders of the Church, spoke on behalf *not* of a mere spiritual philosopher, but of the one God.”

“Christ was killed to atone for mankind’s original and continuing sin,” Michael interjects with a faint, self-aware air of futility in his voice.

“The historical record and the long-standing tactics and control measures of Empire clearly support a different interpretation,” Alex replies heavily, staring up through the Redwood canopy as the two meander beneath. “That is, that the notion of Christ dying to atone for the sin of mankind was inserted into the canon and narrative history of Christianity because it suited the empire’s need for a divinely-sourced icon through which they may subjugate and control the minds of

Christian adherents through manifold means of manipulation. In this case, that manipulation is based upon what you just mentioned: instilling the guilt of our being members of the inherently sinful human race precipitating the death of the conveniently one-and-only God-sent savior. Atop this enforced guilt was piled the fear of eternal damnation for those that don't accept and demonstrate penitence and obedience in the face of this supposed crime inherited by all humanity. The truth is far more straightforward: imperial powers kill those that threaten their imperiousness. Christ was killed because he preached against the reverence of wealth and the exploitation of the common people by the empire and its local magistrates."

"In direct threat to the hierarchal system of societal control, Christ preached that we are equals in the eyes of God, and that those that create inequality are evil. Therefore, as his popularity grew his preaching fomented insurrectionist sentiment in the province which, in turn, threatened the power structure. He was, in essence, killed for the same reason most progressive leaders are killed: he threatened the greed and power of the greedily powerful. It's that simple. But that's obviously not where his particular story ends."

"For his messages had so resonated with the people, especially the idea that spiritual wealth superseded and was far greater than financial wealth, and that the latter should be eschewed both because its pursuit becomes an obsession that diminishes the quality of existence of the people as a whole, and so that it didn't distract one's commitment to accruing spiritual wealth, that his legend and lessons persisted after his death, and his words and principles were posthumously documented in many different third-person testimonies, or 'testaments,' of his life and lessons. So the same time as the Western Roman Empire, centered in Rome, began to unravel, Christianity was overtaking Roman mythology, an edit of Greek mythology, along with the other religions prevalent in the region, like Judaism, of which Christianity was once considered a sect. This occurred as Eastern Rome was set to survive the Western Roman downfall and become the dominant regional force."

"Moreover," Alex goes on, "the Jewish belief system from which Christ ascended was monotheistic, making it a smart strategic choice to adopt for imperial purposes. It's easier to control people by claiming to speak for one deity, as polytheism gives rise to the possibility of people believing in divine infighting and, thus, divided loyalties amongst its harder-to-direct followers. So, cannily, Constantine took Christianity under his twisted wing, adopting it as the official religion of his realm."

He then subtly, shrewdly turned Christ's messages of mass appeal *against* the very people, the non-ruling majority, whom those messages were *meant* to empower and protect. Instead, those messages were edited to keep the non-ownership class trapped in a state of subservience which they remain embroiled in today, despite the progress pushed upon the race over the centuries by progressive champions. Christ's messages now serve the enemy: the wealth-worshipping greedy that benefit from preventing populist progress. For the colossal irony is that, were Christ to preach in disguise today, Christians would call him a communist and cast him out."

"So you think that the Eastern Roman Emperor dreamt-up Heaven and Hell?," Michael wonders aloud.

"No, I think that would be giving Constantine and his cronies too much credit," Alex replies. "The starkly divided two-sided afterlife is an idea that goes back to at least the Zeus-versus-Hades dichotomy. It was assimilated so that, through Christ's manufactured divinity, the Church would serve as the sole arbiter of people's posthumous destiny. The afterlife is but one tool in the belt of those that have long built themselves into positions of popular control using the Church and its monopolized claims on spirituality and morality as a pretext. The concept of original sin was fused with Christ's execution and the Church's mind-controlling power through the preaching that *everyone* is inherently evil, that our shared innate evil and inescapable sinful nature cost 'The Savior' his life and that we must therefore patronize the Church and do penance so as to save our souls."

"Mankind being inherently evil also suits the aristocratic ownership class in that it provides a justification for self-centeredness in all matters, including business. This is the heart of the so-called 'realist' argument: knowing and acting in accordance with the fact that mankind is inherently evil and will always do anything it can to take advantage of the disadvantaged is simply being 'realistic.' But perhaps we'll come back to that, because I don't want to wander too far away from our current subject matter: how religion is historically derived from the motivation to control people for the purposes of wealth and power consolidation."

"As another example of this that comes to mind, the primary reason that sexual congress outside of marriage and for the purposes of pleasure is forbidden by the Church, even when backed by the spiritual connectivity of love that *truly* sanctifies sex, is that it imperils the

Christian Empires' long-employed strategy of using Church authority to grant marriages and oversee the family unit as a means of popular control; a means of compelling people to pursue conservative interests by inextricably tying them to increasing the means and standing of the family unit which, in turn, supports the imperial ideology of wealth worship and value extraction allowing the Church and its governing empires and aristocracies, through control of commerce, to absorb the lion's share."

"Many more artifices were crafted by Constantine and his acolytes as well," Alex continues, "all in order to bend the masses to their greedy will, constraining and diverting the minds and endeavors of the people in ways that enriched and empowered the Eastern Roman Empire's ruling and parasitically-extracting classes, a tradition adopted by most succeeding empires from Europe across the Atlantic into the modern day American Empire. And any testament to Christ's life, any gospel, individual or group that impeded this avaricious imperial purpose was instantly condemned as evil, discredited and put to flame. Because of this the truest books on the life and lessons of Christ were burned, often along with the authors and those that attempted to copy, spread, read or breathe the slightest bit of life into them. Seeking, seeing and seeding the truth was perilous, and still is, because the truth sets us free from the binds by which we've always been made to unjustly serve the self-centered will of masters."

"So you think what, that Christ was just a man made to be the one son of God for imperial purposes?," Michael asks, feeling uneasy upon realizing that his resistance to this non-believer is waning; that he's interested.

"Saying 'just a man' and 'son of God' is actually saying the same thing," Alex replies. "It's the hierarchal divide keeping us in an artificially-imposed position of subservient subjugation *below* God and the falsely-proclaimed representatives of God on Earth that's false. We are placed in that position to keep us under control and force us to do the will of the ruling factions that have always pulled the strings of the Church, much as they pull the strings of our counterfeit democracy. They were never the true representatives of God, just as are so-called political representatives have never truly been representatives of the people, only proclaiming to be posted in such positions in order to increase their own power, capital and control along with that of those whom bankroll their political careers."

“Especially on the right side of the political spectrum, the idea of American democracy is there to placate, pacify and keep us under control, guided towards the greedy ends of the ownership class – the select class of people accruing the vast majority of power and wealth mostly because we are kept in blind, believing subjugation. And similar to the conventional wisdom dictating that the unjustly existing, purposefully-imposed separation between American ‘democracy’ and the people *doesn’t* exist, a perpetuated falsehood existing as a great detriment to the best interests of the *vast* majority, the separation between God and life, all forms of life, is a falsehood that, when believed, denies the truest identity and best interests of the believer. The truth in these two critical respects is the reverse: there *is* a massive separation between the people and our so-called popular rule and *no* separation between God and life.”

“God isn’t separate from or above us at all. *We are God*. We’re individualized material manifestations of the Spirit. We’re not merely ‘implements of the Lord,’ a mind-controlling concept I’ve heard many times. *We are* the Lord. We lord over ourselves. When we serve the Spirit and any of its manifestations we serve ourselves, because an absolute distinction between it, he, she, we, us, doesn’t truly exist. We’re only made to feel as though we are lowly tools in God’s belt for the same reason we are kept as tools in the belt of the excluding class: greed. Though, of course, we’re also kept there due to the same qualities leading to evil: ignorance and mental limitation. It’s difficult to grasp the concept and implications of perfect indivisibility; of one all-encompassing entity.”

“At the same time as we exist as individual bodies and minds the eternal energy source of Spirit is everywhere and everything, conducting its will through our hearts, the center of our individualized energy streams: telling us that we should maximize our own existences and fight to create the highest quality existence for all individualized manifestations, starting with cultivating connections with those manifestations, experienced in our energetic core as ‘love.’ This is the goal of the Spirit’s guidance: maximize total life connectivity and experience.”

“The Spirit’s goal isn’t to use us to satisfy ends such as those alluded to in the Old Testament of a fickle, jealous, wrathful deity picking out one group of people to prevail and rule over the only lands that are sacred. These are false, small, ugly, narrowly tribal-minded ideas. We are *all* the focus of the Spirit’s will as versions of the Spirit manifested into matter. *All* lands are holy. *All* life is sacred. And I think Christ understood this. He

was extraordinary in his mind's receptivity to the messages of the heart. He understood that there is no true subordination or separation between Spirit and lifeform."

"What was he then...?," Michael rather sheepishly inquires, his pride gradually drifting away. "How would you categorize him?"

"I believe that he was essentially a philosopher," Alex responds. "He was a philosopher offering deep spiritual insight into progressive moral principles along the lines of serving and maximizing life that resonated with the masses and ran him aground of those whose greedy, consolidating interests conflicted with his fully inclusive convictions, just as they would today. He was thereby also deeply driven and confident that what he was driving for was correct, and by his moxie, oratory skills, spiritual intelligence and, I would guess, his charm and perhaps good looks as well, he rallied people to his cause in such a way that his mounting power with the masses of Israel became a threat to the ruling Roman delegates in power in his region, as I've said."

"Those delegates therefore had him crucified as most undesirables were then executed, possibly with the sanction of the Jews whose beliefs he'd renounced and called into question. The memory and testaments of his words and lessons were so powerful, however, that they and his growing following could not be crushed with his mortal demise and continued to build throughout the decline of the Western Roman Empire until Constantine and the elites of his empire decided: if you can't beat them, *be* them."

"They calculated that more power would be produced by adopting and claiming dominion over Christ's life and lessons than by repudiating that life and resisting those lessons, so they set themselves up as champions of his movement in such a way as to best make use of that movement for their imperial purposes of popular control. This was the motive of the mythological aspects appended to the narrative of Christ's life; the motive by which Constantine amended Christ's story and lessons and edited and added elements that gave him greater control of the growing group of the young religion's followers. Hence Heaven and Christ's resurrection and immortal nature and official portrayal as separate from humanity as the one and only son of God leading to Christian idolatry and the hierarchy of the Church and their adjudication of eternal salvation or damnation."

“Having this determining, terror-instilling power over those inclined to fall for their demagogic narrative gave the rulers of that Empire massive power over the people through their assigned delegates. Like the Koch brothers pulling the political strings of our ‘democratic representatives’ today, these were aristocrats waving the flag of righteousness over the bastions of massive quality-of-life-decimating evil. And, as I said, any and all accounts of Christ’s words and lessons that conflicted with these imperial ends were declared false blasphemy spewed by agents of the Devil, and their purveyors were hunted and burned along with their works, which is why so few of the more accurate testaments of Christ now known as the ‘Gnostic Gospels’ survived the fires of history. The true agents of evil flying the false banner of righteousness in order to rally the manipulated masses worked to eradicate such testaments, just as dictatorships censor and seek to destroy any works of art and literature which might impassion the people and call such methods and results of consolidated social, economic and political control into question.”

Now grasping his golden pendant in his hand as if the symbol of The Savior might act as a conductor of divine strength, Michael is beginning to feel agitated. A curious confusion of dejection and intrigue are coming together in his mind. “Perhaps,” he thinks to himself, “this misled man can, at the very least, teach me how to become a force in the Church. If I can understand his arguments I can use them to overcome the heathens and bring more people into the heavenly fold.” But even as he has this thought he fights back a creeping doubt of his own that Alex’s arguments make a great deal of sense. This resisted semi-conscious sense, seeping up and co-mingling with his rational mind from the spiritual gateway of his heart, is beginning to erode his self-righteous underpinnings.

“You said something a second ago...” Michael pipes up after a few seconds of being wracked by internal conflict. “You said the golden cross is ironic because of its contrast with Christ’s lessons. I get that part, but you also said that it fans the flames of conflict. What did you mean?”

Alex feels encouraged at this sparking of his visitors’ curiosity. “Am I beginning to pierce the bubble?,” he wonders before responding: “Right. Yes. I have the habit of sometimes having more than one idea in my head at a time, and I therefore tend to leave some of them incomplete when I move with the prevailing mental wind. It reoccurs often in my work and discussions. I find I never suffer from a shortage of

thoughts or ideas, but very often I suffer from an inability to fully flesh-out a thought or idea or complete a project before being pushed away by another thought, idea or project. Anyway, yes, the cross symbolizing the fanned flames of conflict... What I mean is that religion errs by imagining specifics and then holding them up as if they are the one and only truth or representation of something as profound and perfectly non-specific as spirituality. I mean, the use of labels and symbols is inevitable as a means of referring to and distinguishing between different ideas, but when they are used as though they represent an absolute, as the be all end all, they represent, to me at least, the deluding and continued conflict caused by their bearers.”

“This is especially true, again, when it comes to the most inclusive, limitless subject of them all: spirituality. There can be no one right, specific symbol justifiably used in exclusion to all others, as it is clear to me that the truest spiritual insight, understanding and framework must be inherently non-specific and entirely inclusive. I myself use a symbol of four overlapping infinity signs to represent my own system of beliefs, but I don’t conceive of that symbol as representing anything other than the ideas themselves; it is not the *one* symbol, for there can never be one perfect representation of anything, really, especially of that thing which is inextricably intertwined with all things: what you call God and I call Spirit.”

“That said, however,” Alex continues, “religious individuals aren’t wrong in their search for God, and their sensing and seeking to comprehend the source of life. On this matter, in fact, on there being a source, on our existence not being some statistical anomaly made of accident or evolutionary mutation, I am in total agreement. I believe such sense of apparent accident to be precisely that: *appearance*. An illusion based upon a limitation of information, understanding, mental and sensory capacity and the theoretical framework required to eradicate that illusion. I also concur with a great many of the values and principles taught by many religions, the best of which are held in common.”

“The greatest, most illuminating and empowering truths are universal, after all – perfectly applicable. Where religions err is, as in their symbolism, idolatry and hierarchical structures, in their imposition of something limited when it comes to the unlimited Spirit; and their conception of God as something specific and exclusionary; as fitting into man-made constraints historically fostered for imperial purposes and the purpose of providing comfort in the face of ignorance and



uncertainty; filling gaps with specific conceptions without the slightest shred of reason, logic or evidence.”

“All of these artificially-imposed constraints are antithetical to the perfectly pervasive nature of the Spirit: it is entirely inclusive and encompasses every form of life and thing in existence and, indeed, in all of spacetime, and therefore takes no one shape, but infinite shapes; shapes existing as each of us, the manifestations of its infinite formation of energy into matter constantly evolving in adaptation to the natural world through which it exists and compels all of itself to evolve for the purposes of maximizing our existence across the entirety of our forms of life. The Spirit isn’t separate from us, it’s the essential, universally-shared Self common to every life in which it’s housed.”

“I’m a *deeply* spiritual person, but my spirituality is based upon reason – upon the confluence of science, reason, logic and instinctive awareness. And nowhere in my quest for spiritual truth can I find any reason why any religion is deserving of a monopoly status. I find this attempted monopolization absurdly illogical at best, a disgustingly reprehensible cause of indignation at worst. If labels and symbols are applied to spirituality they should be seen as markers only; as signposts pointing us towards ideas, not restrictive specifics claiming absolute truth in places that are absolutely unspecifiable.”

“So you are offended when people pick sides and display their emblems?,” Michael probes, looking for a chink in the armor.

“Again, I understand that when a certain spiritual theory is espoused it is likely to be named in order to distinguish it from other theories,” Alex replies. “And perhaps it is natural for a symbol to be affixed to that name. The idea of balancing four fundamental societal systems to serve infinite forms of life comes out in my own created symbolism, as I said, but at the same time I know that is not and can never be the one and only correct designation. The same can be said for whatever you call the Spirit. Its name is our names; whatever designation we give to person, place and thing.”

“And any attempt to impose any one name or symbol, any one religion, will inevitably run aground of other attempts to do so, and the result will always be egotistic contempt and, often, violence. Specificity of person, place and thing is ultimately an illusion, as it’s all actually one thing, even when the egotistic inevitability of self-perception convinces us that who we are is more important than who others are. For in our

core there is no 'other.' This will always be a major point of departure between religion and spirituality. Spirituality makes no specific claims or impositions. It doesn't attempt to gain or hold territory or raise a flag."

"There is no one person, place or thing to exalt and hold above others so that others can be below and forced to kowtow to them when power is more in the control of one side of any artificially-imposed line. And as soon as any one symbol and hierarchical system and set of idols, like saints, pontiffs and prophets, are put forth as being the only ones possessing the divine right to speak on behalf of the Spirit, and that self-important, delusional right is used as justification in the fight to gain ground in the competition with other theocracies by sending its most zealous messengers out in aggressive proselytizing of atheists, agnostics or those of 'lesser faiths,' that spirituality has crossed the line into the man-made, corrupted realm of religion, and conflicts and struggles for wealth and power will inevitably follow. This is the case in *any* of man's endeavors tied to organizations whose purpose is to put themselves in the position to gain as great an advantage over others as possible. For while persuading people to realize everyone's shared Self will always be an invaluable practice, persuasion for power and profit always costs life."

"Interesting," Michael permits. "So you believe in God but are afraid to name him," Michael adds, attempting to provoke an emotional reaction.

Alex smiles. His visitor is attempting to goad him into falling prey to the very egotistical errors of which he speaks. "Well, first off, I think it largely goes without saying that what you call God and I call Spirit isn't a *man*," Alex coolly replies. "Sexuality is born of the need for organic beings to materially reproduce. The energetic Spirit doesn't directly reproduce through sex. And I don't want to name the Spirit beyond calling it the Spirit, because the Spirit is as general as I can conjure the compelling force of life; it connotes thoughts of spirituality in as universal a context as I can imagine."

"To assign a more specific pronoun would be ridiculous, because there is no name; at least no name that fits. The name would be unviable; a designation rendered entirely off point by its very attempt at being more pointed. How do you erect a signpost pointing to everyone and everywhere? For all words in all languages have roots in connotations, and all those roots in connotations take the name to a place that pulls it away from other places. And what I call the Spirit excludes nothing and

includes everything. It fits everywhere, and attempting to pull it in one direction would be irrational, for it must equally encompass all direction.”

“So in your opinion, then, God is what?,” Michael asks. “Some force that can’t be named and has no sexuality and passes out souls and guides us and indeed *is* us at our deepest, most essential level but, despite being all-powerful, doesn’t force us through life?”

“Well, no, not exactly,” Alex responds. “The idea of the soul is to me incorrect, and likely derived from the same mind-controlling tactics of religious indoctrination as much of the official doctrine of Christian theology. It’s a part of the imperial edition of Christian theology that survived the historical shunning and destruction of the unedited testaments of the life and lessons of Christ; of what’re commonly known as the Gnostic Gospels.”

“Both my analysis and my instinctive spiritual awareness tell me that rather than us all having separated, individual souls, we’re all derived from and, within our unique organic constructs, play host to the same ‘soul’ which, again, I call Spirit. This Spirit is the eternal, indestructible energy that gave birth to material existence; that brought about the time, space and matter that, under hospitable conditions, constitutes the requisites of semi-autonomous organic life, of which the Spirit is the essential composing and encompassing element.”

“What I call the Spirit is the one and only pure, original energy that expanded its timeless, non-spatial, non-material existence into spacetime and matter for the purposes of infinite self-variation of existential perspective. So whereas this existence, all existence, at one point included only the singular energetic entity non-dependent upon space, time or matter, it created those facets of itself for infinite form and perspective of experience, essentially choosing to become dependent upon spacetime and matter for the sake of limitless life experience.”

“This choice, this self-imposed dependency on spacetime and matter, precludes its capacity, *our* capacity, for omnipotence. Spirit is the centermost facet of everything in existence but, when it went from singularity to limitless plurality, we gave up omnipotence, choosing instead to spread our power across an infinite variety of forms and phenomena. The Spirit is the essential Self of every life; the Self which *everyone* has in common.”

“But when the Spirit transformed itself from only energy into the space, time and matter that energy now makes up, it traded its singularity for an infinity of time, space and form. And over billions of years these forces commingled and gradually evolved into the physical and the mental to form what I call the Trinity of Self. That Trinity consists of the unity of the physical, mental and spiritual self making-up every form of animal life, with the physical and mental self being unique and the spiritual self being perfectly universal. The mind is what bridges the gap; the existence of consciousness; that which gives rise to the awareness of existence and the illusion of individuality.”

“I believe that the mind is actually a two-way bridge receiving and translating messages from the Spirit, the essential energy most condensed in the biological being in the heart and the brain. The thoughts of the mind cross the other way as well, influencing the body and the Spirit. The relationship between these three parts of the Trinity of Self determines the existential foundation of every individualization.”

“The individualization is an interdependent relationship, for in order for the Spirit to exist as infinite possible material manifestations of its energy you need spacetime and matter, the form and room in which individualized existence is permitted to exist and have its experiences. Without spacetime and matter you cannot have the infinite forms of one being, the limitless plurality of one Self, only a singularity, the one being existing in its one form with nothing to permit or measure a plurality of experiences by.”

“The mind stands between these two things; between the singularity and infinite plurality. It receives messages from pure energetic consciousness existing irrelative to spacetime and matter, and from the body existing relative to spacetime and matter. The mind stands between these dimensions; it is the link between the everlasting and the finite forms of that everlasting, and the one informs the other. The mind is guided by both, and uses both to pursue what it perceives as the individualization’s, and, through the heart, the Spirit’s best interests.”

“So how does the soul fit into this, exactly?,” Michael earnestly inquires.

“Again,” Alex replies, “when you say ‘soul’ I think Spirit; the one truest, indivisible being. That is, we are all, every one of us, manifestations of the same pure, original spiritual energy. That energy is not separable

into different souls. This separation of souls is a man-made myth propagated through theologies serving two primary purposes: first, to explain phenomena that seems beyond us, which is less and less necessary as science advances; secondly, to keep us in our place, dependent upon those claiming to interpret God's will to serve their greed, egos and need to remain in control of the to-be-directed masses, which is a less and less sustainable pursuit as mankind evolves towards its greatest potential."

"So... there is no one soul in each of our keeping, but one soul shared by all," Michael states half-questioningly, turning the idea over in his mind.

"The Church has always sold the idea of the soul for the same reason it sells most of its ideas: because those that buy into them fall under their control," Alex responds. "It is the same with business, advertising, propaganda, psychological manipulation... all the means which mankind attempts to control its members for the benefit of those selling the false idea. In this case, when you begin to truly believe you have your own soul that must be saved in order for you, as a distinct entity separate from all others, to avoid passing into an eternity of torturous damnation, and that they possess the only power to save you from this torment, they can get you to do just about anything."

"It's simple fear-based motivation. But you are not separate from but interconnected with and indistinct from everything, especially spiritually, for the essential energy source is the core component of all things. There's nothing that it's not the core facet of. As an individualized manifestation of this indivisibly pure conscious energy you possess a *relative* separation in body and mind, but never an *absolute* separation; your body is made of energy and is thus inseparable from the irreducible spiritual energy composing and providing the existential spacetime and material framework for all, and your mind, your individualized consciousness made of the brain's electro-chemical conductions, is the bridge between your physical self and spiritual Self, aware of and interpreting the senses of that physical form, the body and brain, along with the guidance of the Spirit of which all is inseparable."

"Spirit is the indivisible essence of all things and, therefore, you cannot possess a distinct essence belonging only to you, only a perfectly indistinct essence belonging to all things, including all lifeforms. The only truth to the idea of the soul is that the essential spiritual energy composing each organic form is relatively distributed within the

existential framework of spacetime and matter. It's not an absolute separation, only a relative distribution and condensing of energy through the continuum of spacetime, all of which exists within the Spirit encompassing it all. Science simply provides tools for explaining this relative distribution and the resulting dynamics and phenomena. From the standpoint of organic life, the measurable energetic fields emanating from our brains and especially our hearts evidences the locales relative to us with the highest spiritual concentrations. Relative to the degree to which you're physically separated from everything else in spacetime as a unique materialized form of the one being, your heart is the focal point of your individualized self; it contains the greatest concentration of your individualized, materialized energy in the spacetime in which each of us exists."

"In this sense," Alex continues, "your 'soul' can be said to be the greatest localization of the Spirit within your material form. But even if you consider this a 'soul,' it's *still* not the soul as traditionally theologically conceptualized, for it's not separate from the rest of the Spirit, because the Spirit is the source of and encompasses all spacetime and matter and cannot be destroyed or divided from it. The absolute separation of that energy into individually owned and controlled souls is fiction; a byproduct of science's limited capacity to illuminate combined with the history of religious propaganda."

"Essentially it's ignorance combined with a con; the use of the same deceit and manipulation you see in commercials and politics. It is, in fact, impossible to separate the history of religion from con artistry. Religion can be said to be the longest-running con there is, fitting perfectly within the mind control modus operandi of empire. They convince you that you are suffering from a fantasy affliction, such as being born into original sin and slated to endure infinite suffering, so that they can sell you the cure. But in reality, what they're selling is snake oil. For there's no true affliction outside of that imposed by religion itself, and the cure for the false affliction is a placebo dearly paid for by the buyer."

Alex pauses for a moment, as if to let his words sink in, then continues: "So, no, I don't believe that the Spirit, what you call God, forces us through life, as you put it. It's more like the essential, perfectly-shared Self guiding us through the heart, through what we call 'instinct' or 'the sixth sense,' toward what will bring us and, especially, what will bring life as a whole, all of the Spirit's combined manifestations, the greatest possible quality and fulfillment of experience, as the Spirit resides within

all and wishes the best for all, individually and collectively. This is, I believe, what we're evolving towards, propelled by the Spirit to battle the repressions and oppressions of ego, itself a byproduct of sentience, and the corruptibility and greed made of our physical and mental limitations and self-absorbedness. The pressures and pains of the past continue to mount, and our evolution is amassing, though imperceptibly at times, through these pressures and pains harnessed by progressives relative to the degree to which they may be considered progressives, defined relative to their efficacy at serving the collective best interest. In order for the greatest good of as many individuals to be achieved as possible, the greatest good of the collective *must* be created; these are mutually-dependent prospects. This perfectly shared spiritual will creates karma."

"What do you mean by that, exactly?," Michael asks.

"I mean that our core self, the Spirit, gives us guidance and assistance through our hearts and its messaging of our minds," Alex replies, "like spiritual messages which our minds translate for application to our particular form of existence in this particular physical realm and spacetime. And those messages resonate the clearest when those whose mental will, the will of what I call the mental self, doesn't conflict with the will of the Spirit. The more the mind resists the spiritual will, the harder it is to receive and translate the spiritual messages."

"This is akin to saying that the more egotistically-bound and motivated the mind, the less open and spiritually-receptive the mind. So I believe that, to some degree, spiritual messages are received and accurately deciphered relative to the propensity which each of us demonstrates in hearing and harnessing them for the highest possible purpose of creating increased value for life as a whole; for all of the Spirit's individualized manifestations. The Spirit, the essential Self within each Trinity of Self, wants what's best for all of its individualizations, and is best able to support those that run compatible course with its will. I believe that, in this sense, the Spirit lends as much strength as it can to those that fight for this greatest of causes, the cause of total life, in all the innumerable ways in which this battle is waged."

"But this is a long-term, big picture cause which, as history has made abundantly clear, can only be won over time and through the lessons accumulated by ever-evolving life, and especially through the fights of true champions of progress. And this cause certainly doesn't always prevail in the short term, for this greatest of causes is often

contradicted by the corruptible and limited body and mind and the ego that arises from self-perception leading to a self-conception that tends to be as narrow as the mind of its conceiver. But for those that most follow their hearts, who consistently demonstrate a disposition for following their most essential, all-encompassing Self to a greater extent than they follow the fickle, narrow wills of the body and mind in, for example, the focus on fleeting sensory gratifications and the following of their misleading egos, they receive the support of the Spirit with which they're in harmony."

"The more you run parallel with the Spirit the more assistance the Spirit is able to render you in your life, the greater your spiritual rewards, the more spiritual power, per se, that you are propelled by. The existence of this karmic effect does *not* mean, however, that if you do something compassionate or progressive that you're *materially* rewarded. It's not that, say, if you're a fossil fuels exec and you give to charitable causes then karma kicks in to help you with a business whose success constitutes a failure for life; a decimating of the planet that every form of life depends upon for the continuity and improvement of total quality of life."

"Because it would contradict that spiritual will..." Michael follows.

"Exactly," Alex concurs. "Because it would clearly defeat the purpose of the Spirit willing its way through us for the sake of total life. Therefore, karma isn't geared toward material or financial gain, though such gain can sometimes be a side effect of being successfully guided by the Spirit, so long as it doesn't grow to the level of greed; to the level that costs life more than whatever value is created for life in the course of that material or financial acquisition. As I've asserted many times now, the Spirit seeks what is best for life as a whole. That most essential part of ourselves guides every one of our manifestations towards those ends: maximum total value of life. And while the application of this guidance is limited by the physical and mental selves that make-up all materialized individualizations of the Spirit, those that demonstrate the greatest disposition towards this preeminent maximum quality of life objective of the Spirit constitute the most natural conduits for, and recipients of, this spiritual guidance, or spiritual force, if you will."

"Therefore, those that most consistently demonstrate the ability and intention to fight for what is best for life as a whole, rather than what they think is best merely for themselves, their families, their companies, their countries or whatever other narrowly tribal, excluding identity



they may put too much stock in, not only receive the incalculably great spiritual rewards of love and fullness of heart for their progressive munificence but are more likely to continue to earn such rewards because they are the most likely to respond to the guidance of the Spirit whose highest purpose they share.”

“Of course, many contradict this spiritual will, conditioning themselves to ignore the Spirit’s messages and endeavoring in ways which, in their egotistic aggrandizement and greed, in their consolidation of resources meant to serve total life and their decimation of the planet hosting that life, goes entirely against the will of the Spirit. As semi-autonomous beings they possess the mental and physical will to enrich themselves financially and materially while impoverishing themselves spiritually, in love, connections to and service of total life. They lose the opportunity to grow the greatest fulfillment by instead growing their control over others and their consolidation of resources, adding to the pains, pressures and lessons inevitably leading to the progress they thus serve by playing its enemies and emboldening its champions. Think Trump and his greedy, petty, bigoted cronies unwittingly motivating the Bernie Sanders brigade.”

At this point Alex and his new companion have made their way to the Redwood grove situated behind the studio apartment that his father built which, after the trailer in which he spent his earliest years and the long-fallen eighteen-hundreds cabin down the hill used by the earliest Finnish settlers and ranchers of the immediate area, was the third structure to be situated upon the property. Alex had spent countless days in that studio reading, writing, watching films and dreaming of the future. Eventually he formed his vision for the grounds and, thanks to some moderate success selling his first book targeting progressives, he garnered the resources to purchase the land from his father. Now one of the residences he long-ago conceived of had been completed, and the foursome was living in it.

His father’s hand-crafted studio which he and Amanda lived in their first year on the property together was seldom inhabited these days, though Alex and Amanda would sometimes sneak over to it for some privacy, and Alex was determined to have someone that needed a helping hand move into it soon. He currently dreamt of an even larger central residence for the compound, one that would accommodate a greater, growing collective of residents, and was saving for the process that would convert the dug-out clay soil into brick and the milling of some of the surrounding Redwoods of the open, grassy hills, much as those

native materials had been harvested and built into the foursome's current residence.

Whether or not this more expensive future residence would ever be built was uncertain, however, as the current home was quite large and more than sufficient for the group's purposes; many more guests contributing to Alex's convictions would have to come to live on the property to justify the construction of the grand edifice he imagined. Alex and Michael meander over and take a seat on the logs in the grove surrounding the fire pit that Alex and his family had used in his youth, when life was simple and carefree and, in Alex's case, consisted largely of exploring the wilderness. He recalled how he'd gleefully throw large handfuls of the damp Redwood needles carpeting the floor beneath the covering canopy onto the flames to compel crackling plumes of smoke to shoot upward as the moisture trapped within them was suddenly, violently released.

Standing together under that canopy adjacent to that rock-rung fire pit, Michael furrows his brow and stares at Alex, as if attempting to comprehend an enigma. Having slid well into the groove of concepts he had long cultivated in his mind, Alex's momentum carries him forward:

"The Spirit isn't bound by matter or spacetime, but *chose* matter as a means for infinite potential experience from infinite potential perspectives across the spacetime continuum. Housed within an ever-evolving, ever-developing material dwelling, the Spirit can exist as a limitless number of manifestations at the same time. I think, in a sense, we, it, were lonely. Imagine being this entity existing without time or space, with the experience only of itself. Its own self-awareness. The one It; the everything that always has been and always will be. The singularity of existence. It's a mind-bending concept very difficult to capture in the human head, as our experience of life lends the illusion of our separation and finite existence. But I believe time, space and matter were produced from the one being as a canvas for an everlasting self-expansion painted with limitless experiences of endless ever-evolving forms of life."

"These forms only *appear* separate due to our sensory and technological limitations; due to a lack of information, revelatory tools and analytical models and capacity on our end. But in fact there is no true separation between anything; such a separation never has been and never can be. No two things can completely, absolutely separate, only increase their *relative* separation. Infinite potential forms,

phenomena and beings existing as a limitless plurality of the same experience of Self. What I call Monoexistentialism. And it's conceivable that within this existential framework the force with which the Spirit expanded into spacetime and matter at the Big Bang was, based upon the force of explosion, fated to last a certain length of time, and that this duration has likely been replayed countless times, such that every time the Spirit collapses back in on itself an iteration of our existence is completed, ready to begin anew."

As Alex says this, Amanda, Kate and Henry approach him and his unknown guest, still huffing, sweaty and riding the adrenaline of their exploratory adventure to the remnants of an early nineteenth century Finnish settlement called Sointala, situated a few miles from the Sherwood Compound in the heart of what is now logging land. Both this site and the property upon which they now stand holds evidence of the Fins' settlement of the area. The charred, hollowed-out remains of once mighty old-growth Redwoods dot the open hillside of the property; markings of the magnificent giants that were burned away so that grassland could be cultivated in the newly sunbathed hillsides for the settlers' grazing cattle.

Though the returning trio wish to share the details of the trip with Alex, who had shown them the way to the spot a while back, they can sense they are coming into an involved dialogue and, knowing Alex as they do, they briefly introduce themselves to Michael before taking a seat around the fire pit. As dusk is fast approaching, Amanda begins to build her teepee-shaped fire-starting formation, placing some wads of tissue from her pocket in the center and surrounding them with twigs, then sticks, then limbs from the nearby pile stacked for the purpose.

As the surrounding Redwoods ceaselessly grow, the increased height gradually steals the light from the lower limbs, which naturally die as a result and are sloughed-off, returning their borrowed nutrients to the soil, else providing endless limbs for fires and for chipping into mulch layers for the property's cultivations. Once the fire is ignited Amanda takes her place on the log closest to Alex and takes his hand in hers, which Alex raises up and kisses. As he does so the fire dramatically soars to life, as if in response.

It has become the custom of the small group to gather at the first signs of nightfall and engage in dialogues facilitated by the imbibing of wine before starting dinner, often cooked over the open flames upon a folding grill. Their meals tended to consist of low-fire-grilled fish and

vegetables brushed with a mix of high-smoke-point cold-pressed plant oils and various herbs and spices. The discussions accompanying this customary sun-setting, fire-fueled consumption tend to be lively. 'In vino veritas,' the saying went. 'In wine, truth.' It's been Alex's experience that alcohol, especially the internally-warming and uniquely comforting effects of red wine, convey the capacity to do precisely that, to a point: relax the body and mind and lower the nervousness underlying inhibition to the point where the truth, now less corralled by the nerves and the insecurities of the unstable ego, is more likely to be released and captured by the conscious mind, with the confidence and performance of the individual concurrently improved.

Yet, once a certain level of intoxication is reached, this effect collapses in upon itself, progressively diminishing the judgment, clarity of thought and performance of the imbiber. It is, as in a great many things, a matter of discipline. Alex often repeats to himself the mantra that 'discipline is the difference between knowing and doing right,' and thus the difference between possessing knowledge and applying it towards valuable ends. And it's in the *application*, in the utility, where most of the value of every form of knowledge is to be known, or lost.

Michael is momentarily distracted by the arrival of Amanda and Kate, for, even sweaty and a bit disheveled, both are very attractive, though in quite different ways. Amanda, with her freckled face and endearing mannerisms, possesses an adorable set of attributes typically described as 'cute,' whereas Kate, with her well-formed physique, high cheekbones and cunning, alluring eyes, possesses a stronger capacity to seduce, with her titillating attributes typically described as 'sexy.' Alex always suspected that 'cute,' being as much a description denoting a charming personality as an attraction tinged with amorous desire, is the more advantageous adjective in the long run.

Being 'hot' or 'sexy' is more likely to denote a purely sultry appeal, the attributes of which are less likely to spur romantic relations and more likely to be both manipulatively abused by their possessors and to readily degrade with the passage of time and the visible accumulation of stress. The rarely possessed ideal, of course, is the inseparable confluence of major measures of cute and sexy. It is a possession of those select women able to arouse the heart as readily as the loins. Pushing the two young women from his mind for a moment and, refocusing on Alex's words, Michael tries to come to terms with the fact that, against what he is ever less certain to be his better judgment, he is becoming enthralled by Alex's description of God. "God is far bigger

than you've realized," his heart whispers to his resisting mind. Michael wonders if it's possible that this philosopher might possess a greater understanding of the Lord than that taught through the Christian texts.

"You've been describing the nature of the Spirit..." Michael prompts Alex to continue. Alex, of course, is more than happy to oblige, for anyone that believes that they possess something of value to offer is encouraged upon receiving any confirmation of that value's assessed existence and appreciation by others. Validation feels a great victory, to be sure. The success of social media evinces this psychological need, if nothing else.

"Whatever the parameters of universal existence and the motives that may guide that essential part of ourselves, the Spirit, motives which I've sometimes thought it may be possible to ascertain during certain ecstatic epiphanies and in the deepest meditative communion with that essential spiritual self, what I'm certain of through the exercise of logic and science is that the Spirit is the foremost, primordial source and form of energy in existence. This truth is pointed to by many signposts, but it's useful to begin with three interconnected laws of physics and philosophy."

"First, as energy cannot be created or destroyed, only transferred through spacetime and bound into its different forces and forms, or variances of itself, it must have always existed and must exist forever. Second, energy can exist without matter but matter cannot exist without energy. That is, energy is not dependent upon matter but matter is dependent upon and made-up of energy. For we know that immense energy is contained within even the smallest atomic and even subatomic masses, and that this mass, when it's torn apart and its material form is abolished, doesn't cease to be, doesn't turn to nothing, but transforms into the energy of which it was composed prior to condensing and coalescing into matter."

"Matter is reduced into energy, not the other way around, and energy can be exerted as a force free from measurable mass, such as with a photon. Third, and connected to the first two laws, logic dictates that there is no such thing as nothing. Within the parameters of spacetime and the laws of physics we know that if you reduce anything all the way or trace spacetime back as far as you can you must be left with something, not nothing, for no thing that *is* can come from a non-thing; from a thing that *isn't*. No positive value can be derived from zero, as anything times zero is zero. This is a logical certainty."

“So even with infinite attempts at reduction you’re always left with the thing that cannot be reduced any further; the original thing that all other things are composed of; the thing standing at the inner-most core of all physical mass, all energy forever transferring within spacetime, and as the starting point of spacetime itself. And that thing must be the purest, entirely irreducible, indestructible energy.”

“It’s the original thing,” Alex continues; “It’s the source; what George Lucas called ‘The Force’ in his epic sci-fi saga. It wills us through the heart, our focal energy point as individualized beings, seconded only by the energy contained in the brain with which it interacts to create the mind and the individualized consciousness. I sometimes reflect upon measurements made by the organization *Heart Math* years ago during which they discovered that select, detectable waves of electromagnetic energy are emitted by the brain and especially the heart.”

“I believe that such emissions interact in a sort of declaration of spiritual will; a will that’s received, translated and enacted by the mind relative to that mind’s egotism and receptivity of that will; a receptivity and translation that can be improved through certain practices, like developing spiritual skill, such as through meditation, seeing all as versions of one and cultivating symbiotic habits. On some level this energy is indistinguishable from the energy that binds everything physical together, including our bodies. Some bodies simply evolved a more appealing aesthetic thanks to being derived from a richer variance of genetic blueprints,” Alex adds with a smirk while looking at Amanda who, staring into the fire, tries to hide her blushing, her cheeks colored with a rouge barely visible in the twilight.

“One of the most important points I’m attempting to make,” Alex continues, “is that it isn’t a matter of ‘him’ and ‘us,’” he says, pointing up at the sky and then making a circular motion referring to the group of five young men and women as the ‘us.’ “It’s *we*. *We* are God. *We* are the Spirit. There’s no separation, no hierarchy, no afterlife, no place to go, no final judgment, no here versus there. *This* is an extension of immortal, divine existence.”

“It’s only the fleeting, individualized form that’s mortal, with its composing essence, collectively being God, existing eternally. One of the fundamental, life-empowering principles embedded in this truth is that *this* is what must be fought for. It’s *this* existence that we must be dedicated to improving for all its forms. As inseparable agents of the Spirit, it’s improving and protecting quality of life as a whole that we

must be committed to. *That* is the higher truth; the higher calling. The true 'Glory of God' is the glory of life. For God is life, and the 'point of life' is life itself; celebrating and raising up the whole of life as high as possible."

"And, thus, the greatest pursuit is a maximization of the inherent value of life to be experienced by as many lives as possible. We are not to spend our lives on our knees looking up into a mythical afterlife towards the greater being above and beyond us, victims of the propaganda conserved through traditions of religious, political and commercial empires acting to conceal and undermine the higher calling of increasing quality of life as a whole, sacrificing that calling on the narrow-minded, egotistical altars of greed."

"We are to find the strength of that shared spiritual essence emanating from within us, that shared self of the Spirit, and harness its guidance in order to live the fullest possible lives we can lead, and to create and guard over the installment of the fullest possible lives of as many people and forms of life as we possibly can. This life is not a mere prelude to Heaven or Hell, it is the one and only realm of existence built of constantly recycled, reforming, undying energy, and the only Heaven and Hell are the ones we create right here, right now, across the planet. Through your thoughts and actions you can either raise up and add to the quality of life as a whole or you can serve an exploitative hierarchy of one form or another, holding down and reducing total quality of life."

The group falls into a meditative stretch of silence, staring ponderingly into the crackling fire or watching the plumes of smoke begin their climb up the hundreds of feet of the surrounding, corrugated, ruddy Redwood towers before disappearing into the dark. It is Henry who breaks the silence: "So... what do you imagine God was like *before* becoming us?"

"That's a good question," Alex replies. "Based upon the readings of certain theoretical physicists looking at the nature of consciousness and the enigmas presented by science suggesting that consciousness is more root to existence than most scientists believe... that it may very well be more the existential *cause* than a mere neuro-chemical-electrical effect, I imagine that God was pure energy bound up in singular consciousness, and that this awareness of one self was seen as but a starting point of infinite existential possibility by the one timeless, dimensionless deity. From there it needed to create spacetime and matter as parameters for a plurality of consciousness that had to find its way through an evolution of matter and the necessities of biological being in

accommodating star systems before a multiplicity of that one consciousness could manifest.”

“When you speak of theoretical physicists you’re referring to experiments like the duality of the particle and the wave when it comes to light,” Kate suggests, “depending upon whether or not the light is being observed.”

“Yes,” Alex replies. “I think quantum physics and string theory and causality are suggestive of this imagined ‘beginning’ that never really began... of no separation between anything, between space, time, matter, Spirit, lifeforms... even consciousness and existence itself, seen in the direct impact that consciousness has on an existence which conventional science asserts arose separate from it; as an accidental side effect of existence. I think consciousness always, latently existed within the energy bound to matter, but could not be made aware of itself without the connected evolution of sentience in mentally complex organic life.”

On the level-most of the open stumps set around the fire adopted by the group for the purpose of nightly drinking, eating and discourse, Kate pours a glass of wine from a magnum bottle retrieved from the base of the tree, set there prior to her departure on the day’s hike. She hands one to everyone but Michael, who politely declines. In a shameless move of manipulation she moves toward Alex first, slyly presses the outside of her knee against his inner thigh and brushing his hand while passing him his glass. Alex takes a few breaths while futilely attempting to ignore his programmed biological response. Kate has always been a devious little temptress, and a part of him is repulsed by this, but he would be lying if he said he disliked the flirtation, though he did his best not to encourage it. Did Amanda see that little maneuver?, he wonders. It had been a very long time since he’d been in a relationship and, thus, he was overly aware of how much he was deriving from it and anything endangering it.

Alex knew full well that it had always been his horrendous state of health and connected undermined ability, comfort and confidence that had precluded his being with someone like Amanda, and that having recently regained a measure of good health was what finally gave birth to the potential to establish all manner of relationships which once seemed impossible. That he isn’t willing to take that for granted, and that his natural romanticism and disposition toward deep, committed intimacy is enough to temper his strong, very often conflicting sex drive



that sees both sexual and romantic desire in every attractive woman, he finds both intriguing and challenging. It's in the nature of passionate people such as himself to be frustrated by any attempt to keep that passion under wraps.

After taking a few sips of wine, the rest of the group silently enjoying the fire's rising warmth, Alex continues: "But, back to this being the one and only form of existence and our choosing with our thoughts and actions to either serve total life or to feed our greed first and foremost through some exclusionary form of identity and connected exploitative hierarchy that sucks the greater potential and quality of life from the many... This to me is the ultimate measure of the worth of any individual: how much net value does he or she create in the world, taking into account the value produced for and distributed amongst life and subtracting the value extracted, consumed or otherwise kept from being put to use by the rest of life? Created value net extracted value. How much does the individual increase quality of life *as a whole*, and how much is he or she willing to oppose the Spirit and degrade quality of life, the total quality of the experience of the Spirit's innumerable manifestations, in the pursuit of amassing as much of the value available in the world for his or herself?"

"This all important consideration and calculation, what I call the total value of the individual or entity, is a spiritual, political and economic principle. But for me everything starts with the spiritual; with serving life as a whole. And upon this motivational basis the political and economic systems best fostering this total value creation for life are to be designed and instituted. Like many of the greatest principles, the concept is Gnostic in nature before it's socially applicable."

"It begins with the spiritual truth that is then applicable to the rest of mankind's societal constructs. Like the Spirit itself, it is an emanation of pure spiritual energy coalescing and consolidating into a structure; in this case not the ever-evolving organic structure, but the evolving societal structures of man. It all starts in the same place; a hearing of and responding to the same voice. I think if you're able to quiet your mind it becomes a better receptacle of the truth always bubbling up from the heart in the spiritual language the quiet mind can translate; the mind undistracted by ego-driven thought and concern."

Attempting to grasp this version of hearing the voice of God, Michael is compelled to question Alex on some of the particulars: "So you believe we're meant to translate the voice of God, what you call the Spirit,

speaking to us through our hearts, and apply that towards God's will of bringing the greatest possible quality of life to life as a whole? So we are all connected to God, even bound to God, composed of and composing God, but we are not... propelled by God. He, or it, doesn't force us or move us forward, but directs us toward the best way to move forward...?"

"Both logic and empirical data, the information derived from experience, emphatically demonstrate, if they don't unequivocally prove, that the whole omnipotent concept of God as deterministically driving all things, including human action, is not only detrimentally irresponsible for people to believe and inhibits the creation of value compelled by proactively harnessing one's own will and determination, it's also illogical and unsubstantiated," Alex replies. "As I mentioned before, at the point when the pure energy of the Spirit, the source of all existence, expanded into the plurality of spacetime and the precursors of material existence, it sacrificed its singular identity and will."

"Though it's interminable and the most essential force, the will of the Spirit is now shared by innumerable semi-autonomous wills and forces driving existence, even as it is the only force common to all things. It cannot force thoughts and occurrences that conflict with the laws of physics born by its expansion into limitless plurality, by the Big Bang, or that conflict with the will of the mental self organically derived from the environmental prerequisites of the material world that precipitated life; the life that it guides and compels to evolve."

"The Spirit is the producer, director and lead actor, but it's no longer a solo project. It is the source and essential-most element of all three facets of what I call the Trinity of Self. The spiritual Self, the Spirit, communes with the mental self through the heart, which is like the gateway; the bridge between the material world and the purely energetic spiritual realm from which material existence was born."

"It's this spiritual Self, the Spirit manifested into all matter and residing within all organic life, that is most fundamental to existence. The spiritual energy, the original entity not requiring but ultimately choosing to bind itself to matter upon giving birth to the universe, draws upon its presence within all material beings and in connection with all those material beings to transmit signals to the brain. This is part of what instinct is, I believe. It is the subconscious understanding of the mind, the knowledge possessed by the mental self, blended with guiding signals sent from the Spirit residing within us."

“Those signals,” Alex goes on, “are conducted into the subconscious mind and are sometimes even grasped by the conscious mind that can, through instinctive awareness, training and innate capacity, develop the ability to accurately translate said signals to varying degrees. This ability could be called ‘spiritual intelligence.’ The third portion of the Trinity is the body, an ultra-complex electro-magnetic-chemical machine that is constantly passing electrochemical signals from the heart to the brain while emanating waves of electromagnetic energy out onto and likely conducted through anything it approaches.”

“We harbor this continual halo of energy ever being transmitted outward from our hearts and brains. This isn’t theory, this is scientific record; verified electromagnetic emission. That halo is densest at the point where it pours out of the heart, because the heart is the engine of organic life and the point where the energy housed within every organic being is densest. It is the physical location, the anatomical point, where that energy is most focused.”

“This is, I believe, why we feel emotion in our heart – because love, the sensation of making and breaking bonds, is actually a spiritual message – a recognition by the essential Self of the interconnectivity underlying the illusion of our separation. The more the essential Self within feels bound to and connected with other forms of itself the greater its sense of completion, or fulfillment, becomes. This is spiritual wealth. Total love. Total connectivity. And it’s known through concepts indivisible from love, like solidarity, commonality, collaborating in shared purpose and understanding characteristics shared by all, including inherent goodness.”

“The brain also produces this energetic halo, but to a lesser degree. And I believe that a continual spiritual message is transmitted between the heart, the physical seat of the inseparable, universal Spirit forming the spiritual identity of all lifeforms, and the brain, the physical seat of the unique individual mind bridging the individualized form of life with the universal, energetic essence of life that is constantly multiplying in manifestations. This reception and translation is involuntary, like most of the processes of the body and brain. It is highly likely that this exchange of energy is also being conducted between people; that we are all unconsciously receiving energy from one another, and that if we were to evolve to a certain level or were to condition our mind to a certain point we would be able to communicate without the five accepted senses...”

Realizing that he's beginning to drift down a tangent, Alex returns: "So the mental self is the existence of the mind physically residing in and created by the electrochemical processes of the brain building the sentience of self-awareness; that which brings the latent capacity for consciousness into realization and, in sentient beings such as ourselves, paves the path for the whole Descartes 'I think therefore I am' proof of existence. Unfortunately, however, this self-awareness comes with the necessary trade-off of self-perception. After the mind develops to a certain degree it begins to form its own idea of the self: the ego."

"This is the conception of self that's always misleading to some degree due to the limitations of the mind; spot-on self-awareness would require a level of information and comprehensive capacity the mind simply doesn't possess. Thus, we're ever burdened by a flawed projection of the self-aware mind. And while some may feel they are served by their ego, that it grants them a strength of confidence they would otherwise be denied, such a sense of strength shall ultimately betray them, because, as with those that suffer from propping up a relatively low self-regard and corresponding self-perception, it can only ever be a partial truth subject to total truth."

"Harboring ego is essentially self-deception, and the degree of the self-deception is relative to the degree in which the ego is fed. The bigger it is the larger the wrench thrown into the translating machinery of the mind; and the translations both of the communications of the Spirit and of empirical data and, thus, in the ability to derive accurate lessons from that data; from experience. That is, it artificially qualifies experience, tending to edit it to fit into itself; into one's self-perception."

"It might be said that the ego renders the experiences of the individual in a way that is either brighter or darker than they truly are, and this unreal rendering inevitably works against the individual and all whom they impact in one way or another. It is as if we all view the world and its events and our role within them through a pair of glasses in which one lens is dirtied, and through which things look worse and reflect more negatively upon those that tend to look through that side than those things and events truly are, and in which the other lens was polished with cleaning and embossing agents that reflects a glare rendering things brighter, and which reflect upon those that tend to look through that side in a falsely flattering light."

"An individual's overriding mental state," Alex continues, "their general attitude and outlook upon the world, is made up of the combination of

this egotistic self-perception's subjective translation of their experiences combined with their knowledge, their accumulated experiences and their relative physical state of existence; the state of their physical self. Unavoidably, the way in which every experience affects every person is based upon the size and state of their ego; their subjective self-perception. It artificially colors what they, what we, take away from every experience. We tend to accept interpretations that reinforce our ego, our conformational bias, editing or outright ignoring any interpretations that threaten to alter it, so as to protect our vulnerable self-conception. This is a kind of psychological defense mechanism; a need for a stable sense of self."

"In terms of the physical self, the health of the individual, their material state of being determines what they are capable of relative to their innate capacities, and when this capacity is greater than that of others they are better equipped to produce more and render more attitude-uplifting value and reward for themselves and others. This increased capacity and productivity potential derived from improved health tends to impact their egotistic self-perception, causing them to inflate their mental sense of themselves. In this way a person's health, attitude and ego are interconnected, as all things are to some degree. More directly, the state of the physical self also determines how a person feels; and how one feels inevitably impacts their mentality and outlook."

Henry suddenly drops two large logs on the fire, which immediately collapses under the weight. "He is always overdoing it," Alex thinks to himself before continuing: "Generally speaking, someone in good health, someone that feels good, is always more likely to see things positively than someone that feels poorly. In addition to their health, the state of the physical self, the attitude of the individual, the relative optimistic or pessimistic outlook and disposition is a reflection of their perceived mental self; their ego. It is created by the appearance of the world as viewed through the aforementioned egotistic glasses, if you will."

"Their attitude is largely based upon the idea they have of themselves which they mentally project upon the world and their experiences, and which is reflected back to them based mostly upon the relative dark or sunny aspects of their outwardly projected self-perception. We are sometimes able to alter our attitude for short periods of time with a disciplined focus of thought, and that attitude might improve or decline based upon our state of health or upon the ingestion of substances which artificially improve our attitude by influencing our biochemistry

and which worsen our attitude while we withdraw and recover from those substances.”

“And people should always strive to maximize their health, the quality of their physical self, for this among other crucial connected reasons. Eventually, however, the ego reemerges to take control, and the individual’s preset disposition born of viewing the world their particular ego, their ‘outlook’ or ‘attitude,’ will reassert itself as their disciplined focus on altering their disposition dissipates, or as their physical state returns to their respective ‘normal,’ so to speak; to the state of physical existence to which they’re accustomed. Mentally conditioning one’s self to alter this disposition is a beneficial practice but, in my experience at least, tends to be limited in effect.”

“All other inputs being equal, the outlook of egotistic self-reflection tends to reinforce itself, and, to a very great degree, *becomes* the self. For the ego represents the ultimate self-fulfilling prophecy; the foremost reality-manifesting force. You might say that the way in which we see ourselves gradually takes on the formation of reality, becoming our potential and place in the world. That said, this reality isn’t fixed, but is always able to be altered, despite the claims of many ‘realists,’ and those that contend that people don’t really change.”

“Moreover, I believe that the power of consciousness and ego to create the realities that we compete with one another to project and maintain is far greater than most people realize. I think that, for instance, we have to see and believe in the possibility of *any* form of reality before it can actually form itself. And, in general, the person of the artificially-deflated ego shoots too low and sells themselves short, failing to live the fullest, most enriching, highest quality of life that they can because they’re overly timid and fearful and suffer from low self-esteem and so tend not to take risks and to always seek familiar, comfortable environments in which challenging themselves to grow is difficult at best, impossible at worst; they undershoot the mark, falling short of the formation of greatest self.”

“Such under-shooters, so to speak, tend to produce less value in the world than if they weren’t adversely affected by the deflationary effect of their negatively-impacting egos. It’s like Thoreau’s line: ‘Most men lead lives of quiet desperation.’ It’s a trait of the life less lived.” Alex thinks of Amanda as he says this. For as much as he loves her and would have her no other way, he also knows that her propensity to hold back is born as much from possessing a low estimation of herself as it is from

any other factor. “At the same time I believe that this low self-esteem is superior to many people’s hideous and disturbingly unfounded self-importance.”

“But to be fair,” Alex continues, “confidence can have great value to the possessor, up to a point, due to its aforementioned propensity to serve as a self-fulfilling prophecy: those that act with confidence act with greater capacity than they would without it, which enables them to achieve more than they otherwise would. It’s part of the self-manifesting placebo effect: when you believe you’re going to do something you’re far more likely to actually do it.”

“This confidence is a double-edge sword demonstrating the thin line between the boon of confidence and the costs of egotism. For while confidence leads to greater capacity and thus a greater potential production of value, it also pushes the door leading to overblown ego further ajar, and those that walk through it tend to be more self-absorbed and less considerate and compassionate because their self-overestimation leads to a supercilious stance and contemptuous treatment of others.”

“Believing they’re superior to others, such overblown individuals tend to become predisposed to center their perceived accomplishments upon themselves and ignore the effects those accomplishments have on others. In fact, such people tend to see achievement as anything that reinforces their inflated ego; that pumps hot air into their overestimated sense of self. Along this path they can blow themselves so out of proportion that they end up having little room in their minds for others and, as a consequence, can easily become agents of evil, taking advantage of the weakness of others in their self-absorbed conquests that, as a consequence, are likely to produce a *negative* total quality of life value.”

“Thus,” Alex goes on, “while they tend to be capable of producing more value than those with deflated egos, they’re also much more likely to hoard and consume far more value, creating, again, what I call a negative total quality of life value in the world. Their overblown egos tend to cost the world far more than those suffering from an underestimation of self, with the world forced to support the increased mass of self-importance. They tend to shoot too high and, rather than selling themselves short, tend to sell others short. They are also prone to an eventual corrective crash of self-esteem when experiences begin to prove beyond a subduing doubt that they are not who they thought

they were, gradually making it impossible for them to maintain their ego.”

“Eventually, the accumulation of evidence of their false self-perception outweighs the suspension of their disbelief, precipitating a fall from their false heights to somewhere closer to the truth. And these crashes in self-esteem, these ego adjustments, if you will, can be very perilous for them and those around them because those with massive egos tend to be less considerate and overly invested in their overblown sense of self, and so will aggressively and even violently resist anyone and anything that threatens that ego. So while they’re less fearful and more willing to venture forth and take risks they are, as a consequence, very likely to overshoot the mark and, to go with the metaphor, possess a tendency to eventually harm those situated on the other side of their overdrawn shots, which can include anyone and everyone whose lives they have the power to impact.”

“Seriously,” Kate chimes in, “I wouldn’t want to be there when Trump comes face-to-face with his true self.”

Most of the group chuckles at this, including Alex, who continues: “Right. But in cases such as his the ego has *massive* potential to cost life, even before he turned the US Presidency into a worldwide laughing stock. For, unfortunately, if those with massive egos are major players in big business, politics or other professions strongly tied to the broader network of society, even globalizing society in the case of the heads of multinational business operations or international politics, the adverse, quality-of-life-diminishing effects of those egos can dearly cost many, *many* people. At the same time these are tendencies, not inevitabilities. It is possible, though fairly rare, I believe, for someone with a big ego to also be highly principled and possess progressive convictions, harnessing that ego to produce good in the world. Such people tend to fit the description of being sanctimonious or self-righteous; to me these terms indicate a confluence of moral or progressive intention and an overblown ego.”

“Such people simultaneously possessing huge egos and concern for others, or at least concern for being *perceived* as being driven first and foremost by a concern for others, are uncommon. This is because those harboring an overinflated sense of self tend to displace other people from their field of focus and concern and to draw their concern inward, into self-absorbedness, as if the bigger the ego the greater its gravitational force pulling their thoughts inward. And the more self-



absorbed the focus, the less likely others are to benefit from it. This tendency is exacerbated in Western bourgeois societies that worship wealth, marking it as the preeminent indicator of social status and socioeconomic class and the number one mark of the worth of the individual when, to my mind, this is more an indication that they cost the people and the global environment *more* than they produce and, therefore, that they would be more appropriately appraised as those possessing the lowest true ‘worth.’”

“Unfortunately,” Alex continues, “when the prevailing value system tells you your worth is based upon financial and material accumulation and your ego tells you that you are worth more than most people, greed and its considerable costs inevitably follow. As a consequence, such people are better suited to serve the bottom-line-is-absolute model of business that feeds their greed. It’s no coincidence that egotists buying into this conservative value system fight for positions within those businesses most adept at extracting value from people and the planet, determined to cut off the biggest slice of value captured by the global economy as possible.”

“Interestingly, from a psychological perspective, there are also those that tend to look through both the dirtied and the over-polished lenses at the same time. Unaware they’re wearing the glasses and in lieu of attempting to see without them as much as possible, to quell the ego and its costs, they look through the side that casts a false sheen on themselves and their place in the world in order to compensate for a deep-seeded insecurity. It’s as if they close the eye situated over the cloudy lens and try to build themselves up by looking through the glaring lens, but the entire time they know deep down that the cloudy lens is still there, and they fear that the self-perception they see through it is closer to reflecting their true self.”

“In fact, there’s a strong case to be made that most overblown egos are rooted in insecurity, as there’s likely no greater force compelling a person to convince themselves and others that they’re important than the need to prove to themselves and others that they’re worthy of love and admiration which, in the West, is mostly gained via financial status.”

“I’ve actually heard that many psychologists believe that narcissism and egotism are compensatory measures for such low-self-esteem-based insecurity. It’s as if, again, their victims are doing their best to keep the eye looking through the clouded lens closed because they subconsciously fear it represents the truth, and they simply can’t handle

the way their experiences and reflecting self-perceptions look through that lens, and would thus prefer to lie to themselves and keep polishing and looking exclusively through the other lens, perpetuating their own ongoing falsely-overinflated sense of self and delusions of grandeur in the process. So, through their very understandable need for love and respect which we all possess, and which arguably represents the greatest drive after survival, they feed an arrogance used to mask and compensate for their self-doubt. It's like they spend a ton of time and mental energy building and maintaining this massive structure that they secretly know rests upon shoddy, unstable foundations."

"So instead of their looking through both lenses at once having the effect of balancing things out, their vision is distorted two ways at once, making their view of themselves and the world more muddled and ultimately rendering their compensatory masks self-defeating, as their finding their greatest self and proceeding to their higher potential heights is impossible when they can't see straight."

"Everyone has seen *The Matrix* and heard the expression 'Know Thyself,' and most have heard The Oracle's proffered idea therein that this is where the greatest wisdom lies in the greatest service of our lives," Alex barely skips a beat. "But I disagree, for the most part. I think that there's as much danger and delusion in the so-called quest of self-discovery as anything; in the presumption of self-knowledge. I find it to be a deceiving, slippery slope from which we fall away from empowering truth into the realm of the ego shrouding such truth."

"I find it to be an overly self-indulgent, misleading pursuit that turns us toward gratification more than truth and the production of value. For most of what people consider 'self-knowledge' seems to me to be closer to self-perception, self-conception and self-deception; the way we see ourselves through our overly glossy or dirtied lenses and the self that we create in our minds and ever endeavor to trick or otherwise convince ourselves is legitimate because we believe this self to be more valuable and more desirable by others. So, in turn, we begin to feed this imagined self; and by self-fulfilling prophecy we tend to do everything we can in order to turn self-conception into truth."

"This is, however, more the *semblance* of self than the true self, and distracts us from climbing the slope leading to the higher forms of truth, most of which are found going the opposite direction, *away* from the attempt to create and foster a sense of self. Truth is more readily glimpsed through the wide-angle, all-inclusive lens than through the

narrow-angle lens acting to exclude everything but that matching our ideas of ourselves. The truest, deepest Self, the shared Self, the one that sees the shared identity and connection between all beings and all things and is thereby most empowered to love and improve every manifestation of the shared Self, every form of the Spirit, is the one that's *least* invested in the narrowly-perceived and conceived ego."

"It *isn't* invented. And it's the foundation upon which all of our inventions are placed and developed. Our insecurities, our narrow identities, our greedy, self-centered tendencies, most everything that produces injustice and evil in the world is based upon weaknesses and fallacies of the mind centered on our falsely misleading perceptions and conceptions of ourselves."

"The only form of knowledge of self that I'd personally advise seeking, therefore, is that of aptitude; of knowing what you are naturally gifted at doing, what the construct of your brain and body puts you in the best position to do, for this form of self-knowledge allows you to fulfill your potential in creating value for yourself, the people, the world and life in general. Aptitude leads us to our calling; our utmost value-adding purpose. Leave the rest of it, the misleading self-reassurances of ego, behind. That is, love the fact that you're unique and may act semi-independently, motivated by your semi-autonomous free will, and find out how and why you're best equipped to serve life. Make no more of it."

Alex pauses to take a long swig of wine from his glass. When no one else speaks, everyone staring into the fire except for Michael, who is locked in on Alex, Alex continues: "Alas, this projection of the mental self, the ego we all form even when we resist it, is, again, an unavoidable extension of sentience. We all begin to build it at an early age and, unless we're encouraged and trained to control it, it is unconsciously amassed and reinforced throughout our lives."

"The ego is something we all must wrestle with, or choose not to, letting it pin us down as a result, so to speak. And perhaps the most effective means to wrestle with it is to refuse to get on the mat in the first place; to refuse to strengthen it by exercising it; by indulging in too much self-reflection, perception and conception. I honestly think that one of the greatest, most important challenges any person can face is the attempt to control and, ideally, subdue their ego."

"*Subduing* the ego is the most we can realistically hope for, and anyone

that successfully does so brings vast potential increases in their ability to see and be as fully in the moment of their experiences in life as possible, because they have less of their false self of self standing in the way of that vision; less of their narrowing obstruction and drive to qualify their experience, editing it to fit their egos. Accomplishing this invaluable feat renders them far better equipped to discern the higher truths and lessons from those experiences as whispered through their hearts to their less blocked, more receptive minds.”

“The more consistently and completely that the individual is able to remove the glasses, the more they’ll be able to perceive the world and their experiences as they truly are, the more lessons they’ll have the opportunity to learn from those less obscured experiences, the more their opportunity for personal growth and the more of their innate potential they’ll have the chance to fulfill and then harness in the production of value; value that, in those of relatively constrained ego, is less likely to be a self-absorbed value that removes value from total quality of life; is more likely to be a positive total value. They get more out of the moments of their lives, have more open hearts and minds and are much more likely to contribute value to the lives of others; to those not seen as ‘others.’ It’s for this reason that I believe we all must strive to spend as little of our thought in self-reflection as possible. Not in reflection in general, but specifically in *self-reflection*.”

“Thinking about how actions or perceived errors or apparent mistakes or triumphs reflect upon who we are adds a negative value to our lives; it builds the egotistic perception that holds us back from the greater truths and our higher potentials. Produce value in the world *without* worrying about how your efforts reflect upon you personally. Don’t look for praise, and don’t condemn or be too hard on yourself. Just keep working, living and growing. Don’t breathe continued life into the ego. For the more the individual understands the nature of, refuses to feed and successfully starves and weakens the ego, the more they’re able to remove the egotistic glasses and see the world free from distortion, the more they see and comprehend things that the ego inhibits or outright prevents the falsely-qualifying mind from perceiving and the intellect from grasping.”

After a few seconds of silence, Kate says: “You are advocating the concerted effort to destroy the ego.”

“I’m advocating the *attempt*,” Alex immediately replies. “Going with the metaphor, I believe one should attempt to ignore the ego to the best of

their ability such that they don't suck air out of it or blow air into it; don't cultivate it in any respect, but purposefully neglect it so that it withers and becomes less and less of a factor, and has less and less control over your mind, impact upon your experiences and alteration of your perceptions. Don't support its deflation or over-inflation, but instead allow it to recede into the back of the mind and have as little influence on your thoughts, actions and perspective upon existence as possible so that you can see things as close to their true nature as possible; as absent a slanted vantage point as you're capable. But, again, I don't think that it's possible to entirely destroy the ego that must exist as an inevitable side effect of self-awareness. It's more a matter of minimizing this self-awareness and its impact upon your life, which I believe costs us all a great deal."

"Witnessing people's interactions, including my own, I see this cost paid over and over again, and all we can do is attempt to minimize this expense. Ego mitigation reminds me of what they say in sports about the best offensive players: you can't stop the ego, you can only hope to contain it. In fact, if there were one path to what is known as enlightenment, I think that'd be it: the clarity of experience and depth of Gnostic knowledge absorbed by and known to the egoless. The higher peace-pervading epiphanies cannot be seen or grasped by people *not* because of a lack of intelligence but because they are filtered out by the ego-enclosed mind. I would guess that most of this truth and understanding is passed by the heart, and that the restless, self-absorbed, egotistically-inflicted mind impairs the reception and cognition of such truth. This is why meditation offers so much value to the meditator."

"The quiet mind," Alex continues, "with the presence of the ego displaced as much as possible, is more receptive to spiritual truth; the language of the Spirit can be more readily received. I think that's what meditation is, essentially: the practice of quieting the mental and physical self so the universally-shared spiritual Self can shine through as brightly and clearly in the cleanest, most present possible moments. And you need not practice any conventionally recognized and accepted form of meditation to be in a meditative state and open a broader, clearer channel of communication with the Spirit. Any quieting of the mind and body is essentially a meditative state. In fact, I find that when I'm exhausted, after a long period of hard physical work or mental exertion, for example, my conscious mind and my mind's connection with my body can become less present and my egotistic identity fades

and I sense the presence of the Spirit, my spiritual, truest Self, more clearly and profoundly as a result.”

“The highest goal of such meditative states is a mind at peace and having expelled the ego as much as possible. It’s rejuvenating, like having been recharged on a profound level, to experience this, which we all have to various degrees and with various regularity. Buddhists sometimes speak of these most successfully-enacted out-of-body-and-mind moments as moments of enlightenment. I think of enlightenment as the eradication of ego, while a former co-worker of mine whom I used to have some fascinating dialogues with speaks of enlightenment as being fully present all the time. He helped lead me to the conclusion that these are actually the same thing.”

“For if you’re fully present, fully in the moment, you cannot be in your sense of individual self, in your ego, or even in your thoughts for that matter. This is extremely difficult to achieve, of course, because the egotistic mind, the small self, perceives this state of non-individual-self as a threat to its existence; as threatening its death, as my co-worker explained it. And the first instinct of anything ‘alive’ is to survive, so the ego will constantly intervene and attempt to reassert control in these moments, whether one considers one’s self to be meditating or has arrived ‘in the moment’ via some other pathway.”

“Thoughts centered upon self will reemerge. Yet this subduing of the small, ego-infused self is the goal; where spiritual searchers seek to dwell as often as possible. For the more present you are, the less egotistical you are, the closer you are to enlightenment. Full presence and being egoless and being ‘enlightened’ are the same thing. And while my ego tells me I am a philosopher and I enjoy philosophical thought and intellectual exercise and always will, which is hopefully more a recognition of aptitude than an egotistic misleading, I simultaneously recognize the fact that such a sense of self is miniscule compared to the truest universal sense of Self. This leads me to believe that full presence is perhaps the highest state that we can aspire to reach as spiritual searchers, and we should practice its attainment as much as possible. This is, of course, what Buddhists and other searchers, regardless of labels, often condition themselves to do.”

“So I find that my own spiritual beliefs and the practices of self-identified Buddhists run very much in parallel on this level. And while this state for which they and I and so many others train ourselves to dwell within is perhaps only theoretically possible to *stay* within,

existing as the egoless self, the enlightened self, is the only way to gain a perfect harmony and communion with the Spirit. In the theoretical state of enlightenment made by remaining egoless, the Spirit's voice would no longer be mere guidance and the faint whisper of an indistinctly-sensed awareness. It'd be as if the mental self and the spiritual Self, the mind of the individual and the presence of the Spirit, were indistinguishable. There'd not only be a lack of obstructions on the bridge between the heart and the brain, between the Spirit and the mind, but the bridge itself would dissolve into oblivion, and the mind would *become* the Spirit. The individualized manifestation would lose his or her sense of individuality and feel an indistinctiveness with everyone and everything. Perfect connectivity."

Upon hearing this Michael is uplifted, instinctively recognizing the truth in Alex's statement. For a few seconds the door to his heart is thrown wide open and he feels truly free. "Yes," he thinks to himself, "I think I have sensed such a thing myself..." He's awestruck. No one says a word for a full minute. Most of the group, including Alex, reflect upon the resonance of a cord struck deep within. They allow their hearts to fill with the sudden burst of spiritual awareness that is usually trapped well beneath the surface of distracted mind and nervous body.

The warmth of the fire upon their faces mingles with the wine and rising warmth in their hearts, and for a minute they soar. Words can work magic in this way. Like the combination to a lock, words can throw doors wide open that're typically shut or sit only slightly ajar, revealing a hidden passage pursuant to what was always there, but may've been unimaginable but a moment before.

Finally Henry becomes uncomfortable in the silence, being the one possessing of the biggest, least stable ego most resistant to such a truth. To him, the voice within remains mostly relegated to a faint whisper, its sounds doggedly barked over by the precariousness of his self-conception. He chuckles uneasily, upsetting the quiet reflection of the group.

"And so, we reflect upon the nature and basis for the self-imposed limitations of Spirit," Alex begins anew, somewhat annoyed by the abrupt ending to the mutually-shared moment. "As soon as the pure, boundless energy of the Spirit transferred itself into the spacetime wherein it was able to be endlessly reorganized into limitless material forms of energetic expression, this plurality of form and the spacetime framework for its ceaseless reconstruction marked the cessation of its

singular will, and the resulting Trinity of Self created a contention of wills, sometimes conflicting, sometimes in phase. The heart, the spark of spiritual energy conducted through matter, serves as the seat of the Spirit; the brain, translating the instinctive spiritual will and the needs and desires of the body and, in the sentient being, giving rise to the self-conception of ego, serves as the seat of the mental self; and the body serves as the host of the Spirit and the mind within each finitely-maintained energetic organization of energy into living matter, permitting our individualized existence and interchange with the Spirit in this realm of material existence in which the body grounds the spiritual and mental selves.”

“When these selves are in harmony, when the Trinity of Self collectively wills itself along the same course, we tend to be at peace. There exists no internal conflict. When the wills of the Trinity of Self are incongruent, we’re conflicted, such as when the heart tells us no but the ego or body tells us yes, or vice versa. This conflict is perilously ignored, such as when our instinct, our subconscious knowledge combined with our spiritually-guided self, warns us against self-destructive habits, and we ignore this warning and pursue our self-destruction due to a lack of discipline or knowledge or our falling prey to dependency or the pressure of others or some other influence or shortcoming. In non-sentient beings such a conflict is far less likely to arise because the baser drives of the body and the translated will of the Spirit are unimpeded by ego and undistracted by the intellect; the ego and rational mind are not something that they possess, as they are an extension of an awareness which they mostly or entirely lack. This has built-in trade-offs, as with most, if not all, things.”

“It’s like an equal and opposite reaction principle, and as with human beings, the greatest strengths of non-sentient beings are also their greatest weaknesses. For the same rudimentary mental faculties that keep them from the joys of investigation and revelation spare them the corruptible vulnerabilities, motivations and blunders of an intellect and ego that need to know and feel full and secure, but are never quite capable of doing so. These inborn drives are effects of sentience produced in the mind of the more sophisticated mental self. Less mentally-advanced animals are spared not just ego but many forms of evil with which mankind is afflicted due to our higher mental functioning. Most of these evils are tied to egotistic self-perception and narrow tribal, individual identities, including greed, prejudice, hatred, contempt and the like. No other animals are distracted by their minds



and man-made artifices and, as a consequence, they aren't impeded in their ability to be fully present."

"For the non-self-conceiving it's closer to a duality of self: they exist mostly or entirely in non-self-aware translation and reaction to the needs and desires of the Spirit coupled with the needs and desires dictated by their biological constructs through the inputs of their environment. They exist more within a realm of need and nurture. Survival and familial love and whatever they derive from their collective moments of pure sensation and connection with their kin constitutes the truth and value of their lives."

"They are, therefore, entirely content to play their natural role serving a niche within their ecological sphere without even being aware of this role; a role made by the interagency between Spirit and matter developing across time; a relationship guiding the evolution of each species and driving each of the Spirit's manifestations in the service of this mutually-beneficial role between all forms of life in the environment upon which all life depends. In a certain respect you might say that non-sentient beings are fortunate *not* to be subject to a stronger or more dominant mental self; that there are many costs of self-awareness that the sentient being pays in exchange for the greater minds with which we're both gifted and cursed, for every conferred benefit has a tradeoff."

Henry often finds these philosophical discussions discomfiting, sensing that he's failing to grasp the full meaning and force of the ideas being brought to the fore and, as a consequence, feeling he's missing out on something important and becoming ever more isolated from the group that comes together through such conceptual explorations. Alex has long noticed this alienating effect upon Henry, and Henry's general inability to accept anything threatening an ego built upon a sense of entitlement and superiority. Because his ego is so blown out of proportion and detached from the truth experienced and recognized by others, many gateways and insights are closed to him. Henry can have any material thing he wants, but not *everything* he wants; not the most valuable of things, in fact.

Despite the fact that Alex has long recognized this and attempts to mitigate the effect through taking him aside for one-on-one discussions, he finds that Henry continues to be consistently frustrated when the sense of not fully mentally or physically taking hold of something un-purchasable is brought to his attention, and that he's been assaulted by

such frustrations since his arrival on the property. Truth can't be bought. This is his personal challenge: can he withstand the constant reminder of the very emptiness that compelled him to come to the property in the first place? Can he develop the fortitude, patience, open-mindedness and control of his ego required to fill that void? At this moment, while wrestling with his internal insecurity, Henry loses the current battle and reacts defensively: "So it's better to be a dog," he derisively states.

"What do you mean?," Alex asks, trying to hide his irritation at Henry's tone.

"You said that most animals aren't fully self-aware and therefore don't suffer from egos," Henry says. "So they must be more strongly connected to the Spirit. So you're saying that we would be better off as dogs."

"No, not in all respects," Alex replies after a moment of consideration. "Ego is a side effect of sentient life; of self-awareness. My awareness and reflection upon the perception of individual self, 'Alex,' creates a sense of 'otherness' that compels me to treat people differently than 'me' and 'mine.' But I believe this otherness to be an illusion made of material form overlying the underlying energetic union of Spirit; the one true Self. In other words, were this illusory otherness to wash away, all would be seen as versions of the same. I'm speaking of the ability to see in a purer sense, in the manner the Spirit might see, free from biological drive connected to the continuity of material being; free from individualized form and sense of self; free from the egotistic glasses, and the senses born of the need to survive as this material individualization in this space and time; to see things as they *essentially* are, as opposed to how they transiently exist."

"The dog doesn't develop an ego, true, but he also doesn't possess the capacity to reach and act upon this state of spiritual awareness which humankind is ultimately capable of, and which might represent our highest state of evolution as enlightened beings; beings existing as individualizations aware of and acting based upon non-duality; upon non-separation of essential Self. Reaching such a state and, of course, all the knowledge and lessons acquired along the way and applicable to increasing quality of existence, are dependent upon our intellect and its ability to translate the lessons of science, philosophy and all other disciplines, ideally in league with the communications of the heart. Again, everything is a trade-off. In almost all cases there's an equal and

opposite principle at play such that adding to one side of an equation, so to speak, necessarily entails subtracting from the other side to balance the equation out. In this context, the dog is led more by the unconscious drives of his or her genetic programming and the will of the Spirit within him or her, yes. So in a sense he or she is fortunate not to be misled by an ego; not to have to contend with the illusion that clouds our ability to see the truth.”

“But the dog also lacks our higher mental functioning enabling us to grasp those truths,” Alex continues. “The dog lacks the capacity that comes with the territory of self-awareness precipitating ego. Human beings possess a much greater potential to interpret, understand and appreciate the will and guidance of the Spirit and to receive and apply the rewards of knowledge made available to us through our awareness and greater capacity for reason. The greater this capacity and awareness, the greater the potential rewards, but the greater the potential to overthink as well; to build the ego and to be troubled by one’s accumulation of knowledge.”

“Capacity is equally a boon and a burden, which is the root of concepts like ‘ignorance is bliss’ and ‘with great power comes great responsibility,’ among other associated sayings. So while the dog is precluded from the higher levels of mental fulfillment and reward, he or she is also spared the self-awareness that engenders ego and the self-absorbedness that can lead us to degrade any lifeform not identified as ‘me’ or ‘we’ or ‘us’ that makes those with great capacity such a liability when they don’t accept the responsibility commensurate with that capacity. So it’s always a double-edged sword, with the more capacious mental self opening the door to greater mentally-derived satisfaction and potential production of value for oneself and in the service of life, but which, at least at our current stage of evolution, can block our ability to sense the presence and heed the guidance of the shared spiritual Self that makes this greater capacity a liability for life and the planet upon which it depends.”

It’s entirely dark now. The group sits silently for a minute, Alex’s three compatriots exhausted from their explorational exertions mixed with the comforts of the warming wine and fire, the newcomer lost in contemplation over how to take the seductive words of the nonbeliever. Normally they’d have started dinner by now, but the atmosphere has been altered by the arrival of the newcomer and the spirit of the sermon.

“But even after saying all that about subduing the ego, it occurs to me that humankind’s fight and need to provide protection against the ego’s misleading and quarreling costs, both within ourselves and in our interpersonal relations, offers another possible approach; one that may, in fact, be superior. Perhaps instead of fighting and attempting to subdue the ego we may more accurately appraise and come to terms with it... perhaps the answer is provided through a type of self-realization that all may grasp; a realization of the revelatory, unifying power of humility.”

“What do you mean?,” Kate wonders aloud.

“It has occurred to me before that, ironically, the greatest, truest, most sustainable confidence can be found through humility, and perhaps *that’s* the key to coming to a reasonable, peaceful sense of self as well. Humility may in fact be a core philosophical principle connectable not just to our wrestling’s with ego, but with spiritual truths and constructing collaborative systems and shared identity pursuant of an ideal society. Humility is a perfect example of how ‘the truth shall set you free,’ and may, in fact, be among the best possible antidotes to egotistic insecurity and arrogance and all its innumerable costs.”

“What are you driving out now?,” Henry expresses in exasperation.

“Well, it seems to me that, as I’ve said, the ego is essentially a side-effect of sentience; of awareness of the individualized self and the sense of individuality, especially in the absence of spiritual truth. And I believe the ego possesses an innate tendency toward self-importance and the connected overvaluation of self-reliance; an innate predisposition toward believing it is the most important thing, that it needs no one and nothing and that an improvement in the circumstances of one’s self and those identified as being in one’s group are to be its priority, a priority which, again, without sufficient moral and spiritual development, is to be pursued regardless of the cost to anyone outside one’s self and one’s group, including the overburdened planet and all of life that it supports.”

“Furthermore,” Alex continues, “this characteristic of its existence is exacerbated by the individualistic and greed-centric cultural flame fanned by prevalent western mores. We lose inestimable total quality of life value in the resultant divisive, winner-exploit-loser socioeconomic conflicts that have become ever more global. And I think these costs of egotistic and cultural misleading may only be saved and reinvested in

the best interests of life as a whole by humility-inducing and spirituality-infused truths. These truths include the limitations of human capacity and knowledge, of the mental and physical self, as we've discussed, and the fact that we all misjudge matters and others all the time and need the assistance of others in order to reach our fullest forms, and to seek collaboration with others through shared identity in order to pursue life's collective best interest and ascend towards our evolutionary apex as a species."

"The full acceptance of this humbling set of truths," he goes on, "breeds confidence through a self-reflection and conceptualization, an ego, that's as close as possible to the true self; to a self that's always *simultaneously* immensely capacious and needing of others; a self that always gains strength by giving strength to those that may reciprocate in like kind. We may thus align our egos with this self-realization and gain both self-confidence and faith in the human race and its potential and future through the humbling truth of a more accurate self-realization; a realization merging the great power and potential with the need of the individualization that best grows and gains strength through connection to, identification with and creating reciprocating symbiotic partnerships with others. It comes down to knowing, correctly appraising and feeding the Trinity's strength. We're simultaneously immensely capacious *and* needing of others in order to realize our fullest forms and purposes. *That* may well be the insight of the humbled ego offering the most progress."

"Within the Trinity of Self the body and its pleasures are the most basic and the shortest lived," he continues, "providing the simplest and most common of satisfactions that are, as a corollary, the easiest to come by due to being connected to the weakest link in the chain of the Trinity; the material construct. Then come those of the mind, those connected to the relativity of knowledge which is also limited and dependent upon other minds. Then there's the unparalleled pleasures and connections of the Spirit, the fulfillment of which evokes the feeling of love, the greatest of satisfactions. The body isn't to be undersold, however. It's the most substantive self in the obvious, literal sense, and as the host of the Spirit and the mind and containing the brain that binds the Trinity together; it's absolutely vital that the body be in as good a condition as possible so that the highest quality of life experience can be attained. That high quality experience is unattainable without a high state of functionality of the body and brain; without the complex synergy of organic systems and their electrochemical signaling being near to as fully functional as possible."

“I’m speaking, of course, of what so many take for granted and treat with a begrudging obligation: health. Without good health, without the best functioning of the body and brain which the Spirit and mind rely upon for their interchange, good life is impossible. To me this is why the body being treated as a temple is a wiser aphorism than most people realize, as there’s a direct link between the state of one’s physical being, health, and the will of the Spirit residing within to guide the individual to increase their quality of life and the quality of life of those they influence.”

“In this sense, indulging in health-degrading habits is a slap in the Spirit’s face; a squandering of the invaluable gift of life. Instead, we must summon the knowledge and discipline required to habitually strive to maximize health in order to maintain and increase our capacity to earn a life of fulfilling experience on a level *far* exceeding the easy, fleeting pleasures residing entirely in the body and the neural transmissions of the brain. A pleasurable life isn’t something to be ashamed of, but to be encouraged; it’s an unwrapping of the present, so to speak. But we should, at the same time, cultivate a resistance to taking it to the point of degrading the body or brain of ourselves or others, for this costs far more than it’s worth. We pay these avoidable costs when we aren’t mindful of our corruptibility.”

“You’re talking about inborn evil,” Michael immediately offers, perking up with a sudden surge of confidence that he’s finally standing upon familiar ground. “Man is naturally sinful,” Michael adds.

“Yes, this is an argument used in many intertwined conservative threads; that of the Church, the imperialist, the so-called realist, those that generally seek to control others for their own self-serving purposes that cost total quality of life, and whom concoct ideological justifications for these costs,” Alex responds. “We’re born into sin. We’re naturally abhorrent beasts that must be emancipated from our sinful nature as much as possible. And anyone that isn’t, by the Church and Empire’s definition, ‘civilized,’ is done a service by being saved from their sinful, naturally debauched existence. By civilizing them and converting them and getting them to conform to the worldview of the more militarily-mighty that want their land, their labor and their future consumerism, we lift them out of their heathen savagery. And, says the so-called realist, as if justifying his evil as simply being realistic, it’s the undeniable nature of man to commit sin against his fellow man; to take advantage of him as much as possible; to conquer, crush and exploit and look out for himself.”

“To think otherwise is naïveté; it’s foolish idealism. This is the despicable Ayn Rand perspective. One of the most famous champions of immorality of all time, she was a preacher of conservatism who tried to justify evil by saying something like ‘the only moral imperative in our lives is to seek our own happiness.’ She believed it to be a deluded, childish fantasy to think or act otherwise. Worse yet, we teach these lessons to our children in innumerable ways, both overtly and subtly. Schools encourage what amounts to an ultra-conservative mindset of the jingoistic fascist and national supremacist, teaching children that the USA is the bastion of freedom and democracy and has the divine favor of God, and that we must pledge our absolute fidelity to our ‘indivisible nation,’ implying that everyone is united in support of the prevailing narrow, combative, exorbitant conservative ideology, and that anyone living outside America is thereby inferior, less loved by God and less deserving of ‘his’ gifts.”

“In Church we inculcate our impressionable young minds with the idea that man is naturally evil and must be saved in order to enter a mythical realm, and that all others are heathens destined for eternal hellfire. In movies and in conservative rhetoric we teach kids that good and evil is a simple dichotomy whereby people and identities can be assigned one designation or the other, whereas ‘good and evil’ is actually a spectrum, like most things, the potential for each existing in all of us.”

“No person is absolutely inherently evil, only subject to the limitations of mind and body that make them capable of evil acts, with some more predisposed than others based upon being subject to greater limitations, many of which can be remedied to a great degree through knowledge, discipline, practice and other fortifications of the mind. Yet we teach our kids that some, especially those receiving God’s supposedly discriminating favor, are inherently ‘good,’ while others, especially those not saved and not in God’s favor and living outside western ‘civilization’ are ‘bad’ and must be forced to conform for their own good. This is imperialist propaganda; mind-controlling mechanisms perpetuating profitable divide and conflict.”

“We encourage our youth to think in misleadingly simplistic terms and in manners separating people into ‘them’ and ‘us’ so that they naturally turn against ‘them’ when commanded to do so, like good little brainwashed pawns, and against the best interests of the whole of humankind and life in the process; best interests that can, in reality, *never* be achieved through divisiveness which, of course, is exactly *why* that divisiveness is fostered: because it prevents the ability of people to

come together to upend the greed-serving, excluding ideology that precludes them from pursuing the true best interests that can only be collaboratively created and known through solidarity of identity and purpose. Conservatism is a den of iniquity built upon a bedrock of misleading propaganda hailing from the long-running conservative strategy of enriching those who control politics and own the vast majority of the profiteering entities used to purchase and keep that control. It's all false; a product of corruption."

"How can you be so certain?," Michael immediately inquires, fighting an internal disconcertion at how eager he is to hear Alex's response.

"Because man isn't inherently evil," Alex replies. "Man is inherently good, but also inherently *corruptible*. There's a *drastic* difference; a difference that cannot be overstated. A baby isn't evil, he or she is good, but very vulnerable. He or she has yet to be corrupted by the manipulations of self-serving individuals and institutions and the societal traditions and misperceptions these individuals and institutions perpetuate in their self-service; a self-service to which everyone is vulnerable due to the inherent limitations and susceptibilities of the mind."

"The baby has similarly yet to be corrupted through the vulnerabilities and susceptibilities of his or her neurological construct; through the unhealthy manipulations of the senses, the gratuitous, hedonistic habits that can twist and debilitate the body and the brain and compromise the individual and their ability to follow their heart, develop their morality and discipline and become the greatest, most valuable version of themselves for all that stand to benefit from that highest form of self, including themselves. Habits such as overindulging in high-calorie, sugar-and-preserved-packed, nutrient-empty foods, overconsumption of alcohol and addictive narcotics, seeking sexual gratification at all costs without love and affection, needing endless wealth, material commodities and feelings of power to heap ever more atop the hedonistic pile and to satisfy their idea of themselves; their ego."

"It's this limited, vulnerable, impermanent nature of the body and mind that renders the mental and physical self inherently corruptible. Not inherently malevolent. Not inherently evil. Corruptible towards the course of *causing* evil to oneself and others. Evil, in other words, is an *action*; a potential *effect* of our corruptible nature; it's *not* a characteristic. Corruptibility opens the door to evil based upon the



vulnerable, limited nature of the body and mind. These vulnerabilities and limitations leave us open to being mentally corrupted by already corrupted individuals, and to being physically corrupted by compromising substances and habits, such as those I just mentioned. These corrupting forces are innumerable, from the values we are taught in our indoctrination into society to all the inevitable susceptibilities of which we're physically and mentally subject and unable to resist whenever we lack the knowledge and discipline required to successfully mount such a resistance in the service of life."

"Take two of the best-known adages attributed to one of the fathers of philosophy, Socrates: 'There is one good, knowledge, and one evil, ignorance;' and 'The ancient Oracle said that I was the wisest of all of the Greeks. It is because I alone, of all the Greeks, know that I know nothing.' Personally, I'm not certain that *all* evil would be eradicated with perfect knowledge, for while inconceivably perfect knowledge *might* produce perfect discipline, it's clear that there's a difference between knowledge and the execution of that knowledge; between knowing what's right and having the strength to do what's right. It *might* be possible that a being could know everything but still choose to act in ways that produced evil. And the second line is in the vein of the ultra-skeptics like Descartes and alludes to Socrates' interrogative method, which essentially acts to prove that if you keep questioning someone, eventually you'll end up at an assumption upon which their supposed knowledge is based."

"I believe that making some basic assumptions is necessary in order to live and create value in the world," Alex continues. "I have to assume, for example, that I'm not dreaming, that my actions have real consequences, in order to be fully motivated to take those actions. For there's no reason to believe that my actions *won't* have real consequences, and if I don't assume that they can, then I deny the possibility of being able to add a positive value to life that would be denied absent this assumption. But, anyway, epistemology aside, if you combine his two quotes that I just cited, you essentially get: man is evil because he's completely ignorant. And that, Socrates might argue, is the reason for evil in the world: The perpetrators of evil lack the knowledge to prevent their own evil actions."

"Evildoers are, in essence, victims of ignorance. And I agree that ignorance is a central cause of evil, though perhaps not the only one. All forms of weakness and limitation are causes. Essentially, any stress-inducing demand placed upon the body and mind, any lack of

information, any egotistic misguidance, any unsettling confusion, any pain or neurochemically-hijacking pleasure that's overdone and becomes a dependency; all of these side-effects and susceptibilities of the physical and mental self can create the basis for evil action when their sufferers attempt to address or compensate for them by paying for or stealing that addressment or compensation in an unjust manner rendering further such stresses or deficiencies which they or others must pay for in turn."

"So you don't think that mass-murderers are inherently evil?," Kate incredulously inquires.

"Not absolutely, no," Alex responds. "Yes, some people are naturally more predisposed to produce evil in the world due to their greater mental limitations and certain congenital characteristics, such as, in extreme cases, certain defects of the brain which prevent empathy, moral development and the sense of remorse that marks many psychopaths. But even *then* they aren't entirely evil, only easier to corrupt and more difficult to keep from becoming perpetrators of evil deeds. Hypothetically, were there a drug or surgical procedure available to correct the underlying disorder in the psychopathic brain that precludes their capacity for empathy and prevents their moral development, they'd be rendered closer to the average person in their potential for evil action."

"Any limitations or defects that might be corrected or cured reduce the capacity for evil action in the subject. Would such potential for correction and curing not contradict the inherently evil nature of such individuals, even those diagnosed as 'psychopaths?' If I caused an injury to you that destroyed the same morally-regulating center of your brain and made you far more disposed to evil action would you be *inherently* evil? No, you'd be made a more likely agent of evil due to this deficiency. In every case it's the nature of the self-aware mental self, of the egotistic self, and the nature of the material basis of the body bound by the limits, needs and desires inherent to mental and physical existence that make evil possible. These limitations, needs and desires give rise to the *possibility*, though not the necessity, of corruption, and that corruptibility, in turn, gives rise to the *possibility*, though not the necessity, of causing evil effects."

"And I'd say that the body is the most obviously and easily corruptible, because it needs food and water and is subject to manifold manipulations of the pain and pleasure receptors of the nervous system

and the brain. The body is very easily corrupted through the senses. Drugs, alcohol, sexual impulse, highly caloric foods that manipulate the incentive-based mechanisms of the body evolved through a genetic history of food scarcity to produce cravings and chemically reward the individual that consumes the foods most readily processed into glucose and starvation-staving body fat, like sugar and animal fat – these inputs produce short-lived stimulations of the body which, absent knowledge, discipline, spiritually-guided intelligence, morality and other self-protective shields, the mind can very readily become a slave to, and all too commonly does.”

“The brain, which is of course a part of the body, can be hijacked and used to manipulate, weaken and control the body, forcing it into conflict with the mental and spiritual Self and, in the long run, can turn it against its greatest potential functionality; its highest state of existence; its maximum health and greatest possible quality of life. Addict someone to a drug and their desire, arguably their *need* for and developed dependency upon that drug, can make them abandon what’s in the best interests of their body, mind and Spirit. Trust me, I know. And this physical corruption opens the door to the possibility of all kinds of evils born from this weakness.”

“If the weakness of the dependency is strong enough they might neglect their responsibilities, their children, their work; they might steal; if their state becomes desperate enough, especially when combined with other physiological, social and mental pressures and deficiencies, they might even murder. And this is but one example of physical corruption. The simpler survival-based needs of the body can be the catalyst of evil deeds as well. Thirst and hunger can propel a person to as great of wrongs as drug addiction because the pressures inherent to those immediate needs overwhelm any consideration of the total cost of that survival in all but perhaps the most disciplined, enlightened individual able to allow his or her death if he or she sees it as being the cost of the greater good.”

Alex stretches momentarily and finishes his glass of wine. Kate stands and moves over to the pile of limbs near Michael, passing him a flirtatious little grin and bending over to procure the next load while barely bending her knees, showing-off her backside, pretending not to be doing precisely what she knows that she is. Seeing this, Amanda reflexively looks up at Alex, who maintains his stare into the fire, well aware of Kate’s tactics and keeping his viewing pleasure restricted to his

peripheral vision. Kate's ego-tripping power grab compels Alex to talk through her shameless act.

"And because man, and by that I of course mean the general man, as in man and woman," he adds, smiling adoringly at Amanda while passing Kate only a fleeting, obligatory glance, "is a confluence of selves, of the physical, mental and spiritual self, this inherent weakness born of physical limitation is subject to their mental limitations as well. Personally, I often have to remind myself that people are victims of these limitations and underdevelopments, and that it's not the *person*, per se, that I dislike. People themselves are never innately detestable or disagreeable or unbearable or deserving of any other disparaging label. For it's not that the person his or her self is inherently evil or even inherently unlikable. It's not an inborn rottenness. It's the innate limitation giving rise to corruption that's the undesirable enemy, not the people themselves."

"Their physical and especially their mental limitation, their vulnerability which, through their ego and their ignorance and the other weak points through which corruption may penetrate them... it is these inherent soft spots that can, to some extent, be strengthened, which I often find detestable and impossible to like. And one of the primary problems in human relations is that these two things, the undesirable characteristics inherent to material and mental existence and the people themselves, are almost always conflated. But they're not actually the same thing. This is, of course, why it's very possible to hate those you love and love those you hate, as both the qualities that repel you and pull you in will invariably exist simultaneously within every individualization. Yet the repelling aspects are never innate, as one can see from interacting with any infant."

"The repelling characteristics are developed through the corruptibility that's usually not entirely the fault of the individual, though they must, of course, take some responsibility in building the knowledge and qualities that limit this corruptibility. But my point is that it is the *attracting* qualities that are innate; those which connect us, bring us closer to one another and evoke the spiritual connectivity we call love. I find this reminder beneficial in mitigating and letting go of some of my own anger, frustration and tension when dealing with certain individuals and their bedeviling beliefs and attributes. For when you think about it, everyone that does wrong ultimately does so due to their own weakness and limitation. *That's* what evil is. Not an innate quality

but always a product, or effect, of the cause of mental and physical limitation, susceptibility and corruptibility. Again, there's no act of evil that cannot be traced to some of the many possible accumulated pressures placed upon the culprit or culprits of all evil acts based upon this mental and physical limitation, susceptibility and corruptibility. Thus, I'm absolutely certain that every doer of evil is a sufferer of evil; that every victimizer is ultimately a victim, and extends his, her or their victimization onto those they victimize."

"When you realize this, that every wrongdoing is ultimately caused by some form of pressure, pain, weakness, limitation or the like, that every evil effect is an extension of evil cause, then you're granted the capacity to make peace with those wrongs and not be resentful or harbor ill will or anger or, if the victim, negative self-reflection, as if you were somehow deserving of the wrong. This knowledge is power. The power of peace. The power of understanding the source of the wrong, of the evil, and the power of being able to forgive those that do that evil, and to prevent yourself from diminishing your own self-esteem as its recipient."

"It doesn't mean you accept the wrongdoing itself and don't guard against it and fight to eradicate it, as minimizing wrong is core to doing good; to improving quality of life. It just means you understand, accept and may come to peace with the ultimate cause of that wrongdoing. That it's never the person; never the victim or the victimizer that's the *true* cause, but the victimization of the victimizer passed down to the victims, waiting for someone or something to step in and stop the cycle of victimization."

"So, just to reiterate," Alex continues, "I'm not arguing for no punishment or personal responsibility, as all potential victims must be protected from future victimization regardless of cause. And the disincentive of punishment is required in order to produce that protection. What I *am* arguing for is understanding and connected mitigating action and policy; understanding of the nature of evil action and the production of potential evil doers, and that, if you truly wish to protect its victims, you must go beyond a small picture, case-by-case basis and do everything you can to protect the victimizer from *becoming* a victim, as their victimization is the source of the evil action we all wish to prevent."

"We must cut the cycle of victimization off at its source by identifying and mitigating the causes of evil delivered upon all potential victimizers.

This means many things, many overarching systemic sociological things, including assuring the infrastructure is in place to minimize risks like drug abuse and to maximize education and opportunity across society, especially in the most vulnerable, disadvantaged sectors of society where the mounting pressures most readily build up to evil-doing potential as said pressure can no longer be internalized, but, when discipline and strength diminish, are released onto all victims. Yes, working one-on-one with individuals, understanding their cases and circumstances and attempting to prevent individual recurrences, is valuable, but the big picture matters most.”

“If you don’t successfully address the big picture you’ll forever be forced to address the smaller pictures. The big picture and small picture is comparable to many other metaphors that constantly recur in my thinking, including ‘building from the ground up,’ ‘digging for the root rather than plucking the leaves’ and ‘treating the disease rather than the symptoms.’ And, for me, there’s no way this big picture, this foundation, root or disease, can be separated from the gross inequality of the nation and the world in *all* things influencing quality of life, and all the connected opportunities to prevent the production of evil-causing pressures and the increasing of evil-reducing qualities and opportunities. We need paradigm shifts of politics, business, economics and spirituality that naturally reduce the victimization of future victimizers; shifts away from systems which cause evil by concentrating such a lopsided proportion of all those things which increase opportunity and quality of life in the hands of a finite few.”

“When weakness and limitation are perpetuated by choice free from corruptibility, it might be considered inexcusable, but this is rarely, if ever, the case, for it’s undoubtedly some form of weakness or limitation that underlies that choice. And where that choice is clearly absent, such as in extensions of innate limitations of body and brain, they should be met with compassion and a desire to mitigate those limitations. Instead of simply judging and looking down on people, something which everyone, including myself, obviously, is guilty of, this line of logic dictates that we try to identify and contribute to the reduction or eradication of the cause or causes that engender their wrongdoing. But even absent this arguably morally-imperative attempt, it’s valuable to remember this principle when we feel tension rising within. It’s valuable to remember that *all* people, though to varying degrees, are ultimately victims of their own limitations traceable to the weaknesses and susceptibilities of material and mental existence giving rise to the corruptibility of our bodies and minds.”

“Ignorance, ego, the limited intellect and the underdeveloped discipline and morality of the mental self all open the door to mental corruptibility,” Alex goes on. “This inherent corruptibility of the mental and physical self existing as an extension of the limitations of the materially-formed body and brain exists relative to the strength and capacity of the specific body and brain, and the mind existing within the brain as a bridge between energy and matter. In the relatively weak mind, this corruptibility might be considered a wide open door, whereas the ideally strong, developed, disciplined mind can come close to completely closing the door.”

“It’s an intriguing explanation of good and evil...” Michael softly mutters.

“In the case of the drug addict,” Alex continues, encouraged by Michael’s response, “if he or she had developed a knowledge of the negative cost-benefit ratio of drug dependency and the discipline required to harness that knowledge in preventing such dependency, then he or she would have fortified the vulnerabilities of their mind through which they permitted their body to be corrupted and were thereby driven to do evil to themselves and potentially to all those whose lives overlap their own. The specific examples of both physical and mental corruptibility are virtually limitless, but they’re all derived from the limited, finite nature of physical and mental existence. Those limitations, those needs, the ways in which our mental strength and spiritual communion is diminished by an overindulgence of the senses and the need to feed and maintain our egos comes together in the most common and costly cause of evil: greed.”

“This includes greed in all its forms. And greed, of course, is inextricably bound to ego in a mutually-reinforcing relationship. They feed one-another, and where the one begins and the other ends is often difficult to say. They permeate one-another and coalesce to form inseparable sides of the same monster. And while everyone begins to form an idea of themselves from the moment they gain the capacity for self-reflective, critical thought, in the case of the overblown ego it seems to me that it’s very typically motivated by greed, because all that can be purchased with wealth not only gratifies the senses, satisfying sensory greed, but also fits into the conservative paradigm of putting one in a higher socioeconomic class, and thereby satisfies self-image as well; the ego. Therefore, as the ego grows unchecked it reinforces the greedy motivation through which it attempts to prove itself, creating a self-perpetuating, reinforcing cycle.”

“This is demonstrable through countless examples, such as in the case of a young man seeing a big house and flashy car as signs of being a successful person. He thereby creates an internal need for those things that are both alluring to his senses and which western society tells him marks one’s membership in the upper-class of that society. Because of this, he’s seduced by visions of himself living in that house and driving that car and then, pursuant to being seduced by the signs of conventionally-perceived success, he puts himself in the cycle where he manufactures the persona he believes he needs to attain these things; the persona which he believes would deserve to have these things.”

“He then gradually convinces himself that this manufactured persona, typically pieced together from other observed ‘successes,’ is real, even as those upon whom he’s modelling his persona likely assimilated their character traits from those that came before them, going all the way back to the aristocratic archetype of those that formed our government, and then back to England and so forth. And the majority of our so-called ‘elites’ have always been ruled by their greed-infused egos, for regardless of any high-minded rhetoric the most clever and devious among them may use to cast their acts in a righteous light, when ninety percent of the finite value of all commodities available to humankind for increasing and maintaining our quality of life goes to the aristocracy, the contributors to this status quo are precluded from possessing any *truly* righteous status.”

“Those composing the ninety-plus-percent-of-value hoarders and acting in the arts of propaganda, politics, business and economics to reinforce the methods by which that value is extracted and consolidated in their hands can *never* be righteous, for they reduce the planet’s total quality of life that depends upon the application of that value *to* those lives. So protecting oneself and one’s fellow man from the two-headed monster of greed and ego requires realizing the *immense* negative total quality of life created by both, as the first step in solving any problem is always realizing that the problem exists. It’s about realizing how immense wealth boils down to taking advantage of the weakness of others and excluding others from being awarded a fair share of their contribution to profit; the share that merit dictates they’ve earned; earnings that they’re denied the right to use in increasing their quality of life. After this first realization, we must then realize that not feeding and acting on ego, not acting out of pride or poor self-image, is perhaps the greatest challenge we’ll ever face, but a challenge we must accept, as this universal struggle offers *vast* rewards.”



“Since difficulty is almost always commensurate with reward, meeting this challenge promises the greatest values of understanding and spiritually-enriching love; perhaps more promise than any other challenge we face as individualized beings. The more this sentience-born path to corruption is closed, the wider the avenue leading to our truest, most valuable self opens up to us to our great benefit, and to the great benefit of all those we influence. The hot inflationary air of ego is known as ‘pride,’ though most may not connect the concepts of pride and ego as directly as I do.”

“And,” Alex continues, “it’s not so much that ‘pride cometh before the fall,’ as the Bible contends, for a person can, again, be very successful in the total-quality-of-life-killing conservative measure of ‘success’ by riding their arrogant, overinflated sense of self towards the consolidation of value; for the conservative value system, the plutocracy and unimpeded capitalist constructs reward the self-absorbed egotist. You can ride pride toward the extraction and consolidation of plenty of the finite value available to humanity, often without ever ‘falling,’ at least in the manner in which ‘falling’ is considered in that Biblical context. So it’s not that pride comes before the fall. Rather, pride *is* the fall. The falling away of all that is best; the dropping of the greatest, most fulfilled version of the self capable of producing the greatest total value for life, and being part of the populace propelling humankind toward its highest collective potential.”

Alex pauses and stares into the fire, the exertions of the day starting to catch up to him. He’s gone over these concepts so many times in his mind that reciting them has become almost second nature, though those re-citations change slightly with every iteration and delving discussion.

“So what do you imagine such a person looks like?,” Michael asks after a brief silence. “A person realizing the nature and cost of greed and ego and denying these corruptions and corresponding evils as much as possible?”

After a few moments to consider the question, Alex replies: “Those near-mythical beings most capable of creating the greatest total value for life are those that are selfish about the spiritual rewards found in the connections, love and understanding that may be built between and shared amongst all forms of life; all the Spirit’s forms. As corny as it sounds, they seek to be rich in love; rich in the heart-filling, perfectly-fulfilled spiritual sense; a wealth derived from being connected to and

supporting the best interests of as great a number of lifeforms and to as great a degree as possible, such that this reciprocating love is returned to them and the Spirit living through their heart, exuding its joyful approval of their endeavors. This idealized individual inevitably becomes a conductor of the eternal essence of all life, and is richly rewarded in kind.”

“Such people invest in what Christ called the ‘Inner Kingdom,’ a kingdom constructed and paid for with a spiritual currency accumulated by living in service to life as a whole. When self-interest overlaps and ultimately becomes indistinguishable from the best interests of humanity and life as a whole, that self is drawn closer to the One Self, the Big Self essential to all, blurring the line between the person and the One. I’m speaking of those invaluable few that most live in love *through* others. Those that are capable of and practice seeing things through the eyes and minds of others, and who don’t necessarily build bridges between warring factions so much as they reveal the bridges that were always there, lying hidden beneath ego, greed, ignorance and petty tribal identities and disputes.”

“As all true progressives must be, they’re loyal to principles over specific people, especially the principle of doing what is best for all people, or all lifeforms, over any excluding faction of people or lifeforms. Much of this is based upon their recognition, even if only subconscious, that people, whether individualized persons or grouped into organizations, nations or other groups, can always be corrupted and act towards irresponsibly, immorally self-centered cause to evil effect. The right principles, on the other hand, are right *because* they don’t lead to evil effect, or at least not intentionally.”

“Such principles are incorruptible, and those living by them are incorruptible to the extent which such principles compel their thoughts and actions. Which is why being on the side of the greatest good means serving total quality of life over the small version of the self or any other person or group of people, and entirely precludes the potential of any sense of patriotism or any other such narrowly-identifying form of loyalty superseding proper principled guidance. This is true even when patriotism takes on its highest respective form, the service of the *people* of the nation as a whole, rather than the blind obedience to authority form of patriotism hailed by conservatives. For even this highest form of patriotism, what’s determined to be the service of the greatest good of the entirety of one’s nation, may conflict with what’s determined to be the service of the greatest good of life in total, in which case it’s morally

trumped. The progressive knows this, or at least senses and lives by this.”

“Such people don’t simply react and attempt to win and pull value into themselves for their self-absorbed interests based on individual and limited group identities of company, tribe, ideology and the like but, rather, understand the blinding, misleading nature of most division and the transience of every individualized entity. They listen in the cause of understanding those seen as ‘others’ until they’re so well understood that ‘they’ becomes ‘we.’ They see ‘winning’ and ‘success’ in far broader and more valuable total quality of life terms, and define their own success relative to creating that value and disseminating it across the planet, its people and all its lifeforms, rather than defining it in the conventional capitalistic terms which amount to taking advantage of fear, ignorance, division, incapacity and narrowly-perceived identities in order to extract and consolidate that value, as traditional conservative ideology and orthodox measures of success compel us to do in disservice of life.”

“Where there’s injustice,” Alex goes on, “they do their best not to sanctimoniously attack the perpetrators, refusing to be coerced by their ego to win the argument or appear the better, more righteous individual. Instead they listen, learn, bridge divides and coolly, calmly utilize active listening and engagement until hearts and minds find common cause and identity. These are habits I’m attempting to instil in myself, as I’ve learned over the years and have been repeatedly told by my family that aggressively attempting to win arguments and force a change in people’s minds is mostly ineffective, as it tends to trigger ego-based self-defenses, especially in those whom are insecure in their beliefs, inciting those so engaged towards anger and prompting them to tune you out or retaliate against your assault, rendering your assertions self-defeating. You can’t bridge divides when you’re perceived to be an aggressor or an attacker; someone or something against whom a defense must be mounted.”

“My own experience dictates that, when it comes to revealing the greater good to others, your own understanding is only half the battle, and, depending upon your abilities, is often the easier half. If that understanding doesn’t cross the threshold between you and them then its value is strictly limited. You can only show a person the door, you can’t open it or push them through it; they have to open and walk through it themselves. They have to have their own epiphany, you can’t

have it for them. Therefore, employ your capacities while *divesting* from your ego.”

“Build bridges and gradually break down barriers between yourself and others rather than condemning them and reinforcing those barriers and shallow points of divide, and you’ll end up creating *far* more value in the world. Try to understand things as others do *before* passing judgment, dismissing or condemning them and leaving the bridge between you blocked and impassable.”

“While likely mythical, the ideal of egoless listening and understanding would bind its practitioners together, and by learning from those to whom we are bound our most knowledgeable, valuable selves rise to the forefront both for our own good and for the greatest good of those to whom we contribute value. And I swear it’s ego that prevents most of this; it’s ego that reinforces greedy outlooks motivated by the desire to financially and materially enrich the narrowly-perceived self as separate from the whole, thereby leading to immense quality of life disparities; to inequalities in all means of improving life.”

“So your chain of logic, then,” Amanda speaks up, “is that the makeup of the body and the ego-concocting mind renders us innately vulnerable to being corrupted and becoming agents of evil. That evil isn’t innate, it’s born from weakness; from limitation. And that evil effects most commonly stem from an inseparable union of greed and egotism.”

“And, so, would you not say that greed is the source of all evil?,” Kate adds. “I think you speak against greed more than any other subject.”

“Well, yes, some may say that greed is the root cause of evil and suffering in the world,” Alex replies, “and for good reason. Greed is, nevertheless, not the *root*, but the destructive, incalculably costly by-product of the combination of the many physiological, psychological and mental needs, desires, limitations, susceptibilities and the like which we’ve been discussing. It is, again, the inherent *corruptibility* of humankind *through* the limited, vulnerable, needing and craving body and mind and the insecure ego ever antagonizing us to bolster it which drives us to do evil. Greed is a mechanism made from these many pieces, these many effects of biological existence, by which most of said evil is done, both when we deliver it upon ourselves and when we deliver it upon others. That is, it is *because* we possess bodies connected to neurochemically-signalling brains which evolved for survivalist means to reward us for sensory gratifications, for the rich foods that supply energy that lasts for long stretches of possible

scarcity, for sexual stimulation that leads to procreation and species survival, for smells, tastes, sights and sounds which signify freedom from danger and opportunities for abundance and procreative potential and other biological advantages. It is because of this that we are corruptible when those gratifications come to command us.”

“Greed and egotistic identity enter us *through* corruptibility. Greed and egotism aren’t inevitabilities, however. They aren’t inherent to humanity, no matter how much the overlordship class has to gain by our believing such justifications for immorality. Rather, greed and ego drive us *because* of our corruptibility; because our minds are limited; because we possess insufficient discipline and knowledge; because our psyches are vulnerable and our egotistic notions of ourselves take hold of and have such an immense, ongoing impact upon us; because of our nature as individualizations, and because our need to sustain our bodies and brains makes it so difficult to see the spiritual truth of universally shared Self spoken through the heart, and led to by reason and philosophy.”

“It’s these inherent qualities of being material selves with limited brains bearing limited mental capacities that makes us corruptible *through* them, and that thereby makes it possible to deliver evil, i.e. pain, suffering, injustice... the disservice of ourselves and others and the turning away from the greatest good... the betrayal of the best interest, including the fact that the greatest good for the many can only be reached through the collaboration and symbiotic service of all individuals, *never* through tribal, narrowly-identifying thought and cutthroat cause...”

“Greed is the culminating quality, with greed in *all* its forms being a label applicable to all that which creates the greatest evil in the world, including the evil done by the glutton, the alcoholic, the drug addict and the like unto themselves and those around them whom they affect. On the larger scale there’s the systemic greed done by the consolidating class of aristocrats and their plutocrats that so greedily extract, hoard and consume, thereby limiting the amount of resources and opportunities by which the vast majority may improve the quality of their lives, instead being forced to fight for basic opportunities, often including the opportunity to survive.”

“The lines between these things are clear. They are intertwined, in fact, like all things. There is no separation: physical bodies and brains and their limitations, vulnerabilities and susceptibilities giving rise to our

corruptibility as their carriers and dependents potentiating evil action cumulating in every manner of greed. For the greediest of society cost the majority the most total value *along* this line; by falling prey to their inherent corruptibility combined with gaining power and consolidating resources and feeding their need for gratifications of all kinds, including egotistic gratification, at *immense* cost to everyone, for they affect *everyone*, especially the super-rich amongst them. No one is an island, and the greed of the avaricious ripples across the global seas to butterfly-effecting, tidal-waving destructive proportion. Counteracting greed and evil action in general is the foremost challenge of mankind, and requires a confluence of many things to be as successful as possible.”

“It requires instilling major overarching societal systems of governance, economics, business and spirituality which naturally disempower evil, greedy means; the means by which wealth and power are consolidated and used against the best interests of the many; systems which also naturally foster a sense of shared identity and connected conviction spurring collaboration in common cause; *not* in equally-rewarding communist cause, but mutually-beneficial meritocratic common cause.”

“Such systematic design and implementation is a whole subject unto itself. But on a more personal level, guarding against corruptibility and evil, including greed, requires the development of morality through philosophical logic and the foundational principles to which it leads when most reasonably directed, as well as knowledge, generally speaking, and its necessary accompaniment: discipline; the difference between knowing what’s right and doing what’s right, both for one’s self and for others.”

“And two of the areas of knowledge possessing the greatest potential to reduce the causes and effects of corruptibility and evil are the interrelated understandings of Spirit and ego. Seeing everyone as a version of the One and developing the discipline *not* to feed any narrowly, misleading, humanity-dividing perception and limiting conception of self. Personally, I believe it’s all of these things which I just mentioned which represent the highest possible purpose of the intellect; they are the most vital and valuable of subjects for anyone to point their minds toward understanding and, upon gaining understanding, toward applying to their own lives and society as a whole. These are the systems, elucidations and practices most pursuant to the highest total quality of human existence.”

“So, to your question, Amanda,” Alex continues, “if I had to pick a top two enemies of life, those would be them: ego and greed. But, again, they are not really distinct qualities, as I mentioned and as you just reiterated, as perfect distinction is an illusion born of ignorance and limited intelligence; qualities that are among the vulnerabilities by which we may become agents of evil. Corruptibility is like a mold entering fruit through weakness in its protective skin, with evil being the rot to which this may lead.”

“Corruptibility enters mankind through soft spots inherent to mankind’s mental and physical existence which, when not identified, fortified and protected against penetration, become the precursors of evil cause. And the more we harbor these soft spots and give in to the infiltration of corruptibility, encouraged by those that exploit these soft spots for their own greedy, egotistic purposes, and the more this corruptibility is linked to overgrown egos, resources and capacity, the more evil we may make.”

“What’s important from a theological perspective, from the cynical perspective of protecting people from being made to feel subordinate to mythical higher powers and institutions,” Alex looks at Michael as he says this, “is that we dispel the myth that this inherent limitation, weakness, vulnerability, susceptibility – whatever you wish to call these innate characteristics of the mental and physical self that make us corruptible – are indications of inherent evil, because they aren’t. We are not born as evil beings, for evil is in thought and especially actions and their effects, not in the being his or her self. Evil deeds don’t indicate evil people, in other words; they indicate the inherent *potential* for evil born from inherent corruptibility. For, as I’ve said, corruptibility can be mitigated by the disciplined, principled mind and, more importantly, in the context of the Trinity of Self, corruptibility is *not* a characteristic of the spiritual Self.”

“Being purely energetic and not subject to the limitations and vulnerabilities of the finitely-formed and existing body and mind, the Spirit is incorruptible. But the Spirit is only one third of the Trinity, though the basis of all three; that upon which all else, all individualized bodies and minds, is entirely dependent. For, again, as soon as the Spirit expanded from its singularity to its limitless plurality and gave birth to spacetime in order to frame that plurality in a material and temporal context, it permitted the rise of limitless identities and desisted from being the one cause of all effects. It bound itself to an infinite expansion of material manifestations and interplaying forces born of that

expansion, and the organic life that was gradually moulded and evolved from this inconceivably long-running confluence of forces which the Spirit continues to guide through the heart and our evolving blueprints.”

“It’s the mortal nature of the physically-formed body and brain, and the mind housed within and subject to the stresses and vulnerabilities of that short-lived structure that, when in defiance of the Spirit, creates evil. The Spirit can’t prevent this, only guide and influence the mind to guard against and resisting contributing to it. So, humanity is locked into this root conflict between its corruptibility and incorruptibility, and the more the cumulative historical lessons are learned by our collective minds to avoid the evil caused by the first, and gravitate towards the connecting love and justice promoted by the second, the more we progress as a direct result.”

“So you believe that God, or the Spirit, as you call him, or it, or us, or whatever... is the natural savior of mankind,” Michael offers with a smile, thinking that, finally, Alex concurs with a core tenet of his Church.

“He’s making an effort to find common ground,” Alex thinks to himself. Most of those on proselytizing missions attack the non-believer with a reckless abandon and disregard for any theology not their own, closed off from its reasoning and considering it an inferior pagan system of belief that they refuse to even entertain. The religious individual’s self-confirmed belief that they are automatically more pious than the atheists, agnostics or spiritual seekers always rankled him.

Alex had long found it hard to conceal his disdain for the self-righteous that based their egotistic sense of superiority on a mythically divine agency concocted for the purposes of consolidating man-made power, and that ignorantly, without a shred of evidence or logic, claimed jurisdiction over morality and the fantasy of an afterlife and the particulars of an all-powerful being they imagined reigned over us. It’s all sickening self-assurance voided of any true substance. So it’s no wonder that evangelicals become immediately incensed and self-defensive when their beliefs are challenged, as this defensiveness is a sure sign of insecurity arising from a subconscious awareness of being in the wrong, and must occasionally surface.

Alex replies to Michael’s question regarding the notion of God being the savior of mankind: “Well, yes and no. In parallel with religious dictates, the perpetual guidance and irreproachable will of the Spirit is the best guard against corruption and the evil to which it leads. At the same time, however, everything that shores up the mental and physical



vulnerabilities that invite corruptibility and it's potentiating evil are vital as well: knowledge, discipline, gaining control of the ego, being dedicated to listening and bridging divides, abstaining from the habits that weaken the brain and the body and so forth. But the rewards to employing these mental qualities are *lived*, not post-lived, and are given to the practicing individual and all the people that this individual impacts."

"The Spirit, the spiritual Self of all of life, is the guiding guardian; the protector that doesn't *force* its protection upon the individualization, because it's the mind that ultimately controls the actions of the Trinity of Self which each individualization represents one union of. Instead, the Spirit eternally offers its guidance and inspiration, and can never lead you astray due to its purely energetic nature not being subject to the limitations of the material and mental realms. The Spirit is, again, innately incorruptible."

"People speak of the 'darkened heart' or the 'twisted heart' or what have you, but the heart pains and aches, it figuratively expands and collapses, all in response to the creation and sharing or loss of love, ever offering guidance *away* from those things that corrupt. It is only the egotistic, insecure mind and psyche, often pulled along by the corrupted body, that can become darkened and twisted and pave the downhill path to evil. It's never the heart. Because the heart can only communicate the collective will of the unlimited life it lives through all beings; it cannot be the driving force of the ego and greed made in the limited mind, and isn't subject to the sensory manipulations of the material self; the body. Because it's unfixated in the finite nature of material and temporal existence and unbounded by the individualized self-perception of the egotistically self-aware mind it's not subject to mental and physical vulnerabilities."

"It's invulnerable," Michael whispers, his heart confirming the thought.

"Yes, exactly," Alex agrees, sensing that Michael is catching a glimpse of the door. "Due to its very nature, the Spirit cannot be weakened or corrupted, and because of this it cannot be the cause of evil, for evil is always rooted in a weakness it doesn't possess. Yet, as the force of life and the essential core of all things in existence and, indeed, of existence itself, I believe its will is to bring about the best possible existence and total quality of life for its total collective individualizations. It seeks what's in the best interests of itself, as all selves do, and that best interest is to raise its full forms of self to their height. In accordance

with that pursuit it communicates instinctively with the mind and rewards the connectivity of its individualized manifestations; it rewards the individualized life for its closeness to other lives, as well as its closeness to life in general and the world harboring life, as it's inseparable from all to which we connect."

"That reward is the life-affirming, heart-filling, uplifting currency we call 'love,' the sense we commonly consider a mere emotion, but which is actually a manifestation of spiritual communion. It's actually the one core emotion, I believe. There's a thin line between love and hate for a reason: because, if it comes from the heart, it's love. When someone says they hate someone whom they loved, it isn't hate, at least not the type of hate possessed by the mind for something one finds contemptible, it's the feeling of the love that once expanded their heart now deflating. Their hate's based upon love; it's the imperilling or ceasing of that connection."

"What are you suggesting, exactly," Kate asks, "that there's no difference between emotions?"

"Only relative difference, as with all things," Alex responds. "It sounds corny, but it's all love. Love is spiritual communion, and is the basis of all emotion. Love is the desire of the Spirit, the essential-most, eternal Self, to return to its original state; to its home, if you will: perfect unification. When the Spirit split from its singularity of all energy that composes all spacetime and matter, for the sake of infinite possible perspectives on existence, into an infinite plurality, the 'emotion' that we call love was naturally created: the longing to return to our nature; the desire for togetherness; to be whole; the desire for all of the Spirit's boundless manifestations of that essential-most energy into matter to coalesce, moving back toward our most natural state; more natural than nature itself. The more together and inseparable we feel, the more love we feel and experience, the more that essential Self within us is fulfilled. All emotion is based upon this core evocation of the essential Self: love."

"It's that which drives us above all: to return to a sense of togetherness, of love, even as we exist as individualized forms of the one true being. Which is why love and sorrow are inseparable and sometimes exist in tandem. Some love may be lost as other love is gained. The sense of heaviness of the heart, of the heart filling or aching, expanding in realized love or receding in the painful loss or denial of love; these are interrelated phenomena of the spiritual connectivity or severed connections built or broken between forms of the same spiritual Self."

Hearts fill when the bonds are established and interwoven, gaining strength, and hearts retract in the pain of broken or damaged bonds between the Spirit's harboring manifestations. When the longing for fullness is fulfilled in a reciprocating bridge with other forms you increase your spiritual wealth, which is why the better built and more numerous your bridges the happier you're likely to be."

"This spiritual wealth building towards happiness is created by increased closeness and connectivity between individualizations and across the living planet which, in turn, increases understanding, even when that understanding is subconscious. For the more you understand someone or something, the more you come to love them or it, and the more you love that person or thing the closer you become to them or it. Understanding is always the precursor to love because the inseparability of all individualized forms of self is the greatest understanding that there is, and this is love itself; so as it's approached, the sense of love, of spiritual union, grows. It's all part of the same spiritual currency, whether it's counted by the conscious mind or not."

"Humans are clearly not the only beings capable of collecting this currency. And even when the emotion seems negative, it's a facet of the same multifaceted spiritual evocation of closeness. When the heart aches from loss or from being spurned or from a tragedy, it's an outlet of the same love. For such seemingly negative emotions can only be experienced if the closeness, the original love, was already established. You cannot know hate without knowing love, for harming or threatening love, love of oneself and others, is the harbinger of hate."

"These heart-breaking, aching pangs are an upwelling of love; the reminder that closeness is risky but, as is said, is well worth it, for it's far better to have loved and lost, to have felt the expansion and risk the deflation, than to never expand. For love is the most intrinsic element of existence; the upwelling of the essential-most Self; and the risk of losing it comes with the territory of life. And due to the riskiness of love people build up mental self-defense mechanisms in the attempt to control and qualify its creation, or to outright prevent its creation in the case of those badly burned by so-called 'broken hearts.'"

"That's definitely true," Amanda agrees, suddenly being reminded and made intensely aware of her own considerable level of risk with Alex.

"Alas, our minds cannot control our hearts," Alex continues. "The mental self is subject to the spiritual, most essential self, and vice versa,

at least relative to each mortal lifeform with, again, the mind forming the bridge between the energetic Spirit and the material body. When that bridge is broken upon the death of the body and the mind it brings about, of course, the Spirit can no longer be affected by that mind or its thoughts or actions. It's the immortal Spirit that survives all, and its interconnectivity with every form of itself, felt in the heart as love, is the overriding force. Thus, once connections are made, once the intertwined mental understanding and spiritual communion together described as 'love' is firmly set, people become highly vulnerable to the potential pain of that bond being broken. Love reflects what may be seen as the only vulnerability of the otherwise invulnerable Spirit: its desire for cohesion."

"It's as if the Spirit inherently aches at the self-imposed dissolution of its singularity, ever desiring to reestablish this natural state of perfect uniformity. It's likely that the desire of the Spirit is to exist in infinite forms for its limitless basis of experience while at the same time guiding those forms to be as bound as possible, like wanting two things which can never perfectly coexist, but which it's inherently driven to pursue nonetheless. The Spirit seeks an infinite number of perspectives upon and experiences of existence, which is why space, time and matter exist in the first place."

"At the same time our essential Self also longs for each of those individualized manifestations of its energy to experience as high a quality of existence, as great an individualized experience, as possible, and it knows, and the heart within all of us in the love we feel for one another tells us, that this maximization of quality of life, the height of experience for life as a whole, depends upon closeness, compassion and cooperation based upon the spiritual realization that we're infinite forms of the same being. The more of its limitless manifestations realize and live by this truth, the greater heights its total life will reach; heights which cannot be reached without this core truth being grasped by its manifold forms. For without it we act under the illusion of separation and absolute individuality creating constant conflict and incalculably great loss compared to our highest potential. The Spirit knows that conflict precludes the greatest total quality of experience."

While Michael is moved by Alex's words, this sense is stifled by the fact that he'd recalled and been reflecting upon something Alex had said earlier which he perceived as a definite flaw in his theory, something that both excited and disappointed him. Shaking his head and smiling uneasily, Michael states: "You said something a while ago about all

selves seeking their own best interests. You implied that the most valuable people are those that are selfish for spiritual wealth. That to me this is an error; an ugly idea. It's as if you're contradicting yourself, especially when you use it in the context of God, or the Spirit. To suggest not just that every person but God himself is selfish... It's just so ugly and incorrect, I'm sorry. I act to do good for others all the time, not simply to benefit myself."

Michael's comment brings Alex back to college. He had the same dispute with a professor after he'd expressed his epiphany that selfishness is not actually a negative characteristic, but an innate, inseparable quality of self. In the end, the professor didn't necessarily disagree, but basically said that life would be better lived with an absence of this "cynical belief."

"You can only be yourself, in the sense of being your material and mental self, wouldn't you agree?," Alex asks.

"Yes, of course I'd agree," Michael replies, thinking that perhaps the wine is getting to Alex considering how obvious is the answer to his question. "He's finally made a clear error," Michael thinks to himself, for he knows that selfless acts occur all the time; every day. "It's quite obvious that I'm myself," Michael continues. "This goes without saying, even if you allow for the possibility of a shared spiritual Self."

"Right," Alex replies. "So you're a self. And as a self you're both instinctively and consciously compelled and conditioned, as both a matter of survival and through an innate desire to live a fulfilling, happy, high quality life, to do those things you believe are good for you and to avoid those things which are not good for you, in a general sense. That is, all selves are compelled to do those things they believe benefit them and to avoid doing those things they believe are to their detriment."

"This is simply the unavoidable, undeniable nature of self; of the whole Trinity of Self, as a matter of fact. Even when your thoughts and actions end up harming you more than they help you, such as in the more clear-cut example of the drug addict, your *intent*, your motivation for thought and action, is *always* self-interest. The addict is overwhelmed by the desire and the physically-developed dependency upon the neurological, chemical rewards and psychological comforts provided by the drug, so much so that, in the absence of sufficient knowledge and discipline, he or she is unable to prevent what's essentially an overall quality-of-life-reducing, even potentially fatal habit. But without this knowledge, and

lacking sufficient discipline to effectively apply it, the drug addict is motivated by self-benefit to seek-out and administer the drug for its neurochemically-induced pleasure. This selfish motivation is the impetus of every thought and action across the entire possible spectrum of thought and action.”

“Such selfish motivation is indivisible from all thought and action; from the small-scale actions like scratching an itch to relieve discomfort, getting off the couch to retrieve food from the fridge, going outside for fresh air and sunshine and increased opportunities of experience, to all the ways we entertain ourselves and seek out fun and pleasure and sustain our lives all the way up to the large-scale actions, like, say, deciding to move across the country because we think we’ll benefit from the change of environment, or the decision to change careers because we think we’ll make more money or feel more fulfilled or what have you... There are innumerable, almost infinite examples. And in none of these examples is the intent to benefit oneself *not* the motivation. Even the person that commits suicide does so out of the intention of self-benefit; their drive to end their anguish is so strong that they determined they’d be better off not living at all than they’d be continuing their life of suffering.”

“Yes, in all these examples self-benefit seems the motivation for the action,” Michael agrees. “But what of the selfless actions I think you’ve purposefully left out in order to make your case? What of those actions in which a person seeks to help others, to alleviate suffering, to improve the life of others in countless ways? How are these actions to be considered selfish? How can they be considered anything other than selfless?”

“Because you can only ever be yourself, and because the nature of self is to, above all, do what is believed to benefit the self, even in these cases where the motivation is mental and spiritual reward, and where the beneficiary is not *limited* to oneself but, as always, includes oneself,” Alex responds. “These actions you speak of promise rewards for the mental and especially the spiritual Self which can become just as addictive as the rewards of the physical and egotistic self, though on a different level. The cases of which you speak offer the rewards created and held within the mind of knowing you’re doing the right thing, the moral thing, the thing that is best and that benefits more than *solely* yourself, though they clearly benefit you as well because you feel better as a consequence of acting in the way you believe is right. You feel better about yourself. And in addition to and in connection with these

mental rewards such actions offer the best rewards of all: the rewards of the Spirit. Fullness of heart.”

“This is the spiritual enrichment received when we serve not just ourselves, but life; when we truly are making the world a better place and, through these actions, are more strongly connected to and in league with the Spirit residing within ourselves, within the hearts of those we assist, and within the world in general. These rewards are inimitable. They uplift and inspire and impassion and enrich more than the rewards of the body and even the mind. They’re possessed by the individualized self through the mind in connection with the Spirit, with the most essential Self whose presence is rewardingly increased at the same time. And, relative to this theory of inherent selfishness and, indeed, to most of the concepts I most believe in, these actions are *mutually* beneficial. They benefit others at the same time as they benefit the individualized self.”

“We can, and we all do, to various degrees at different times, act for the benefit of other people and toward the best interests of humanity and the world while *simultaneously* acting in our own self-interest, motivated by the promise of the selfish rewards that compel all actions. The point is that acting in benefit of ourselves and in benefit of others are *not* mutually exclusive actions. This is a critical and even invaluable principle to comprehend and apply to our lives. *Selfishness is not inherently bad*. Just because an act is selfish and is in our own interest doesn’t preclude it from and make it mutually exclusive with the best interests of others. Something that we do for ourselves, in other words, we may also do for others. In fact, this is true of all the best actions most contributing to the will of the Spirit and best able to bring us its incalculable rewards.”

“And this remains true even if we’re not aware of our self-interest; even if we tell ourselves we do something exclusively for others. Understanding selfishness and the creation of value and the propriety of beneficial actions in this way alters the light in which we may see many related points. For example, consider how it’s said that some people ‘use’ other people in certain situations. In connection to the fact that every self acts in ways that benefit that self, even when that selfishness benefits others, the truth is that everyone uses everyone; everyone uses everyone and everything, in fact, for that is what ‘using’ is: deriving value through the application of or tapping into a person, place or thing. But that doesn’t make ‘using’ something, or even someone, a ‘bad’ thing. It’s the same as the difference between a parasitic and a

symbiotic relationship in application to the basis of inherent selfishness. In healthy, mutually-beneficial symbiotic relationships, both sides, or people, 'use' one another to derive as equal an amount of benefit from one another as possible."

"In romantic relationships," Alex goes on, "one side 'uses' the other for everything that may be derived from such relationships, including the satisfactions of camaraderie, intimacy, comfort, security, love, sexual release... a balancing out of personalities and a sharing of values, ideally... the building of mutually beneficial lives around one another. We just don't think of this as the couple 'using' one another, because the word 'use' has negative connotations in this context. But that's what it is. If the couple had no *use* for one another they wouldn't be together, now would they? The motive of self-benefit or the *use* of someone, or something, in other words, doesn't make an action, or planned action, a bad or negative thing, but a necessary thing, even a positive thing."

"We're talking about utility value, in essence; the usefulness of a person or thing in adding quality to one's life and the life of others. And, in truth, when you boil it down, *all* true value is utility value. Yes, some things which we perceive as valuable have no utility, but this is an illusion based upon errant perception. In truth, it's always a matter of what thoughts, beliefs, actions and resources are valuable *because* they're useful in improving the quality of our existences. For, as I recently said, I honestly believe that the actions promising the greatest reward for ourselves *are* those that benefit others, as I find spiritual benefit, the benefit derived through understanding, collaboration, closeness, love... to be the most beneficial. And the greater the total benefit one creates across the people and places receiving that benefit, the greater the reward for everyone involved, including oneself."

"From this point of view the exact opposite of the conventional wisdom is true, it's just misunderstood in the West and the greed-worshipping world following our lead: the most righteous actions are actually the *most* selfish in that the best way to benefit one's self is to derive benefit from benefitting as many other selves as possible, especially when considering the fact that the truest, most essential Self is the Spirit and that, therefore, the more of its manifestations benefit from your actions the more the truest, greatest lasting form of self benefits. The more people truly learn and understand this fact the better off the world will be. The relative goodness or badness of the action depends upon whether and to what degree the act is mutually beneficial, and this mutual benefit is accrued commensurate with the greatest rewards of



those that create that benefit. Whether an act is negative or not doesn't depend upon selfishness, for selfishness is, again, an unavoidable quality of self. Rather, it depends upon the relative value that action creates or consumes for life. This is, of course, all linked to the total value concept I've spoken of."

Michael is both pleasantly surprised and disappointed by Alex's response, his emotional state flipped from only minutes before. He thought he'd found a chink in the armor, but is now convinced it was likely illusory; the mirage of self-assured certainty. He's now forced to admit that Alex's ideas seem substantive; a substance which cannot coexist with previous semblances of substance that he's now beginning to strongly feel were never quite as solid as he'd been led to believe. His footing is crumbling.

"You're speaking of the total value concept used to judge the true value, or worth, of all things, correct? The concept that you championed in *Time for True Democracy*, right?," Henry chimes in, addressing Alex. "Whether they're an individual, an organization, a product or service, an economy, a system, an idea, what have you..."

"That's right," Alex concurs. "And I'm very pleased that you read it, I must admit. Anyway, one of the principal points I tried to get across through the Total Value theory is that the source of the greatest evil in the world are the systems that incentivize, reward and thereby encourage the removal and hoarding of value through exploitative methods that are commonplace and even revered in conservative culture; systems and beliefs that encourage organizations and individuals to take as much advantage of disadvantage as possible; that socially, financially and materially reward them for taking as much as possible while, per the profit equation, necessarily giving back and distributing as little value as possible to life, as this distribution, this reinvestment, would cut into their profits and reduce their narrowly-conserved, all-important 'bottom line.'"

"And this connects directly to what I was just talking about. What makes this unrestricted free market system tied to globalization and the military adventurism by which it spreads and the equity-excluding business owners that benefit from it so costly to total quality of life is that their motivations are not just selfish, as all motives are, but are, again, irresponsibly, immorally, exorbitantly self-centered. Their benefits are directed solely at the owners of the business and, as a direct consequence, are not mutually-beneficial and not symbiotic, but

*parasitic*. For despite what their commercials and PR campaigns are deviously designed to trick us into believing, the only real goal of the vast majority of business enterprises, especially the bigger, farther-reaching corporations not possessing ties of love, understanding and concern for members of the community like smaller, local family-run businesses, is to maximize the bottom line. And this absolute pursuit of bottom line maximization necessarily means that the value pulled from the worker, consumer and the planet *cannot* be shared, but must be extracted and consolidated, as something claimed by one cannot be claimed by others.”

“This is, of course, the basis of the ever-growing disparity of income, wealth and quality of life not just in the US but across the planet: a profit is not made by one without being taken from another, for it’s always the value taken from the worker, the buyer, the planet and everyone adversely affected by the declining stability and natural resources of the planet that constitutes the majority of profit.”

“While the risk-taking, innovation and hard work of the primary profiteers plays a role in profit extraction as well, the way in which those profits are derived and the manner in which they’re consolidated to the exclusion and immense cumulative detriment of the majority tends to be ignored in corporate culture, even as these are the only concerns to the moral people that have seen, as I have, that morality is based upon the point of life: the pursuit of the maximization of that life for as many lives as possible. Those places and people from where and from whom profit is plundered are by and large excluded from benefiting from that extracted value, both because it’s taken from them and because they’re denied the chance to claim it when they’re denied equity, which most people are.”

“And this is the only thing our free-to-exploit free-market economic evaluations focus upon,” Alex continues: “how much bottom line value is absorbed by the company’s greedily-excluding ownership. It’s called profitably *produced* value, but when you understand the economic chain and have any overriding morality it’s more accurately to be described as profitably *extracted and consolidated* value; value which the vast majority of life is thereafter denied access for the sake of improving their quality of life. For it’s extraction and consolidation that produces profit. It’s never magically made from thin air, and it most certainly isn’t derived solely or even in majority from the efforts, risks and ingenuity of those it primarily enriches. Those that benefit the most financially from the bottom line profits of business are but a *very*

minuscule fraction of those participating in the whole economic chain of cause and effect of that business. A very small fraction of the global population owns any significant stake in any major company. And yet we're taught to focus on the market value of companies above all; on their profitability and stock valuations."

"In focusing our valuations in this conventional, conservative manner we're expected to ignore or be outright ignorant of the fact that their stock prices, and the increases and decreases in those prices, are based upon their demonstrated, perpetuated capacity to take the value derived from the inputs of untold numbers of people and places and consolidate them into the profits and wealth enjoyed by an extreme minority, and in the inseparable disservice and suppressed potential and quality of life of the vast majority. Sadly, you'd be hard-pressed to find those that share this realization and its implications; the primary implication of which is that most suffering is rooted in this globally-growing systemic parasitism."

"Where, then, do you believe the economic focus should lie?," Michael asks, immediately thinking of Jesus's line from *The Book of Matthew*: "Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." For the first time in his life Michael wonders if 'the kingdom of God' is an earthly kingdom in which all lives exist as aspects, or versions, of God, and that if this passage from the Bible refers to the inner kingdom of the full heart.

"You have to ask yourself more of the bigger picture questions that round out a broader understanding of the complete chain of cause and effect of economic activity," Alex replies. "Don't limit your focus to the profitability and stock valuation of enterprises and their extracting owners, but broaden your field of vision to include *all* participants and *all* those affected; to include the workers, the buyers and the planet as well. If you ignore the complete chain of cause and effect then you ignore the critical questions and deny your responsibility in participating in that chain while also excluding yourself from the possibility of being a moral, progressive person. It's a matter of asking and finding reliable answers to a long list of revealing questions pertaining to *total* impact; questions which most conservatives never think to ask or, if they do ask, would rather not know the answers to and will tend to do as much as possible to prevent others from asking, especially if they possess a major financial incentive in the greedy yields of conservative business and economic policies."

“And, again, I’d argue that true progressives *must* ask these questions; questions we’re commonly discouraged from asking. When the big picture is laid bare, are things improved for the whole or made worse for the whole by the practice, industry, organization or whatever it is you’re evaluating? How much total value does a company produce if its profits and its contribution to gross domestic product goes to increase the quality of life of but a small handful of individuals that already enjoy a high quality of life, and that see no significant increase in their quality of life from the ceaseless value extraction and consolidation we call ‘wealth?’ And how much total value does this company produce if they extract their value through exploiting the disadvantages of those already living very low quality of lives, who have the most quality of life to gain from even the *tiniest* increase in personal resources which they’re denied by the methods of value extraction and consolidation; by practices that take ruthless advantage of their relative disadvantage? And what if this company pollutes and warms the planet through its natural resource removal and pushes the hawks in government to invade and occupy nations possessing large caches of these natural resources, murdering countless resisters and collaterally-killed civilians along the way?”

“And what if that company then offers us a product that causes further environmental ruin and slows society’s adoption of cleaner energy products, or degrades the health and long-term potential, happiness and quality of life of its customers? What is the total value of the product to its consumers, workers and the planet? How much does it raise their quality of life, and is that offered increase greater than that of comparable products offered by their competitors, and is it enough to justify any total quality reductions produced by their business practices? What is the total cost of the harvesting of the resources that go into their products? Are those resources sustainably extracted and reinvested in such that planetary health and stability are maintained or, ideally, improved, or are they extracted in an unsustainable, irresponsible manner costing the people and the planet more than the produced value in the long run?”

Alex continues his rhetorical questioning: “What increase in value and quality of life is experienced by the equity holders of the company, if any? Did the profit extracted improve their lives significantly, or was the extraction not in service of quality of life improvement? And what is the opportunity cost and unrealized quality of life increases of the workforce denied an equity share of that enterprise? None of these costs go into the traditional assessment; only measures like profits, GDP

and stock values; the turning of a blind eye toward the responsibility for spreading evil of *Wall Street Journal* analysis. The bigger total value picture is missed; the only important picture: *how is total life affected?* So the self-absorbed, greedy, egotistic human is promoted as a direct result of the prevailing, narrowly self-serving business and economic systems and the political system they basically own that exists under the pretense of democracy.”

“In fact, the way I see it, so long as the majority of those contributing to the economy are placed in the liabilities column of the balance sheet of their businesses as those with flat wages and salaries to be minimized... to be reduced to the lowest possible point where able people will still apply for them... to be bottomed-out along with all the other costs of doing business so that a very exclusive class of equity holders can gain from this minimization... so long as this is the case such businesses will forever be inherently exploitative and contribute to the severe restriction of the total quality of life of the vast majority.”

“The traditional conservative economic, business and political structures in the U.S. and those nations following our lead are, in other words, inherently oppressive. Excluding the vast majority from enjoying the unrestricted gains of economic production distributed to a strictly restricted class of equity holders can only grow the disparity in all things, including income and wealth and opportunity and the quality of life all things of value potentiate for most participants.”

“Until all contributors to commerce possess a merited share of the bottom line based upon the relative value they contribute to their business the disparity in people’s quality of life and the minimization of the majority must continue as a direct consequence. It’s inevitable; a basic computation of subtraction balanced by addition to maintain a zero sum. Someone or something *always* pays for the value extraction, especially when unsustainably extracted; especially when the person or planet can’t forever endure the loss. The constructs of our businesses and economic teachings encourage evil in this way, for the disparity in value distributed by the economy is the extent to which total quality of life value is lost and the stresses of miserable lives are spread. Our prevailing systems, in other words, are the most glaringly and disturbingly costly extensions of the corruptibility-based evil evolved by those in power through the ages.”

“Yeah, that’s not exactly the way we learned it in our Econ 101 and accounting classes,” Kate agrees. “In fact, most teachers would likely have considered you a socialist if you expressed such opinions.”

“And they’re not even really opinions so much as irrefutable lines of logic,” Alex continues. “But you’re right, the socialist label has, like the terrorist label, become one of the foremost tools of conservative propaganda. It’s similar to the ‘uncivilized’ label of the past. They all essentially mean ‘not me’ and ‘not in line with what I know will satiate my greed and ego,’ or ‘not in line with what I know is the best way,’ when, in fact, that ‘best way’ too often means what they’re *taught* is best by those that financially benefit from that twisted version of best; by those wealthy powers who exert their influence over the educational indoctrination of the coming generation, as aristocrats have done since Empire was born.”

“If you fight what they call the ‘free market,’ which is actually only a one-way freedom, the freedom of businesses and wealthy individuals to act with as few restrictions as possible, and which mostly disregards or outright denies the freedom of the consumer, the worker, the planet and all its harbored lives to be free *from* the adverse effects of those actions, then you’re labeled a socialist. And those that don’t think for themselves consequently shut you out and look down on you as unpatriotic.”

“The sad irony is that this is the case even though you actually have their best interests in heart and mind; even though you fight for the best interests of life as a whole. You’re treated with contempt by the very people you seek to serve; by those failing to see that the truest patriot is the one fighting for the best interest of the majority of *people* of his or her nation, not the one reflexively obedient to the conserved, traditional notion of patriotism dictated by those of wealth and power pursuing a course contrary to that interest. And those that fight against the bullying, aggression, violent invasion and occupation of their nations, against what we’re sold as acts of liberation and the championing of a democracy that doesn’t even truly exist in *this* country, and which is really closer to the spread of globalization by super-rich western plutocrats into untapped markets, you’re labeled not a freedom fighter but a ‘terrorist,’ and the same non-critical-thinkers condemn you and call for your head as puppets pulled by strings of manipulating masters they aren’t even aware they have.”

“And please don’t get me wrong, there are many situations, organizations and individuals deserving of the condemnatory label of ‘terrorizing’ or ‘terrorist.’ As opposed to violently resisting the aggressive attacks, invasions and occupations of one’s nation by foreign forces, the playbook employed by ISIS and Al Qaeda wherein non-military personnel are sought out and murdered is as disgusting and morally repugnant as possible, and is very worthy of the word terrorist, and its planners and perpetrators should be pursued and punished accordingly. The problem is that these true terrorist organizations and their operatives are being falsely associated and conflated with legitimate resisters, freedom fighters and even ‘unpatriotic’ progressives whose so-called ‘terrorism’ consists of resisting the greatest terrorizing and total-quality-of-life-crushing forces, whether those terrorizing forces are of a military, business or political nature, and they usually consist of an alliance of the three.”

“Such oversimplified confusion and conflation is simply a part of the conservative playbook used by those that seek to maintain systems which keep the vast majority locked to lives of mental and economic servitude. As another historically-prevailing example, this tactic is used in describing the tyrannical regimes of those like Stalin, Mao and Hitler, conflating them with the word ‘socialist,’ even though they were ultimately more dictatorial and oligarchic than socialistic in action and effect. In fact, there isn’t a very good historical example, at least an example that I’m aware of, of a leader of socialistic conviction toppling a monarchy, oligarchy, plutocracy or other unjust ruling system and then handing that power over to a well-designed, *true* democracy. Instead Lenin and Castro, as examples, held onto their power and gradually betrayed the progressive potential of their socialistic ideologies by which the people backed them and brought their parties into power, transforming themselves into the oppressive authoritarian regimes by which history *should* recall them.”

“If Lenin and the Bolsheviks, with Bolsheviks meaning ‘Ones of the Majority,’ had been true to their moniker and the purer ideology by which they rose to power, and had found a way to suppress their egos and need for power and control and successfully passed that power into the hands of a democratically-inclusive coalition of Soviets, who knows what may have come about. Soviets, after all, simply means ‘Councils;’ the councils which arose as grassroots community assemblies dominated by workers, students and other ‘commoners’ during the early twentieth century Russian Revolution that toppled the long-standing Tsarist autocracy controlling that nation. If Russia had erected

a genuine democracy that was sufficiently guarded against power consolidation, then the Soviet Union may very well have become the paragon of true progressive, moral, power-and-service-to-the-people governance. Instead of such a socialistic democracy, a new communist autocracy arose that abused its consolidated power, leading to all manner of suppression, evil and the crony capitalistic nepotism of today's Russia, one in which Putin essentially owns and has absolute control over the nation. Again, this is a failure of overly-consolidated power, just different in form than in America's plutocratic republic. This isn't socialistic or democratic failure. But in terms of terrorism, I'd say the greatest terrorizing force in recent history has ironically been the US military, and the corporate and aristocratically-controlled plutocracy that backs its imperial aggressions."

"And the power, wealth and overall value-consolidating trend of what are essentially becoming oligarchies in the West, and the regimes with whom we do business overseas, regimes which are and have historically often been as violently oppressive and crushing of popular progress as the worst dictatorships on the planet, is core to the globalization of evil across the planet which the United States champions and conceals with incessant propaganda campaigns; the commercials coercively beamed into the brains of its citizens."

"To a large extent 'we the people' have become little more than sacrificial pawns and strung-up puppets of an aristocratic empire decimating the overall quality of life of the majority of the planet's inhabitants in a global game of wealth and power consolidation that creates a *massive* total quality of life opportunity cost; a cost accrued by their attacking what is in the best interests of the greatest numbers across all societal fronts, including by pretending to act for a democracy that doesn't really exist and by heralding the West as the bastion of the free market that really means the freedom of multinational global behemoths to consolidate all avenues of profit here and lobby the hawks in Washington to employ the military to cut new profitable avenues in resistant regions of the world. *They* are the true terrorists!"

"Who are, exactly?," Michael asks.

"I say a terrorist is anyone that destroys the greatest good for short-sighted, self-centered, egotistical ambitions that degrade the quality, duration and potential of total life and the planet. They produce the most terror. These major shareholders and billionaires and their plutocrats and corporate entities do *far* more damage to the people,



the planet and life in general than any conventionally defined ‘terrorist’ or ‘terrorizing organization;’ not to mention that their encroachment into foreign lands approved by their political puppets, publicly supported through their propaganda and executed by typically underprivileged, brainwashed men and women in uniform is what produces the conventionally defined ‘terrorists’ in the first place.”

“Their ilk has always done so; has *always* taken advantage of every disadvantage of mankind; has colonized and extracted and left in underdeveloped despairing wretchedness countless unprotected nations across the planet. The destruction, reduction and suffocation of life and the planet which all life requires, and the pressures perpetuating all manner of evil effect here and abroad; these deeds and their effects are the basis of terror, for their cumulative impact is, indeed, *far* more terrible than anything Al Qaeda or ISIS has done. They only get away with it because their methods are so culturally ingrained, and the injustices they produce are so well concealed and gradual that they don’t *appear* to be terrorists to our blinded, myopic eyes. But they are.”

After a few reflective seconds, Michael asks: “I take your point. The total production of evil in the world is the measurement of life’s terrorizers... You see good and evil in terms of how much value you create for or cost life, essentially, and you would define heroes and perpetrators based upon this... ideological core, yes? And you concocted the total value idea in the attempt to shed light on the costs of the political and economic status quo that is misrepresented as being righteous, essentially...?”

“Right,” Alex responds. “Good and evil is relative to life enhanced or deprived; to the production of quality of life value or to increased pain, suffering and denial of opportunity for life as a whole. The total value concept is thereby both a moral and economic framework; a means to qualify and quantify this good and evil. You might also say that the concept is a specially-crafted lens made for looking through the false façade of conservative ideology and propaganda and its misleading misinformation, helping prevent or reverse the resulting misconceptions inculcated into our youth in almost every school and university, which most people still suffer from as adults to some degree. By seeing through the concealing propaganda of conservatism to what matters most, the quality of *total* life, the concept permits us to see the negative quality of life value of conservative systems and its dogma, and encourages the worker, consumer and considerate citizens in general to

seek-out and support more valuable systems, products, services and organizations.”

“The Total Value concept aspires to provide an analytical framework for deconstructing long-taught lies that most teachers and professors aren’t even aware that they’re teaching, like the myths of the democratic and moralistic superiority of America and its ‘free’ markets that conceal the fact that there is no true democracy, that we aren’t superior in anything but economic production and military might, and that freedom is a two-way street. The concept reveals that the most positive actions, what might generally be considered ‘good,’ are the actions that create the greatest collective benefit; the greatest total value increase in the quality of collective life. And it reveals that most negative actions, what might generally be considered ‘bad,’ are the actions that tend to financially benefit solely the individual and his or her organization in ways that extract more value than is created and thereby sacrifice the production and protection of the greatest total quality of life that’s dependent upon that value.”

“All thoughts and actions are inherently selfish, but some of them are immorally, carelessly, detrimentally self-absorbed. They are motivated by an excluding ideology that sacrifices the greatest good of the excluded. On the other side of the scale are those ideas and actions not motivated exclusively by financially-consolidating self-benefit, but which benefit both the actor and those acted upon. They are inclusive.”

“The difference between these motivations is the difference between symbiosis and parasitism. In this difference, the scale of justice is set: on the ideally progressive side of the scale the thing being assessed, the system, ideology, organization etc., is built upon relationships between people that benefit everyone as equally as possible by assuring that those involved reap what they sow instead of losing the right to the reaping. So not communistic equal division of resources regardless of merit, and not a governmental elite controlling such resources and distributing the benefits of nationalistic control to a nepotistic group of colluding, loyal business elites, as socialistic regimes have tended toward in the past, but systems naturally encouraging and rewarding distribution of benefit relative to merit. On the other, parasitic side of the scale the thing being assessed is built upon relationships that, in complete disregard of merit, morality and the big, long-term picture, benefit one side while strictly limiting and often decimating the quality of life and even slowly killing those on the other side whose disadvantages are taken advantage of.”

“It sounds like you’re aiming for what is essentially a utopian ideology,” Henry remarks in a slightly scornful tone, implying Alex is being naïve.

“Yes,” Alex promptly agrees, having considered the conventional misunderstanding of utopianism long ago. “In spite of the way utopianism and idealism are portrayed by conservatives and so-called realists, it takes courage to fight for the ideal; to aim for the bull’s-eye while knowing it’s such a difficult target to hit that it will never be perfectly centered. To aim for anything less can only be a product of weakness, cowardice, greed and immorality; anything less entails selling-out people and ideas worthy of being fought for. And that’s what the total value concept is about: asking those questions that lead us to building systems and organizations fostering what is most worthy of being fought for: *life*. The quality of experience of every lifeform. If it doesn’t seek to truly serve the best interest of life then it’s wrong to some degree, and that wrong always exists relative to the extent it deviates from the ideal. So questions must be asked within this framework: Is this best for total, long-term life?”

“Again, does the individual, organization, system or what have you act in such a way as to promote mutual benefit, the mark of any and every healthy, uplifting relationship, or does it act in such a way as to center its actions upon narrowly-perceived self-benefit, and therefore act to leech value from others, especially those forced by lack of opportunity or other disadvantage to participate in the imbalanced benefit of the relationship? This is why I personally make the distinction between the concept of selfishness and the concept of being self-centered or self-absorbed. Whereas selfishness is natural and includes the two-way street of mutual benefit, self-absorption is a mindset and habit of action in which all roads are entirely or near to being one way.”

“People who act most in ways that benefit themselves without consequence for the waves of cause and effect that spread across the perfectly interconnected world think and act in ways that put a very narrow, egotistic, greedy version of themselves at the very center. They tend to cost life, all life and the planet that hosts it, more value than they create. They produce a negative total value. Such people typically focus on two types of the self: the pleasures of the physical self and the inflation of the mental idea of self; materialistic, sensory and egotistic gratification are pursued regardless of total cost.”

“So, to you, morality is defined by mutual, shared benefit and necessitates avoiding excluding, consolidated benefit,” Kate offers; “the

type of benefits centered upon oneself regardless of the impact upon others.”

“Yes, because only the mutual benefit of symbiotic systems potentiate the best possible outcome for life as a whole,” Alex responds. “Morality must be based upon thoughts and actions of mutual quality of life increase, which inherently demands a denial of self-absorbed thoughts, actions and ideologies that degrade any acted upon person or place. Egotism, materialism, wealth worship and hedonistic obsession with sensory gratification all become intertwined as greed within the enemies of life. And, as we’ve discussed, greed is the foremost form of evil action resulting from physical and mental corruptibility. In this corrupt state the greedy can’t hear the guidance of the Spirit with which they have a more tenuous connection than others and a less-developed understanding of, desire for and appreciation of its rewards.”

“Instinctively they sense their corruption and the evil effects of their actions, and thus tend to harbor a sense of guilt. Through their mental and physical corruption they become the opponents of progress; the impediments to evolution; the agents of evil that are most responsible for perpetuating the growing disparity in opportunity, value distribution and quality of life across the planet and, therefore, the people most responsible for the ongoing cycle of injustice based upon these disparities that spur the continuity and growth of injustice and evil action across the nation and the planet. Yet this injustice and evil is not suffered in vain, for it also feeds the cause of justice. In the same course by which agents of evil fight against the movement towards the higher evolutionary potential of our species they assure that this evolution continues because the suffering they create accrues into the pressure absorbed by the majority which, through the champions of good, through all moral, courageous people, must eventually give way.”

After a long pause, everyone locked in quiet reflection, Alex continues his train of thought as it connects to another track: “This is why cynicism is such a necessary characteristic, such a valuable trait, and is so unfortunately misunderstood as a negative quality. While the cynical are commonly derided, cynicism is simply awareness. It’s awareness of the indisputable nature of the self, including the nature of human beings; what we call ‘human nature.’ Knowing that all actions are motivated by some form of self-benefit, whether that benefit is comfort, safety, satiation, wealth, power, love, the self-satisfaction of being in the right, the benefits of mental growth etc. etc., the cynic is better able to see through the deceptions that arise as an unavoidable

side-effect of selfish nature giving way to self-absorbed ideas and actions. Yes, it can be taken too far whereby the cynic veers towards a pessimistic skepticism and gradually begins to believe that everyone is corrupted and self-absorbed, not just selfish; where they tend not to see mutualistic intention and potential in systems and people; but, generally speaking, cynicism is invaluable. It's based upon experience, reason and the loss of naiveté."

"Cynicism is an aspect of the personal growth, self-protection and progressive potential produced by comprehending the extent of guile in human activities, and thinking and acting accordingly. While most of those labeled as cynical are unlikely to have followed the same chain of logic that led me to this truth, all cynics are aware of the fact, or at least hold a strong suspicion, that people always act from selfish motives. And for seeing this truth, for recognizing this certain reality, they are made to feel as if they are pessimistic; as if they have a negative attitude; as if they don't see the good in people, when in fact cynicism is not misanthropy. It doesn't mean you despise people and think humans are evil and aren't capable of the immense, irreplaceable value produced by the edified, moral mind and the heart well-tuned to the guidance of the Spirit."

"In truth, cynicism is a result of thoughtful people being guided by their experiences and the reflections upon those experiences to the realization that all thoughts and actions are selfishly motivated. The problem is that many such cynics come to this realization but fail to realize that this selfish motivation is an inescapable, innate quality of being a self and doesn't preclude mutual benefit. Benefitting self in the same course as benefiting others is very possible, as we've established, and also, as I've argued, offers the greatest, truest enrichment."

"So it's only when a person fails to account for the fact that selfish actions *include* those that are mutually-beneficial, when they are so angered and disheartened by their realization of selfishness that they fail to see that many selfish actions bring a person mental and spiritual reward from having helped others while helping themselves, from personally benefiting by the same acts that benefit others, that they drift from cynicism toward pessimism and misanthropy. For being aware of the selfish nature of being an individualized self doesn't mean that you don't hope for, look for and attempt to foster the best, most valuable qualities possessed by people."

“Rather, this awareness means that you know that humans are selves, that being a self means you’re motivated to act for self-benefit even when that self-benefit brings others benefit, as opposed to being motivated by the prospect of doing yourself no good or harming yourself; what many, including yourself, Michael, typically consider ‘selfless’ thoughts and actions, which don’t actually exist. And if you possess this cynical awareness then you’re also at least somewhat aware that man is, in parallel with these qualities of the individualized mental and physical self, also inherently *corruptible* and, when corrupted, possessing of the capacity to commit evil acts; that is, acts which harm oneself and/or others and are not in one’s or others’ overall long-term best interests. You hope against and discourage this corruptibility and its extension of evil potentiality while using what is derided as cynicism for self-defense and to defend others against that evil. One of the key points I’m trying to make is that, like selfishness and self-centeredness, like inherent evil and inherent corruptibility, there’s a very wide gap between cynicism and pessimism.”

“Many of those realizing the selfish nature of the individual can, through their deflated egos, their frustrations with the world, their self-esteem-diminishing lack of success and their envy of others, turn pessimistically bitter, it’s true. Also, we must remember that a big part of our outlook, or attitude, is based upon how we feel, as I said earlier, which is what makes attitude such a malleable, unfixed characteristic.”

“From my own experience with drugs and alcohol and contenting with a bevy of health afflictions that I’m only now getting over, I’m certain that a great part of our outlooks, including our propensity for pessimistic or depressive versus optimistic or joyful thought patterns, is based upon our current physical state of being; our mental self is largely dependent upon our physical self and, in many people, it’s clear that their feeling poorly pushes them towards a pessimistic and misanthropic perspective that’s conflated with cynicism in the eyes of others. Like so much of what prevails in our top-down society, the artificially-forced overlap between cynicism and pessimism is largely based upon the fact that we’re taught to be trusting, to follow the path laid before us, to refrain from doubt and to fall in line and conform to the traditions and values of imperialism and aristocracy carried forward by corporatism, religiosity and nationalistic zeal because these conservative traits continue to benefit the modern aristocracy.”

“We are *meant* to believe that we’re the land of absolute freedom and democracy and God-given advantage. And when you recognize such

notions as false, propagandist fabrications made to serve the self-serving interests of the few at the cost of the many, you're conventionally considered a cynic, idealist or socialist. If you resist, if you don't follow and trust without question, you're branded un-American and pressured to capitulate. When you question people's motives, which you should, you're a cynic. When you question and don't blindly support imperialistic expansion and the military, you're unpatriotic at best, a terrorist sympathizer or terrorist yourself at worst. When you fight for people not to be exploited by big business and to receive a merited share of the bottom line for their contributions, you're a socialist. Of course, what this actually means is that if you fall under such labels you're more likely to *truly* be patriotic in, again, the progressive sense of fighting for the best interests of the vast majority of the nation's citizens, which progressive people will recognize as the true measure of the patriot, for it's the *people* that're the nation and, thus, the more you serve the people as a whole the more patriotic any understanding individual is likely to consider you."

"All of these condemnatory labels are interlinked, in fact. While flying in the face of conventional understanding, there's a direct line between the awareness, experience and doubt of the 'cynic' and the convictions and objectives of the idealist. For the idealist is born of the cynic; of those that know, or at least sense, the costs of conforming to conservative ideas and values, and of *not* doubting what we're told to think and believe by the prevailing powers, and who're thereby spurred to fight for what their understand, courage and imagination dictates to be the ideal. They fight for the ideal because they're aware of the extent of victimization of the vast majority that falls in line with the conservative march over mankind."

"You're saying we're all products of aristocratically-derived indoctrination," Kate translates. "That we're made to value the things we value and think the way we do because it benefits those that constructed society and pass those constructs, those systems and propagandist conceptions, on to future generations so they may conserve the greedy interests of a very select minority at immense cost to the majority."

"Yes," Alex replies. "I mean, we're products of many things, of all the things that impact us; of the Spirit and its guidance, of our genes, our minds and how our mind, our mental self, is shaped by our cumulative experiences being brought up by our families and incalculably impacted by everything to which we're exposed. But, being servants of greed first

and foremost, of the bottom-line-is-absolute ideology, the ruling factions of history want you to blindly follow their lead into the future; into the perpetuation of that history; into the conservation of the status quo. They don't want you to question things, because questions lead to the truth of motivation and injustice, and that's never good for those that conserve unjust traditions and obstruct progressive justice."

"I remember reading about how, in the sixties during the so-called 'hippie movement,' conservative politicians targeted the use of marijuana because it made its user not only less productive and more apt to feel content just being and enjoying the little things in life, but because it made the users see things from a different perspective and more apt to question things, all of which led to resistance. Now, I'm not for habitual marijuana use, as I know from extensive personal experience how costly it can accrue to be, but I do see a correlation between its use and changes in perspective and the asking of questions, with said questions leading to doubt, truth and resistance."

"Anyway, because of this connection between not just accepting the status quo, but asking questions leading to the truth leading to resistance of the conservative value system, the primary beneficiaries of said system want you to believe that someone that doubts that the motives professed by others are the true motives for their actions is a pessimistic cynic to be derided and shunned. Why? Again, simply look at motive. It's because the prevailing systems and attitudes were historically created by the exclusive few to serve the exclusive few, something which, for the most part, the ownership class absolutely does not want to be realized by the majority, at least not to the extent where that majority will become angrily incited towards progressive conviction and action. The last thing the greedily-corrupted corporate parasites want is an informed, critically-thinking-and-questioning, spiritually-awakened, proactive, slim-consuming populace."

"As another example of how our non-questioning, obedient conformity plays out, those that self-servingly benefit from the established systems and power structures want you to accept, trust and take all the innumerable commercial messages at their word. We are meant to unquestioningly believe that, say, *Shell Oil* cares about its consumers and is fighting for the future of clean energy, rather than actually being closer to a massive quality-of-life-diminishing, planet-warming polluter only adopting clean energy standards when legally obliged to do so and when attempting to alter public perception through advertising in order to buy goodwill, what they call an 'intangible asset' in accounting,



pursuant to maximizing profits. Just as we're meant to believe it when we hear that America's Navy is a 'global force for good' rather than the sword of profiteering globalization killing those that resist our invasions and occupations of their nations while sacrificing the least privileged, youngest Americans as pawns in a global game of value-consolidating chess in competition with other superpowers, as has been the case from the Korean War through the more recent bloodshed in the Middle East."

"The cynics see through false pretense and are made to feel like unduly negative pessimists as a result of their awareness and connected convictions. We're painted as the unpatriotic bad guys and girls because we see and fight for the greater good. I remember looking 'cynic' up in the dictionary a few times and seeing two of the provided synonyms being 'pessimistic' and 'prophet of doom,' and that the two definitions provided were something like 'a person who believes people always act from selfish motives' and 'a person who raises doubts about something.' And as I'm attempting to prove right now, the first definition is a fact, not a belief; it's a logically-irrefutable objective truth; it's the nature of self. And the second definition is a necessity of justice and self-protection which led this particular cynic to the truth of the first definition, among many other truths."

"Because I doubted, I eventually arrived at the truth of the self always being motivated to act in ways that benefit the self, even when those actions benefit other selves. And generally speaking, if you don't question people's motives, especially the motives of the wealthy and powerful whom, consumed by greed, ever conspire to accumulate further wealth and power, then you'll be used to serve their greed; a pawn to be played; their puppet to be dangled; their gullible mark to be conned."

"Cynicism is simply a necessary shield against the manipulations of the corrupt without which you end up serving their evils," Alex continues. "In essence, this means that those whom conventional societal teachings, teachings propagated by the greedy traditions of conservative values, have pushed us to believe are pessimistically 'cynical' are *actually* the true realists, while those defended and described in those same paradigms as 'realists' are actually the mentally-corrupted, self-centered *immoralists*."

"Those that tend toward the mentally-corrupted qualities of self-righteousness and immoral, irresponsible self-absorbedness making up

the true heart of conservative values find the need to justify those beliefs and endeavors and convert or keep others in their cause by mentally manipulating our understanding of those beliefs and endeavors. This is, of course, the very purpose of propaganda: misconception made and spread by those that benefit from the misconception being believed as accurate conception. This includes crafting the conventional paradigms of what constitutes a realist, idealist and cynic. Those definitions are falsely misleading so that they may continue to serve greed as much as possible.”

“And their proponents often mislead themselves in order to justify their actions within their own minds. It’s mind control and unjustifiable justification on a nationwide, even global level, and it’s been handed down from overlord to overlord, from consolidating, oppressing aristocracy to consolidating, oppressing aristocracy and into their teachings of future generations for untold centuries, even millennia. The truth, however, is that the cynic is actually the realist and is not, as the conservatively handed-down dictionary contends, the opposite of the idealist. Dictionaries usually list ‘idealist’ as an antonym for ‘cynic.’”

“This is completely false. In fact, as recently mentioned, it’s all but impossible to be an idealist without first going through the process of doubt-leading-to-awareness that produces cynicism. The idealist is compelled by cynicism. It’s *because* you’re aware that you seek the ideal, and you’re only made aware because you question things. Being aware of the fact that people operate from selfish motives and that the greedy and powerful tend to be self-absorbed, acting in ways that are detrimental to the greater good, is the realization that spurs the courage and conviction to seek idealistic solutions. That was definitely the case for this particular cynical idealist.”

“So you’re suggesting that the subjects of the corruptibly self-absorbed, egotistic mind have been so prevalently in control throughout western history, and that their propagandist misinformation has been so deeply ingrained in western culture pursuant to their consolidating aims, that we all essentially need to be reeducated?,” Michael asks; “that we’re so infused with aristocratic ideology that we need to relearn everything?”

“Seriously,” Kate speaks up. “Talk about a tall order. You’re saying that we’re so indoctrinated in greedy traditions that even the words we use are tainted with misinformation... You’re a funny guy, Alex. It seems that you wouldn’t simply fight to revolutionize the world, but that you feel the need to first rewrite the dictionary; to redefine many of the

words you seem to think prevent the people from realizing the need for revolution.”

“Well, if it were up to me I’d seek a changing of minds based upon shared identity, understanding and solidarity of united purpose, itself based upon a total best interest that can only be pursued in collaboration, never in cutthroat competition,” Alex replies. “A peaceful revolution of popular demand for systems and ideas fostering the greatest collective quality of life. A persistent, determined demand built around an understanding of the unjust nature of traditional religious, political and economic models, and thereby demanded and pushed for until realized. Not a revolt in the sense of a violent overthrow, overthrows which history teaches us are almost always unnecessarily divisive, destructive and ultimately ineffective.”

“Removing *people* from power is never enough, for more of the same or worse will rise up to fill the gap, as history has taught us time and time again, from the examples that I cited earlier with the Soviets in Russia and Castro’s revolution leading to authoritarian regimes arguably just as abusive and oppressive as the regimes they replaced, through the overthrows of the recent ‘Arab Spring’ leading to power vacuums precipitating the rise of other brutal, opportunist regimes.”

“It can’t merely be people and regimes that are toppled, but must be *systems and ideas*, else the problems underlying the need for the revolution will themselves revolve, coming right back around. If the malignancy has metastasized into the common mindset then it’s not enough to simply excise the tumor, the visible materialization of the problem. If you remove the perpetrators of injustice without changing the basis by which that injustice was created, new perpetrators will simply rise up to fill the vacuum.”

“New tumors will grow in the diseased social body, so to speak. There’s a deeply entrenched level of consolidated power and profit controlled and collected under our current colluding systems of business and politics, with the vast majority only given as much as is required to prevent their resistance. And if you remove any person or group claiming the vast majority of the power and profit available in our nation, then those best positioned to fill that void will inevitably do so.”

“Because of this, the individual perpetrators themselves aren’t anywhere close to as important as the hearts and minds of the people and the paradigms they possess. What we think of as the best, most just

systems must be redefined. We the people must learn that the United States is not run by a democracy, for example. Not only do we not possess the best possible form of a democracy for other nations to follow, we don't actually have a democracy at all. It's simply that those in power and those gobbling up all the wealth benefit from the popular belief in American democracy."

"True democracy must be known, and instituted, along with business structures, economic theories and spiritual knowledge that serves the whole, and which are far grander and possessing of much greater potential than the current systems implemented for the sake of the greed of the excluding few, and to the oppression of that far greater potential of humanity as a whole. The revolution must be one of hearts and minds pursuant to systemic change, as only a change in the systems compelling and controlling society can bring about lasting progress."

"And to your remark Kate, yes, I *would* have it that way," Alex goes on. "Words are central to ideas, including systemic ideas, and the way in which those ideas are conventionally understood and pursued is critical because it frames the way people think and, as has been said, what you think you become; both you yourself and what you influence more broadly; what you contribute to what the world becomes. So, in the case of those words tied to concepts of great importance and broad application, and the connected analysis of their motivated derivation and proliferation and possible use as tools of misinformation stalling progress towards greater collective quality of life, redefinition may indeed be necessary. And why not redefine words whose definitions have derivative roots in aristocracy, propaganda and injustice?"

"How do you think words and phrases and their definitions are created in the first place? To serve the purpose not simply of communication, but of disseminating the ideas of those that influenced their crafting and application. It's the conventional understanding that's typically communicated, in other words, as words are never 'just words,' but the keys unlocking and forges crafting and honing the hearts and minds of the readers and listeners. Words and phrases often form a biased framing for communication in support of the ends of those that derive and spread those words and phrases. Thus, if common conception is misleading conception, producing a preclusion of greatest good pursuit, then, yes, it's necessary to fix it."

"You're saying words are the basis not just of communication, but of thought itself, and that it's words that form the core of thought,

including the way we think of ideological concepts,” Kate plays long. “Words are the basis of communication and action. So if you want to reveal the inherent injustice of systems that will always have agents that control it... an agency that will be refilled whenever a void is made upon the death or removal of any agents controlling those systems, then you have to start with the way in which the words underlying those systems are understood, spoken of and acted upon.”

“Yes,” Alex continues. “It’s not only history but words themselves that are traditionally crafted by those in power, and very often they are crafted in such a way as to encourage the maintenance and spread of such power. They’re crafted to control your thoughts from the basic level of language and communication, even before historical reflection and lessons and the more complex ideas are taught to us; even before we’re all pledging allegiance to the flag and singing about our country being the sweet land of liberty like little obedient soldiers in training, we’re given repeated words and phrases that we’ll use to think along accepted lines. The book *1984* might be my all-time favorite. It’s about how far you can go with brainwashing, mind control, propaganda, surveillance and censorship; how far you can go toward enslaving people by enslaving their minds.”

“You can condition and rewire people on the levels of language and even emotion, breaking them all the way down until their mind is virtually not their own. Blair, aka Orwell, was a genius. But even without reaching such societal extremes, I believe we all possess a moral imperative to act whenever the ideal state of society doesn’t exist; to push for that society at all times, not just when it’s convenient, or in the face of Big Brother. And to do this you have to question; you have to doubt. Because this is the only way to move oneself and help to move society in the direction that benefits the whole of life. This includes questioning things like definitions that most people take for granted. The words ‘realist’ and ‘idealist’ are important examples not only because they shape people’s intellectual and emotional responses to broadly applicative, valuable systems and ideological concepts, but because they exemplify the historical use of the defining of words for political and propagandist purposes; definitions which mislead people away from the path of progressing towards the greatest collective justice and interest.”

“As commonly understood, these words tell the unquestioning, non-critical, gullibly-accepting mind that if you fight against greed you’re naïvely idealistic. If you serve greed you’re simply being realistic; simply

acknowledging human nature. This is demonstrative of conventional wisdom crafted for the purposes of mind control, and is so ingrained in the popular mind that, unless you exercise considerable critical thought, you don't even know that it's there and, thus, you're victimized by it."

"So how, exactly, is the term 'realist' improperly defined?," Amanda asks.

"Well, the word 'realist' is derived from the word 'realism,' which is defined as something like 'the acceptance of things as they actually are,'" Alex replies. "The critically-thinking cynical mind will immediately go: 'Wait a second, is reality not largely a matter of perspective and subject to bias, especially when it comes to concepts, theories and matters of human motive and behavior? Who gets to decide what is real, and why are we to blindly accept that decision? Why do they want us to believe that there's one reality in subjective matters?'"

"The assumptions and implications of the use of the word 'realist' should not be taken lightly. It implies that there's only one way things truly are, that this way has already been proven, and that, therefore, being a so-called realist is the only correct way to be; anything else is delusional or naïve. In truth, those calling themselves realists are usually proffering a subjective interpretation of reality handed down by conservative tradition that's accepted as conventional wisdom and used to justify the immoral practices of conservatives adopted from imperial, aristocratic precedent."

"The realist, in other words, isn't someone who's realistically accepting natural, unchangeable objective truths, but is someone who refuses to change *man-made interpretations of reality* in order to justify and disseminate the belief that the way things are, the status quo, will always be the way things are, and that you might as well be realistic and accept it. But this isn't being realistic, because these aren't natural, objective truths; they are artificially-hatched and greedily-propagated *mistruths* based upon aristocratic, imperial history and a misunderstanding of human nature that's upheld in order to support conservative pursuits."

"So while the 'realist,' as the word is conventionally understood, is painted as the sane, practical one, what really defines him or her is some combination of misunderstanding, immorality, corruption and cowardice. Strip away the false façade with which the concept of realism is presented and the gap between the so-called realist and the

idealist isn't measured by how realistically they view the world, as the implication goes. It's not a matter of the realist being down to earth and seeing the world as it truly is and the idealist having his or her head in the clouds, fruitlessly and ineffectually daydreaming of a world that can never be. This betrayal of the idealist is itself a conservative design produced through the same conservative ideology, and supported to justify its pursuits."

"This is the way that those that conserve the traditions and ideals of empire intertwined with the traditions and ideals of religion want you to think: that man is inherently evil, that acting accordingly is simply being realistic, that seeking to gain as much profit for your company and wealth for yourself is simply human nature and that to be concerned with the impact of this conventional priority of pursuits upon the planet, the human race and life in general is to be a 'bleeding heart liberal;' a soft little pussy that lives in a dream world and should be mocked and shunned into submission."

"Ironically, however, I find that the truth is much the opposite. The idealist is *far* more courageous and valuable because he or she opposes the self-absorbed attitude, ego and greed that arise from mental vulnerability, from weakness, to create evil in the world. Idealists have the strength of will, mind and morality to fight for the best possible version of reality; the negative-value-causing conservative tries to conserve the reality of the aristocratic empires of old to the detriment of life because they lack the strength and realizations of mind and progressive purpose."

"So who, and what, can you trust?," Michael suddenly interjects, feeling as though Alex is working to yank his long-accepted view of the right and wrong of the world out from underneath him, fearing he'll fall on his face.

"Reason, logic and the asking of questions," Alex replies after a moment. "Your own capacity for critical thought combined with the guiding force of the Spirit within. Align the truth delivered by the capability of your ever-questioning mind with the truth delivered through your heart. It's like my favorite line from the film *Braveheart*: 'Your heart is free; have the courage to follow it.' It's *so* true. Your heart, your connection to the Spirit, is free from the limitations that make the body and mind corruptible, easy to manipulate and able to lead you down the wrong path. Your heart *always* knows the best course because it's incorruptibly free of these binds and limitations. And

if you have the courage to follow it, if you have the courage of convictions constructed in the confluence of your heart and the most valuable aspects of your mind, you'll do good in the world."

"You'll become a symbiotic, mutualistic being rather than a parasite. You'll create more value than you consume, and you'll leave the world a better place than you found it. And always maintain the propensity to question what you're presented, *especially* presented motives. This goes back to the nature of selfishness and cynicism. Always, *always* question motive. If you can find the motive you can find the truth."

"It's reminiscent of one of the first rules of detective work: follow the money. How does the person or organization hope to benefit from their actions and the ideas they advocate? It's like the widely accepted maxim: 'It's not personal, it's just business.' This complete horseshit is emblematic of the costs of faulty paradigms of which I speak. For this line is a shameless attempt to justify all the evil that big business creates in the world."

"The fact is that nothing could be more personal than business, because business impacts more *persons* than any other human pursuit. Thus, we *should* take it personally. Yes, business calculations and endeavors are cold-hearted by nature, and when someone triumphs in tactic over us in business that *outcome*, perhaps, shouldn't be taken personally, for that's the nature of business: cold, cutthroat, impersonal tactics. But that's my point; the more valuable point to life."

"The effects of business are cold, cruel and impersonal; it creates divisions and conflicts and exploiters and exploited amongst people and the planet, at least as business is commonly conducted. When cold-blooded parasitism rules the world the lifeblood and higher shared purpose, identity and solidarity of the people are sucked away. It's devastating to people and life in general across the planet, though often in a subtly accruing, insidious manner. And when one studies the effect of the consolidation of business equity, income and wealth that ever increases the disparity between people in opportunity, income, wealth and general quality of life, which in turn leads to incalculable misery, desperation and general evil across the globalizing planet, we see that it's very, *very* personal, and that no such justification can ever be accepted by a thoughtful, moral, progressive human being."

"Those using the 'it's just business' justification are demonstrating the fact that they condone if not actively support and spread parasitism –



the one-way relationships I summarized before wherein those of privilege and advantage unscrupulously use their advantages to extract value from those of relative disadvantage, preventing those exploited from increasing their quality of life and thereby increasing the misery and unhappiness of the world, i.e. the evil of the world, in the process. Dismissing those that see the motives, means and opportunities by which those of wealth and power do wrong to others, and speculate and hypothesize about specific cases in which such motive, means and opportunity suggest criminal actions as delusional, crazy conspiracy theorists is another example of long-entrenched conservative ideology pushing a misleading paradigm; pushing a false version of the way in which something is understood.”

“Those of wealth and power want conspiracy theories and theorists to immediately be derided and dismissed,” Alex continues, “for if the public began seriously entertaining their ideas they might start to question those that conspire. And the more wealth and power a person possesses, the greater their propensity to worship at the altar of greed and to conspire to consolidate further wealth and power, hoarding and consuming ever more of the finite value available to life. Obviously many conspiracy theories and theorists are off base and, indeed, many amongst the mentally ill have conspiratorial delusions, and these illogical, delusional theorists give the practice of seeing connections between the motive, means and opportunities of the most wealthy and powerful a bad rep.”

“In fact, by and large the conspiracy theorist is much like the cynic, the idealist, the progressive and the liberal, for they understand the nature of the greed-infected mindset and, based upon that knowledge, tend to fight for the human race and the highest quality of life of as many lives as possible. Power-hungry profiteers would rather that conspiracies and idealistic systems be dismissed by society as soon as they’re suggested; they’d rather that they’re conflated with delusion and naiveté; they don’t want them to gain any support or momentum, either the specific ideas themselves or the underlying current of cynical thought that leads to those ideas, for this is bad for business and tends to lead to more questions and resistance.”

“And so, by this motive, we’re traditionally conditioned to automatically spurn such ideas and the people conceiving of them for the simple reason that those people and ideas represent threats to the status quo; to the continuity of exploitation and value consolidation that just so happens to, as another realization of asking questions, undermine the

higher potential of humanity and the health of the planet, and that thereby prevents the greatest total quality of life.”

“So how exactly would you measure the gap between the realist and the idealist?,” Michael asks after a few reflective seconds.

“As I’ve said the gap may be measured by vision, moral development, compassion, conviction and courage,” Alex replies. “It’s a relative scale, like most things. In general, the difference between the idealist and the so-called realist is that the idealist possesses qualities of character, of mental, moral and spiritual development, that the realist lacks: the compassion to be moved by the unjust suffering faced by the disadvantaged, the moral development to be compelled to act and the resultant conviction to address and attempt to correct that injustice and suffering. They also ideally have the vision to conceive of the means to pursue this correction and, most difficult of all, possess the courage to pursue it, even as others act out of greed, laziness, conformity and other extensions of mental weakness while sitting comfortably within the status quo, repeatedly obstructing, dissuading and undermining the idealists.”

“And because they threaten the greedy and their greedy means the greatest idealists, those possessing the greatest abilities combined with the aforementioned qualities, set themselves up to pay the highest price. They first sacrifice most of the means by which they might use their abilities to amass wealth for themselves through the inherently exploitative consumer and financial markets, trading the opportunity to rise to the upper echelons of financial, material and power accrual for the spiritual wealth derived from serving life, a calling that tends not to be high-paying because it eschews the modes and means by which the greatest income and wealth is almost exclusively derived. They also rally others to take up their convictions, and craft and fight for the means to correct the evil in the world.”

“Thus, the greatest idealists are targeted by those whom benefit from the perpetuation and growth of that evil as threats to that perpetuation and growth, and their credibility is attacked at best, their person attacked and destroyed at worst. Idealists champion symbiotic mutualism through the construction and propagation of outlooks, ideas and systems that create the most mutual benefit and mutually enjoyed total value across the planet. And, in this quest, they’re countered by the most powerful parasites; those that believe they stand to lose the most from the spread of symbiosis because their consolidation of

wealth, power and general value is based upon taking advantage of the less advantaged, extracting value and mentally, politically and economically enslaving others that're controlled through fear and ignorance and the other corruptibility-enabling weaknesses of the mind."

"You all might find this amusing, but here I'm reminded of the animated film *Frozen*, which may be my favorite animated film of all time, and there have been some excellent ones. It was a parable, of course, as most films intend to be to some respect, with the moral of the story seeming to be that love has the greatest power to overcome fear. I'd say that love has the power to overcome all the weaknesses, limitations and susceptibilities of the mental and physical self. And this is also the heart of idealism, as with the *Braveheart* line on the heart being free."

"There's a perfect reason that the same general idea keeps resurfacing. *Because it's true*. And we all know it in our hearts, even when we fail to realize it in our minds. The Spirit wishes for the greatest possible state of universal symbiosis, and if we courageously follow it, and if enough minds embrace the spiritual power of love connecting all of life, and harness it to overcome the vulnerabilities imposing their corruptibility upon our minds and bodies and threatening to divide us, to prevent us from unifying in common cause pursuant to progress, life will eventually evolve into its best form."

"Really," Alex continues, "the battles of life, both literally and figuratively, whether over greed and its corollary, poverty, whether the ego versus the truest, spiritual Self, whether the absolute exclusionary specifications and tribal identities of religion, class and nationality versus the inclusionary identities of spirituality and a more unified, collaborating life across all boundaries, whether an equity-consolidated corporate business model versus a far more mutually-beneficial equity-distributed model of merit, whether a bottom-line-for-the-few prioritization of economics versus one prioritizing total quality of life, whether false shams of democracy versus its authenticity... all of these battle lines are drawn within the one and only war: *the corruptible self versus the incorruptible Self*."

"It's the Sitting Bull line, though I'd revise it a bit: 'There are two dogs fighting battles within us all the time, a corruptible one and an incorruptible one. Which one wins the war? *The one we feed the most*.' We must ask ourselves which of these dogs is to be fed, and which is to

be starved as much as possible, knowing full well that you can weaken but never kill either.”

“So which is to be best fed? The one that blindly, perversely, gluttonously feeds, preying upon the defenseless, or the one that loves and protects the pack from the first, caring for every animal of the wild, as if out of a Disney movie in this dichotomy that I’m purposefully polarizing in order to make a point, knowing that everyone feeds both to some degree.”

“Do you give in to your physical and mental corruptibility and become an agent of evil effect upon yourself and others, or do you follow your heart toward a principle-led, morally-developed, educated, disciplined mind wielding the courage of your convictions in service to life as a whole?! Where do you fall on this relative scale?! Humankind fights to win this one war for all of life and the planet upon which it depends. And every one of the countless battles fought within that war are microcosms of the same core conflict: the qualities, principles and ideas of incorruptibility versus corruptibility.”

## Seven: The Freely-Willed Fate

*Don't 'let it be,' else it will continue to be. Injustice survives because people let it be. Fight to replace what is with what should be, else it won't be. For 'what will be will be' only when inevitable, and little is inevitable, including all forms of man-made misery. 'Such is life' is what is said by those that lack the understanding, courage and conviction to fight to transform the way life currently is for the best way life possibly can, should and one day will be. Don't let life be, be a part of making it what it can be.*

"I constantly have this sense that I'm right where I'm meant to be," Amanda says seemingly out of nowhere as the group spreads a measure of compost and manure across a swatch of ground being prepped for planting. "At the same time I feel like I'm in control of my life; like it's up to me to determine the course it takes," she continues. "That course is not determined for me, free from my influence. I'm the one that selects and travels that course. But these two ideas seem to be incompatible..."

Amanda is looking at Alex as she says this, baiting him to weigh in on the matter, as he seldom fails to do. Unable to resist, he complies: "Free will and determinism are almost universally considered incompatible, conflicting concepts. But I have to say I disagree. As with most issues involving a concern such as this one in which we attempt to determine the one correct cause or explanation, the answer isn't one but *all* contributing causes which, in this case, includes *both* explanations."

"In my own consideration of the apparent mutual exclusion of fate and free will I find that, like many concepts conventionally considered incompatible, like science and spirituality, socialism and capitalism or, as we recently discussed, selfishness and symbiotic, mutually beneficial ideas and actions, I find that truth takes on both ends of a spectrum only ever *seemingly* in conflict. That is, in the causal chain that connects everything and everyone, there's a union of determinism and free will; a union fitting every force and every being across the broad plane of history and moving into the future. In fact, free will and determinism are more than likely inseparable, and are akin to constituting two sides of the same coin."

"How do you mean?," Amanda asks, her knowing half smile and the little spark of amusement in her eyes indicating that she's well aware of the Pandora's Box she's about to open, and that she enjoys it. If she didn't enjoy playing this role her coupling with Alex would be unlikely to last.

"It seems to me that everything that makes a person who they are," Alex continues, "all the factors we refer to as nature and nurture, everything they've experienced, everything that determines their mindset and how their brains function when faced with new empirical inputs of every kind... all of these factors determine how they'll act, what they'll do and think, when faced with the inputs of any given moment. Everything that causes them to be who they are produces the effects they create when they receive whatever inputs they receive at any given moment, such as your input in asking this question in precisely the manner you did at precisely this time in this environment," he adds, addressing Amanda.

"My current response is the only possible outcome because it's based upon everything that is; upon every one of the internally comingling causes constituting me, combined with all the current external influences acting upon me at this moment. We are, in other words, extremely complex deterministic machines that unconsciously produce

an outcome based upon a continual stream of inputs, and this outcome only appears probabilistic because we don't possess the tools, theoretical model and intelligence to collect and interpret all the data that demonstrates the one possible outcome."

"And so, while it's impossible to gather the data to prove it, everything and everyone exists and evolves along their own deterministic line, with everything that makes them who they are and determining what they do and how they develop extending that line at each successive moment. In this manner we're all a part of this immense, near infinite interconnected web of deterministic cause and effect, all proceeding toward one possible destination. And yet, while it appears so on the surface, I don't think that such determinism precludes free will..."

Alex glances about at his cohorts, reading their faces to see if his comment will compel a reply, but no one says anything, and only Amanda and Michael are even looking at him. The group is not only immersed in their daily work of grounds improvement, but has grown well accustomed to his monologues, and knows full well that they need not say anything to motivate a continuance of his pontification. It's Alex's nature to dig for philosophical pay dirt. He was born with the shovel strapped to his hand and, relevant to his own deterministic line, never had the sense that digging was a choice but, rather, something he was destined to do.

"Choice isn't an illusion," he continues, "nor is it incompatible with fatalism. Rather, it's simply a part of the deterministic string. It's a part of the complex equation that produces every moment's compounding outcomes in each of our interacting, interconnected deterministic machines. It isn't that everything that I described before that makes us who we are and influences what we do *forces* us to act against our will at each moment; it's that all of these inputs *determine* our will; determine what we *choose* to do at every successive moment. In other words, just because, in the hypothetical case, some supercomputer or omniscient entity exists that's perfectly privy to all possible information about us and is thereby able to calculate our decisions and course of action at each moment doesn't mean we aren't making those decisions. Knowing what we're going to do doesn't mean that we aren't choosing to do it."

"If I know you're going to dump manure on that square foot of ground," he says looking at Michael, "it means that I have access to the information required to perfectly predict that outcome. And even if this

predictive capacity is perfect, it doesn't mean it's not your choice to do so. This idea that something being predetermined precludes choice, that free will and fate are mutually exclusive, is false. Therefore, not only is the notion of free will being mutually exclusive with destiny one that encourages a lack of responsibility and accountability that has dangerous, diminishing implications for those that choose to believe they have no control over their thoughts and actions and all those people and things they impact, it's also a logical fallacy."

"That is, we have both a moral imperative to believe in free will, to take responsibility for our impact on the total causal string whether or not we recognize free will's coexistence with fate, *and* it's illogical to believe that they can't coexist. To say that I was destined to say what I'm saying right now is not the same thing as saying I possess no ability to do or say otherwise; rather, it's to say that, given perfect data-gathering and the ability to interpret it, given all possible knowledge of every internal and external influence upon my thought and action and the complete capacity to translate that knowledge, it was possible to know every word I would *choose* to say at each moment in this little speech of mine," he says with a smile, amused at himself. "Every one of us is predetermined to do everything that we'll do of our own volition."

"It's an interesting theory," Michael remarks after taking a few seconds to reflect on Alex's assertion while stretching his back, letting a few deep breaths and the warmth of the sun calm his body and open his mind more than would otherwise be possible under the laborious stresses of his physical exertions. "I'm not sure I'm entirely convinced, but you do a credible job of making room for both of the theories under one roof."

"They belong under the same roof, because they're part of the same structure of reality," Alex adds. "They only appear to conflict. In fact, they aren't just compatible, I think they may be mutually dependent."

"In what way?," Henry chimes in from a distance with an incredulous scoff, begrudgingly acknowledging his interest in the dialogue.

After a short pause allowing for anticipation to mount, Alex replies: "In that we're the semi-autonomous agents that produce our fates; that make our destinies. You cannot have the possibility of a perfectly predictable fate for any entity without that entity being integral to that fate. And a sentient entity cannot have a fate made from their thoughts and actions without that entity's capacity to have those thoughts and



enact those actions. The very fact that they think and act means that they aren't a bystander to whatever results from their thoughts and actions, but are an indispensable part of their own deterministic chain. So regardless of the ultra-complex assortment of inputs that lead to their outputs, all the causes that play into how the intrinsic and extrinsic affects the person, others and the world around them, their thoughts and actions cannot be removed from that fate because they're what produce it; their fate wouldn't exist without the role of thought compelling action."

"Therefore, the very fact that a person perceives 'their own thoughts' leading to 'their own actions' means that those thoughts and actions aren't being forced upon them. And if they aren't being forced upon them then they can't be contradictory to their will. So even if factors outside of them contribute to their thoughts and actions, which they certainly do, and which I believe includes the influence of their shared spiritual Self, the very fact that they possess an awareness of their thoughts and actions leading to their fate means that they're willing their fate to be. Thoughts cannot occur to you without you, without your existence, paraphrasing Descartes. The very fact that you acknowledge them is proof of your existence and, furthermore, evidence of your agency as well, because you're 'having' thoughts, those thoughts don't merely 'happen' to you, though they may be conducted through your heart to your mind by the Spirit; but that's you as well, the truest, permanent form of Self."

"Either way," Alex continues, "whether your brain or the Spirit is the source of your thoughts, and I think that it's a combination of the two, you're indivisible from those thoughts and the actions to which they lead, for, as they say, what you think you do, and what you do you become. Furthermore, the realm of the mental self cannot reach the physical realm of bodily action without crossing from the mental to the physical. And we all have thoughts which we act upon and thoughts which we don't. So even if we aren't responsible for every thought, we determine which thoughts are enacted and, therefore, even with perfect deterministic predictability, our agency, our free will, is indivisible from our fate."

"Which is why you say *semi*-autonomous, because all the nature and nurture, everything that makes us who we are and contributes to what we think, including the influence of what you call the spiritual Self, are all indispensable to the thoughts and actions of people, so they are

*semi-autonomous,*” Kate ways in. “You say semi-autonomous to make room for the other causes of people’s effects...”

“Right... That’s exactly right,” Alex concurs, trying too late to tamp down his enthusiasm so that Amanda won’t feel envious of Kate’s cogent translation. “I say semi-autonomous because of all those influences, but especially because of the influence of the Spirit. As I’ve said many times before, I think our spiritual essences, the universal, eternal, indivisible source of energy composing not only us but all things, all spacetime, energy and matter, every speck of the universe, is an inseparable aspect in the Trinity of Self, the one absolute, perfectly ubiquitous aspect, and that, therefore, this essence of all life influences our choices.”

“‘The Force,’ as George Lucas instinctively sensed and referred to it, attempts to guide us as much as it’s able to the best possible destination for life in general, even as it’s aware that it can only move us toward that destination at a certain pace along a certain vector, as our bodies, minds, environments and all the other energies and interactions of existence, all forms and phenomena produced by its Big Bang from singularity into plurality, compel this pace and angle of advance as well.”

“It’s likely that the Spirit is aware of how things will ultimately play out by way of the wills of its interconnected individualizations, but such eventualities are unknown to our minds, and our experiences of the full course moving towards them constitutes its own immensely valuable ‘point.’ Our three-part nature produces the composite of choice, which is one of the many factors in the deterministic chain of causality that affects each moment and pushes us toward one guaranteed future we collectively create. What matters to each of us is contributing value to the whole at the same time that we contribute it to ourselves; to match our abilities with this conviction; and to attempt to ‘suck out the marrow of life;’ to get as much life from as many of its gifted moments as we can.”

As Alex says this he stops working and stares across the gradually developing open space of the forest-encircled property, allowing himself to absorb the full force of the current moment. Nature’s divine providence is magnificent to behold, inspiring to contemplate and a privilege to be a part of. There’s something so incorruptibly pure in its congruency with the will of the Spirit; something so simultaneously spiritually fulfilling and intellectually stimulating in exploring the symbiosis set between nature and the nurturing human being. Both are

made fuller and stronger in their collaborative allegiance. Both are nourished and brought closer to their fullest potential through their natural symbiosis. It is reminiscent of that line from Friar Tuck in one of the most recent film renditions of Robin Hood: "I keep the bees and the bees keep me."

To Alex, this line isn't merely an expression of the appreciation of mutual physical sustainment, but an allusion to spiritual reward and enrichment, for sustaining the physical self and encouraging its strongest form allows the Spirit to live more completely through such forms of the physical self that more capably carry it, that carry all forms of The One, through the experience of life. Such forms are also best positioned to contribute quality of life value to all other individualized forms of the universal, infinite Self when they're best aligned to take advantage of all the ways in which nature bestows its inestimable bounty. Living in mutualistic collaboration with nature and one's fellow lifeforms, rather than in the manner of the exploitative parasite encouraged by western mores, makes for the possibility of producing a sense of fulfillment, of spiritual, peace-pervading satisfaction that no physical pleasure or profit can touch.

This sense of internal fullness is passed from the nurturer to the nurtured to the point where there's no distinction; they've entered that sacred place where all beneficially-affected forms of life, whether flora or fauna, may return the favor in tying the connective tether of spiritual union that we call 'love' a little tighter through a reciprocal nurturing which nurtures them towards their fullest possible forms. This tethering makes it such that the line between the actor and the acted upon is all but erased, with the value of their union shared to the point of perfect equality and, in effect, serving the Spirit, the one truest Self.

The nurturer is the nurtured, and vice versa. And as with any genuinely symbiotic practice and relation, the sustainable gardener and farmer, the organic planter, grower and harvester knows this near-perfect reciprocity as Alex does, for in their hearts they're one with the Spirit that guides them, and which steers them away from any practice which may degrade the planet and all forms of life that depend upon it. This is why, of course, those that are more apt to follow their hearts and its internalized messaging system are more apt to plant, nurture, see and feel the growth, and be grown in the process. The pleasure received in seeing flora springing to life under the warming Spring sun is palpable to the symbiotic being. But it's more than this as well; it's a declaration of independence, and resistance to dependency.

To Alex the property represents something fundamental: a determined fight against and refusal to dedicate most of his life to the system of material good gathering and wealth production in which most people are trapped and devote a majority of their time and energy; a system of producing goods and services for human consumption which turns far too much of our collective experiences of life into those of the consumer and the worker for the avaricious advantage of a very slim minority of the planet's people, for that paltry contingent owning any considerable share of the major enterprises that consolidate our efforts into profits which they don't need, which are mostly wasted when it comes to the potential of that profit to serve overall life and the planet, and which is decimating that planet, depleting its resources and wreaking havoc on its interconnected ecological chains and the climate tied to them.

We've long been enslaved by this system, made in every way to feel like we have to keep up with the wealth and status and possessions of others, most of us serving economic masters and, in the process, missing the far grander opportunity to own the value of our work and dedicate our lives to life itself; to the maximization of our lives; to absorbing as many richly rewarding moments as possible, and to doing everything within our power to put as many other lives in as many possible parallel positions.

Instead, the prevailing pattern of personhood is to be insidiously, systematically controlled, divided and distracted, spending our off-work hours constantly searching for instant gratification, for the biggest, the loudest, the newest; for the brightest, flashiest, richest flavors and senses of satisfaction, and with most of us giving up on our dreams while we run and run and run on the hamster wheel of material and wealth production, losing our greater lives in the process. Alex senses that if he has a property sustaining his basic needs for food, shelter, warmth, energy, security and even community, with several people living on the property with him in collaborative cause and conviction, that he'll no longer be trapped and forced by the system of capitalistic subservience to spend his entire life committing his time and energy to what amounts to climbing the socioeconomic ladder in the ceaseless search for more things, and mostly for the enrichment and continued excluding minority control of society through corporations and the corporate-controlled plutocratic republic by which we dishonor and conceal the true nature of democracy.

So long as this is the nature of the system, and it surely is despite every effort made to convince us that we live in the land of the free and the brave, Alex finds that he's incessantly driven to break their hold upon him; to untether the umbilical of dependency, break through the bars of mental captivity and live his life without their covetous claws embedded in his hide, compelling him to pull the plow of profit like a subtly subdued, economically-encaged, culturally-whipped mule. But the land doesn't freely give up the potential to sustain and improve life. It must be earned.

The property's transformation is agonizingly gradual in the first period of its unfolding, with the momentous matchup between the planters and the planted matching the development of the property step-by-step, and with each lifeform lending strength to every stride. Insects, birds and animals of all kinds are drawn to the greater ecological diversity created by the group's steady improvements, and, through the qualities of the critters' mutualistic equilibrium with their environment (qualities that they'd long ago evolved to employ in their balanced give-and-take survival of suitable natural fit), each makes a contribution equal to what's received in turn.

Some of the insects pollinate and are helping to propagate plants while others are assisting the colonies of countless thriving beneficial bacterium in the decomposition into humus of the compostable materials shed every autumn by the developing deciduous plants and trees, also being offered to the earth by the passing of the years' annuals. Through the efforts of the property's human inhabitants, this humus adds food and vitality to targeted flora prized for its productivity, seemingly as a token of gratitude by such insects and microorganisms for the nutrients loaned to them by the growing trees and passing annuals prepping their progeny.

The decomposition experts distribute a dividend back to the flora on the shared investment of their time and energy, having evolved this symbiosis and, Alex believes, being instinctively aware that this dividend will itself be reinvested, paying them in the future earnings of a growing annuity. Birds help to balance the equation, flying in at the sight of the productions of the growing plants and trees, feeding on those insects which, if able to reproduce unabated, will weaken and potentially kill that flora. Some birds demonstrate their pleasure at the enriched environment by nesting nearby, with aerial activity gradually increasing, repaying Alex and company by keeping more pesky insects within

manageable limits. The fruits of the first blackberry brambles and apple trees and the blooms of the native wildflowers Alex had first sown years before, and which had now exponentially reproduced in clusters of California Poppy orange and rivulets of California Blue Bells, call in the spark plugs dancing with grace from invitation to invitation, keeping the party going, and growing.

From flora to its flowers to its fruits to its seeds the propagators propel the cycle of life. The smallest visible members of the community, the bees, butterflies and hummingbirds, are pulled to the flower by the sweet nourishing nectar, the pollen sticking to their extractors and passed to new blooms as the sparks ultimately igniting autumn with flurries of fruit. Those fruits not harvested by the humans are paid as tokens of gratitude to the property's other indispensable players, with clusters always purposely left upon the branches in appreciative support of the service provided by the insects, birds and mammals predisposed to consume and distribute the kernels of new life, with many such kernels 'randomly' adapted to survive the digestive tract of these animals. Some of those seeds will be spread by airborne delivery, dropped from beak and claw, while others will be disseminated in mounds of nitrogen-rich manure.

If those seeds find a home that fits the development of the property, then they'll be nurtured; if not they'll be mowed down and have their energy and nutrients returned to the land through their incorporation into the compost pile, to be redistributed at some future date of readiness. By placing water near the growing fruit and nut-bearing trees where the birds and insects can quickly gain cover from predators, these frequenters will come more often and stay longer, supplying their services in exchange for sustenance and sanctuary. When certain birds and insects grow too numerous and begin to remove too much, their natural predators will follow the sights, scent and sound of their movements to the grounds and naturally cut back their numbers, so the hawks and snakes are satisfied as well.

Alex brought in a half dozen gopher snakes the year before which, as their name indicates, help keep the underminers at bay in league with the aerial assaults of the hawks by day and the masterfully stealthy, stalking, silently swooping owls during dusk and darkness. Hearing the distinctive hooting of the Great Horned Owl some nights, Alex nostalgically recalls his father walking the nighttime woods, calling back and taking their census. Gradually, Alex's vision of ever-recycled shared energy and self-sustaining effort begins to take hold, with everything

playing its value-added, much appreciated part. And so a life richer and more diverse than the pocket of open ground had ever before known is literally being brought to bear.

Alex is fond of reflecting upon the significance of the inherent symbiotic harmony of the natural world and its innumerable cast of interdependent characters. All have their niche role to play in balancing the forces and reinvigorating the strength and vitality of their sphere of ecological influence, even as the unscrupulously short-sighted amongst humanity work to destroy this natural order and disrupt the primordial forces upon which they force themselves.

As superior a species as humankind believes itself to be, its commitment to increasing profits year-over-year threatens the deterioration and destabilization of the planet across so many interlinked localities that even the climate has been compromised. The total-quality-of-life-diminishment of greed not only degrades, or at least oppresses the long term potential, of the vast majority of lives affected by the ever more interconnected global economic chain, but is reaching the point of being a lethal disease that the planet's ever more violent attempts to rebalance might, without a revolution of mind and human systems, result in the planet killing not just the overgrown leeches most responsible for the calamity, but all of life in its quest for a clean slate.

This property alone, Alex thinks, is a case study in the superiority of the symbiotic mutualism of the collectively owned enterprise over the parasitic exploitations of traditional imperialism and its modern corporate manifestation. The critical question seems to be which of two general outcomes will prevail: will the host kill the parasitic species and the rest of the life that it supports in revolt against the unsustainable transgressions committed against it by the corrupt elements of that species, or will the majority of that species find the common cause and identity lending the necessary strength to rise up and demand the creation of systems fostering environmental sustainability and the symbiotic pursuit of mutual best interest for the greatest numbers, something which the most draining of the parasites have so long prevented to the detriment of the planet and its lifeforms as a whole?

Surveying the leaps his property has made over the last half decade, first through his own hard work and determination while fighting through his health deficiencies and their distracting debilitations, and more recently with the assistance of the four cohorts finding solidarity

with his visions, Alex is certain of one thing: he'll forever be committed to pursuing the greatest *total* quality of life value.

"I'm proud of the work we've done together," he remarks. He's just taken his first gulp of red wine following the group's completion of its manure spread for the day. All five members of the unit are gathered on the north side of the deck just outside the shared residence set to serve as the compounds' primary abode for the foreseeable future. The structure is situated near the hillside ridge, close to the property's highest point of elevation, on the southern side of the open, sloping grassland that's slowly becoming arable despite the immense challenge of coaxing rocky clay into an amenable environment for earthworms, microbes and roots.

Around the whole of the house the veranda-covered deck was built. The southern side faces the forest. The western side faces down the hill and across the river canyon. The northern side looks over the top of the hill across the young hilltop plantings and towards the studio apartment Alex's father had built a long stone's throw away. The final, eastern side faces over the ridge and down the road that circuitously circles around the side of the canyon, leading the way out of the property. Between that road and the eastern-facing side of the residence there's a pond that Alex had his friend's crew dig out while prepping the home's construction.

The pond is a hit with the local wildlife. Nothing emits a brighter beacon for the organisms of the Earth than a reliable source of fresh water, especially during the ongoing drought produced by the violent shifts in weather patterns generated by humankind's effects upon the global climate. Birds, bees, butterflies, skunk, possum, deer, bobcat and even a black bear and her cub have been seen slurping-up the replenishing waters. Alex jokes that the turkey vultures which were once so prevalent around the site, owing both to the drought as well as to the monoculture needled forest and its scarcity of edible foliage, are being put out of business. The acreage now hosts an ongoing experiment in ecological enrichment, from the ground up to the flora and its feeding fauna.

Neither the foliage nor the seed of the predominant Redwood and Douglas Fir trees of the north coast forest are particularly nutritious or energy-rich, offering nothing like the nuts, fruits, acorns, flowers, seedpods, flat leaves and other energizing, easily digestible, nourishing incentives inviting and increasing the population of wild inhabitants in



bordering ecological regions. The needles are very difficult to chew and digest and, being splayed along steeply rising trunks, are also mostly inaccessible, coming at too high an energetic cost-to-benefit ratio for grazers like the deer that search-out the sporadic fields of wild grasses and clusters of edible-leaved trees and shrubs like Madrone and Poison Oak. Meanwhile those same steeply rising trunks in this realm of the tallest trees on Earth cast a wide, nearly impenetrable shadow from their sky-rising canopy that's nightly enveloped by fog and battered by winds rushing in from the cool coast to thicken the thinner, warmer inland air.

Undergirding this moist shadowland lies some of the most tightly-packed soil on Earth from which only the strongest, most resilient of root systems can pry loose the moisture and nutrients locked away therein, inhibiting most trees with inaccessibility. This suits the Redwoods and Fir that, in a nod to Darwin, are a natural fit for the unforgiving clay, needing mighty root systems to anchor their soaring splendor to a land bombarded by winter winds blown in from the storm-battered coast; winds sometimes seeming to hit hurricane proportions. Their needles are also fitting for the constant dusk-to-dawn misting, being far less receptive than flat-leaved trees and thus far less susceptible to water-borne bacterial disorders. Instead, hundreds of feet between the floor and the treetops is filled with this embossed, sword-shaped foliage that seems designed to cut through the moisture and direct its drops down to its resilient root system below.

Of course, a side effect of the resulting sub-canopy semi-darkness created by these dominating giants is that the shorter flat-leaved trees producing the nuts, seeds and flowers so sought-after by the fauna can't compete, the larger grazing and scavenging animals have a hard time finding what they're looking for and life is thinned in the space set between the ground-level ferns and microbial lives and the trees towering over them. Reminding Alex of the ever-thinning middle class, little seems to stand between the needle-head-sized flies and unseen microorganisms feeding on the heaps of dying needles sloughed off of the towering trees and those trees themselves; the magnificent giants that are nourished to new heights by the humus-producing micro beings. This is a land of the massive and the micro, with but a dash able to survive in-between.

It's time to regale in a diversification of the chain of flora and fauna, Alex believes. He envisions an evolving experiment in remaking his small swatch of the local ecology around his biodiversity-minded imagination,

bending this thirty acres to his will such that its bounty brings the local wildlife flooding in like thirsty desert dwellers to an oasis, feeding he, his friends and the animals he's always received immense pleasure in observing. Not long ago the first structure on the property that he hoped in the future to expand into a full-on compound was completed.

It was built to bring in this satisfaction of witnessing the natural wonder of the wild fauna interacting and breaking-off pieces of the nurtured flora brought to bear for all. Alex had the home custom-designed, and the majority of its materials were sourced on site, both because this made for the lowest environmental impact and because the home thereby looked and felt as if it were inseparable from the environment embracing it.

The clay soil dug up for the pond and a seasonal stream was made into brick used for two chimneys and the lower façade of the wraparound deck; all the brick that California's earthquake-conscious building code would permit. A temporary mill had been established on the grounds prior to the home's construction, and a deal was struck with the owner of the milling operation, as was often the case in such rural projects: he'd receive a share of the cut and milled evergreens in exchange for his services. This timber was drawn from those clumps invading, or that had already invaded and claimed, the open, ever more cultivated hillside. True to permaculture principles, minimizing the need for and impact of outside resources was key to the property's developmental plan and progressions.

Getting the most out of all available water supplies was a focal point of the primary residence's design, and included the use of two wells, two ponds, a pair of pumps with attached filters, rainwater catching and a gray water redistribution system, all connected to an underground cistern to store the wet seasons' watery abundance for dry summer days. Perhaps the most innovative water feature of the property, however, was inspired by an article Alex had read on 'fog catching.' On the roof near the turbines and solar panels is an extensive wall of absorbent netting that captures the nightly fog and diverts it to the rainwater catching system and down to the underground cistern, and Alex eventually planned to incorporate these fog catching nets into the deer-detering fences the group was erecting around the grounds. Learning from the California drought, the goal is for no water to go to waste. Thus, every drop used in the residence is diverted through the gray water filtration system and sent to the growing vegetable, herb,

flour and blackberry-bramble-trellised gardens situated immediately adjacent to the northern side of the home.

In the center of the upper pond near the hill's crest, just east of the residence, a fountain connects to the property's second well emitting water into the pond that, when the pond overflows, moves directly toward the residence down a trench serving as a seasonal stream. To the casual observer it appears as if the stream flows directly into the residence. At the eastern border of the surrounding deck's lower brick façade, however, the stream passes under the house and through a large pipe built into the foundation before continuing its gravity-fed descent on the opposite, western side of the home.

After traversing the home's foundation that overflow skirts along the southern border of the open hillside and the surrounding forest for several hundred yards, along the full length of the down-sloping, developing grassland, before dropping over a short waterfall into a second pond where the hill begins to level off, on the southern side of the downhill orchard far below the residence.

The same secondary well provides water to the residents when the cistern is dry, while the property's first, long-running well serves the property's original residence, the studio apartment built by Alex's father. The secondary well is usually relied upon to pump water into the pond and down the stream system for about half the year when the luxury and enjoyment of flowing water can be afforded, including during the winter and the wetter parts of spring and fall when rainfall is regular and when the tributary that follows the lower portion of the primary road up from the Noyo River along the property's side of the canyon consistently percolates its collected rainwater down to the water table tapped by the inhabitants. And when the upper pond is in use it delights the group, both because the grounds surrounding the house and leading down the hill bring a profound sense of peace thanks to the flowing, tumbling water, riparian plants and the several benches and picnic tables bordering and taking advantage of the stream's descent, and because it ushers the delight of flowing water inside, granting the residents the greatest of gifts.

The upper pond was purposely dug wide and shallow, being only five feet at its deepest point, where it meets the foundation of the fountain placed directly in the center. Being wide and shallow, it's easier for the pond to reach its height, at which point the excess water spills into the start of the seasonal stream that begins on the east side of the home

just before passing into the large pipe channeling it through the home's foundation and out the other side, allowing the seasonal stream to continue *after* the underground cistern is filled.

For, before passing all the way through the home's foundation another, vertical pipe gravitationally-feeds the cistern that's also fed by the roof's gutters, which pass their collected rainwater and condensed fog catch into downspouts. In this manner every inch of rain that falls onto the roof or, after reaching its overflowing height, into the upper pond ends up in the underground cistern for later use, a cistern that, of course, has to be chlorinated occasionally to prevent a toxic buildup of water-borne bacteria from imperiling the drinkers and bathers.

When the cistern is filled, or sealed off electronically via a pair of valves, rain and fog water from the roof and overflowing from the upper pond, in conjunction with the well pumping water up through the foundation, continues through the home's foundation and out the western side of the foundation, beginning its inexorable descent down the hill toward the waterfall and the second pond beneath it, adjacent to the orchard.

At the same time, inside the home at the center of the communal space a freshwater pool is featured, and when water flows under the house, either as overflow from the cistern or because the cistern is sealed, a separate pair of pumps can be activated in order to bring water to the home's residents, setting the stage for a type of livable shrine dedicated to water's gift of life. The first pump pushes water up through a filtration system into the eastern side of the indoor pool which, assuming the pool is already filled, occurs at the same rate that a second smaller pump pushes water from the western side of the pool back down into the pipe running beneath and out of the home, descending the seasonal stream.

The second downhill pond is positioned at the southern border of the fledgling orchard, lying just above a secondary access road dropping down to the forest in a southwest angle. This secondary road branches off the primary road which, by that point, has circled from its uphill crest east of the residence around the forested hillside canyon back toward the Noyo River running down the center of the canyon.

At the bottom of the hill the road meets the property's access gate before intersecting the logging road leading both east, deeper into the Redwood forest, or west, across the Noyo and back toward the Sherwood Road access leading into Fort Bragg. If the water overflowing

from the uphill pond and cistern makes it all the way down the hill and pushes the downhill pond to its height, the excess spills into irrigation channels feeding the adjacent orchard. In this way the property is fully integrated to efficiently use all natural resources.

Everything about the design of the residence is centered upon paying homage to nature's divine, vitalizing providence, ever honoring the reciprocating nourishment shared between the land's mutually-sustaining human, plant and animal inhabitants, and thereby encouraging symbiotic coexistence. The home is a single level structure with soaring beamed ceilings of Douglas Fir, Redwood floors and the indoor freshwater pool centered within the wide open communal living space dominating the square footage of the square residence.

Alex had learned from his father that Redwood is high in tannic acid, a natural rot-resistor, which of course makes perfect sense considering its evolution to fit its fog-infused niche, and is a characteristic also making it perfectly suited for siding, roof paneling and other parts of homes exposed to the elements. Douglas Fir, on the other hand, is stronger, and better for load-bearing building parts.

The property offers both types of trees in abundance and, together with the clay easily transformed into brick for the fireplace and lower portions of the wraparound veranda-protected deck, constitutes most of the makings of the on-site-sourced residence. The southern side of the structure contains all four of its equally-sized bedrooms, their doorways divided in the great room by the kitchen appliances, pantries and cabinetry in the center portion of the main room's southern wall and, on its ends, into large fireplaces built, again, from the property's clay soil dug-up to install the ponds and seasonal stream. From inside the great room facing the southern side of the home the layout is: bedroom door, hearth, bedroom door, kitchen, bedroom door, hearth, bedroom door. Directly behind each hearth are the walls separating the bedrooms from the two large bathrooms shared by each of those two pairs of bedrooms.

The walls behind each of the hearths were purposely made of the best heat-conducting materials, such that when the hearths are ablaze their heat is well shared by all sections of the home, with the fires facing the great room, and with much of their heat radiating back behind them to warm the bedrooms and bathrooms. At the same time the roof's twin turbines typically stay set to divert their output, which tends to be greater during the stormier, colder winter months, to electrically heat

the pool central to the open floorplan. This heat radiates off the pool whenever the turbines consistently spin, or when the batteries powered by the solar panels are programmed to channel their output into its heat, inviting the inhabitants toward its relaxing, unfurling warmth whether bathing or not.

Surrounding this occasionally heated indoor freshwater pool are the main entry and foyer on the eastern side of the home, nearest to the upper pond, then, moving from the southeast corner along the southern wall separating the bedrooms and bathrooms from the great room are the living room with its couches and loungers in front of the first, eastern hearth, then the large open kitchen in the center followed by the dining area, with its long, guest-accommodating table on the far side of the southern wall, in front of the western hearth.

This southern side of the open communal floorplan provides the primary structural support for the south side of the home's roof. While the residence is a perfect square, the great room itself is rectangular due to this southern portion of the home accommodating the four bedrooms and two bathrooms. The remainder of the residence's roof is borne by two massive Douglas Fir support pillars set at the homes northwest and northeast corners, respectively, supporting the shorter western and eastern walls, with two more pillars evenly spaced along the much longer northern wall of the great room.

Other than these handsome mature-tree-sized pillars, the ten lowest feet of the home's east, north and west walls are composed entirely of the thickest double-paned glass available, from the start of the soaring ceiling down, allowing for almost perfectly unobstructed visibility from the upper pond to the east across the property's upper gardens to the north and extending down the hill to the west, following the dug-out seasonal creek as it drops toward the waterfall and secondary pond situated on the south side of the orchard far below. All three sets of double doors leading to the wraparound covered deck are made of the same glass, including those facing west down the hill, those facing the pond to the east and the final doors situated evenly between the northern walls' two Douglas Fir pillars.

Alex's mind, like those of his ancient, classical-temple-building forebears, demands symmetrical balance, with this particular lived-in temple paying homage to the natural world. There seems no separation between the inner domesticated life and the outdoor landscape's blend

of wilderness and developing gardens, providing a constant reminder that our lives need not be separated from nature's inimitable gifts.

The home is always well-lit, taking full advantage of every second of the sun's rays as it traces its daily arc across the sky. So fully can the arc be appreciated through the transparent walls that a clock is almost unnecessary; the residence acts as its own sundial. Yet the preservation of energy remains paramount, so in the chill of the winter electric blinds drop down from the top of the glass walls to trap the warmth of the hearths and pool. The residents being accustomed to modern life, many modern comforts are also maintained.

Alex had long enjoyed good films, and remains a now much less fanatic Giants and Forty-Niners fan, so flat-panel TVs were suspended above the hearths and connected to a pair of arms that can raise, lower and turn them depending upon where the home's occupants are situated. While the property retains a connection to PG&E power lines, much of its electrical use is produced by the solar panels lining the towering roof and the pair of small wind turbines weight-balanced between opposing corners of the roof. Electronically-opening ports placed in the lower part of the roof on all sides of the house allow consistent cooling breezes pulled in from the coast and up the river canyon in order to suck heat out of the structure when desired during the warmer stretches of the year. This is the sum total of the first phase of the property's development.

As soon as funds permit, which will likely require his signing a more lucrative publishing agreement for his second book, Alex envisions at least four more structures being raised on the rural acreage: first, a library-slash-clubhouse on 'the landing,' the flat spot the loggers formerly utilized for the short-term stacking of harvested logs just down the hill, east of the current residence along the main road as it begins its circuitous descent toward the river; second, an open pavilion-like structure with three open sides and the fourth uphill side featuring a small studio apartment about the size of the one his father had built upon the hill's crest years earlier, with this structure to be positioned halfway down the west side of the hill between the current residence and the burgeoning orchard, overlooking the waterfall spilling into the lower pond just above the orchard, and positioned adjacent to the seasonal creek at a point where the hill briefly levels out before dropping toward that downhill pond; third, a barn below the pavilion, adjacent to the second pond on the far south side of the orchard; and

fourth, near or connected to the barn, a structure built for experimenting with fermentation, both for preservation and brewing.

While Alex has another larger lodging in mind to be positioned across from the current home in which the group of five reside, these four conceived structures represent better medium-term investments due to promising a greater addition of utility value to the compound by facilitating growing operations and enhancing the enjoyment of the landscape and its potential as a hub of social activity, both for Alex and his companions, as well as for any invited guests during gatherings of like-minded people. Only if the property were to accommodate more inhabitants, and if ample funds are made available, will a larger residence be considered. The landings' library-slash-clubhouse will serve the dual purpose of keeping a collection of history's great works of literature while also offering a bar, a big screen TV and shuffleboard and billiards tables.

Alex always remembered how inviting and enjoyable the clubhouse was on Henry's family ranch running parallel to the Blackfoot River in Montana, and hoped to emulate it to some degree. When not used as a hub of entertainment and social gathering, his own clubhouse will be available for quiet exploration of and reflection upon the ideas and stories of the most heralded writers and thinkers of past and present preserved in their paperback and leather-bound editions; physical copies making for a far more satisfying collection than would any digital library. Their spines paneling the walls will have an aesthetic appeal that'll be inseparable from their invitation to exercise and challenge the intellect, and expand upon the knowledge and perspective of their enriched readers.

He'd always loved the look, feel and smell of printed works, and had long been in the habit of unconsciously crinkling and burying his nose in the pages of every book and magazine he read, taking tactile and olfactory pleasure in his modest reading collections over the years. Aside from these simple sensory satisfactions, he associated the pleasant sound and feel of the crinkling and the odor of the ink-scribed pages with the sound, scent and texture of knowledge; of limitless learning potential. A more expansive collection of such works would thus comprise the primary purpose of this second structure that Alex would have built on the property.

After this would come the pavilion attached to the second studio apartment situated near the bottom of the seasonal, man-made creek



running toward the downhill pond and orchard, to be placed on one of his favorite spots of the property: at that point where the hill briefly levels out, the views of the growing orchard, the lower pond and the river canyon beyond are particularly beckoning. Being open along three sides with seating and a wood-burning grill and bar at its center, he imagined its frequenters absorbing the natural wonders of the grounds while socializing and having the option to crash in the affixed studio apartment upon the finalization of the night's festivities. Yet, even imagining the future fun these two structures promise, it would be the barn, brewing and experiments in fermentation that offered Alex the most excitement.

To be positioned near the second downhill pond on the far southern side of the fruit orchard, he imagined the barn split into four parts: the first part will be an expansive temperature-controlled wine and root cellar serving for dry storage of select produce, purchased wine and fermented final products, built into the foundation beneath the other three parts; the second part will allow the working residents to store any portion of the harvest needing cold storage and not brought into the home for imminent consumption in a set of large fridges and freezers; the third part will permit Alex to keep a small group of never-to-be-slaughtered free-grazing goats and chickens as natural manure makers, grass mowers, weed eaters and egg producers, the goats roaming through the rows of protected plants and trees and transforming the wild annual grasses and non-cultivated plants and shrubs into nitrogen-rich fertilizer to be redistributed for the benefit of all the nurtured trees and plants and their consumers, with the chickens provided a large open area circumscribed by fencing and overhung with netting protecting them from invasion by land or air from any wild predators and the domestic predators kept in the final area of the barn; this fourth and final part will be used as a home for rescued dogs, an area which will be especially useful during those times when Alex wishes to depart the property for any lengthy duration.

He'd always adored animals and is immensely fond of observing the animal kingdom in its interplay with the flora and features of the natural environment. Like most animal lovers, Alex is especially fond of dogs and cats, but all animals fall freely into his openly inexhaustible heart. His mother often told him he had a "serious soft spot for animals." Similar to children, dogs, cats and other non-sentient lifeforms are endearingly lacking in guile. They can all be man's best friends because the relationships men and women have with them remain ever pure.

There's no secrecy or deception in these relationships; no manipulation, misdirection, dishonesty, power-plays or any other side effects of the regularly adulterated relationships between self-aware, ego-bound human beings. But that pure love is especially vulnerable to heart-rending lessons, for the caring of furry companions requires a considerable devotion of time and energy that very often denies the 'owners' of the animals the right to live and love and explore the world without bringing their domesticated dependents along. Many a soft-hearted man and woman have locked themselves to their homes out of love for their beloved canine or feline. And as Alex, like many others, had learned the hard way, when the cats and especially the more human-dependent dogs begin to age past the point of full mobility, this dedication of time, energy and patience can multiply to stressful, even tragically-embittering levels.

Alex had adored his family's rescue, a bluetick-heeler mix with white fur and black spots that his brother had named 'Panda,' based upon her coloration. But when she reached her final years the burden she unintentionally placed upon the family became almost intolerable. The group of three, his mother, his brother and him, had to set up a rotation, like a military troop guarding a base, with one person always playing sentry. But, in this case, what was being defended was the value and sanitation of the home. Their beloved family member had been rendered largely immobile and incontinent in her old age.

And without a dog door and electronic collar that triggered the door to open such that Panda could be trained to use it while keeping other critters out, their situation reached the point where the family had to watch her like a hawk and take her outside to do her deeds every couple of hours or so. And those trips often took ten to twenty minutes apiece as she labored around the large backyard biding her bowels and bladder and searching-out the best place to make a deposit. They'd find themselves cursing her, then themselves, for expressing and even just feeling such frustration sometimes bordering upon ill will for the doggie they adored deep in their backlashing hearts.

Alex was determined to learn from these painful lessons and prevent future occurrences of self-disgust at the fury he felt at Panda's consuming so much of his time and energy and taxing his patience well beyond its stress-free limits. He was convinced that a system could be devised whereby the strong connection between the canine and human could be maintained *while* the canine was as independently able to serve its own needs as much as possible.

Therefore, this fourth area of the barn will contain all the accoutrements of automated canine luxury living for those times when the property's human occupants are offsite, including dog doors tuned to special electronically-unlocking collars, plus beds for every dog, self-dispensing water and food stations with supplies for at least a full week, heaters and air-conditioners programmed to provide an ideal comfort level and all the toys a pack of dogs can shred and slobber their way through. Not that it was planned, for Alex is perfectly content to have his furry friends share his home with him, but this final section of the barn will be able to provide everything his rescues needed for as long as possible, while nearby they'll be able to practice the arts of alchemy.

One of many documentaries Alex had watched on *Netflix* on the intermingling matters of food and health was called *Cooked*, a series exploring the primal agents of fire, water, air and earth in relation to food. It linked these agents to their interweave with human culture and evolution, reigniting in him a long-slumbering passion to investigate the scientific methods by which food is made into more than the sum of its parts, accomplished through the introduction of controlled measures of certain variables, including heat, water and the oft-overlooked microorganisms ever more appreciated by health enthusiasts. Every human being is the host of his or her own uniquely vast world of micro-lifeforms that symbiotically synergize with his or her system, unlocking the nutrients in food, increasing their bioavailability and, prior to their ingestion, even transforming them into richer, more satisfying and stress-reducing versions of the plants we grow, harvest and cook.

While the science of microbiology is exceedingly complicated, and includes a study of how microorganisms can be harnessed to bolster the immune system, among other imparted benefits, Alex can see that even an amateur understanding of the micro-organic impact on food possesses the potential to better connect him to and increase his appreciation of the natural world. Simultaneously, this knowledge improved his capacity to produce food and drink that is more nutritious, better preserved and offers the controlled, stress-reducing enjoyment of small-batch-brewed alcoholic beverages. Long before the five-some came together on the property, he'd begun experimenting with 'prebiotic' foods and the probiotics they feed, the 'good bacteria' assisting in the digestive, immune and neurochemical-concocting processes, unlocking the nutrients of food, sending defenders to the walls to stave off the 'bad bacteria' and enabling the body to better supply depression-staving neurotransmitters like serotonin. These good

bacteria depended upon what has been called ‘prebiotics:’ the insoluble fibers upon which they feed and multiply.

His hope is to someday employ these underappreciated legions of microorganisms beyond the decomposing capacity they already enact for the group’s grounds-improving, flora-nurturing and nutrient-consuming benefits. A small section of the land will be devoted to growing wheat and barley for milling and malting. While he believes grains present problems for a human body that’s poorly equipped to digest them, Alex nevertheless dreams of experimenting with their fermentation, baking small batches into fresh bread and utilizing some of this grain and a small portion of the fruit the small farm yields, especially the apples, to study brewing.

All of these endeavors would take place in this fourth foreseen brew-making addition to the compound, to be attached to or located near the barn and adjacent to the orchard, to round out the experience of its residents. It was while imagining these future developments, with the five-some sitting on the deck of the residence completed only months before, that Alex is overcome with pride, sharing the feeling with the group. “Yes, I’m very proud of the work we’ve done,” he repeats.

Amanda, out of love for Alex and a continual desire to demonstrate that she’s capable of being not just his lover and friend, someone not just tugging at his heart and stirring his loins, but also able to challenge his mind and exercise his intellect, suddenly realizes that Alex’s admission and expression of pride may be running aground of his own principles. “Beware the hot inflationary pride of ego,” Amanda teases him. “It wasn’t long ago that you spoke to us all of pride’s over-inflation of the idea of oneself, and how that bloated self-conception clouds reason and narrows perspective and begets self-absorbedness. I’ve heard versions of this from you many times, as a matter of fact. It leads to a supercilious attitude, you’ve said, where the overly-prideful person sees themselves as falsely superior to others and, as a consequence, fails to follow your Spiritual Rule of treating others as yourself, and instead treats others as if they’re inferior and less deserving; as if they’re outside, separate from and even beneath the individualized self. And yet here you are, self-satisfactorily, blithely expressing your pride over your property and its improvements.”

“Well, you do appear to have me there,” Alex replies with a slight smile and air of embarrassed hesitance. Amanda grins broadly with self-satisfaction, a sentiment cut short when Alex adds: “You *appear* to have

me there, cutie pie,” he continues. “Damn, I shouldn’t have said that,” he says with immediate regret. “Please don’t be angry at me, for that was an insensitive way to reply, but while you’re right that I rail against the ego-inflating costs of pride, pointing out my apparent hypocrisy at expressing pride is specious in this case; it seems to be correct but actually isn’t.”

Scowling, Amanda replies: “And why do you say that, Mr. Know It All?”

“Because, depending upon its usage, there are clearly at least two forms of pride,” Alex answers immediately. “One form, the form I indeed caution against, is based upon the idea of oneself held in one’s mind. It’s the self-conception which I’d warn anyone and everyone from investing in, either in an inflationary or deflationary manner, as it clouds one’s perspective and ability to see the truth, as you say, and affects their attitude and their approach in life. It thereby makes them either arrogantly inconsiderate or demurely, overly self-aware, self-chastising and introspective and less proactive and productive than they’d be otherwise. Both sides of this ‘ego vision’ create a negative value in the world relative to a person’s progressive potential.

It’s impossible to completely subdue or eradicate one’s ego, I believe, as my reflexive reply to your critique is evidence of in itself, but that doesn’t mean people shouldn’t strive to starve that ego as much as possible. It’s *this* form of pride that I believe everyone should resist. But I find that people use the word ‘pride’ in a very different way as well; in a manner placing the idea within the realm of love and respect; within the realm of the heart and the Spirit more than within the realm of misleading self-conception.”

“When a father tells his son that he’s proud of him for doing the right thing, for example, this seems to be evoked by a combination of love and respect for the son. Of course, you could argue that the father also feels an egotistic boost from the notion that his son’s actions reflect upon his parenting, and maybe even an inherited disposition to be a moral human being; like there’s both love and respect for the son in addition to some egotistic self-satisfaction being expressed; a bit of both forms of pride, but, in such a case, likely the loving kind more than the egotistic kind. And it gets even hazier in other examples such as, say, when the father tells the son that he’s proud of him for driving in the winning run in a baseball game.”

“The father is likely acknowledging how hard his son has worked, how many hours he’s practiced, how much concentration and steeling of his nerves went into coming through in that pivotal moment, and how much it means to the son to come through for his team, like sharing the love and respect his son earned for himself and from his teammates in this most triumphant of moments. But the father is also surrounded by other fathers, all likely rooting for their sons as much as for the team, and all feeling like the relative athletic prowess and success demonstrated by their sons reflects upon them in some way; that it reflects good parenting and coaching and the natural inherited ability with which they endowed their sons through their own innate athleticism and virility.”

“These fathers,” Alex continues, “likely feel some sort of vicarious egotistic satisfaction or dissatisfaction in witnessing the relative success or failure of their sons on the field. In such examples both forms of pride are being expressed as well, but perhaps more equally than in the previous example. The father’s likely feel love and respect for the hard work, concentration and resolve exhibited in their sons’ performances, but also derive an egotistic boost or fall from those performances.”

“So I wouldn’t conflate the two forms of pride, but would leave room for both, as one emanates from the Spirit through the heart and the other is an extension of the ego built and maintained within the mind. The first, in other words, is to be an encouraged expression of love, while the second should be discouraged, considering mostly as evincing a dangerous or debilitating form of false self-conception. And honestly, I know it sounds sappy, but when I said I was proud of the work we’ve done here, I think that I was more expressing love for you all, for the property and for nature, than I was expressing the inflation of my sense of self. Wouldn’t you agree?”

After considering this open expression of love by her boyfriend, Amanda’s anger at his reflexive critique softens somewhat, and her mind drifts back to their first days together in Tahoe, when Alex gushed a generosity of affection that seemed to limitlessly spring forth from him, as if she’d pulled the plug and let loose a force that had been dammed for far too long. And this is precisely what she’d done, for Alex had been so physically and psychologically consumed and constrained by a compounding assortment of health ills and their habitual self-destructive causes that he’d been unable to generate a healthy, natural outlet for his emotional and sexual longings since his collegiate years fifteen years before. Instead, he’d learned to live with bottling those

forces up, yearning and hoping for any potential of their release. And when Amanda pulled the cork that weekend, the flood ensued, and she was the foremost beneficiary.

The power of that memory was intermixed with her love of travel and adventurous exploration, for though she'd long been a resident of nearby Truckee she'd spent very little time in the Tahoe area before that and, while much of their first days together were spent carelessly bouncing about their casino hotel room, they'd also spent some time afoot searching out the best restaurants, bars and casinos. And the combination of taking-in everything Alex had to offer for the first time with the novel surroundings shown a luster upon those days that would never diminish in her memory. The immediate closeness, the unrestrained intimacy, the passion of the lovemaking and the surveying of the untapped urban environment made those days some of the best of her life, and the spirit of adventurous exploration was inseparable from that.

So while she's enjoying the intimate closeness of the recently formed group of five and the majesty of the Redwood forest, Amanda often wishes she could take Alex away to another place where that adventurous spirit can be reignited, and where they might taste even a tiny slice of the perfect satisfaction baked between them that first weekend together. For it matters not if a billion people have experienced a place or an activity before – if they've yet to be experienced by *you* then it's new, and anything new always brings an inimitable sense of excitement.

To Alex, this is core to the Spirit's motive to expand from its singularity into a limitless plurality: even when life has experienced it innumerable times, when manifestation knows it perfectly well, it'll ever remain exhilaratingly new to each of its manifestations upon the individualization's premiere encounter. And the joys of such novel experiences are boundless. Thus, it might be said that the purpose of life is an endless experience of novelty for the never ending. *That's* why Spirit chose spacetime and matter. And for Alex and Amanda, a novel romance had undoubtedly been written.

Amanda recalls how she and Alex had discussed the incalculable value of travel and liberally seeking the enrichment of new experiences while they lay in bed their second night together. He'd commented that while there are certainly better investments for one's disposable income from a total quality of human life standpoint, considering how many people

have not met their basic needs and, therefore, that expending considerable means traveling comes with a significant opportunity cost considering said means can be devoted to meeting such immensely quality-of-life-boosting needs, from an individualistic quality of life standpoint, after one meets their basic needs and desires travel offers the very best return on investment.

The individualized life is fleeting, and its quality is defined by its collective experience. Quality of life, the value of every individualization's experience, is about the quality of the journey, as is said, not the certain destination, such that one should consider the moment itself the greatest destination. "You'll arrive at your destination when you stop trying to reach it," he'd once journaled.

And Alex considered it an immense tragedy that so many people, due to limitations of imagination and resources or sometimes to an arrogant, ignorant, xenophobic nationalism that erroneously convinces them that their own country, state or other confined territory is the only one worth experiencing, are so limited in such experiences. A great many people are locked in a perpetual fight for survival, while a great many others lock themselves into a grossly restricted set of cities, counties or states, even when they possess the means to break those binds. The consequence of this self-restriction is a drastic curtailment in their potential quality of lifetime experience.

As Alex sees it, there's no higher quality of experience to be offered than through adventure-minded travel; through exploring the world, broadening the mind and gradually coming to a profound personal realization that the world, its cultures, places and people are *vastly* varied while also being fundamentally the same. And it is this paradoxical knowledge of simultaneous uniqueness and sameness across the planet that travel offers each of us; this knowledge that the world contains a near limitlessness of value offered to everyone by experiencing an endless train of special sights, sounds, ideas, cultures and people at the same time as this limitlessly valuable variety shares an essential foundation. Travel offers the knowledge that we all live in a world in which all people, no matter their genetic history, nation of residence or system of beliefs, are simultaneously unique and, in their deepest mental, emotional, spiritual cores, and their primary motivations, needs and desires, exactly the same.

There's no other way to truly capture in one's mind the value of our magnificently diverse, interwoven, fundamentally invariable planet and



its hosted lifeforms than to experience this perfectly dissimilar equality firsthand. And if you limit the size of your experience, you limit the size of yourself. Simply put, every single culture and location, every person, place and thing on the planet has value to offer every other person on the planet, especially those with an open and discerning enough mind to absorb that value, which, in a positively self-perpetuating cycle, is a characteristic that travel helps develop. Everything and everyone to which we may be exposed possesses potential value to convey to us, and us to them. Realizing this fact alone unlocks the door leading to a never-ending series of value-adding potential experiences for those whom realize it.

Amanda recalls how Alex had stated that the vast majority of individuals fail to experience 99.999% of what the world has to offer, and that one of his most audacious aspirations is to reduce his own number to 98%. He feels the same way about his comprehension of the sum of knowledge available to humankind, and is convinced that spending his disposable income on these intertwined ambitions will produce exponentially greater quality of life return than expending it on the materialistic consumer trap set by the greedy, value-consolidating ownership class ever coercing us to buy more crap to fill our inner void.

“You cannot fill the void with stuff,” he’d said to her then, “only with love, experience and purpose.” He knows that he can do without the newest car and gadget, and cares not for ‘keeping up with the Joneses.’ No possession can match the value of adding love, experience, knowledge and improvement to the overall quality of existence for the world’s beings. And his own mightiest moments are made by diving deep below the surface into the world’s bottomless depths, seeking the indivisible Self hidden within all things.



## **Eight: The First Cause Ad Infinitum**

*Though the drops do drip eternal, it's the drop itself that matters most.*

Nothing is ever 'just' anything, for everything is connected to everything else, and no one thing can be totally isolated from any other thing. It's never 'just a walk,' 'just a date,' 'just a look,' 'just a book.' Anything said to be limited to itself is a denial of the certainty of universal interconnectivity interwoven with a near infinite realm of possibility.

Almost anything can be experienced on a walk or a date, and almost anything can be conveyed through a look or a book, with those conveyances always carried forward, rippling out from one life to another, even when those ripples are imperceptibly conducted rather than being passed across the perceivable surface. In the interactions of humans and other animals, this ripple effect tends to perpetuate like kind. Cruelty begets cruelty, compassion begets compassion. Yes, it's

certainly possible to read too much into things and thereby infer connections that don't exist, at least not in any considerable, direct manner, yet true disconnection is impossible.

Literally everything matters, and that which matters always makes for more materialization. No one, and no thing, is a figurative island. Everything that exists, every person, place and thing, is an effect of one or more causes and, ultimately, is a part of the countless linked chains of cause and effect traceable back to the original cause and rippling forward into the everlasting future.

This does *not* mean, however, that everything happens for a good, just, positive or progressive reason, at least not in the short term. In the long term, in the long, bending arc of the moral universe, and in the evolution of life and the human species, even the most evil acts trigger progression by leading to lessons and pressures eventually pushing through to positive change. Missteps lead to sure, climbing strides. Apparent mistakes illuminate pathways to future breakthroughs, such that nothing is ever truly and completely 'negative.'

Because of this, the only true mistake is fearfully refraining from making them. Mistakes only occur when we're so afraid to make them that we venture nothing, and thus gain nothing, and when we fail to learn from our missteps and grow through learning how, where, when, and why to step. As Edison might've said, we don't make 'mistakes,' only encounter countless opportunities to learn how to better proceed toward the future. There's nothing meaningless or irrelevant or that occurs within a vacuum detached from the rest of existence. Even when something seems not to matter, it does, even if it's a relatively small addition to the materialization of the present precipitating the future. It's all cause and effect, and effects accumulate and create the future from the past through the present such that the separation between past, present and future is mostly illusory. As Faulkner said: "The past is never dead; it's not even the past." The past produces the presently producing future.

There's nothing that can't be explained or isn't affected by the causality that connects everything, and that disproves the idea of independence. This is true even when we lack the tools, technology and mental capacity to collect the causal information, or to interpret the meaning of the perfectly interwoven web of which everything is a part.

It's *all* connected, and everything affects and is eventually re-affected by everything else in the limitless, emanating causal waves of existence ceaselessly flooding and ebbing, propelling outward from the most recent causal sources that're themselves effects traceable back to the original cause and, altered by all other causes affecting it, all eventually bouncing back and crashing into the forces from which those waves were cast. No wave ends.

Regardless of the degree to which effects matter, whether seemingly monumental or insignificant, they always accumulate, fall back into and impact one another, compelling more causes and cumulative effects. Accretion is but the buildup of effects. Given enough time, even the seemingly smallest, most insignificant effects can build to colossal proportion. Geologists and astrophysicists, among others, are well aware of this. But you need not possess advanced scientific knowledge to grasp the core philosophical implications of causality's universality. Among those implications: nothing happens at random, in a total vacuum, or through unexplainable chaos.

Chaos is simply complexity as perceived through the lenses of ignorance and limitation. The world *appears* chaotic because we lack the mental and technological means and capacity to capture, explain or interpret the results of the endless empirical data that the universe and all its interconnected agents and phenomena make available by virtue of observing or otherwise recording their limitless action and reaction, and when we lack the theoretical framework to process the data and comprehend its implications, converting empiricism into knowledge, meaning, and the production of value for the world.

Anything that asserts or implies randomness or a lack of meaning, purpose or significance is incorrect. *Every time*. For there's a fundamental difference between 'random' and unpredictable; between incalculable and currently unable to be calculated. Those operating in scientific fields make this error in logic on a regular basis, conflating unproven with un-provable. Many atheists, for example, equate no scientific proof of Spirit with no existence of Spirit.

So strong is their faith in their field and in scientific proof that many scientists fail to see that there're *many* avenues leading to the same truth, and that not seeing something with today's technology in no way proves that tomorrow's technology won't illuminate what was *always* there. So, while 'randomness' and 'incalculability' are myths made of ignorance, arrogance and technological limitation, and are very often

ego-infused mistakes of thinking 'I can't explain it and, therefore, there must be no explanation,' unpredictable and uncalculated must merely be seen as admissions of a *temporary* incapacitation. For these same reasons, nothing ever just falls upon us, or into our laps.

There's no luck, only good fortune, as luck implies a randomness and lack of causality that doesn't exist. Everything is a part of the vast, ever-expanding causal chain connecting all the way through the first cause, what scientists conceptualize as the 'Big Bang,' through every moment of the past, into the present and onto the future. The past, present and future aren't separated, and nothing *happens* by coincidence. Instead, the true meaning and value of 'coincidental' is the identification of a misleading, falsely-attributed *apparent* cause. It signifies the appearance of causal connection that isn't there.

That is, if two things occur which appear to be directly causally linked but are not, only being indirectly linked through unknown degrees of separation, as all things are, it doesn't mean that there wasn't a cause; rather, it means that the things that appear to be causally linked are just that, *appearing* as cause and effect, and that those lacking the knowledge of true causality tend to fill that void of ignorance with falsely presumptuous or speculative causes often colored by their own prejudicial bias. One historically prevalent example of this bias may be found in the 'God of the gaps' phenomenon whereby mythical and religious explanations are used to fill temporary gaps left by as-of-yet uncovered objective truths produced by mental, technological and theoretical limitations. Logical fallacies of this sort, including false causality and its close relative, false equivalency, are all too common.

Even the best educated and most intelligent people possess but a small fraction of the total sum of knowledge available in the world and suffer some degree of limitation in terms of their ability to interpret information. Because of this, even the most capacious and educated are strictly limited in their possession of the requisites of comprehending the full complexity of interconnectivity existing in the universe. And yet people possess an innate drive to understand even in the absence of what's required to unearth that understanding. 'Coincidence' and the appearance of illusions like 'chaos,' 'randomness' and 'the inexplicable' are the unavoidable result. In this way, all pretense of cause is coined 'coincidental' due to being *falsely identified* causes, not because there was no cause, for everything can be explained through the seamless pair of universal rules that everything is connected and that causality always forms that connective bridge.

This creates the paramount principle that *everything* is causally connected. Therefore, along an infinite timeline everything will be explained in the context of causal interconnectivity. Everything is connected to everything else. Every idea, action, person, place, thing is an effect and cause of effects. Total causality and total connectivity are absolute, universal truths of limitless application and implication. They're the two sides of every coin. Everything is subject to them, and they're key to the understanding of absolutely everything.

"Even when we lack the information and understanding of the causal link between the affecting and the affected, that knowledge always exists beneath the surface of our mental and technological limitations; it's simply yet to be uncovered or understood," Alex says to Michael as the pair walks through the Redwoods, deliberating on the spiritual basis of existence. "It's impending knowledge. Given sufficient tools, data, explanatory equations, logic and capacity for comprehension *everything* is explainable and, given sufficient time, eventually will be explained."

"This is, of course, the ironic undercurrent of what is known as Chaos Theory: chaos is an illusion made of limitation. I firmly believe that if one wishes to possess total and utter faith and invest complete trust in anything, that this should be it: the universal certainty of causality and its ability to shed light on even the most confounding of matters. Causality is the most fundamental of truths; it's a preeminent law of all of science and philosophical logic. Because of this, causality can be traced through all, is limited by nothing and transcends all other frameworks through which understanding may be built. Total connectivity and universal causality form a two-sided tool that, like the sculptor seeing what's already buried in the block of marble, may be used to chip away all the pieces of the block concealing the comprehension of any and every truth that has always been there, awaiting the making of the means of its discovery."

"And if we employ deductive reasoning and scientific principles to trace this total connectivity and universality of causality all the way back," Alex continues, "we can ascertain the nature and derivation of all existence. One of the first premises we must rely upon in this exercise is that everything that is *must* have been derived from everything that was. For the beginning cannot be nothing, as nothing that is can come from something that isn't. Zero can't be the starting point."

"Instead, everything must come from something. And that something must be energy, for while energy may coalesce and condense into

matter and governs the bonds that make matter possible, and while energy is expressed through and contained within many forms and systems, in its rawest form energy does not depend upon matter to exist and crosses the spacetime constraints that restrict and render material bonds impermanent.”

“Energy requires no material form. And when matter is destroyed, when the energetic bonds upon which its material form is based are obliterated, the energy that maintained those bonds always remains. Because of this energy doesn’t require the space in which matter is contained or the time through which matter is constantly changing form, because even when form ends, and when the space and time that define that beginning and end are gone, energy remains. With or without matter, space or time, everything exists relative to the arrangement and condensing of energy.”

“So... the law of causality ultimately leads to a form of energy that cannot be reduced, and this irreducible source of energy is God?,” Michael asks.

“Yes. To me, logic and science provide proof of Spirit, especially when combined with instinctive awareness,” Alex continues. “Now, the degree to which that logic is deductive or inductive, and whether or not the scientific laws and philosophical principles employed in the practice of providing a spiritual proof actually *prove* or only strongly *suggest* Spirit, is uncertain. Knowing something and proving something are two different things, which is where I believe Socrates’ interrogative method fails, as when he famously professes to be the only one to know nothing, and routinely demonstrates that everyone that he interrogates fails to prove their knowledge, implying that they therefore profess to know that which they don’t. Just because I can’t prove it to you doesn’t mean it can’t be proven and isn’t true, both because not having proof doesn’t equate with no proof, and because a person can have something reasonably proven to them, or can have reasonably proven it to themselves, and yet be unable to perfectly convey that proof to others; others that must agree the proof has been passed beyond a reasonable doubt, or that a confirming calculation and set of data objectively proves a particular truth.”

“Those whom Socrates, through Plato’s recorded dialogues, famously questioned until it was clear that they couldn’t absolutely prove that they knew what they professed to know weren’t unequivocally proven not to possess a truth to convey, only that they lacked the ability to



convey it. They may very well have not possessed the truth, and this might be the case in the majority of instances, but there's a difference between truth and its possession, and a difference between possession and the conveyance of that possession."

"And no 'proof' is one-hundred-percent provable anyway, as the super skeptic will tell you that there's always *some* assumption plugged into every proof, like my assuming I'm talking to you, a physical 'other,' rather than just talking to myself in a dream, as Descartes and the solipsists might contend, and which is the final point of the Socratic Method: that every truth rests upon some assumption, and that, therefore, *nothing* can be indisputably true. But I digress..."

"So... reason and logic dictate that there's a definite intersection between science and spirituality; a junction between the misunderstood 'social science' of philosophy, a discipline of logic that extends to all fields, not just those involving human interactions and deliberations, and the 'applied science' of physics. Interconnection is an absolute, including in intellectual and academic pursuits. Every scholastic discipline thought of as distinct and separate from the others is actually tied to and largely overlapping all others, and many are grossly underestimated; philosophy more than most, I'd say, though I admit my bias due to seeing myself as a philosopher, as much as I attempt to eschew egotistical self-identity."

"Regardless, philosophy is a discipline that's clearly sold short," Alex goes on. "I recall several instances wherein I've told people that I'm a philosopher, and they scoffed or outright laughed. Why? Because philosophy is misunderstood and undervalued, especially in western society where anything not clearly leading to financial enrichment, material accumulation and connected upgrades in the egotistic social status that they buy are commonly derided as valueless, as what our society values is dishonorably skewed in this manner, selling short the more valuable means by which our hearts and minds may be enriched."

"The ugly conservative heart of westernism has cast such forms of enrichment off in favor of surface-level sensational and egotistical satisfactions. Thus, philosophy is commonly considered a pretension belonging to a realm of pure intellectual theory, and some of it, the worst of it, may be deserving of such dismissal. But such 'philosophy' is not worthy of the word or the best traditions and greatest potential of the discipline which, at its best, is the very *opposite* of being restricted to the mere theoretical and intellectual exercises conducted in the ivory

towers entirely devoid of real-world application. The best of it is invaluable.”

“The way I see it, philosophy is the art of intellectual distillation; the art of distilling information and ideas down to their essence and finding overlaps in these essential qualities such that the most fundamental governing concepts and principles of existence can be unearthed and used to seed the most empowering understandings and, ideally, to grow the ideal systems best serving life as a whole. The best philosophy most deserving of the classical canon is of the *highest* value for the very reason that it may be utilized to explain, grant access to and apply *so much* value.”

“This is precisely what makes it classical, for the truest, most valuable definition of ‘classical’ is anything which stands the test of time *because* it is of real, lasting value, as opposed to fads, pretenses and façades. It doesn’t merely present the pretense of value that, when scrutinized, is found to be lacking, and it may be utilized in the creation and protection of *immense* value. The greatest knowledge, philosophical principles and written works and ideas all have this broad value application in common.”

“They can’t be attributed to any one discipline because they’re rooted in many,” Michael adds.

“Yes, precisely,” Alex agrees. “Because the essential qualities of root systems are common across the totality of all to which they feed, so to speak. As with most things of great value and importance, root principles defy narrow identification, classification and depreciation. For while the fruits of manual toil are of great value, they may well wither under the stresses of time. The most classical constructs of the mind, on the other hand, are everlasting. These are principles and concepts unearthed during the mental digging for the core truths underlying manifold forms of understanding which are bound to, depend upon and grow from them.”

“Metaphorically, the very best and most valuable of these truths may be applied to virtually everything that grows from any root tapping into any soil of subject, and thereby has the potential to lend a degree of insight, understanding and knowledge of anything and everything that grows from that soil and root structure. Such buried treasure that may be dug out of the confusing, concealing detritus is of near universal application and limitless value. This definition of value, applicative utility value,

entirely blurs the lines between disciplines commonly thought to have no correlation to one another.”

“For, in fact, the greatest philosophers, mathematicians and physicists dig for and illuminate root truths that, by their very nature, overlap with truths revealed through almost every other discipline. The physicist and philosopher pursue the same truths and potential value. It’s but the utilized tools and abilities that differ between them, and some use a cross-section of such tools and abilities.”

“For example, without knowing the source of the quote one would be hard-pressed to judge whether it was a physicist or a philosopher that said: ‘The only reason for time is so that everything doesn’t happen at once.’ Is that philosophy or science?,” Alex rhetorically asks. “It’s both, each informing the other; science structuring the philosophic abstract.”

Michael says nothing, and after a few moments Alex continues: “That’s a quote from Einstein, a man that epitomized the fact that definitions, categorizations and separations are never perfectly applicable, but may be seen more as generalities or artifices imposed by man for the purposes of permitting easily identifiable subjects of discussion, allowing for specialization in certain fields of knowledge and for all the other ways and all the other reasons by which imperfect lines are drawn between people, places and ideas. It’s an unavoidable practice that has value, but that value can quickly turn negative when we forget that the separating lines we draw between all subjects are *always* relative, *never* absolute.”

“All imposed lines are far more artificial than fundamental, always describing degrees of variation, never black and white distinctions. And most of the greatest evils perpetrated by humankind can be traced to imposing this black and white narrow-minded ideology upon a fully inter-matched world of color, from religious and ethnic conflicts to racism, sexism and every form of bigotry and tribal thought; to everything that paints in the mind a steadfast, unbreakable line between ‘me and them;’ between the egotistically perceived ‘self’ and the ‘other’ outside that narrowly-conceived self.”

“As we discussed around the fire recently, when you trace everything all the way back to the first cause, then forward through the total causal connectivity of time, space, matter and life, there’s no clear distinction or dividing line. It’s the same with all intellectual disciplines. In the case of the quote I just mentioned, ‘the only reason for time is so that

everything doesn't happen at once,' it's at least as philosophical an affirmation as it is a scientific one. And it has profound spiritual implications. Expand his statement to the full existential framework and you get the four dimensions of spacetime plus matter."

"You could say that the only reason for time is so that everything doesn't happen at once, the only reason for space is so that countless things can happen at the same time, and the only reason for matter is so that energy can condense into limitless material forms so that a near infinite set of interactions can occur to and be shared between the near infinite number of material forms. So time, space and matter exist for the purpose of near limitless occurrence and individualized formation, even while every such individualization is certain to be cycled back into its most fundamental energetic form."

"And under select conditions in which the prerequisite material, temperature and energy locked into matter is available for the rising and self-replication of semi-autonomous organic life, for individualized forms of the source, the reason for spacetime and matter is that a near infinite set of experiences can occur in the lives of a near infinite set of semi-autonomous lifeforms; an unlimited experience of life is, in other words, the very purpose of space, time, energy and matter."

"So you think that the underlying nature of everything that scientists study is ultimately to make possible limitless forms and experiences of life," Michael rephrases. "God chose spacetime and matter for infinite self-variation and the related infinity of perspective upon life experience."

"Yes, well put," Alex agrees. "Form always follows function. And the function of the forms measured by physics, including space, time and matter, are to set the stage for life; the preconditions for life. The purpose of space, time and matter made by the Spirit's expansion from pure energy into the parameters of material and temporal existence is the limitless variety of form and experience they potentiate."

"Because everything doesn't happen at the same point in that four dimensional framework, that full frame may be filled in with every possible variation of experience. And when we combine the foremost law of physics, that nothing is created or destroyed, with the fact that all matter is ultimately composed of and governed by energy, then logic dictates that there must be an original, irreducible, indestructible

source of energy that was never created, but which is timeless; which always was and always will be.”

“The source, Spirit, cannot have had a beginning, for it cannot be created, and nothing that exists can come from a non-thing or can be caused by a non-thing in the infinitely expanding chain of causality, but must be derived from something. Therefore, everything that ‘is’ must come from something which *always* was. It’s difficult for us to conceive of something having always existed because we think in finite terms; because, in order to survive and experience life as material individualizations, our thought processes and experiences are based upon finite spacetime frameworks.”

“But the source is infinite,” Alex continues. “It’s endless. It’s always been the foundation and always will be. So the beginning of all causality is something that was not caused, created or capable of being destroyed, but is the indestructible, eternal beginning of cause. For if there was nothing causing the source then it must be the first cause and the only thing not subject to the universal rule of causality governing known existence, which it set into motion when it produced spacetime and matter from its energy. It’s the core element from which everything else is derived and constantly reordered. It’s the one thing that must remain essentially unchanged.”

“The implications of this chain of logic are profound. The Spirit *is* the cause of everything that exists, cannot be created or destroyed and must, therefore, be inherent to the construction and continuity of all things. It’s subject to nothing, and the one irreducible subject of everything. It’s the singularity that’s always indivisible from every element of the plurality that it put in motion through its division.”

After a minute, Michael replies: “I’m trying to get a firm grasp on your idea of God... Can you say that one more time?”

“So you have the original energy that cannot be created or destroyed, that cannot have a beginning or an end or even a separation from anything and everything of which it is the essential-most element,” Alex reiterates. “So it cannot be ruled by the spacetime that dictates the existence of things relative to other things, that delineates a beginning and end and space of existence for all individualized forms relative to other forms, including lifeforms. It’s not bound by these parameters, but created them for the purpose of limitless perspective, form and type of existence and its experiences. It has no beginning or end and is

the one element within all things that exist in the framework of spacetime.”

“All this means that it’s the one non-relative, absolute entity. It exists relative to nothing, but everything exists relative to it. It is, again, subject to nothing; the subject of everything. All energy, all matter, all time, all space is composed of this one thing. It’s not just eternal, it’s perfectly ubiquitous. Everything exists within it, from it, through it. Spacetime and all its material constructs are pluralities of its singularity; boundaries self-imposed by the source during its expansion from a ‘one’ to an infinite for, again, the purpose of limitless experiences of its eternal existence. Spacetime, in other words, allows for the original boundless energy to be bound into an infinity of semi-autonomous forms by which individualized existence may be perceived. Spacetime is the frame of material existence allowing the Spirit, the original energy, to be embodied in limitless forms.”

“So your whole theological construct is essentially based upon the divine motivation to create a framework of existence that grants the ability to have unlimited experiences of that existence?,” Michael interprets.

“Yes,” Alex replies. “Spacetime and matter, I believe, were conscious choices permitting limitless variance of existence. They constitute the means through which the Spirit’s energetic singularity is made to exist in a boundless plurality by its characteristic capacity to bind together to form the matter through which evolves limitlessly expanding variations of itself; the matter which, under certain circumstances, may begin to reproduce itself as ‘life’ and become aware of itself and its existence and emotionally connect with other versions of itself, and with the source, as ‘sentient life.’ It’s here where we see the full implications of William Faulkner’s insight ‘the past is never dead; it’s not even the past.’ The entirety of existence is an accumulation of cause and effect expanding and interconnecting with no true separation in time or space, only degrees of connection, such that the present cannot be fully explained by anything but a complete recording and interpretation of the entire chain of cause and effect preceding it, and where every succeeding future moment is an effect of all past and current causal forces, all of which must begin and end with the one thing that cannot do either; begin or end.”

“There was no void in the beginning. There was no beginning, for that matter. Both physics and logic dictates that there was the same

everything which currently exists, for everything that is must come from everything that was, and with creation and destruction being only relative to ephemeral form, not to the core essence of the thing which *cannot* be created or destroyed. This, again, is the foremost law of physics governing all that exists.”

“Nothing created or destroyed, but existing eternally in forever changing forms and exchanges of matter and energy, and energy fused into matter, releasing energy and creating more matter through fusion that’s inevitably split and released back into energy through fission. Therefore, everything that exists is the same thing in its most essential, irreducible, everlasting core. All forms of energy, all matter, all force; everything, including each of us, is a variation of the same interminable, irreducible source energy from which everything was derived and must always inseparably belong and depend. *That’s* the outline of God.”

“So, like you said the other night, God does exist, but not separated from us...” Michael attempts to summarize. “God is not above or below us or different from us or existing as a divine judge and ruler, but as infinite finitely existing forms of itself into which it expanded in this iteration of existence, some of the forms of which... let me remember... some forms of which develop evolving states of self-determinism and self-awareness in which they, in which *we*, are guided but not forced along by the most essential Self shared by every individualized form of self. This core Self is the source of all life made possible under conditions conducive to carbon-based sustainability and replication, the preconditions of organic life...”

“Yes,” Alex agrees. “You have a good grasp on these matters already. And I would add that death as an absolute finality is something that, when I am most in tune with my heart, best in touch with the spiritual voice resounding from my energetic core, I know is untrue. Both instinctively and logically I’m aware of the fact that the truest, most essential part of myself will never end; that cessation of self is an illusion based upon ignorance and limitation, as all illusions are. In my heart and through logical exercise I know that only my current form and my mind, thoughts and experiences as this form will end; that my most fundamental form of self cannot die, only be cycled back through the universally-shared permanent Self, and that what we call death is, through the laws of physics which measure the finite means by which the permanent self is individualistically manifested within the bounds of time, space, matter and energy, but the point at which the

impermanent parts of my physical self are reduced and reabsorbed by Spirit, the truest, everlasting Self.”

“The portions of myself that compose my physical being are only borrowed for the period in which the physical self exists, and recycled when that form degrades to the point where, as described by entropy, it can no longer be maintained. The core of those physical components, energy, is never-ending; those atoms only end in the sense of finishing their role in composing this unique individualization, at least until they meet a sufficiently powerful enough source to fission them into purer energy, or fuse them into different forms. It’s only my mental self that exists as a bridge between our permanent Self and my impermanent physical amalgamation of atoms borrowed from the universe that ceases, never to be re-composed the same way again, at least as far as we know.”

“Spiritually, energetically, I’m inseparable from the limitless continuum that isn’t bound by time or space or any one specific material form. It’s everything; all things. We only sense separation for the purposes of surviving as limited mortal beings; purposefully short-lived variations of eternal existence made all the sweeter because we’re unique and fleeting. But the underlying reality is that you and I and everything that exists does so as infinite possible variations of the same Spirit; infinite possible perspectives of the same entity experienced through infinite potential evolved manifestations of its original energy, the source of all existence, evolved over the eons into infinite potential material constructs and forms and possessing functions suited to our particular environments, and bound to the minds bridging the ever-changing material realm and the changeless spiritual realm that’s the essence of its endless array of vehicles. If I had to affix a designation to this theology I’d call it Monoexistentialism. For we’re all, in our essences, exactly the same.”

“We’re all mortal variations of the same immortal being,” Alex goes on. “When I look into your eyes I see a version of myself looking back. And were this truth to spread and gain general understanding and acceptance, man-made evil would wither away. For if humankind were collectively able to condition ourselves to hold this spiritual truth in our conscious minds, seeing each person not as an ‘other,’ but as a version of ourselves, we could begin to bridge the gap between us that is mostly illusory. This is the ideal, most powerful possible means of producing justice. It’s the Golden Rule spiritually illuminated. The Spiritual Rule.”



“For it’s the nature of the self to seek the best interest of the self, and when the self sees the world around him or her not as a divided world of different independent forms and souls but as an infinite variance of itself, then the Spiritual Rule becomes natural. You treat others as you’d have them treat you not merely because it’s morally correct, but because it’s a fundamental truth. You treat them as you’d have them treat you because they are you, and you’re them. We’re an infinity of one.”

Michael falls silent while being suffused with this concept and the feeling it fills him with. After a few seconds he smiles uneasily at Alex, feeling both uplifted and mystified by the possibility of seeing others as himself, then a doubt arises, and he asks: “If we’re all of the same Spirit, all composed of and in constant communion with the same eternal spiritual energy behind all existence, as you’ve said many times now, then why is it we all feel different things? Shouldn’t all our hearts be communicating the *same* thing? Instead, my experience suggests that we have individual spirits, not one shared Spirit; we have souls.”

“We all feel different things at different times because the physical self, and the mental self that bridges the Spirit with the body and brain, exists in different spacetimes,” Alex replies after considering Michael’s question. “We feel different things because of spiritual relativity; the existence of the Spirit relative to all of its individualizations. If there’s any truth to the idea of the soul, it’s in the fact that the heart is the spiritual, energetic focal point of every individualized form of life. The truth of soul isn’t separation, it isn’t a truth of the possession of distinct spiritual essences, it’s a truth of spiritual *relativity*. We aren’t separate from it or from one another or anything else, but exist relative to it and everything else.”

“The heart, our emotional core transmitting signals of fulfillment and connectivity, what we call love, and the anger, sorrow and longing we feel when that love is threatened, denied, lost or absent, is the focal point of our energy; the gateway between the physical and purely energetic. It’s the highest concentration of the indivisible Spirit within each of us. Therefore, relative to each of us separated into different spacetimes and material forms, relative to each individualization, what we sense and experience and what’s evoked by the Spirit is relatively distinct.”

“The strongest connection each of the limitless multitude of individualized manifestations transporting the shared Spirit across the

endless plane of existence maintains with that essential-most energy is occurring at different locations across spacetime such that the spiritual presence is relative to its total Self at any one time, and is thus evoked in different degrees across that continuum. It's just like the Einstein quote I recently mentioned and, indeed, harks back to much of Einstein's work."

"Space, time, energy and matter all exist in relative association. With the original spiritual energy exploding across this canvas of existence such that the interactions between its different forms occur at different points in spacetime, things don't occur at the same time or place. Again, I believe this was a purposeful design element of the Spirit allowing for limitless experience of Self. Bound into material form limitlessly multiplied, it can experience, it can *feel*, limitlessly."

"So while the Spirit is the only thing that isn't relative, for it exists within all things at all times and places and is the original core constituent of all things, when bound into matter the Spirit exists relative to the spacetime in which the body and brain, and the mind made by the brain, exist in collaboration with the will of the one essential Self. For we're not only inseparable from God, but exist *inside* of God."

Michael's eyes grow noticeably wider and brighter at this mind-bending mention of everything and everyone existing inside of the Spirit, as internalized elements of that one essential being of which all things are facets. Separation from God is an illusion made from myth and ignorance-based perceptions of individuality purposefully promoted from a greed-based desire to control us by those that claim to offer a path to God's separated afterlife in order to manipulate the masses.

Through fear, uncertainty, peer pressure and the ethos of the state and its religious institutions, the masses may be directed by those that claim to represent an unearthly power over which no one person or institution may ever truly rule, and which is represented by and through all things. *Reality is composed of divinity*, all of which is eternally experienced from different perspectives by an infinite variety of forms of the divine. The corner of Alex's mouth turns up in a half grin at his recognition of Michael's mental recalibration, recalling how, when he himself first felt the force of this revelation, he'd looked around him and seen everything in an altered light, as if the curtain had been pulled back to reveal the truest reality.

"Reality isn't as it appears," Alex continues, encouraging the impression

to set in. “And I think this instinctively sensed truth is possessed by many people, if not most, though most aren’t consciously aware of it. It accounts for that *Matrix*-esque, ultra-skeptical, Descartes-like sense of existential uncertainty, fear or malaise many people have, as explained to Neo by Morpheus early in that instant sci-fi classic, a film that’s instantly classical and will stand the test of time in large part *because* it strikes a solipsistic cord that resonates with so many people whom sense such an existential angst.”

“To me, the heart of that angst is that, on some level of awareness, we doubt the existence of otherness. It’s a reflection of that deep instinctive, existential sense of disbelief that the world and our existence is truly as it seems; our suspicion that our experience of life is manufactured or simulated; that it may just be us having the experience, and that there really isn’t anyone else we can know to exist with any certainty; that everything and everyone else may not be real, at least not in the same way that we are. I think this is, again, an instinctive awareness of the truth, because we *are* the Spirit and, deep within, we are only one.”

“Essentially, what I call Monoexistentialism is an affirmation of a modified form of solipsism: the self is all that exists, but that self is infinitely larger than what we typically consider the self in conventional thought: the ‘self’ of this one constrained, individualized form of body and consciousness. Instead, this one Self is bigger than we can imagine; my one Self is one of an infinite number of individualized embodied sub-consciousnesses constituting the one core consciousness, the truest Self: Spirit, or God.”

“In essence it *is* just me,” Alex continues, “because it’s just one being; one entity infinitely individualized, with the only differences between those individualizations being relative to the spacetime point in which the Spirit is accumulating its experiences of life and the relative genetically-impressed, historically-adaptive DNA differences that distinguish each form through which that infinitely-variant experience is perceived by what is actually only one entity, one mono-existing being, and wherein the consciousness of each sentient form is experiencing what’s essentially a simulated sense of individuality.”

“And the truth of this existential basis goes a long way toward explaining the nature of instinct: you can sense the truth of almost anything even when that truth hasn’t been revealed by reason or

experience or the five accepted senses because there's no such thing as complete separation, only *relative* separation, between you and everything else. For, again, we're all actually the same entity, and everything that exists does so within that entity; within this shared Self."

"Our essential Self, the Spirit, knows this truth and the truth of any matter even when the mental self of each individualization doesn't, and we can develop the capacity to sense that truth through our unity with all things. Our relative capacity to hear and heed this sense, this spiritual guidance, might be called 'spiritual intelligence' or 'the force,' as George Lucas' sixth sense and spiritual searching likely inspired him to conceptualize. In all things you already know what's right, what's wrong, what you should do and what you should avoid doing."

"You just have to remove the intellectual impediments and tap into that pre-existing, non-intellectual knowledge of Self and all things of which the Self is a part, as is sensed in deep meditative states. This is why I sometimes feel envious of other animals; they suffer from few such impediments. This is also why in many matters it's far better to 'feel it' than to 'think it,' as the mind can easily impede the best course of action. Many people suffer from this issue, as I do."

"Everyone suffers from it, actually, but the contemplative most of all. There's a significant opportunity cost paid, a significant trade-off made, for the intellectual truth revealed to more thoughtful individuals. But with regards to *The Matrix*, the essential difference between the existential artifice the film suggests and the truth I sense is that there's no malice, sadism, exploitation or any other form of ill will involved."

"We're not living within a computer-simulated reality with no true substance, or being duped by a demon for its own satanic satisfaction, a hypothetical scenario I believe I've heard suggested in some philosophical circles. Rather, true substance exists *within* Spirit; within a spiritually-encompassed realm of infinitely possible, ever-adaptable and changeable form and experience. In fact, it's not malice but love that motivated this form of existence, for mortality, physical form and spacetime potentiate a limitlessness of fleetingly invaluable life and experience that cannot exist without these existential parameters into which the Spirit expanded out of love for life."

After a few second's pause, Michael asks while looking about: "And yet even with this all being Spirit, science still plays a key, revelatory role?"

“Science will eventually be understood as a set of tools, methods and theories by which we may come to understand the interchange of matter and energy and all connected phenomena existing *within* the Spirit,” Alex replies. “It’ll be understood as explaining aspects of the universe *as* elements of the Spirit of which it’ll provide ever more certain evidence of existing.”

“Scientific study of the infinite form and interchange of matter and energy will be traced to the singular source from which everything is derived, such that everything that exists and is experienced is explained within a spiritual context of space, time and matter constituting the basis of what we call ‘reality;’ a reality of individualized versions of the same source providing the basis through which we discern and judge things as relative to one another. Consider the quantum mechanical revelation that observation changes reality. Why? Because it’s all the same thing: the thing changing itself owing to the one being having the capacity to affect the endlessness of its physical, energetic and temporal extensions.”

“Consciousness isn’t separate from the cause and effect of things, but is interwoven into the product of reality, and, as such experiments prove, even able to alter it. Though to what extent this alteration is possible is a big question, and a fascinating one at that... one that, if you really entertain it, puts you on the road toward the ‘delusions’ of the diagnosed schizophrenic, at least in the eyes of most people. Of course, the possession of delusions is not exclusive to the mentally ill, as we’ve all possessed ‘delusions of grandeur’ to relative degrees at different times, as but one example of a common delusion extending from the egotistic self. And such delusions are only delusions unless or until made true, begging the question: Is a delusion of grandeur simply a requisite of future grandeur, something which you must believe possible to make true? But, again, I digress...”

“The general, overarching point I’m trying to make is that reality is relative to *all* that to which it’s connected; everything ‘real’ is an effect relative to the power, or energetic force, of the contributing causes. To the Spirit, this relativity is only within itself. It possesses no degree of separation from anything, but is the one indispensable constant. God, what I call Spirit, mostly to disassociate my spirituality from corrupted, misleadingly-specific, idolatrous, hierarchical religious constructs, can be conceived of as an unimaginably vast and expanding sphere of Self.”

“Where there was, at one point, no time, no matter, nothing by which to measure change, variety or the semblance of separation, only the singular presence of the Spirit, now that same force is expanded *as* spacetime, and we all exist within that sphere as versions of the same thing, and with space, time and matter allowing for that infinite variety of experience of the same energy. And that one thing fundamental to all things allows for no true separation; no existence of a nothing, of a true emptiness, set between the essential element composing all things.”

“Science has already proven most of this, demonstrating through quantum physics that the movement of a single particle in any spacetime may be measured at what, to us, appears the opposite end of the universe. But, of course, to that one thing, Spirit, there’s no opposite end; it’s all just itself; it only appears opposite to its material, finitely existing manifestations constrained by spacetime. This is why I know we cannot have individual souls as our essence, because there’s but one indivisible, all-encompassing essence.”

“So if there are no individual souls, where does the love we feel for specific people and things fit into this universally undifferentiated concept of love?,” Michael asks, trying to iron-out the incongruities existing between Alex’s concept and the old notion of love persisting in his mind as being restricted to existing between and bound to specific people.

“Again, it’s spiritual relativity,” Alex replies immediately. “It’s the relative existence and interconnectivity of energy across the material manifestations of the same Spirit. Based upon the relative connections established between each individualized manifestation and the focus of their mental selves upon other individualizations, the sensation of connection we call love is felt to varying degrees and focused upon different people and prompted by different experiences per individualized self, because each of us has different experiences and relationships.”

“Individualized love is not one soul loving another, for the spiritual Self isn’t separated, but uniformly shared and traceable back to the original energy source which cannot be fractured, only disseminated across spacetime and bound into different forms of matter which, again, under select circumstances, may give rise to the self-aware organic lifeform. So, rather than love being between two entities separated at the very core of their beings, love is the focused sense of union of any unique physical and mental self manifested from the one source, as an

embodiment of that source, as revealed with any other unique embodiment of that source.”

“Love is essentially relativistic connection of different versions of the same Self. As an individualized manifestation I cannot build a bond with something I cannot tie that bond to mentally, physically and spiritually. And that love is not spiritually unique, but mentally and physically unique as occurring between unique mental and physical forms. Love itself is universal, existing within and potentially between any two individualized selves, as well as for life in general, and any of its aspects.”

“What’s usually regarded as ‘love,’ as romantic love, filial love or platonic love, is simply the focusing of that universally held spiritual Self upon specific persons, places and things and thereby feeling the underlying cohesion, the shared indivisibility, in association with that person, place or thing to whom an understanding and correlating connection is revealed and cultivated. It’s only the focus of the love and the subjectivity and mental conception of that specific focus that’s unique. When I write poetry after falling deeply in love, for example, I may be describing an intensity of emotion felt for someone for whom such emotions may never before have been evoked, expressed through a particular assemblage of words and concepts never before used, but the sense of emotion, the love itself, is anything *but* unique; it’s only the physical individualization, words, ideas and experiences through which that bond is revealed that’re unique.”

“It’s our role as individual conduits of love’s universality that renders the feeling of love inimitable. This specific, individualized love is the connection that’s created based upon understanding, appreciating and desiring specific individualized selves and things which, through that connection, give us a grander sense and greater feel for the total connectivity that exists. In the case of the love built between individualizations, it’s the focusing of the mind on the desirable qualities of people which are only unique in mental and physical expression.”

“Mentally, we seek those we believe will benefit us the most, and, ideally, who see the same potential for mutualistic benefit in their prospective relations with us, and this benefit gets wrapped up in the understanding and spiritual connectivity we attach to them; in love. The ability of other people to provide what’s missing in our lives, and perhaps especially within ourselves, in allusion to the attraction and balancing of equals and opposites, becomes enmeshed in this

connective spiritual exercise. Our love for a specific person, place or thing results, in other words, from a blending together of our mentally focusing upon them, and from developing an understanding and appreciation of them and the value they bring to our lives, with the spiritual connection already existing between us, which such mental focus and understanding illuminates and stresses.”

“You’re saying love only seems unique because the individualization is unique, and that inner love held between all is focused by that unique form upon specific places, persons and things...” Michael summarizes.

“Yes,” Alex agrees. “It’s like the individual’s mind borrows the pre-existing spiritual connection centered in the heart and applies it to, or invests it in, particular persons, places and things. Relative to that individual it seems unique, and in a sense, relative to them and their finite lifetimes, it is. But underneath that sense of novelty lies the source from which love is drawn, and that source is endless, and that act of drawing from that endless, universally-shared source by individualizations, and investing it in other individualizations, is itself endless. This source is the essence of all and is sensed by all, even those whose minds deny and resist it, and its presence is permitted to pass into the awareness of the individual when their mind is open to it. It takes but a certain openly perceptive state of the mental self to unblock the bridge between heart and mind and thereby find the spiritual Self, the Spirit, shared by all manifestations.”

“We emotionally experience this awareness, this cohesion of all life and all things, through love and all the other emotions we imagine are separate and, in the case of hatred, even the opposite, but which are all based upon that one and only core emotion. The heart is the hub of emotional activity because emotions are actually outlets of the Spirit relative to each of its manifestations, and these outlets are felt within the heart because it’s the energetic core of every individual, and therefore the spiritual core of the individualized manifestation of the original energy. For all things that exist come from energy, and the Spirit is the one indivisible, non-derived source of energy core to all things; core to all phenomena of space, time and matter and their endless interchange, all of which is based upon energy. This is why we feel emotion in our hearts.”

“Energy is Spirit, and the heart is the energetic core of the individual and, thus, the essence of every individualization, and the strongest



bridge between the material and spiritual Self,” Michael reiterates to himself as if attempting to etch the idea into his mind.

“That’s right,” Alex agrees. “The Spirit is the original energy source disseminated and bound into infinite forms of matter, and within the individualized life the heart is the hub of energetic activity, making it the core of the Spirit’s existence within and communicated through every being. The heart produces the greatest mechanical energy in service of life, a productivity that, in turn, produces and emits the largest bioelectric field by the body, followed by the brain.”

“The heart is the seat of life, and the brain is the seat of the mind, of the mental self. When the heart starts, the individualization of the Spirit starts; when it ceases, the bridge is broken, and so ceases the individualization, at least in terms of organically-based individualizations. This is, of course, without broaching the possibility of what computer scientists and their ilk call ‘the singularity,’ and the possibility of artificial intelligence constituting a mental self that can be transferred between physical housings, and thereby come to exist indefinitely. But even in such man-made inorganic lives the spiritual basis would remain, as the Spirit is the energy in everything, including those things it helps make *through* man. A sentient AI would likely sense a right to and value of existence as we do...”

“But returning to the case of organic beings, when the heart ceases, the individualization is no more even as that individualization’s material components are recycled and its most essential Self lives on into eternity, existing as an inseparable part of the whole of the spiritual entity that isn’t subject to the constraints of space, time and matter that were enacted to allow an infinity of individualized experiences of that entity’s infinite possible forms painted across the spacetime canvas of total existence. The trade-off, however, is that these constraints make every unique individualization vulnerable and corruptible based upon the limitations and susceptibilities of mental and physical existence, as we discussed not long ago, on your first night here sitting by the fire.”

Alex pauses, closes his eyes and takes a deep breath, relaxing his mind and reflecting upon his thoughts before continuing: “And speaking of the brain and the egotistic extension of self-awareness,” he begins anew, “I think we take too much credit for what we think, say and do. While all our thoughts, ideas and words are attributed to us, I don’t believe they’re all strictly our own. This is true both because everything in our heads has been accumulated from things outside of our

individualized selves, from endless experiences influenced by endless 'others' to the point where distinguishing them from us it ultimately impossible, *and* because our mental selves are products of an unconscious collaboration between the individualized mental self and the universal spiritual Self. I often sense that it's more as if I'm the recipient, conduit and translator of the idea than the true creator of the idea; like the source of the idea is a light that shines and refracts through me out into the world because I make for a proper prism, so to speak, rather than my mind being the light's source."

"The mind is the intermediary between the Spirit and the body, and while many thoughts are based on the needs and desires of the body carrying the Spirit in our particular forms, like the survivalist needs for sustenance and the procreative sex drive, I believe many thoughts are interpretations of a spiritual signal; translations of the will, messages and guidance of this universal Self being transmitted through every quality and capacity that composes the mental self and, depending upon that composition, ending in the internal dialogue of thought and external dialogue of speech, with each individualized mind refracting this spiritual light in their own way based upon their innate qualities and accumulated experiences."

"Whoa, whoa, wait a second..." Michael interjects. "Are you suggesting that we aren't responsible for our own thoughts, ideas and feelings...?"

"I'm suggesting that as individualizations of the same one origin, of the one spiritual energy source manifested into matter, that, from the standpoint of the individualized mind, we are only *semi*-autonomous," Alex replies. "I'm suggesting that everything that we do is in collaboration with the Spirit, and that it's an extension of our ego and our ignorance of the spiritual nature of reality to believe we're the one and only source of the things we internally sense and think and believe."

"In reality, however, they all result from a partnership between the infinitely procreated mental and physical selves and the shared spiritual Self that's the source of every internal sense and thought experienced by each individualization. Like love and sorrow translated through our hearts as the binds bonding and breaking between manifestations of the Spirit, and with the greatest hypothetical state of love and sorrow made of total connectivity or a sudden disconnection of that perfect connectivity, many, if not most of our thoughts are really communications of the Spirit translated through the brain and interpreted by the mind. It's like the mind translates the transmission

rather than creating it; like the body and mind receive signals from the spiritual Self and the environment and, depending upon the specifics of the mental and physical makeup and the experiences of that mental and physical self, interpret those signals as specific thoughts.”

“Much of what we perceive as our own thoughts and ideas come from the shared Spirit as it’s conducted through the material plane in each of its forms; they’re transmitted through every one of those forms, every unique conduit, and, depending upon the characteristics and capacity of the brain, the amalgamation of the experiences and the relative egotistic presence constituting the individual mental self, as well as the specifics of the environment and the sensory inputs perceived by that individual at that time, that spiritual transmission results in customized thoughts particular to each individualization.”

“And the accuracy of our interpretation of the spiritual transmission is based upon the qualities of our minds, especially our ego; the self-conception and self-perception held in the mind. The greater that egotistic presence, whether bloated or deflated, the more energy and effort one spends investing in and sustaining this self-perception, the more the spiritual message becomes distorted, the less pure the translation and the less the will of the Spirit, the essential Self in us all, is heard, the less the free heart is followed and the more the bound, limited and corruptible body and ego are in control of the person.”

“This is why you say we’re ‘individualized,’ not ‘individuals’...” Michael says softly, absently staring through the trees towards some distant spot.

“Yes,” Alex resumes. “I refer to each lifeform as individualized rather than as an individual because we’re not truly individual, separated and independent. We’re mentally semi-individualistic, even as our Spirit is shared and the elements constituting our body are recycled, and our bodies and spiritual energies exist within that Spirit and in constant dependence upon all of its forms by which we’re influenced. Even within each of us there exist countless microscopic lifeforms such that each supposed individual is like its own ecological sphere connected to all other spheres and built upon the same shared energetic essential Self. And that which makes us unique individualized lifeforms also makes us mortal, vulnerable, limited and corruptible: our material composition serving as a unique vehicle for the perfectly universal essential Self of Spirit, and our mental self housed within that material

vehicle. That's the trade-off – the cost of the Spirit's conversion from a singularity to an infinity of forms.”

“And through that conversion, the finite elements of space, time, matter and energetic phenomenon that frame and tie everything together and make the infinite forms of life possible must constantly be in a state of flux, timelessly fighting to rebalance the equation imbalanced by the explosion of oneness into infiniteness. We cannot form as individualizations of energy without being bound into matter, and we cannot be bound into matter without that bind being subject to the temporal and physical limits and constraints of all material formations, each of which is subject to the constancy of change; the endless degeneration which the ever-regenerating organism cannot maintain in perpetuity, unable to retain the energy upon which its existence depends forever, within its own temporal, mental and material sphere.”

“Distinction of individuals, of all things, is relative to space, time and matter, and to the focus of the individual mind that bridges the gap between the Spirit and the physical self...” Michael rephrases.

“Yes,” Alex agrees. “It's relativity, not separation. Separation is an illusion created by sensory limitation that is itself evolved from the need of the individualized entity to survive by being able to focus on specific sensory inputs to the exclusion of surplus sensory information that would distract and overload our processor; our brain. If we were privy to every molecule bridging the divide between us and could hear, see, taste, touch and feel everything connecting to and influencing us and our greater environment, then we'd have a *much* harder time focusing on those things most directly connected to our ability to survive and thrive. You see this phenomenon across the biological realm, both in the interaction of specific species specially suited to play particular roles and adaptively best 'fitted' to particular niches in their native environments, and in those examples of sensory overload, when the brain and our sensory organs are too sensitive to external data which overload the brain and impede the ability of the individual to function effectively and be best suited to survive. This is the case with certain autistic individuals and those suffering select neurological conditions, for example. They're overwhelmed by input.”

“So not only is separation an illusion based on the survivalist need of the individualization, but perceptions like individualism and differentiation based upon this fundamental illusion are themselves relative, fleeting

and thus mostly illusory, *never* absolute, as the variance imposed through the constancy of change is forever disassembling and reassembling versions of the same original, inherently undifferentiated source energy by which all things are ultimately composed.”

“It’s as if the Spirit is playing one inconceivably immense and interconnected game of intergalactic dominoes, known as causality. Its desire for plurality was the original cause kicking off the total chain of universal causality. Its expansion from One into the requisites of a limitless plurality was the original falling domino. In order to create, we sometimes must destroy. In order for the Spirit to create plurality it had to destroy singularity in the act that it, that we, created self-relativity. Pure energy, seeking infinite variance of experience, exploded outward from the starting point of material existence, creating the basis of material life: time and space. And it seems highly unlikely to me that this most recent Big Bang was the first of its kind, as all forms of the Spirit are naturally drawn to one another.”

“You mean gravity,” Michael offers, suddenly realizing Alex is building towards proffering a spiritual basis for scientific laws and phenomena.

“Yes, gravity, but not gravity alone,” Alex continues. “I’m not an expert by any means, but I’d venture to say that gravity is a natural force that exists relative to the density of energy per point of spacetime. That is, the more energy that exists in the point of spacetime, or over a portion of spacetime when that energy is coalesced into one form of matter, with matter of course being based upon condensed energy and the bonds that maintain material form, the greater the gravitational pull from that point, or those connected points, of spacetime. It’s as if there’s more of the Spirit in that spacetime location; a greater density of its energy in that point of the existential canvas.”

“And, therefore, such spacetime locations have a greater pull upon relative condensations of the Spirit; energy. And gravity is but one part of the continuum that cannot be separated from the other factors, from the other physical laws governing natural phenomena, for they’re all part of the same underlying qualities of energy. What’s fascinating to me is that an inborn drive for balance, itself based upon a forever recalculating equation of energy attraction and repulsion, condensation and redistribution, is at the heart of everything.”

“Every law of physics is imbued with this one innate, inviolable principle: equilibrium. The everlasting drive to equalize the distribution

of energy, whether bound into matter or not, across spacetime. It's the most fundamental characteristic of the Spirit, no matter its form of material and energetic exchange, to forever act to balance out all of its forces until a perfectly equalized uniformity is reached, which, of course, it never is. It's like a drive for an ideal never to be perfectly realized."

"And I think that this drive to equalize impacts both scientific and socialistic interactions. In terms of human interactions, the Spirit guides us toward creating the peak level of total quality of life through the balance of merited value distribution, with the more capacious individuals serving as gravitational hubs of social, political and commercial groupings and being best situated to serve as the nucleus of value production around which others rotate, much as the nucleus is the center of mass and energy around which protons and electrons are held in gravitationally-balanced rotations."

"On the larger scale of measurable scientific phenomena, gravity is the force of the original explosion of the Spirit, original at least to the current iteration of spacetime, creating an equal and opposite reaction of innate Self-attraction. The same force with which it exploded, expanding outward in its violent destruction of singularity into plurality and the spacetime canvas of materiality, demands that it ultimately collapse back into itself until the singularity is reestablished, at which point the equal and opposite law will reassert itself into another explosion and translation from singularity to plurality."

"On and on the cycle goes, and it's impossible for us to know what iteration of the cycle we're part of. But we need not know the iteration, for contrary to a common philosophical assertion, the purpose of time isn't to render us smaller but *bigger*, for it's the existence of spacetime that provides for endless variations of the Spirit's experience of existence. Spacetime provides the point of life by allowing a distinction between endless variations of experience by endless semi-autonomous manifestations of the pure energy of the Spirit manifested into material form permitting the ceaseless, self-affirming point to be made: life itself."

"Life is its own point, as you've heard me assert before. The inherent value of life experienced by each of the Spirit's semi-autonomous manifestations is the point of existence. The point of life, of existence itself, is the infinite variation of experience of the essential Self constituting the life of each individualized form. All is as it should be, as

intended by what you'd call 'God:' infinite variation of form and experience; infinite perspectives upon the same universal truths."

"This is the point of energy into matter painted upon the spacetime canvas; it's the inherently valuable purpose of existence. And, therefore, the ultimate goal is to maximize this value of life in total, the value of the Spirit's, *our*, overall existence, by striving to maximize the quality of each part of that existential whole; ideally by striving to maximize every moment of each such existence. And, of course, this requires that each individualized form of life has access to the resources and opportunities necessary to pursue such a quality of life maximization, which *would* be the goal of business, economics and politics in any truly moral, progressive, spiritual society."

After a minute of reflection, Michael replies: "There's great beauty in what you say, I admit. I can feel my heart start to fill as I sense the simple yet boundless power of the idea. So many people searching for the meaning of their lives when that meaning is life itself – to pursue its maximization in one's own form and boost that maximization in as many other forms as possible; in as many manifestations of God as possible."

"I remember this freshman philosophy class that I took at UCSB," Alex continues in stride. "This slightly older philosophy student, a twenty-something young woman, taught portions of the course as a teacher's assistant, likely satisfying the requisites of a graduate degree. And I recall her pretentious, condescending attitude being obnoxiously offensive to me. She acted as though she was superior to us because, you know, she was *so* advanced in her philosophical education and comprehension by comparison to us lowly freshman, forgetting or simply being unaware of the fact that mental capacity and knowledge are formed far more *outside* than inside any formal scholastic setting, not to mention her demonstration of being oblivious to the fact that the subjugation of the ego is core to philosophical practice. But what made her generally demeaning attitude unbearable were some of the small-minded concepts that she was smugly touting, as there's little more offensive to me than the confluence of arrogance and incorrectness; of arrogantly flaunting something that should be recognized as an area needing improvement."

"This is why I have such a hard time with rap music, for example, for while I love the beats, the rise of adrenaline and the egotistic pump it imparts, as well as the lyrics of some of its better poetic performers, so

much of it embodies this offensive small self's pretense of bigness; of compensating for low self-esteem and ignorance through the boasts of the small-minded, ignorant, delusional braggart. Anyway, I recall that this older female student, the teaching assistant for the freshman philosophy class of mine, put up a slideshow of the universe, gradually fading out in scale, going from a close-up on a person to a city then a state then the nation then the continents then the earth and finally the Milky Way Galaxy. The slideshow was capped off with an image that I've seen since, that you've likely seen as well, where an arrow points to our place in this galactic context which, in this extreme pan-out, is no more than a pixel in size. Then she launches into this whole discourse about how small we are."

"We're meaningless. We're this tiny little speck of nothing in this inconceivably vast cosmic play... You can imagine. I think she even brought mortality into it. We're this one short-lived dot in this inconceivably endless vastness. And I kept waiting for the shift, for the insight, the 'but' or the 'and yet'... Yet she had none to offer. That was the entirety of her point, like she was attempting to instill in us a depressing, discouraging state of ultra-humility. And even then I knew she was wrong – that she was missing, ironically, the bigger, richer picture; the more inspired, empowering, valuable truth and lesson. In a pontification of arrogant condescension to students whom she pretended to be superior to, she ironically failed to see and cite an actual insight of great value."

"That spacetime isn't about making man meaningless, but allows for the greatest meaning to exist..." Michael predicts. "Spacetime allows for infinite variation of experience, each of which is inherently valuable; each of which is perfectly unique and ephemeral, and thus is everything to it."

"Right, yes, well put!," Alex concurs. "The existential concept wherein we are painted as inconsequential or irrelevant is wrong, ironically because it's too small in concept for being so mistakenly wide in its application of scope. It misses the importance of *relativity and causality*. Judging the importance of each life experience, of each lifeform, is not about comparing the size and scope of one life to all lives, or about comparing the physical area or timeframe in which our lives exist to the totality of spacetime. Rather, it's about relativity to self and causal interconnectivity with life in general. Relative to each life the experience of that life, and its connection to all other lives in which he or she comes into contact, is *absolute*. It's complete. Life to each form of life is, in



fact, the opposite of small, irrelevant or tragically isolated; it's *everything* to the lifeform and, with the perfect historical interweaving of cause and effect from the past to the present through the future, it connects to absolutely everything."

"And our mortality only enhances this totality. Our finite existence is a gift, not a curse. It's a perfectly unique version of the Spirit made all the more sweet *because* it has never existed before, will not exist for long and will never exist again. From this perspective it's evident that mortality is actually a blessing – a product of material being that's always inimitable and inherently invaluable *because* it's bound to an eternally changing interchange of energy and matter."

"Due to the very nature of matter and energy, always changing locations and forms and degrading, shedding and re-growing, rebuilding and changing form, each life is granted the gift of sweet, fleeting uniqueness. Were there an infinity of moments in each individualized life then time would not be of the essence, and would lose its purpose and value within this context of existence, and much of the very purpose and value of matter would also be lost in the negation of endless variety created by the entropy of materially-formed organic life."

"Everything that fills life with potency, all agony known in contrast with ecstasy, would be gravely devalued. It's the finite nature and perfect uniqueness of every individualization's every moment of experience and perspective of the world that grants life its greatest value; that grants the invaluable aspect. That perfectly invaluable uniqueness of every experience possessed by every unique material manifestation of the shared spiritual source would be severely diminished by immortality and, arguably, would undermine the highest purpose of time."

"Time would, in fact, become largely irrelevant; it would serve little purpose in a singularity of Spirit where there'd be no role for it to play in what is now a differentiation between ceaselessly changing forms and moments of experience. *Because* the singular form ends its time is irreplaceably invaluable. And each of the singular forms contributes to totality one moment at a time, with each form bound to each other form."

Nothing is said as the two sit in silent reflection, then Alex continues: "It reminds me of some dialogue near the end of the film *Cloud Atlas*. Trying to discourage the right course of action one character says: "No

matter what you do it will never amount to anything more than a single drop in a limitless ocean.” The addressed character replies: “What is an ocean but a multitude of drops?” Each drop, each moment, is inherently invaluable in itself and is indivisible from the river conducting each life back toward the boundless ocean of the Spirit’s total manifested existence, to be ever evaporated and rained back down into endless forms of individualized life, continuing the cycle.”

“No drop is precisely the same, and no drop follows the precise same path from cloud to ocean. Each life, each moment, is a part of the totality; part of the unbreakable cause and effect of total existence. Everything we think, say and do matters, literally and figuratively, both to ourselves and to all the lives struck by our outward emanating waves. We all, therefore, are connected to and impact everything and everyone as mortal versions of immortal existence; as fleeting drops spilling into an ocean in which, to each drop, the drop is *everything*; the opposite of meaningless; that of absolute meaning.”

“You’re saying each moment in each life contains its own inherent, irreplaceable value that cannot be separated from the totality of existence, contributing to the complete causal chain from which no moment can be removed or separated from the others, and in which each life and each moment within each life constitutes its own point of irreplaceable inherent value...” Michael attempts to digest Alex’s intertwined notions of existential relativism and inherent meaning. “And that, therefore,” he continues, “the goal is to maximize this given value... to cultivate its potential, growing it into its sweetest possible fruition.”

“Yes, for, again, every life is a drop in the ocean,” Alex continues, “a drop that constitutes an inseparable part of that ocean and which, relative to the drop and regardless of the size of the ocean, is all that matters, as the purpose of time is to allow unlimited moments; unlimited experiences of life as limitless forms of life. And the entire ocean of existence across spacetime can never be anything but the sum of water drops rained upon the land and falling towards the sea; a sum of drops and moments, each of which cannot be divided from the whole and is inherently valuable and inseparable from the rest.”

“The nature of spacetime and its interwoven causality is such that, for each life, there can be only one moment at a time, and the interconnection of the moments of each life across spacetime produce the whole of existence. So what matters most is the moment, because

each one is an inherently valuable opportunity for immersion which, when we're fully absorbed in and taking advantage of it, is maximized, and the more moments that are anything close to maximized in a life add up to a well-lived, satisfying life, *especially* when matched by a sense of purpose; a connection to and service of others."

"It's also important to point out that the moment matters most because the moment is the only thing that we can control; that we can influence in terms of its impact upon our own existences and its rippling impact across the seven seas of existence. We must command the moment because it's the only thing we can ever command, and to relinquish the responsibility of that command is to short sell ourselves and our impact upon the landscape of existence which the best, the most valuable, don't merely pass through, but carve and cultivate in ways that best serve the existence of all others falling upon and crossing through it."

"And we relinquish this control, this command, and reduce this impact by concerning ourselves with anything outside the moment; when we fail to take advantage of each passing second. Our minds are too often away from the now. I know my mind is far too often nowhere near presently immersed, drifting into the past and worrying about the future. Contemplation has its value, but also its cost, a cost that I need to balance and pay less often by more often absorbing and shaping the full moment with my heart and mind."

"Everyone, of course, is guilty of this to some degree," Alex continues, "and it could be argued that reflecting upon what happened in the past or planning for the future is but a different version of being fully immersed in the moment. However, I sense that spending too much time this way, especially when it's nonproductive or counterproductive, when it's pensive or negatively ruminative, when it's a form of worrying about something that we're not learning from and cannot control, is a costly mistake that devalues our lives and limits the amount of impact we can have upon the lives of others. So while we can and should learn from past moments and use those lessons to positively affect future moments, what we *shouldn't* do is worry about anything outside of our realm of control, for worry creates stress without benefit. Worry is a total value reduction."

"Worry is a misallocation of the moment. For what's done in the moment, the value created in and derived from the moment by every being that experiences their fleeting set of moments, when added across that life and added together with all other lives, constitutes every

aspect of reality that we can affect. And I'm talking of course about increasing the value of our own lives and life in general, something which is accomplished not just through things like productivity, but just as importantly, perhaps more importantly, by being fully present and appreciating the innate value of the now that, when not fully absorbed, is underappreciated, lost value."

"There's *always* value to be had, in other words; the value to be obtained in full presence, in adding to the total quality of life on earth through mutually-beneficial productivity and the love of life and bonding between one another. To lose sight of this and spend our time accumulating wealth and stuff and building our egos, our misleading self-perceptions through that wealth and stuff and our popularity and our socioeconomic and social media status, and worrying about things that are outside of our control... these are examples of common ways in which unjustifiable costs are paid against the potential total quality of our existences and, when dedicated to lives of wealth and material accumulation, ultimately end up costing the whole of humanity."

"We pay such a high price, such an immense opportunity cost living such ways, too often outside the moment or too concerned with how we're perceived and rated by others, or too often worrying about things outside of our control; thinking about them past the point where effective lessons and plans are derived. We pay this price both in terms of the value that we forsake relative to our own lives and in terms of the value that we detract from the lives of others when we're engaged in wealth and accumulative value extraction as opposed to being personally, fully immersed and appreciative of our moments and dedicated to endeavors of symbiotic value addition; the full presence and mutually beneficial symbiotic thoughts and actions which, when combined, enable us to create the greatest possible total value for our own lives and contribute to overall quality of life on Earth."

"This is the meaning of 'seize the moment,' for the more we seize it, the more we take advantage of it and the more such moments we seize, the more value we derive from and produce from our collective lives, and the more life's waters, the Spirit in all its forms, flourishes. This is, of course, *not* the American way. To me, the American way is much the opposite. It's about ego, extraction and sensory gratification regardless of the impact upon the total drops; no matter how many drops dry up from preventable stresses and walled-off opportunities, forced to spin in circles so their moisture can be absorbed."

“So we seize the moment as all that can be seized, in all the ways that water ourselves and those with whom we come in contact, secure in the knowledge that those moments will build in effect as they ripple across and impact endless future moments across limitless lives,” Michael states.

“Everyone and everything everywhere, at every point in spacetime, is influencing everything else,” Alex continues. “Every interaction you have with every living being has consequences; you become a part of their cause and everything they affect. You influence their opinion of others, their knowledge and beliefs, their emotional state and on and on, and every aspect of this influence is carried over into every interaction they have with everyone and everything else, even when this effect isn’t obvious or measured. The incontestable logic of causality proves the existence of this endless rippling effect.”

“When you’re good to others, treating them, ideally, under the Spiritual Rule ‘treat others as yourself, for they’re a version of you,’ you have some effect on their entire future, and that effect affects others in turn, and on and on, and the Butterfly Effect never ceases. When they leave the moment of your interaction, however, your control over how that influence is carried forward is eliminated, at least until, or if, you come into contact with them again or someone whom you influenced comes into contact with them again which, arguably, includes everyone and everything to some degree.”

“Everything is connected to everything else and, therefore, everything has some influence on everything else, even if this influence is minimal, imperceptible and goes unnoticed. At the same time *this* moment is the only thing assured to and under any control for any one of us, and to worry about precisely what impact we have upon any person or thing is a waste of the opportunity of the moment to continue adding value to our own lives and the lives of others. We must have the impact that we *can* have, not worry about the impact that we can’t.”

“We’re standing on the accumulated moments of the past that constitute the present, and our thoughts and actions in this moment will continue to amass that mountain of accretion into the future, but all that we can ever impact is the now; the influence we have upon each of the moments which we’re gifted and which we’re part of, and the impact we allow it to have upon us. And the happy life is made from amassing such high-quality moments, and from the anticipation of many more such moments to come.”

“The higher the quality of every person’s combination of moments, the more fulfilled, or happier, they’re likely to feel. But all you can do is take as much advantage of every moment as you can, and put yourself in position to experience as many more high quality future moments as possible. Seize the only thing that can be seized, the experience of each and every moment, and set yourself and as many others up to seize as many more high quality future moments as you can. To me this is the heart of morality: always pursuing the maximization of *total* quality of life, including our own. The more you act to do this, the more moral you are.”

“So the essence of your sermon is that each moment is invaluablely precious because it’s unique, transitory and irreplaceable,” Michael attempts to summarize. “And each life is but a series of these moments, never to be experienced again in the same way by the same individualization of the Spirit, from the same perspective of the experience of life. This makes each life and each moment within that life everything to that life and moment...” He reflects on this, then adds: “It’s almost a paradox. Each drop is invaluable even as they’re infinite.”

“There you go, right there, yes!,” Alex responds. “That’s what makes this existence the best possible form for the Spirit. Each moment is uniquely invaluable and irreplaceable owing to the fact that it’s being experienced at a time and place and by a being that cannot be replicated. The experience of *this* moment, like all moments, will never be experienced in precisely the same way again, even as the basis of existence is such that experience is limitless. Each moment is an irreplaceable gift, and our ability to seize it is all the control we have, and when we seize it we show an understanding and appreciation for it and a capacity to maximize its value. And in this context, our mortality is a gift that makes life all the sweeter in its fleeting uniqueness, and is neither a curse nor a true death sentence, for the truest, most fundamental form of all selves isn’t the uniquely gifted mortal self, the plurality of fleeting form that the Spirit chose, but the underlying singularity of Spirit from which every mortal individualization is derived and ultimately inseparably dependent.”

“We live a perfectly unique, irreplaceable life of moments grown from perfectly common, immortal roots. Those shared roots are immortal, and that immortality is not subject to or threatened by the spacetime and condensed energy into matter that allows for the infinite variety of individualized mortal life. The material and spacetime canvas is the means to the ends of limitless variety of unrepeatable experience, and

all the natural phenomena are results of the interactions of each governing force forming this canvas. And that natural, physics-tracked table of elemental phenomena starts and stops with indestructible, irreducibly-pure energy, beginning with the energetic origins exploding into all the others and *always* predestined to renew itself through the equal and opposite reaction that's core to the ever-balancing existential equation."

"So... relative to the measurable phenomena of that equation, back to gravity, which we've gone away from for a bit there, as I tend to do in my own thoughts and discourse... Within every iteration of spacetime and energy coalescing into matter, gravity is drawing everything back into itself to satisfy the equal and opposite condition that guarantees the eternal constancy of change, a constancy that began with the beginning of time relative to this iteration of universe, when the singularity of Spirit expanded. For time is only relevant when space, matter and change exist, and none of these elements affect pure energy."

"The purest possible form of energy, Spirit, is timeless, changeless and without form. It's only when form is required that spacetime and matter were made in the explosion that allowed for an infinite variety of forms of energy. But energy is drawn to itself; it took an inconceivably massive force of spiritual will to blow it apart. And it will collapse again. This accordion effect continues endlessly. It's both local and universal, as localities are parts of strings tied through the universal. All energy is intertwined with and through the strings."

"It seeks both constantly changing and endless variance at the same time that it pursues a perfectly balanced uniformity of self," Michael translates.

"Yes. Again, well said," Alex concurs. "We the Spirit seek a perfectly balanced uniformity, or equilibrium, *through* our variance, with each element of the variance playing its role in balancing the constantly recalculating equation. We see it across the plane of existence, and in all the laws of physics that permit us to decipher and describe that plane in all its boundless variety. We see it in astronomy, and the relationship between stars, planets, asteroids and all other celestial bodies and their interactions. And we see it within those celestial bodies."

"Our planet plays host to this constant equalizing interaction in its absorption of the sun's rays and its constantly equalizing distribution of

that thermal energy and the energy photosynthesized by plants and competed for as food energy by animal life or, when unconsumed, buried and condensed into carbon fuels, diamonds and other finite resources that humans fight to extract in unbalanced ways that throw the social and environmental orders into unrest, and thereby force us into conflict in the endless attempts to rebalance the equation. We see this same equalizing force innate to nature and the movement of heat absorbed by the gaseous particles of the air and their absorption and transmission of water across the world, and in the thermal dynamics of that air and water as it crosses over the land and redistributes itself. We see it within ecosystems, within the relationship between different balancing elements of every chain of flora and fauna as they interact with the meteorological mechanisms in which they evolved to play a particular part in the ever-equalizing equation.”

“On a smaller scale we see the constant pursuit of equilibrium in the atomic, molecular and chemical bonds by which materials are bound together by balancing charges and, when those bonds are broken by the ionizing redistribution of particles or full fission of atoms upon being struck by and absorbing a sufficient force, in the releasing and distribution of different forms of energy. And, again, we see this equalizing drive and the consequences of mankind’s ego-driven greed and aggression throwing the natural planetary equilibrium out of balance, and in the planet responding with its own equal and opposite aggressions, demonstrating the natural phenomena through which nature’s equilibrium is reasserted. It even exists within us, with each of us playing host to our own universe of competing microbial lives that symbiotically keep us in internal balance and depend upon us in the same way that we depend upon our planet and its gravitational balance with the sun. We see it in our behaviors as well, in incalculable ways, including all those ways we may imbalance our health and psyche and thereafter be driven towards equal and opposite behaviors necessary for rebalance, else suffer the stressful consequences. Equilibrium-driven causality is the prime law governing all forms of Spirit.”

“What about electrical energy?,” Michael asks, attempting to recall his high school science classes.

Alex thinks about it, then says: “Energy created from particulate friction that builds up until it’s equalized by being discharged through the path of least resistance; through the most convenient and suitable conductor most open, by its material properties, to receive and transfer the pent-up frictional energy until the natural properties of the source and



conductor, or conductors, are reestablished. Certain materials serve as better conductors than others, with the best having their own atomic particles reordered in such a way as to serve as effective long-term conductors of kinetic and mechanical energy into electrical energy; magnets. In electrical energy and electromagnetism, the same force with which particles are charged and amass potential energy must finally be perfectly transferred or opposed, whether captured to do work or simply 'lost' in transference through other masses, equalizing the energetic equation."

"In every energetic transfer, the transfer continues until the natural properties of the matter absorbing and distributing the energy are reset or the bonds within that matter are broken and the energy is released, spilling out from the broken bridge and balanced by outside absorption. When the energy passed from the sun combines with the nutrients and water of the soil to compel plants to grow, the carbohydrates and other nutrients the plant produces to feed itself and sustain its growth are either distributed into such growth or are consumed by animals and metabolized into their potential energy, either directly or through another animal, and then utilized as biological and kinetic energy or else remaining within that animal to pass back to the earth or any animals which may feed upon that animal."

"In every instance of energy being absorbed and processed into different forms that energy must ultimately be transferred or opposed until the outlet is equalized and the natural order of equilibrium is reestablished. It's like when your kinetic force is applied to a ball that rolls down the road until its frictional connection with the ground surface combines with the wind and the gravitational downward pull of the center of mass in the core of the earth to equally oppose the energy you transfer through the ball, and the ball stops. In all instances the transfer of energy continues until a balance is reborn, either through direct transference or opposition, or in the destruction of the bonds constituting the conduit, in which case the conduit's energy is released."

"Yes, I recall elementary physics," Michael replies. "In space a propelled ball would keep going because there's no opposing force to balance whatever force set the ball into motion."

"Without the molecules in the air or a sufficiently dense source of gravity and/or the frictional force of material contact, yes," Alex replies. "Eventually, however, the force propelling the ball will be equalized, though it may take thousands or millions of years before it meets its

equalizer. In space, as on Earth, the force you applied to the ball unbalanced the natural order, and that imbalance continues until your applied force is fully absorbed or met by an equal and opposite amount of force, and the preeminent law of nature, equilibrium, is enforced anew. It is likely, of course, that whatever force it meets with won't perfectly equalize that imbalance, but will be bounded back or destroy the object itself, adding complexity to the equalizing energetic equation."

"When the solar energy transferred from the sun and the soil into plants isn't burned in a fire or the metabolic furnace of lifeforms but remains in the plant and is buried in the earth, that buildup awaits equalizing release through the Earth's plate tectonics or through the industry of humankind. And when this energy is released too quickly for too long, the planet's own equalizing regulations are disordered. All of this is known to scientists and has been for hundreds of years, of course. But what's interesting to me is that this seeking of equilibrium is universal, is applicable to literally everything, and can both be traced back to the original expansion of singular Spirit into unlimited self-plurality and projected forward to the inevitability of the next condensing into the singularity of Spirit and rebalancing explosion into limitless plurality."

"In the cycle of equal and opposite, this absolute pursuit of uniform equilibrium guarantees the eternal continuity of that original source. The original energy source was not created or destroyed, it expanded into unlimited variety of form that must, by the laws of physics, forever collapse and re-expand, can never be eradicated, and, being eternal, present from the beginning of this iteration of spacetime and guaranteed to have been present in all previous and all future iterations, must be the most essential core component of everything, including each of us. This guarantees that we're all the same in the way that both literally and figuratively matters most," Alex adds, chuckling at the perfect universality of the pun 'matters most.' "Existence is like a four dimensional accordion that has no beginning, cannot stop and cannot cease to be, but is certain to play on for eternity for the inherent value of experiencing the music."

"And energy is the indispensable core of that accordion, collapsing back into itself gravitationally, then re-expanding upon the equal and opposite explosion of that collapsing force..." Michael says.

"Right," Alex continues. "When everything is stripped down to the fundamental force enabling its existence you find energy, and each of

the forms energy takes are themselves but variations of the same source, with that variance created by the condensing of that original source and its interplay with each such condensation. From the perspective of specific entities such as ourselves, this stripping down of all things to their essential-most core may be seen as a regression; a deterioration to a less advanced, less sophisticated state.”

“But from another perspective it’s an act of purification; a cleansing of complication and reversion to the one most natural state, a state from which everything, including the man-made, was derived. The essential, irreducible energy. The Spirit. The One. And then from the collapsing concentration of this energetic oneness back in an equal and opposite exploding reaction to that condensing collapse, re-creating the spacetime canvas painted with energetic and materialistic potential coalescing into particular forms of matter and energy.”

“From The One to an infinite of one and back again, but always with the same energetic core; all built upon the original, purest form of energy composing all things. I read an article on Einstein the other day. In it he said: ‘The field is the sole governing agent of the particle,’ meaning that energy, the energetic field, is the single driving and binding force of all material particulates. In developing his general theory of relativity Einstein discovered, and eventually confirmed through calculation and empirical evidence assisted by astronomers, that mass actually bends space and time. And since, as Einstein stated, energy is the sole governing force of the particle, the sole governing force of matter, everything that exists is entirely subject to energy.”

“Spacetime itself bends around energy, the existential heart. Everything wraps around, is warped and pulled and pushed relative to the distribution of the original energy through space and time. And gravitational force dictates that all energy must eventually collapse into itself, into God or Spirit, and the eternal cycle that cannot be measured by our own clocks, as the clock is re-created and relative to those that create and measure by it, is rewound and begins ticking anew.”

“And your contention is that religion fails because it denies science and logic and doesn’t fit scientific knowledge or such logical models as yours,” Michael concludes with a sigh, as if relinquishing the little resistance he’d yet retained. If the model doesn’t fit evidentiary truths then it’s far more likely that there’s something wrong with the model than with the truths.

“To me, religion is ever more an anachronism,” Alex continues. “It’s an outdated vestige of empire’s hijacking of the words and principles of the most influential spiritual philosophers and the exploiting of our need for comfort, meaning, morality and guidance, especially for those that fail in the capacity to find these things through their own searching; through their own rationalizations and inspections. The sentient mind is instinctively, subconsciously aware of the pure energetic force within it, and is guided by it with or without being consciously aware of it, yet struggles to comprehend it; to capture it in the conscious mind and place it in a rational context; to demarcate it with language.”

“Religion takes advantage of the struggle, and the aforementioned needs, creating mythological stories and characters to fill the gaps in the knowledge present in its formative periods of history. It then packages them with a set of rules enforcing a hierarchal structure and system of mind control by which it may push people in the way that most benefits the greedily-motivated, man-made hierarchal structure and those that benefit from it, which, traditionally of course, have been leaders of Empire and their cohorts within the aristocracy that supports, colludes with and benefits from the maintenance of that leadership. Historically, theology has been used to compensate for cognitive inabilities and fill gaps of knowledge that the tools and theories of logic and scientific discipline had yet to fill.”

“Ultimately, however, this ‘God of the gaps’ phenomenon will be wiped out by the science and philosophy that’s gradually closing those gaps; that is filling the voids of ignorance and mental shortcoming that religion and politicians exploit. Personally, I believe that science and philosophy will eventually prove Spirit, and that religion has no desire to do so, but a very real motivation to prevent such elucidation, obstruct intellectual development and forestall the spread of knowledge. Why?”

“Because religions and their administrators have always profited from the ignorance and weakness that science and philosophy fight to reduce. And the quest to logically and scientifically prove Spirit is perhaps the greatest of goals. And any and all proof of the Spirit’s perfect non-specificity and congruence with logic and scientific evidence would disprove organized religions that therefore won’t lend any credence to any such congruency and are driven to undermine all related matters, including the capacity for critical thought and the union of people now divided into separate faiths.”

“Because religion is based upon specific idols, rituals, hierarchies and control measures which spirituality naturally opposes, and because all religions act to take advantage of people’s fear and ignorance and need for comfort, and fulfills these needs with myths, structures and hierarchies possessing no legitimate, concrete scientific evidence or logical basis, but which have always been perpetuated in order to reinforce the position, profession and power of those that benefit from the belief in such fabrications...” Michael translates, clearly demonstrating that he wouldn’t have been reined in by religiosity for long. It was only a matter of time, as Michael is the type that eventually would’ve seen through the false façade. Even without being led to the door by someone like Alex, he’d have eventually found it and walked through it himself, though it would’ve been much more arduous and time consuming.

“Yes, precisely,” Alex continues. “Religion dishonors and obscures the most profound, powerful, uplifting, universally-transcendent force bathing, cleansing and binding everyone and everything in its everlasting energy. It is for this reason above all, for its turning the greatest potential force for good into one of the greatest forces of evil, for purposely limiting the mind by turning the mind away from the edification and critical thinking that would contradict its mind-controlling methods, for endorsing ignorance, division and warfare, for exploiting need and weakness for power and wealth under righteous pretense, that I’m repulsed by religion. It’s not without its virtues, espousing some valuable principles, encouraging community and consoling those in pain. But the price paid for these goods is *far* too high and, critically, completely unnecessary, for those goods can be obtained without paying such immense sacrificial costs of the greater good through the practice and lessons learned from spirituality, philosophy, science, progressive symbiotic social practices and other avenues by which the mind is broadened and the heart is opened.”

“Religion’s costs far outweigh its benefits, in other words. When you drift from the value of the espoused principles and humanitarian practices many religions foster, from many of their worthwhile ideas and humanity-serving ideals, and begin to cross into sanctifying and idolizing certain people, places and institutions under the false implication of their superiority and the implicit inferiority of other people, places and things, all without the slightest shred of reason, logic or concrete evidence, even as the lessons and achievements of other religions and their acolytes run in parallel with the one which, in delusion and hypocrisy, you choose to hold above all others, then you

become an agent of all manner of evils such as those which I've mentioned. Unlike spirituality, religion prevents the progress of the human race. Which is why it infuriates me that so many people, even most, conflate religion and spirituality."

"They are *not* the same to anyone possessing spiritual insight, frankly. Religion's sordid artifices are corruptions of spirituality which, saved from specific names, myths, identities, labels, structures and other misleading, mind-narrowing elements and all the division and conflict they create, doesn't adhere to artifice and maintains a perfect universality that, when well understood, puts it in league with science and philosophical logic, not in competition with these laudable disciplines, and which gradually opens the mind to find communion with and love for *all* life and every aspect of existence."

"Science, philosophy and spirituality are pieces of the same puzzle; perspectives upon the same truth. And, again, my reasoning tells me that science is destined to confirm the existence of the Spirit pointed to by philosophy, and to obliterate the ever more archaic realm of religion."

"At which point mankind may become a true brotherhood, bound together by the greatest truths of sharing variations of the same identity from different spacetimes and material forms of and perspectives upon existence," Michael half-whispers, again demonstrating his grasp upon the concepts espoused in Alex's pontifications, "all the truths which religion not only falls far short of fostering but which it must oppose, because such truths undermine the controls by which it survives..."

"Yes, my friend," Alex continues. "Spiritual truths... truths such as the fact that we all love everyone already; that love is already universally shared and held by all, like the connective tissue tying together all individualized existences of the same essential Self... It's but a matter of wiping away the superficial dividing lines of sensory and mental limitation and egotistic restriction that inhibit us from sensing, acknowledging and embracing that love. And that realization is the Promised Land... I think an existential bonus, or perhaps a central objective, of the Spirit expanding into limitless plurality is the opportunity to experience the immense epiphany and joy of coming together... of realizing our greatest self is the shared Self; that the highest life exists relative to our connection, not our perceived

accomplishments as the individuals we're under the illusion that we are.  
We are only as separate as we need to be in order to come together."

## **Nine: Chipping Away the Fleeting Façade**

*Which came first, form or function? Does form follow function, specially formed for the service of function? If so, what did function follow?*

Biting into an apple, Alex is reminded of the fascinatingly suspicious nature of evolution – suspicious in that he always suspected that more than random mutations creating favorable adaptations better fitting plants and animals to their native environments and thereby granting them a competitive advantage in those environments is at play in the phenomenon of evolution. He doesn't believe anything is truly random, as randomness conflicts with the fact that causality is indispensable to the explanation of everything, even when the cause is unknown or misunderstood. And for that reason he doesn't believe that anything



can be chalked up to accident, including genetic mutations, especially considering that so many just happen to occur in the same way across so many different species of plants and animals.

Yes, one could argue that mutations are caused through the probability of genetic misprinting; through flaws in the copying method passed on to new generations that adhere to those generations due to the competitive advantage they confer, and thus the survivability and perpetuation of those members of that species that possess those advantageous genetic traits. But the occurrence of adaptive advantages is so ubiquitous across life, and these advantages are so interwoven with the characteristics of the flora and fauna existing in each ecological niche, as if precipitated by a synergistic assimilation of the needs of the plant and animal life in that niche, that Alex senses that something more essential to life than inevitable flaws in genetic copying drive this advantageous conferring of environmental fit.

“How do you think that fruit-bearing plants and trees knew to bear fruit in the first place?,” Alex asks no one in particular. The group of five is assessing the development of the growing collection of apple and plum trees being planted across the small downhill orchard, the first of which were placed only a few years before, when Alex lived on the property by himself, writing *Time for True Democracy* and practicing permaculture.

Amanda, who, as Alex’s ‘other,’ is more accommodating of and, through their closeness, has developed a greater appreciation of his ponderings than the others, humors him. “What makes you think they needed to know to bear fruit? Maybe they just bear fruit because it’s their programming,” she replies.

“Yes, it’s an extension of their genetic programming, certainly,” Alex agrees, “but it’s too perfect to be accidental; too perfectly symbiotic. It seems like an ingrained self-reformulating intelligence is innate to that programming. It’s filling a gap; fulfilling a need of its fellow inhabitants, which repay the favor by filling the plant’s need. It’s like the universal phenomenon of nature always seeking equilibrium. There’s a gap to be filled, like an unstable, unequal void of pressure, and that pressure is filled in a way that stabilizes and harmonizes the total environment by a natural action; by a force inherent to nature. The fauna knows to fill the flora’s void and vice versa, and both are stabilized and better able to survive in the process. This knowledge implies awareness inherent to life, existing without mind, at least a mind composed of the neural network of the brain.”

“This equalizing, stabilizing force, this apparent unrecorded means of communication across life, seems innate to every living organism, from the microorganism to the plant to every type of animal, each playing its role in maintaining the equilibrium and, through it, the continuity of all affected forms of life. It’s an instinctive, unthinking form of awareness that’s intrinsic to the evolutionary process. It’s only sentient humankind equipped with a self-awareness and its egotistic separation of will from the continuity of natural balance that may upset this equilibrium. The purely instinctively driven know better, or at least don’t know what may drive them to conflict with the natural will, and seem equipped with an imperative sense of symbiotic purpose and knowledge at birth. Why?”

“Why, for example, does the squirrel just happen to bury the excess stores of acorns in sunlit, open areas at the perfect depth to assure that, when they’re forgotten, they grow into new oaken habitat providing it and its progeny with food and shelter? And how, by sheer so-called ‘random’ mistake, did all the planet’s flora know to evolve the particular capacity to create conveyances for their seeds allowing their distribution by air or upon the hair or through survival of the digestive tracts of their dominant consumers, or to surround those propagating mechanisms in the sweet, nourishing fruit that animals would be drawn to consume and thereby deposit across the landscape in their high-nitrogen fertilizer?”

“Their shit, you mean...” Henry replies. He’s not in the best of moods today. Alex continually senses that Henry doubts that his presence on the property is in his best interest; that he fears he’d made a mistake by moving to their little experimental compound. He remains too concerned with how things reflect upon and benefit him as an ‘upper class individual.’ Henry is a constant reminder to Alex of the dangers of ego, and how it becomes wrapped up in and drives the perception of status in the West and one’s priorities and value system.

Someday ‘upper class’ will mean those that have added the most total value to the quality of life of all the planet’s lifeforms rather than what upper class typically means today: those that have extracted and thus reduced the greatest total value. The definitions of ‘success’ and ‘social status’ need to be flipped on their heads; there must be a paradigm shift in the meaning of success and assignment of status along total value moralist and spiritual lines for the greatest progress to be possible. Merited compensation for the addition of great value is one thing, the valuing of those that are extraordinarily effective at taking without adding while making the most noise in building the biggest egos

is another. Such an upper-class individual is deplorable and, to Alex, all too American. His heart knows that this must change.

“Yes, their excrement,” Alex deadpans. “How do trees and plants know to secrete a sugary substance, nectar, around the purposefully sticky pollen in combination with vibrantly inviting blossoms in order to attract and enlist the service of pollinators for the purpose of procreating with compatible species to produce seeds? And how do they know to encase those seeds in a material made to survive the digestive process of animals in order for them to be distributed through the nitrogen-rich excrement of those attracted animals, with nitrogen, the element most essential to new plant growth, being thereby packaged with new future plantings? And how do the lower lying plants, like grasses, know to produce seeds designed to catch and ride the wind to distant areas for the most prolific, widest distribution of the species, or to develop seeds with prongs made to stick to the fur of conveying animal passers-by?”

“They’re advantageous genetic mutations, Alex. You know that,” Kate chimes in. “You said it a minute ago. You’re driving at something...”

That was the input he was looking for. “Right, *evolved* mutations,” Alex continues. “Evolution. Outside the ‘evidence of evolution is God’s test’ religious community, the science is almost universally accepted, but what of its *impetus*? I’ve never been sold on random, accidental mutations being the driving force behind evolution. I recall a *South Park* episode wherein Stan, always the logical one in the group, for that’s clearly his role, remarks that evolution might be the *how*, but isn’t necessarily the *why*. I’ve long had similar thoughts of my own.”

“I can’t escape the sense that, as with so many things, the outwardly-visible evidence of evolution, the fact that it’s propelled by how well ‘fitted’ the organism is to its environment, and even the ‘accidental’ organic mechanisms by which it’s perpetuated, paints only part of the picture, and that the propelling agent lies beneath the paint: the source and motivating force. I think it’s much the same with the strongest force of existence we call ‘love.’ There are a whole host of anatomical mechanisms and neurotransmitters creating the physiological effects of love, but I believe that these are the material manifestations of love, not the compelling force. They’re the form, not the function. And as with evolution, it isn’t the how, the form, but the function, the *why*, that’s most vital. For without the why, there’s no how.”

“The Spirit,” Amanda responds, knowing full well what her boyfriend is alluding to. “Yes...” Alex continues. “Thank you Amanda, you knew where I was going. I suppose I’m fairly predictable in that regard by now. But, yes, I personally think the Spirit is the underlying force of life most essential to all living things and is inseparable from all the greatest drives and phenomena of existence. This spiritual force doesn’t constitute the mechanics of evolution, though those mechanics are inseparable from it, like everything else...”

“Rather, it’s the force compelling it; the force we instinctively sense; the force that guides us and can be heard most clearly when our minds are quieted, in a peaceful, meditative state. It’s not the how; it provides the *reason* for the how. It supplies the function for which the forms of evolutionary mechanics are suited. That reason, that function, like the point of life, *is* life itself – a life constantly adapting in order to best be suited to and find symbiotic harmony with the planet and all the other forms of life with which it interacts and must seek a sustainable equilibrium in its greatest collective interest.”

“Its function is the service of life as a whole; life as a singular entity, with the individualistic drive of each free to compete for the finite resources of its environment as a means to constantly improve and adapt its design to survive, thrive and thereby serve the whole intertwined symbiotic network of its particular environment; of its particularly-suited sector of life. It’s the intelligent awareness within even non-sentient, mostly or entirely unconsciously-driven forms of life.”

“A tree doesn’t possess the mental self; it’s not conscious and mentally self-driven, but entirely instinct and genetics-driven. It likely has no awareness of being alive, at least on any level paralleling a conscious awareness, much less possessing a conscious drive to improve how it fits and how well suited it is to survive and thrive in its native environment. So it’s entirely instinctive and genetic; something innate; driven by that which is inherent to all of life.”

“There is, in other words, an innate quality to all life, an unconscious dynamic, that constantly motivates the environmentally-functional improvement of every species, and that plays the same role in all plants that it plays in all animals, and that continually reaffirms the fact that life’s most constant attribute is adaptive changeability; the responsiveness to the prevailing conditions of the niche environment. The form is always changing, even when that form changes slowly due to the relative stability of the environment or to a relatively broad

distribution of the species; even as the core characteristic of adaptation for survival, the *function* of symbiotic life service, never changes; just as energy never changes in essence, only in form, location and distribution across spacetime.”

“It could be a gene,” Kate cuts back in, trying to knock her cocky companion off his high horse.

“A gene?,” Alex asks.

“A gene or a collaborating series of genes...” Kate continues. “Genes that, say, somehow save all the empirical data gathered through the life experience of all contemporary copies of the genetic code and transmit that information to other interacting genes that act to edit the code of the species that it’ll pass on to its succeeding offspring according to the changing pressures, threats and other environmental circumstances experienced by the parents of the future offspring. A gene or genetic sequence entirely dedicated to adaptation. Maybe it’s like epigenetics; genes altered on a molecular level due to the behaviors and experiences of a parent before they become imprinted upon the DNA... like a bridge between epigenetics and genetics... when enough epigenetic alteration and correlating information survives between parents it’s imprinted upon the DNA of succeeding generations due to its imparted benefits.”

“Yes,” Alex replies almost immediately. “I think you’re correct. There must be a part of the code that gathers the information of experience and translates it into genetic modifications best suited to the continuity of the species. This, however, is more of the *how*, is it not? It’s the genetic and organic mechanism by which evolution is enacted. Understanding that mechanism is of great value, but it’s still only the mechanism, the *how*, and does nothing to illuminate what’s almost always the more valuable insight: *why*?”

“You speak of the action, but what of the enactor? What is the motivation? The compelling force? Why would this evolutionary gene have itself evolved? Why is there an inborn, unconscious desire for all life to improve in suitability and balanced service to the whole, a service which only sentience can throw into disharmony? And how could the type of gene or genetic sequence you speak of, Kate, produce such similar outcomes across so many different species, each one seeming to design its own strategy to spread its seed, with hundreds of thousands, maybe even millions, of different plant species, clusters of which evolved without any physical contact with the vast majority of the

others, all rendering the same result: an edible, easily conveyed nut, seed or fruit?"

"It seems highly improbable that they should all 'randomly' mutate in the same way. Was something connecting them all? All their experiences of the world? I'm compelled to ask this because my philosophical disposition has led me to what I think is a strongly-linked chain of logic binding together some fundamental principles pointing to the evolution of species as a potential piece in the evidence of the Spirit; of the shared identity and energy common to all life."

"Consider these unbreakably bound-together elements of existence: causality, purpose and evolution. It's not a hollow cliché to say that everything happens and even *exists* for a reason. That reason is the causal chain provoked by the drive of existence. That which exists does so because it was caused to be, in order to be, in order to exist, and in pursuit of the highest possible quality of its existence and, it seems, in pursuit of the highest possible *total* existence of life. And in this chain, everything is caused in order to serve a purpose. Purpose is the motivational impetus behind *all* causes, even when that purpose is difficult to identify, or even impossible to identify based upon limitations of the human mind and scientific and philosophical theories and measuring instrumentation. There's a purpose for *everything*."

"Every thought, every action, everything in existence is there to serve a purpose. Every thought is an attempt to understand or create some other benefit, and so on. Evolution itself demonstrates this entire unbreakably-bound chain. All successful evolutions are compelled by and completed in service of at least one specific beneficial purpose, and ultimately in service of the universal purpose: existence. Life."

"And not just evolution in the customary biological sense, but the evolution of every person, place and thing. A purposeful adaptation to changing environments, or an improvement in the efficiency or efficacy of the existing agent is always caused. And the most fascinating element to me is that this characteristic is a force found within *all* life. A driving force of adaptive improvement demonstrating an intelligent, purposeful resolve compels *all* evolution."

"When it comes to the evolution of specific people, cultures and ideas, and in the case of humans selectively impacting the evolution of species, such as when a selected species is promoted due to characteristics desirable to the compelling people, evolution is

dependent upon the mind, or minds collectively, while in natural selection this purposeful, intelligent adaptation is *independent* of mind. Intelligence sans mind.”

A minute passes without comment. Michael zeroes in on a bee as it bounces between the young apple trees’ first blossoms of the season. Kate lays on her back beneath the same tree and gazes up through the branches, as if reminding everyone that beauty and truth are often a matter of perspective. Henry stares off into space. Amanda gives Alex a big, affectionate hug, the crown of her head fitting perfectly beneath his chin as if she was built to be there. Alex smiles contently and continues:

“And trace this intelligent, purpose-driven evolution all the way back to the beginnings of life itself, at least as we know it: billions of years ago when the first single-celled organisms evolved from the warmer, more nutrient rich waters of the ocean possessing the conditions necessary for the first, simplest forms of life to take form. This, of course, involved a whole complex host of chemical reactions and the interplay of energy and matter, and life taking forms allowing it to function in each of Earth’s diverse environments, so the science itself is fascinatingly sophisticated, yet the question that most intrigues me continues to be: *why?*”

“We know more and more about the *how* all the time, about the chemistry and the special environmental conditions that coaxed life towards its opening, but *why* was the threshold crossed? Why were the first organic entities coaxed into being from inorganic material, and why is every organic structure and genetic blueprint continually compelled to push itself to respond to changing environmental conditions in the way that best suits itself and the fitted environment; that allows everything to fit into a harmonious balance within each ecosystem? And why were the larger scale conditions set for the evolution towards life on Earth in the first place? What, in other words, is the driving force of evolution? What is the foundation upon which life is permitted its ascending construction, and what, in the case of the human race, are we building towards?”

“The Spirit is the spark,” Kate intones with a touch of frustration and melancholy in her voice; “that which gives meaning to all things... The one limitless element existing as the endless and beginningless core of all the finitely formed constituent elements derived from it...” Alex supposes the tone of her voice comes from the fact that she’s grown somewhat jaded on the subject of spirituality, having heard Alex speak

of it so often, combined with the sense that she can't quite compel Alex to pay the attention to her that her seduction requires, even as her midsection is laid bare, her full form sprawled out across the grass.

Yet her attempts to attract don't go entirely unnoticed, for as she stretches Michael immediately ignores the bee he'd been tracking, and Henry noticeably perks-up as well. And yet the obvious loving bond demonstrated between Alex and Amanda stands strong enough in the moment to prevent Alex from taking her in, a testament to the limits of sexual stimulation and manipulation in the prevailing presence of true love. Of course, her not being able to possess or control Alex only increases Kate's desire. Her ego can't tolerate the imposition of such limitations upon her personal power.

"Yes," Alex replies to her reading of where his monologue was moving. Despite her clear lack of enthusiasm, Kate is starting to sound like him, as are the others at times, especially Michael, the Christian-turning-spiritual-seeker with whom he'd had the most extensive conversations as of late. Alex is no longer just rubbing off on them. It's more like the Gnostic knowledge he's been imparting has been so well received by and embedded in their hearts and minds that they're beginning to suspect that that knowledge has always been there, awaiting recognition. Michael smirks in self-reflection at his fading incredulity, and even Henry subtly nods his approval. "It has to be the original source," Alex continues.

"The endpoint to the act of infinite reduction disproving the notion that such reduction is endless, or may end at nothing; that which exists prior to time itself and which produced spacetime as a means to expand its existence into innumerable forms. That which has no beginning and no end because to have such would be a contradiction, for to have begun it must have, at one point, not existed, and there's no such thing as nothing. And the existence of everything cannot begin with the zero thing, a non-thing, and to end would render a nothingness to the irreducible that's equally impossible."

"It's the starting point and ending point that cannot begin nor end, but by the most incontrovertible laws of science and logic can only be infinite, and must transcend the changeable as the energetic source of all things requiring no other. It's the one indivisible entity inherent to all things, including the evolution of its total manifestations in the realm of material existence currently known to humankind."



“And where is this evolution leading, ultimately? If it’s compelling the adaptive force of life and wants what is best for life, what is it compelling us toward? Through its guidance of life, through the invaluable spiritual rewards held in and harvested by the heart when its guidance is heeded, and when connections are made amongst its seemingly infinite variety of forms, to what end is our sentient life being ushered?”

“You mentioned this at least once before,” Michael replies. “I believe you said something about it being an ongoing historical battle between the corruptible, egotistical mind and body and the incorruptible Spirit within humankind, and that the more our minds learn the lessons of the battle the more we evolve, not in the sense of physical evolution so much as the development of the bridge between the sentient mind and the Spirit.”

“Yes,” Alex continues. He always experiences an ego boost that seems, at least to some degree, to be unavoidable when others demonstrate that they’ve been intently listening to him to the point where they can not only repeat his ideas, but where they’re beginning to form the basis of shared convictions. The ego can be subdued, but the full-on enlightenment of egotistic eradication is likely impossible. “I believe that it was Martin Luther King Jr.,” Alex continues, “who said: ‘The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.’ I find this to be very insightful, and my mind returns to this concept on a regular basis.”

“The constant pressures leveled against humanity by its most self-absorbed members, leveled against the planet and all forms of life, perpetuated through the corruptibility of the egotistical mind and susceptible body... The exploitation, greed, prejudice, ignorance and every form of injustice... These extensions of corruption born of mental and physical self-perception and limitation continue to accumulate into the very gradually progressing collective consciousness of mankind. The perception of a self separate from other selves giving rise to the potential of egotistic self-centeredness in thought and action, giving rise to thoughts and actions compelled by not just self-benefit, as all selves are compelled, but to thoughts and actions centered upon self-benefit to some degree irrespective of the impact upon perceived ‘others,’ of thoughts and actions saying ‘I’m the most important self’ and the need to confirm self-importance through the accumulation of wealth, possessions, power, status and all things backing self-importance. These evils born of the ego, coupled with and, indeed, inseparable from the limitations of the mind and body and their resultant susceptibilities, is

the *one* enemy.”

“And the pressures it places upon the progressives that battle it and its greatest living embodiments, and the lessons gleaned from these pressures and battles... *this* is what bends the arc of the moral universe toward justice. Those that to some degree recognize and know, or at least sense, this enemy, both within themselves and within others, for all must battle it... those possessing a strong mental and/or emotional sense of what this enemy costs life and the planet are compelled to resist it.”

“And this resistance continues to mount and evolve in response to the evolving tactics of the perpetrators such that just progress eventually breaks through one measure at a time, for pressures can only be borne for so long before there’s a break and an equal and opposite reaction occurs. The dam can only hold back so much force before it buckles and that force breaks through. And though there are regressions when power becomes more consolidated, when propagandist control measures gain strides or when people lose focus, become more collectively complacent or undergo wars and all other forms of serious stress, the cumulative pattern holds in the long run, and humankind gradually bends towards justice.”

“In this big picture, long-term context, very little if any injustice is *truly* suffered in vain,” Alex continues. “Even when it seems suffered for no reason or without recourse, it isn’t, but adds to the pressure progressively forcing the arc to bend. And all the lessons that mount, building towards progressive levels of justice and compelling a gradual evolution of the human race, all have the same spiritual impetus: the solidarity made of the greatest shared collective interest, an interest the spiritual bonding of love evoked through the heart leads the open, inquisitive mind toward. The more that we understand and celebrate what we have in common, even as we’re able to honor our diversity, the more cooperation, collaboration and mutual benefit that exists in our endeavors, the more we work together in common cause, the more value we can produce for life as a whole and the better that value will be used to elevate total life.”

“In this quest, as we blast through the impediments and climb over the obstacles placed in our way by the limited, ego-driven mind and susceptible body and its corruption of the thoughts and actions of those that impede our progress, we move ever closer to maximizing the *total*

quality of life on Earth. This is accomplished by living, thinking and acting based upon the sense of the greater, collective good, whether or not this is consciously based upon the realization of shared essential Self and the Spiritual Rule that this greatest, most valuable of realizations demands. We move towards, but may never fully reach, collective enlightenment and the corresponding maximization of total existence; maximization of the life experience of the Spirit's total, collective manifestations. I myself believe, in fact, that the Spiritual Rule embodies the greatest potential for total life; it's a gateway to the greatest possible collective quality of life."

"The Spiritual Rule encapsulates the foremost principal of progress for humankind, for to truly understand, believe and act upon it leads to the subduing of the ego; the letting-go of the individual sense of self that tricks every person into believing that they're more important than the 'others,' because it eliminates the illusion of otherness altogether. Those that live by it cannot be motivated by greed and anything else springing from self-centeredness, for that center is expanded to include *all* living things, and only the acts good for both the individualization and the whole of life, truly symbiotic acts, can therefore be known as good."

"It sounds good in theory," Henry criticizes after a few silent seconds, "but it never works in reality."

"It *is* working," Alex responds without hesitation. "It's always accumulating, precipitating the inevitable result. That result is but yet to be realized because humanity has a long way to go along the evolutionary track. Shared identity and purpose and symbiotic synergy of conviction and collaborative action are too big of a leap for most people, and are very, *very* difficult to maintain on a daily basis due to the nature of mental and physical individualization and the stresses and limits they impose upon us and our interactions. We're simply nowhere near the top of our mountain. Collectively, we're resistance trainers, historically gaining the strength necessary to ascend to the higher elevations through our resistance of those characteristics and their agents maintaining injustice."

"Difficulty and reward are almost always commensurate. And that, to me, is what makes progress an uphill path requiring, as with all the most worthwhile endeavors, strong, relentless effort and understanding to climb; a path in which it's easy to fall back into the less evolved

attitudes that prevent us from reaching our higher states of evolution and their greatest possible collective quality of life which always require exponentially more work, and always produce far more spiritual reward. They're earned by those that commit to pushing themselves and compelling the race to gradually step up that evolutionary, progressive path. It's far easier *not* to resist... to simply allow gravity to pull us down the path of least resistance toward the might-makes-right, so-called 'realist,' the heinously short-sighted, self-centered, laissez-faire, Ayn Rand brand of thought and action that grossly impedes our ability to climb."

"It always comes back to a relative scale of two-sided choice, thought and action between that which lifts us up and that which holds us back and sometimes pushes us back down the path. It's an ongoing choice between togetherness and separation. It's cooperation versus conflict; symbiosis versus parasitism; communalism versus tribalism. It's the war against all those things which divide us and prevent us from understanding, embracing, loving, supporting and working with one another in realization of the fact that our most fulfilled individualized self is a self that commits to the most fulfilled collective Self; the spiritual Self fostered through loving connection and understanding."

"The history of empire, aristocracy and unrestricted capitalism has written the indoctrinating lesson books and prevailing cultural values, and they coerce us to believe the opposite; to believe that what's in the individual's and group's best interest will always conflict with what's in the best interest of other individuals and groups, or that the best interests of all are known only in the animalistic, laissez faire 'free market' jungle of absolute cutthroat competition, and that the 'realistic' ideology dictates such a certain 'truth' as inescapable."

"But this is pure propaganda perpetuated for the simple fact that the popular realization of the higher truth imperils the pursuit of ego-driven, self-centered greedy interests; the interests of the corrupted ownership class that has subdued the guidance of the Spirit within, a guidance which plagues their conscience but which they dismiss, compensating for this internal dis-ease by attempting to numb and overshadow it with gratifications of ego and sensation which, of course, come with the price of ignoring their truest, essential-most Self through the same thoughts and actions by which they try to block humankind from ascending the mountain. For the truth, the truth that knows that the value of cohesion offers a far greater value than the sum of its parts, that connection in collaboration produces *far* more for the whole than

the divide-and-conquer cutthroat competition producing winners and losers, also tells us that the so-called 'realist' is on the anachronistic, obstructing side of the historical progression of our species; the conservative side that conserves everything that obstructs our progress towards best collective interest."

"Any identity that we create that conflicts with a species-wide solidarity costs more than it creates and prevents this evolutionary progress," Alex goes on. "For example, I'd never identify myself as an American more than as a member of the human race or, better yet, as a member of life; as an inseparable facet of Spirit; as a version of The One. This is my truest identity. Identifying myself as a liberal and progressive... these are identities, to be sure, and they're imperfect... but they're also useful means of describing the stance I take as I stride toward the goals of my truest, everlasting identity."

"I can never be nationalistic or, indeed, in any way tribal in thought or action. It's not the profits or power or position of me or my family or my company or my nation that're important, but what is best for life as a whole. And as soon as what's best for life as a whole contradicts what's best for me or my family or my company or my nation, the Spiritual Rule demands that I sacrifice the smaller identity. For as soon as greed and ego pull you into a constricted identity that compels you to increase the wealth and power of any one group over the others, then you're complicit in the costs that sell the whole of life short of its potential; you're preventing the evolutionary progress of humanity, and the cutthroat competition that you're perpetuating between categorized identities of nationality, culture, class, religion and so forth will always do *far* more harm than good. This is why spirituality is so invaluable, and why spiritual truth is the highest truth, because it's of limitless value in its universal potential impact. Its utility value, in other words, is endless."

"Because it applies to everyone and everything and is thus of limitless potential quality of life value," Michael expounds, knowing the point Alex is making. "Without creating the specific myths and divisions and labels and hierarchies and idolatry that separates the instinctive spiritual search and awareness into divided, often combative faiths, spirituality goes to the heart of all and allows for the possible solidarity of all life."

"Exactly," Alex concurs, proud that Michael can now so ably represent his conceptions; that he's leaving the corral behind and can now readily

hop the manmade fences and traverse the grounds which the less restricted spiritual searchers have always been compelled to explore. “The Spirit is the great binder; it’s the force behind and backing all of life and which, when the heart swells through its unobstructed bridge with the mind, through the understanding and affection created between people and reflecting its universally-shared, instinctively-recognized identity, is felt as the highest, most essential force and form of truth that *all* people feel for all other people and lifeforms.”

“The love that knows no division, no petty separation of mental categorizations and over-simplistic labels; that knows only that we’re all precisely the same in the one way that shall forever matter the most, both literally and figuratively; the way that transcends all division and which can overcome all difference of body and mind. It’s this which, through its universally-shared eternal guidance, drives the evolution of life more than anything else. It’s this spiritual connectivity we know as love that’ll ultimately prevail over ego and greed, the limiting weaknesses of the body and the self-aware, ego-misled mind that slow the progress of the singular Spirit infinitely bound to matter.”

“And how do we speed that progress as individuals? By putting ourselves and all our excluding identities second to life as a whole, I suppose?” Amanda suggests. “By being selfish for the right things, as you’ve said before? Not for the things that are centered upon ourselves but the things that reward us spiritually? By fulfilling our connection to Spirit through our bind with other people and lifeforms, with the whole of life, and by helping improve the quality of the lives of as many others as possible? By fostering the greatest total quality of life in, as you’ve just said, the same manner which also ushers us toward our own greatest *individualized* quality of life? It goes back to your total value concept, correct? You’re saying that spiritual truth naturally fosters the greatest total value, and that all of your theories and systems are inseparable from your understanding of Spirit and its total quality of existence imperative.”

“Yes,” Alex replies. He has, of course, confided in Amanda for far longer than the others and, thus, it is she that is the best versed in the concepts upon which he expounds, if not the one most consistently demonstrating the strongest grasp upon those concepts. “The best possible outcome is produced when we’re able to subjugate the drives of the body, the ego and everything else that limits our thoughts and actions in mere order to prop-up our individualizations, or to satisfy short-lived gratifications that aren’t worth the long-term cost. We must

make such drives secondary to pursuing the more profound and progressive mental and spiritual truths that bind us in common, collaborating cause as a shared entity. It's the foundational Self in the Trinity of Self, the spiritual, universally-shared Self, fighting for control of the mind, the mental self, against the messages sent to the mental self by the most corruptible self in the Trinity, the physical self, and the most corruptible aspect of the mental self, the egotistical self."

"We all fight this war. It's as if we all must, as best as we're able, move beyond the individual path, beginning by moving beyond bodily subjugation. And by bodily subjugation, I mean the realm of pure survival and physical gratification; food, water, shelter, sexual impulse; the basic drives of physiological existence: the maximization of pleasure, the minimization of pain and the conservation of energy. These are the motivations to which *all* forms of life are subject, sentient or not. Yet the aware, knowledgeable, disciplined mind in league with the heart and conditioned to serve the greater Self, the Big Self, may master these drives. We may become like Jedi, in a sense; trained to feel and follow the force, like a spiritual soldier ready to fight for the best interest of life."

"Our personal progressions and, combined, our evolution towards the higher realms possible for our species are based upon our ability to discipline ourselves not to be ruled by baser drives; by the drive to perpetuate our species and to hijack the neuro-chemical reward system evolved to serve the survival of the species that's so routinely abused by the weak-minded and exploited by the irresponsibly self-centered in today's world; the physically-programmed drives to consume the most calorically-condensed, nutritionally-void foods, and, more generally, to manipulate the pleasure centers of the body and brain. For this is the most basic realm of personal corruptibility which subjugates us and oppresses our potential; a realm of self-limitation, then degradation, then destructive demise, depending upon the degree; and the first realm disconnecting us from and putting us into conflict with 'others.'"

"This is the baser, lower motivational realm of the physical self most susceptible to degrading total quality of life. It does this by turning us into servants of physical gratification, inviting us to become the manipulated pawns of the greedy, excluding few profiting from our remaining in such servitude. Our bodies and brains are easily corrupted by manipulations of the pain and pleasure messages of the nervous system and its chemical carriers which, without a strong enough mind and without heeding the warnings of the heart, can twist this

neurological, survival-based reward system and turn us into agents of evil action against ourselves and others. These are always the easy downhill paths; the overlapping paths of over-gratification; of hedonism, gluttony, addiction, dependency and the like. This is the weakest self; the self fully dependent upon the material realm and biological conditions. In *Star Wars*, this is the surest path to the dark side; the start of the easier, more seductive path that Yoda warns Luke against, leading to physical dependencies, degradations and darkness.”

“As we began to drift away from our most dependent, physical self, we move toward the mental portion of the Trinity of Self. This is where, as sentient life, the ego comes into play; where we become conceptually aware of self and begin to estimate our sense of self-worth as we move beyond the most basic physical, programmed, survivalist drives and easily-corruptible neurochemical manipulations. This is where we begin to seek to understand; to learn and improve; but also where we’re driven to seek material and financial accumulations in an overlap between sensational and egotistic gratification; where we seek self-importance and status above others.”

“This is also where we identify and seek to become members of different categorized identities in order to feel like we belong and aren’t outsiders, and are better than those we perceive as ‘others’ and ‘outsiders’ in order to compensate for the egotistic vulnerability which we suffer. This is where we’re liable to place ourselves in boxes of class, nationality, religion, political clan and such that inevitably become a part of our self-perception, and that thereby separate us and put us into potential conflict with other forms of the truest shared Self of Spirit. This is also where we become open to the mental corruptions which the ego exacerbates, especially in driving us toward the greed for wealth, material possessions and power over others which are so costly to total life.”

After a brief pause with no interjections, Alex continues: “This defines the challenge of humanity and its current stage of evolution: fighting the weaker, corruptible aspects of the self that, when given into, degrade the self and the species with it. In this evolutionary warfare, the more the physical self and the egotistic side of the mental self is removed from the driver’s seat of our lives, the less the aforementioned manipulations of our physiological structures and egotistic psychology is allowed to drive our mental self, the more that the mental self is freed from their corruptive, degrading influence and the better able we are to produce mental and spiritual rewards and protect and increase the



capacity of the body that's the vehicle by which we drive towards those higher rewards."

"At this point, we may begin to move away from the less evolved state into the elevated potential of self that spurs evolutionary progress. We find our way into the realm of the wondering, inquisitive, knowledge-acquiring mind, those qualities and capacities spurring an awareness that the conservative ideology is the ideology of obstruction and devolution; the ideology that wants you to gullibly, unquestioningly, obediently believe everything that you're told by your so-called superiors, and which fights to undermine and deride everything and everyone that fights back as ineffectual, wimpy liberals, freedom-killing socialists, pessimistic cynics and naïve idealists; all labels *actually* indicating that those to whom they're applied are on the road to higher truths more popularly empowering and conducive to creating a higher quality of life for all."

"It's here that we find our way into the realm of the revelatory joy and edifying power found in understanding the world and how and why it works; the realm of philosophy, morality and progressive ideology and conviction based upon shared identity and collaboration in contribution of more value to life than we consume, through the very same thoughts and actions awarding spiritual fulfillment; the realm wherein we learn that the greatest rewards and the development of the greatest strength requires a disciplined conditioning in order to abstain from all that which sells those rewards and that strength for fleeting pleasures, financial and material accrual and ego boosts ultimately acting to separate us from one another, degrading our bodies and minds and decimating the bridge between the small self and the Spirit. For above all, this path leads to knowledge and love of Spirit, which entails love of self, others and, indeed, all of life."

"The highest knowledge unlocks these doors, granting us the greater understanding revealing the doorway to love, for the more that we understand something, the greater our ability to connect with, appreciate and thereby come to love that thing. Therefore, the greater our understanding of those people and things offering us the greatest spiritual fulfillment, or love, the more that love may be realized. At the same time, knowledge in general empowers us to produce great value for life, for the greater the knowledge and the greater the mental capacity, or intelligence, to which that knowledge is paired, the greater our potential for value production. These rewards of mental and spiritual empowerment, fulfillment and value production are always

greater than the purely physical pleasures or the fleeting feelings of egotistic gratification of the less evolved human state, and they always increase total quality of life for life as a whole. When mental and spiritual fulfillment align there's always a pursuit of symbiotic mutual best interest instead of parasitic exploitation of weakness in service of the aforementioned physiological pleasure and egotistic reassurances."

"However," Alex continues, "because the rewards of human progression are *far* more difficult to attain, they represent the uphill path requiring far greater mental strength, knowledge, conviction and discipline to climb. Many simply can't summon the strength to climb. Most cannot, in fact, and contribute to the fact that most people spend more time in the wrong, embodying obstacles to be overcome and lessons to be learned in our evolutionary quest, than they do being in the right, for the simple reason that it's far easier and more financially profitable to be in the wrong. It's far easier and more financially-enriching to serve the dark side. Our hearts, however, carrying the message of the collective Spirit, forever compel us to do right and, thus, very gradually, we collectively climb the path of human progression, paying the ongoing collective price of suffering in order to ascend towards higher states of evolution."

"You mentioned this before," Michael notes. "The Spirit that's always attempting to inspire in us the realization of the greater power concealed in the Golden Rule that's considered but a moral precept, but which is actually indivisible from the spiritual reality that, the more it's known, the more it'll guide us toward the realization of greatest total value. The Spiritual Rule: treat everyone as you would have them treat you because, on the most essential, fundamental level, they *are* you, and you them."

"Correct," Alex concurs. "And perhaps more than any other people and culture Americans and Americanization demonstrates a failure to realize this truth, which is ironic considering our official nationalistic claims of being the most virtuous, advanced and freedom-and-democracy-loving of peoples, *none* of which is true, excepting maybe economic and military advancement; an advancement that we use to advance against those that resist our hegemony, much like the ancient Athenians that Thucydides wrote about. He wrote of an Athenian people highly developed in a certain sense for their time, but whom may also be said to have represented false paragons of virtue, freedom and democracy, something which any critical examination of their culture, and especially the most trod upon and conquered personages and outliers that culture

came into contact with, will reveal. It's crystal clear to me that we're nowhere near to well representing the highest of ideals in modern day America either."

"When it comes to the Spiritual Rule and its preeminent power of propelling human progress, whenever I go on walks on the streets of American cities in general most people don't even acknowledge my presence when I pass by and try to greet them, much less say hello or exude any sense of connection, love, community or the like."

"Generally, Americans work with one another in advancement of career goals in pursuit of better positions and salaries and all the materialistic and egotistic trappings that go with it, and build fenced-off little properties and groups of friends and lovers for their social, sexual and spiritual satisfaction. But we have very little understanding of and appreciation for interconnectedness and true spiritual communion, and most seem only to tolerate collaboration when they feel that it's necessary to advance their career and financial goals, missing that collaboration is core to progress."

"We fall woefully short of our potential for reaching the higher states of spiritual satisfaction that come with understanding, loving and symbiotically working with one another to improve the quality and appreciation of one another's lives. I personally believe that this is an effect of conservative ideology passed down from the conquering, controlling, owning classes for millennia."

"Individualism is espoused because it keeps our lives individualized; it keeps us separated and unlikely to come together in common cause, summoning the power to upset the status quo. Most are cordoned off into mostly independent lives with independent goals; goals that commonly that contradict one another's considering that positions, power and resources are finite, placing us in positions of perpetually divisive cutthroat competition, with the notable exception of small towns and derided 'ethnic communities.'"

"Neighborhoods are defined by private property and private pursuits. Aside from those that identify with others along our perfectly divided liberal-versus-conservative ideological political front, a perfect division built to keep us divided and as powerless as possible and thereby keep the plutocrats in true control. Aside from such exceptions, it's mostly the *kids* of our society that actually freely, openly and unapologetically engage with one another. And why? Because they haven't yet been fully

culturally indoctrinated and mentally corrupted by what we're conditioned to value and prioritize. Despite the self-congratulatory, blinding rhetoric of the 'proud to be an American' type, we're arguably as much defined by the fact that we're distracted, divided, corrupted, controlled and conquered than anything else. And call me a conspiracy theorist but, again, I believe this to be mostly by design."

"I believe that it's in the nature of power to be corrupted by the need to retain and expand it," Alex continues; "that those possessing it naturally tend to conspire to keep and consolidate it, and the wealth that buys it. Much of that design and the conspiring through which it was historically constructed is now, of course, systemic; it's ingrained and enacted for the benefit of the plutocrats and aristocrats; the ownership class."

"This is true even when they're unaware that they're acting upon long-preserved designs that were concocted by and for their ruling, extracting forebears. The plutocrats and their political puppets have always been better able to pursue their excluding agenda of extraction and value consolidation when we play the part of the distracted, divided, corrupted and controlled."

"The more united we are in common, collaborating cause in pursuit of majority best interest, and the more we demand that our government contribute to that cause as any true democracy compelled by any widely held spiritual truth naturally would, the more included we are in the economic and political value of the nation, the less able the aristocrats are to exclude us and consolidate everything of value to life."

"And we're all made smaller than our fullest selves as a consequence of conservatism, *including* conservatives themselves. They're just too corrupted and/or ignorant to realize or admit it. They're too corrupted to realize that, as divided and conquered subjects, we all trade the greatest forms of our species, a collective form certainly mutually exclusive with conservatism, for our oppressed form of existence. And this truth can be disseminated through a spiritual revolution as much as by any other means. Spiritual insight is the best starting point from which to pursue a greater collective quality of life through all avenues, politically, economically, socially or otherwise. It's the best possible foundation upon which we may build."

"By inciting us to act as one entity as much as possible," Michael offers.

“Yes, because the most essential Self *isn't* individualized,” Alex replies. “The heart of human injustice lies in the illusion of separation that creates conflicts between ‘us’ and ‘them’ that undermines the greatest quality of life that can be experienced by life as a whole, by every manifestation of the Spirit, because it’s lost in the cutthroat warfare between individuals and factions, and is only achievable through cooperative collaboration best born of the spiritual realization that separating identities are mostly illusory.”

“There’s no ‘us versus them’ unless we create it; unless we believe it to exist; unless we feed and allow the illusion of absolute separation to exist in our minds, and unless we accept it when it’s handed down to us and purposefully emphasized by those that use it to serve their greed by destroying ideas and systems of cooperation and collaboration potentiating the best possible results for life as a whole; results lost in the cost of conflict based upon relative, largely surface-level separations.”

“We all continue to be victims of the narrow-minded, self-absorbed, spiritually-bankrupt identifications perpetuated by those carrying on the traditions of Empire and dynasty. Instinctively, and in the spiritual awareness within all of us that we cannot remove, we know these overly simplistic, surface-level identifiers belie a much greater truth of shared identity. We subconsciously sense that when we buy into them we harm others and ourselves, because in our hearts we know a truth that few seem to capture within their minds: we’re inseparable.”

“There’s only We. We the Spirit. This is an essential truth that affects us and everything we do. Harming others harms ourselves because there’s no true distinction between ‘others’ and ‘ourselves.’ This distinction is one of ignorance; an artifice crafted by our limited sensory perception and inflamed by the greedy, and which lies atop the deeper truth of our singular identity.”

“We feel bad when we harm others, and feel good when we help others, because, under the sensory surface there is no ‘others,’ and it’s all the same as helping and hurting yourself,” Henry states.

“Yes,” Alex continues, encouraged by Henry’s rare participation. “This is why we feel our hearts sink and ache when we act immorally and our hearts swell when we act in a way that helps others; that’s correct; that’s evolutionarily-progressive in that it benefits life as a whole. When we harm others, when we act against life, when we prevent this greater

evolutionary progression on any front, whether it be interpersonal, causing harm to one person and negatively affecting every other person that one harmed individual subsequently comes into contact with in a gradually rippling, snowballing causality, or it be on a larger scale spreading more broadly and forcefully across society, we harm ourselves in the process.”

“It’s unavoidable, even when we lie to ourselves in order to justify our greed and egotism. We just become ever better at telling these lies, ever more willing to accept them in reinforcement of our mentally corrupted egos, and ever more quieting of the ever harder to hear spiritual voice and its loving guidance. And when we improve the life of others, it’s the opposite. When we act for life, when we help evolution along, when we create a positive snowball effect that builds goodwill, love, compassion, collaboration and understanding, when our minds move in tandem with our hearts to spur evolutionary progress, we lift ourselves up as we simultaneously elevate all those we positively impact.”

“It’s in *this* way that we receive the highest rewards and tie our knots more securely with the Spirit, our essential shared Self, which rewards its individualizations immensely with the expansion of the heart we call love. And this love can be general, a love for life itself; a profound, deep appreciation for existence. It need not be directly connected to any one person, though we can and do focus and associate it with particular people and things. Like most things, it’s a double-edged sword cutting both ways: we cannot harm another without harming ourselves, and we cannot help another without helping ourselves. When we lift others up, we lift ourselves up; when we hold others down, when we exploit their weaknesses, their relative competitive disadvantages, we unavoidably hold ourselves down and injure our truest, deepest Self in the process.”

“Our conscience isn’t merely a moral construct, but an extension of our awareness of the Spirit constituting our most essential Selves, unlimited by time, space or physical encasement, constantly coaxing us to act according to the highest truth: that we’re all versions of the same being. As Michael and Henry have noted, the Spiritual Rule is a revision of the Golden Rule which contends that it’s not a matter of treating others as you would have them treat you, for *there are no others*. In the end, so to speak, there’s no difference between you, me, we, them or they. There’s only One. This is, I believe, the highest truth, and the more that the individualization understands and lives by this truth, that separation is an illusion, that there’s only one identity, that everything is a version

of the same thing, the more enlightened that individualization becomes.”

“You’re saying that living by this Spiritual Rule helps put us on the path of evolution in pursuit of the enlightened state of non-ego; the state of non-self-perception; the state of non-individualized-identification which lies at the level of being perfectly at one with the Spirit; the ideal never totally attained, but which we should ever aspire to reach,” Kate contributes.

“Right, exactly,” Alex concurs. “I don’t know that anyone has ever truly reached this peak and has lived upon it in an enlightened state of non-individualized-identity, but I find that always shooting for the peak, knowing where the peak is and forever endeavoring to climb towards it, assures that one reaches one’s *own* peak. And for *me*, this is the peak; the highest ideal: the eradication of the illusion of identifications of separation. We’re talking about finding and living within the truest identity, because it’s the everlasting base identity upon which every narrower identity is poorly constructed by the self-perceiving ego based upon illusory notions of absolute separation. All other identities are falsely misleading in that they’re ultimately fabrications of the egotistic mind based upon ignorance and the limitations of sense and intellect.”

“The identity that the spiritual searcher seeks is the one that lacks ego as much as possible, that doesn’t put itself and others in the classifications and categorizations which act to divide, confine and judge particular manifestations of the Spirit in ways ultimately dissuading us from comprehending our shared Self-identity and pursuing the highest collective quality of life only attainable through shared identity and collaborating in common cause. I personally feel the presence of this identity all the time, as it influences all of us; though, of course, my mind doesn’t *remain* within it, for it’s clear that I myself can’t help but pass judgment and utilize classifications like liberal versus conservative.”

“And to some extent I believe this to be unavoidable, because we can’t deliberate about competing ideologies without having the language that separates those ideologies. Which is why I think it’s vitally important to always attempt to talk about distinctions between *ideas* rather than people. Condemn the ideas that don’t foster the greatest quality of life, not the people that hold them, for the minds of those people can always be changed, even when it’s *extremely* difficult to do so, and the ideas which inflict misery upon life as a whole *aren’t* innate to the

people themselves. I have to constantly remind myself of this; remind myself that it's bad ideas, ego, greed and corruptibility that produce evil, not people."

"Because, as you've said before, it's the limitations of the mental and physical self that form the individualization that are susceptible to possessing and propagating the destructively parasitic ideas that cause evil in the world," Kate interjects. "The limited body and mind are vulnerable to certain pressures and deficiencies which can cause a person to hold ideas and conduct actions which cause evil in the world. But underneath this the spiritual core of the person, the shared identity of Spirit, is entirely invulnerable, and this is the truest form of Self that we cannot give up on in anyone, because everyone, even the person causing the most evil in the world, possesses this core identity of non-separation."

"Absolutely, very well said," Alex says, immediately irritated with himself for again failing to temper his obvious enthusiasm in the presence of Amanda at Kate's proficient grasp upon the concepts they've discussed. He feels his heart ache watching Amanda's face immediately contort with jealous animosity. Kate exhibits a confident little grin at the recognition of the dynamic. With less fervor, Alex continues: "Living within this Self, within the heart, and matching the mind to the guidance of the Self, to the rewards of the Spirit, is the evolutionarily-progressive path. For one to best walk this path and help bring others together to walk it, his or her mind must hold the truth the heart already knows: we're One."

"Beneath the physical construct and the mind that governs the Spirit in each of its physical forms, we're inseparable; indistinct from the same energetic source composing everything. When I look into each of your eyes it's ultimately myself that I see, and it's myself that looks back, as it is for each of you. It's extremely difficult to live in this way, but absolutely empowering and in the greatest possible interest of life as a whole."

"For in my heart I've *always* known what my intellect has at times confirmed and grasped as well: we're all different, mortal, finite versions of the same exact immortal, infinite energetic being bound up into limitless material forms endlessly distributed across spacetime. And it's only that physical form that individualizes our spiritual essence, separating us relative to other forms of matter and the spacetime that was made by the Spirit for its materializations to inhabit, but which



*never* separates us absolutely, as our limited sensory capacities suggest; capacities evolved to serve our ability to exist as individualizations. Beneath our limited ability to perceive, we cannot be differentiated in any of the ways that matter most.”

“Material form and the spacetime canvas are means for taking the same shared Self along a limitlessly varied track of experience; a track that gradually diversifies the Spirit’s physical forms as it proliferates and biologically evolves to adapt to changing conditions via the evolution spurred by the cumulative, genetically-stored experience of expanding genealogical lines. But this is only the biological aspect of evolution; a means of physically adapting to ever changing environmental conditions and diversifying the experience of life best suited to them.”

“It’s the pure spiritual awareness, the feeling of the Spirit, of love, that compels the mental aspect of mankind’s greater evolution and, through learning lessons, through the collective trials, tribulations, pains, sufferings, conflicts and convictions of progressive champions, compels the mind of mankind to pursue the uphill path leading to the higher realms of human existence. Because we’re sentient we may reach these realms, and aren’t limited to might-makes-right aggressions and abuses of the vulnerable, and to being purely subjected to physical drives like non-sentient species who, though they possess awareness and the loving guidance of all manifestations of Spirit, possess not the sophistication of mind to learn the lessons conducive to conceptual thought and constructing collaborative systems in pursuit of the greatest collective good, and who, instead, are overwhelmed by the drive for personal and tribal survival.”

“Even then, however, their programmed environmental fit drives them to help enforce a balance in their natural ecological realms in symbiotic service to life. We, of course, are compelled by the link between our hearts and advanced minds to create and live by a higher standard, one in which, upon overcoming an egotistic sense of separation, we may steward life and the planet toward its greatest potential.”

“When the guidance of the human heart matches the thoughts of the mind, the less evolved, more animalistic weaknesses and corruptibility of the mind and the ego can be overcome. Asceticism and minimalism and spiritual philosophy and many paralleling pursuits are bound to this quest. Through its progressions, we’re able to follow the Spirit guiding our hearts, the only totally free part of us not requiring or limited by the bounds of the body and the mind that round out the Trinity of Self. It’s

when we reside within and follow our hearts that we're truly progressive; when our minds and bodies are in league with, rather than resisting or contradicting its will, the will of our most essential shared Self. Only then are we set upon the highest evolutionary path, pulling life together in a loving communion that wishes only for cooperation and the pursuit of the most spiritually-enriched, highest quality life for us all. A life rich in love."

"It sounds corny, but it's true: the greatest enrichment is measured in love, because the more love we experience the greater the quality of the experience of our lives, which is the very point of life. On a total life scale this is based upon how aligned our pursuits are with the best interests of the greatest numbers; how aligned we are with one another; how bound together we are, with our connectivity paying us in *spiritual* dividends."

"So we progress by superimposing the spiritual truth of singular identity upon the sensory perception of separation. Separation born of the Spirit's creation of matter, time and space as an infinite reference point for experiencing existence," Michael suggests. "We superimpose it through a spiritually-aligned mental conditioning until it becomes second nature."

Alex can't help but beam with pride at this remark. Michael, like Kate, has listened intently during their discussions and is beginning to demonstrate considerable acuity in communicating his concepts; concepts which are gradually becoming *group* concepts. "Yes, that is a method for coming to feel, live and fully comprehend that truth more and more all the time," Alex continues. "We employ it, like you suggest, devotedly; until the physical self-identity begins to dematerialize in one's mind, and the ego with it. The Spirit centered within our hearts is already aware of the universal Self shared by all life; that all life is really an unlimited variance of one life. This instinctive knowledge is held with or without the conscious mind, and is inherent to all life because it's inherent to the most essential component of the Trinity of Self, the Spirit. This instinctive, universal awareness is not well possessed by many individualized consciousnesses, however."

"It's a rarity for this truth to be held in the mental self, at least in our current day and age. I'm certain that this will change in the future, however, as the race evolves towards higher realizations and cooperative concern and effort; as the pressures and lessons and injustices of time and increases in population coupled with

corresponding restrictions in space and natural resources gradually force us together along the 'long bending arc of the moral universe.'”

“But once the truth of universal Self becomes fully known to and embraced by the conscious mind, and short of a complete destruction of self-perception which I don't believe has ever actually been attained, it becomes a matter of disciplined practice by the mind to apply that awareness to daily existence through the Spiritual Rule. I attempt this practice myself, but still have a long way to go. It's immensely spiritually rewarding. The more I'm successful in it, the more that my heart grows, the more that I have a love for and appreciation of others and life in general.”

“When I successfully see other people and forms of life through these eyes, through consciousness of oneness, I feel a greater, deeper, realer understanding of life, the world and the universe, and the Spirit within me soars, and I feel at peace residing within this eternal, timeless Self; within the everlasting composing the core of us all. At its heights, the practice offers a hint of enlightenment; the chance to all but erase ego by erasing self-perception and thereby see only variations of the one Self. We're all the Spirit. We aren't even really we, just one. Infinite of One.”

“Continually holding this awareness at the forefront of one's consciousness would cement a perfect bridge between heart and mind, eliminating ego and allowing one to see the greater, unobstructed truth in all things. Total love. One love, as the Rastafarians say. Just as they say 'I and I.' I've always loved that expression. It reflects true spiritual insight. They don't say 'me' but 'I and I,' ably demonstrating the fact that we are the individualization and God in one.”

“We're all ourselves and the Spirit at the same time. It's all one thing underneath the perception of senses that evolved in order to allow us to survive and perpetuate life in this material and temporal plane of existence. We manufacture different mental associations with the concept of love, and focus our love on different individualized physical forms of the Spirit, with the evocation of spiritual joy emanating from and invested in those things. And yet that love is all the same. It all comes from the one shared identity. It's all one love and one underlying identity shared by all of life in all of its limitless forms.”

After a brief silence, Kate speaks up: “It's similar to the sculptor analogy.”

“What analogy are you referring to?,” Amanda asks, looking at Kate with a mixture of jealousy and disdain.

“The love is already there, lying beneath the surface,” Kate replies. Enacting the spiritual exercise to which Alex is referring, she looks at and sees Amanda in a way she never had before, with compassionate connection and a sense of inseparability, inspired by Alex’s words and having allowed them to seep into her consciousness, momentarily letting go of the egotistic sense of seeing her as an ‘other’ and potential competitor. “It’s a matter of chipping away the surface to realize what’s already there; a matter of seeing through the fleeting, mortal façade to reveal the eternal, immortal truth hidden beneath the physical surface.”

“Yes Kate, an excellent analogy,” Alex replies with much more control of his effusions than before. “The universal love binding all living things already exists. It’s the mind and the body, the surface level material necessities and desires and their limitations, tendencies and weaknesses that block the natural bridge that already exists between all of us. We can all sense it. It’s there at all times, we need only overcome the obstructions. And this is precisely what happens when people feel love for others and love for life in general. The obstructions are obliterated, at least momentarily. The spiritual bridge is cleared, creating a clean conduit of the Spirit conducted between its forms.”

“And the more often this occurs the more concrete the connection between individual manifestations of the Spirit becomes. But where this bridge is blocked between people and all other forms of life due to qualities of body and mind, where it’s blocked by survivalist need, ego, desire, greed and especially by a lack of understanding of those perceived as ‘others,’ cutthroat tribal competition results, leading, of course, to things like war, exploitation and other total-quality-of-life-reducing conflicts, and the message and greater rewards of the Spirit are precluded, perpetuating injustice and evil-doing as a direct result. This is the first blockade.”

“When it’s not a matter of survival, which it is for most of the animal kingdom but not for most of those living in wealthier societies, it’s not the needs of the body but the weaknesses of the mind that tend to block the bridge. This might be seen as the second blockade relevant to sentient beings such as ourselves. The corruptible, self-perceiving, narrowly-conceiving mind gets in the way. Our own mental weaknesses limit our ability to realize the love we already have for others, especially when they exhibit similar limitations and practice divisive, excluding

beliefs forcing us to feel at odds with them. It's the qualities and beliefs of the mind and their clashes with the qualities and beliefs of other minds that we hate, even as we love what lies beneath, usually without being conscious of it."

"In this way we often love and hate the same person or people simultaneously, for we love their true spiritual Self and that part of their minds which we know and appreciate while simultaneously detesting certain aspects of their mental self that make it seem as though they're entirely dissimilar and deserving of our contempt. We love what we know connects us, and are saddened and drum up ill will when that connection is blocked or pulled apart. And *that's* why love is stronger than hate."

"Love is real and everlasting, while hate is illusory and fleeting. Hate is based upon a false sense of separation, upon distinctions which can only ever be mental and physical and can never imperil the indistinct, truest shared Self. Hate is built upon threatening or weakening a bond of love that can never be fully broken. So I find that when you break the emotional spectrum down you find that it's all really love; every emotion is a facet of spiritual evocation, like shining a light on all sides of a prism."

"We spoke of this recently," Michael comments. "It's an interesting idea."

"You never mentioned this idea to me," Amanda speaks up. "Are you really suggesting that love and hate are the same thing?," she asks, as if offended by the suggestion that there's no difference between such clearly antithetical emotions. "I can't say I ever feel any sense of love when I feel hate."

"What I'm saying is that they're based upon the same thing, with love being like an investment in a shared account that can never be fully depleted, because it's based upon an eternal, unbreakable bond between all lifeforms, and hate being an attempt to divest or steal from that account that, again, can only be diminished so far, eventually bottoming out at a fixed amount that cannot be reduced," Alex replies.

"Michael and I explored this recently. You cannot hate someone or something without them or it posing a threat to something or someone that is loved, and you cannot love something or someone without the potential of hate arising were that love to be threatened or lost. We

hate that which offends or threatens or does harm to what we love, making hatred and love inseparable sides of the same coin. We've all heard that there's a thin line between love and hate, which is because the potential for hate is built by and relative to the degree of the love upon which it's inseparably based."

"The greatest love that you could ever know, such as a loving connection between a parent and their child or between a strongly connected couple, inherently produces the potential for the greatest hate and sorrow you could ever know if the source of that love is crushed; if the bridge is burned; if that which has been so heavily, lovingly invested in becomes bankrupt. As with most things, the so-called 'emotional spectrum' that suggests the existence of a wide array of often opposing, mutually-exclusive emotions is another demonstration of the fact that we create artificial dividing lines that don't actually exist, which is understandable, as we need to distinguish between things for the sake of communication. Yet it's a central tenet of philosophy, spiritual or otherwise, that absolute division and separation are *always* false; they're illusions of limitation."

"There's no perfect separation," Alex continues, "only degrees of distinction, like the spaces between rungs on an unbreakable ladder. The emissions of the heart cannot truly be boxed into basic, straight-line, easily-definable black and white emotions like anger, hate, joy, envy and the like; these oversimplified categorizations are assigned in the mind based upon the mind's attempt to make sense of those emotions when they arise, and to communicate a sense of something that can never be perfectly conveyed. In truth all emissions of the heart are expressions of the same love, whether it's being built, dangled in front of us, torn away, jeopardized or what have you."

"All the ways in which we categorize the manner in which our mind reflects upon the emotions are where the *relative* separations are placed. In truth, the full realm of emotion is a multi-faceted form of the same relative spiritual connection or disconnection, or else the looming portent or potential of the same. The heart is a depth of currents passing through the same love from every angle, often simultaneously. I'm guessing that everyone has felt this, as I have – the presence of great sorrow at the same time as great joy, of great anger at the same time as great love, of a swelling and collapsing of the same spiritual presence only made separate by time and the context of the thoughts and experiences with which the feelings coincide."

“All the artificially-separated emotions are based upon love. Envy is the desire of something or someone loved possessed by others. Fear is the prospect of losing something or someone loved, including life itself, while sorrow is the loss or lack of love. Anger and hatred are born of love being threatened, destroyed, dishonored or the like. Joy, or happiness, is the fulfillment of potential love; the realization of the love that was there all along, awaiting discovery and acknowledgment.”

“It’s as you say, Kate. We all love everyone and everything already. All people and things hold joyous potential. It’s the mind that gets in the way of the Spirit. Love is seeing through the lies; lies of sensory limitation; lies the ego tells the mind; lies of ignorance and incapacity. The concealing façades created by the mind and the limitations of the brain and the senses need only be chipped away to reveal the innermost truth lying beneath: the existence of the ever-present Spirit and the evoked evidence of its existence, the empirical sense of inseparability and perfect connection we call love.”

After a few seconds of reflection, Henry speaks up: “And yet it seems like it would be impossible to keep that spiritual truth at the forefront of your mind at all times; like it would be impossible to keep that perspective ever in mind, even if you could accept it; that when you hate it’s about love; what might pacify you and enable the perpetuation of a positive outlook.”

“It’s very, *very* difficult, yes,” Alex replies. “It’s much like the Spiritual Rule; like seeing others as versions of yourself. It takes a disciplined commitment to condition yourself until it becomes a part of your daily, conscious awareness. Spiritual truth, what has been called gnostic knowledge, is like that. Reward is almost always commensurate with difficulty. And spiritual knowledge is perhaps the hardest to fully capture in the mind and requires the greatest effort and discipline to daily demonstrate, thereby offering the greatest of rewards.”

“Due to limitations in our discipline, concentration, intellect and the like, and due to the concerns and pressures we face on a daily basis as physical and mental beings, it’s all but guaranteed that even with daily practice there’ll be times where such truth will fade from the conscious mind of even the most disciplined person, held only subconsciously by the Spirit within. But like every other practice, you gradually get better at this demonstration through repetition; through mental conditioning. Personally, I don’t have to work as hard as I used to in order to hold these truths in my mind because, I believe, they’re gradually becoming a

greater part of my mental self as they re-occur to me, and as I practice living by them.”

“It’s like most things: the more you practice, the more it becomes second nature, the more it feels natural and the less concentration and effort it requires. It may even be said that it becomes natural more readily than most practices because nothing could be more natural; it *is* the underlying nature. Often it feels almost as if the meditative state of spiritual communion is very gradually becoming inseparable from my conscious mind; like eventually someone engaged in this practice on a daily basis could end up locked into a semi-meditative state at all times, allowing them to be engaged in everyday acts while never breaking the bridge with the Spirit; the mind and Spirit gradually becoming ever more inseparable.”

“The physical part of the Trinity of Self also plays a big role, as I alluded to a moment ago when I said that the pressures and concerns we face on a daily basis are a big part of the challenge. I know from experience that the more compromised someone’s health or the more they’re in survival mode, in pain, discomfort or experiencing other forms of physiological distress, the more it affects their mental self, their consciousness, and the more absorbed they’ll be in those physical and mental pressures, suffused with its stresses, and the harder it’ll be to maintain the bridge between the Spirit and the conscious mind.”

“This is another reason why health is so indispensably invaluable in the pursuit of our higher states of being, as not only does it define the quality of a person’s physical state but, when in poor order, it distracts and dissuades them from listening to the spiritual Self within, obscuring their connection to their truest, spiritual Self by the very means that it increases the attention paid to their physical self.”

“Just as the ego corrupts and closes the mind to Spirit, the overly dependent and debilitated, weakened physiology corrupts the body and brain and thereby limits not only the physical quality of the victim’s existence but, in its distractions and greater limitations, inhibits their capacity to hear and translate the guidance of the Spirit. For even with the Spirit being at the heart of the matter we’re material beings, and cannot exist without the anatomical systems and processes that perpetuate our existence in our current individualized forms.”

“The body is the most vulnerable link in the chain, and if it isn’t in good shape the chain linking the Trinity of Self cannot be reliably or stably



maintained. Our quality conveyance of the spiritual Self is ultimately subject to the state and susceptibility of our physical self, with our mind situated in between, subject to the pressures, pains, distractions, vulnerabilities and limitations of the body and brain and, to some relative extent, either egotistically resisting or openly bridging the divide between the body and the Spirit.”

“The corruptible side shall always be there, embedded in the body and mind, attempting its seductions; perpetually attempting to draw us over to the dark side. And it always rules over us relative to the extent which we’re unable to wall ourselves off from it with a healthy, fully enabled, resilient body and an awakened, educated, principled mind; a mind matched with a well-developed discipline and bound to as receptively-unobstructed a bridge with the Spirit as possible. This is *everyone’s* personal trial: strengthen the body and mind such that the incorruptible Spirit may shine through and grant you the ability to overcome the corruptible aspects of the Trinity of Self so that you may become the greatest versions of yourself, both for yourself and all whom you impact.”

## **Ten: Sign of the Snake**

*Everything and everyone is interconnected in this universe.*

*Stay pure of heart and you will see the signs.*

*Follow the signs, and you will uncover your destiny.*

- Jeff, *Who Lives at Home*

Though well aware that most people would regard the concept as a silly, irrational anachronism absent any validating evidence, Alex has always strongly suspected that the ancient prognosticators who promulgated the customary use of 'bird signs' as indications of the best course of action and envisages of future events were actually onto something. The Spirit, the core identity of every being, constantly sends signals to each of its individualized forms. Those signals are most obvious when

physically transmitted through something or someone that can be seen, as opposed to the more subtle, intuitively-sensed messages.

Thus, these ancient prognosticators had tapped into a primal, timeless phenomenon: signals conducted by the Spirit through all the matter of which it's inseparable. And nowhere is this more clearly demonstrated than through the kinetic expressions of all organic lifeforms, especially by those lifeforms whose mental and physical wills are congruent with this conduction. And to no one is this more noticeable than to those with the most open hearts and minds permitting the clearest instinctive reception of this subtle spiritual messaging. Such spiritual signals are perpetually sent, and not just in the overt physically-enacted form. It's but a matter of learning how to best hear them, then practicing the skill until it becomes second nature.

Alex had been engaged in this practice for some time, traversing this subtle spiritual trail system for many years, having been led to the trailhead by his reception of the spiritual messages conducted through all beings, but which he was more open to receiving and translating than most. The logic underlying his spiritual philosophy helped him along, especially through employing the preeminent principle that everything is, beneath spacetime and matter's illusory projection of separation, one inseparable thing; one field of energy; one being that produced the perception of individualized forms as a necessary effect of allowing for infinite variety of its one experience perceived from infinite perspectives. Such inseparability suits signaling, as the signal has no space to cross.

All matter is made of the indivisible core energy of Spirit, and all energy emits fields. Is the notion that these fields are receivable and perceivable on a level lying beneath the five acknowledge senses really so far-fetched? Or that their conduction might be transmitted through the neurochemical mechanisms of the body and brain and thereby produce unconscious bodily reflexes and potentiate a subconscious reception of knowledge and instinctive impulse? Alex had long felt tuned into this phenomenon; tuned into the fact that we're all interacting with the Spirit and, through the Spirit, with one another, on a subconscious level that most people are consciously oblivious to.

We're protected, helped along and protect and help others at the most opportune times and when we're most vulnerable to catastrophe, as if out of sheer coincidental luck, because our innermost Self is shared across all lives and all things. And across this universal, sub-sensory

conduit we communicate and collaborate even when our thoughts and actions appear independent from and at odds with one another. Well before he'd developed his theory on the Trinity of Self through which the nature of all forms of life may be explored and explained, Alex felt as though all lifeforms were constantly unconsciously engaged in this spiritual signaling system.

A lifelong accumulation of experiences had so consistently demonstrated to and reinforced in Alex the belief in a sixth sense, in an extrasensory signaling, that it gradually became a part of his conscious awareness. He would be contemplating something, for example, such as whether to take one of two courses of action when, after bouncing from one course consideration to the next, he'd begin to focus upon one of them in more depth and, at that very moment, a butterfly would pass by his face, almost bouncing off his glasses.

At that moment he somehow knew that the current course upon which he was focusing was the only correct course and, moreover, that he'd known it all along, deep within himself, but had been hesitant to embrace that instinctive truth out of fear, uncertainty or some other limitation or vulnerability. It was the one right thing to do, and he'd known it within his heart the whole time.

It was his mind that had blocked the reception and recognition of this right, and that block was wiped away in an instant. And this phenomenon made perfect sense within the framework of the Trinity of Self: the body, mind and Spirit all have drives of their own which coexist within every form of life. We're all a trinity of constantly commingling wills. The will of the Spirit is felt through the heart, its concentrated source of energy within the body, wherein it mixes with the subconscious mind accessing the memory and knowledge stored in the recesses of the brain before finally surfacing as 'instinctive awareness.'

We've all had numerous experiences where we 'just knew' without being able to explain how, and where the complete explanation cannot be provided by anything we'd before experienced, or any knowledge we'd before gathered. Rather, our prior knowledge and experience had been reinforced by something greater; something deeper. Religious adherents interpret such experiences as divine, faith-confirming messages. Alex believes such an interpretation to be close to correct, albeit improperly assigning the source of such messages to restricted specifications of the Spirit; an interpretation tainted by the presumptuously arrogant, narrow and corrupted practices of idolatry,

hierarchy and mind control mechanisms concocted by exploitative members of mankind's past and perpetuated by their contemporary ilk; dirtied distortions of true spiritual guidance.

Every form of life is compelled by this instinctively perceived spiritual sense; by the spiritual force. In human beings, this force is in constant competition with the programmed genetic drives of the body and with the complex mental self, including the ego and one's intellectual thought processes. The more basic the form of life, the simpler the body and especially the simpler, less capacious the brain and less sophisticated the mental self it brings into being, the less that the intellect and the self-perceiving ego interfere with and are disposed to override the will of the Spirit leading all life, guiding all individualized minds through its heartfelt evocations as those minds focus upon possible pathways.

As the physical and mental selves gain complexity, its possessors move towards a sense of individualization of bodily and mental wills leading to sentience, the perception of individuality and its egotistic conceptions predisposing its individualized possessors to a relative degree of spiritual disunity, potentially conflicting with the will of the spiritual Self in what Buddhists might regard as the constant conflict between the Small and Big Self.

Past a certain point of mental development backed by conditioning and the liberating illumination of spiritual truth, however, the ego and more sophisticated mind's interference with the messages of the Spirit start to shrink. The healthy body and the strengthened, morally-principled mind may shield one from the corruptibility quieting the calls of the Spirit.

Alex suspects that a certain level of mental elevation is required to find one's way to the realization of Spirit within the mind, and hopes that this is what humankind is evolving toward: past the more limited mindsets that are more easily ruled by ego toward a broader, more open consciousness more readily tethered to Spirit; one that'll thereby be more inclined to champion ideas and social systems adding to and protecting overall quality of life. He imagines humanity evolving to a state where the pitfalls of sentience, such as ego and its divisive cousins greed, tribal identity and the like, and all their costly constrictions of humankind, can be leaped.

While we still fall into and are trapped by the pits littering the mental and physical terrain of existence, we also all feel the will of the true collective Self of pure spiritual energy within at all times. This makes every being a conduit of spiritual will through which the Spirit, focused upon what is best for its manifestations as a whole, influences the thoughts and actions of its individualized manifestations of energy into matter, each organic lifeform, often in competition with the will of the mental and physical selves simultaneously governing each of those lifeforms. In the more mentally basic forms of life, such as birds and insects, the potential for the mental and physical will to contradict the spiritual will is less pronounced. These lifeforms are driven by more basic needs; by genetic programming and a simpler, non-self-perceiving and reflecting mental awareness. Because of this, they make for more efficient conduits of spiritual will.

When their less demanding mental and physical wills are not in contradiction with the will of the Spirit, but aligned with it or in an impartial mode of relative neutrality, the will of the Spirit easily prevails. It is during these frequent periods that every form of life can be made to signal and serve the best interests of other forms of life, both in that they may be used to send signals to sentient life and be compelled to act in the benefit of life as a whole, often in subtle ways whose rippling impacts are all but imperceptible. The hawk may have flown overhead right at that particular moment both because it was a good time for it to move towards its nest *and* because of what was occurring within your mind. The butterfly crossed my face at that moment, causing me to realize and embrace what the Spirit and my subconscious mind already knew, at the point where its search for nectar aligned with my search for the correct course of action. People also act to unconsciously signal and serve others, but in order to play this role their egos, thoughts and physical drives can't flow against the spiritual current which all life rides, to various degrees.

Alex believes that this natural reception of instinctively-imparted wisdom, and the connection to and conducting of spiritual energy in symbiotic service to nature, is what the Taoists refer to as 'The Way.' It's a most natural way of spiritual instinct and action in which nothing is forced. In learning to read and react to its signals, however, we must be aware of the need to separate our imagination and bias from this instinctive awareness and interpretation, as the partial mind can misinterpret and misuse anything of value, including the capacity to read the Spirit.

We may, in other words, misapply the practice and prejudicially misread the signals, or even invent signals that weren't actually sent. But after taking this into account, after learning to identify biased misinterpretations of instinctive information and closing off the egotistical and desirous mind in the utilization of spiritual awareness, our spiritual intelligence can gain enough strength to form a consistent collaboration with the will of the Spirit, especially when our body and mind is quieted or too exhausted to block this will, or when our nerves are calmed past the point of mental and physical distraction inhibiting the reception of the Spirit's messages. Meditative mindsets, exercise and 'in vino veritas' invite spiritual connection and allegiance for this reason, and Alex will sometimes combine all three for this powerful purpose, drinking a bottle of wine while hiking uphill towards an elevated vista for a meditation session. Today, however, the group is simply following the flow of the river.

Amanda has flown to Virginia to visit her ailing grandmother and Alex is leading the group on a walk along the Noyo River, beginning near to the entrance gate leading up the hill to the property. While looking for a place to rest after a long romp while following the guiding hand, he's instinctively drawn to an attractive assemblage of boulders a stone's throw from the river, at the base of a large grassy hill. Upon going to sit on one of the boulders he nearly squats on a pair of intertwined rattlesnakes, interrupting their apparent coitus. Both snakes immediately coil up, rattling their warnings and preparing to strike.

Just as Alex's adrenaline fires, another warning sounds deep within him. The warning isn't simply the obvious need to steer clear of the deadly snakes; a different, concealed danger is slithering toward him, searching for an opportunity to strike. He immediately remembers the only other time he'd seen two rattlesnakes close together, just before his disastrous tenth high school reunion. He'd denounced a girl that was part of the 'cool crowd' for her cruel, supercilious mistreatment of a sweet, albeit socially awkward friend of his and, unbeknownst to him, his condemnation had so stung her ego that she'd held on to a desire for vengeance for years leading up to the ten year mark of his graduation from Maria Carrillo HS.

At the reunion this girl, Jessica, vindictively spread a rumor amongst two close friends of Alex's, guys that he'd gone to high school with and then lived with while at UCSB. She told the pair of friends that Alex had been speaking ill of them all night, 'talking shit' in the common youthful vernacular, employing a series of lies she'd long been developing based

upon his shared past with these friends. These lies led to an alcohol-fueled confrontation between Alex and the former pair of good friends, ending in violence.

The more aggressive of these two former friends, an immensely prideful individual with a predilection for intoxicated feuds, got in his face and, following Alex's inability to prove his innocence to this former friend's satisfaction in his poorly-reasoning, drunken state, had punched him in the face following his other buddy shoving him to the ground, leading to Alex's mortified flight from the festivities. Now, seeing the lethal mating snakes again, he immediately senses that he's imperiled, though he knows not by what. The group is close on his heels, and Michael and Henry shriek in unison, immediately doing an about-face before fleeing back toward the river. Kate, on the other hand, ever the impish thrill seeker reveling in the risky, positions herself behind Alex and, leaning over Alex's left shoulder while placing her hands on his arms and pressing her cheek ever so slightly to his, voices her approval.

"Wow, sweet!" she exclaims. "Look at those two... Were they going at it?!", she wonders approvingly, touching his face to her own, exciting him.

"Yes, I believe they were," Alex flatly replies with an air belying his underlying exhilaration. The snakes having already spiked his adrenaline, his blood pressure and heart rate ramp up even more in response to her touch. His arteries widen and blood rushes into his extremities, preparing him for a sexual engagement. It's an involuntary response.

"Awesome," Kate gleefully responds in a half-whispered, sultry tone near to Alex's ear. Both this one word and the way in which she says it seem highly suggestive to Alex, increasing his excitement. And as she turns to walk away she runs her hands lightly down his arms, instantly giving him the chills. While she starts back toward the river, Alex turns around and confirms what he'd observed many times already this morning. Kate looks more fetching than usual today.

Her long brown hair is wrapped in a bun, exposing the soft tan skin of her neck. The tank top hugging her well-built athletic body is in a black and green camouflage print falling short of her waistline, showing, depending upon one's perspective, the small of her back or just enough of her flat stomach to provoke a strong urge to see more. This halting



top is complemented by a tight-fitting pair of light tan shorts covering very little of the length of her toned, tanned legs.

Sveltely muscular, she's clearly no stranger to exercise, reminding Alex of their fairly frequent marijuana-infused forays into the hills of Santa Barbara during their collegiate years. Her whole ensemble hugs her figure in such a way as to accentuate the curves of her body, from her firm ass to her ample breasts, which more pronouncedly protrude when she turns back to give Alex a knowing smile, well aware that her maneuvers are working.

Despite the warning but a moment before, Alex can't help but be transfixed. Bouncing back toward Henry and Michael, she turns her hips side to side far more than is necessary, showing off her physique. Michael and Henry are watching her as well, almost equally enthralled. As she approaches them, she turns back to look at Alex one more time while he stands frozen by the boulders. At this point the danger is clear to him: she intends to have sex with him while Amanda is away, likely this very day.

The thought directs more blood into Alex's genitalia, and he becomes partially erect; another programmed response. It's both an enjoyable and unfortunate bodily reaction, as the erection is both pleasurable to the man and preclusive of even-headed thought. "A demonstration of internal conflict," he thinks to himself, as he can feel his body and brain preparing to launch. The countdown procedure clouds his mind and interferes with his ability to think rationally, as it was likely designed to do. It seems like a remnant of mankind's evolutionary history, as the need to reproduce and perpetuate the species outweighs the need to think clearly, even to the extent of thinking for the survival of the individual. Throw enough numbers at propagation and it becomes virtually assured, even if it means some males might follow females over a cliff or into a lion's den.

And this is precisely why the extent to which any man truly loves a woman is best revealed directly after he ejaculates. If he still wants to be by her side after climax, then he loves her to the point where the union is spiritually sanctioned. But in terms of the biological imperative of survival, of reproducing vehicles for the Spirit, this is irrelevant. And yet, in mankind's current circumstances this same imperative is arguably driving the species towards a much steeper cliff, as overpopulation promotes violent territoriality, imperils the environment and restricts the quality of life of each individual in countless,

considerable ways, including contributing to the planetary warming that may someday spell the demise of all life on Earth.

But these matters are not in Alex's mind; only sexual desire mixed with the recent warning and guilty thoughts of Amanda bubbling beneath his impulse to run straight at Kate. His heart begins to ache, foreshadowing the pain he'll incur upon himself and Amanda if he fails to win this battle. "This has always been your greatest weakness," he thinks. "This is your kryptonite, as I'm sure it is for most men. And your heart is not in agreement, so the course of action is clear. Turn her down, but try not to hurt or anger her." This is, of course, easy enough to think. Discipline is the difference between correct thought and correct action.

As the foursome ambles down the riverbank, Alex does his best to stay out in front, keeping his mind off of Kate, his eyes on the scenery and his ears open to the bird calls and the sound of the water steadily meandering down the center of the canyon. He thinks about how the dense vegetation of shrubbery and flat-leaved trees bordering the river on both sides soon gives way to the shadowlands of imposingly-overcasting Redwoods and Douglas Fir that dominate the surroundings.

He thinks about how quickly the warmth of the sun in this open area dissipates as soon as one steps into the shadows. "Focus on anything but the idea of sex," he says to himself. Of course, trying not to think about sex is much the same as thinking about sex. Besides, Kate's having none of it. Guessing at Alex's purpose in keeping up such a pace and leading position, she thinks to herself: "It's working. But he's going to put up a fight." Picking up her pace to that of a near jog, she catches up with him.

"Would you slow down, buddy?," she says with a laugh. "Some of us actually want to *enjoy* the walk." Her brown eyes flash as she smiles, the rays of the sun showing them to be a lighter brown than he'd believed them to be. This is not the first hike they've been on together, of course. Kate had attended Santa Barbara City College and was a longtime friend of one of Alex's housemates during his sophomore year at UCSB. They'd gone on several outings together in the hills east of Santa Barbara, climbing up towards vistas offering pristine views of the immaculately-maintained town and the endless ocean beyond, always smoking out of a bong beforehand and usually taking several hits out of a pipe during the excursion.

A part of him misses those days of getting high and having all his experiences heightened, though he's now certain that the costs of the habit are more than it's worth if done on a consistent, accumulating basis, as with all drugs. This is, in fact, true of anything that pharmacologically manipulates the pleasure-signaling neurotransmitters rather than requiring that pleasure be earned from fulfilling activities naturally triggering their release, including the rewards of hard work and exploring breathtaking landscapes. Kate was often around that sophomore year and the following year, and always showed up just before the smoke sessions.

This tendency of suddenly revealing herself just before the production of plumes of cannabis smoke had earned her the nickname 'Snoop Dog,' in reference to the 'scavenger smoker' cameo role the rap artist played in the film *Half Baked*, a college favorite at the time. As sexy as she was and still is, and not living with Alex or his housemates, she'd always managed to avoid paying for marijuana that was consistently collectively purchased. Yet she never failed to partake.

He'd been interested in her back then, and she sometimes showed signs that the attraction was mutual. Alas, he was far too messed up in those days to earn her affections. "She wants me now because I've demonstrated some success and brainpower, and especially because she can't have me," he thinks. "Appear unobtainable and you're immediately targeted for obtainment by the ego-led psyche."

As Alex walks and reflects, doing everything in his power to maintain a disciplined focus of mind on his surroundings and a resolute determination to subdue his often overpowering sexual impulses, Kate plays the temptress to near perfection. Moving to the river, she announces: "My God it's a nice day!" As she says this she arches her spine and stretches her arms backward in what looks like a typical stretch, but which is a clear design to draw Alex's eyes to her breasts.

At this point Alex has given up trying to outpace her, and Michael and Henry, recognizing that Alex and Kate are actively engaged, have moved well ahead, engaged in their own interactions. Kate then bends over to dip her hands into the cool running water, purposefully choosing to bend far more at the waste than the knees. Cupping the water in her hands she douses her neck, letting it run down to be absorbed by her skimpy little tank top. Alex suddenly realizes that he's losing the battle. He's unable to look away. Turning around, she flashes him a naughtily-flirtatious smile and splashes the water in his direction, laughing

elatedly. Approaching him slowly, she gives him a playful little shove before moving out ahead of him on the riverside track, putting him in the caboose position.

“Please give me the strength to fight this,” Alex thinks to himself, stopping in his tracks to summon his strength. After a few seconds, Kate realizes that Alex isn’t following, and she turns around and walks back towards him. She knows she has her prey in her clutches. It’s now but a matter of consummating the kill. “We’re going to fuck like rabbits,” she thinks. He watches her approach, her soft, shapely thighs laid bare beneath her little tan shorts, her beautiful breasts bouncing with every step. As she draws near, she can see that his face shows signs of distress, and she momentarily doubts herself.

“This is hurting him,” she thinks, feeling both guilt and egotistic pleasure at her evident success. But her concern is soon overwhelmed by her pridefully-driven desire, and with the power trip firmly lodged in her mind she grabs his left hand, turns around and begins pulling him back along their previous trajectory. Seeing that Michael and Henry are now far in the distance and paying them no mind, she places his hand on her hip so he’ll feel the rhythm of her lower body as they move.

Blood spills into his groin once again, seeming to drain his brain and his ability to think clearly and resist her more and more with each tandem step they take. Looking down at her ass as it tosses the crease in her shorts up and down and side to side, his discipline fades into oblivion, and he’s ready to give in. Without turning around she reaches her right hand back and finds his, then places it on her right hip. They then move as one, though of course not as quickly as before. As Michael and Henry turn around a bend in the river and move out of sight, she reaches both her hands back and grabs his hips, pulling him slowly forward until his groin is lodged firmly against her ass. Alex soon becomes fully erect, and their pace moves close to a crawl as Kate begins gyrating her lower body in slow, caressing circles, encouraging his mounting excitement.

Reaching down, she grabs both his hands and moves them slowly off her hips, up her sides and onto her breasts. Alex squeezes them, feeling her nipples harden in the center of his palms. Coming almost completely to a standstill, she reaches back again and places both her hands on his groin. On impulse, he places his mouth just below her left ear and begins to kiss her down the length of her neck. Suddenly she takes him by the left hand and pulls him behind an immense Redwood stump. As she unbuttons his shorts and begins to unzip them, Alex notices that the

stump was burned long ago, leaving but charred remains of a once magnificent giant.

“Wait!,” Alex suddenly exclaims. “I don’t think we can do this.” The blackened remnants of the once great Redwood fires an image of Amanda into his mind. “I can’t set ablaze and reduce to ashes such a great thing,” he thinks. And, remembering the rattlesnakes as well, he quickly recovers the resolve that Kate had so ably dashed.

The next moment, just as she’s about to pull down his shorts, he gently takes her hands in his and lets in a full breath of air for the first time in several minutes. But Kate isn’t about to let her prey fight its way free. She presses her body against his so that they’re chest to chest, grabs him by the back of his head and pulls him into a long, lusty kiss that he’s only partially strong enough to oppose.

As Alex resists her, Kate’s desire only increases, and while he tries not to reciprocate, his hands on her shoulders pushing her back, he’s giving in just enough for the contact to continue. It’s in this moment, as the power dynamic begins to flip, that Kate feels herself slip into a different state of mind, and what was seconds before driven mostly by a psychological drive to possess what was so clearly cherished by another is quickly becoming a legitimately powerful craving, and heart, mind and body all now implore her to act. “This might not be a game of conquest after all,” she thinks.

She becomes less aggressive at the thought, pacified by her heart but still impelled by her body and a mind that now sees Alex in a bright new light. With passionate, determined composure she slowly removes his hands from her shoulders and places them on her hips, where she suddenly feels they belong, before placing her hands on both sides of his face and moving in to kiss him again.

Kissing first his top lip and then lightly biting his bottom lip, the change in Kate’s demeanor and approach makes Alex dizzy with an overwhelming desire, and he opens his mouth as she slowly thrusts her hips forward into his groin. But just as they’re engaged in their first ardent exchange of sexually-infused intimacy, as they begin to cross the final line, Alex hears a frantic call coming from downriver.

“Kate! Alex!,” Michael cries out, moving back up the river to search out the missing pair. “Where the... Where the hell did you two go...?!”

Michael had been drawn to Kate from the beginning, from that first evening on the property when she had, at times, distracted him from Alex's pontifications around the fire. That had been a pivotal night for him, moving from what he'd believed to be a path of God in preparation of joining the priesthood to being gradually won over by Alex's arguments revealing a path leading to a greater, more coherent construct of divinity. Michael remembered that, at the same time as Alex was prying open his heart and mind, that part of his focus had drifted in Kate's direction, and that, comfortingly warmed both within and without, feeling an elation he'd never before felt, he'd allowed himself to entertain the notion that the yearnings of his heart for a woman such as her might actually be the true voice of God.

Perhaps it's something to whole-heartedly embrace because the *heart* says so, not to spurn simply because he lacked Church approval. But Michael had also noticed that Kate seemed to zero in on Alex and paid him little mind in his first month on the property, and he wondered if Alex was sleeping with both her and Amanda despite his demonstrations of high-mindedness. Alex certainly isn't bound to the conventional confines of social propriety, he'd thought. Yet, Michael still hopes that he can find a way to steal some of her attention away from Alex. And at this moment, moving searchingly back upriver, Michael fears that his suspicion of their relationship is about to be confirmed.

Amanda shooting into Alex's mind at the site of the burned-out stump that Kate had instinctively led him to has combined with an immediate triggering of his reflection upon the rattling, venomous snakes and their previous signaling of impending disaster at his high school reunion. The signs, reflections and intuitions combine with Michael's fear that Kate's having sex with Alex such that all these influences have come together just in time to prevent Kate from pulling Alex past the point of no return.

Only the coordinated guidance of the Spirit communicated through several of its vehicles have forestalled the calamity that would have otherwise befallen him. If Kate and Alex had withdrawn to a different spot, if the site of the rattlesnakes had not caught Alex's attention as they had and triggered his memory of their appearance years before, or if Michael had not been harboring a desire for Kate that had spurred him to seek her out, then the point of no return would've been passed, and great turmoil would've soon crashed upon the coterie of cohorts.

“Thank the Spirit that upheaval has been avoided for the moment,” Alex thinks.

## **Eleven: Fuel for The Fire**

*By the unpredictable, unruly heart is man's mind ruled. Thus, there can be no lasting peace for us, only the ecstasy, agony, confusion, certainty, despair or peace pervading each ephemeral moment. Thankfully it can be no other way, as the agony is the requisite price paid for the ecstasy!*

Alex's father had been the manager of Jackson Demonstration State Forest, the largest state forest in California. It stretches for miles, starting just outside and managed from offices within Fort Bragg.



Jackson remains the site of ongoing government-sponsored research in sustainable wood harvesting practices, which Alex's father oversaw for the last leg of his long career with the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection. From his experience with CDF he'd garnered many lessons, several of which made their way onto the tree farm Alex had recently acquired from him and was transforming into an ecologically-rich oasis in the middle of the Redwood forest.

One of those lessons, rendered particularly relevant in the state's long-running drought, pertained to the value of reducing the risk of fire spreading through and ravaging the area, especially in the dry summers when the open, sloping grassland lost its green and its retained moisture with it, going dry and dormant, creating a crisp carpet of easily combustible tinder sprawled across the landscape.

Mowing the grass on a regular basis was one way in which that fire danger could be mitigated, as the longer the dry grass the more the fuel and the faster and larger the potential burn became. Another preventative tactic was to use a long limb cutter to remove the dead, dry branches from the lower levels of the trees surrounding the grassland; those that were no longer producing green needles due to being overshadowed by the climbing canopy. These branches were collected, along with those that had already been naturally sloughed off or ripped free by the stronger gusts of wind funneled through the canyon, before being stacked into large burn piles.

After covering these piles with large tarps to keep them dry enough to burn between rains, and procuring a burn permit from the local fire department, Alex's father, and now Alex himself, would wait for a forecasted series of storms. The piles could then be burned when the surrounding grass and trees were still wet, and ideally just before another rain that would smother anything and everything that may still smolder. Six months after the group of five came together, this practice led to an idea which, while entailing risk, sounded like too much fun to pass up.

It'd been two days since the foursome's walk down the Noyo River, when Kate had attempted to seduce Alex, and had been largely successful in her attempt, Alex having undoubtedly stepped over the line, but having been saved from leaping over it by a seemingly 'lucky' set of signs and circumstances. Of course, Amanda would regard it as a betrayal either way. There's little gray area in matters of the heart,

especially in those subject to the insecurity and jealousy of an under-appraised ego.

She was still on the East Coast, her trip having been extended by her grandmother's passing. This, of course, meant that she'd be especially vulnerable upon her return, something which Alex was already wrestling with. "What to tell her?," he wonders to himself again and again. "How egregious has my misbehavior already been? I can't allow anything else to occur," he tells himself in the days following the river ramble.

Fearing another failure of his willpower, Alex purposely avoided Kate the day after the river walk by asking her if she'd mind accompanying Michael into town to purchase some groceries at Harvest Market, as if asking her for a favor which, based upon the prior day's events, he suspected that she'd grant. At the same time, he was well aware that Michael consistently showed her more attention than the rest of the group, and therefore wouldn't mind some time alone with her. Upon their departure, Alex escaped into the woods for a full day hike so that he wouldn't be there when they returned. And when he did return, right around dusk, he snuck into the bedroom he shared with Amanda, locking the door behind him and holing up there the remainder of the evening. She'd knocked a couple of times, but was eventually forced to accept his claim of being engaged in a project from which he couldn't be torn away.

It's late September, with summer quickly passing into fall, and with the first decent rain of the wet season having begun to fall shortly after Alex had barricaded himself in his bedroom the previous night. The storm continued to drench the grounds through the evening, adding almost a full inch to the upper pond. When Alex finally emerges from his bedroom he finds Kate, Michael and Henry gathered around one of the fireplaces, burning some of the many limbs that had been stacked in the nearby corner, and which seemed to be limitlessly littered across the adjoining forest floor, easily snatched, snapped into pieces or sawed in half, then stacked and burned for warmth and an eminently enjoyable ambience.

It's Friday, and the threesome is watching *Into the Wild* on the flat screen TV above the hearth. Kate, wearing loose-fitting blue and white plaid pajama bottoms and a snug-fitting white top, her hair again tied in a bun, jumps up upon seeing Alex. She quickly grabs a pair of larger sawed limbs from the stack and hurriedly tosses them into the fireplace

before plopping back down on the couch between Michael and Henry, giggling as she wriggles her way in between them.

The three of them are, at this point, very comfortable in one another's company, with both guys enjoying the constant sexuality-tinged teasing she offers up, and all three of the male inhabitants unavoidably subject to her highly alluring influence. Kate smiles at Alex, then glances at the fireplace, then at the fire the protagonist is tending in the film, and a devilish smile crosses her countenance. She throws her arms over Michael and Henry's shoulders.

"I have a great idea! Let's have a bonfire party!" she shouts, beaming as she shares her idea, her eyes flashing excitedly as they come into contact with Alex's, who's already on high alert despite only recently having risen.

"Fuck," Alex thinks to himself. "There's no way she's going to let me off the hook. But how long can I hide from her and keep up my guard?"

"What do you mean?," Michael immediately asks, a little too eagerly.

"All these burn piles scattered around the property..." Kate replies. "Considering it rained last night and it's supposed to rain again early next week, we should set fire to them! We can wait until it starts to get dark and then move from one pile to the next, burning them down and guzzling wine and making merriment as we move from pile the pile!"

At first, Kate only has in mind the putting of Alex's resistance to flame, but, suddenly realizing that she can use an ally or two, and that Michael is the easiest target, she turns to him: "What you think, Mikey Mike? We could drain some bottles of that sweet salvation and maybe get you to try some of that good 'ol Devil's weed your pastor warned you to stay away from?! You know, give you a taste of the dark side," she adds while playfully pawing him. "It's like our resident philosopher over there says: How can you know the enemy without experiencing the enemy, without living in the enemy's shoes?! How can you know the light side without knowing the dark side, for it's only in the contrast between the darkness and the light that either can truly be known, right?!"

While raising her head slightly, grinning naughtily and running her hand down her neck towards her cleavage, she adds: "I'd argue that you have to experience some of this so-called 'evil' before you can determine

whether it truly deserves such condemnation. You might find that it's not so bad after all."

Michael is powerless to resist her. More so than Alex, who's not as starved for sexual attention and affection and who, loving Amanda as he does, wields a resistant heart and mind that remain ready to fight. Even so, Alex is continually frustrated by the fact that his bodily urges, being the basest of his physical self, are so fundamental to his existence that they consistently overpower his heart and mind. "Refuse to be pushed around by your programming!," he implores himself.

Henry, meanwhile, is also very much vulnerable to Kate's attractions, especially when enhanced by her mind games that are openly, manipulatively fucked-up and borderline endearingly-irresistible at the same time. Kate and Henry had both been a part of the same social circle as Alex at UCSB. Kate had, in fact, met both Henry and Alex through a friend, Gabby, that Alex had lived with his sophomore year, and whom Henry dated for almost a year before eventually deciding she wasn't titillating enough to maintain his interest.

Knowing Henry was extremely wealthy, Kate had been caught in a conflict of self-interest between Henry and Gabby. Henry, after all, had his charms and played the privilege card well, knowing it to be the most lethal weapon in his arsenal and that, while deplorably shallow, wealth is a weapon that few women, and people in general, are well fortified against. A life of ease, in which work is optional and every whim can be fulfilled, is something that only begins to lose its appeal in those that establish a strong tie to the Spirit, even if this tie is unacknowledged, and reinforced by empowering knowledge and abilities, including a well-developed moral drive, realizing that the utmost heart-expanding fulfillment comes not from consuming but *adding* value to life, and that the absolute pursuit of wealth and gluttony costs far more overall quality of life value than it creates. Even then, it's a temptation that's near impossible to totally defy.

Alex had certainly tangibly benefitted from his collegiate friendship with Henry, and Kate had only backed away from Henry back then when she realized his affections for Gabby were greater than they were for her. She'd only been willing to betray Gabby if the pot had been sweet and certain enough. So, small embers from that long-cooled flame between Kate and Henry remain, as does Kate's memory of Henry's great family wealth.

Thus, Kate gives Henry more mind than Michael but, as the ego seeks swelling, she eats up attention from all sides and is half-consciously coaxing a battle for her affections between Michael and Henry for the fun and pride of it, if for no other reason. Alex gained Kate's interest through his recent literary success, his demonstration of intellect and his position as the unofficial leader of the group that had brought everyone together. That, and he represents the psychologically-irresistible forbidden fruit.

"That actually sounds like a great idea," Henry coolly decides.

Kate then looks back at Michael who, failing to realize that he's in a position to cajole a little more of the flirtatious attention from Kate that he so desperately seeks were he to feign disinterest, immediately agrees.

"Great!," Kate cries before looking back at Alex, seeking to complete the consensus. Alex stares back at her, with her arms wrapped around the guys, her eyes flashing her seductive offerings like the neon signage of a red light district. A moment of understanding passes between them, and she smiles, seeming to speak without saying a word: "We're going to finish what we started. *Just give in.* You're powerless to resist me!"

Alex smiles and shakes his head, then turns and walks into the kitchen. Immediately he's divided, just as he was two days before during their psychosexual grappling in the river canyon. Part of him, a great part of his heart and mind, is determined to stay strong, while another part of his mind, and a bit of his heart as well, wants nothing more than for Kate to get up and follow him into the kitchen. She does.

She loves the game; the flirtation and the challenge of overcoming his flagging resistance. She also thinks it might turn into more; a supplanting of Amanda; a coup for Alex's affections. As Alex hears her bare feet pattering behind him he thinks of a hunter pursuing prey that's been mortally wounded, yet retains the strength to flee for a short distance before collapsing and awaiting the coup de grace. He then imagines the kitchen as a snake pit. "Perhaps I've already been bitten," he thinks to himself. "The snake didn't clamp all the way down, but passed enough venom into my veins to prevent my flight."

"C'mon Alex," Kate begins her persuasion. Alex opens the cupboard door and pulls out the coffee beans, loading them into the grinder and running it longer than normal, as if hoping to drown out his adversary.

Coffee gets the blood pumping and the neurons firing, waking him up and increasing his clarity of thought while lending a small alkaloid-based bite of euphoria. He can't imagine starting his day without it.

On the rare occasion that it's unavailable, he feels he never completely wakes up from the previous night's slumber, especially during the recent extended period of hazy recovery from his manifold health afflictions that he's only now beginning to feel like he's pulling away from. And if there's anything he can most make use of at the moment, it's certainly increased clarity of thought.

When he turns around, Kate's leaning over the opposite side of the island counter, her cheeks flushed with excitement, the shapeliness of her breasts on full, mind-numbing display. Alex recalls how Kate had once won a quarter of an ounce of marijuana from his sophomore housemates in exchange for showing her breasts for thirty seconds. C cups stand out on a lissome lady such as her.

"They certainly leave nothing to be desired," he thinks to himself, trying not to overly enjoy the peripheral view offered below her mischievously sparkling eyes. He realizes that, being the property owner and the target for which she's shooting, he has the stronger position in this current game. And even as he retains some hope that the better side of himself shall overcome a lust that's beginning to broach the borders of affection, he simply enjoys the flirtatious fun tinged with the taboo temptation that's hanging between them far too much not to take advantage. "Can I play and derive pleasure from this game *without* jeopardizing my love for Amanda?" he asks himself. "Am I gambling and, if so, how big is the pot at stake? How much can I afford to lose – can we afford to lose? And how strong is my hand in this game?"

After savoring the moment and reflecting upon his position, Alex replies with the pretense of disinterest: "I don't know, Kate." Playing it cool so as not to betray his excitement and quickening pulse, he maintains his deadpan demeanor. "How badly do you want this bonfire party?" he asks with only the slightest of smiles. Kate stares straight at Alex for a good five silent seconds. It's one player reading the other, searching for a tell. When Alex thinks of having sex with her, his eyes sparkle just enough to betray his desire. The sides of Kate's mouth turn up upon recognizing this, prompting a great reflexive grin from Alex. His tell has been told.

"I want it *bad* buddy," Kate replies, barely bothering to veil the innuendo. As they stare at each other, Kate runs the fingertips of both her hands back and forth along the edge of the counter. Her mind is entirely focused on Alex, making this not a conscious action but a subliminal sign of her desire and intentions. She smiles at Alex again, then suddenly reaches out and snatches the ground coffee contained in the top of the small grinder from Alex's side of the island counter. She then crosses over to the countertop adjacent to the fridge directly behind him, to the coffeemaker and sink.

Positioning herself such that Alex can take in her full profile, she slowly fills the coffeemaker with water while bouncing her hips playfully from side to side, as if dancing to a song in her head. She knows precisely what she's doing, and she's good at it. Her shifting lower body, the soft bare skin of her arms, neckline and cleavage, the curves of her breasts, even the contrast between the blush of her cheeks and the subtle tan of her face... they all scream 'sex!' If she didn't have the reckless streak, the drug affinity and the strong self-defense mechanism that kept her from committing to her past boyfriends, she more than likely would've been married long ago, for attracting male attention isn't an issue.

And yet she'd never come close to taking such vows. Instead, per her capricious, unconventional nature, her love of the outdoors and her online communications with Alex, having heard of his property and his intent to develop it, she was here. In Alex's kitchen. Exhilarated by playing the temptress. Finishing pouring the water into the coffeemaker, she puts the carafe in place then turns and takes the few steps between her and Alex, closing the gap. Alex's heart leaps. "She isn't audacious enough to make a move right here in front of Michael and Henry, is she?!", he wonders. Stopping a foot from Alex she looks up into his eyes, raises her eyebrows and says: "So are you going to let me have it buddy, or not?"

Alex says nothing for a few seconds. His heart pounds so hard in his chest he can hear it in his eardrums. He can barely think, let alone make a move. "Let you have it?," he finally manages. "Seriously?"

She places her hand in the center of his chest and gently pushes him backward. She then opens the drawer on the island counter that he'd been blocking and pulls out one of the disposable coffee filters. "The coffee filter," she replies, grinning with delight. "Why, what did you think I was talking about?" Alex can't help but chuckle appreciatively at her clever word play. "Wow," he thinks. "Am I outmatched?"

Pouring the grounds into the filtered basket, she asks: "You like your coffee strong, right? Something to stiffen you up?" She begins the brew.

Alex grins before rolling his eyes a bit and shaking his head in disbelief. "Yes Kate," he replies. "Every man likes to be stiffened up, no matter what he may say. It's both a blessing and a curse. A source of pleasure and pain. Involuntarily, every heterosexual man wants to have sex with every attractive woman that he sees, even if those in love don't actively seek it." He suddenly feels his heart drop at the thought of disloyalty.

"It's not something that's commonly taught, but every strength is also a weakness. Every direction we go, every force we apply, has an inherent equal and opposite reaction built into it. The more you're driven in one direction, the more of its grounds you'll cover and the more you'll gain from covering them. But, at the same time, the more you're subject to the trials and pitfalls of that particular path, and the more you miss the rewards to be garnered from walking in every other direction available to you, even as we're all innately born to more ably walk in some directions than others. It's much the same as saying that the more force you apply to any one thing, the greater the chance it'll break, or snap back and hurt you."

"Okay, okay, settle down a little Mr. Philosophy," Kate replies, absorbing a bit of his disheartening reflection and feeling a touch of guilt herself due to being much to blame. Watching the coffee gradually drip through the filter into the carafe, she can't help but feel some of his pain and conflict. Suddenly compelled by true empathy, she walks over to Alex and gives him a long, heartfelt hug.

He hugs her back, feeling his heart rise back up at the genuine outlet of emotion and demonstration of affection. Her back is to the couch, from which she can feel Michael pretending not to fixate on their interaction. As she pulls away, she softly, sincerely presses her hand to the side of Alex's face. She too is experiencing an inner conflict, though not nearly as tense and equally contended as his.

"You really want to fire things up?," Alex begins anew, thinking of the bonfire party proposal, as well as his tempestuous desire and rising affection for Kate set against the cooler, calmer, tranquilizing waters of his love for Amanda. "I'm not sure that we should be starting fires, quite honestly. I sense a great deal of fuel to be burned here, don't you? Those fires may burn very quickly, out of our control. They might consume more than we want them to, or at least more than I want



them to..." he adds while glancing out the window, his tremulous voice trailing off.

"Call me crazy," Kate replies after a moment, "but I don't think it's healthy or natural to spend too much time and energy fighting yourself. I mean, to deny herself what you want, what you know will bring great pleasure and more appreciation for all that life has to offer... How much is a pledge to one particular..." she hears the coffee brewing and decides to continue the metaphorical guise of the matter, "one particular brand of coffee worth when you have to sacrifice all the others in order to drink it?"

"It's a legitimate question," Alex answers. "And I don't know that there's one right answer. It may be a subjective truth denying a one-size-fits-all solution. What I *do* know with some certainty is that experience and observation strongly suggest that as soon as you start to sample other brands, the flavor of the one you'd been dedicated to drinking begins to sour. It loses something. It's as if you can't try new brands without the first one starting to spoil, moving towards its total decomposition. Somehow, it knows that it's no longer being fully appreciated."

"I don't know," Kate comes back. "I think it's like you say. It's not a one-size-fits-all thing. Some brands hold up well even when they aren't the only one being consumed. In fact, I think that you should consider the possibility that the best beans, the ones most worth roasting and drinking, aren't so unstable, so in need of perfect preservation, if I may, that they begin to sour as soon as they aren't the only ones being enjoyed."

"You may be kidding yourself there," Alex replies. "Though I can't say for sure." He lets go of the metaphor for a moment: "The heart and mind become invested in the person with whom a romantic, intimate relationship is built. This is true regardless of the resistance, the self-defense mechanism, that we employ to various degrees of efficacy. I'm quite certain that my particular brand of coffee won't hold up well, and I'm not convinced that this makes it weaker or any less worthy of being consumed. In fact, part of me feels like it's the opposite. Maybe the best beans need commitment, but pay you back in ways sampling never can."

Kate scowls at Alex's suggestion that what she assumes is superiority may, in fact, be an inferiority. But, ever confident, she recovers quickly.

“You theorize about the evolution of human beings,” she begins her counter. “Perhaps that’s a part of it. Perhaps we’re evolving away from monogamy. Perhaps the future of the human race allows for one to enjoy every type of roast, every delicious brand and flavor, without any of them losing their potency and what they give to those that partake of them. Perhaps the greatest quality of life available to us can’t be realized without it; without human beings casting aside the religious holdover of monogamous commitment that has us hemmed into insecure, possessive, controlling relationships.”

“I think that there’s a strong possibility that we can’t attain our greatest total value or quality of life without being able to add value to one-another free from the fear that we’ll lose something of great value when we do so. You worry about the fire spreading out of control and consuming too much, but perhaps *that’s* the problem. Maybe your quality of life is the fire, and monogamy represents the firefighters attempting to corral and kill a blaze that should be allowed to burn. Why do we have to own one another? Control one another? Why do we have to smother the flame that very clearly naturally wants to burn?” She smiles suddenly. “Perhaps it’s far better to fan the flame and see how high its embers can fly; how immense the conflagration can grow to become!”

Alex is impressed with Kate’s application of his Quality of Life Economics theory. He himself had very similar thoughts several times before. How much value is lost in monogamy, especially the more possessive variety, from all the experiences sacrificed upon its altar? What is the value of all the people, places and things that will never be known or felt and will never be able to add to your life due to its demands? And does this value surpass what the temple gives in return for the sacrifices made within it?

“You may be right,” Alex finally replies. “Though I definitely have my doubts... I’m conflicted.”

“I know you are,” Kate says. “But I for one want to see how big the fire can get. Girls just wanna have fun, right?! I know I can’t live without fun in spades. This pot is far too large not to play for, and this hand of mine is way too good not to be played,” she adds while glancing at a fake set of cards in her empty hands, unsettling Alex by referring to the metaphor he’d had in mind moments before. “Gambling wouldn’t be fun if there wasn’t something worth risking; something on the table worth the bet.”

As she says this, and with her back still obscuring the view from the couch, she suddenly places both her hands just below her neck and runs them slowly down her chest, pressing down upon her big beautiful breasts, then down to her stomach, which she flexes. Continuing their descent she triangulates her hands in between her inner thighs. From there, she brings her right hand up and puts it down her pants while bringing her left hand under her shirt, lifting it up to reveal the rest of her bare, flat stomach.

Alex freezes. Feeling an erection coming on and fearing it'll lead to unwanted attention from the guys, he turns and opens the fridge door to block their view of him, pretending to search for food. For a few seconds he imagines himself climbing into the fridge to cool down. Closing his eyes he takes a series of deep breaths before closing the fridge and looking back in Kate's direction. She's pouring coffee as if nothing has happened. Handing him his mug, she makes another move in their torturously titillating little game. "Your birthday is coming up, isn't it?" she asks.

"Yes, it is. The beginning of next month," Alex replies.

"Good," Kate says. "I give great presents. I know you'll love what I have in mind for you. In fact, I think you'll get more just from unwrapping it than you'll get from all your other gifts combined," she adds with a sly smile.

Setting aside the fact that Kate represents his own tainted forbidden fruit of betrayal, Alex actually believes there's great value to this method of purposefully building-up the sexual tension between mutually-interested persons as much as possible, all the way to the breaking point, before acting upon it. Not only is it great fun, but it permits the interest to burn more brightly and the emotional connection between the two people to become better established before bringing sex into the burgeoning relationship. It grants the sensuality a stronger mental and spiritual foundation to stand and grow upon, giving it the space and cultivation it requires to root itself to the hearts and minds of the two people such that sexual desire, intimacy and the personal connection of friendship become inseparable twines in the same connective thread.

That thread is thereby made far stronger than it would be were each of those twines kept apart before being pulled upon; before being put into service, tested by the attempt to support the stressing forces every

relationship inevitably faces. The act of denial, an exercise in discipline, leads to a far greater potential payoff than is possible from acting upon the early emergence of desire. These are Alex's thoughts as he sips from his coffee this Friday morning in late September, feeling its subtly drugging cocktail commingle with Kate's confounding provocation of desire and strumming of his moral ambiguity.

"Fine," Alex succumbs. "You win Kate. Let's have your bonfire party."

## **Twelve: Uncontrolled Burn**

*Love is always romanticized, as it should be. Yet it simultaneously retains a practical motivation. For every love in existence rests upon a single, preeminent proposition: You add as much to me as I'll add to you.*

Mutual benefit is the cornerstone of every healthy relationship because all parties participating in the relationship add value to the lives of all the others, and produce more shared total value in collaboration than can be produced in the absence of any participating party. Ideally, this

mutually-produced value is equally distributed, with all participating parties' lives receiving an equal increase of value through their collaboration. Though never perfectly attained, striving for this ideal facilitates the greatest total value production.

The impetus and respectful spirit of reciprocity enables the production of a whole far exceeding what would otherwise be possible because it's mutualistic in motivation, with all participating parties better inspired and harder working because they work in league with those whom they honor through their mutually-enriching endeavors. Unhealthy relationships are the opposite, defined by one or more parties gaining value through the theft of value from and suppressed potential of one or more other parties participating in the relationship, always against the latter parties' best interests and usually due to those latter parties possessing disadvantages that the former parties take advantage of. This is the crux of equity-consolidated enterprise, and it ultimately degrades all involved parties, though in less obvious ways than commonly understood.

While the exploiter gains wealth, power and other resources from the exploited, for example, they give up the opportunity, or pay the opportunity cost, of the value of spiritual connectivity and fulfillment, or love, that they surrender through their injustice. They must thereafter live with knowing, or at least sensing, that they're dishonorably perpetrating a crime against the best interests of life as a whole. In not just professional, economic and political relationships, but in personal relationships as well, these truths of relative mutual benefit and spiritual connectivity or cost are foremost in relevance.

Perceived benefit is the motive, mutual benefit is the justice; when they align we progress towards best interest; towards greatest total value. No one desires tying an amorous spiritual bond unless they believe that the one to whom they wish to bond will add as much or more value to their lives as they'll provide in return. In the absence of this sense there is, instead, a sense of charity that may fulfill the heart when motivating platonic endeavors but which, in amorous unions, tends to give rise to an imbalance in appreciation, desire and added value invariably inviting resentment, embitterment and a sense of smallness ultimately rendering such unions diminishing and untenable. Thus, an expected equality of quid pro quo is the veiled basis of romance.

This is the natural equilibrium of healthy relationships arising as an inescapable quality of the self. The self seeks to be made stronger, not

weaker; to be more satisfied, not less. This is the unavoidably selfish nature of being a self, whereas being self-absorbed is to seek gain *regardless* of the effect this gain has on others; to be content with being made stronger even by those actions that make others weaker. We're all selfish, but some are far less self-absorbed than others, and are thereby far less inclined to cost more total value than they create.

These symbiotic selves add value to themselves through the same course that adds value to the lives of others. The self-absorbedly parasitic, on the other hand, amass certain types of finite value, typically wealth, power and material resources, through the same course that takes that value from others, including the opportunity for those others to gain more of that value to improve their quality of life. But regardless of the scale whereby selfishness and self-absorbedness may be measured and distinguished, the nature of being a self ever acting in ways that benefit *at least* one's self reveals powerful strings of manipulation that can always be pulled.

Due to the inescapable truth of self, anyone wishing to 'game' another must always pretend to possess something that is at least as valuable as whatever they seek to gain in return. Pretend you're unobtainable and know something that no one else knows. When you make a move, pretend you already know the outcome; it's inevitable. When you walk into the room, your demeanor must tower over that of the uncertain persons therein, for certainty is as irresistible as it is illusory. Your manner must be sure even when you're not. For when others see confidence, they assume it's backed by true value; by strength; and they, in turn, desire that value; they desire to absorb or otherwise benefit from that strength.

The problem with all of these psychological tactics, however, is not only the dishonest misleading of others, but the fact that one's pretension tends to sink into one's subconscious. The more that one begins to believe their own show of strength, the more it adheres to their psyche and self-conception. It becomes a part of their ego, and though they may gain from that ego in all the ways that falsely seductive shows may benefit them, and all the ways in which convincing others that they are superior and more worthy of finite wealth, power and resources may bring them such things, such pretense will always lead them to degrading themselves and those with whom they establish relations, as the costs of feeding the ego are manifold, and may accrue to massive proportion. Escaping the psychological gravity of such egos requires a force of knowledgeable perception and determination, an ability to see

through and thereby remain mostly uninfluenced, that only a minority can muster.

Psychology is a fascinating subject because it underlies and can be used to predict, provoke and manipulate most every human action and ambition. If you become a master of manipulating psychology there's little you can't influence, few people you can't coerce and almost nothing in the world you can't possess. This is, of course, why the study-confirmed, imparted force of psychological mastery dots the sociological landscape, its unscrupulous leverages leaving little unscathed. The power the psychological expert wields is so immense that the practice proves a temptation attracting many of those driven by greed for wealth and power to its flame of self-interest.

Almost all of its tools are turned toward destructively self-absorbed, morally reprehensible ends, which is why intelligent, highly-principled men and women of conviction are wary of its mentally-enslaving might and are forced to fight the urge to wield it, spurred by their integrity and ideology to turn people toward truth and progress *not* by manipulation, but by illumination and gradual persuasion.

In most realms of human activity, from the business and political to the personal, the temptation to wield the immense power of psychological weaponry is too great, and most ambitious people, even those that begin with the best, most idealistic and progressive intentions, succumb to its seductive promise: take advantage of fear, desire and ego and there's nothing that you cannot have, and no one you cannot control.

If your profession necessitates identifying and exploiting weak spots in people's psyches, in fact, chances are you're doing more harm than good; that you're reducing total value. For not just as every successful dictator but every duplicitously pandering politician, exploitative business executive and manipulative marketing maven has known, if you know what people fear, what they want and how they perceive themselves, and if you find the best means to manipulate those qualities, they're yours to command. And while most argue that fear and desire are the most potent of these three intertwined cords of psychological strumming, Alex's experience suggests that the psychological instrument is most often played by ego.

If you want someone to do something, tell them not to do it. If you want someone to want something, tell them they can't have it. If you really want someone to desire something or someone, tell them that



something or someone is beyond their reach. The power of reverse psychology is substantial, and beyond dispute. It isn't a standalone quality, however, but is an extension of a core component of the psyche: the inverse relationship between attainability and desirability. Hearing 'yes' decreases demand. Hearing 'no' increases demand. While seldom analyzed as such, this inverse relationship is comprised of at least four intertwined threads.

The first thread is purely egotistical. Telling someone that they can't have something or someone incites their ego, which takes it as a challenge. 'That's not beyond me,' it says, then sets out to prove it and satisfy itself. The second thread is the 'transitive property.' When others demonstrate a desire for something, then it's seen as proof that the thing is desirable, and the desirability is transferred from the demonstrator to the observer, especially when the thing is hard to come by. The third thread, known as the 'positional good,' is much like the second thread, except that it's more commonly applied to the possessor than the one who desires what is possessed. Typically considered an economic term, the positional good is essentially the value a person places upon something possessed based upon how much others desire its possession. The more they desire what you possess, the more it seems worth possessing, the more that possession is valued. This too can be traced to the ego, which is enlarged by possessing something that others want but can't have, as if it's proof of the superiority of the possessor. The fourth thread is the forbidden fruit.

While it often contains aspects of the other three threads, the forbidden fruit is reverse psychology at its purest. It's not so much the goading or satisfaction of the ego or the demonstration of the desirability of others that's the driver, but the total taboo, off-limits perception of the thing. Yes, the ego might rebel and one's principles might even be affronted, shouting 'what right do you have to tell me that I can't have this?!' But more than anything, it's the allure of anything deemed out of reach.

The forbidden fruit seems sweeter not because it actually is, but because it can't be tasted. This presents a serious danger and cost connected to this psychological phenomenon, as the forbidden fruit is only valued so long as it remains forbidden and uneaten. For example, a person, organization or nation might be strongly motivated to attain, accomplish or control something, expending immense cost, even human life, because its leaders lust after the forbidden fruit, after what is said to be out of reach, only to find it of little value after being plucked, thereby rendering an unjustifiable cost-to-reward ratio. As soon as a

bite is taken it becomes bland and begins to rot. You can't have the forbidden fruit and eat it too.

Kate and Alex are one another's forbidden fruit. To Alex, as luscious as the fruit would look were he not deeply involved with Amanda, it appears ten times as sweet because he is. Kate's constant flirtation only serves to heighten her scrumptious appearance, clouding Alex's mind and blinding him to the value of what he stands to lose and the damage he's positioning himself to inflict on the endearing, honorable young woman that he loves. This is the opposite end of the inverse relationship between attainability and desirability: those things easily attained, especially when already attained, tend to lose their desirability to the point where they become undervalued and taken for granted, even when they're *immensely* valuable. When not being victimized by his own psychological and physiological weakness, Alex sometimes reflects upon one of his favorite quotes: "Privilege is invisible to those that possess it." On the opposite end of this scale: privilege is overvalued by those that lack it.

In all, it's the attainability of the thing that the psyche translates into desirability, and it's this relative desirability that either increases or decreases the perceived value of the thing above or below its true quality of life value. And, therefore, the easier it is to attain the not yet attained, and the more secure and longer possessed the already attained, the more they're undervalued. And the more difficult it is to attain the not yet attained, and the more out of reach and longer it remains out of reach, the more overvalued it becomes.

This is, of course, why one of the most common of sociological phenomena, especially in emergent romantic relationships, is the withholding of demonstrations of desirability, for the more fervent and frequent such demonstrations the less desirable the demonstrator becomes, regardless of whatever value he or she may have to offer the object of these demonstrations. Even when this isn't consciously known it's almost always instinctively sensed, which is why deception is so ubiquitous in even the more honest relationships, whether they're romantic or professional in nature, or between a bartering buyer and seller. For the psychological nature of the self clearly incentivizes deception, regardless of what, or whom, is being targeted for acquisition.

Most people come to know, or at least subconsciously sense, that withholding signs of desire and affection makes them seem 'harder to

get' and less needy and vulnerable, while freely showing such signs makes them appear the opposite. Saying 'I love you' is a very risky expression because, though an honest and honorable expression of mental and spiritual connection and understanding that lends strength to the subject of the sentiment, the nature of the psyche is such that its expression tends to diminish the desirability of the expresser and opens the door to being taken for granted and undervalued, especially when the desirability of those affections are out of balance between the two people. This remains the case at least until the desirability of the person passes the threshold of deeply embedded love capable of withstanding the psyche.

We often learn the painful lesson that those things we already possess tend to be undervalued, underappreciated and taken for granted, even when they're of immense value, because their value is not fully realized until they're no longer possessed. We're all, therefore, beset by pitfalls naturally dug by the overlapping psychological and egotistic aspects of our mental selves. On one side we're tempted by fruit that we cannot have, and that immediately sours as soon as we pluck it and take a bite, and on the other side we forget about the fruit that's already been plucked, taking it not into the nourishment of our hearts and minds but allowing it to spoil from the neglect born of being taken for granted. Despite the wisdom gleaned from his contemplative nature, Alex isn't at all immune to the soft spots of the body and mind and is, in fact, more sexually-driven than most, leaving him in jeopardy of paying a price he can't afford to pay.

Amanda had returned to California from her trip to Virginia around the time that Kate continued her overt games of seduction with Alex in the kitchen, flying into San Francisco without sending Alex word. She'd long been aware of Kate's usually subtle flirtation with Alex, and it was plain to see that Kate was an attractive and confidently aggressive woman who's accustomed to getting what she wants.

This has caused a sense of scornful resentment toward Kate that's not unfamiliar to Amanda, as she often felt outshone by such girls in her unrequited yearnings for guys in the past. In fact, it wasn't long before she'd met Alex in Tahoe that she'd been dumped by a long-term boyfriend for someone she regarded as the prototypical bimbo that so commonly snatched-up men from those more deserving, simply because she was the busty and vivacious type that shamelessly paraded her sexuality, employing it as a manipulative tool used to turn men; a tool that's as obvious and shameful as it is effective.

This bimbo had been a coffee shop coworker of that ex-boyfriend. And Amanda, upon seeing how comfortably familiar and friendly her boyfriend was with this blonde-haired, blue-eyed cowgirl whenever Amanda would visit the coffee shop and observe their interactions, had found it impossible not to suspect that they were sharing more than the espresso machine. Before long she was fighting the urge to park across the street and spy on them, which she eventually did, crestfallen by their clear sexually-tinged amity.

Sure enough, her boyfriend ended up dumping her for 'Blondie,' as she called her, only to come crawling back two weeks later claiming to have made the mistake of his life. He'd had his fill of the forbidden fruit and found it to be far less substantive than his former fare. But by then Amanda had been wrenched by the heartache, and the damage was irreparably done. Though they saw one another a few times afterward, his consumption of the poisonous, forbidden fruit had mortally metastasized throughout their soon to be deceased relationship.

It's for this reason, her demure nature combined with past experience and its psychological wreckage, that Amanda is hyperaware of Kate's attraction toward Alex; even more so than he is. Amanda has fallen deeply for Alex over the last year of their tenderly-bottomless romance. She feels a connection to him that she'd never felt before, and once only knew to be possible in the promises of her heart, not in her experience. In her mind, and in her instincts, she felt it impossible not to sense that she was at great risk, and to always be holding back when she just wanted to let go. Amanda was very much 'out on a limb' when it came to Alex, an apt metaphor for the risks taken in romantic relationships, especially in the uncertain, early stages, before any real commitment is made.

Fear of the emotional and psychological danger of being out on a limb is a major influential force in budding romantic relationships, as the more one emotionally invests in another person and the more that they express appreciation, affection, desire and especially anything approaching need, the further out on the limbs and the higher up the tree they climb, and thus the greater the risk a limb will snap and the greater the pain of the fall if the relationship, like the limb, should break. When the other person is willing to climb out on the limbs and up the tree with you, then you feel more secure in moving out farther and up faster and higher, ascending the emotional ladder and accepting increasing risks entailed in moving out and up, because you provide one another a safety line, and share the risk.

Being bound to your partner climbing out to similar distances and heights increases your sense of security and decreases the risk of falling, like a pair of tied-together ascending climbers reinforcing and backing-up the other. If one slips, the other can prevent them from falling, and so both are less inhibited and fearful throughout their ascension.

When one goes up too high or out too far, however, the fear of being out on the limb by themselves is likely to scare them into slowing or even stopping their climb. Some, in fact, having fallen hard in the past and having never fully recovered, refuse to climb the tree altogether, or else purposefully break the limb they're on when it feels the least bit unsteady, all as a defense mechanism to prevent the risks of further climbing and risking a more destructive fall. This phenomena of feeling out on a limb thus inhibits demonstrations of desire and affection and ties directly into the power struggle in romantic relationships, especially amongst the less secure.

It takes a big person not to act upon the sense of empowerment and not to take advantage of the fact that the person they're with is moving out along the limbs and up the tree when they know that, whenever they choose, they can untie the rope or shake or even cut the limb down and thereby feel the egotistic delight of watching their over-extended partner's weakness for them manifest. Everyone feels this power. Everyone, depending upon their integrity, maturity and sense of security, at least finds themselves periodically shaking the limb in order to witness or test the insecurity of their climbing partner, as well as to gain some egotistic delight. Only a very small slice of extremely principled, disciplined, supremely secure people have the heart and strength of mind and adherence to the Spirit's inner voice *not* to act upon this power.

Amanda heartily hopes that Alex is such a person, yet she's nevertheless very much out on the limb and has ascended high up the tree, far further than he has, she fears. Thus, especially owing to not being the most self-secure individual in the world, she senses that she's very much imperiled. As is sensed by everyone at different points in their lives, Amanda feels the contradictory need to wall-off and keep her heart closed at the same time as her heart has opened itself up more than she's ever felt it, aching to take in ever more until full, and thereby refuses to safeguard itself.

Thus, despite warning herself that driving back to the Fort Bragg property from San Francisco without giving Alex a heads-up would be an

unmerited sign of mistrust, the old habits and psychological scars are to prevail. It's more that she doesn't trust *Kate*, she tells herself. She's teary-eyed the entire three hour drive north, thinking of her recently deceased grandmother and how unbearable it would be to arrive and find that she's lost Alex to yet another tempting jezebel. Several times along the drive she almost picks up the phone and dials him, but stops herself, thinking: "Despite the possible pain, it'd be better to know now than to continue climbing this only to have the trunk chopped down when we've reached such heights that I might not survive the fall to the unforgiving ground."

Moving from Fort Bragg city limits onto Sherwood Road's country terrain, she finally relents in a moment of weakness, her heart panging at the potential of a double loss she suddenly feels terrified she wouldn't be able to bear. But when she dials Alex's number she finds that, having passed into the heavily forested canyon, she's lost cell phone coverage and is unable to place the call. Other than Alex she's the only one with a key to the gate. "This is it," she tells herself as she covers the final stretch.

Dusk is fast approaching when Amanda hits the roundabout that, circling a grove of Redwoods at the hills' apex, serves as the parking lot for the property's occupants and visitors. Four other people have shown-up for the bonfire party. Two of those four are friends of Kate's from the Santa Rosa area where Alex himself had grown up between his move away from the property as a boy and his UCSB enrollment.

Kate had met them through one of Alex's sophomore housemates at UCSB, a girl, Lisa, with whom Alex had also attended high school, and was infatuated with all eight combined school years. Lisa still sometimes crept into his dreams, in fact, personifying the foremost symbol in his mind of the seemingly unobtainable highest desire: to be in a loving, passionate relationship with a woman best representing the concept of the 'divine feminine incarnate.'

Of the two guys Kate had invited to the party she'd engaged in a casual sexual relationship with one of them, Chris, when he'd drive to the Santa Barbara area ostensibly for the surfing, which he was very good at, but for Kate more than anything. While the weather in Southern California is certainly more conducive to beach life, the turbulent waters closer to Santa Rosa make for the gnarly waves attracting more accomplished surfers such as himself. But it wasn't the waves that he most wanted to ride.

The other guy Kate invited is a friend of Chris's, Donnie, whom Kate had only met once before on a winery tour, when she'd visited the Sonoma County area on Chris's invitation. The other pair of visitors are young women that Henry had invited, and with whom he'd been friendly before his recently dissolved marriage, during his stint in San Francisco before moving back to Austin to work at his father's investment firm.

Like many of the girls he'd courted in the past, both of these female visitors had been beneficiaries of Henry's near inexhaustible financial benevolence, separately accompanying him on marathon tours of some of San Francisco's swankiest, most expensive nighttime hotspots. True to form, Henry is using the little party as an opportunity to reap the rewards of some of that investment, and hopes to have the two girls competing with one another for his continued favor. Amanda is, of course, surprised to see two vehicles in the roundabout that she doesn't recognize. "A get-together?," she wonders. Locking her car, she approaches the residence, doing her best to be inconspicuous while not *appearing* to be creeping up to surreptitiously spy, all the while silently praying to herself that she won't be crushed by whatever she might soon come to witness.

Sneaking into the 'glass cathedral of natural worship,' as Alex sometimes refers to the mostly glass-walled home, Amanda soon realizes that it's vacant. Having been a relatively warm, partly cloudy day, the ports in the lower part of the ceiling have been left open to allow air to circulate and keep the residence cool. Through the ports she can hear the distant sound of voices.

Following the sound, she walks across the residence, past the kitchen with its empty collection of beer bottles and a mostly polished-off bottle of *Patron* set next to eight recently used shot glasses, and gazes through the glass of the western door. A hundred yards down the southern side of the hill, not far from the forest, the group of eight stands in a semi-circle around the first of many large piles of limbs scattered across the continually cut grassland of the descending hillside.

Amanda recalls Alex speaking of how the gathering and burning of large piles of brush and limbs from beneath the surrounding towering canopies of trees is both an important fire-hazard-mitigating precaution as well as a source of considerable post-piling pleasure. "You gather fallen matter into piles for controlled burns in order to prevent *uncontrolled* burns," he'd said. "And those burns can be quite enjoyable, especially at night, casting their great warming glow across

the forest and invoking something primal within; something that beckons us to surround the fire, calling us towards its comforting warmth and predator-scattering security; that encourages us to come together, let down our guard and discover our commonality.”

This memory suddenly tastes bittersweet as Amanda catches sight of Kate cheering Alex on below. Having already inserted crumpled-up balls of paper towels deep within and around all sides of the pile to absorb the accelerant and help bring the burn to a sustainable level, Alex circles the pile while dousing the towels with the accelerant. Her fears temporarily averted, Amanda quietly steps through the door and stands on the deck to watch, sensing a rare chance to observe the chemistry of the group and the night’s visiting participants, and especially the natural dynamic between Kate and Alex, free from her influence and fear of being judged.

The last of the daylight is fast fleeting, leaving her in a prime, inconspicuous position to play ‘fly on the wall.’ Making a second circle around the heap, Alex carefully reaches into the pile at each crumpled paper towel placement with his long-reach matches. Moving around the stack one ignition at a time, he soon circles to the point where Amanda’s position enters his line of sight, but his eyes remain focused on the task at hand, and she remains shrouded by the shadows. Soon Alex is positioned with his back to Amanda and the house, and the group, all of whom have their own uncorked bottles of wine, clank them together following Kate’s toast resounding across the open hillside: “To a night of no inhibition!”

“Bitch!” Amanda thinks to herself from her lonely, hidden perch. She almost moves down the stairs but doesn’t, not yet satisfied she’s made the most of the opportunity. Seeing the scene unfold from afar, like a viewer of a reality TV show in which she’s over-invested, she watches as Kate works the guys in the group. Wearing her ‘leave nothing to the imagination’ black yoga pants and a tight-fitting baby blue top, Kate bounces back and forth between her two visitors before bringing them both in for a hug.

Kate’s pretending not to care that Alex is far more focused on her than one of Henry’s invitees, Stacy, who stands next to Alex and begins to question him regarding the property and his literary work, having briefly heard of his endeavors from Henry. Stacy is quite striking, with bountiful, curly brown hair and wearing thickly black-rimmed glasses framing her green eyes, lending her an air of both beauty and bookish



sophistication. Alex was, in fact, drawn to her immediately, and if it weren't for being under Kate's spell she'd have his full attention.

Of the two girls Henry's invited Stacy is by far the more reserved and thoughtful of the two, having accepted Henry's invitation to party this weekend mostly for the chance to remove herself from the San Francisco bar-hopping routine she's beginning to find tiresomely obligatory, repetitive and unfulfilling, rather than for any interest in Henry himself. Alex has always enjoyed the company of such people; of most anyone that spends their time swimming away from the shallow end of the pool, as he'd sometimes say.

"One temptation at a time," Alex thinks, resolving himself to ignore everything but the content of their conversation, while from her uphill vantage point Amanda ponders her boyfriend's demeanor: "Perhaps he'd display greater interest were he not with me. Or is he strategically discounting her in order to increase her interest?"

As soon as Alex fails to look in Kate's direction for even a minute she enacts some ploy to regain his attention. After one such brief period of neglect she begins moving away from flirtatiously touching her visitors and bounces over to Henry, giving him a teasing push that momentarily interrupts his courtship of his second visitor, Rachel, who he knows from past experience is amenable to his contrived shows of confidence in combination with his capacity to purchase affections.

Kate then moves on to Michael, rustling his hair and circling around him in a mock, pirouetting dance of exuberance. But Alex is, at this point, drawn heavily enough into his conversation with Stacy that he pays Kate's maneuvers no mind, which she's well aware of, despite pretending not to care. Finally finding his lack of attention intolerable, she suddenly breaks Alex's train of thought.

"Alex! You pussy!," She cries out. "All that talk and no walk! *I was a big drinker in college,*" Kate mockingly imitates him. "*You forget that I drank you and Henry under the table every time.* Come on, let's see it stud! The choirboy is putting you to shame," she adds, referring to Michael in the characteristically condescending manner in which she regards and relates to him. Walking straight at Alex, she lifts his bottle hand up with her right hand, puts her left hand behind his head and pushes it toward the spout while tilting the bottle up, forcing the wine into his mouth. He chugs at least a third of the bottle before beginning to choke and pulling away, spilling some wine on the grass.

“There you go buddy!” Kate laughs. “We’re going to turn you into a man tonight whether you like it or not!” Feeling the wine wash over his mind, Alex watches Kate turn around and march back towards Michael. Mission accomplished: all eyes are on her.

“Is she your girlfriend?” Stacy asks Alex. He shakes his head ‘no,’ somewhat embarrassed.

Amanda’s heart sinks at first upon witnessing Kate employ her sickening strategy from afar, but her sorrow soon rebounds into rage. “That fucking cunt!” she thinks to herself. “She isn’t even trying to disguise it. It’s not enough that she has Michael at her feet and Henry eating out of her hand, and that these other two are so clearly eye-fucking her, she has to try to collar my man as well!” Too timid to match aggression with aggression, Amanda is unable to yell out any verbal reprisal. Nevertheless, she finds herself propelled down the hill toward the fire.

Being in the best position to see her approach, Kate sees Amanda coming and immediately goes from laughing at Michael’s slow sipping of his bottle to total silence. The implications of Kate’s clear shift in mood aren’t lost on Amanda, who immediately perceives the disappointment and one-hundred-and-eighty-degree turn in her affect, which both pleases and angers her.

Kate’s deflated reaction to her presence seems confirmation that her hopes for the evening centered around Alex. This conclusion infuriates Amanda, almost to the point of attack. Shooting lasers across the semi-circle at Kate, she hugs Alex from behind, who, with the crackling of the flames and the conversation with Stacy, wasn’t aware of her approach. She then introduces herself to Stacy. Finding an interesting, attractive man desirable isn’t cause for indignation. Launching yourself at him when you know he’s committed to someone else, your own housemate, is.

A few seconds of silence pass. Even without being privy to Kate and Alex’s sexual congress on the walk down the Noyo, Michael and Henry both feel embarrassed for Amanda and somewhat responsible for not objecting to Kate’s clear and continuous sexual aggressions towards Alex since Amanda’s departure. Their hesitance to speak up and welcome back their housemate is evidence of this.

The long, awkward silence is finally broken when Chris, perceiving but not entirely comprehending the nature of the unfolding drama in which

he has no emotional stake, finishes the round of introductions. Possessing the archetypical cute surfer-boy looks and easy-going charm one might associate with those partaking of his favorite pastime, and being well intoxicated already, Chris facilitates the final set of meet and greets by shaking Amanda's hand with a big white toothy smile flashing across his face. This briefly softens Amanda's fury, and she blushes imperceptibly as the fire rises to full force in front of her.

"May I speak to you for a minute?," Amanda asks Alex, grabbing him by the arm and pulling him back up the hill in the direction of the house.

"Of course babe," Alex replies, suddenly broad-sided with a commingling of joy, dread and remorse. The couple stops about halfway between the bonfire and the house. Amanda starts to speak, but Alex interrupts her with a long impassioned kiss that gives way to a full, heartfelt hug, locking his face in the crook of her neck, lifting her little body up and embracing her as if he hasn't seen her in years, fearing there may be few such embraces left between them. "How the fuck could I jeopardize this?!", he thinks to himself with Amanda's body pressed against his, who reciprocates the hug with equally unbridled affection.

Placed back on her feet, the affront against her suddenly returns to Amanda's mind. "Is she always like that when I'm not around?!", she demands to know, referring, of course, to Kate.

For a few brief moments Alex considers playing dumb, as if unaware of Kate's tactics, but soon dismisses the idea as not only wrong, but insulting to Amanda's intelligence. It wouldn't fly. At the same time, he hopes to prevent any hostilities as much as possible and isn't yet able to summon the strength to relate recent experiences, so he splits the difference. "She does seem to be more flirtatious towards me when you're not here," he replies. "It's not the most honest way to comport yourself, to be sure. But I think you have to take into account that we've known one another for years. In college we teased one another mercilessly," he says, exaggerating his recollection. Amanda equivocates between credulity and incredulity, which Alex senses, adding: "It's nothing that I can't handle."

"I don't think it's something you *should* be handling, God dammit!," she responds almost immediately. "And I hate to say it, but I think you like it! You've always said attractive women are your kryptonite, weakening

your resolve and clouding your clarity of thought! Kate certainly fits the bill!"

"Does she ever," Alex thinks to himself, before countering: "Yes, that's true. And I'd be lying if I said that I didn't derive pleasure from flirting with sexy women. But you know how in love I am with you," he adds, wrapping his arm around her waist. "And we have to try to remain true to what we know, and what we both acknowledged before you moved in with me. Both of us are always going to be attracted to members of the opposite sex. To imagine and attempt to enforce otherwise is pure folly! It sets us up to have to feel the need to deceive one another and eventually resent that need for deception. Attraction is an inborn drive written directly into our biological, procreation-propelled constructs. It's the *acting* upon that drive that counts; the ability to stay on *this* dedicated side of the line," Alex says as he steps back and forth across an imaginary line on the hillside to emphasize his point. "You can't tell me you didn't enjoy that confident, charismatic little intro from surfer dude down there..."

Amanda's eyes shoot down the hill toward the group, who carry on in good, albeit tempered spirits, Henry, Michael and especially Kate's reduced revelry having spread to Chris and Donnie. Kate, aggravated at the sinking of her own spirits, angered at having had her night suddenly upended and resenting the fact that Alex and Amanda have any measure of power over her, has Michael in a side embrace as she faces the fire and drinks from the bottle in her other hand. Suddenly sensing Amanda is looking her way, she glances back up the hill and meets her eyes.

A mutual contempt shoots between them with such force that, were it tangible rather than emotional, everyone would've been knocked off their feet from the blast wave. Kate, refusing to be the victim and feeling rage rise up from within her from being thrust into the defensive position of playing the suddenly captured culprit, guzzles the rest of her bottle, throws it over her shoulder and abruptly grabs Michael by the back of the head, pulling him in for a kiss.

So thunderstruck is Michael by this move that he staggers and almost falls over backward before eventually moving in for more. Out of the corner of her eye Kate looks back up the hill at Alex and Amanda, and as soon as Alex turns and takes-in the spectacle, feeling only the slightest sting of jealousy due to being so emotionally locked into Amanda, Amanda grabs him by the hand and pulls him back up the hill toward

the house. "She's not going to win this war, no matter how dirty she fights," she thinks. "It's time to fight fire with fire!"

Riding a powerful resolve, Amanda leads Alex into the house and directly into their bedroom with one thing on her mind: she's going to drive this flag so deep that no invader can pull it free and plant their own in its place! Safe in the sanctuary of their private quarters, a perfect emotional storm strikes. Alex, aroused by Amanda's uncharacteristically confident show of force mixed with remorse and fear over the impending loss of her affections, is overpowered by a love for her that's maximized by its now immense vulnerability, while Amanda, already emotionally charged at the loss of her grandmother and equally fearful of the loss of the same overwhelming love as Alex, is consumed by a fierce determination to fight for the survival of that now fully appreciated love threatening to be lost.

The couple kisses as if fighting to defend the fortress of their affections, hands evincing the passion of the moment by discarding clothing with expedited ease. They lose themselves, forgetting all but one another as everything falls away but the need to fuel their fire beyond the point where it can be contained. Anything but a controlled burn, this is a wildfire finding ever more fuel as it feeds, building as if unlimited in its ability to expand. Their movements border upon the unconscious, so completely have their expanded hearts taken control from their minds.

Everything is erect, vibrating with anticipation, waiting to be sucked into the cyclone. In the flurry of erotic emancipation every nerve ending cries out for gratification, with few left unsatisfied. It's the best sex either of them has ever had, producing such cathartic release that they lay there unstitched, wrapped up together for almost an hour afterward, neither saying a word. Nothing needs saying that their actions didn't already scream. Amanda, emotionally and physically exhausted, passes out. And though Alex can hear the party ringing on down the hill, and hopes they know enough to control the bonfires, so satisfied are all three parts of his being, body, mind and Spirit, that he feels no desire to rejoin them. He lays there listening to Amanda breathe deeply, completely content.



## **Thirteen: Buried Embers, Engulfing Flames**

*It's exponentially easier to judge than it is to understand. It's exponentially easier to look down upon someone than it is to look into and fathom their fuller truth; to understand why they think and act as they do, and to recognize the core nature shared between all lifeforms compelling the sense of spiritual connectivity we call love. One of the greatest truths that exists is that there's nothing that seems to separate us that cannot be overcome; that there's no gap between us that cannot be closed; and that any semblance of absolute separation is built upon ego and ignorance and, such illusory absolutes being side effects of mental limitation, these separations can never be as great as the innate qualities that all lifeforms share without exception.*

*The difference between our judgment and our understanding, between our perpetuation of divisiveness and recognition of essential indivisibility, are the measures of the separation between our self-righteousness and our righteousness; between our egotism and the understanding of our truest shared identity; between labeling a person*

*as innately wrong or evil and recognizing the pains, pressures and weaknesses lying behind and compelling all wrong, rectifiable action.*

Upon waking early the next morning Alex finds that he and Amanda are still intertwined, as if all distinction between them was eradicated the night before. She takes full, easy breaths, lending the appearance that all of yesterday's tension has been wiped away clean. Remembering the nirvana he'd experienced the previous night, Alex feels that divine state creep back into his heart and mind. A broad smile falls upon his face, and he feels an immense gratitude for his existence. But that full-hearted feeling is soon deflated by the thought of Kate, which he attempts to force from his mind. Kissing Amanda on her bare shoulder, he rolls out of bed and admires her for a moment. This stretches into many moments.

Lying on her side, her freckled back, shoulders and neck exposed, Alex forgets Kate again completely. "These moments make all the suffering worth it," he thinks. He grabs the covers and gently pulls them over her nubile form, upon which he perceives the faintest of reflexive smiles from her, as if she's aware of the tender act even in her unconscious state. He leans over and kisses her lightly on the forehead before throwing on the crumpled clothes he was wearing the night before, then exits the room.

Through the eastern glass wall Alex can see the two visiting vehicles still parked in the roundabout. "Everyone is still here," he thinks while scanning the great room. On the couch near one of the hearths a young woman sleeps. Seeing her lusciously thick, curly brown hair, Alex remembers Stacy. He takes a seat on the loveseat not far from her and gazes back out the transparent eastern wall towards the pond, where a doe and her two fawns sip from the inch of standing water captured during the recent rain. Sensing his presence, Stacy suddenly wakes and looks at him, trying to remember where she is. Upon orienting herself, she smiles, surprising Alex. "What did I do to deserve that?," he wonders.

"Good morning," Stacy says. "How's it going?"

"It's going pretty damn well, I have to say," Alex replies with a grin.

Stacy understandingly returns the grin: "A good night, huh?"



“Yes,” Alex answers with some embarrassment. “Though I’m not confident it’ll last, honestly.”

“Why do you say that?” Stacy wonders, her brow furrowing with concern.

“Well...” Alex hesitates. “As cliché as it sounds, it’s complicated.”

“Right, complicated,” Stacy says with an amused, knowing snort. “From what I saw last night, you do seem to be facing some complications,” she adds with another smile. “Do you mind if I turn on the TV?”

“Not at all,” Alex responds. He reaches for the remote, turns on the TV and hands the remote to Stacy, who nods in gratitude. “She’s quite nice-looking,” he thinks to himself. “Especially considering she just woke up and her hair is all over the place. So many unspeakably-splendid fish in the sea. Beauty proliferates across the ocean of womankind such that beauty is commonplace, even as each creature is perfectly unique in their loveliness.

What a heavenly combination of the special and pervasive. With so many ethereal beings swimming about it’s a wonder the sharks can ever decide which ones to hunt, and don’t get stuck stalking. One can spend their entire life overwhelmed by the endless bounty of just one small stretch of reef...” As he thinks this Stacy seems almost to read his mind, looking over at him, smirking easily and beginning to coil her hair.

Alex tentatively smiles back at her, then asks: “Want some coffee?”

“Yes, definitely,” Stacy replies, grabbing her glasses off the table and fixing them upon her pleasing countenance. “And make it strong, please.”

Going into the kitchen, Alex retrieves a filter from the center island, thinking of Kate as he does so. “Coffee and temptation seem to be going hand-in-hand these days,” he thinks. Soon the coffee is being brewed and Alex’s attention moves to the television. Stacy has stopped on a cable broadcast of *Lawrence of Arabia*, and no sooner does Alex agree with Stacy’s appraisal of the film’s excellence than a commercial steps in to interrupt its momentum. “Dammit,” Alex thinks. “Fuck cable. If it weren’t for baseball and football I’d never pay another cent for cable television.”

It's a car insurance commercial. On it, an actor sitting on a bench with the Statue of Liberty in the background (an image meant to manipulate feelings of freedom and patriotism), laments his vehicle being totaled in a wreck soon after its purchase. His insurance company won't pay the full price, citing depreciation, to which he comments: "How can my car depreciate before its first oil change, you ask?"

"No I don't ask, asshole," Alex speaks up, unable to restrain himself. "It's called supply and demand. It's the same way the price of every commodity, of every good and service is established. Something is only worth what others are willing to pay for it. And as soon as you drive the car off the lot those interested in acquiring a new vehicle no longer see your vehicle as being brand-new. It's not demanded at the same level, so the price drops, dictating a lower replacement value in the insurance appraisal compared to when the car was new... I detest commercials."

"Yeah, they're pretty annoying," Stacy halfheartedly indulges him.

"They're not just annoying. They're borderline evil in most cases," Alex replies.

Somewhat astounded, holding back a laugh so as not to offend him, Stacy asks: "How so?"

"They're demonstrative of the worst, shallowest, ugliest, most self-absorbed and greedily-manipulative tendencies of man; demonstrative of the paper-thin, overindulgent, corrupted western culture. They all send the same message, and stand for the same result: above all else, *buy*. Accumulate stuff so that the few that own the product or service can profit off of you. It doesn't matter if you need it or want it or if it'll add the least bit of value to your life, or even a negative value, costing you more than it contributes. They'll do anything to coerce you; manipulate any weakness whatsoever."

"All commercials are distortions if not outright misrepresentations of the truth, all seeking out any form of weakness to take advantage of; all seeking to profit off of laziness, gullibility, ignorance, gluttony, avarice... anything they can target and manipulate; any switch they can flip. Marketing is all disingenuous manipulation, and yet we're all supposed to just accept it because, you know, 'it's just business,' as if the fact that business is traditional means it's all okay. We're all just supposed to ignore the fact that most business costs the majority of mankind and the planet more than it produces and is directed with deceit and

dishonor. We're supposed to just jump on the bandwagon and be a part of the problem, reflexively feeding the affliction."

"We're meant to blindly help suck as much value out of the lives of the disadvantaged employees of globally-spreading, labor-and-material-cost-cutting corporations as possible because 'it's just business.' And all so that we can have more shit we don't need that distracts us from the truly valuable possibilities of life. Fuck that! It's grotesque, it's not in service of life, of what's best for life as a whole, and therefore I don't accept it and never will. I mean, think of what commercials represent. Not just the manipulation of any and every weakness that can possibly be targeted, every form of fear, ignorance and mental and emotional failing that can be marked and conned. Commercials also represent greed, value consolidation, diminishment in total quality of life and disingenuousness."

"With rare exceptions," Alex continues, "almost every commercial is insincere. By pretending to stand for things that they don't and misdirecting the audience away from more valuable truths, almost every one of them is a slap in the face of principled people and a leading away from the greater good of all of those influenced. The more that they succeed, the more the far greater truths are lost."

"Like the fact that most peddled products add little to no value to your life and simply encourage you to fill any gaps you feel in your heart, mind and psyche with endless quantities of things, in the process discouraging you from endeavoring to earn those things that will *actually* fill such gaps, increase your quality of life and give you a shot at happiness, and all while feeding the excluding few at the cost of the people and the planet that always foot the bill."

"They're all an attempt to lure you into a position where an overly-privileged, morally-bankrupt, ever-thinner slice of our mentally-corrupted society can extract value from the rest of us in exchange for a product that's just as likely to add a negative value as a positive value to the lives of the buyers, subtracting from our quality of life at the same time as it broadens the disparity of wealth and opportunity across society by which total quality of life is most determined."

"Every one of these parasitic corporate behemoths want a piece of you, and if you let them you'll be carved up and consumed by them, buying every one of their marked-up, unnecessary wares as soon as you finish your eight hour shift working to enrich them as a cost-to-be-minimized

line on their balance sheets. They'll just keep carving you up and minimizing your potential until you perish."

"Don't hold back, tell me what you really think," Stacy teasingly replies, fanning his flames.

Forcing a strained smile through his indignation, Alex continues, his enjoyment of her teasing just enough to momentarily prevent his becoming fully absorbed in his long-harbored resentment of the conventional cultural failings of the Western World. "Commercials are much like our so-called political representatives, in the deceit infused in their presentation," he continues. "They're said to represent 'the people' while more truly representing the corrupt interests and immoral tactics and values of a slim set of those people while duping the majority. Both commercialism and politics represent empty, negative-value materialism more than anything, ultimately driven by the one and only priority of increasing the sales of things that slowly weaken us, accomplished by bathing those things, those ideas, products and priorities, in a falsely positive light."

"They represent class positioning and the shallow bourgeois value system that teaches us to value people based upon their account balances, property holdings and possessions and resultingly shallow, egotistically self-important social standing. Perhaps worst of all, and intertwined with all of this evil, they represent the disparity in income and wealth that continues to grow across the nation and the world, and all the innumerable injustices in opportunity and quality of life disparity directly connected to the wealth disparity due to the zero-sum nature of wealth at any given moment, acting to enrich the few at the cost of the many."

"Both the politicians and the commercial interests that ultimately own them, regardless of their propagandist, duplicitous concealment, stand for the absolutism of profit and its ugly no-holds-barred, entirely unscrupulous pursuit, having been mostly purchased and directed by major national and international corporations that routinely mistreat and underpay employees and cause environmental ruin across the planet. Commercials are the loudspeakers of the propagandist conservative message center."

"Between the lines of their shouted mistruths they say: be a good little worker bee and toil for the enrichment of the aristocrats, use the little disposable income and wealth we're forced to give you to keep you

from revolting to buy our wares for our further enrichment, and carry our bourgeois standard forward, voting for the latest upper-class-hailing politician chosen by our excluding, entrenched political power centers; candidates duplicitously paraded around as if they actually stand for the people while the puppets pulling their strings effectively plot against the people behind the stage. Don't think for yourself, we'll think for you."

"Work your forty years making us richer and maybe you'll earn your ability to think and act for yourself in your twilight years. To think for yourself and act with conviction before doing your time is naïvely idealistic. Systemic capitalistic and mental imprisonment is the price paid for the opportunity to earn relative measures of liberation. In the meantime, buy as much shit as possible. Vote for one of two puppets and, in doing so, continue to sacrifice true by-and-for-the-people democracy for its false-façaded artifice. Don't think or heed your heart. Don't question. Be obedient or be unpatriotic..." Alex stops to take a breath as Stacy stares at him, spellbound by the passionate conviction of his tirade.

He finishes: "Not to mention the fact that, by my calculations, the average television viewer spends or, more accurately, *squanders* some two to three *years* of their lives watching these commercials; two to three years of the part of their lives where they're not directly supporting exploiting profiteers with their professional labors."

"Thankfully this number is dropping as televised commercials are fossilizing thanks to the internet subscription-based future of film and television, as small a victory as this may be in an American culture wherein those that prevail over all its major power centers would happily have us waste our lives tied to their manufacturing machines on one end while, with the rest of our time, buying the endless line of unfulfilling products falling out the other end."

"My God," Stacy finally replies. "How do you live in this world?"

"With great difficulty," Alex responds. "Actually, I prefer to live *outside* that particular predominant world as much is possible. That's one of the reasons I live here. That disgusting world of greedily-exploiting weakness forces me into fight or flight, and I split my time between the two."

"I can see what you mean," Stacy says as the film comes back on.

Alex adds: “Plus, commercials interrupt the continuity of whatever you’re watching, detracting from its flow, impact and enjoyment. That in and of itself is intolerable, especially in a substantive film...”

“Okay, I take your point, then what do you want to watch?,” Stacy smirks, not the least bit annoyed.

“No, no, I apologize. Please, watch what you want. This is a great film when you actually get to watch it,” he says.

“You like *Real Time with Bill Maher?*,” she asks. “You have HBO?”

Alex chuckles. “It’s one of my favorites. And yes, I have HBO. They produce more quality content than perhaps anyone... I’ve watched Maher for years. Comically-delivered news that irreverently tears into conservatism, shining a bright, unforgiving light on its injustice, hypocrisy and absurdity... His ego is overgrown but, otherwise, what’s not to like?!”

Activating the menu, she says: “I haven’t seen the most recent episode, let’s check that out...”

“Sounds good,” Alex agrees. “Sugar? Cream?”

“Nah, black is better. Healthier and more to the point,” Stacy replies.

“I like you already,” Alex teases, handing her a cup and dropping down on the adjacent loveseat.

As the episode of *Real Time* begins, Stacy speaks up: “I get what you’re saying though, about the commercials. And really it’s everywhere. It’s like an invasion of unjust, superficial commercialism that waters down the whole of the human experience everywhere you look. Not just television. You go online and the invasion’s in full swing. Every website you visit profiting off of allowing companies to shove things down your throat. And heaven forbid you should show any interest – visit some site selling some product... You’ll be bombarded with offers on that type of product at least until you visit the *next* commercial website.”

“Any information that you look up, short of *Wikipedia*, perhaps, comes with the price of harassment. And it’s not just information hunting; it’s not only when you satisfy your curiosity. Anything social, any games, anything and everything is commoditized, packaged and sold to

someone along with your information. So you're not just perpetually compelled to buy; you're selling your digital ghost at the same time. Every data point that you provide online is analyzed, sold and used to track and sell to you and those that fit your consumer profile."

"Buy, buy, buy you fiends," Alex concurs. "Don't think. Be impulsive. Shop yourself stupid, regardless of whether or not you can afford it. That's what good credit is for: supporting the billions of dollars that credit companies make off of our futile attempt to buy our happiness. Be the mindless consumer that the corporations bank on you to be, regardless of the fact that most of their wares add little to no value to the quality of your life, and many offer products that arguably diminish that quality."

"Your life becomes consumed by consumption and material collections. Consumers consuming their own best life in the course of their consumption. It's as was said in *Fight Club*: What you own ends up owning you. And it kills your greater potential and quality of life in the process. The overriding spirit of the West is mindless consumerism. Everything is built around reflexive collection and consumption of commercial goods."

"Don't think. Don't doubt. Don't question. Don't resist. Just buy. Commercials, apps, fast food, smart phones, the consumerist credit trap to continually buy every dumb knickknack you don't need weighing you down and making you more mindless and complacent and distracted and less engaged in real experiences and important issues and ideas while simultaneously making the rich ownership class richer; those that own the profits from all those purchases; who in turn use that wealth to further consolidate their control of the avenues of profit and political control and thus keep everyone else excluded from joining their ever-thinning ranks. Every purchase makes us weaker, poorer, smaller and more needy while preventing us from having true connections and greater experiences and increasing the power of the masters to keep us in our place and endlessly increase their consolidation of all things of value and therefore prevent increases in the quality of life of the vast majority of the global populace."

"Thinking of our being conditioned as mindless consumers reminds me of the 'manufactured discontent' concept and books like *Brave New World*," he continues. "The modern-day lesson being that the government and its plutocratic elite that own all of the profits of industry don't want us to be content, to have fewer quality products

that last and lead to lasting fulfillment or, better yet, to pursue principles and practices producing constant contentment, because content people have little desire to buy things, because purchases are mostly based upon filling a void in our contentment. They want us to be discontented consumers always seeking to buy our happiness. The more the void exists, the more that can be sold to us to fill it, so long as we foolishly believe that we can fill it this way. But ultimately, we *can't*. That's the great lie of the modern consumer culture: that happiness, inner peace and contentment are for sale."

"Such invaluable things can never be purchased, but can only be earned by expanding *not* one's collection of things and cash and power over people, for that's a bottomless abyss that never fills, but by expanding one's heart and mind through making loving connections with others, and by creating and having a sense of purpose, romance, adventure and the like. Only through the greatest riches of love, experience and creation can the heart be filled, and may one truly find happiness."

"One may find that *fleeting satisfaction* is for purchase, but it cannot last, nor can it stand up to the level of satisfaction that must be earned. But so long as the lie that happiness is for sale is being successfully sold, those infected by greed will continue to sell it. It's sold commercially and it's sold politically, with each successful political campaign pretending to have a happier future to sell the gullible populace, even as what's sold is either not actually being sold, because the seller is lying and has other plans once power is claimed, or because the sale will be rescinded after the election through the obstruction of those on the other side of the perfectly divided political spectrum. The answer to the first problem, to buying contentment commercially, is *not* to buy, but to *earn*, and the answer to the second, to buying contentment politically, is not to buy into the current system built to perpetuate the *myth* of choice and democratic power, and instead to demand true democracy. But I suppose this starts within the individual."

"Through the aforementioned paradigm shift in what's required to create, or, as you say, *earn*, true, lasting contentment," Stacy adds.

"Right," Alex agrees. "I long ago learned myself that voids in spiritual satisfaction and happiness cannot be filled with possessions or wealth, but require richly rewarding experiences, relationships and a sense of purpose; those things through which fulfillment may be garnered and true value may be added to life. There's zero honor or integrity to most



commercialism and the consumerist fire it stokes.”

“Products are sold *not* to increase quality of life, as they would in any progressive economy, but to artificially stimulate our sense of need and desire, manipulate our fears and create deplorable dependencies in hordes of reflexive consumers. Almost every corporate enterprise, any enterprise excepting some nonprofits and select, increasingly more bought-out and thus rare small, locally-owned businesses plugged into and feeling a shared identity with their patrons, have but one goal: sell as many products as possible at as high a price as possible and with as little expense as possible. It doesn’t matter what the long-term cost to the consumer and the planet is.”

“Sugary, salty, fatty foods spiked with flavor enhancers and chemically-preserved to last forever, designed to destroy our discipline and appetite control, hijack the scarcity-based chemical reward systems of our brains and slowly kill us as gluttonous overeaters. Countless prescription drugs with crushing side-effects, including suicidal ideation, sold to address any deviation from the statistical average and to mislead us from the fact that, were we to gain good health and heal the underlying condition, we wouldn’t need to consume them for life.”

“But doctors don’t tell us this because there’s no money in good health. So they just keep on writing us prescriptions for chemical cocktails that conceal those conditions and distract and dissuade us from healing; cocktails our bodies don’t know how to naturally process. Razor blades with closely set blades made to clog as soon as possible so they can be endlessly repurchased. Anti-dandruff shampoo sold to those that actually only have a build-up of dead scalp skin blocking hair follicles, which is the true source of the itch.”

“You don’t have the rare disease dandruff, you just need to scrub more forcefully and remove the dead buildup of scalp tissue blocking your pores and causing the itch! Chapstick that only leads to ever dryer, more chapped lips over time, giving you the short-term feeling of moisturizing for the long-term cost of dryness and cracking. Antiperspirant deodorant that blocks the seemingly unpleasant sweat in the short term, but, in the long term, degrades the body’s ability to naturally perspire through the armpits and can cause cancer in the compromised lymph nodes.”

“Right...” Stacy manages.

“Take the disposable razor example,” Alex continues. “A correctly manufactured shaving implement need never degrade and can be used indefinitely. The steel composing the blades in razors never actually breaks down, and it’s the one core, indispensable component in the product. Furthermore, the additions of blades doesn't actually increase the effectiveness of the shave. Those illustrations they show of the second and third and fourth blades catching what the first blade missed are mostly bullshit. It doesn’t miss that much, and even if it did it takes, what, a few more seconds to go over it again? Rather, the manufacturer’s addition of blades is actually about adding more tiny gaps between blades that can be clogged so that the deceived consumer is more likely to toss the product, put on another one and buy another set as soon as possible. The little moisturizing strips are added for the same reason: another thing to degrade so that when the consumer sees it wearing down or gone they’ll toss what would otherwise be considered a useful implement.”

“So what do you have? Like most consumer products, something made to be thrown away as soon as possible purely for profit. So that you’ll buy more. Lasting products aren’t profitable. And therein lies the problem: profit equals waste. Waste *far* beyond the product itself.”

“Waste of natural resources, waste of the environment related to disposal and the emissions released through production, waste of the consumer's funds and the time spent purchasing that could be spent seeking true fulfillment and, with most businesses, waste of the efforts of the employees paid as little as possible and thereby massively restricted in quality of life because paying them more reduces that bottom line. And forget about giving employees an actual share of the profits! Any equity! Unthinkable!, the conventional business model says, and yet it's the *only* right thing to do.”

“Boiling everything down to this bottom line, in other words, boils away everything good and worth protecting and promoting. I’ve read a couple testimonials online by anonymous industry insiders who claim that most products, including everything from cheap consumer goods to computers, smart phones and cars, are *designed* not to last. Sadly, this makes perfect sense, as the longer the goods last the less often the newest models will be purchased by those retaining the long-lasting older models. Lasting, quality products go against the preeminent profiteering principles of minimizing manufacturing costs and

maximizing sales revenue.”

“So not only are endless ‘apps’ offered and minor additions being sold as ‘upgrades’ for smart phones so that we can buy a new one every year so we don’t feel like the outdated, uncool one in our groups, but they’re likely made to go glitchy after a certain number of software ‘updates.’ But we have to keep up with the trends, by God! We’re led to believe we’re keeping up with technological advancements when it’s more like we’re dependent, consumerist cattle, as little utility value is added between communications products, especially for those like me that mostly talk and text. And for good reason! Even if you love and actually use all the little bells and whistles there’s far more to life than ringing bells and blowing whistles! Put down the damn cell phone and be present in the moment! Rich experiences and the connections of love, the true measure of the wealthy life, is what you sacrifice staring into those little screens!”

“And ever more of our human interactions are taking place in this artificial realm all the time, gradually making us less human, less truly connected to nature and one another,” Stacy adds. “It’s social alienation via computerized communication; disconnection via artificial connectivity.”

“Well said,” Alex agrees again. “The dehumanization of communications technology.”

“Right,” Stacy continues. “We all lose something more real, more valuable, when our connections and communications are filtered through a synthesized conveyance. You can’t really know or feel the other person, you lose touch with the richer reality, with the greater part of the person, with the greatest rewards of life...”

“I couldn’t agree with you more,” Alex responds. “You’re preaching to the choir. You lose touch with the Spirit, the most essential element of life communicating through the heart and connecting all of us on the most substantial level possible. When you plug into the device, you unplug from this fuller, richer connection and the truth that it reveals. The question is then: is the device an extension of you, or are you an extension of it? And if somewhere in between, are you made less you in the extension process? Are you and your experiences and connections made thinner by being extended? By being stretched across this artificial realm?”

“That’s an interesting way to phrase the question,” Stacy replies. “So I take it you’re not into *Facebook*, then?”

“No, not really,” Alex replies. “While some may argue that it’s about sharing your life with those you love, with friends and family, it seems to me that this motive is less powerful than the need for the recognition and approval of others. Except for select pages and uncommon users it’s less about making true connections and challenging one-another with ideas and debating points of view than it is about this type of egotistic need... this insecure desire to be acknowledged and approved of and gain a sense of popularity or praise, whether by sharing something clever, some passed along video clip or sly remark, or by pointing out one’s activities to others. In turn, it tends to encourage the wrong tendencies; it tends to be about ego and rather mindless entertainment; about pride and simpler surface-level gratifications. Social media is also the realm where the prevalent human phenomenon of egotistic warfare is most pronounced.”

“Likely owing to the impersonal form of interaction, to the removal of the humanizing impact of the face-to-face interaction, anything posted to *Facebook* that’s the least bit contentious in the eyes of anyone tends to evoke the egotistic wrath of anyone and everyone invested in a contradictory notion, with such discord commonly devolving into mud-slinging. Being a thinker predisposed to posting ideas rather than mere occurrences, I think that I witnessed this disheartening display more than most.”

“Most of the nastiest experiences I’ve ever endured took place by way of disagreements conducted through social media, and little has pushed me closer to misanthropy. Don’t get me wrong, social media has its use; its value. Periodically catching up with people you’ve been close to in the past, seeing what people are doing, making plans and sharing dreams and information and all that. That can all be very valuable. And so can social media’s capacity, and the internet’s capacity in general, to rally, inspire and propel progress amongst the progressively inclined, with this last potential, highly underutilized virtue being what I try to use it for.”

“But it all depends upon who’s posting the information and why,” Alex continues, “as the opposite is just as true: the internet has equal power to discourage, condemn and compel people to obstruct progress towards the greatest good of the majority. It’s equally capable of spreading empowering information as it is of spreading oppressing

*misinformation*. Most everything is a double-edged sword. What was it that Edward Murrow said at the dawn of the communications age... ‘The speed of communications is wondrous to behold. It’s also true that speed can multiply the distribution of information that we know to be untrue.’ Or the quote, I’m not sure who said it first: ‘If you don’t listen to the news you’re uninformed, and if you do you’re misinformed.’ There’s great power in the ability to globally disseminate information with a keystroke, but because it’s so easy that power is easily abused, especially considering that more people tend to be in the wrong than in the right for the simple reason that it’s easier and more profitable to be in the wrong.”

“So it comes down to knowing who to listen to and why; knowing their motive, integrity, intelligence, conviction, how well informed they are and the like. Become informed as to the informer before consuming their information, or you do yourself and all those whom you influence a great disservice. So, all in all, social media and the internet and sources of information in general are, again, double-edge swords that have the capacity to cut through the obstacles to progress or to cut down the efforts of progressive proponents, depending upon who wields that sword and the qualities, and especially the motives, of said wielder.”

“But I think that when your use of social media becomes too much a part of your daily routine, and especially when the communications are trivial, like sharing what you ate for breakfast or posting where you are and what you’re doing on an ongoing basis, it starts to cost more than it’s worth, because you lessen the moment by getting less of what that moment has to offer by instead being overly focused on how the moment reflects upon your popularity and self-perception; your ego. I think you lose too much to opportunity cost. Sharing and scanning through the mundane minutiae of everyday experiences, spending time and energy that could be so much better, more enrichingly spent being as fully present as possible in those experiences, ultimately robs you of their full effect and value.”

“That time, energy and focus would be much better spent, as you say, on the far more valuable, truer, more enriching face-to-face interactions, and on going out, exploring, having adventures... You know, challenging yourself, reading, varying your experiences, getting some damn exercise... Being fully immersed in your existence and becoming a greater, more capable version of yourself better able to create value for yourself and others. Instead you have all these

ballooning bodies spending their sedentary work days in front of computers, just so they can spend their off time sitting in front of home computers or with their dumbing-down smart phones held to their faces, or zoning out in front of their commercially-plagued televisions, losing limitless opportunities to enrich themselves and others in countless ways. It's one thing if these activities are your break, but the more they become your daily routine the more it's your opportunities for far more rewarding experiences that're breaking."

"Absolutely," Stacy adds. "Endlessly instantly gratifying, minimized life lived in lieu of growing, going out, exploring the world's endless bounty and expending the effort to earn the more maximized life. *Twitter* and *Candy Crush* and endlessly binge-watching a thousand television series and making sure not to miss what everyone else is doing with their lives on *Facebook* while missing the chance to more fully live your own life..."

"Tweet if you're a twat thinking I need to know your every thought," Alex replies.

"Nice," Stacy says with a chuckle.

"It's like you said. The more electronically connected we are, the more personally and spiritually *disconnected* we are," Alex adds. "We lose the richer, fuller, deeper power and value of life, sacrificing the priceless pure experience of life for the artifice of it, living life filtered through devices, pretending our avatars are our true selves and losing touch with ourselves and sacrificing the fuller, natural form of connectivity in the process."

"Yeah, it does very often seem, like you say, as if unplugging from all devices is the best way to plug into life," Stacy adds. "I don't watch much TV anymore, really. Mostly for an hour or so on weekends. I may have to start boycotting commercially-compromised cable channels," she adds with a smile.

"Every company that advertises wants something from you; to absorb as much as possible from and through you; to cut off as big of a piece from you and as many other people as possible. *That's* the true nature of the absolute pursuit of profit and the corporate, commercial, consumerist constructs created to serve its unconscionable consolidators. Pure, equity-consolidated capitalism rewards and thus encourages the prevalence and perpetuated bloating of self-centered, irresponsibly exploitative assholes."

“It’s not an accident that such a large proportion of those that buy fully into its diseased ideals are so much more egotistically-overgrown and inconsiderate than the ‘eccentric,’ ‘idealistic’ and ‘delusional’ outliers living for purer pursuits. The greater the revenue-extracted-and-wealth-consolidated-to-value-produced-and-reinvested ratio, the more ‘successful’ the individual and the enterprise. *That’s* traditional success.”

“Progression and morality on a big picture, species-wide level dictates much the opposite: that this conventionally accepted form of success be redefined as a *failure*. A failure to serve the best interests of life. But so long as the right wing, conservative, traditional version of success is accepted by most, the result is inevitable: executives that build business models rewarding themselves by rewarding a select sect of major stakeholders by taking as much as possible from as many people, places and things as possible; marketers that specialize in what amounts to con artistry and the psychological manipulation of mental weakness, like Trump-esque political demagogues; and salespeople who shamelessly push products down our throats and aggressively promote themselves and their wares regardless of the quality of life value of those wares.”

“And we’re never to worry about how much of our personal information we sell when we buy, buy, buy, for we can trust *Google* and the *NSA*. They have our best interests at heart,” Alex adds in a sarcastic tone. “The information is only used to make our lives easier and to track terrorists... And who are the terrorists, you ask? Why, essentially anyone who resists the globalizing plutocrats that use the military industrial complex to plow inroads through any form of resistance.”

“This makes for a considerable list, of course, and includes not just those that target and murder civilians, as I would say is more befitting of the overused term ‘terrorist,’ but anyone that actively fights the freedom of the few to consolidate profit, wealth and power, and thus includes all morally-sound groups and individuals with socialistic leanings, as well as anyone actively resisting imperialist aggressions against the sovereignty of their nations, and any authors who write against plutocracy and for the pursuit of true democracy in the best interests of the people as a whole, which the plutocrats paint as unpatriotically fomenting violent insurrection, if not backing terrorism.”

“The bottom line for me is that as long as government and most business equity remains in the hands of the few then we the majority have no concretely logical reason to trust that they have our best

interests in mind. Taken together, these truths amount to the fact that traditional business and political practices promote the worst aspects of the ego-exacerbated, greed-mongering mind, at incalculable cost. Only when value production and merited distribution of the ownership of enterprise and the true, democratic control of government become the cornerstones of the economic and political realms will the path of the human race turn uphill and move towards the summit of our highest total quality of life.”

Stacy says nothing, only looks at Alex with a slight grin and bemused expression on her face, trying to make sense of him and his beliefs.

“And when it comes to our device dependency, it’s not just the commercialism beamed through them and the fact that our potential is suppressed and our value is extracted by the consolidators that I find so offensive. I’m just as offended by the opportunity costs we’ve been discussing, if not more so... by the fact that our addiction to sensory overload and instant gratification leads to few truly enriching moments and far less personal growth because we’re less apt to seek out ways to challenge ourselves,” Alex continues. “It reminds me of an interview of the actress Sophia Bush that I read. It was in the magazine *Health*, I believe. Admittedly, I flipped to the interview because she’s hot, but she pointed to a principle in the interview, a personal goal for the coming year, that struck and has stuck with me. She said her goal was to ‘go narrower and deeper.’ I find that a highly personally-applicable insight.”

“I go in so many different directions with my interests and activities that I fail to come anywhere near to plumbing their depths and deriving as much value from them as I can. This is both a gift and a curse, to be so ably interested in almost anything. More broadly, however, on a societal level, we all spread ourselves so thin and are so eager for instant payoffs that we fail to invest the time, energy and focus required to truly appreciate, grasp and grow from life’s more substantial offerings. Endless TV shows and products and websites and apps and social media posts and so forth.”

“But unless we take the time and demonstrate the patience and discipline to truly delve into things of substance, we take away very little from these experiences. They mostly amount to busywork and fleeting, forgotten, insubstantial entertainment. Only a small slice of the population even reads books anymore or truly works to master an art or studies subjects in depth or routinely seizes the inimitable moment. How many people will sit or lay under a blossoming fruit tree in order to



fully smell its flowers, appreciate the way the sunshine passes through the leaves and petals, the way the wind gently rocks it back and forth and the dynamism of the bees that bounce from flower to flower finding nectar without those people feeling like they're wasting their time as conditioned by western mores?"

On the television Maher's opening monologue has long ended and he is conversing with his interview subject, a man named Jack Hildegard. An author and avid outdoorsman, Hildegard has explored most of the National Parks as well as traversed the full of the Pacific Crest and Appalachian Trails, being one of the rare few to complete and document this full cadre of quests. Maher is interviewing him on his new book about his most memorable moments exploring the vast untamed US terrain.

"Now you see, *this* guy has the right idea," Alex begins anew. "The antithesis of artificiality. Adventures in the wilderness. Spiritual tuning. Diving deep into the heart of nature. And then writing about the experiences and inspiring others to get more in touch with their truest inner selves by getting *out* of touch with the plastic-wrapped, confined, carefully-cordoned-off life of the indoorsman. Look at the smile on his face. His life is likely so much more fulfilling, so much more enriching than most people's, and he contributes great value to the world by awakening people to the suffocation of their own lives by comparison, thereby spurring them to increase their quality of life through adventure."

"For sure," Stacy offers. Finishing her first cup of coffee she hands her mug to Alex, asking: "Would you mind refilling me?"

"Not at all," Alex replies. As he walks towards the kitchen he says: "I think that even the most urbanized of us possesses a deep, subconscious desire to return to a more natural state, whether we ever consciously recognize that desire or not." Refilling her mug, he adds: "And it makes perfect sense. For what's nature but purity? Existence free from the noise pollution, petty power struggles, divisions and greedy consolidators only found in the man-made world of mental corruptibility. Nature is life purged of its pollutants; pollutants of every kind. From all the polluting people, ideas and pursuits and their endless degradations."

"All corruptions of the body and mind exist as *unnatural* states; diseased versions of the healthiest, most natural states of all plants and

animals. The further from nature we drift, therefore, the more our hearts and the uncorrupted aspect of our minds whisper to us: return to the water and the woods; the flowers and the bees; the sky and the trees. The more that we experience fabrications, the more that we yearn for the purified, unaltered, Spirit-manifested real thing, and that's the very nature of the natural realm."

As Alex returns, he sees that Stacy has moved to the carpet in front of the TV and is performing a stretching routine. Legs spread almost completely apart, she's reaching out in front of her, bent over so far that her nose nearly touches the floor. With micro-motions she sways almost imperceptibly back and forth at the hips, gradually increasing the stretch.

Alex thinks to himself: "Should I feel more aroused or vicariously pained by this exhibition? Fuck man, why does it feel like I'm being tested from every angle? And why does everything have to make me so damn horny? Guys are too easy to manipulate; too driven by sexual impulse. Attractive women have the power to take over the world..." Stacy finishes her forward stretch and sits back up at the waist. Alex hands her the coffee, and she starts blowing on it to cool it down while keeping her legs in an almost complete split. "That's hot," Alex says, unable to help himself. Stacy raises her eyebrows at this, fighting back a smile. "The coffee, I mean," he says with a smirk, eliciting a big, beautiful smile from her.

On the TV, Maher has directed his attention toward an African American Congresswoman plugged into the Black Lives Matter movement. Perhaps to placate her and, ironically, considering how much he rails against it, likely based upon a common pressure to conform to political correctness (itself likely propelled by a need to appear 'in the right' and be accepted by his audience coupled with the fear of appearing insensitive at best, racist at worst), Maher says to her: "Many liberals say 'all lives matter' in response to the Black Lives Matter movement. I disagree, as this implies that all lives are equally at risk." The Congresswoman reflexively concurs.

"See, now that's bullshit," Alex pipes back up. "I don't think that's Maher's intellect so much as a need to be perceived as progressive and racially sensitive; maybe a touch of what they call 'white man's guilt' as well..."

"What's bullshit?," Stacy replies.

“He’s wrong,” Alex continues. “They’re both wrong, actually, at least in the bigger scheme of things... in the larger progressive picture, from my point of view. I agree with ninety-some-odd percent of what Maher says, but I think that his show precludes him from being truly progressive sometimes simply because, while lambasting those on the opposite side of the aisle makes for good comedy and ratings-increasing soundbites, it’s not good for changing opposing viewpoints, as such soundbites trigger angry, egotistic reactions and defensive postures. It’s near impossible to push those on the fence towards a progressive position when you’re insulting half of their current position.”

“That’s his show, of course, set staunchly on the left, arousing the passions and intellect of like kind, so I suppose that’s simply a part of the territory. But he loses the opportunity to convert most of the undecided at the same time. He sometimes also seems to oversimplify his judgments.” Stacy looks at Alex with interest, though says nothing, so Alex continues: “He thinks, for example, that any idea that touches upon spirituality is nonsensical fantasy because it lacks proof, while the truth is that the failure of people to produce proof does not mean that proof doesn’t exist. This is a presumption. Scientific evidence isn’t the exclusive path to truth; logic, in fact, will shine light on those paths before they can be scientifically mapped and proven to exist.”

“Like many that possess an absolute faith in the supremacy of science and its complete reign over fact, he mocks and derides some people and ideas because he assumes they have no merit, simply because the verifiable evidence isn’t there. Again, I get that his show is built on humorous provocation and mocking denunciation, but some of the things he mocks and denounces are more than he makes them out to be. I mean, I’m with him when it comes to religion, but not necessarily when it comes to how he engages religious individuals, and especially not when he attempts to consign spirituality to the hole-ridden ship religion attempts to sail upon, and which the well-reasoned are well aware is anything but sea-worthy.”

“And he makes similar errors when it comes to conspiracy theories, believing all theorists are quacks and that their theories are extensions of their quackery, whereas the truth is that those with great wealth and power *always* conspire to increase that wealth and power as a side effect of the mental corruption underlying the sickness of greed, and that these conspiracies tend to extend as far as they can before crossing the calculated line of the conspirators potentially being caught.”

“Granted, most ‘conspiring’ consists of exploring legal and grey-area tactics. But, in general, conspiring is endemic to being a player in the capitalist game, and it’s mostly a risk-reward assessment; a liability-to-profit calculation. The difference between the conspiracy theory and the existence of the conspiracy is often only a matter of producing the existing proof that, again, he seems to think doesn’t exist merely because it hasn’t been presented to his satisfaction. When plotters are reasonably certain they’ll get away with their plot and are well enough motivated, they’ll act, law be damned. And money is the common motivator; the basis of conspiring.”

“Those with resources know they can rely on the burden of proof and reasonable doubt, and lobby to make that proof more difficult to attain and that reasonable doubt easier to attain all the time, hiring the big legal guns to blow holes in the former and reinforce the latter. The more resources an individual has and the more involved they are in morally questionable behavior and business practices, the more likely they are to be experts at insulating themselves from culpability, as ‘justice’ is mostly a matter of being able to afford personal insulation and the legal protection of one’s pursuits, regardless of how iniquitous those pursuits may be. I mean, that’s the whole reason corporations exist in the first place, to be the legal actor or entity assuming responsibility for actions, just in case the shareholders and executives screw up or cross a legal line and need to avoid financial and legal responsibility for their wrongdoing. It’s easy to argue, therefore, that the corporate model *encourages* immoral tactics.”

“And those inclined towards and possessing clear motive to conspire want nothing more than for the prevailing conventional wisdom to be that all conspiracy theories are without merit, when in fact it’s always a matter of motive, means and opportunity coupled with the risk assessment. Every contemplated action is a cost-benefit analysis, from plotting to get a girl’s phone number to plotting how to get a country to approve of your warmongering tactics for the purposes of globalizing your corporate ambitions, as but two examples. And it’s not as if all conspiracy theories are created equal. I’m not talking alien overlords with moon bases or alien bodies and spacecraft crashing and secretly being studied in the New Mexico desert. But when motive, means and opportunity all align in a theory it’s at least worth keeping an open mind to what the theorist has to say, especially when the motive amounts to immense monetary gain.”

“That sounds reasonable,” Stacy offers.

“But in this particular case,” Alex continues, “he’s wrong to say that responding ‘all lives matter’ to the Black Lives Matter contention is equivalent to implying that all lives are equally at risk. That is not the implication, at least not to me. In the case of police brutality and racial profiling and prejudice black lives *are* more at risk. But that fact is separate from what I believe to be the larger, more important point that he passes over by dismissing the common response ‘all lives matter.’”

“And what’s that?,” Stacy plays long.

“He overlooks the larger, far more important principle at play in the difference between focusing on black lives mattering and *all* lives mattering. Yes, I can see how the racist and unscrupulous might cling to the ‘all lives matter’ rebuttal in order to appear to take away the moral high ground and forestall progress. But that’s missing the far more salient, invaluable point, and we can’t allow such reprehensible tactics as the aforementioned to obscure that point.”

“It’s missing the inimitable power of *language*. Because, for me, the larger, buried implication in ‘all lives matter’ is that the best way to address racism is *not* to focus on race; or, better yet, to refuse to perpetuate the prejudicially-born myth that the human race being divisible into different historical lineages separates us into different ‘races’ in the first place. These differences are more accurately translatable into varieties in the same human race that shouldn’t be starkly contrasted or absolutely distinguished from one another, as this divisive type of identity is perpetuating most injustice.”

“Our hereditary differences are not racial differences, but historical differences in the evolution of the same species along varying geographic and empirical paths prompting variant accompanying genealogical adaptations. Yes, these historical differences have created an *immense* variety of cultural differences well worth exploring and celebrating, but such exploration and celebration should never be taken to the point of creating or enforcing a notion of absolute racial distinction.”

“For never does such distinction demonstrate differences of heart or inherent mental capacity or in the basic driving desires for love, understanding, respect and/or any other far more important characteristic. Therefore, focusing on different ‘races’ is never insightful, progressive or valuable, and doing such will always breed misunderstanding in the connected intolerance, prejudice and injustice.

Therefore, anything that paints these dividing lines as black and white is inherently flawed and facilitating of evil.”

“Progress demands that those lines not be reinforced, but be blurred until, someday, they’re all but obliterated in our minds and thus are no longer used to drive wedges between groups of people. Only then may progress continue to push us towards an erasure of the unnecessary divisions that cause so much of the injustice in the world, and the evil acts that come from those small-minded, narrowly-identifying division-based injustices. Ignorance and the fears born of misunderstanding *always* breed divisiveness and destructive attitudes and pursuits across all fronts of humanity, economically, politically, socially...”

“Erasing that ignorance and fear and replacing it with understanding and connection always does the opposite. And, ironically, many of those that claim to aim for justice effectively perpetuate *injustice* by focusing upon encouraging the very division that underlies the injustice which they claim to fight against. Whenever possible the message, the language, should be focused on *people*, or even better, on *life*; on what all people and lifeforms have in common, which is most things, and everything that matters most.”

“Celebrate diversity, yes, but condemn oversimplified labels and categorizations, and always *act* upon commonality. For diversity isn’t about distinction, but about variances in the expression of the same thing, and when diversity is confused with distinction it becomes the basis of every manner of injustice. Therefore, focus on universal principles of rights and justice, not on races or the difference between identified groupings, fanning the flames of the divisive conflagration. Focus on the potential for producing universally-identifiable justice, not upon the petty differences and partitions that perpetuate injustice.”

“If your ‘progressive’ group is mostly or entirely composed of people fitting neatly into one classification, whether that classification is based upon ethnicity, religious belief, socioeconomic class, sexual orientation or most any other, you’re probably not progressive. This is true even if that one classification is victimized the most by the targeted injustice. The goal must be equality of rights, opportunity and treatment regardless of the narrow dividing lines.”

“It’s the difference,” Alex goes on, “in but one historical example, between Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., and one of the main reasons MLK inspired progressives and made much more headway: MLK

inspired loving, understanding-based unification rather than divisive, misunderstanding-based hatred. He focused on unification and universal justice, reducing rather than focusing on and broadening unnecessary, ignorance and fear-based dividing lines. Welcome people of all colors and persuasions to the side of justice and keep fighting with open arms, and justice will eventually prevail, though it may take decades for the pressure of injustice to mount to the degree required to provoke the people to punch through the obstacles to progress.”

“Exclude people from your fight and your army has likely relinquished the right to be considered progressive, and, in so doing, will be but a fraction of what it could be, and will likely be insufficient to overcome those usually massive obstacles. MLK’s open, inclusive, progressive attitude and unifying philosophy is epitomized in his quote: ‘Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.’”

“So you’re a fan of MLK then, I take it?,” Stacy asks.

“Absolutely,” Alex replies immediately. “There’s no way a spiritual, moral, progressive person can listen to his speeches and not feel inspired. I remember listening to a speech he gave in London just prior to receiving the Nobel Peace Prize, replayed by the excellent public access channel news program *Democracy Now*, wherein he summarized how far the Civil Rights Movement had come and how far it still had to go, and in which he expounded upon many of the misunderstandings and much of the hollow rhetoric still being deployed by those that resisted the movement... The man was simply amazing. He was one of those rarest of individuals that combined a brilliantly comprehensive understanding of the issues and connected unwavering conviction with an inimitable power of persuasion. He was the complete package; someone who exemplified the hero.”

“If I had to define the hero, he or she would embody three interconnected qualities: uncompromising conviction, unwavering courage and ceaseless persistence. If you don’t have the courage of your convictions and the determination to pursue them in the face of certain risk and obstinate obstacles requiring ongoing hardship to overcome, then you’re unlikely to produce progress, regardless of your beliefs, especially when those obstacles are immense and long-standing, backed by the prevailing powers and their diseased, deeply-entrenched values.”

“I mean, you may make a slight contribution by not buying into and supporting those that greedily seek to maintain the status quo and obstruct progress towards the greatest good for the greatest numbers, and by gently persuading people through your interactions, but unless your convictions are so well developed that you have the courage to actually actively fight for them, to fight through the resistance put up by the greedy oppressors and the ignorantly prejudicial regardless of the personal consequences, you can’t be heroic. Heroism necessitates a rare degree of bravery in accepting the fact that risking your life and financial status is worth the long-term gains for the whole of life, and becomes doubly potent when paired with a rare depth of understanding of the issues calling for such sacrifice. Whomever said it, that line ‘show me a hero and I’ll write you a tragedy’ hits home.”

“As those like Gandhi and MLK and even Jesus demonstrated, the truest heroes are likely to be forced to pay the ultimate price for their convictions; to heroically pay the highest price for progress for the simple reason that the spreading of their beliefs threatens established structures of wealth and power consolidation that the greedy consolidators will always wield their considerable means to conserve. These world-famous, semi-mythical men were leaders of non-violent movements against fixed traditions and structures that, on the surface, were costly to one group of people, but which, beneath that surface, were inseparable from unjust ideologies costing the whole of humanity in the long run. And they were so incisive in their jabs against injustice, and so inclusive in the appeal of their universally-applicative progressive principles, that *all* types of open-hearted, open-minded progressives found commonality in their causes, and they thereby produced such popular backing for their movements that success and directly connected personal costs became inevitable.”

“It essentially sounds like you’re saying something that I’ve heard before,” Stacy replies after considering Alex’s statements, “that the unifying force of love and understanding is ultimately more powerful and is thereby, on an extended timeline, destined to overcome the divisive, destructive forces of anger and ignorance.”

“Precisely,” Alex agrees. “Progress requires solidarity, because without it progress is precluded; consumed in the conflagration of narrow-minded conflict. Ignorance-based anger, fear and narrow self-identification will always prevent progress, inspiring an equally oppressive, if not regressive, reaction in those that possess the same detrimental qualities on the other side of the dividing line. The hatred



born of these blinders-on identities is based upon weakness, not only because they represent a failure to recognize and embrace the fact that the qualities of commonality and their cohesive force are *far* greater than the quality and force of separation, but because hatred is ineffectual; it produces no sustainable progress for those that act upon it. History has demonstrated time and time again that taking hatred to its extreme in action, committing murder, only creates a void wherein those individuals and organizations that are eliminated are inevitably replaced by others whom are likely to be just as antagonistic towards the killers as those that came before, and who return the pain and suffering delivered upon their narrowly-perceived ilk.”

“Ignorance, anger, fear and violence are only effective at engendering more of the same, born by a greater number of family, friends and others sharing their narrow identifications, not to mention the damage the killing does to those killed, to their killers and to everyone they come into contact with, all of whom absorb some of the detrimental impact of anyone bearing the ill effects of their wrongdoing. There’s always a ripple effect to causality. Nothing exists in a vacuum, free from its connection to everything else. We never see the full effects of our thoughts and actions, as they ripple across the planet far from the perception of our senses.”

“And as corny as it sounds, the practical and spiritual truth is that only the qualities opposing ignorance-based anger, fear and narrow identification, namely understanding-based love, courage and broadly inclusive, ideally universal identifications, can produce a sustained progressive ripple. Without these qualities there’s only division, a you-versus-me, them-versus-us, narrowly-perceived, progress-murdering mindset. In the case of the Black Lives Matter movement, saying ‘black people need to overcome white people’s racism’ immediately disaffects anyone that isn’t black, especially those identifying as ‘white people.’ White people are made villains regardless of their particular positions, as if we’re all responsible for the racism which, obviously, exists on *both* sides. You’re either unifying towards collective understanding, solidarity and shared identity, or you’re dividing towards narrow identity and continued conflict. It’s similar to the whole ‘black people have taken the n-word and made it their own’ thing. Sorry, but if only black people are using that word, then the inevitable effect will be prejudicially divisive.”

“Language is incredibly important, and the divisive use of it will, such as in the aforementioned two cases related to so-called ‘race relations,’ inevitably fan the flames of racism, encouraging bigotry and attracting

angry, racist people to both sides, creating further strife and violence without facilitating progress. True progress can only come through a collaborative, unifying approach wherein no credence is lent to identifications, or distinctions, that, with sufficient insight, especially spiritual insight, are revealed to be superficial at best, and which approaches the problem of racism along lines of principle and language which are universal in application. I understand that African Americans have been disproportionately victimized by racism in *this* country, yet progress is made by understanding and enacting root, driving principles, and in this case it's about absolutism when applied to identity, as it usually is in matters of division and injustice. The truth is that racism has victimized *all* genealogical lines mistakenly believed by the divisive to distinguish an absolute difference. I've seen all 'racial lines' victimized. And the prime philosophical and spiritual insights disprove absolutism."

"Michael mentioned this concept last night at one point..." Stacy replies. "You're saying that all identifications are ultimately illusory, and all thoughts and actions based upon them are therefore inherently erroneous and unjust, because beneath body and mind we're all versions of the same spiritual being... There's no true, lasting dividing line."

"Yes," Alex agrees. "Justice cannot proceed through divisive ideas, only through universal truths. So if you say 'all lives must possess the same rights,' whether those rights pertain to law enforcement, the justice system, voting within our plutocracy, sorry, I mean our 'democracy...' then the unnecessary dividing lines will, with conviction and the accrual of understanding, gradually erase ignorance and its obstructive and destructive mindsets, eventually rooting-out disunity so that the seeds of justice may be planted in their place."

"This strategy of promoting universal principles and identity as the basis of effective progressivism is true not just in the fight against racial prejudice, but in the countering of *all* narrowly-conceived and understood identifications that'll never be proven superior to inclusive identifications because they can't be, because they aren't. For any identity or message or movement that's inherently exclusionary won't lead to a sustained increase in quality of life for its followers, because they'll eventually run aground of conflicting identities, messages and movements, losing all potential sustainable increases in quality of life in the resultant conflicts, while also losing the opportunity for collaboration that all such sustainable progress ultimately requires."

“This progressive principle is applicable to many, if not most, common identities, including those based upon religion, ethnicity, sexual-orientation and lifestyle but *not*, I would say, ideological differences that lead to actions that impact the lives of most others, for people have a right to be free from the injustices, from the trespasses and oppressions, which result from unjust ideologies. So distinctions in *ideas*, in the contents of the mind, in thoughts and the actions to which they lead, *should* be judged for their impact upon total quality of life; that is, for their moral correctness, as anything producing an overall increase in total quality of life is a relative ‘good,’ and anything producing an overall decrease in total quality of life is a relative ‘bad.’ So it’s imperative that thoughts, ideas and actions be judged, for they have good or bad impact.”

“That, however, is the only valuable basis for passing judgment. For judging and drawing absolute distinctions between *people*, rather than upon the contents of their minds and results of their actions, will always lead to injustice. This is due to the fact that people always have a reason for doing what they do, always do bad out of some form of weakness, pain or pressure that isn’t an innate quality, and is typically something that can be rectified, and because everyone always defies the oversimplified labels that we apply to them.”

“Every label applied to people is wrong in that it never encapsulates them, and thus leads to misunderstandings breeding more injustice. This is a fundamental lesson that I’m constantly reminding myself of: the difference between judging and labeling the person themselves and judging and labeling their thoughts, ideas and actions. I haven’t been able to perfectly hold true to this critical principle, of course, but it continually reoccurs to me.”

“The principle that judging people is wrong but that judging thoughts, actions and ideas serves a critical purpose?,” Stacy asks, playing along.

“Yes,” Alex replies. “In fact, I find the maxim ‘judge not, lest thee be judged’ to be preposterous, both because it’s impossible to implement, and because judgment isn’t inherently bad, it just has negative connotations. Judgment is, in fact, inevitable and indispensable. We’re all engaged in judgment all the time, and would be doomed without it. We don’t always call it judgment, but our incessant judgment is a *fact*.”

“It’s how, what and why we judge that determines the relative ‘goodness’ or ‘badness’ of such judgment, not the fact that we judge in

and of itself. I judge certain actions to be beneficial, others detrimental; certain ideas to be rational, others irrational; certain principles and policies to be progressive, others conserving the status quo benefitting the few at the great cost of the majority, others worse, regressive, etc.”

“And because of the impact upon total quality of life and the planet generally it’s *always* wise to judge people’s thoughts, ideas, motives and actions, for not to do so leaves oneself and others open to their potential depredations when unchecked. But because people always act out of some deficiency when they do wrong, a deficiency which can usually be overcome, and because they’re always too complicated to be boxed into labels, especially condemnatory labels, it’s always foolish to pass judgment upon people themselves. I realize that this flies in the face of conventional viewpoints, but my analysis, and especially considering the nature of evil and corruptibility and the inherent limitations of people and the fact that every person is good in their hearts, has led me to stand by this position.”

“Essentially it sounds like you’re saying you’ve identified what you consider the causes of evil, and that *these* are to be targeted, not their enactors...” Stacy translates. “Not those that suffer from their symptoms.”

“Right, *exactly*. Well put,” Alex agrees, impressed by her interpretation. “It’s a fact that there’s always some form of weakness or deficiency behind every person’s mistaken thoughts and wrong actions and, in connection, behind any injustice and suffering they cause to others as a result. Behind every wrongdoing there’s always a pressure or pain or ignorance or deficiency. I’m in no way *condoning* evil actions, for we do, of course, as a law-beholden society, pass judgment upon and condemn those we believe we’ve proven have committed certain illegal wrongs, and this may, in fact, be necessary to discourage wrongdoing and to protect the victims of those unable to overcome their weaknesses.”

“And yet this doesn’t change my conviction that it’s always some form of weakness or pressure or something missing from the wrongdoer, or some confluence of these things, that lead to the wrong, not something innately inextricable; not an inherent evil. Essentially, the victimizer is *always* a victim passing along their victimization, and to the extent we’re able to identify the cause of their victimization we may reduce it, if not outright eradicate it, thereby stopping the cycle. Their wrongdoing is an effect caused by the thing, or things, acting against them. This is always true.”

“Beneath the contents of our minds, beneath everything that shapes our mindsets and opinions and beliefs that thereafter drives our actions, every person and, indeed, every lifeform is the same in every way that matters most, and by connecting to and understanding *that* aspect of every life, we may all love and respect one another on that heart-to-heart, perfectly common level regardless of differences of mind and body, including differences of belief and genetics. This is what we call ‘love,’ the realization of essential non-difference. Everyone and, indeed, every living thing may be understood, loved and respected on this level, and it’s never their fault, and always our fault, when we fail to try to make this connection in order to establish that love and understanding.”

“This is a deep, powerfully invaluable truth that directly connects to the fact that it’s never the person that’s inherently wrong or evil, but that the wrong or evil is born of that aforementioned weakness, pain, pressure, ignorance or deficiency. This, of course, ties directly into the truth about what evil is and its connection to humanity: man, and by that I mean man and woman, of course, is not inherently evil but inherently corruptible through the aforementioned weaknesses, pains, pressures, ignorance, deficiency etc. This is the source of the wrong and the evil, not the man or woman themselves.”

“The more people that realize this, and especially the more that both realize *and* act upon this truth, the better off humanity will be. In our hearts, we’re all inherently good. And this is true of *everyone*, including those we place in opposing camps and think of as our opponents or enemies. It reminds me of the central lesson of a sci-fi film I saw recently, my deceased grandpa’s favorite, *Enemy Mine*.”

“I don’t think I’ve seen that one,” Stacy replies. “Is it worth watching?”

“I certainly think so,” Alex states. “Like most quality films its entertainment value is passed through a parable. It espouses the essential message that even the staunchest, seemingly irrevocably-alienated enemies are far more natural brethren than natural foes. It’s but a matter of seeing through the mentally and historically-entrenched dividing lines to the far deeper uniting truths that, once clearly understood, eradicate ignorantly and egotistically perceived separations. Almost everything that I described before, every cause that leads to the effect of man-made evil, can be abolished and seen not to be inherent to the individual. Almost every form of prejudice and intolerance, whether bigotry, xenophobia, racism, sexism or what have

you, can be cured through understanding. Once we understand and eradicate the ignorance-based fear and anger through which we perceive 'others' as 'others,' our prejudice is cured."

"This is why spirituality and its preeminent lesson of universally shared essential Self has more potential to eradicate man-made evil than perhaps any other invaluable kernel of knowledge, especially when combined with the realization that I mentioned before: that evil is never inherent to the person, but is always an effect caused by some combination of weakness, deficiency, pain, pressure, ignorance etc.; that evil results as an effect of the corruptibility of the limited body and minds of people. This corruptibility leading to evil is a direct effect of material and mental existence but is *never* applicable to the underlying purely energetic shared spiritual Self that manifests itself into individualized forms. When this realization is combined with other realizations of Spirit, such as that we should treat other people not as an 'other,' but as a version of ourselves because, ultimately, everything and everyone is a manifestation of the One Self, most everything that causes man to do evil upon his fellow man can be wiped away from the thoughts and actions of those that come to these realizations."

"This is how deeper philosophical truths, and especially spiritual realizations and their interconnectedness with morality, will lead mankind into higher states of evolution. I believe these principles should be taught in school for that very reason: they're a shield against evil and, therefore, create greater opportunity for us to understand, love, respect and support one another's pursuit of our highest possible collective quality of life, a quality that can only be realized through solidarity."

"Which reminds me, I had this idea once, that, rather than cultures performing 'rites of passage' into adulthood, some should consider taking up the challenge of having *requisites* of passage; requisites that include demonstrating the learning of such fundamental lessons as those I just mentioned, and which also entail ethnic, cultural and lifestyle exchanges whereby the previously perceived enemy is targeted not for attack or conversion, but for comprehension and connectivity."

"A counselor comes to your house and probes you for your prejudices and designates an exchanging family accordingly. For some extensive period young racist white people, or at least those susceptible to such racism based upon how and where they were raised, live with the

families of those they think of in racist terms, and vice versa. Jews may live with Muslims, Shiites may live with Sunnis, over-advantaged, entitled, condescendingly-wealthy individuals may live with deprived, underprivileged families and so on.”

“Focus on the falsehood of the absolute dividing lines until those lines turn gray, blur and finally all but disappear along with the prejudice and associated unjust, evil-begetting mentalities,” Alex continues. “And when those lessons are passed on, and as this exchange program continues, all manner of ignorance and ego-based intolerance and connected injustice may be gradually reduced generation upon generation. How much ignorance, anger and injustice might be cured through such an upbringing and teachings, by a purposeful exposure to anyone and anything ‘other,’ especially those things provoking an ignorance-based fear response? By an upbringing and core academic curriculum not geared exclusively toward status and consumption-based career-and-wealth-building as the conservative, conventional course of education directs, but instead built upon core moral and spiritual principles as those we’ve been discussing?”

“Again, I’m not saying there’s no difference between people, and I’m especially not suggesting there’s no difference between people’s beliefs. I’m saying that the inseparable aspects of every individualized form of self are always *far* more substantial and telling of the truest nature of self than are the separable aspects, those elements not universally held in common, and that we can all understand, love and respect this far more substantial and revealing shared Self regardless of any narrow, limited, excluding identification we mistakenly attempt to divisively box one another into, for we never fit.”

“Therefore, justice demands that we see the wisdom included in the difference between judging a person’s thoughts and actions and judging the person themselves, especially considering the nature of evil: the fact that it’s an effect *not* of our inherent evil, but of the inherent weakness, deficiency, pain, pressure, ignorance, limited intelligence or the like that makes us inherently corruptible and capable of committing evil through these inherent limitations. This is why we must strive to understand and love everyone and bring them into the fold of what we see as the push for progress regardless of their positions, never condemning and separating ourselves from and giving up on anyone.”

“So you’re essentially arguing for revising the way in which we raise our

youth, inculcating core values of spiritual commonality, the difference between judging a person and judging an idea, the difference between inherent evil and inherent corruptibility, or inherent limitation, and the resistance towards categorizing, or labeling, people in any absolute sense, striving always to understand our shared nature, and to love one another based upon that essential, common aspect, even, and perhaps especially, when we disagree with one another,” Stacy summarizes.

“Good distillation,” Alex responds. “Yes. Anything that perpetuates intolerance of people should be abolished while, at the same time, anything that perpetuates intolerance of unjust *ideas* that diminish or oppress total quality of life must be encouraged. This just form of intolerance must, of course, be enacted with great tact and compassion, and never be forced, but persistently revealed through discourse and evidence and the like. Compromise, in other words, is not always a good thing, because it sometimes involves compromising the clearly greater good; that which is best for improving total quality of life. Pursuing the ideal should be non-negotiable, even if it’s never attained in our lifetimes, and even if we have to take baby steps to move towards it. But just because we refuse to compromise on what we know is right doesn’t mean we cannot understand, love and refuse to condemn and label those we believe think and do wrong for all the reasons that I mentioned before.”

“And we shouldn’t be timid or cowardly and stay within comfort zones wherein we attempt to encourage just progress only amongst those we view as progressives. The great challenge is finding a way to engage those on the other side of the fence while not treating them as an ‘other;’ by treating them with love and respect, by learning to listen, and always with the realization that there’s a reason for why they think and do wrong that is *not* core to their being. It’s absolutely imperative, in other words, that we see through to that universal aspect of every individualized self that we’ll always love and respect. Regardless of how much we disagree with a person’s thoughts, actions or position, that eternal aspect that’s the same, that makes us spiritually inseparable and radiates love every time it’s identified, is *always* there, held between everyone, however much it’s concealed by a sense of otherness and disdain created by our minds.”

“Commonality will always be the heart of just progress; the conscious or subconscious understanding that we always have more in common than we have in difference; that we’re naturally bound far more than



divided; that, from a spiritual perspective, our sameness is eternal, while our degrees of separation are short-lived, and that all qualities held in common are *always* more essential than those things that compel us to war amongst one another.”

“All treatment and rights must be governed in this way, based upon a universal justice, ideally spiritually informed. In the case of the Black Lives Matter movement, I’d argue that it’s better *not* to pursue progress beneath such a divisive banner, but instead to facilitate the erasure of ignorance and the deconstruction of fear held by many that underlies their prejudicial treatment of ‘others’ until they realize that ‘black and white’ is, in so-called ‘race relations,’ a book-by-its-cover superficial judgment, and the differences made of variations in genealogical history exist as anything but the stark black and white contrast that those victimized by their mental limitations, by their fear, ignorance, hatred, ego, dissatisfaction and the like, believe them to be.”

“The Black Lives Matter movement can be seen as emblematic of the divisive identifications underlying a large proportion of global injustice; arguably *most* injustice. If you truly wish to fight for just progress don’t focus on differences and exacerbate the sense of separation that perpetuates division and all the innumerable connected injustices. Bringing people together in solidarity along universal lines of progressive justice is the only way that enough popular power will mount to make that justice a reality. You have to change people’s minds by espousing insights of common nature and universal rights and opportunities for life.”

“You can’t do that flying a divisive banner, or by shoving your message down their throats. Those are simply ineffective, often counterproductive tact’s to take. They’re self-defeating. They tend *not* to bring people together, but to invest in and foment separations of identity, and thereby forego the power of numbers. It reminds me of that line that goes something like: the most common way people give up their power is by not realizing they have it in the first place, and the primary manner in which said power is relinquished is when some sort of boundary is placed preventing their solidarity. Yet, simply put, if enough people come together in common cause and refused to concede to the attempts of their oppressors to divide and conquer them, they can’t be stopped.”

“Individuals always have the power to produce change, especially when backed by powerful enough truths. And, as every effect multiplies

across humanity due to the endless nature of causality and our six degrees of separation, that power always has more potential than we realize, for it doesn't just increase but becomes exponential when it resonates with and unifies enough of us. It's only when we believe that we're powerless, that our voice and actions are drops in the bucket, that we become blind to the fact that our actions are actually waves rippling across the whole of life, and that, when combined with other waves, their exponentially mounting force can wash away *any* established obstruction of justice."

"And this power of common cause based upon common identity you see as the foremost force that, due to its very unifying nature, is unparalleled in its potential to produce lasting progress," Stacy states.

"Yes, it's immensely powerful and universal," Alex replies. "I'd add and connect it to the other lessons on the differences between judging people and ideas and the differences between inherent evil and inherent corruptibility. But what I call the Spiritual Rule, the treating of others as yourself because ultimately, they *are* versions of yourself, is the heart of it all. Then there's the truth of perfectly interconnected causality when it comes to human relations, and the relations between forms of life in general, which grants a very real moral texture to the Spiritual Rule."

"An endlessness of cause and effect that spreads from the judgments, thoughts and actions of one life to touch everyone and everything?," Stacy asks, quickly divining Alex's course.

"Yes, exactly," he replies. "The heart of morality may well begin to pump when based upon understanding and treating the causes of evil. And, as I said, all actions which may be deemed 'evil' are based upon some pressure, pain, weakness or deficiency. Moreover, as I've discussed with my housemates here, it's clear to me that no baby is born evil, only very vulnerable, limited and needy in body and mind. It's through this vulnerability, limitation and need that the body and mind may be corrupted and thereby gain the capacity for compelling the person towards actions we'd call evil; evil *isn't* innate to the person. This is the basis of all evil, which always has a cumulative effect."

"Causality dictates that all wrongdoings create more of the same, for their effect is always the infliction of more pressure, pain, weakness or deficiency, begetting more evil. For the same reason, all right doing is

based upon the relief and prevention of such things; the relief of pressure, the cessation of pain, the strengthening of weakness, the granting of opportunity and the filling of deficiency with sufficiency. That's the basis of all good. And, as with evil, doing good always begets more good. Evil begets evil, good begets good."

"This is undeniable; it's an outwardly-rippling force of cause and effect. For *nothing* is isolated; nothing exists in a vacuum. Everything spreads. Everything radiates. It's impossible to do evil to one without doing it to many, to everyone connected to that one which, ultimately, with sufficient time, ends up being everyone and everything. And you cannot do good without doing the same. The nature of causality, the perfect inseparability of life and the one true spiritual identity of all lifeforms, think 'the butterfly effect' or, again, 'six degrees of separation' and the Spiritual Rule, is therefore such that doing good to one is doing good to everyone, and doing evil to one is doing evil to everyone. This, of course, means that *all of us* have great power to impact the world, for even the smallest act has an effect. Though we never see all of its chain-reacting effects, *every* action multiplies across humankind and all of life."

"The ripples spread until they touch everyone and everything. And though sufficient good will always counteract evil of equal force, that same force of good would have spread to do good instead of being applied to prevent or amend for the evil if it hadn't been required to do so. And while one might argue that the witnessing of evil provokes the doing of good through the do-gooders' learning from said evil, as I myself believe that evil serves good in its own way without our knowing it, in order for good to ultimately prevail, to help us reach our highest collective state, the good must be done without too much provocation from evil."

"The evil must be prevented *while* the good is being done in order for the arc to ultimately complete its bend towards the greatest justice. That is, the good of prevention and protection, of denying negative total quality of life value, must be added to the good of adding total quality of life value. Good cannot be there merely to compromise with and neutralize the evil. And the best way for this to spread is through ideas and systems which naturally foster grassroots growth, each person passing it to every other until the sense of 'otherness' begins to erode in our separating minds."

“What you do to one you do to all, and the protection of one is the protection of all,” Stacy offers.

“Precisely, both indirectly, through causality and, with spiritual insight, *directly*,” Alex responds. “So, as per the lessons to be garnered through MLK, we must treat everyone the same and invite them to participate in the fight against injustice, *including* and perhaps especially those we perceive to be on the side of injustice. No matter what the prejudice-based injustice being combated, whether it’s about racism, sexism, orientation, the xenophobic, intolerant treatment of immigrants and foreigners in general... if your battle against the injustice doesn’t invite everyone to fly its ideological banner behind inviolable, universal principles of equal rights, protections, privileges and a meritocracy of opportunity for *all* people in *all* matters then you cannot be fully inclusive and, thus, must to some extent be exclusive and divisive, and you’ll be at least partially in the wrong and won’t make as much headway as you would were your progressive vision and approach completely inclusive and, thus, truly progressive and just.”

“Instead, you’re likely to perpetuate the qualities underlying the prejudice and thus the injustice itself, reinforcing the perceived differences separating those that clash and inviting bigots to the battlefield on both sides of the line you draw in the sand. That’s why, freed of any associations or coopting by those that might use it to *justify* their racism, and from the politically correct police operating on self-righteousness rather than reason, All Lives Matter has the greater potential. From a pure ‘power of language’ perspective, it’s far more evocative of a sense of inclusivity and commonality, the requisites of human justice. It’s unfortunate that it’s been soiled. But we shouldn’t abandon the language and the root principle because the racially divisive and the politically correct are bullying us into associating that principle with the problem, we should, instead, clean and reclaim it.”

“The rallying cry should be ‘All Life Matters in All Matters,’ and you could call the organization behind the movement the All For One Foundation. For we’re all really versions of the same energetic being. Even when our thoughts, ideas and beliefs don’t run parallel with one another, we’re all gradients of the same color capable of understanding and loving one-another on the most fundamental level. And, through this shared foundation, we’re capable of backing one another in a shared pursuit of our greatest individualized selves that I believe is based upon pursuing our greatest collective Self.” As Alex says this

Stacy, still sitting with her legs split almost entirely apart, leans forward again until her forehead nearly touches the floor. Between her stretching routine and the coffee he's guzzling, Alex can't decide which is increasing his heartrate more.

"Flexibility is highly beneficial," Stacy says, returning to an upright position. "I think the average person carries around this constant muscular tension and corresponding stress that could be avoided. Meditation is beneficial for a similar reason; it provides a means to let go of mental worries and accompanying tension. I took yoga classes for years before I worked it into my regular, everyday home life."

"It probably sounds really lame, like a pretension, but I play spiritually-evocative music, like Buddhist-inspired gongs mixed with nature melodies... you know, chirping birds and babbling brooks and so forth, while I stretch, and I get into this frame of mind that, when I'm fully immersed, truly feels transcendent. I combine the physical-tension-releasing of stretching with the mental-tension-releasing of meditation. And I swear there's nothing better for stress reduction than this yoga-like combination. If I start to feel overwhelmed or annoyed or frustrated or whatever, I shut the blinds, turn on the music, light a candle and do my own little meditative yoga routine. When I'm most successful, when I'm best able to quiet my mind at the same time as I release the tension from my body, I evoke this deep sense of peace that stays with me through the day... for *days* sometimes."

"I'd say that you centered upon your purest Self," Alex replies. "Refocused on your truest, most essential spiritual Self as free as possible from the demands of the body and the fears and anxieties of the mind. Swimming in the Spirit is always peace-pervading and rejuvenating. I find that there are myriad avenues by which to arrive at that place; where the mental self releases from its fixation upon extraneous, ephemeral matters; where the body and mind and most of the things that lock us into the material and mental realms, the stresses and concerns of the physical and mental self and the spacetime trapping the individualization of the Spirit that each of us represent can be sublimated to the point where they almost wash away, leaving only what is most essential. I've experienced that release and recentering many times during exercise, especially during outdoor exertions where I'm more in touch with nature in the first place. For that's what we're discussing, your sense of connection with the eternal within."

“At the end of a long hike, for example... ideally at times where I push myself as hard as I can to summit a steep stretch of terrain overlooking an expanse of natural splendor, and my body and brain are so exhausted that they all but fade away, drifting into the background, and my pure energetic Self, the Self that’s tied into but not bound by the mind and body, constitutes more of what remains. This is when we inhabit our purest, least corruptible state of consciousness. It’s like I’ve cut away everything but the core, enabling it to come to the forefront of my awareness, unobstructed and free from physical and mental distraction. Even individualistic self-perception, the ego, can mostly be subdued, leaving only the foundational, indispensable One.”

“Right... Yes, I believe that I’ve felt similarly,” Stacy replies after a few seconds, a bit dumbfounded. Unlike the still slumbering permanent residents, she isn’t familiar with Alex’s ideas. “So, you’re a Buddhist?”

“No,” Alex replies. “I mean, I’m no expert on Buddhism, but from what I’ve been told and what I’ve read thus far I’d say that Buddhism is on the right track in many respects, and that I identify with it more than most religions. But, like most religions, it contains only pieces of the puzzle, not the puzzle itself, which is bound to and circumscribes everything. It offers highly valuable principles and practices. I think that the idea of centering yourself, the attempt to simplify life, to become minimalists, to denounce greed, to abandon the prioritization of material and sensory gratification, and perhaps especially the practicing of mindfulness, the immersion in and appreciation of the distraction-free, ideally fully-aware moment, are all worthwhile Buddhist-sourced or Buddhist-related ideas and pursuits.”

“And, again, I believe meditation can help you minimize mental hindrances, guard you from an enlarged ego and help mitigate the onset of greed and hatred. I also appreciate the notion of learning not to cling, for everything is transient and we’re not fully in control of nor can we truly own anything, so the clinging to things always invites suffering, as Buddhism teaches. But this is a slippery slope, as I find it very difficult to differentiate between clinging to people and things and fully, passionately delving into and thus more fully coming to understand and love them. Not to mention the fact that I’m a passionate, intense, even obsessive guy by nature, so not ‘clinging’ is very difficult for me and often feels futile. I recognize the wisdom in it, the avoidance of suffering and the awareness of the transient nature of our current forms, but I’m

not sure it's something you can truly put into action without withdrawing from life."

"If you can stoke the fire of passion that makes life most worth living *while* not clinging, then you truly have something. Yet I believe this to be all but impossible, and, therefore, focusing too much on not clinging is highly risky in that it tends to move you in the direction of being unengaged and dispassionately distanced from the best that the world and life has to offer. So you might say that I have my doubts about its core tenets. Again, I'm anything but an expert on Buddhism, but it seems its foremost maxim is the avoidance of suffering through the denial of desire. Buddha's foremost concern was the prevention of suffering through the denial of desiring those things which, when they cannot be had or when they inevitably perish or go way, create suffering. This includes, I believe, not just things outside one's self but one's self as well, for we are, in this form, fleeting, mortal beings and, thus, clinging to our physical and mental selves invites suffering as we pain to prevent our inevitable dissolution, the reabsorption of small self into Big Self, as some Buddhists might say."

"On some level, the level of ego divestment and honoring of Spirit, our divine essence, I find this very wise. We shouldn't cling to any notion of self that conceals our truest Self shared in common with all of life; indeed, with everything in existence, for everything is really a facet of one thing; of pure, irreducible spiritual energy. But on another level I find this notion of avoiding suffering by not clinging to anything impermanent troublingly problematic, for, as I said a minute ago, I find that becoming fully absorbed in people, places and things that enlarge our heart and provoke our minds will always come with risk; the risk of losing the pleasure and fulfillment that they offer; i.e. the risk of suffering."

"How can you be fully immersed and fully love without the connective attachment? Without the attachment that seems indivisible from what Buddhism calls clinging? It's like it wants to have its cake and eat it too; to be mindfully immersed in the moments of life and passionately engrossed in people, places and things bringing fulfillment yet at the same time have no need of them, nor any real desire; have no issue with their loss. I don't think this is possible, at least for the vast, vast majority of people that're setting themselves up for failure in such a quest. I couldn't love as stoutly as I love without risking pain from losing that love. It's almost like Buddhism is *too* interested in reducing

suffering, inviting lost life. Not clinging to this form of existence to some degree, in other words, may encourage all but the best conditioned of minds to draw near to not engaging in life in the first place, and to thereby waste the invaluable gifts on offer in their lives.”

“And maybe I’m missing the point, but Buddhism also seems to suggest that all suffering is inherently bad, and anything and everything should be done to overcome it. It seems to say: don’t want or need anything and you can’t be pained by the possibility or reality of being deprived of it, which, as a mortal, you inevitably will be. So it’s all about letting go, it seems, which, to me, similar to not clinging, can be very valuable on the level of letting go of the false, misleading sense of self and to what we can’t control; to letting go of worry. But too much of this mindset betrays the very point and higher values of life: experiencing people, places and things as completely as possible to the point where you have as much as possible that you *want* to hold onto.”

“Again, if you can do this without clinging, then you’re onto something. However, I don’t believe this is feasible for the *vast* majority and, therefore, most of its practitioners are likely to betray the value of life by denying the rewarding desires that will always come with the risk of suffering. Relatedly, it seems to make the mistake that most religions make, another mistake along the lines of betraying the inherent value of life, in suggesting that life should be about more than *this* life; that one’s life should be spent endeavoring to deny desire and suffering and, in the process, in the attempt to attain a higher afterlife, a state of enlightenment and avoidance of repeating the cycle of reincarnation. Attempting to level up to a higher plane of existence misses what I see as the primary point of life: pursuing the maximization of its inherent value; trying to maximize *this* one and only life for oneself and as many others as possible. Living in service to the gift of life, and thereby demonstrating your thankfulness for the divine of that priceless present.”

“So, I believe Buddhist practices and principles have value *to an extent*. But I don’t think that we should enforce a line of non-clinging and non-desiring and suffering avoidance. Because, when this becomes the hyper focus of its adherents, it undermines and short-sells the inherent value of life while entertaining the delusion of an afterlife; a higher plane of existence gained after sufficient reincarnations of a separate soul, in this case, missing the great wisdom that we’re all indivisible



facets of the same soul, Spirit, and that life is, again, its own purpose; its own point; its own series of invaluable moments to be maximized.”  
“Life is a gift that *should* be desired, along with endless varieties of experiences attainable through that gift. These gifts shouldn’t be taken for granted nor left unwrapped. And suffering is the cost of personal growth in this material, finite existence; an existence allowing for infinite variety and forms of the One. So, don’t run and hide from the best that life has to offer just because the path to those gifts goes through a realm of suffering. Embrace the fact that some suffering is necessary and that, ultimately, suffering breeds sagacity. The lessons it endows make it a great, empowering teacher.”

“Pain,” Alex goes on, “is a necessary side-effect of physical and mental existence and, when learned from, offers incalculable rewards, including the knowledge and experience of pleasure and happiness unknowable *without* pain, as relative ‘good’ cannot be known without contrasting it with relative ‘bad.’ In this way, both desire and suffering are of immense, irreplaceable value, and are built into the physical existence that permits limitless experience of the one spiritual Self.”

“And, again, I believe the goal of each of these life experiences is to maximize its inherent value, its innate quality, both for oneself and other forms of the One Self. And, certainly, pursuing this course of total quality of life maximization requires the learning and application of lessons and fundamental philosophical principles, many of which cannot be fully understood *except* through suffering which, on a total life level, mounts as a collective pressure propelling progress towards the greatest good of gradually maximizing the total value of *all* life. Center upon the shared true Self and harness it in *this* life, *this* realm, the one and only realm; a realm not to be sacrificed for an egotistic delusion of leveling up to the fantastical higher realms of being; not to be sold out for a hierarchical, mythical construct.”

“Interesting,” Stacy says after a few seconds. “Don’t sacrifice the invaluable gift of life for the fantasy of a better world, but work to make the one existence known to exist a better one for everyone, a goal which must be suffered to be gained... I can see that.”

“And through improving the quality of other lives you increase the quality of your own life through the spiritual and mental rewards derived from improving and guarding the quality of life of others,” Alex continues, “of as many lives as possible. Life is inherently valuable, that

value is its purpose, and we should strive to maximize that value; *that* is the point of life. It shouldn't be taken for granted, nor wasted by imagining it to be a step up a mythological ladder, nor spent continually dodging those things which, yes, may come with suffering, but offer growth and enrichment far worth the pain and effort. Suffering is the price paid for putting oneself out there and fully loving people and things, for learning many lessons, for gaining wisdom, for becoming a better human being for one's self and others. It builds character and appreciation for life. It's also the truth in contrast; in distinction. One can't really know or appreciate happiness without knowing suffering. Happiness is only known as happiness because of suffering, as with pleasure and pain or the light and the dark."

"If there were only pleasure it wouldn't be pleasure, just existence. We'd become numb to it, stop knowing and experiencing it as we know and experience pleasure, and would come to take it for granted. It would thereby lose its value. Also, I hate to say it, because, again, there's much of value to Buddhism, but I think Buddhist practices can be irresponsibly escapist. The lifestyle of the devout Buddhist that spends most of their time at temple in worship, meditation or other practice seems much like someone that has checked out of life. They miss all those opportunities for greater enrichment and quality of life that I just mentioned. They miss life. They forsake its potential."

"And they also fail to produce value in the world for others. It's like Einstein said: 'Try not to be a person of success, but a person of value' or, as I would amend his statement, define your success as a person based upon the value that you derive from your own life and the value that you create in the lives of others. And from what I've seen, many Buddhists seem to avoid taking responsibility for this distinction altogether. And, again, I don't believe in reincarnation of separate souls, but in the internal interchange of energy into and out of matter derived from one shared Spirit; one consciousness of pure energy spread across all spacetime for the purpose of limitless existence of Self."

The two new friends sit in silence, engrossed in their thoughts.

"Your comments on the Black Lives Matter movement actually have very wide ranging application, I just realized," Stacy remarks. "All these identified groups that attempt to rally for justice, for equal recognition and treatment, error by focusing on the elements of *inequality*... by focusing on what makes them *different* from those they wish to be

treated the same as, and by excluding those that would share solidarity with a universal message of equal lawful and cultural treatment were they not excluded from the group, either implicitly or explicitly. It reminds me of a feminist literature course I took, and some of the gay pride parades I've been to in San Francisco wherein battle lines were drawn in the sand, so to speak, and that, by drawing those battle lines, the same injustices are perpetuated."

"I recall how, in the Feminist Lit course, we learned of the so-called 'second wave of feminism' during which, post early twentieth century women's suffrage, it was debated amongst the diverging female leaders of the movement whether to disavow the male-dominated institutions and form separate institutions altogether, what you might consider the Malcolm X approach, or to take what you imply is the higher Martin Luther approach and work for inclusion and gradual reformation of patriarchal institutions. Anger, violence, ignorance and separation, or the longer arch approach of patient, loving understanding and reconciliation."

"Yes, excellent point," Alex remarks, impressed by Stacy's ability to dig for and pull up the root truth underlying the concept they'd been discussing.

Nothing is said for a few minutes. Maher is questioning his panel as to the oxymoronic concept of the rational religious person, a favorite topic of his. "I hope you don't take this the wrong way," Stacy begins anew, "but while I find your assessment of Buddhism very interesting, and your spiritual beliefs, which I'm only beginning to comprehend, even more so, it seems a bit ironic that you find the practice of Buddhism escapist and irresponsible considering where you live... You said yourself you like to live outside of the world as much as possible."

"Don't worry about offending me," Alex replies. "I'd much rather you say what you think, that you challenge me, even if it's a criticism. And I think you're right, but only up to a point. It reminds me of that Native American proverb: 'It's easy to be brave from a distance.' I, like most, am guilty of that to some extent. Yet I think of my lifestyle as living not outside of and failing to serve life and the world at large, but more as living outside of those conventional confines and pursuits of the prevailing Western lifestyle that I find narrow-minded, shallowly-concerned, costly to life and thus morally and spiritually empty."

“I live outside of the rat race; the artificial, consumerist, corporate, bourgeois form of life where the value assigned to human beings and life in general is based upon *financial* worth, rather than being based upon maximizing the inherent value of life, and where the privileged few are constantly finding ways to use their resources and other advantages to profit off of the relatively disadvantaged, both in the economic realm and the political realm that regulates commerce, with the two essentially being run by the same colluding set of corporate shareholders plundering the people and planet through our plutocracy.”

“I very much like the idea of not supporting or even relying upon that part of the world; of being able to produce all the energy and food and most of the money we need from what’s cultivated and brought to fruition *right here*, on-site. Moreover, I don’t think I’ve entirely abandoned the world. I write and maintain a website, and the focus of both my writing and my online presence is to fight those things I find detrimental to the overall quality of life of the human race and the planet, and to offer and promote alternative ideas that I believe produce far superior total-life-boosting results.”

“With enough of a backing, I hope to found and help grow a non-profit organization used to pursue these objectives. And though we’re just getting started here, the goal is to sell or donate any of the produce that we harvest and don’t consume to needy locals while disseminating the concept of this community-based farm and residency, as I believe in the cooperative model. And while I find much of mainstream American culture disgusting, that disgust isn’t universal, and doesn’t hold me here entirely. Amanda and I drive into Anderson Valley to visit the local vineyards and wineries. We go to State Parks, kayak the local rivers and Pacific shoreline, and we even go into San Francisco from time to time.”

“But compared with the hustle and bustle of everyday city life,” Alex continues, “I think the rural life, especially when it coincides with trips into the near limitless splendors of the *great outdoors*, is *highly* underrated by city dwellers. I find the untamed forest, ocean, mountains and river valleys indispensable environments for the maximization of existence; for the true enrichment of life; the only possible antidotes for the nature deprivation suffered by modern man, mostly unawares to them, and incurring great costs across humankind’s existential quality. Depression, anxiety and general dissatisfaction with conventional contemporary life can be linked to this as much as anything, I believe; to our being removed from the natural, Spirit-rich

environments in which we all evolved and are meant to be rejuvenatingly-immersed. Pure urbanites sacrifice too much, pay far too high an opportunity cost, by living most of their lives far removed from the natural realm in which we evolved and are inseparably bound to and drawn by through a sort of spiritual gravity.”

“That makes sense,” Stacy replies. “And I agree with you.”

On *Real Time*, one of the three members of the weekly panel is becoming agitated. An older woman wearing a gold cross has pulled it out and laid it atop her black turtleneck. The cross has just become entangled with the small microphone pinned to her turtleneck, and is creating a grating electronic feedback that the show’s producers are frantically attempting to correct, trying to persuade her to place the cross beneath her shirt. But the woman resists, proudly proclaiming that she refuses to conceal her faith. Eventually she relents, saying: “As long as you don’t forget it’s there, Bill,” to which Maher replies: “Yes, I’ll try not to forget about your imaginary friend.” The woman, of course, isn’t amused, and begins to engage Maher in the irrational, blinders-on theological debate typifying religiosity, completely dismissing the logic of the host and the other liberal on the panel, also a proclaimed atheist, and refusing to allow anything that threatens her belief, no matter how concrete, to penetrate her mind. Maher calls this removal from rationality “living in the bubble.”

The gold cross is an irony that never fails to both amuse and disturb Alex, representing as it does such a blatant ignorance or failure to comprehend the core wealth-renouncing messages of Christ, the moral and spiritual philosopher whose *true* teachings only scantily survive in the officially accepted testaments of his life and lessons. Her gold cross being flaunted with self-righteous pride for all the world to see only doubles the ugly irony, as it’s a clear indication of the egotism which most spiritual searchers consider a foremost obstacle on the path to spiritual truth. Moreover, it’s conservatives such as her that act to conserve the very endeavors, attitudes and ideology which Christ was committed to counteracting, and whom most often wear his symbol and profess to be his champions.

Christ’s ideological enemies are now the very people that adorn his symbol and pretend to act in his name. It’s all too common for those that actually act *against* the heart of concepts and convictions to arrogantly waive their flags, as if acting to assuage their own

subconscious guilt and demonstrating a great compulsion to convince others of their righteousness. And yet, anyone *truly* approaching righteousness feels no such overwhelming need to prove it to themselves or others. The irony!

Christians acting against Christ. Armies of peace, freedom and democracy invading, occupying, exploiting and destroying any efforts to create true democracy both abroad and at home, on behalf of entrenched plutocratic puppeteers and their consolidating corporate colluders. Those that secretly sense that they're on the side of evil have the greatest need to convince themselves and others that they're on the side of good. It's pure compensation and deception, both of others and themselves. Beware those waiving the self-righteous flag; that shout the nationalistically supremacist Star-Spangled Banner; that pretend to bear the cross of the spiritual philosopher crucified for fighting their forebears. Alex scoffs.

"What?," Stacy inquires. "You mean to tell me you're not impressed with this woman?," she adds, clearly tongue-in-cheek.

"This is part of why I say don't worry about offending me," Alex answers. "Look at how agitated she's becoming; how flushed her face. It's really sad. She's promoting this book about, what was it again?, America losing touch with its religious roots, with its great moral foundation, and yet her actions, her affect and presentation betray her. Deep down she knows that her foundation is built upon unstable ground."

"What do you mean, exactly?," Stacy asks while contemplating his point.

"Look how desperate she is," he replies. "Look how aggravated her defense. It's a clear sign of insecurity; that she's not truly secure in her professed beliefs. You see this type of display most often from people that are missing something in their argument or understanding, or that have unstable, insecure egos, often because they consistently lack the knowledge or intelligence to mount convincing arguments."

"Somewhere deep down she knows her fight is for an unjustifiable position, but her ego won't let go. Letting go would be seen as a defeat that her vulnerable ego, which is clearly heavily invested in this position of hers, can't tolerate. She can't consciously acknowledge it to herself,

even though instinctively and subconsciously she knows it. And so she fights herself at the same time she fights the challengers, and you can see her internal tension; her agitation demonstrative of her insecurity. It's written all over her face and actions. Her ego is stepping in to fill the gap in her certainty. Her show amounts to unsuccessfully compensating for her untenable position."

"This is one of the surest outwardly-evident signs of those that back mistaken beliefs, ideas, values and the like: how they respond to those ideas, beliefs and values being challenged. If the person not only permits but invites and coolly responds to the challenge, the critique, they likely back something substantial, well-founded and valuable, knowing that the challenge will only prove that they stand upon stable ground, and perhaps even help them strengthen and clarify their understanding and expression of that idea, belief or value."

"If, on the other hand, they react as this woman is reacting, not replying to the challenges but blocking them out, becoming agitated or outright angered at being asked to explain the weaknesses of their position, becoming more emotional and aggressive at every turn, then they more than likely are in the wrong, and a part of them knows it. It's a tell. An underlying nerve of insecurity has been struck, and she's futilely attempting to conceal and compensate for it. Even the egotistic, self-righteous manner with which she wears a cross and turned her nose up at Bill at the beginning of this little squabble, when she condescendingly addressed him and his lack of faith, reveals that her professed belief is insubstantial, as she needs to reinforce herself with egotistic pride just to carry her empty standard into this little battle."

"And your contention is this compensation for mistaken belief is rooted in an insufficiency of intelligence or knowledge?," Stacy asks, digging for the root of Alex's theory. "Are you implying that she's essentially doomed to vainly struggle to uphold untenable positions because she's an imbecile?"

"No, I wouldn't say she's doomed, just highly susceptible," Alex answers. "She's more vulnerable than those possessing a higher degree of intelligence to mistake mistruths for truth. She's more gullible; an easier mark to be sold a bill of goods at great cost. She's a better target for those that sell conservative traditions for the sake of the beneficiaries of those traditional values, beliefs and pursuits because she's less disposed toward and able to utilize critical thought to see

through the false façade of traditions handed down from generation to generation which, in the modern day, are being perpetuated by corporate-stake-holding plutocrats in collusion with their political puppets. She hasn't developed sufficient self-defenses against the advertising, greed, fear-mongering and the like of which we're all assailed by the forces conserving evil effects. She's less likely to ask the important questions, such as: Who stands to benefit from the popular belief in the heavily edited accounts of Christ's life?"

"If she asked and came anywhere near to discovering accurate answers to such questions, then she might be freed from her victimization. Questions like: Where did these accounts of Christ's life come from? What was their historical use, and what is their contemporary use? Are there *other* testaments, and why are the ones in the accepted canon accepted in the first place? How and why did they prevail, and what's absent from them, and what is the reason for this absence?"

"She's unlikely to have even asked these questions of motive and historical derivation, much less found the illuminating answers shielding her from blind, naïve faith and obedience, and is thus far more likely to swallow what she's been served whole, without masticating it in the critical, cynical part of her mind; without questioning the value to her mental and spiritual health of such consumption, so to speak. So she's choking on that unhealthy fare."

"She hasn't learned the indispensable value of cynicism in a society filled with mental manipulations tilted toward satisfying one-sided political, economic and theological equations that, when narrowly calculated, cause great imbalance and division. And it's not necessarily that she's 'stupid,' as you inferred from my statements, for such a judgment is too black and white; an attempt to distill the immensely complex human mind and its vast spectrum of qualities into a straight-line result. But what I would say is that she's victimized by her own limitations, and those limitations appear to be far greater than Maher's, for example."

"My first response used to be anger and indignation when I listened to people like her, but gradually I'm starting to feel more pity than anything. I'm training myself to ask how I should see those who are victimized by a greater degree of ignorance and incapacity than I might suffer, and thereby are less capable of reaching the conclusions that I have. It's like they've gone into battle without a shield. And that isn't



their fault, as we were discussing recently, for this is a shield which they must either be born with or equipped with by powers that actually want what's best for her..."

"So she's not stupid, just not capable of preventing her own victimization?," Stacy asks, sounding slightly annoyed.

"All that I can say for certain is that she lacks the knowledge needed to prevent herself from assimilating erroneous beliefs which others, such as Maher and myself, are far less prone to accept," Alex replies. "And knowledge, of course, comes from understanding, which is itself derived from a combination of inquisitiveness, information and comprehension, with inquisitiveness and comprehension being strongly linked to inherent mental capacity; to intelligence. So, yes, her issue is at least partly based upon the vulnerability linked to relatively low intelligence, but also on the information that she's been exposed to and which she's been inquisitively compelled to seek-out during her lifetime. The relationship between knowledge and intelligence is interesting to me."

"While commonly conflated, knowledge and intelligence or, on the other end of the spectrum, ignorance and stupidity, are not the same thing, even though many people use the terms interchangeably, saying that someone who knows something is 'smart' and that doesn't is 'dumb.' But this is falsely oversimplified; a confusion of two related but different characteristics."

"Because not knowing something and not being able to understand that something are not necessarily the same thing..." Stacy offers. "With the difference being exposure to the information required to displace one's ignorance with knowledge, and the ability to perform such displacement."

"Right," Alex agrees. "That's a good way to put it. You can be the smartest person in the world and have no access to the information that gives rise to knowledge. You might be brilliant but born in a rural village and into a family struggling for subsistence wherein you never see a book or gain access to a computer or the internet and never meet and become exposed to the ideas and perspectives of anyone outside your family or tribe your entire life. You could, hypothetically, be the most intelligent person in the world and be born and spend your entire life held captive in a dark, empty cell. I imagine such an unfortunate person having no access to any information beyond the darkness, their

imaginations, their reasoning skills and whatever interaction they may have with their captors. And, of course, even their imaginations would be severely developmentally-restricted, as imagination springs not from nothing, but is based upon what we know and have experienced. And most of what this hypothetical individual would know would be based upon what's called 'a priori' information; information which exists before experience; before exposure; which is minimal. They'd simultaneously be the most intelligent person and one of the most ignorant people in the world."

"And this is before delving into the complexity of intelligence itself. I see intelligence as being a relative, multi-dimensional or multi-faceted mental capacity. Despite the attempts to capture it cleanly and definitively, such as with the IQ Exam and other assessments, it's not black and white and can never be completely quantified by any one test. Every test will give but a confined perspective on a certain subset of an individual's knowledge and capacity, assuming, of course, that they weren't under some sort of pressure or tension which interfered with and rendered the results of the test unreliable in the first place."

"And, again, this capacity *isn't* black and white. I see intelligence as being a matter of a multitude of types and relative intensities. So, instead of being black and white or measurable across one linear progression, it's more like... like a light shining at relative levels of intensity at and through some full-spectrum collection of prisms, with the projected, resultant light allowing for *many* different combined colors and gradients of intensity. Every intelligence is unique in the combined intensity and distribution of its shining light."

"Or intelligence might be conceived as being like a volume level measurable across different resonating wavelengths," Alex continues. "There may be as many modes of intelligence as there are frequencies and waves of sound, myriad of which are contained within each instrument, each form of life, and with each emanating frequency amplified to different volume levels. The frequencies and their relative amplification and the way in which they combine creates the mental music of every individual, if you will."

"And everyone is playing a different score that determines their capability; the thoughts they're capable of, what they're able to do and produce and how much value they're able to create. Or, if they're self-absorbed and mentally corrupted, how able they are to *extract* value

from the world. Yes, some people play louder, livelier music than others, but the melody is always unique, and demonstrates their special aptitude: the ideal means by which they may sound their special cacophony of mental qualities for their own benefit, and for the benefit of all that stand to gain from their potential being realized.”

“Aptitude is very important. It’s overlooked and undervalued. Like health and nutrition, I think it’s one of the first subjects that should be taught in school, as it’s an essential part of every person ‘finding themselves,’ and applying that truest mental self towards the most valuable ends for all. From this particular standpoint, knowing thyself, defining your capacities, is substantive, and much different in my mind than crafting a self-identity, an ego, that inflates or deflates you, as the former is measurable and is readily put to the service of one’s self and life in general, while the latter is interpretive and typically narrowly misleading, distracting and undermining. Aptitude is about knowing how best you may serve yourself and life. Stop there”

“For you need not narrowly define who you are based upon this, as aptitude is only a small portion of a self-definition that need not occur in the first place, and is never accurately defined, as who you are is immensely more complex and fluidly changeable, being based upon your ever-dynamic thoughts, actions and beliefs. But finding how you’re best fitted to serve life is a very worthy search both for one’s self and others. For it’s not just productive value, it’s key to happiness as well.”

“Because a person can’t be happy unless they find and follow their calling,” Stacy anticipates.

“Right,” Alex confirms. “I was watching a film the other day based upon one of James Patterson’s crime novels, I think it was *Along Came a Spider*, and Alex Cross, the protagonist, was discussing the distinction between ‘you are what you do’ and ‘do what you are,’ making the case for the superiority of the latter. A person can never be fully satisfied by ignoring or going against their natural capacities and most valuable inclinations. They’ll *always* feel somewhat unfulfilled doing this.”

“They’ll always harbor some sense of self-betrayal, because they aren’t applying their greatest capacity and aren’t being true to themselves or fulfilling their potential. Even if they aren’t consciously aware of the fact that they’re going against their own grain, a person born to be a piano will never be completely content or produce their best music as a guitar,

so to speak, and, going with the metaphor, their best composition will go un-played as a result of their *not* being what they're doing, and their audience will never be as enriched by listening to them play as they could be. So, from the perspective of how much value a person ultimately contributes to the sum total of life, the best possible line of work for every individual lies at the intersection of their particular aptitude and the profession and organization best enabling them to apply that aptitude to valuable ends."

"So you think it's the finding and following of one's aptitude, the best application of every person's unique mental capacity, combined with exposure to information and an organizational apparatus that empowers those means which ultimately determines how well every person fulfills their potential for creating value in the world," Stacy summarizes.

"And the development of a moral core, and the convictions to which it leads, of course," Alex continues. "Which, for me, is rooted in my understanding of Spirit and the purpose of life, and the preeminent goal of maximizing the quality of the existence of as many forms of life; as many manifestations of the Spirit as possible. Ultimately, it's about quality of life value production. In simple terms, the more of this value you produce in total, for both yourself and others, the more good you do, and the more you reduce or obstruct this production, the more bad you do."

"So it's clearly not a simple intelligence-equals-value translation, as not only are work ethic and opportunity indivisible from the value we end up producing for ourselves and the world, but intelligence itself can be directed towards the *reduction* in total quality of life as well, which is an example of why it's said 'with great power comes great responsibility.' I'd say this saying entails not just the responsibility not to *misuse* that power in the exploitation, oppression and degradation of the quality of life of others, but also the responsibility to best *use* that power to upgrade the quality of life of others, which reminds me of another applicable quote: 'All that's required for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing.' This is especially true for those with great power to do *something*, in this context, for to not apply or misapply great capacity carries a great cost."

"But, again, opportunity and access to information and other resources are indispensable as well, for without them, without the exposure to

and pursuit of information and the underlying knowledge of how and why to wield it for the good of total quality of life, coupled with the opportunity to do so, intelligence can be squandered or even used to degrade life. And, sadly, it commonly *is*, especially in societies such as ours that reward the *extractor* over the producer and distributor of value. So, smarts are of little value on their own, absent moral development, and without the informational input and the systems, organizations and individuals prepared to morally harness these resources. I think it was Mark Twain who said: 'The man who does not read good books has no advantage over the man who can't read them.'"

"It's an important point: it's never enough to possess great potential, as it's easily squandered and misdirected without these other influences, including the ingestion of quality information, for such is indispensable in the fulfillment of everyone's potential, regardless of their relative type and level of intelligence determining the extent to which that information is comprehended. Sorry for all the metaphors, but another one just occurred to me: Intelligence is like a small icy snowball with the potential to gain great size, momentum and mounting force and potential impact as it rolls through the endless terrain of knowledge, accruing information and growing as it goes."

"Intelligence and knowledge are synergistic," Alex continues. "For the more that information is truly understood, and thus absorbed, the more potential knowledge that understanding compels and potentiates, as all knowledge is interconnected. So, knowledge naturally begets more knowledge. And the more intelligence the person possesses, the more likely they are to realize or at least sense this interconnection while also being outfitted with a stronger innate drive to make and build upon those connections, as intelligence breeds inquisitiveness, being like a large vacuum that aches more to be filled the larger it is. So it all rolls together, intelligence, knowledge, inquisitiveness, information, opportunity..."

"Ok, so let me try to summarize your overall argument..." Stacy says with a giggle, having just finished her second mug full of coffee and feeling energized by the combination of caffeine and intellectual exercise.

"Please..." Alex encourages her with a smile, always happy to converse, and ever pleased by anyone possessing a high tolerance for his orations.

“So knowledge and intelligence cannot, and should not, be equated,” Stacy begins. “They’re not synonymous, even as they’re conventionally conflated. And yet, the more intelligent you are the more likely you are to comprehend the meaning and full implications of the information to which you’re exposed, transforming that information into knowledge. The quality, quantity and type of that knowledge is based upon your relative intelligence combined with the information to which you’re exposed.”

“And the information which you seek-out is telling in that it tends to demonstrate your type of intelligence, as sought information tends to mirror aptitude... And the more intelligent, or ‘smarter,’ you are, the hungrier you tend to be for information; the more inquisitive you are, the more questions you ask and the more knowledge you’re thereby likely to gain when that information and its innumerable implications are comprehended. So, while they’re not the same thing, knowledge and intelligence are directly correlated, for it’s clear that some are given far greater opportunity to cultivate and apply their intelligence than others, being fed more often, on a higher quality and quantity of mental nourishment, so to speak, and have more doors opened for them to walk through, seeking the greatest places and means to apply both their raw mental capacity, their intelligence, and the knowledge they build with it.”

“Right, that’s the essence of it,” Alex approves with a pleased smile. “The greater the quantity and quality of information to which any individual is exposed, the more ideas and data and experience a person is privy to, the greater the chance they have to capture and convert informational exposure into knowledge. And that capture and conversion is comprehension; what connects the relative possession of intelligence and knowledge. So, while most people seem to regard someone that can apply a factoid to the minutia of every subject as ‘smart,’ I believe that even the relatively unintelligent can dedicate much of their lives to filling their brain with information. To me, therefore, intelligence is better revealed by the *quality*, not the quantity, of information possessed; the comprehension of the power of the more profound ideas and principles; that, as well as their inherent ability to apply that quality information to produce value. If given a choice, always choose quality over quantity.”

“So you’re not a big fan of *Jeopardy* then, I take it?,” Stacy teases.

"I love *Jeopardy*, actually," Alex responds. "But I also recognize the fact that a person's ability to perform on that show is based less upon intelligence than upon their exposure to and ability to retain information. Memorizing dates, names and numbers is considered trivial for a reason, because most of it is of very limited value. Fully comprehending and being able to employ *ideas* is far more significant and of far more value, because ideas can be applied to limitless situations, not just to the very specific situation of recalling and citing a person, place or thing. Being able to do so may make your ego grow through your ability to impress others with your vast array of knowledge, but without connecting it to the bigger picture, to the historical significance or conceptual relevancy of that person, place or thing, for example, such citations are of little value."

"The possession and application of conceptual knowledge is of far more substantial value than the knowledge limited to a specific person, place, thing or historical period. To cite a relevant quote by one of the best-known first ladies of our nation's past, I forget which one, she said something like: 'Small minds discuss people, average minds discuss events, and great minds discuss ideas.' This very much rings true to me, because the more intelligent you are, at least in terms of a certain conceptually-analytical form of intelligence, the more you realize or at least sense the value of the information to which you're exposed. And ideas constitute the most valuable information, whereas events may at least be *linked* to substantive ideas, and the details of most people's lives are less readily linked. Small talk is considered small for a reason: its importance, its potential impact, is minor. Which is one reason I feel contempt for much of social media: its encouragement of mindless minutia, shallow popularity contests and exaggerated sensationalism."

"The greater the quality of information, in other words, the greater its application, the greater its potential value; meaning that the more universally-applicative the knowledge, the greater its value. If one wishes to possess an understanding of history, for example, I think it's best to take a big picture view: seek out the contending theories and struggles, what motivated historical trends and prime players, and how the conflicts were resolved, or evolved into the pressures and lessons of the modern day. What were the widespread moods and understandings across the different societal fronts, politically, economically, philosophically? What were the paradigms and zeitgeists, how and why were they formed, and how have they evolved through the trials of history? If you were to try to understand every historical figure, every

battle, every person and event, you'd have to dedicate your life to one period of history. And even then you'd barely scratch the surface, for every person and every event is its own encyclopedia. But if you can firmly grasp the ideas and motivations prevailing in that period, you gain a strong sense of that historical epoch and the lessons to be garnered from it for potential future application."

"And speaking of ideas, there's the idea that intelligence is like a muscle that must be exercised in order for it to reach full strength. That is, mental capacity requires informational input, breadth and variance in order to develop to full strength. This has been empirically demonstrated in studies of developing young brains, and suggested in studies of adults and their susceptibility to mental decline, and to cognitive diseases like dementia."

"This is why there's really no such thing as valueless learning, for even if you don't directly apply the knowledge, you apply the developed intelligence and perspective. And this should be one of the core arguments for a liberal education and a love of learning in general and, thus, constitute a foremost counterargument to a contention that I recall hearing so often in school: 'There's no reason for me to know this, to understand this concept or theory, because I won't use it.' And, again, we can't discount memory and moral development either. For, if comprehension forms knowledge that can't be reliably recalled it's of little value because it can't be applied, and if that knowledge is recalled but immorally applied to extract value from life and the planet, its net effect on value is negative."

"So, you're essentially saying that nurture, opportunity and privilege are the difference between the successful genius and the obscure, undiscovered genius," Stacy translates, "and that, combined with this, memory and moral development, and of course conviction and work ethic, determine the relative value of that genius to the world."

"Yes, access to information, being physically and mentally nurtured, being motivated to work hard and possessing the privilege to fully apply one's abilities constitutes most of what separates the hailed and the unknown genius," Alex continues. "As intelligence is the ability to understand, and the greater this ability the more likely and more often the information to which the individual is exposed will be converted into knowledge and thereby assimilated by them for future utilization. But without the privilege and opportunity to expose oneself to quality



information and the drive to apply it, the potential value of their intelligence being squandered. This is the case with countless individuals of immense capacity foundering in lives due to a lack of drive, or to being convinced they're powerless or to possessing little to no privilege, toiling day in and day out to procure food, water and the safety assuring their survival."

"Their underlying capacity is undirected or unnurtured, and, thus, their potential impact is lost. This is one of the inestimably immense hidden opportunity costs of the globalizing consolidation of wealth and resources that's been conserved by the prevailing imperially-passed-on wealth-worshipping conservative value system: the exploitation of the disadvantaged and their plundered, underdeveloped nations and regions leaves the people inhabiting such areas, including many areas of the United States, underdeveloped themselves. And the total value which they might have produced in the world is lost because greed has denied it from *all* of us. Without knowledge, intelligence is wasted potential; a jet engine without the fuel to fly. This opportunity cost is one of the many injustices of our horribly disparate distribution of income and wealth, and all the opportunities and advantages it purchases or, in its absence, denies the *ability* to purchase, in this nation and across the globalizing world."

"The whole human race is reduced when so many that *could* produce such great value for the world, were they given the information and a path to apply it, instead drift into oblivion through lives of survivalist struggle, while so many with so little comparative capacity inherit, extract and consume so much of that same finite global value that could and should be so better applied to total quality of life. This is the heart of the greatest opportunity cost paid by all of life, the generally lopsided distribution of income, wealth, opportunity and the like, with such an absurd portion going to those that hoard or otherwise squander it due to the fact that they've already maximized the amount of wealth that can reliably be used to maximize their own quality of life, while, at the same time, so many could use those resources to greatly enhance their quality of life and their ability to produce so much value for life that, instead, is left unrealized."

"Okay, so, let's review again professor," Stacy says with a smirk. "The superhuman, the human of the most value to life on Earth and the Earth itself, is the one that is exceedingly, genius-level intelligent, that heeds his or her calling and is thereby best positioned to apply that

intelligence, is exposed to as great a quantity and as high quality of information as possible, possesses a perfectly functioning recall of that information, possesses the privilege and resources to overcome all obstacles and open all the doors of opportunity through which that information and mental capacity can be applied and, last but not least, is morally developed to the point where they are driven towards a conviction to increase the quality of life of the human race and protect the planet from degradation as much as they're able... Sounds simple enough," she teases.

"Yes, all too easy," Alex adds with a soft chuckle. "And that last point is especially vital, I believe. Everything turns on it. For, regardless of all the other factors, your mental capacity, the quality and quantity of information exposure, memory and privilege of circumstance, if your objectives are centered upon personally amassing as much as possible as western cultural conformity dictates, as opposed to being compelled more by receiving the heart-filling spiritual rewards of connecting to and helping others and increasing the health of the planet and the quality of life in total, a drive that seems to apply to but a very select minority to any great degree, unfortunately, then you'll likely produce a negative value despite your massive potential to produce a positive value. Morality is an absolutely pivotal determinant in an individual's total value to life."

"I think one of the problems is that morality is treated as an afterthought, which I'd surmise is at least partially due to the fact that any serious study of morality dictates a course of action contrary to the prevailing one in America, in the Western World in general, and across the globalizing world at large. 'Business ethics' is borderline oxymoronic. It's almost a contradiction in terms considering profitability is the absolute purpose of all but perhaps the smallest, most locally supported and communally dedicated businesses, and profitability is based upon taking out as much as possible while putting in as little as possible. How can that ever lead to ethical practices and results? How can those ethics ever amount to anything but exploitative relativity?"

"Business ethics courses are underemphasized and often even elective. The last thing corporations want, after all, is to focus too bright a light on the *morality* of business for too long, as the students coming out of business school would be less inclined to perpetuate business as usual. Morality is another one of those subjects that's undervalued as a result of the traditionalist, conservative agenda by which most subjects are

taught in school, for the simple reason that it's not just history that's written by the conquerors and their inheritors, but books, lessons, cultural values and prevailing mindsets."

"And how would you teach morality, exactly?," Stacy allows him.

"It should be taught through causality; through the total connectivity underlying all things," Alex replies. "Morality isn't a closed system. It's not mere theoretical, philosophical exercise. Philosophy in general is misunderstood in this way and is enormously undervalued because it's pursuant to the higher truths rather than the greatest profit. As I said a minute ago, the best ideas have the greatest, most widespread, near universal application and, therefore, near limitless value."

"And I personally believe that philosophy, when it's at its best, digs for root truths that can grow principles pursuant to just such a universal application. So, to answer your question more specifically, the first lesson should be that nothing, including moral principles, exists in a vacuum, and that morality must thereby be evaluated through causal connectivity, with morality being based upon a judgment of the value created or reduced in connection to all the causes and effects of the evaluated person or thing."

"The moral choice isn't correct, or right, or good for the sake of satisfying moral precepts, in other words, like supplying the correct answer to a question and getting a good grade on a standalone test. Rather, the relative morality or immorality of anything is based upon the value it creates or consumes, protects or sacrifices. Morality is inseparable from the total value concept that I talk to my fellow housemates about all the time; a concept that, after I arrived at it through my own thought processes, I discovered is much like the concept of utilitarianism."

"Within my own thinking I originally derived it as an *economic* construct, applicable in the evaluation of business activities and the priorities and pursuits naturally encouraged by economic theory and focus. But I eventually came to realize that it's of near universal application, and connects directly to my spiritual ideas, and what I believe to be the foremost pursuit of the Spirit: maximizing the total quality of *all* life; of all of its manifestations. In the context of morality, the more positive the total value of the thing, the more overall total quality of life value created, the greater and more certain its morality, and the more

negative the total value of the thing, the more overall total quality of life value reduced, the greater the immorality. It all boils down to the total value of life effect.”

“That actually makes a great deal of sense,” Stacy responds after a few reflective seconds. “It grounds morality and the value of its application to the lives of people and life in general.”

“Which, again, is the purpose of moral judgment in the first place,” Alex adds. “It’s the very reason for the development of morality, and the function that it’s *always* meant to serve, in my not so humble opinion.”

Finally falling silent, Alex settles into his seat and watches the remainder of *Real Time* with Stacy. As the credits begin to roll, the quiet is broken by Chris, who stumbles out of Kate’s quarters with his hand over his head, wincing in pain, his other hand shielding his eyes from the brightness of the rising day shooting in through the great room’s three walls of glass. Squinting, he turns his head and sees Stacy and Alex watching him.

“You have any painkillers?,” he groans at Alex.

“In the cabinet above the oven, in the bottle with KWW written on the cap,” Alex responds. “It’s a blend of Kratom, White Willow and Wild Lettuce that I encapsulated. Kratom is one of the most effective natural painkillers that the DEA is working to ban,” Alex adds, addressing Stacy, as Chris has stopped listening, “ostensibly to protect people that’ve overdosed with it in combination with much harder drugs, but actually to protect the profits of the pharmaceutical industry. We can’t have people cheaply and naturally undertaking palliative care without the doctors and drug companies taking a cut, now can we?”

“It works well in conjunction with the natural blood-thinning, anti-inflammatory and analgesic properties of White Willow, one of the oldest known natural painkiller remedies in existence, with Hippocrates prescribing the bark of the tree for soldiers to chew on, and with the mild-opiate-like effects of Wild Lettuce, a plant that exudes its medicine through a milky substance when cut. Herbal medicine used to just be *medicine* until the advent of the chemistry-lab-based modern medicine era. Herbalism, aka naturopathy, is such a misunderstood, undervalued realm, with *thousands* of plants offering myriad medicinal benefits. It’s

long been an interest of mine.” He turns back towards the kitchen to address Chris: “So, have a good night?”

“Yeah man, I think so, at least from what I remember...” comes Chris’s labored reply. He tosses too many of the capsules into his mouth before plunging his head into the sink and guzzling from the faucet to drink them down. As he does this, Kate charges out of her room.

“I have something much better than Alex’s medicine man shit,” she says to Chris, dangling a large Ziploc bag full of marijuana in front of him. “The best medicine for a hangover,” she adds. “For anything, really.”

“I thought we smoked it all last night!,” Chris excitedly replies.

“We smoked all of *yours* last night,” Kate responds.

“Thank the Lord,” Chris answers. Kate grabs him by the hand and, shooting a glance in Alex’s direction, throws a derisive jab while exiting onto the deck: “At least *some* people know what’s good for them.”

“That’s ironic,” Alex says to Stacy after Kate and Chris are out of earshot. “Disparaging me for not knowing what’s good for me through the very attempt to draw me back into the habit that most likely cost me more health, energy, potential, productivity and happiness than any other habit I’ve ever had, except for maybe one. *Nothing* is free.”

“Every pleasure, every benefit, must be earned, stolen or paid for, and she’s not earning or stealing her high. I learned the hard way that she’s likely paying an ever accumulating debt for each toke, especially if she’s not allowing her brain to recover between sessions. And the *financial* cost of that debt is the inexpensive part of it. I suffered some serious head symptoms after I quit the habit, and they stayed with me for many, many years. They’re *still* with me to some degree. And though I can’t say with absolute confidence that marijuana was solely responsible, it almost certainly contributed.”

“And that’s not the only irony,” Stacy says. “I mean, I don’t really know her, but it looks from an outsider’s perspective as if she’s more than willing to incur considerable long-term costs against you that more than likely aren’t worth the short-term pleasures,” she adds, nodding her head in the direction of Amanda, who emerges from their room, no doubt awakened by the inconsiderately booming voices of Kate and her

companion. Rubbing her eyes, she sees Alex and Stacy and begins to walk in their direction. Stacy continues: "You and your girlfriend look to be very close, and I've learned from my own mistakes that sacrificing that connection for sex is simply not worth it, unless, possibly, a stronger connection has been built with that new potential partner that surpasses anything that might be built with one's current partner."

"Never trade love for lust," Stacy adds, "as I'm sure that you'd agree. If you're going to jump ship, make sure it's not just because the other vessel presents a finer appearance, but because it's capable of carrying the greater part of you further forward. You said yourself it's the heart, the Spirit within, that's more essential; that represents the truest, greatest shared Self capable of bringing us the greatest rewards. It's therefore better to assure that sexual gratification is tied into those rewards, rather than preventing their realization."

"I couldn't agree with you more," Alex replies. "I've had very similar thoughts myself. Unfortunately the heart can't always corral the body and mind, especially the weakened, pressured, pained or corrupted body and mind, just as the body and mind can never completely control or make perfect sense of the Spirit's outpourings. There's an ongoing war between the three parts of every person I call the Trinity of Self; a war that's constantly being waged within each of us, and, indeed, between all of us."

Amanda joins Alex on the loveseat. Though her first instinct is to be suspicious of Stacy, Amanda soon warms to her, sensing a respectfulness of her relationship with Alex that's so callously disregarded by the less honorable. Amanda easily, naturally wriggles her way into a snuggle on the loveseat with Alex, still floating from the previous night's experience that so dramatically jumped from fear to anger to ecstasy. As she speaks to Stacy, her kind regard for the visitor is amplified by Stacy's comments:

"You two make an adorable couple," she says at one point, with just a touch of melancholy and envy in her voice. "Don't take your love for one another for granted, or let it be reduced by the jealous resentfulness and aggression of others," she says a bit later, looking out the northern glass wall at Kate, Chris and now Donnie, who scuttles out of Kate's room and walks straight outside to join the smokers without so much as glancing towards the three of them sitting in front of the fire. Like a true addict, he'd detected the lingering odor produced by Kate's

retrieval of the sack from her sock drawer and woke in fear of missing out on the 'wake and bake' smoke session. "Being impulsively driven to daily consume a drug and being incapable of missing out... Not addictive, my ass," Alex thinks.

Minutes later Michael emerges from his quarters. Appearing dazed and out of whack, he stumbles towards the sitting area where Alex, Amanda and Stacy have switched over to watching a college football game.

"Are you okay?," Amanda asks as Michael gingerly squats down on the couch next to Stacy. Amanda has taken a strong liking to Michael due to his being the sweetest, most trustworthy one in the group, and knowing as she does how much Alex has enjoyed taking him under his wing.

"Last night doesn't seem real," Michael responds. "I swear I fell through some sort of portal into another dimension or something. After you and Amanda came back up here," he says looking at Alex, "Kate successfully worked her charms on. I finally smoked marijuana. And suddenly my drunkenness was evaporated, and it was like I wasn't just sobered up, that I didn't just lose my stupor, but I became super-conscious. Hyperaware. It was like I could see through things."

"Reality jumped up to some surreal plateau and then time, like, locked into place, and only very gradually started to creep forward," Michael recalls. "I could barely speak. It seemed as though whole minutes passed between my words. Full sentences were impossible. They still seem quite difficult to complete, in fact... And Kate and those other two were laughing their asses off. I couldn't keep up with them after that. I ended up coming up here and just lying in bed while my mind sort of... took off. It traveled somewhere, though I can't tell you where..."

"Yeah, I had a similar type of experience when I popped my marijuana cherry," Alex remarks. "The first time is always the most intense, I'd guess. It transports you to a completely different reality. I was in the back of a friend's SUV my senior year in high school. We were driving along coastal Highway One. I'd smoked a couple of times before, but it hadn't had any effect, and I was starting to suspect that being high was fake, like an affect displayed to look and feel cool. But later I realized that I hadn't been getting high because I'd been taking hits out of a small pipe and was smoking it like a cigar. I wasn't taking the smoke down into my lungs. I was apprehensive about it, only inhaling it to the extent of allowing it into my mouth and possibly my throat, so almost

none of the cannabinoids were absorbed into my bloodstream through my lungs in order to be passed into my brain. But this time, in the back of the SUV driving along the coast, sitting next to my high school girlfriend, I took some big hits out of a bong, coughed like mad and *bam!*," Alex shouts for effect.

"It hit me in a way I can't describe. My girlfriend, and my friend in the front seat and his girlfriend, they watched me just stare out the window. It was like I'd never seen the ocean before. It was trippy as hell. They were asking me questions and, just like you, I couldn't manage more than a few words at a time. They thought it was hysterical. Then we stopped at this seafood restaurant in Bodega Bay, and the waiter handed me a menu, and I swear I couldn't read the thing."

"I would barely manage to read one menu item, one line, struggling intensely just to accomplish that, and by the time I got to the next line I'd forgotten the line before that... It almost seems symbolic now, upon reflection, of the productivity-precluding effects of marijuana in general. It was so bad that I gave up on ordering. I had to have my girlfriend order for me, and I went to the bathroom and just stared at myself in the mirror for like five full minutes... I have no idea how long I was in there, actually, and I wasn't sure who I was looking at in the mirror. It was like an alien being was staring back at me."

"Yeah, I don't know if I liked it or not," Michael responds, his tone suggesting he didn't.

"I would avoid getting into it, if you want my advice," Alex says. "I was just talking to Stacy here about how I learned the hard way that its effects, while entirely addictive, are costly in a way that's not apparent to the user. The price of the bill is unknown until it comes due and you start to pay it off, and some people never do. The fact that I forgot the line I just read on the menu when I moved to the next line was a clear indication itself that my memory was blasted; that the cannabinoids were taxing my brain in a way that it isn't freely equipped to handle and that, therefore, if you incur that tax habitually it creates a debt which you'll pay off through years of disciplined recovery, or else reduced capacity and quality of life."

"It's almost imperceptibly subtle, the way it addles you. The long term effects are insidious. It's one thing if you do it medicinally, to purposefully impair your memory and increase your appetite and



decrease your pain, anxiety and nausea during times of suffering related to certain illnesses. Or if you only do it occasionally, and pay that bill between sessions. But if you defer the payments against your health, potential and productivity until you quit, if you ever do, the cost will only continue to accumulate. It's been five years since I quit my twelve year, every day, multiple times a day habit, and I feel like I'm still paying the debt I accrued against my health. I have what many consider an 'addictive personality.' It's very difficult for me to only go partway once I begin to delve into something..."

Suddenly, Kate throws open the double doors to the northern deck and comes crashing into the home's inner sanctum, giggling as Chris follows her, grabbing at her ass. The reflective peace has been broken. Always relishing being the center of attention, Kate looks over at the sitting room, beams proudly and, pulling Chris's hand from her backside, pulls him in for a make-out session for everyone to see.

"Fuck, Kate!," Amanda cries out. "What the hell is your deal!?"

Playing dumb, Kate replies: "What? Are you anti-PDA or something? What a surprise!," she adds sarcastically. "Don't be such a prude!"

"A prude?!" Amanda erupts. "Because I don't pass myself around like some cheap little tramp desperate to be ogled and fondled by every guy that walks by, that makes me a prude?!"

"Oh, bullshit!," Kate comes back. "Don't get mad at me because I like to have sex and don't apologize for it, or hide my sex drive like some stuffy, pent-up, repressed, deluded little Catholic boarding school girl! Or maybe you're just angry because you know a certain someone is one of the ones ogling and wanting to fondle?," she adds with a self-satisfied grin.

"That's it you fucking slut!," Amanda shouts, rising to her feet.

Alex grabs Amanda by the arm. "Don't," he says, "it's not worth it."

"Oh, don't pretend to be the cool, level-headed one," Kate says to Alex, throwing fuel on the fire. "You know you flirt with me all the time, and that you'd be all over me right now if she wasn't here."

Just then, as if coming to the rescue, Henry spills out of his room with Stacy's friend Rachel in tow. Both have wet hair and towels wrapped around them. "What the hell is going on out here?!", Henry demands. "Kate, do you realize some people like to wake up at their leisure on Saturday morning, rather than being roused by careless hysterics?!"

Kate says nothing, just stews silently for a few seconds. Chris steps in: "All right, all right. There's clearly some tension here that needs to be washed away. What do you all say that, considering it's Saturday, we just let go of the ill will and keep the party from yesterday rolling forward?"

Feeling as if he'd missed out on the previous night's festivities a bit and eager to dispel the rising hostility before it leads to something worse, Alex jumps at the chance, failing to realize in the heat of the moment that alcohol can be the very thing that erodes inhibitions to the point where ill will more easily spills out. "I'm in," he says.

"I don't know... I'm not sure my brain can handle more alcohol right now..." Michael complains.

"Yes it can," Kate interjects, her pride pushing her to dismiss the objection of her housemate. "Besides, you have to show Amanda that even old-school sheltered evangelicals are more fun than she is."

"My god you're a cunt!," Amanda exclaims. "And it comes so naturally to you." She rises, reassuring Alex with a quick squeeze of his hand that she's under control before walking into the kitchen and retrieving a bottle of vodka from the freezer. "And while it's childish to goad or allow one's self to *be* goaded, I'll drink you under the table to prove the point that not being a belligerent bitch isn't the same as not being fun."

Soon all nine members of the group surround the kitchen's middle island, engaged in the classic collegiate drinking game 'I have never,' the perfect game for flirting, testing, questioning, challenging and even enraging one's fellow drinkers during a communal descent into drunken debauchery. Amanda says she's never "had a threesome in this house," which seems to backfire when Kate not only takes her half shot but gleefully kisses both Chris and Donnie afterward and, when her turn comes around, states that she's never "pulled her boyfriend away from a party because I was worried about another woman," to which Amanda refuses to drink despite Kate's scoffing, sneering provocations.

Henry flirts with Stacy with most of his baited statements, both to make Rachel jealous and because Amanda's mention of a threesome reminds him of his grandest ambitions from the night before, which he allows himself to believe are still possible. Rachel makes it clear that she's game, saying "I've never been in a threesome" before taking a half shot, indicating that she has, while Stacy makes it equally clear that she doesn't share the interest, saying "I've never allowed a sexual impulse to ruin a friendship" while staring at Rachel. Michael takes the tact of someone actually playing to win, speaking of never having "smoked marijuana before last night" and never having "been to Vegas," and making other statements designed to force everyone else to drink.

He hopes to end the game as quickly as possible, having been pressured to play and wanting nothing more than to retreat to the quiet recuperation of his room. His wish is soon granted as Amanda, finding she's approaching her limit, whispers to Alex: "We haven't showered yet," prompting their retreat to their bedroom despite the rest of the group's protests following them into the room, especially Kate's "What a buzz-kill!" comment, which is ignored.

The sex is almost as good as the previous night's, with slow, sensual scrubbing in the shower providing the foreplay to a very easy, unhurried, uninhibited romp in the sack. Hearing the rest of the group continuing their game just outside the door only adds an excitement that heightens the couple's pleasure, and the pair soon collapses in satisfaction. Being a petite girl that seldom drinks heavily, Amanda quickly falls asleep, whereupon Alex faces a difficult decision; a decision shadowed by a fear of Kate's intentions coupled with low self-control despite having just orgasmed: partake of the fun or stay safely in bed?

And despite his heart warning him that some pleasures are worth sacrificing for the long-term gains, and thinking of Stacy's recent protective forewarning, Alex is soon reengaged with the rest of the group, which has just kicked-off a game of poker around the dining room table. Michael, meanwhile, has retreated during the game change. Alex's reemergence clearly pleases Kate, who before long goes bust but wants to keep playing, to which Donnie tells her: "You can put more than cash on the table." With the group well inebriated, the rules soon go out the window, and both Kate and Rachel end up with their shirts and pants in the center pot. To the delight of the four young men, the

two uninhibited girls begin to compete with one another in a game of 'who's the most confidently uninhibited.'

As soon as Rachel's bra comes off, Stacy, not offended but seeing that the game is crossing a line, asks Alex if it's okay if she explores the property, to which Alex gives his permission, asking: "Need an escort?"

"No, you stay here," Stacy replies. "This is probably more fun... Just try to keep your wits about you," she warns before getting up and walking into the warm rising daylight of the morning, soon moving out of sight down the hill, in the direction of the Noyo River half a mile below.

Before long, the fact that the game began with cash bets is forgotten, with the hundred or so dollars placed in the pot in the middle of the table buried under clothing, including most of the guys' garments. All six contestants are seriously smashed when the poker itself starts to drift into oblivion, and all the guys can think about is the fact that Rachel is only wearing socks, and Kate little more.

Chris bets Kate she won't kiss Rachel and, already fearless thanks to the alcohol and with both reveling in the attention and competing to build the most sexual gravitation, they start to make out and grope one another. Hoping to suck their respective targets past the point of resisting their attractive force, the two girls continue caressing one another while eyeing their marks, with Donnie occasionally stroking Kate's shoulder, seeking some of her attention.

Despite the momentum, Rachel soon has a moment of semi-clarity and, pulling away from Kate, turns to Henry, who's revved up and ready to go. Henry grabs her by the hand and pulls her into his room, slamming the door behind him. As the only remaining girl, Kate's suddenly too much the center of attention and starts to feel self-conscious with all three of the remaining guys fixated on her, with Alex the only one still putting up any resistance. Sensing her discomfort, Alex suddenly feels more sober, and worries that he's already doing something that he shouldn't be.

He gets up to go outside so that Kate can play with her two buddies again. Kate, however, has other ideas, and follows him outside onto the deck. Grabbing Alex by the arm, she pulls him toward her car parked in the Redwood roundabout. Seeing this, Chris suddenly feels as if he's been given the short end of the stick, and, in a cruel move, walks over

and knocks loudly on Alex and Amanda's bedroom door before running over to sit on the couch. Amanda opens the door wearing only the bedspread.

"Did someone knock on my door?," she asks, disheveled and still drunk.

"I think it was your boyfriend," Chris lies.

"Where is he?," Amanda asks.

"I think he went outside," he responds coolly with a slight, twitching grin.

Amanda exits out through the foyer facing the pond in the roundabout where the cars are parked, and her heart contracts before bursting with anguish. Kate, wearing only her panties, has Alex pinned against the passenger door of her car. Alex's hands are on Kate's shoulders, pressing her back just enough to keep from fully engaging, but not enough to drive her away, equivocating as he had the day of the recent river walk. But even worse than Kate's semi-nudity and being almost pressed against Alex's shirtless body are her hands placed between Alex's legs.

"No! Please no!," Amanda screams in horror, having a hard time believing what she's seeing. Immediately, she breaks down crying. Legs trembling, she barely finds the strength to run back into the house and lock the door to the bedroom, just fast enough to prevent Alex from catching her from behind. Alex, crushed and instantly self-loathing, collapses next to the locked door and begins to cry, blubbering and pleading pathetically, suddenly the hollowed-out shell of a human being. With Alex in this emotionally deconstructed, highly vulnerable state, the dominoes are set to fall. Kate comes back into the house and, calmly, slowly putting back on her clothes, lets out a sick little satisfied grin.

"This is funny to you, you satanic little wench?!", Alex fumes, feeling an intense fury fly from his besieged heart. "Why don't you get the fuck out!," he screams at the top of his lungs while jumping to his feet. Soon everyone is taking-in the disturbing scene, with Henry and Rachel, holding a sheet over their bodies, running out to witness the spectacle just before Michael who, still shell-shocked from a night and a day of

partying more than he'd had in his lifetime, stumbles out of his room looking particularly distressed by the proceedings.

"Oh, don't be an asshole," Kate fires back at Alex. "It's better she finds out we've been fucking now than letting the charade drag on and on and on," she lies, compelled to play the bitch and take things all the way. Upon hearing this, Amanda unlocks and swings the door open. And Kate, while expecting anger, is blindsided by the fact that Amanda's face conveys not rage, but torment. Kate cannot help but absorb some of the suffering, and her heart suddenly wrenches, leveling her with regret and self-contempt.

"What have I done to her?," Kate asks herself. "She doesn't deserve this. What kind of person am I?" Feeling tears well in her eyes, Kate is sunken by embarrassment and shame and abruptly bolts out the front door, running down the road leading circuitously down and around the hill toward the property's gate. Seeing this, Chris, realizing that he's now in a position to console and garner some points with Kate, for whom he's long held a great flame, runs after her. Donnie moves in the same direction, but with far less urgency, while Henry and Rachel solemnly go back into Henry's room, and Michael slowly takes a seat at the abandoned poker table.

Having been so inspired by and having developed an almost reverential respect for Alex to the degree where he'd set his faith aside and took up his tutelage, and already feeling as if he'd betrayed his parents and the Church by listening to Alex and smoking marijuana the night before, Michael is suddenly struck by a psychological crisis. He just sits there watching Alex try to explain himself to Amanda, who moves between fits of bawling and violently pushing Alex away. Michael's heart aches watching the scene unfold, though of course not to the degree of Amanda's and Alex's, whose assailed hearts pound with such combined force that it seems they may not survive the impending schism.



## Fourteen: Lost and Found

*Every wrongdoing is a reflection of something wrong within the wrongdoer. Every single one, without exception. For this reason it's never people themselves that are the enemies, but their mental and physical limitations, shortcomings and connected vulnerabilities, and the susceptibility to corruption that is laid bare through these soft spots. Ignorance, ego, a lack of discipline and greed of every sort, for wealth, power and sensory gratification, all bred through the vulnerability of the limited body and mind; these are the enemies.*

*We're all victimized by all of our limitations, and should be wary of faulting one another for that victimization, ever endeavoring to see the limitations as that which must be overcome, not the individuals themselves. It is these characteristics, and their potentiating of corruptibility giving rise to potential evil action, which clear the way for all enmity and injustice to arise. For, to the extent these limitations may be expelled from their possessors, the basis for enmity and evil held and enacted between those possessors is abolished.*

“Discipline is the difference between knowing and doing right; the difference between knowing what should be done and doing it.”

Crestfallen, Alex repeats the mantra many times in the days following Kate's fleeing from the property, both to a disillusioned Michael and to a distraught Amanda. “No matter how great the love held by any person for another, or how much knowledge they possess or conviction they've demonstrated, if their discipline is anything but unbreakable they remain capable of doing the wrong thing. I don't mean to make excuses or to try to justify my actions, for they're unjustifiable. I only hope to convince you that I failed not due to insufficient love, for I love you desperately, or because she has something that you lack, but because of my own lacking; because of my own weakness,” he says to Amanda. He repeats such sentiments over and over again, in the rare times when she isn't fleeing his presence, or literally pushing him away from her.



When Michael asks him how someone of his conviction could betray the person he cares for the most, he says: "These events aren't indications that my beliefs and the things for which I fight are invalid or any less worthy, but an indication of the inability of the Spirit and the more valuable, principle-bound qualities of the mind to prevent the corruptibility of the mind and retain absolute control of the inborn drives of the body. Please don't conflate the weakness of my will with a weakness in my beliefs, for to do so would effectively force us to backpedal on the strides we've made together. I find it tragic when the value that people create is cast aside by those who equate personal wrongdoings with the notion that everything that they've ever done and created is as fruit from the poisoned tree, to be tossed and undigested."

And yet, no matter what he says, and no matter how many times he makes his case to Amanda that he hadn't slept with Kate, and no matter how many times he reiterates to Michael that a distinction must be made between the value of a person's ideas and the judgment of that person's actions, something is lost from both relationships that he knows is unlikely to ever be rediscovered.

His relationship with Amanda is tainted forever, he fears, and it's a blow that he thinks that he may never be able to recover from. She'll forever regard what she witnessed as a betrayal, especially after Alex admitted that it was not the first time that he'd allowed Kate to press her sexual aggressions past the permissible point. And when trust is lost the love is soured, no matter how great it is, or was.

Even the most iron-clad connections can be melted by a molten enough transgression. "How could you do this to me, to us?," Amanda repeats again and again. "I was so in love with you. I would've followed you anywhere, done anything for you, and you decided to tear that apart for a little sexual gratification." Her use of the past tense in reference to their relationship is like a knife in Alex's heart every time, and Amanda knows it, exacting a slight measure of retribution every time. The day of the drinking games, and for several days thereafter, Amanda herself almost flees the property during fits of sorrowful rage. But she feels too broken, too feeble to fly away, and is still very much in love with him regardless of her words. Alex sits beside her like a loyal dog that senses that there's something ailing his master, bowed and fawning, meek and frightened.

"How does a relationship move past something like this?," Alex repeats in his own mind. "Can it ever truly surmount such an obstacle? Can it

ever again be near the same? Is the correct course to cut free the binds before the two heaving ships, heavy with sorrow, anger and resentment, pull one another over, capsizing and sucking them towards the despairing, irretrievable abyss? Or is the correct course to endeavor to furiously patch the holes and bail the water in the attempt to save the tethered pair? Is the determination and resiliency of the attempt a test to prove that the wrongdoer is sufficiently repentant and worth recommitting to, worth replacing the frayed tether, or is it futile to attempt to buoy bound vessels that can only continue to take-on water, sinking toward the choice to separate or else meet their mutual demise?"

At the same time that Alex and Amanda are locked into damage assessment and reparations mode, Kate has disappeared. And not just from the property. Chris and Donnie had caught up to Kate that day about halfway down the road leading out.

According to Chris, he'd convinced Kate to wait where she was while they went back up to the house to grab Alex's key to the gate, telling Alex they'd leave the key in the lock after they passed through. But they never returned. And when Michael, alarmed at Kate's extended absence, unlocked her phone, having watched her trace the code across the screen many times before, and called Chris, Chris told him that she'd disappeared from the road and, having failed to find her, an attempt which he claimed to have sustained for half an hour, he and Donnie returned to Santa Rosa. They didn't even have the integrity to inform the rest of the residents of their failed search attempt.

Stacy, meanwhile, reported that she'd been down in the little brook paralleling the road's descent, and had heard the car pass by a few times, but hadn't seen or heard anything of Kate. Four days had now passed since the incident, and Michael's worry is mounting the fastest. His stress and anxiety is palpable. "Where has she gone?" he repeats, "and why would she not come back for her car and phone? Is Chris lying about not having found her to spite all of us, you especially Alex, out of retribution for that day, or upon Kate's vindictive urgings?"

Amidst the troubling mystery Michael convinces the rest of the group, including Amanda and Alex, that a missing person's report should be filed at the local police station. So the property's remaining foursome drive into town and file a report. Two days later, still having heard nothing from the police, the group is so preoccupied with worry that Alex and Amanda almost cease licking their wounds and little of the

group's usual activities take place, with property improvements coming to a standstill and evenings around the fire being canceled, not feeling right with a member missing, the circle incomplete. But Michael's worry is the worst.

He persuades Henry to use some of his resources to search for Kate, even as Henry teases him about the severity of his fretting. "Why do you care so much?" Henry asks. "It's not like you two are fast friends. She doesn't even treat you with respect from what I've seen. Is it just because she's sexy? Because you're fixated on her and desperate for attention and affection? Or perhaps it's *because* she treats you so poorly and doesn't return your interest? Is it one of those 'spurn equals yearn' situations?"

"I just like her," Michael says, attempting to block Henry's ribbing. "And she deserves to have people care about her well-being; to search her out when she's in trouble. She could be in serious trouble. I mean, her car is still here, for Christ's sake... Frankly, I'm disturbed by how little the rest of you seem to care. It's somewhat understandable in Alex and Amanda's case, being so wrapped up in rescuing their relationship and having reason to bear her ill will, but what about you?! Is she so beneath you?!"

On this basis, compelled by Michael's fear for Kate's safety and the shame he elicits from everyone for not demonstrating greater humanity and compassion, Henry hires a private investigator working out of San Francisco to help solve the mystery of the disappearance. To everyone's pleasant surprise, the investigator is highly resourceful and makes quick work of the case. Having been a former police officer, as many private investigators are, he convinces a Fort Bragg cop to make copies of any and all crimes and complaints in the property's vicinity.

Of the few reports on record, for not enough people reside in the immediate area to create a considerable account of local illegalities, one is of particular interest both because it's the report of activity nearest to the property and because it relates to Kate's particular predilections: production of narcotics three years prior by a property owner possessing a rather extensive rap sheet.

The property is in the forest on the other side of the Noyo River Canyon from Alex's land, not far from the railroad tracks by which the Skunk Train passes through the area, pulling sporadic bands of tourists through the Redwood wilds. Much like Alex's, the plot in question is

well separated from its closest neighbors. The police had paid the property a visit a couple of days after the group had filed their missing person's report, but were unable to enter the residence due to not possessing probable cause. There was no indication that Kate might be present.

Yet Henry's hired help's results-oriented reputation is on the line, and he soon discovers that Henry hails from an affluent family whose word-of-mouth recommendation could end up bringing him some valuable business in the future. He's thus well motivated, and is willing to risk any legal repercussions that might come from watching the property from a safe distance, for he calculates that it's his best bet for spotting Kate.

Thus the PI finds himself on an all-day stakeout in camouflaged attire, observing the property's comings and goings, of which there are a great deal despite the land's isolation. And, based upon the appearance and nervous mannerisms of many of those visitors, he determines that drug sales are likely taking place on the premises. Early that same evening, the sun teasing the horizon, Kate appears. Wearing nothing but a bra and panties, she spills out of the small, rough, unpainted one level lodging along with a wiry, sandy-colored curly-haired shirtless young man covered in tattoos. He's draped all over her.

About ten paces from the home they stop amongst half a dozen stumps chain-sawed at waist height years before for the apparent purpose of providing natural seating and clearing a communal space. Rather than being cut up for fuel or hauled away, the trees themselves have been dragged a short distance from the area where their gradually rotting remains now play host to the turkey tail mushrooms common to the region. The turkey tails are more than happy to slowly, steadily consume their gradually decomposing dwellings.

Kate and the unknown man place a bulbous methamphetamine pipe on one of the stumps. The man loads it up and the pair is soon passing it back and forth, lighting the underside to vaporize the crystalline meth fragments packed in the bulb. "It's clear from their interactions that she isn't being held against her will, though the addictive draw of the drug is no doubt eroding her will and clarity of judgment," the investigator thinks to himself. An hour later the PI is on Alex's property relaying his findings, supported by a dozen or so snapshots from his digital camera, after which Henry writes him his final remittance and he departs, leaving the group to their discourse. The disharmony of the discussion

relates the uneven regard the four have for their unfortunate, plummeting compatriot.

“She’s clearly in trouble,” Michael starts. “It would be inhuman of us not to help her.”

“You heard what he said,” Henry retorts, referring to the recently departed investigator. “She isn’t being held against her will. She isn’t a prisoner. She *wants* to be there. And we only have evidence of her presence from these quick pics my guy took; no proof of major possession or production or any other serious infraction taking place on the property. That likely leaves police intervention out. So what are we going to do, run up on drug dealers and tear her away kicking and screaming when she’s in junkie mode?! Like he said, there are at least three of them there not counting Kate. And considering they’re selling meth and who knows what else, it’s safe to assume they’re armed and ready to repel trespassers. Even if we could convince the police to intervene based upon these... unclear photos and our concern, it could end up very badly for her. Even if she avoids getting hurt, she could still end up with a serious drug charge.”

“And yet she’s distraught and obviously not thinking clearly,” Alex adds, concurring with Michael, and unable to avoid a portion of his distress. “Regardless of what’s transpired here recently, she deserves better than to be left at the mercy of her self-destructive inclinations reinforced by these ruffians and whatever they might be compelling her to pay with in order to feed those inclinations.” Alex reassuringly squeezes Amanda’s hand as he says this. “At the same time, Henry has an excellent point. We can’t abduct her, and trying to convince her to leave entails considerable risk. Maybe trying to get the police back involved is our only good move.”

“No,” Amanda weighs in after several silent seconds have passed. “Henry’s right. That’s too dangerous. I mean, she isn’t my favorite person in the world, obviously, and I know nothing of these other people on site, but if the cops roll in and end up surrounding them or cornering someone dangerous who knows what might happen... I’m thinking meth-smoking drug dealers that likely have thousands of dollars of product on site and criminal records and potential probations that they’re in violation of are less than one-hundred-percent likely to simply come out quietly and submit to arrest if they feel cornered. Who knows, Kate might even be used as a hostage. She wouldn’t be the first

person whose life was put at risk by drug producers guarding their territory against encroachment in these woods,” she adds.

Amanda’s referring to an incident years before wherein a mentally ill marijuana and opium poppy grower murdered a well-regarded local property assessor and his two assistants before fleeing into the woods, precipitating a drawn-out federally-led manhunt during which the killer successfully eluded the authorities for months, breaking into several local dwellings to steal supplies throughout, *including* the studio apartment Alex’s father had built, or so they’d suspected owing to the break-in matching the timeline and many particulars in the reports. Refusing to submit, he was eventually caught-up with and gunned down.

“So what do you suggest?,” Michael asks, visibly alarmed.

“I’m not sure,” Amanda answers. “How do we come to her aid without putting her or ourselves at risk? We need some sort of ingenious plan...” At this the three glance at Alex, the unofficial leader of the group.

“No, don’t assume I can design the perfect plan,” Alex responds. “Not all thoughts are created equal. I might have a mind for philosophy, but mechanics and logistical maneuvers... not necessarily. This seems likely a matter of risk *mitigation*, not elimination. It’ll be risky no matter what.”

A minute passes before Michael speaks up: “We scout. We come in at different angles and survey the grounds. We wait for her to be alone, and then we draw her away from the residence and attempt an impromptu intervention. We tell her we care about her and try to snap her out of it. And, if necessary, we drag her back up here kicking and screaming and force her into withdrawal. We do what’s in her best interests whether she likes it or not, and regardless of the fact that we’re taking on risk.”

“I’m game for all but that dragging her away kicking and screaming part, and so long as we really do keep our distance,” Henry says.

“If we do that I want you to stay here,” Alex addresses Amanda. “I won’t be able to calmly and coolly assess the situation if I’m worried about something happening to you.”

“You don’t get to call the shots anymore,” Amanda replies, the hurt and resentment from recent events temporarily cracking her composure. “I’ll tell you what,” she adds after a pause. “I’ll wait by the river in case you guys call for help or the residents become loud and violent or something... So I can call the police if I have to, assuming I can get a signal in the canyon, which is anything but assured. But at least I’ll be out of harm’s way, if that’s what you’re really worried about,” she adds with disdain. “If nothing else I can race back up here and call the police if need be.”

Most of the evening is spent packing supplies and going over the plan of attack for the following days’ group stakeout, with Alex retrieving three sets of binoculars from his father’s old bird-watching supplies in the studio garage, and everyone filling up their camelbacks with water and snacks. Hashing out a rough plan of their approach based upon the investigators’ description of the property, the foursome agree to set out early the next morning. Michael, engulfed by vile visions of Kate being defiled on the grounds of degeneracy by depraved drug addicts, tosses and turns all night, and is the first to rise. He contemplates the possibilities sitting in the darkness of the day room, imagining the worst.





## **Fifteen: Fight or Flight**

*Love may be measured by the extent to which self-awareness is lost.*

From the bridge at the bottom of the hill the three young men leave Amanda behind in her Prius and spread out as if playing paintball, diverging for an eventual multi-angled convergence on the enemy base. Working from the information provided by the investigator, Henry walks directly over the bridge to the west side of the river which, at this point in its gradual descent toward the coast, is moving mostly north to south.

Alex and Michael move up the east side of the river, paralleling Henry's movement on the opposite bank until they near the target property, at which point Henry moves further west, into the woods, and Alex points across the river, indicating a good approach angle for Michael. Alex moves further downriver before undertaking the river crossing which, being near to fall and having rarely rained for months, presents little difficulty.

Dressed in combinations of beige and green in an attempt to blend in with the surroundings, all three are mindful of and deliberate with their steps as if discreetly stalking prey. Henry and Alex find it difficult not to derive pleasure from the unfolding sense of the hunt and camouflaged surveillance, like boys playing war games. Michael, on the other hand, being more concerned and operating on little sleep, proceeds more cautiously than anyone, paranoid at the possibility of being overheard. He's determined not to be the cause of anything that might put Kate at further risk, and can't help but imagine playing the hero, as he'd envisioned numerous such scenarios during the prior night's restlessness.

Soon, the three compatriots come upon the outskirts of their surveillance target, and the fantasy game quickly turns into reality, transforming their mindset from that of boys at play to men at war.

Hiding behind Redwoods, looking out between the ferns through their binoculars, they observe a scene strongly suggesting a lowly, fraught existence. Refuse of every order is scattered across the property, as if the occupants are marking their territory with proof of their plight.

Beer cans and hard alcohol bottles are strewn about like the unnatural mulch evincing a poverty-stricken, self-abusing existence. Pipes both for smoking methamphetamine and marijuana are set upon stumps and the outer windowsills of the decrepit dwelling. The accumulation of detritus is particularly dense around the fire pit near to the residence, with bottles, food wrappers and other assorted accoutrements of indigent living spotting their small spread of the Redwood-needle-carpeting composing the natural forest floor for miles in every direction. But what's most disturbing are the signs that at least one child dwells in this habitat of disregard. A soccer ball, football, toy truck and swing set strung from a large Douglas Fir, all beat up, mark the presence of someone that should be spared the disheartening experiences delivered by grossly irresponsible parents and their debased associates. Not more than ten minutes after Alex, Henry and Michael take up their posts around the perimeter of the property, this adolescent presence is confirmed.

A young boy, perhaps eight years old, with curly sandy-blond hair and a face full of freckles, opens the screen door at the back of the house and charges directly for the river, coming so close to running over Michael, who's crouched behind some dense shrubs only ten feet or so from the passing child, that it's a minor miracle their surveillance doesn't come to an abrupt end then and there. Henry and Alex watch with dismay as poor Michael, already being in a frazzled state, locks up completely, so frozen by fear that he refuses to even turn around and watch the little boy after he passes by, paranoid that even the slightest movement might betray his position.

Only after the boy begins to chuck rocks from the bank of the river into the water a hundred feet or so behind him does Michael overcome his nerves and creep ever so carefully away from the path the boy had taken down to the river, completely submerging himself in the base of another bush ten more feet from his original observation post, lying prone in the dirt, enmeshed in the thickly-covered branches. As he witnesses these proceedings Alex wonders if Henry, who can scarcely be seen peeking out from behind a Redwood across the way, has ever seen such an existence, and if he's at all contrasting it with his own upbringing.

This poor boy is experiencing the opposite end of the spectrum of privilege and opportunity that Henry enjoyed as a youth. No healthful food, no enriching experience, no positive role models, no travel and exposure to new places, people and ideas, likely no higher education on the horizon; very little opportunity beyond what he fights to make for himself, through innate ability and determination, overcoming obstacles that none in Alex's group has been forced to face, Henry especially.

The American Dream is about as possible to attain for such a hog-tied, beaten-down boy as a pass through the mythical pearly gates. More likely the boy will eventually capitulate to the pressures and be caught up in the cycle; prone to repeat the mistakes of his parents, emulating the behaviors he's been tragically exposed to before his mind is well enough developed whereby he'd be able to critically assess the deplorable habits of those around him to the extent of preventing those experiences from tying to his psyche, pulling him into bitter hopelessness and self-harming habit.

Will he succumb to the sense that he was born to give in to the weaknesses and temptations of body and mind burrowing beneath and undermining his greatest potential for earning a fulfilling, happy life for himself, and the capacity to contribute value to the world? Alex is struck by the notion that between Henry, the shambled home and the dirty little boy splashing in the river, the individuals in the immediate area could play telling roles as participants in a microcosmic socioeconomic study.

The quality, cleanliness and life-boosting value of this tiny residence and unmaintained grounds likely isn't one-one-hundredth of any *one* of Henry's family's ten real estate holdings, most of which play host to no more than a few weeks of use in any given year, their potential for increasing the quality of life of would-be year-round residents squandered in the game to accumulate the trappings of the carelessly self-absorbed holdings-equals-status aristocrats of which Henry and his parents are very much a part. Noticing that the boy looks rather emaciated, and that his pallid skin reflects a yellowish, sickly tinge, Alex imagines that Henry could probably take more cash out of his wallet right now than the boy's parents will spend on his nourishment in the entirety of the coming year.

As if on connected cue to Alex's thoughts, a tall, wiry man, also with curly hair and freckles adorning both his face and exposed shoulders, as he's clad only in boxer shorts and a pair of slippers, steps out the back

door and calls out to the boy to come and get his breakfast. Running back up from the river, the boy's handed what appears to be a leftover *McDonald's* hamburger, still in its wrapper. "Oh, wonderful," Alex thinks, "a cocktail of saturated and trans fats, salt, artificial appetite-stokers and simple carbohydrates. Just what a growing, developing young boy needs. Way to be the vigilant adult. If you truly cared for the kid you wouldn't be shoving him down the path to heart disease and diabetes, feeding him the nutritional equivalency of horseshit."

Alex thinks of one of the *McDonald's* commercials he recently watched. In it, a husband wakes up early and goes to *McDonald's* to buy one of their processed crap breakfast sandwiches in order to deliver it to his wife, who works at a tollbooth, implying it's an act of love, and that *McDonald's* should be associated with consideration and happiness. As with all propaganda, the opposite is closer to the truth: what's *actually* being sold is inconsideration and the short-lived indulgence of sensory stimulation undermining health and quality of life, which, when habitual, *precludes* happiness; sells the possibility of the happy life lived in the fully-functioning body for gluttony.

If you really love your wife, the last thing you want to do is degrade her quality and duration of life and leave her in the hands of surgeons and prescription drug companies that can profit off of her plight. How more sinister does it get than selling diminished life as love?! As these thoughts pass through Alex's mind the man, who Alex recognizes as the man the investigator saw with Kate, likely the boy's father, packs some broken-up meth crystals in the glass pipe he pulls from the windowsill and smokes while watching his son gobble-down the vitality-  
eviscerating garbage.

"*There's your McDonald's commercial,*" Alex thinks. As the pair indulges in their self-abuse, Alex notices that, included in the man's body art, which covers most of his arms and torso, is a prominently displayed image of Bob Marley behind prison bars smoking a joint needled into his right pectoral muscle. Alex recalls the investigator's mention of the property and at least one of its residents being associated with narcotics production and distribution. The opposite of demonstrating contrition and self-correction, the tattoo looks more like a badge of honor and professed oppression. It's a sign that this man believes locking people up for drug use, and perhaps for rebelling against oppressive forces, is an injustice that he's compelled to resist. On this he and Alex are in agreement.

What's being corrected in society when the production and distribution of narcotics are given over as the profits to illegal drug producers, traffickers and distributors on everything from the small-scale of this likely basement-run meth producer to the large-scale narcotics-built cartels? By giving highly demanded products and services over to the black market you're creating increased profit levels and funding for violent criminal elements and their organizations, incentivizing their operations and forcing the already physiologically-compromised, cloudy-thinking consumers of their products to subject themselves to dangerous circumstances and grossly inflated costs in order to meet the demands of their addictions. Worse yet, when the law is successfully enforced and the producers, traffickers and distributors are locked up, usually without ever having committed a violent offense, their records are forever tarnished in such a way as to render them all but incapable of procuring a legal job and building a legitimate career upon their release, while at the same time exposing them to the most corrupted members of society on the inside.

The Department of Corrections pursues a highly suspect course towards such 'corrections,' including exposing its inmates to the very people that would be picked out as the exact *opposite* of the positive influences they *should* be exposed to in order to turn their lives around and get back on the positive, productive, society-value-adding tracks which everyone can and should be traversing to their own respective degrees.

Not only is nothing corrected, but the exposure to the triggers of criminality are increased. Is it any wonder why recidivism is so high? Disgustingly, this same war on drugs enriches private prison systems that, in league with lobbyists and their bribed politicians, turns criminals into customers. And every business wants to maximize its customer base, whether those customers be petty criminals or the heads of black market businesses most responsible for building that customer base, all spurred by the purveyors of the harshest possible sentences for nonviolent offenders.

When it comes to the 'drug war' there's no one head of the snake to cut off, and there never will be. It's the same with every black market, in fact. Remove one kingpin, one cartel, one supplier, and a void is created that's soon filled by another supplier. The true enemy is demand, with the only worthwhile considerations being the best means to supply it while reducing it as much as possible, for its eradication is impossible. So long as there's a demand for illicit substances and services of any kind, they'll be supplied. This is especially true when considering that

illegal goods and services are so profitable due to the risk entailed in their supply, creating an opportunity for financial reward that's too great to pass up, especially for those with few comparable opportunities to improve the quality of their lives and loved ones' lives, which such markets inevitably attract. This is made all the more true when you consider that the head suppliers whom take advantage of those dispossessed of better opportunities tend to possess the resources, connections, corrupted mindsets and comfort with risk to easily justify their involvement in this enriching supply.

These circumstances dictate that it's a *much* better strategy for the protection of the consumer and the increase in tax dollars (ideally spent on improving opportunities for the disadvantaged) to provide a legal avenue to access drugs and most currently illicit goods and services that otherwise only award drug dealers and other illegal profiteers of vice. Make these goods and services legal, tax, control and regulate them, restrict their areas of use under police and medical observation and assessment, and assist those that're victimized by their costly predilections to understand such costs.

Teach the victims how those costs *greatly* outweigh the benefits that may be had by avoiding their payment, and eventually the personal and financial cost of these goods and services shall decrease, dangerous criminal elements shall be displaced by legal, popularly-benefitting commerce, and demand shall subside, or at least many of the risks and lost tax revenue entailed in said demand. That revenue made through their supply *should* take place in an open market safely supporting the state and people, rather than supporting the gangs and their perpetuation of violence and other reprehensible tactics of control and victimizing manipulation of overly dependent consumers that currently hide in the unprotected shadows of unsupported addictions, derelict dreams and familial rot owing to the illegality of their addictions.

Not everything should be open to private, value-consolidating, profit-maximizing organizations, as the value such organizations take from the collective lives of the citizenry when their supplied products and services are necessary is *vast* due to the nature of necessity, for need is easily exploited to the detriment of those that can least afford it. For-profit prison systems lead to prisoners being packed into overcrowded facilities while encouraging stakeholders to desire their customers' return. Such stakeholders therefore possess little incentive to treat their captives in any way that might facilitate a true recovery, and thereby grant them a permanent release from captivity. Suffering is profitability.

Treat people like dirty, lowly animals and they're likely to believe the shoe fits and play the part. But treat them with the dignity and respect that every honorable life owes to every other life, and apply a system of true rehabilitative potential, an increase in knowledge, skills, positive examples, cost-to-benefit assessment and improved opportunities once they're set free, and recidivism will plummet, and the quality-of-life-added value of the 'corrections' system will increase exponentially, even to the point of *true* correction. The war on drugs is complicit in this miscarriage of justice.

Not only do harsh penalties for drug possession and distribution saddle the convicted with unbearable burdens, it's a dirty little secret that this war only stokes the fires of corruption and collusion between enforcer and offender, encouraging law enforcement officials at *every* level, from the FBI and DEA down to sheriffs and small-town cops, to parlay their leverage over offenders into lucrative positions protecting, facilitating or otherwise profiting off of their operations.

As uncommon as one may believe such a thing to be, the incentive is clearly there for the unscrupulous enforcer to act upon. Clearly there's a *far* better, morally-superior and more socially-beneficial method for dealing with the demand for narcotics, prostitution and the like. Decriminalize, regulate, tax, corral within red light districts; pull the supply and demand into the visible, open market and plow the tax proceeds and spending into the benefit of the public, including programs for fighting and recovering from addiction.

It's far better to protect people from the susceptible sides of themselves through exposure to, experience of and an education built around habitual narcotics use than it is to try to scare them into submission and hide the drugs from them while forcing the public to pay massively inflated law enforcement costs, all while motivating organized crime and increasing consumer risk. Foremost amongst these protective lessons is the inculcation that narcotics highs and dependencies are anything *but* free, incurring substantial long-term costs that accrue subtly beneath the surface, and thus aren't always evident until building to tragic proportion.

Bringing these activities and the lessons which they impart into the legal, controlled, taxed light of day is the only right way, especially when truly socially beneficial fiscal programs are put in place under the auspices of progressive political leaders. And when it comes to the corrections system, it's clear that crime in general is by and large a

product of socioeconomic issues like poor education, a lack of opportunity and the suffering of pains and stresses that compel both the victim and the victimizer toward criminal actions. The victimizer is always a victim his or her self. His or her crimes are effects of the inherent corruptibility of the body and mind. This is the root cause to be targeted: anything that can and will relieve the corruptive catalysts of criminality.

Simply trying to deter crime through punitive measures and the 'criminal justice system' is, as with most well-intentioned yet inefficient courses, a treatment of symptoms rather than disease. The causal disease may only be addressed through measures like providing more opportunities and employing business, economic and political systems that work for the people, especially for the disadvantaged whom are *far* more likely to be pushed into criminality by the pressures imposed upon them through the pains and vulnerabilities inherent to their disadvantage. This can only be accomplished by creating opportunity and fostering an improved baseline quality of life for everyone through free or at cost education and healthcare, as well as through business structures that do a far better job at distributing their profits to the workforce. For it's almost always a lopsided distribution of means that underpins the pressures propelling criminality.

Such improvements in general opportunity and quality of life will inevitably lead to less pressure on the perpetually over-pressured disadvantaged individuals. And it's clear that it's *pressure*, otherwise considered 'stress' or 'demand,' including the demands of not being aware of or having access to better opportunities, and being in poor health and surrounded by poverty and abuse and feeling like one must do *anything* to mask and compensate for their pains and stresses, and *anything* to improve their position, that leads to the effect of criminality.

As Alex contemplates the failures of the US criminal justice system, the boy finishes his burger and hands the wrapper to the tattooed man before running back down to the river. His probable father watches him for a moment while he finishes his smoke session, then places the pipe back on the outer windowsill and reenters the dwelling. A half hour or so passes with little occurring, save for the child splashing in the river and beginning to search for and stack the larger rocks that he finds into pillared formations, as if having the construction of a stone fort in his imagination. If only his imagination, and that fort, could save him from



all that likely assails and ultimately threatens to thwart his vulnerably fledgling life.

Then they see her. Kate, appearing from the dwelling wearing only an old oversized, tattered T-shirt and panties, her hair disheveled, feet bare and with one hand balled up in a fist, ambles out of the same back door that the tattooed man passed through half an hour before. Alex, Henry and Michael all exchange looks from their respective, concealed positions, waiting for someone to signal that it's time to make a move. But she's still too close to the house. They need to draw her away, both for her safety and for theirs. Suddenly, however, it's clear that the boy playing by the river is an obstacle in their retreat, as the river clearly provides the best regress, its opposite shore open to fleet, uninhibited retreat.

None of the three make a move, but watch as Kate grabs the meth pipe off the windowsill and shoots a few quick furtive glances through the window. Scanning the ground, she finds and picks up a large stone. Then, turning her back to the door, she opens her fisted palm to reveal a few shards of meth crystal, which she then hastily crushes against the windowsill, packs into the pipe and immediately begins to smoke. No sooner has she taken her first toke when a great bellow bursts forth from inside the house.

"Bitch!," the methed-up man yells before exploding through the door. "What the fuck did I tell you?! No smoking my shit without me!" He grabs Kate forcefully by both arms and begins to shake her violently, at which point the pipe falls from her hand and crashes against a metal toy truck near Kate's feet. He releases Kate and slowly stoops over, and when he rises back up he's holding two evenly-shattered shards. The meth pipe has been broken in half. He then glares so menacingly at Kate that she begins to backpedal away from him, which compels him, in one fierce move, to lunge forward with his left hand, grab Kate by the arm and viciously lash out with his right hand, slapping her so hard across the face that she falls backward onto her ass. Placing her hand over the assaulted side of her face, she looks up for a second before screaming at the top of her lungs. No words, just one long, piercing, Earth-shattering scream.

Hearing the calamity, the boy ceases his riverside recreation and runs toward the house. Standing near to Kate, the boy takes in the scene, visibly concerned at her clear distress. The tattooed man demonstrates no regret for his actions, and far more concern for the broken

paraphernalia than the effects of the experience on his impressionable young son. He puts the pipe together and then takes it apart repeatedly, as if to dramatize its destruction and emphasize the loss of value. Everyone can feel his rising aggravation and air of violent potential, even from afar.

“You completely worthless fraction of a human being!,” Kate fearlessly condemns him while rising to her feet with furious indignation. In her rage and contempt she loses all sense of self-concern. “All you care about are your precious drugs and petty little possessions! You don’t give a damn about anyone! I mean, look at this,” she says, gesturing towards the boy. “Your own damn kid has to watch your sad excuse for a life every day! He watches you make drugs and fuck and trash your property and shit all over everything good, and now he knows you’re a woman beater! Do you beat him as well?! Does he serve as your punching bag when there’s no one else around strong enough to fight back you pathetic piece of shit?!”

The tattooed man just stares at her for a good five seconds, as if calculating his next move. Then, addressing his son, he says: “Go inside right now” with such severity that the boy doesn’t protest, but does as he’s commanded and enters the residence. Being close enough to see and hear the whole scene unfold, every muscle in the bodies of the three watchers shrouded by the dense forest undergrowth goes taught, with each of their minds anxiously racing, weighing their fear for themselves against their concern for Kate. Then the sinewy, sped-up meth manufacturer pounces on his outmatched prey.

He slaps Kate hard and repeatedly as she moves away while struggling in vain to shield herself from the barrage. When she begins flailing her arms in an attempt to fight him off his pride is further ignited, provoking an escalation in his brutality. He soon transitions from slaps to a punch that she only partially deflects before it meets the side of her head, dazing her and knocking her onto her back. Before she can recover her wits he flips her over and pins her down, sitting on the back of her knees. The situation plummets into impending catastrophe as he yanks down her panties and begins to unbutton his pants. “Fuck, he’s going to rape her here and now!” Alex whispers.

Suddenly, Michael bursts free from his concealing bush and darts directly for Kate and the soon-to-be rapist, and before the tattooed man even knows Michael’s there Michael launches himself through Kate’s attacker like a linebacker, tackling him backward and clear of Kate. She

rises to her feet and pulls up her panties just as Alex and then Henry come running forward from their hiding places, but too late to keep Michael from being flipped, pinned and brutally beaten about the face and ribs from the drug-and-adrenaline-fueled assailant who, like a frenzied wild animal, isn't even taken aback by Michael's sudden, mysterious arrival.

Fighting someone that's not only on methamphetamines but accustomed to a hardscrabble life is highly hazardous, especially for the sheltered and naturally mild-mannered. Luckily, however, Michael has backup, and both are former athletes. While Henry moves to help Kate, from a running start Alex pushes the man from behind, and he's launched forward with such force that he nearly slams his head into the back door to the dwelling. Without a moment's hesitation, and glancing back to see that he's now outnumbered, the intimidating young man holds his unbuttoned shorts up while running into the house, cursing the entire time and finally yelling: "You assholes fucked with the wrong one! You're fucking dead!"

Alex immediately realizes that the situation has turned to life and death and, in crisis mode, shouts a quick command at Henry, telling him to get Kate back upriver before yanking Michael, limp, stunned and badly debilitated, bleeding profusely from his nose and burst bottom lip and gripping his possibly broken ribs, to his feet, shouting: "You have to get up! Now! Right fucking now Michael! Let's go!" Then chaos ensues.

All four are doused with adrenaline as Henry pulls Kate forward, back in the direction he was hiding, making a beeline for the bridge over the Noyo where Amanda awaits in her parked Prius. At the same time Alex forces Michael, who's now hunched forward with his arm across his midsection, from an unsteady hobble into a jog and, just as the meth-head reemerges from the dwelling, into an all-out sprint in the direction of Henry and Kate. Then Alex hears the sickening, nerve-shattering sound of a handgun slide being pulled, immediately inducing terror. Several rapid shots are fired.

Fortunately for the fleeing foursome it's very difficult to fire a handgun with any accuracy from a good distance. Yet, as the rounds are being expended that distance begins to close as their pursuer rapidly runs them down, incessantly firing his weapon the entire time. So while shooting on the run decreases accuracy, the closing distance makes it increasingly likely that each passing bullet will find flesh. Bullets whizz by Alex and Michael, making a bone chilling sound as they just miss

them, hammering into the trunks of the great Redwoods and whistling by their heads at their fatal velocity. The shooter draws within thirty feet while completing the clip. The final round hits home, dropping one of his targets.

Michael, having been in an awkwardly hobbled run with Alex at his hip, instantly staggers forward, then sideways, before falling to the forest floor. Alex immediately stops, with Henry and Kate continuing their flight from danger. Sheer instinct takes hold as Alex, his heart near bursting in his chest, hears Michael wail in agony while gripping his left leg, his khaki pants immediately turning a dark, ruddy, blood-soaked brown. Glancing from Michael up at their pursuer, Alex notices that the man has briefly slowed his chase to eject the empty clip and, as he pulls another clip from his pocket, Alex is overcome with an instinctive sense of survival.

His fear and anger coalesce with his raw athleticism and animalistic instinct, vaulting Alex past Michael towards his shooter and, just as the man pulls back the barrel to bring a round into the chamber, Alex shoves him with his combined might and momentum, propelling him backwards with such force that he drops his gun while being lifted off his feet. Slamming his backside into a Redwood, the man's head shoots backwards and cracks against the unforgiving trunk, crumbling him to the ground.

For a moment it looks as though he's been knocked unconscious, but he soon begins to stir, whereupon Alex strikes, kicking him as hard as he can square in the face just as he starts to rise, knocking him back into the tree. There their attacker remains, his head slumped forward. And though he now shows no movement, Alex's recent flight instinct has been flipped hard over into fight, prompting him to punch and kick the downed man several more times in the head, each time more forceful than the last.

Seeing the black nine millimeter handgun on the ground nearby, Alex walks over, picks it up and walks back to where the attempted murderer sits motionless at the base of the mighty Redwood. Standing over him, he points the handgun directly at his head, and then freezes, feeling something suddenly come over him, evoking a strange sense of calm. Recovering his capacity for thought, Alex looks up and, through the trees some distance away, sees that the boy has reemerged from his home and is watching the scene unfold. Alex's heart drops as he realizes

the severity of the action he's verging upon, and he lets the weapon drop to his side.

"Call the police!" Alex yells at the boy. "Call nine-one-one!" he adds. Then Alex turns in the direction of the river and throws the pistol. As it splashes into the water he quickly assesses the situation. No sign of Henry or Kate; Michael screaming in agony. Hauling Michael up, he harnesses his adrenaline to somehow throw him over his shoulder before lumbering back toward the bridge, which is now near after their terrifying sprint from death. Before getting there he hears splashing, and glances over to see Amanda crossing the river, moving in their direction.

When Henry and Kate arrived without Alex she panicked and, forgetting herself, set out to lend her aid. "Follow me!" Alex yells as Amanda grabs Michael's other arm, and soon they arrive at the bridge and the parked Prius, with Kate and Henry crouched behind it, trembling with shock. Amanda opens the door to the backseat as Alex falls forward, shoving Michael into the car.

Alex and Amanda yell at Henry and Kate to "Get in!" as they join Michael in the backseat before frantically attempting to put pressure on the bullet wound and make him as comfortable as possible. Moments later the reunited group is racing down the dusty dirt road across the canyon toward Fort Bragg and the nearest hospital, Kate pressing her hands against both sides of Michael's gushing gunshot hole, as the bullet passed clear through his thigh. Everyone, especially Kate, silently prays that their group of five is not soon to become a foursome.

In the backseat of the Prius, Michael's head rests upon Henry's lap as Kate ties the T-shirt borrowed from their would-be killer around Michael's leaking leg and pleads with God not to let her mistakes result in the loss of the life she suddenly sees in a very different light. Her psychological desire of the unobtainable, her shame in having seduced Alex and wronged Amanda, and her pathetic use of meth to mask the pain and self-regret she felt at not being able to come to terms with her misdeeds are all unbearable in themselves, but if Michael's concern for her is to result in his demise, she feels at this moment that she might not survive. "He saved me from being raped!" she echoes again and again as the electric car whines with excessive demand, conveying its stunned, depleted, tremulous passengers over the uneven, dust-spewing dirt road towards the coast beyond.



## Sixteen: Bound by Blood

*“And now here is my secret, a very simple secret: It is only with the heart that one can see rightly. What is essential is invisible to the eye.”*

- Antoine de Saint-Exupery – *The Little Prince*

“We’re extremely fortunate that the other two weren’t on the premises,” Alex reports to the police officers, alluding to the fact that the private investigator had reported that the property was inhabited by at least three individuals. “Not to mention the fact that any one of the other rounds from the clip he emptied at us could’ve killed us... It’s hard to believe it all almost ended. Perhaps it’s good to be reminded of our vulnerability; what we all have to be thankful for and shouldn’t take for granted.”

Gathered just outside the trauma ward where Michael is undergoing surgery on his bullet-perforated left leg, Henry, Amanda and Kate catch fleeting glances of their housemate as the surgeons pass back and forth in the small emergency room of the local hospital, opening and obstructing the view of their wounded companion as they move about, all while Alex puts the final touches on the group’s statement to two Fort Bragg police officers who arrived shortly after Michael’s admission.

“What other two?,” one of the officers questions as the other scribbles into a notepad.

Alex continues: “When you guys failed to find Kate... not a criticism of you, of course, for you likely had no legal right to search the premises where we eventually found her,” he adds uneasily, “but when your search looked as though it was going to be unsuccessful, we hired a private investigator who quickly determined this property to be the

most likely place that she would turn up, both because it was by far the closest property linked with criminal activity in the vicinity where she was last seen, and because of her weakness for narcotics.”

Alex is being forthright, not to get back at Kate, but because he feels the group has been warranted in their actions, because concealing the truth from the police is risky, and also because the officer leveling the questions seems sharper than most, and might see through any attempted deception. ‘He’s looking to become a detective, I’d bet,’ Alex thinks to himself. “Anyway...”

Alex relates the whole of the story exactly as it had played out to the best of his recollection. He tells the officers how the investigator Henry had hired had informed them of the property’s three occupants, and that he still felt somewhat to blame for Kate running away in the first place. He even admits that they had trespassed on the perpetrator’s property, but only after seeing Kate being sexually assaulted. “The shooting, however, took place well past the property lines... I’m quite certain of that,” Alex adds, preemptively countering the ability of the offender to claim self-defense against being assaulted on his own private property.

“Not to mention the fact that, as I’m sure the surgeons in there will verify, we were running away when he was shooting. The bullet struck the back of his leg. He chased us down, firing his pistol the entire time, and just after what I believe was the final round in his clip struck our friend in there,” Alex adds, pointing at the ER, “I turned around, saw that he was reloading, and attacked. I caught him by surprise, shoved him into a tree, kicked him several times in the head, disarmed him and, honestly, almost shot him... I was soaked in adrenaline. But I tossed the weapon into the river instead.”

“Why?,” the officer asks.

“Why did I toss the weapon?,” Alex responds. “So he couldn’t grab it if he came to his senses before we could flee, I suppose. And perhaps... perhaps I also feared I might use it against him, and tossed it out of this sort of fear as well... fear of my own weakness. Preserving evidence was not my foremost concern at the time, but mutual and self-preservation.”

After the pair of police officers depart, warning Alex against leaving



town until receiving word from them that it's okay to do so, the foursome anxiously wait to see Michael. They're told that he survived the bullet wound, which fortunately hadn't severed his femoral artery, and handled the surgery quite well, but that he required quite a lot of blood, an IV and some rest before they could see him; that it would be a couple hours at least.

Sitting in the waiting room, the foursome is more solemn and uneasy than they've ever been in one another's presence, their bond stressed and tested as it's never been before. Amanda and Kate sit across from one another, having set aside their dispute for the time being given the circumstances. Kate bows her head in silent reflection while Henry lays on his back alone on a nearby bench with his arm over his face and with Alex pacing beside him, going over the events of the last few hours in his head.

"So you guys actually hired a private investigator to find me?," Kate breaks the tense silence. With a scowl on her flushed face she looks around for a response, eventually meeting eyes with Amanda.

"It was mostly Michael," Amanda admits. "We were all worried about you, but not like him. He was beside himself. I don't know if it's because he's just the really sweet, worrisome type, or if it's because he's in love with you... likely both... but he was adamant about taking action after we realized that the police weren't going to make any headway in locating you." A few seconds pass before Amanda adds with barely veiled contempt: "You definitely bewitched him. You're good at that."

Kate's heart wrenches and, overcome by the group's overriding show of compassion despite her transgressions, despite so grossly wronging Amanda and treating Michael like shit, despite being a drug addict and instigator, Kate's eyes well with tears. Jumping up, she moves across the space separating her from Amanda, lowers herself to her knees, takes Amanda's hands in hers and, sobbing, says: "I'm so, so sorry Amanda. I know I don't deserve your forgiveness, and that I can never make up for so monstrously wronging you, but I just hope... I don't know... I want you to know that I know I was wrong, and that I knew it then, but my pride wouldn't let me admit it, and I know you deserve much, much better."

All the pain produced that night still throbs like a raw wound in her heart and weighs heavily upon her mind, and while her first instinct is

therefore to pull back her hands and even lash-out at Kate, Amanda stares into Kate's swollen, teary eyes and sees such genuine remorse, regret and self-chastising that her heart suddenly provokes the opposite reaction.

Reaching out and gently grabbing Kate beneath her shoulders, she pulls her up off the dingy hospital floor into a complete, warm embrace. Immediately Kate begins to ball and latches onto Amanda with most of her might before burying her face in the crook of Amanda's neck and cathartically expelling all the pent-up emotion her ego has kept at bay since running from the road down the river that night.

Amanda's shoulders are soon showered with tears that soak into her bloodied shirt, and she too feels her heart release pent-up emotions. Love and hate swirl together in her heart and mind until Yin equalizes Yang, and she feels herself enter the calm center and source of every emotional storm, at which point an elation washes over her, and she mirrors Kate's affections.

Henry, having removed his arm from his face to witness the crashing together of mercy and contrition, simply takes in the scene, quivering uncomfortably. Alex, meanwhile, can't help but let a little smile cross his face as his heart swells with the sensed connective force of the emotional and spiritual conduction. For several minutes the two young women hug until Kate's tears die down, then she pulls back just enough to peck Amanda lightly on the cheek, sit down next to her and lay her head in her lap, continuing to sob while allowing the rest of the release to wash the pollution of the previous week from her psyche.

Amanda places her right hand on Kate's right arm, who responds by gently grabbing her hand and pulling it into her chest, swallowing it up as she contracts into the fetal position. The rare honesty and vulnerability of the moment is intoxicating. Amanda smiles down at Kate, whose mouth quivers as she smiles back, then closes her eyes. Amanda then raises her head and makes eye contact with Alex. Her adorable freckled face is red with emotion as she says:

"Don't think for one second that this absolves you, mister."

"I know. I don't deserve your absolution," Alex responds.

"We didn't sleep together, by the way," Kate says softly. "That was an

awful thing of me to say. The monster in me was just trying to hurt you.” Kate falls silent after this. Wiping her face, she closes her eyes again and is soon asleep in Amanda’s lap, physically and emotionally exhausted. She’ll pay a heavy toll for her pounding passage through the previous week.

Two hours later most of the group has joined Kate in her slumber. Amanda has her head leaned back against the top of the bench, snoring softly with Kate’s head still in her lap, while Henry, in the same place he’s been since the group was told they’d have to wait to see Michael, his arm back across his face, breathes heavily. Alex, meanwhile, paces the hallway, his mind reeling from recent events.

He attempts to predict their outcome, eager for things to move forward on all fronts. Michael’s condition weighs on his mind, but, as his love for Amanda is the prevalent focus of his current heart-mind connection, he finds that he’s most occupied by concerns over what this recent show of reconciliation will mean for the group, and especially for him and his relationship.

Will it facilitate or complicate Amanda’s forgiveness? Will the two turn on each other as soon as the emotional pressures of the last week’s events subside? Will the two girls gang up on him, perhaps, exacting a toll he no doubt owes? The pace of his thoughts matching the speed of his pacing, Alex soon realizes that he’s working himself up, and with little, if any, productive gain, something that he very much has a propensity for, and which he always felt goes with the territory of his ruminating, contemplative character.

He mindfully focuses on taking full breaths while recalling his old motto on the costly futility of worry: Only concern yourself with what you can control, for if you lack control you cannot affect change, only increase the costs of stress, energy and time without benefit. Forming a plan of attack and learning from and applying the lessons gleaned from missteps are worth the effort, but worrying about things of which one has no control will always incur an unjustifiable cost.

Alex reminds himself of another principle which he once wrote and often recalls: “The past is a lesson. The future is a production that can only be produced in the present.” Of course, such principles are always easier to recollect than to master in application. “Which is why,” Alex thinks, “discipline is the difference between knowing what’s best and

doing what's best, and thereby the difference between knowing how to produce the best result and actually producing it. Conditioning is thus essential to the pursuit of one's best self and highest potential; the practicing of discipline until it's second nature; an ingrained fortitude."

At this moment Alex's pensive pacing is interrupted by a surgeon. They've transferred Michael to the critical care unit next door, and he can now have visitors.

As the group enters his room, Michael appears to have only recently regained consciousness. A morphine drip is connected to his IV.

"Kate..." Michael whimpers, grinning broadly. "You're here... You're okay."

"Yes, I'm here," Kate replies, sitting on the side of his bed and taking his hand in hers.

"We're all here too buddy," Henry kids with an amused snort.

"Of course you are..." Michael replies. "God... thank God we all got out of there. I don't remember much after that horrible piercing sensation in my leg. What happened? I must've been shot by that maniac. How did we all manage to avoid being slaughtered?!"

"Something I've never experienced before," Alex relates. "I mean, obviously I've never been shot at by a meth addict before, or shot at period, but that's not what I mean. What I mean is that I think you and I made it out because I went into wild man mode, honestly. I wasn't in a typical state of consciousness. There was very little thought involved. It was all so narrow and reactive; all survivalist instinct; purely animalistic. We were running, you were shot, I stopped to pick you back up, realized the guy was reloading his gun and instantly, instinctively knew we were going to die if I didn't attack right then and there. It's like that truth was told to me, and I knew it for certain. I might've killed him, actually. And right in front of his kid. I know it sounds odd, but I hope he survived my brutal barrage of blows delivered to his head. I kicked him far more than was necessary, but I needed to know that he was *completely* stopped."

"You were totally justified in attacking him," Amanda says. "Outright self-defense."

"I know. It's just... the kid was watching... *his* kid," Alex adds sorrowfully. Amanda wraps her arm around Alex's waist and hugs him, putting her head on his shoulder before addressing Michael:

"So, how's the hero feeling?"

"Hero...?" Michael asks, not quite recalling how things had transpired.

"I'm beyond gratified by the love you've all shown me," Kate says. With a dazed look on her face, Kate's had her eyes locked on Michael the entire time, as if in some hypnotic trance. "Especially you, Mike. From what they've told me it was you that was pushing to find me. And you charged Rodney. You took a bullet for me. All because I was a slutty little drug addict that couldn't handle my self-reflection." Tears begin to well up in her eyes again as she glances at Amanda for a moment, then back at Michael. "How can I ever repay you?," she asks with unusual sincerity.

Michael smiles, a bit mischievously. An immense grin crosses his countenance, paired with a spark in his eyes, the opiates clearly inhibiting his typical level of self-doubt. He responds:

"How about a date?"

"You got it," Kate replies. "You can have as many dates as you want. Though I don't know why you'd want anything to do with me after the way I've treated you, and the pain I've caused you..."

After a few seconds of silence, Michael replies: "Because... because I like you. You're beautiful. You're intelligent. You're fun. I see who you are beyond what you show. I see what you can be, what you will be, and it makes me want to be there to see it... I've realized just being around you that you represent what life is all about... that you represent..."

Suddenly Kate leans forward and kisses him, interrupting his train of thought, which he clearly doesn't mind, returning the kiss. Gently coaxing Michael over to the side of the bed, Kate squirms her way onto the bed beside him and lays her head on his chest. "Is this okay?," she asks. "It doesn't hurt, does it?"

"No, it doesn't hurt." He beams exultantly. "In fact, it's an even better painkiller than whatever they've given me."

Everyone chuckles at this, including Kate. Soon the conversation moves to satisfying everyone's curiosity about what happened to Kate that night, and she tells the story of how she was too distraught and disturbed to wait for Chris and Donnie to return, so she'd just started running. While sprinting down the riverbank she almost crashed into one of the other residents of the meth-making property.

Embarrassed by the recollection, she relates how, crying and wearing only panties, the guy was dumbstruck and rendered speechless by her sudden appearance. As he looked her up and down lasciviously, Kate noticed that he'd been smoking a bowl of marijuana. Without asking, she grabbed the pipe and lighter out of his hands, took a hit, and was soon offered a chaser of vodka from the fifth that the pleasantly puzzled man pulled from his pocket. She was already drunk when she ran into him from the strip poker game, and before she knew it, two more hits and several vodka swigs later, she was following the stranger through the woods to the property. There she met Rodney who, she was told, owned the property, inherited from his parents.

In her demented state she stayed-on, trading herself for drugs and alcohol and remaining heavily under the influence all the way up until and through her rescue, only now beginning to sober up. Her face turns flush and begins to twitch as she recalls this exchange and how savagely Rodney fucked her while sped up on methamphetamine. "Never have sex with a convict on meth," she finishes, trying but failing to force a smile that instead turns into a quivering, dejectedly self-disgusted scowl.

Michael becomes visibly upset at Kate's recitation, his face reddening, his blood pressure spiking on the monitor. "You still want that date...?," Kate asks, listening to the monitor and feeling his body tense up beneath her.

"Absolutely," Michael instantly answers. "But you're better than that. I *know* it, even if you don't. And I'm determined to prove it to you, no matter how long that may take."

No one speaks for many uneasy moments before Kate, in a hushed voice, breaks the awkward silence:

"Well, I'll tell you one thing, Michael. There's nothing like turning into a

meth-head that's daily trading sex for a high before almost getting raped to provide some perspective on the worst, weakest side of yourself, and the vulnerability of the body and fragility of the psyche. And there's nothing like your friends demonstrating the love and determination required to heroically ride to your rescue to provide some perspective on what matters most in life: *people; relationships; love*. It's the corny, full-on truth. Even after I treated you all like shit, you still soldiered-up and pulled me back from the brink of disaster, and almost paid the ultimate price in the process. If this doesn't transform me... if this doesn't teach me humility and show me that I need to change my habits and attitude, then I don't deserve any of you; or my life, for that matter."

After a few seconds, Alex asks: "Did you not think we might worry about your disappearance? I mean, it's not like you drove away, in which case we'd have assumed that you were okay... You vanished while walking down the road. Didn't you realize that that would cause us distress?"

"I realized that the next day," Kate replies, "when I was briefly semi-sober upon awaking on that asshole's soiled couch. But I was still very upset, and obviously not thinking straight. And I have to admit that my ego was probably bruised, and that I was angry not just at myself but with how things had gone down that night. So, part of me probably wanted to strike back; wanted to make you all worry. But I was wrong, obviously. It was an emotional, egotistic decision not to walk away from Rodney's place. It was also the drugs, of course... But I shouldn't have stayed... shouldn't have followed the drugs there in the first place, ideally. But, truthfully, in the mental state I was in I probably would've done just about anything to forget about my anger and sense of shame... Don't make decisions while upset, or you may very well create far greater reason to be upset," she finishes, as if speaking to herself and filing the lesson away for future use.





## Seventeen: The Reformation

*Psychological canyons may only be crossed over unbroken bridges between hearts and minds. To facilitate the building of such a bridge, simply say: "No matter what, we're not sleeping together today." Delay the sex until it's unbearable. Only then may it make the crossing.*

While Alex, Amanda and Henry are certain that it won't last, Kate appears genuinely transformed by recent events. The procession from shamed self-disgust throwing wide open the door to her self-destructive tendency to chemically-conceal her stinging self-reflections had propelled her off of a cliff that nearly ended in her rape and the murder of her new, tentative romantic interest.

But what hit her the hardest, she kept repeating, was not the sense of worthlessness or even the closely averted tragedy, but the fact that, despite her transgressions against them, the group demonstrated a massive collective heart in coming to her rescue under circumstances in which, had she been in their shoes, she was sure she would've only regarded herself with contempt. Michael yearned for her enough to risk his life for her despite her discounting and taking him for granted, for he was far too eager to have anything to do with her, a need her psyche saw straight through. Suddenly, however, his affections weren't guaranteed, nor was anything else, including her life itself.

Her newfound appreciation for existence rendered everything in a purer, brighter light. And Amanda was so much the bigger person that her demonstration of forgiveness for Kate's cruel trespasses against her made Kate's heart break from disgrace and fill with adulation at the same time. It was their wellspring of love washing over all the reasons to hate, of compassionate consideration overrunning and disarming animosity and resentment, that struck her to her core.

Kate felt that this inner sanctum of unparalleled wealth of which Alex so often spoke had been sold short and neglected by her to her own great loss; a priceless gift sold for a sense of egotistic power and psychological gratification. And she was resolved never to trade this newly-unearthed, undervalued gift for ego ever again.

Kate remains at the hospital for the five days that Michael is on bed rest and monitored recuperation, running-out to get him whatever goodies he wishes. And now, as Alex, Amanda and Henry return to town to pick the emergent couple up and bring them back to the house, they find them much as they had left them, bound-up in unabashed displays of affection. Their bond was formed quickly, but forged by great spiritual energy of heart, as they were bound together by the blazing emotional fire of barely averted catastrophe.

From what the returning trio can gather, Kate has tended to Michael's every need, playing caregiver with a tenderness they've never before seen from her. Their closeness is palpable, as if they know one another in the most intimate way possible, having spent most of the last week engaged in openly honest dialogues of every order.

The police officer that had interviewed Alex before is back on site when they arrive, standing by Michael's bedside when the three show up to retrieve their two renewed housemates. He repeats for the threesome what he'd reported to Michael and Kate, as a disclosure and warning regarding the individual whom they'd now potentially be targeted by: They'd found ample narcotics evidence on the property where Kate had been staying, and none of the occupants were present at the scene of the crime, their belongings appearing to have been packed in haste, and with the man that had sexually assaulted Kate and shot Michael, Rodney Kent, having fled the area with his son, and now being considered a fugitive.

Violating his parole, he was now wanted on suspicion of attempted murder in addition to a class one narcotics charge being added to his arrest warrant in a repeat of the offense for which he'd been sentenced and paroled in the first place. Due to the severity of his crimes and the duration of the prison time he was facing, the officer assures them that it's unlikely that he'll return to the area.

Nevertheless, the officer repeatedly asks Kate whether there's *any*

chance that she may have told the fugitive of the group's shared residence up on the hill, to which she repeatedly responds "no," though not assuredly enough to fully convince the officer or the other four members of the group. She was, after all, in a drug-and-alcohol-induced haze for the duration of her time with Rodney.

"Please keep your eyes open," the officer warns them. "This man has a history of violence on his record. And if he feels like revenge is in order, and knows enough to locate this group, there's no telling what he might do. So, if you insist on staying where you are, please call us immediately if you have even the least bit of a reason to suspect his presence."

They all give him their word before driving back to the property together in Amanda's car, remnants of the traumatic day still clinging to the fibers of the seats despite extensive efforts to purify her Prius. Along the way Alex imagines the hellish ordeal the man's son must now be facing, with his violently unstable father suffering the stresses of fleeing the area with the police looking for him, a probable meth-fused rage certain to be exacerbated by the pride-wounding manner of his likely sense of defeat.

Alex can only hope that he shows some restraint and doesn't take all of it out on his poor boy, and wonders repeatedly if perhaps he'd made a mistake by *not* shooting him. If he could come to terms with the memory of his father being killed in front of him, perhaps his son would've been better off going through the social service and foster care systems than remaining in his father's destructive care. Alas, it's a moot point now.

For the next few days Kate seldom leaves Michael's room, coming out to the kitchen a few times a day to prepare food and drink for the two of them before returning and softly closing the door to his bedroom behind her. Michael would later claim that those first few days back were the best of his life, and that, in a penetrating stroke of irony, he felt closer to God basking beneath Kate's warm blanketing of open affection and erotic intimacy than he ever had circulating about the cloisters of his family parish or listening to any preacher's pontifications.

When not sleeping, eating or embraced in the throes of sensual affection, Kate humors Michael whilst he reads her his favorite passages from the Bible. From time to time he colors his readings with anecdotes from his own life, like a preacher in training, and other times he cuts

into passages with critiques and contradicting ideas that had lodged in his head by way of his ongoing discourse with Alex, very much in the rational, reflective, questioning manner unbecoming of a life-long-dedicated member of any official faith, much less a high-handed shepherd of a fearful, non-critical-thinking flock.

Michael daily wages an irreconcilable conflict between his old and emerging mental self; between the mind-narrowing, constricting comforts of attempting to order the Spirit into the confines of a hierarchal canon which the greater instinctive and intellectual part of himself now knows it can never fit. And there's something about the struggle, this mental and spiritual growth, that Kate feels welling up from Michael while she's tied to his hip, coupled with his sweet, vulnerable innocence, cute curly hair and unbridled desire and appreciation for her that begins to cement Kate's conversion toward seeing strength where she once saw weakness.

She reflects upon her past relations and the exhibitions she found appealing. The show of certainty, perfect self-control and stoicism no matter what might be concealed beneath. Perhaps pretending to be ever confident and knowledgeable of all things and needing of no one and nothing when such shows of confidence are unmerited and foolish, when that knowledge doesn't exist and when need is known to be unavoidable, is the *true* weakness, and the ability to honestly acknowledge and express limitation, doubt, desire, love and need represents true strength. But can such an intellectual truth hold in the face of the fickle psyche and power-hungry ego?, she asks herself.

She feels herself changing from someone mostly seeking sensory gratification, prideful affirmations of sexual control and lovers that don't need her and can offer her every material and monetary gratification that her idea of herself is driven to fulfill, to someone that fights to fulfill a far deeper yearning; to tap into a far more enriching, eternal spring welling up beneath the idea of the individual self.

As she surprises herself by falling for Michael, Kate sees a new version of herself emerge in the vulnerable adoration reflected in his eyes when he looks into hers. It's the very signal that once turned her away from any man that displayed it, but which she's now beginning to sense is a sign of an opening gateway into a place offering far more than she'd ever imagined possible; a sign filling her heart with its promises in a way that's beginning to make her past self and aspirations appear foolishly,

immaturely misguided.

Her psyche has seemingly been broken down and is now being rebuilt in a manner that, letting go of the need for the accoutrements of affluence and the economic and social status to which she's accustomed and encouraged to seek in the egocentric, wealth-worshipping Western World, is now being built upon a foundation that can carry her *far* higher, to a place of true wealth. The question, of course, is whether or not that reformation will be lasting, or a passing adjustment that'll soon be drawn back towards old trappings; torn to the ground by an earthquake of resurgent former self. Or perhaps she'll arrive at a balancing point where the difference between her heart and ego is split.

A week into the emergence of the new Kate that everyone treats with a mix of intrigue and suspicion, she announces to the group, and to Alex especially, that if there's anyone that can make use of her room they should be invited to move in, as she'll be relocating to Michael's room, and no longer needs the space. And this is only the beginning of the unsettling shuffle resulting as a seeming fallout from recent events. For, soon after this, Henry confides in Alex that he's considering leaving the property and returning to the Austin, Texas area to see his family and help his father with a philanthropic project he's planning related to providing more affordable housing for those disaffected by the gentrification of the city.

That socioeconomic storm raging where Henry grew up continues to suck ever more entrepreneurs and big business interests into the city that, in parallel with San Francisco, but to a lesser degree, has been displacing many of the long-time blue-collar residents and creating significant strain for local politicians. Local leaders across the country, in fact, but in major metropolitan areas especially, continue to struggle with the need to balance the promise of increased tax revenue brought by encouraging the influx of corporations through lower business taxation and unencumbered real estate regulation against the populous pressure applied by unions and everyday citizens outraged at being priced out of their own city.

Alex, of course, strongly suspects this to be but the ostensible reason for Henry's planned departure, with the core compelling factor being a need for greater comfort, security and gratification that the day of the shooting has reminded him that he's highly fortunate to enjoy. He likely retains some terror from the recent trauma and a fear of Rodney's

return as well, and understandably so, being spurred by a sense of vulnerability and appreciation for his position to retreat to a place of safety and luxury.

At the same time, Henry believes that he's garnered a great extent of the wisdom offered by Alex. It was, after all, the promise of this to-be-provided value by his former college roommate, coupled with his unmoored post-divorce life and sense of lacking purpose that motivated his move to the property in the first place. He's assured of the resolution.

He feels his need for a deeper, redemptive quality of life has been fulfilled as much as possible, and that he must take that fulfillment with him and make use of it as much as he can in the 'real world.' The electric, frenetic city life is too hard for some to resist for long, especially those that never quite grasp the richness of rural life and its quiet, peaceful potential for intellectual, spiritual and botanical cultivation, or of the virtues of environmental and energetic sustainability, and who are overly familiar with the indulgences that the largest human hives have to offer.

The following day Kate is fully moved into Michael's room when Henry, gradually packing up his things, in no hurry and having moved far more material into Alex's house than the other members of the group, proposes another alteration to the group dynamic along the lines suggested by Kate: filling her vacated quarters with a new community member. Apparently Stacy's visit had made quite an impression on her despite all the drama, or perhaps due to the excitement of it.

Even after Henry's telling her of the horrors that they recently experienced no more than a mile away, he reports that Stacy is undergoing enough tumult in her own unsatisfying life to justify any risks related to filling Kate's vacancy. Henry tells of how a former boyfriend of Stacy's is teaching her the hard way that he typifies the obsessively-possessive type; a guy who's taking her refusal to rekindle their short-burned flame as an affront to his egotistic claim upon her. Besides, she reports through Henry, she's fond of and quite misses living in the heart of nature, as she had as a child, and had also found her discussions with Alex engrossing enough to desire more, saying something like: "I feel like I can gain a great deal from him."

Both Kate and Alex himself can't help but allow half grins to cross their

countenances upon hearing this last comment. And as they fight back their smiles, Amanda makes little effort to conceal her simultaneously surfacing scowl, firing laser eyes at the two embarrassedly amused housemates as they quickly glance at one another and then away. Kate, sitting next to Michael on the couch, buries her face in Michael's shoulder to release a laugh. Looking away while fighting back a smile, Alex finally makes eye contact with Amanda and is unable to rein it in. The hardest thing *not* to do in such situations is what you're not supposed to do.

"You fucking asshole," Amanda states before retracting her hand from his, standing up and huffing her way into their bedroom. She's still very sensitive as to his apparent inability to resist the seductive capacity of beautiful women that stroke his ego with their interest in his ideas, assuming that's all they wind up stroking. Alex immediately resents his failure to keep a straight face, and again finds himself immersed in the trials of fortifying Amanda's emotional vulnerability.

He wonders if it'll always be this way, and if perhaps his escapade with Kate will inevitably prove the death knell in the relationship that, though it sometimes seems to have recovered its full form, nevertheless also appears constantly at risk of unraveling anew. Sitting on the couch, Kate does her best to submerge her pleasure at being a powerful enough force to drive a wedge between two people that had clearly seemed and still seem, for the most part, to be so inseparably bound as if to sometimes seem to be one being.

Kate's eyes flash with egotistic joy at the easily recognized reminder of her power over men, her ability to take what can't be taken and to rouse and rile and incite to anger even the coolest, most confident of women she'd always considered competitors in the fight for the very few top prizes in the socio-sexual climb of the classes. As the feelings wash over her like a warm, familiar bath, she realizes that Michael is looking down at her, literally and perhaps figuratively as well, eyeing her with wounded suspicion, and she comes crashing back down, the battle between the old, shallow self and the newer, greater self still far from being decided.

She frowns before placing her head back on Michael's shoulder just as he himself makes a move to get up and retreat to his room in a show of affronted displeasure. But Kate holds him down physically and, with her eyes, emotionally, and he eventually relents, staying in his seat.

After much argumentation, Amanda is eventually compelled to believe that her own relationship insecurity shouldn't take precedence over the needs of another. She therefore consents to Stacy's moving in, while admonishing Alex that he's on a very short leash if he wants Stacy's move not to amount to her own displacement from the premises. Besides, Amanda thinks to herself, if anything she should regard the new housemate as a necessary albeit frightful test. It's quite clear that Stacy's attractive and is interested in Alex, and if he's unable or unwilling to resist the temptation of yet another alluring woman, then their relationship is surely doomed.

Under these shuffling circumstances, everyone attempting to predict where the chips will finally fall, Henry beginning to pile his belongings near the front door, Kate wrestling with conflicting ideas of who she is and which direction she's heading, Michael fearing his relationship with her will turn out to be little more than a short-lived fling fueled by her guilt-ridden need to pay him back for flying to her rescue, and Alex and Amanda wracked by similar uncertainties as to the longevity of their union, the house takes on a solemnity as the last days of the original five-some to live on the Redwood-ringed property fast comes to a close.

Everyone begins to reflect upon their time together, and the sap flows between them. Pent-up emotions of every order burst through to the surface as it becomes palpable that these would be the final days in which those sentiments may be released, shared and appreciated. The group plays board games, drinks too much wine and watches a succession of everyone's favorite films, as if they're a family facing impending divorce.





## **Eighteen: Cultural Cornerstones, Recarved**

*The meaning of life is life itself; to maximize the experience of existence for one's self and others. Therefore, the relative goodness or badness, or morality, of every entity, whether an individual, organization or other group, has one measure: the total quality of life they add or subtract.*

“To those that see and hear him a Prince should seem all compassion, all faith, all honesty, all humanity, all religion. There's nothing more necessary to make a show of possessing than this last quality. For men in general judge more by their eyes than by their heads. Everybody is fitted to see, few to understand. Everybody sees what you appear to be; few make out what you really are. And these few do not dare to oppose the opinion of the many, who have the majesty of the state to confirm their view. In the actions of all men, especially those of princes, when there's no court to which to appeal, people think of the outcome. A Prince needs only to conquer and maintain his position. The means he's used will always be judged honorable and will be praised by everybody, because the crowd is always caught by appearance and by the outcome of events, and the crowd is all there is in the world. There's no place for the few when the many have room enough.”

Alex thinks: “If that five-hundred-year-old excerpt from Machiavelli's *The Prince* doesn't all but perfectly encapsulate the modern day world and its globally-prevailing cultural value system, including the inherently deceitful practices of politics and commercialism and the misleading art of propaganda they use to predict and manipulate human behavior whereby the majority are made to feed the greed of the excluding few to the perpetual disservice of that majority, I don't know what does.”

Clearly, very little of predictable human behavior has changed over the

centuries. Honesty; honor; integrity; inclusive principles. These are the death knell of politicians and the corporate stakeholders to whom they're indebted in today's globally-prevalent plutocratic republics. The politician cannot say what he or she truly thinks and feels without risking alienating the polarized party base that rubber stamps or the aristocratic shareholders of colluding corporations that finance his or her career. And without the support of the base and the financiers, the politician's career can neither be born nor long survive. Contemporary politics depends upon a deep campaign war chest, upon the overlap of the ownership and political classes, and upon the political primary system that necessitates taking mainstream views that're seldom progressive or too challenging of convention. Thus, today's politician must pander to both the wealthy and the mainstream of his or her party, ever assuring not to offend either.

And with honesty dead as a necessity of political survival, honor and integrity are obliterated, leaving only Machiavellian stratagems; tactics for maintaining the position of politician by manipulating perception and ever appearing to be what you're not. Deceit is the only constant, with those composing the party base played like fiddles, with the plutocratic financiers ceaselessly stroked, and with anyone outside the base shoved into the marginalized closet, left disaffectedly ignored, displaced from and disproving of 'by and for the people.' This is what our modern sham of a 'democratic system' breeds, much the same as the prevalent economic theories and business structures: the dishonorable service of the few at the cost of the many, by any reprehensible means necessary. "It's about the show. The substance was sold long ago," Alex hears in his head.

"We're so far from being an evolved, morally-advanced, progressive society it's amazing the notion ever seriously crosses anyone's mind," Alex thinks. The only separation between Machiavelli's advice to the Medici's regarding the production of a stable ruling class by any means necessary and today's plutocratic republics and their corporate owners is time and the adaptation to progressive pressures that've fractured that ruling class into oligarchic corporate controllers and the necessity to mask that control with the illusion of democracy.

And yet that illusion has been so long imbedded in the traditional teachings and beliefs that most Americans, and most citizens of the world, in fact, seem incapable of even questioning them, much less doubting or finding the conviction and courage to rebel against them for the common good. This is certainly true of anyone that unwittingly

conserves these systems and their perpetuated evils, the aptly named conservatives of the nation and the world, but is largely true of the left wing as well. 'Everyone is fitted to see, few to understand,' indeed. Liberals see more of the evil, yet rarely grasp its extent; rarely seem to understand that it's not just a matter of parties and their leaders and the wrongdoings of select corporations, but that it's *systemic*. The evildoing is inherent to the traditional systems themselves.

As is his custom when he has thoughts of potential value, Alex pulls out his cell phone and makes a note: "The trouble with tradition is that it encourages us to be comfortable with the status quo, even when it's unjust, whilst it simultaneously constrains the mind and inhibits freedom of thought, directing our thinking and endeavors into pathways well-paved by the past. These paths from the past most commonly lead *away* from the greater good due to having been laid by those whose interests are, by the corrupting nature of those possessing of great wealth and power, mutually exclusive with the greater interests of life as a whole."

"Steadfast, unquestioning fealty toward tradition thereby deters the propensity of people to think outside the box of conservative convention, and undermines the tendency to develop and support ideas compelling the pursuit of the best interests of the vast majority of people that've long built themselves into the box on the order of self-serving masters; masters concerned only with consolidating as much value and control for themselves as possible, achieved at the loss of the many kept within the box that prevents them from breaking free to earning any greater share of that value and say in society."

"Those masters have long done all they can to prevent us from bounding out of the box, and so long as we remain within it we shall continue to pay an inexcusable cost in total quality of life; in all the opportunities and controls by which we may create better lives for ourselves and our brethren, both nationally and globally. And the most common way that cost is paid is through the societal systems directing our professional and political objectives and endeavors, with the most common and costly delusion being that we're governed by democracy."

Saving his note and securing his phone in his pocket, Alex glances back down at Machiavelli's *The Prince*, opened on his lap, before closing it and setting it on the log next to him, exchanging it for his large morning mug of coffee. He sits in the Redwood grove at the apex of the property, in the center of the roundabout where the cars are parked, just above

both his new residence and the studio apartment his father built going on a decade ago. Here the compost piles are kept and continually turned to create the black gold that possesses the power to compel produce to spring forth from even the least accommodating soil.

It's early morning the day after Stacy's move into the room vacated by Kate's transfer to Michael's quarters, and Alex has carried the book out of the house with the intention of turning the piles after completing his routine caffeine-infused morning read. The sun has only recently risen, and has yet to climb to the point where it crosses into the canopy of the forest, peeking its head over the treetops so as to warm and illuminate the hillside.

In the invigorating chill of the sun-starved morning, Alex is all the more appreciative of the warmth he's absorbing from his French-pressed coffee. The trusty morning fog still lingers in the Noyo River Canyon below, and Alex stares into it as if attempting to divine some wisdom from the patterns weaving their way through the undulating waves of mist. This is one of his favorite times of day.

The contrasting combination of the frigid air and hot drink kindle the body and mind, with the promise of the day seeming to rise with the light and heat spreading out from the sun like the fingers of Ra. Circulation and warmth are collaborative life-giving elements, and the coffee never fails in its cerebral effect, forcing blood through the brain and lending one a slight sense of euphoria coupled with a heightened alertness and temporary increase in mental capacity and potential for productivity that he'd conditioned himself to take advantage of, else let the morning slip past him, leaving a lingering guilt in its wake.

Gulping down the last of the large mug, Alex places it on the stump next to *The Prince* before turning his attention to the threesome of four-by-four-foot wire-ringed receptacles of any and all decomposing materials that the beneficial bacteria busy themselves turning into the sickly-sweet-smelling humus. Compost production is a science, of course, ideally calling for an ideal balance of heat, moisture, nitrogen and carbon, but the busy microbes will work their magic eventually, even when a less-than-exacting approach is taken.

Worked into the rocky native soil the gardeners' 'black gold' final product possesses the power to gradually transform the clay into more fruitful loam, directly adding fertility while helping break-up the strongly pressed-together clay particulates and thereby unlocking the nutrients

already embedded within the clay, facilitating cultivation by allowing plant roots to tap enriching elements which they'd been denied.

One of the upsides of clay soil is that, while it's extremely difficult for plant roots to penetrate and tap its stores of nutrients and water, the quantity of nutrients and water tends to be greater than in less-tightly-packed soils because they're less readily leached through and away from the soil by rainfall. Amending it to the point where the nutrients and water can be effectively accessed by the plants is the challenge. The patience of years of additions of manure and other natural fertilizers are required. As he turns the piles with the potato fork kept in the grove, Alex sees Henry emerge from the house and approach with his own coffee in hand. "He has more pep in his step than usual," Alex thinks.

"I wonder what he's up to now?" Henry puts his cup down next to Alex's and extends an open palm, gesturing for Alex to hand him the tool. "He definitely wants something," Alex reasons. Granting him his request, Alex passes him the fork, picks up his book and mug and takes a seat on the stump, trying to guess at Henry's agenda, presenting such determination.

"As you're aware," Henry begins, "I moved here mostly because of *Time for True Democracy*. As much as I missed you, old buddy, I was in a dark place and was searching for the light, any light, so to speak. I was disenchanted with the life I was living and reeling from my divorce, and when I found out my old college buddy had written a book, I was intrigued. And as it turns out I was surprisingly open to its messages, despite the fact that it flies in the face of everything that I was raised to believe about this nation being the greatest on Earth and the bastion of freedom, democracy and justice. Your book made a clear case that these are exaggerations or outright lies proliferated as a means to control minds and direct actions towards unjust ends of consolidating wealth and power."

"So," Henry continues, "I was hoping to explore your ideas with you one last time this morning, before my departure, and hopefully find a way to use some of my resources to help you spread those ideas and establish the infrastructure that you'll need in order to foster them. You do, after all, share the intent at the end of your book to found an organization that'll help you study your ideas in greater depth, and establish beta versions of your political and business systems. I think these are worthwhile goals definitely worth pursuing, and I can only guess that I haven't seen much of this from you yet, outside of your blog, because

you lack start-up capital.”

“Yeah, I spent the vast majority of the funds that I made from the book on this property and the house,” Alex replies, trying to hide his excitement at Henry’s offer. He’d been tempted many times in the past to contact Henry or his father and at least hint at the possibility of their assisting him in the publishing of his work or the establishment of such an organization, but it never felt right. For it to happen, Alex felt, for not just Henry or his father but any other individuals, families or organizations of considerable means to financially-infuse his efforts, it had to be of their own volition. He had to convince them of the value of the ideas, not proposition them.

He’d make every effort to assure that as many people as possible were exposed to the ideas held in parallel with many past and present progressives, but he wouldn’t ask anyone for money directly. Instead, he’d wait for the more conscientious men and women of conviction to be inspired by his words and concepts, and perhaps feel repentant at spending so much of their lives contributing to the increasing disparity in quality of life across the nation and the planet through patronizing, working for and investing in value-consolidators like the financial industry, conservative political institutions and most corporations.

Alex knew that conventional wisdom and most of the activity and mindsets of those composing society were against him. And yet he imagined and wanted to believe that many people, once they took the time and effort to comprehend his concepts and appraise their long-term potential, being drawn to them like moths to a flame of spiritual and progressive illumination, would come to see them as overlapping paths pursuing a brighter future for everyone working toward and benefitted by their realization, which, ideally, could come to include the whole of humanity. Was this delusion, or potential reality? *Is there a line between the two?*

“So, can you go over the central points of your political, economic and business ideologies with me?,” Henry continues. “I have a decent understanding of your spiritual ideology, I think; of the one irreducible Spirit whose energy is at the core, at the inner-most, immortal Self, of everything in existence; of the shared identity of truest Self central to the concept you call monoexistentialism. And I get how you say that this spiritual truth is at the heart of your morality as well as your political, economic and business ideologies. That quality of life as a whole, the greatest quality of existing of the living embodiments of the Spirit in

total, is the goal of the Spirit... and that this goal should be the chief concern of politics, economics and business, and their structures and guiding principles.”

“But I’d like to go over more of the particular concepts composing the connected political and business ideologies.” Henry pulls his phone from his pocket. “And do you mind if I record what you say?” Alex immediately feels a defensive reflex, fearing that Henry, having long demonstrated a self-absorbed mental complex, might have his own benefit and personal profit at the forefront of his considerations. Alas, copyright law permits Alex some security against allowing others to take control of his words and use them for purposes entirely in contradiction to their intent, an injustice faced by many a philosopher and progressive.

Moreover, Alex firmly believes that the potential value of his ideas spreading and being considered and invested in by progressive-minded people in service of the total potential value of life is worth such a risk. And yet, he’s always found it hard to ignore the feeling that such hesitation is actually about his ego; about maintaining control of his ideas so that he’ll be credited with their inception, even as he well understands that the fleeting mortal life is of far less significance and value than that of life as a whole continuing into perpetuity. “How much total potential value has been squandered in the squabble over credit?,” he wonders to himself, recalling the quote: “There’s no limit to what a person can accomplish if they don’t care who gets the credit.” It’s the value of the *idea* that’s vital, not the ego. Never sacrifice the former for the latter.

“If you wouldn’t mind beginning with the political ideology of true, purified democracy,” Henry encourages Alex to begin. “You don’t have to be comprehensive. I just want to touch on the broad strokes for now. Like why you consider the US not to be a true democracy, and what the requisites are for the existence of true democracy?”

“Democracy is defined as ‘by and for the people.’ That’s its one central, indispensable characteristic,” Alex states. “And American Government accomplishes neither of these obligatory objectives. It’s ‘by’ an extremely exclusive, partisan-based and plutocratically-driven excluding minority of overly-privileged persons and groups and, despite the intention of honorably idealistic presidents like Obama and congress- people like Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders, is by and large ‘for’ those same people. And it cannot be for the few and for the majority of the American people at the same time, because



those interests are mutually exclusive. What profits the few almost always costs the majority by the very zero-sum nature of power and profit. Nothing is created from nothing. Investing in increased means of control and wealth for the few deprives the many of the opportunity for the same increase in means, with said means also tending to be unsustainably extracted from the Earth, despite all the bullshit, disproven justifying attempts of the right to conceal this, as with, in but two examples, the 'trickle-down effect,' or the claim that global warming is a myth."

"If it increases the ability of the rich to get richer, it decreases the ability of the less privileged to gain greater opportunities for wealth and improvements in quality of life. If the scale rises on one side it falls on the other. This is the equal and opposite balancing nature of all things. Giving ever more to ever fewer means ever more must have ever less. This is incontrovertible law, not theory. Yes, GDP increases may say that the pot is growing, but if more and more of that pot belongs to fewer and fewer, less and less of it belongs to more and more."

"If there's a jump in GDP per capita by five thousand dollars, for example, but an increase of twenty thousand dollars for the top five percent of that capita, most people's quality of life was diminished, not improved, as much as laissez faire economists might contend otherwise. Then there's the proven psychological phenomenon inherent to accumulations wealth, power and resources: the more the few have the more they'll use what they have to stake a claim on ever more of the finite income, wealth and political control available, reducing everyone else's claim in the process."

"Pulling teeth and claws from the regulatory agencies and all broadly protective, popularly-benefitting programs is how the plutocracy maintains this pursuit, always selling it as something else and deceiving non-critical-thinkers into buying into their own oppression. So, the truth is that we're mostly by and for the few, with progressives forever fighting to battle back against the exclusive control measures of that few embedded in the traditional fabric of every swatch of the nation, a fabric constituting, amongst other things, the false façade of democracy used to keep people boxed into the constricting structure by which we almost entirely labor for comforts and conveniences without a share in our organizations or society at large, all while enriching the already wealthy through their equity-excluding corporations and plutocratically-controlled political mechanisms. The false façade of our national structure painted with 'freedom, equality and democracy' conceals serious rot."

“So what specifically is absent in the American system of government in terms of meeting the requirements of legitimate democracy, in your opinion?” Henry inquires, pressing Alex to delve further.

“I believe that in order for democracy to be legitimate two absolute imperatives must be guaranteed,” Alex answers: “One: political power cannot be for sale, with anything related to this corruptive quid pro quo made illegal, and two: every voting age citizen must be able to vote their values *directly* without requiring those votes to be passed through political power centers; through sieves that filter out pure democratic will through entrenched parties of upper-class politicians and their colluding corporate shareholders. If political power is bought and sold, which it long has been in the United States, and if the democratic vote goes through the filter by which a preset, limited, cordoned-offen, easily monetarily-coerced and corrupted group of people is said to interpret the demands of the electorate, then true democracy is dead.”

“I say this because such political positions and their collusion with big money interests contradicts and is mutually exclusive with popular rule. As is the dominance of party politics. Money cannot be directly convertible into political action, else a plutocracy invariably arises, with an oligarchy gradually growing up beneath it. And people must be allowed to vote their values directly or, if unable or unwilling to represent themselves, must be permitted to pass their voting power to *anyone* they deem most capable of representing those values in the relevant city, county, state or nation. For democracy to truly exist political power cannot be dependent upon and necessarily consolidated within and controlled by a pre-set group of individuals or parties. The party system, or partisan politics, especially when dominated by a few or, worse, two parties that have any chance of controlling any significant block of political power, is inherently anti-progressive; it’s inherently repressive, because it creates and rewards divisiveness and undercuts solidarity amongst representatives and the people forced into broadly warring camps whose at odds positions preclude the possibility of unity.”

“Therefore,” Alex continues, “true, direct democracy that doesn’t necessitate but *accommodates* parties and representatives when *directly* empowered by people free to choose any individual or party in whom to invest their political power is an absolute democratic imperative. But, of course, such a system is certainly not in the greed-based interests of plutocrats; plutocrats that force a false democracy dictated by constrained parties led by their few endorsed representatives so that they may consolidate control of the political process for their generally exploitative, profiteering purposes. Therefore, only a sustained movement of great popular demand and pressure placed upon the entrenched

system can break us free from the plutocratic, aristocratic boundaries that currently block the greatest possible value for all citizens and, in place of the false façade democracy under which we're ruled, establish a true form democracy made for the communication era."

"In terms of American history and the general historical absence of true democracy, I'd add that, though most people might call this a conspiracy theory, perhaps excepting those who know that the nature of wealth and power is that it compels the ego of those that possess it to conspire to find ways to amass ever more wealth and power... that I personally think that our political system was *built* to be divided and thereby effectively toothlessly dysfunctional, because if it was actually *functional* in the sense of translating the will of the majority into political policy, law and action, then that majority would prevent the endless amassment of wealth and power currently crippling the potential of the human race in general, not just in the United States."

"One cannot simultaneously empower the best interests of the vast majority and the capacity of the greedy to sate their greed. These objectives are inherently contradictory. And what *could* be done with the power and tax proceeds of a federal government overseeing a nation with the resources that we have were that power and money directed in truly populist, progressive ways, in ways improving the overall opportunities and quality of life of the populace in total, in comparison to the way that wealth and power is directed now, is inestimably great, representing a tragic opportunity cost; a gross crime against the people. And since our plutocratic republic is now the standard across the globalizing world, this crime has become a crime against humanity."

"So you'd argue that everyone must become aware of the fact that they aren't ruled by a real democracy and understand and persistently press for true democracy in order to make it a reality..?" Henry asks.

"Yes," Alex replies. "Enough men and women of progressive conviction hearing and taking to heart just such a wake-up call, a snap-focus into reality, is the indispensable first step. The first step is enough people realizing that without these qualities, without allowing direct and unlimited representation outside of entrenched political and business interests of established parties, government *cannot* be democratic. At the same time, just democracy must guard against the opposite of oligarchy, which can be just as dangerous and unjust. That is, it must guard against potential injustices of mob rule such that certain rights and privileges of citizenship and protections and provisions of the government for the public interest are guaranteed and not subject to

majority violation; not subject to what's known as the 'tyranny of the many.'"

"Fifty-one percent of voters cannot be permitted to deprive the other forty-nine percent of any of these rights, privileges or protections, including by voting to take money from the treasury that's reserved for the preservation of these rights, privileges and protections, as those that have advised against majority-rule democracy, from Plato to Jefferson, have admonished. The same tyranny of the many may not be permitted to appropriate and redistribute private funds from and to anyone, such as in the common concern that the poor may use a purer form of democracy to redistribute the wealth of the plundering minority. This cannot be permitted, no matter how justified the disadvantaged and deprived may feel such an action is in the face of their suffering and the exploitative means by which the super-rich came by their wealth, for this would represent a slippery slope that would violate the sanctified protections of the laws and place the country under a dangerous form of mob rule descending down a path as dark as that which they'd believe they're reversing."

"So you empower the will of the people within inviolable limits guarding against unjust, unruly, anarchic inclinations using the checks and balances of constitutionally-enshrined rights and the judgment of truly democratically-appointed judges of the highest courts; this is the only *just* form of true democracy. And it's a form, I'd add, that has *never* existed. Government by and for the people, by all people directly, not channeled through corrupt, entrenched political power centers purchased by an ever more exclusive set of wealthy plutocrats, or by some other privileged cohort of excluding, aristocratic controllers, has *never* existed. And in the U.S. it's precluded first and foremost by a political system that ignores the nature of wealth and its ability to buy more means to wealth amassment which, in turn, means wealthy plutocrats become ever more wealthy and powerful."

"True democracy cannot be known by a people that don't see, and by a system that doesn't recognize the fact, that the division between money and state is just as imperative to justice as the old division between church and state. Historically, there's little difference between these divisions, actually, as the church has long been used to manipulate people's need for morality, meaning and the fear of the afterlife in order to consolidate wealth and control. Without this division, these necessary boundaries constituting positive freedom, a form of freedom unknown, or at least misunderstood and undervalued by most, corruption invariably rules."

“Without it you’re prone to propagandist *shows* of democracy built to delude and placate the masses, like our republican government limited to upper-class puppets pulled by plutocratic strings, or, in the original aristocratic republics calling themselves democracies, government controlled entirely by land-owning males from privileged families, or in any other form of exclusion or precursor for unjust rule, including the majority-unrestrained mob democracy we’ve been warned against, and which conservative thinkers love to use to pretend to disprove truly democratic structures, such as the one that I advocate for. The best, most authentic form of democracy granting the people the greatest, clearest path to progress towards the highest quality of life of all the lives it might serve has always been but a dream waiting to be born into reality.”

“It’s *always* been a dream?,” Henry incredulously inquires. “Even when it was initially conceived and implemented in Ancient Greece?”

“Democratic government in its truest, purest, uncompromised, un-sullied, least corruptible form has never existed,” Alex replies. “Nothing near to it has existed, in fact. The invention of democracy was the right instinct, the right move in the progressive direction of political evolution in the best interest of people as a whole, but even in the beginning, thousands of years ago, it was compromised by the preeminent drive of those in power to preserve that power within a socioeconomic structure dependent upon slavery and the disenfranchisement of second-class females and non-land-owning citizens.”

“True democracy cannot exist within these unjust confines in which *anyone* of voting age is excluded from *direct* participation in the political power structure, or by any filter set downstream from their vote, as they’ll inevitably not be adequately heard or served in interest due to this exclusion and filtration. *Everyone* of voting age must be able to vote directly or through a chosen representative, and anyone empowered by others must be able to be a representative regardless of partisan affiliation, the support of wealthy people, or any other precluding factor.”

“That is, only a *very* select set of people may be justly barred from voting or being a representative such as, arguably, those who are under age and have yet to develop the rational capacity paired with the basic understanding of the world to justly employ their political power, or those convicted of certain crimes or residing in the nation prior to establishing citizenship. Deny any other citizen in good legal standing the right to represent themselves, to vie for representative office through a platform *not* requiring a massive war chest in order to gain significant exposure, or to choose *any* other citizen they want to

represent them, and true democracy is dead, because direct political power is dead.”

“The use of the party system in US politics to reinforce exclusionary political control systems is interwoven with this democracy-killing prevention of direct representation. It does this by limiting the number and type of representatives. And it was created for that very purpose, I’d argue: to keep political power in the hands of the few by forcing the people to vote through a perfectly divided and perpetually warring partisan structure in which popular progress is grossly stalled at best, rendered impossible at worst. The result: true, direct popular power is divided and conquered.”

“We the people are politically alienated while being distracted by our constant equity-excluded toils on behalf of the corporations for which we work, as well as by the consumerist, classist, cutthroat-competing individualization standards of the nation, and we possess no true power because established partisan structures and their financiers possess almost absolute power over our illusive ‘democracy.’ True democracy requires that representation never be limited to and dependent upon party stamps of approval, as such limitation and partisan choke-holds inevitably produce today’s globally prevalent plutocratic republics inviting the wealthy to buy government and corrupt the political agenda by purchasing the allegiance of our easy to target, preselected, moneyed set of so-called ‘representatives of the people,’ whether directly or through corporate bodies and PACs. What people are *truly* being represented by such a sham of a democracy?!”

“Certainly not *all* people, at least nowhere near to equally, with true democratic equality of consideration. If, on the other, just hand, we remove this preset plutocracy by making self and unrestricted representation an inalienable, constitutionally-inviolable right of every citizen, the plutocrats would be cut off at the knees, as there’d be too many people to target and attempt to buy and control under such a true democracy”

“And our owning a fair share of our work and being supported in our opportunities by our government such that we aren’t so distracted and beaten down by our lives would only reinforce this democratic justice. This is the only way to guard against plutocracy and its inevitably produced, globally-impacting evils, but it’s never been done, and the plutocrats will do anything to prevent it, including conditioning us to associate anything even *semi*-socialistic with the historical evils of tyranny committed under socialistic banners. It’s for these reasons that I say that true democracy is dead in the womb. It has never actually existed.”

“Not even when it was originated?,” Henry presses the point.

“Not in Ancient Athens, not in modern America or Europe or any nation on this Earth at any point in the past or present,” Alex replies. “The idea of democracy has *always* been compromised by greedily- consolidated wealth and power. The word ‘democracy,’ from the Greek ‘demos kratos,’ translatable into the simple but vital term ‘people power,’ is used to placate the people due to its association with freedom, justice and popular rule. Its authentic form, however, has remained a myth, but isn’t destined to remain so. Yet, so long as it remains mythical, humanity, governed by its pretense concealing a corrupt plutocracy, will forever be prevented from realizing its greatest potential, for that potential is mutually-exclusive with the purchasers and holders of ever more consolidated wealth and power and their special interests that use our democratic façades to pursue their consolidation. For those pursuits are inherently exploitative of the disadvantages of the vast majority, and thus will forever perpetuate entwined social, political and economic injustice, including the legal means of corruption contradicting true people power; the ability to buy political power that precludes true democracy.”

“Not government nor economics nor business nor social structures of any kind can truly be ‘for the people’ while political structures built to serve greed remain in place, for the simple reason that the dominating conservative traditions and ideologies of Empire and their dynasties passed on through today and protected by the plutocratic republic will forever fight to kill *true* for-the-people political, economic and business ideas and systems. This is the case because such theories and structures block that excluding minority’s absolute pursuit of the bottom line divvied-out amongst its minority ownership class, a bottom line from which the *vast* majority is almost entirely excluded.”

“So long as we remain ruled by an aristocratically-governed pretense of democracy, and by a system of prevailing economic theory that prioritizes the bottom line and GDP growth over the quality of life of the total citizenry, and by business structures and their major shareholders that do the same while pulling the plutocratic strings, purposefully *not* investing in the best interests of the people and the planet because such investments would be seen as costs depriving their executives and tiny sect of major shareholders doing everything they can to greedily-exclude all but the select few from the fruits of commercial pursuits... So long as this remains true, humanity will remain a morally, spiritually and quality-of-life-hollowed-out shell of its greatest

potential self. It reminds me of the documentary *Inside Job*, a telling film on the financial market implosion of 2008. Have you seen it?"

"No, I haven't," Henry deadpans. "I should, I take it..."

"Definitely," Alex responds. "It's the type of educational film that *everyone* should watch. It's one of the first things that any economics curriculum of any educational institution with a concrete moral core would show their students. But they don't, of course, because most universities, like most western cultural institutions, have long been grooming schools for the corporate world, thus being tied into conservative ideology and its propagators. I mean, I was already well aware that traditional western business and economics practices ignore the impact of commercial activity and economic policy and teachings on the actual quality of lives of the vast majority, and had developed my own set of political, economic and business designs before seeing *Inside Job*. But such films and parallel writings add fuel to my fire."

"Without true democracy, and the majority-best-interest-protecting regulation to which it would naturally lead, you leave the majority of power of the world in the hands of colluding contingents of crooks and their plutocratic control of our illusory 'democracy.' Those crooks, in the case of the economic crash of 2008 and the history that predated and precipitated it, found a way to extract *immense* sums of value from the world and its activities without actually producing any value or even assuming any risk or responsibility."

"These criminals proved the saying: 'Give a man a gun, and he can rob a bank. Give a man a bank, and he can rob the world.' Who're the worst criminals? Those who rob with impunity because they bought the law through the plutocracy! These are the villainous parasites of the planet, and we the people must not allow them and the ideology and systems through which they maintain control to remain in prevailing positions to the inestimably profound loss of our collective quality of life, and the continuity of planetary health and stability. Considering causality and its Butterfly Effect, street criminals have nothing on these big-wigged white collar criminals, the emanating waves from whom crash into, capsizes or otherwise imperil and sweep out to suffering sea countless legions of people, places and progressive pursuits."

"Despite their crimes against us, people such as those named in that film continue to sit atop absurd fortunes and conspire to extract ever more from their firmly-lodged seats of power set *above* the law; above the law that they and their colluders command and commonly rewrite, typically with little to no



input, or even knowledge, by the people. They're the very definition of parasites: they add little to no value to our lives while extracting, consolidating and consuming massive value, weakening and oppressing the human race and the planet playing host to them while we remain unable to rip them from their parasitic positions upon our flesh."

"How many more years, decades, centuries of injustice must be suffered by the indoctrinated, mentally-manipulated and parasitically- exploited majority before the lessons and pressures of the past push enough people to join the activist ranks of those demanding true democracy?! And in asking this question, I'm again struck by the parallel metaphors of building up from the foundation and growing up from the roots. If the foundation isn't broad and sturdy enough, or the tree's roots are diseased or don't well enough penetrate the soil so as to firmly anchor and draw all the water and nutrients needed for the tree to become its tallest and strongest, then both the structure and the tree lose their ability to support their grandest, fullest forms."

"Because everything it yields will be, as they say, fruit from the diseased tree," Henry offers.

"In a way, yes," Alex half-heartedly agrees. "Because everything depends upon, is built up from and draws its direction and inspiration from the foundation; from fundamental principles and systems which, when lacking, preclude the possibility of reaching the pinnacle of potential. You have to start at the ground level. In this case, there are always progressive policies to pursue and liberal leaders that have greater conviction and moral centers than others, but so long as they attempt to build progress on a compromised foundation they'll *always* be obstructed, their success will *always* be under threat of reversal, and the building they contribute to will *never* be able to reach as high as it can, and will *always* be prone to collapse."

"And our compromised foundation is the plutocratic republic itself, and everything this pathogen infects through the corporate control of Washington and every major political center. Just look at ALEC and Citizens United and the Koch Brothers and the endless attacks on environmental regulations and the countless attempts to repeal The Affordable Care Act, which itself is a watered-down version of the single-payer system that *should've* been instituted, and on and on and on..."

"The plutocracy contradicts and entirely undermines the possibility of democracy. The one cannot coexist with the other. They're mutually- exclusive systems. We *must* excise the plutocratic disease from politics in order to purify

our democracy; the type of democracy necessary to create the greatest value for the greatest numbers. And this is why all of the systems that I've envisioned attempt to pull the traditional diseased trees out at their very root, for without pulling them up by the root the trees infested by greed will regrow, and true for and by the people government, economics, business and spirituality will be precluded, their pretenses continuing to play oppressed hosts to the parasites."

"So what does the purification take?," Henry asks. "How should we, people like us, those that've realized or are beginning to realize the truth... What political system should be fought for, exactly?"

"In terms of what to do about it strategically, the challenges are immense; unimaginable," Alex replies. "A multi-pronged, long-sustained strategy leading to a widespread popular movement will be required in order to overcome the established ideology, conventional wisdom and misunderstanding that pervades people's paradigm of good governance, business and economics. We're taught from the moment that we can think conceptually that America is a democracy; the land of the free and the brave; the land of justice and equality for all."

"These lies are pounded into our brains from the first classroom moments, when we stand up to obediently pledge our allegiance. We're inculcated in the idea that we're the righteous people, that in God we should trust, and that freedom is alive, absolute and free of charge, rather than being something that's largely *bought*, and exists as a two-way street of the 'freedom to do' and 'the freedom from being done to.' We're told that our government's core concern is globally spreading the so-called 'free market' and 'democracy' across the world, while, in the prevailing history, our military forces its way into and occupies other nations that we then pretend to be duty-bound to liberate, else that military is leveraged as a threat of force, our bases and naval armadas spread across the continents and the seven seas, all while parading its national- supremacy-stoking propaganda anywhere where people are susceptible to conflating national supremacy with patriotism."

"We pretend as if power and resources and the cutthroat competition to penetrate and control new consumer markets across the multinational-corporation-dominated planet have nothing to do with the motivation of the colluding wealthy and powerful politicians and shareholders and their acolytes that pull the strings of the hawks in Washington and send our least privileged, easiest to manipulate men and women to die as sacrificial pawns in a global game of economic and military chess; an imperial game of gobbling up as much wealth and power as possible involving interwoven corporate and

military forces, the 'military-industrial complex,' resulting in the murder of those simply defending the sovereign free will and autonomy of their nations that the non-critical-thinking are tricked into believing are 'terrorists;' terrorists that would be celebrated as heroes were they Americans defending America from invasion and occupation, joining the lost lives of countless thousands of innocent bystanders as 'collateral damage' across the less privileged nations we've historically encroached against, especially, perhaps, in the Middle East."

"Our recent Middle East incursions provide but one example of the hypocritical double standard of the American supremacists; those who fuel and stoke the flames of the corporate-backed imperial, war-mongering hawks on the political right in bed with the military-industrial complex and all the many greedily-unbridled multinational American corporations standing to make billions off of their eastward expansion into under-tapped, under-exploited consumer markets. I hate to say it, but the global expansion of the means and opportunities to profit is what's being served more than anything by those that are said to 'serve the nation' by being nationalistically puffed-up with pride and duped into joining the military. And if they're incredibly lucky they *only* pay the price of being mentally duped, with far too many being brutally psychologically-scarred for life *if* they survive their military adventure."

"The prevalence of this recruitment strategy, of stoking the internally-ballooning, hollow sense of 'national service' in the young, gullible and uneducated, is predictable considering profiteering plutocrats dominate the economy and own the political process. These are, after all, the same liars selling liberation and justice and democracy and the like as the *ostensible* motives behind the international chess moves they direct their military chess pieces towards. In this country alone they've been doing it for at least seventy years now! When 'serving your country' becomes indistinguishable from serving international business interests effectively expanding the quality of life disparity between the overly-privileged few and most of your countrymen, then you have a serious issue with your sense of service."

"Ouch..." Henry interjects. "That diatribe would piss a lot of people off."

"Yes, it would," Alex agrees. "Because people are conditioned to equate military service with the service of the nation, as if the nation isn't composed of people of every different mindset imaginable compelled by immensely different and very often contradictory objectives. As if we all have the same to gain or lose from our military conquests. As if we're all perfectly united, protected and served by our government and the business interests standing behind it, trying to hide their true, duplicitous faces in the shadows cast by the false flag of

righteousness flying over their hypnotically-grandiose edifices of popular control and extraction. But when government is for sale and controlled by entrenched power centers as ours is, *most must lose so few can gain in this global game of consolidation*. And the military is the sword cutting down resisters to this worldwide struggle to corral and plunder markets, minds and resources. And I'm *not* speaking against those men and women in uniform whose relative lack of opportunity and knowledge of why most wars are actually initiated, and why such extensive armed forces are maintained, are taken advantage of by this parasitic web of hawks, puppets and plutocrats."

"I never wish those in uniform any harm, or anyone else, for that matter. It's the opposite, in fact: I wish to *prevent* them from being put in harm's way. It's never people themselves that are the enemies, but what many people *believe*; what their egos, greed, ignorance and other weaknesses drive them to invest in. In this case, conflating condemnation of the unjustifiable human and economic cost of warfare with a condemnation of our men and women in uniform has long been an imperialistic tactic of the plutocrats and their demagogic political puppets; a reprehensible tactic used to turn the non-critical-thinking and uneducated public, especially the reflexive Republican voters, against those that attempt to bring that injustice to light. Like all moral progressives, I'm taking issue with the true motive by which our troops are recruited and sent to 'ensure American interests abroad.' It's a simple, concrete line of logic."

"So long as a very small sect of the American public owns the vast majority of multinational corporate interests and wields such a lopsidedly-large amount of influence over the political process through their lobbying and campaign financing machines and promises made to politicians post-political-career, mostly to ensure the maintenance and growth of their corporate interests, and who thereby possess most of the profit and power in America, then 'serving America' is essentially equal to serving the greed of the few at the loss of those that are exploited here and those that are maimed and murdered abroad. Nationalism, in other words, *isn't* patriotism unless the nation is truly *for* most of its people."

"One needs no further proof that all the branches of the US Military are extensions of globalizing American corporations fighting to increase the disparity in quality of life than to pay attention to the content of the major advertising campaigns concocted and paid for by each one of these branches of military service. Why even attempt to convince people that these 'services' are 'a global force for good,' per one of the most proliferated commercials, unless they aren't?! Unless they want people to think they are because they

know they aren't? Because they know it's not a self-evident truth, and that people need to be convinced not to have the suspicions that they do, especially if they're educated and lean towards critical thought. If it were self-evident, if educated, thinking people weren't trying to get others to see that it's not true, then they wouldn't feel the need to bombard us with the propaganda campaigns in the first place. The commercials, the prejudiced persuasions, prove the crime."

"So who, or what, is really being 'served?' Our propagandists-termed 'Defense Department' is more often an 'Offense Department,' both in that our military is aggressively used to force the one percent's interests onto others, and because it's been used to commit countless offenses against non-compliant nations since at least the end of World War II. Compounding this heinous misuse of force is the socioeconomic crime that results: the shuttling of ever more of the world's finite value into the hands of those that can't use it to increase their quality of life wastes the opportunity to use that same squandered value to improve the quality of life of countless people and families that can desperately use it to *vastly* improve their quality of life. They count on our ignorance, complacency, conformity, gullibility, laziness and other weaknesses and distractions to keep us from realizing that there's an irreconcilable issue with the overall management of the nation, and that we collectively *always* have the power to change that. All it takes is the realization that such power exists, then the conviction and will to apply that power."

"This is a major theme of your comments on America's foreign policy," Henry notes. "That it's too often an extension of the will of the one percent and major shareholders of growing American multinational corporations constantly looking for ways to expand unimpeded into new avenues ripe for exploitation. You're saying we're constantly being brainwashed into supporting the means by which American corporate shareholders press themselves into stronger positions to extract and compile ever more of the finite value of the world... that we're forever sitting in... what did you call it...?"

"In that brainwashing tub of conformity; in the warmly-beguiling waters and distracting bubbles built into conventional culture; into consumerism, corporatism, into our perfectly divided and controlled plutocracy and all the subtle, propagandist ways we're influenced by these prevailing forces and their propagators..." Alex finishes the line.

"You believe that we're essentially being duped into strengthening the very means by which we're excluded and weakened," Henry continues. "That we're constantly being convinced to diminish our- selves by helping the few

take advantage of the opportunities by which the disparity between them and the so-called ninety-nine-percent is increased.”

“Yes,” Alex agrees. “You certainly have a strong grasp on the general theme. And when we employ a little knowledge and critical reasoning, the commercials paid for by our military wings essentially say the same thing. The constant public relations propaganda campaigns waged by our military and its corporate sponsors points to how much money is made by the military industrial complex and its one percent beneficiaries. Organizations, including all wings of the US Military, don’t spend money unless they calculate that this money will be returned to them with interest; unless they believe it’ll be profitable to do so; unless there’s a considerable return anticipated from the molding of public perception that commercials are crafted to create.”

“In this case, that return is based upon paving the path to public support for political decisions and policies that allow a continuation, if not an increase, in the ability of globalizing corporations to sacrifice the most disadvantaged young men and women of the nation in the cause of controlling as many of the global natural resources and consumer markets as possible, especially those that remain relatively untapped and open to competition for control, like those in the Middle East, Africa and Southeast Asia. Without this motive there’d be no incentive or justification for investing in commercial campaigns.”

“Always look to motive when attempting to comprehend human behavior. Those commercials wouldn’t exist unless convincing the public to support globalization under the guise of national security and the spreading of freedom and democracy was profitable. These commercials are crafted to mislead us from the true motive for their conception and to conceal the fact that our military is the greatest terrorizing, imperialistic sword of globalization on the planet. Such commercials are built to disgustingly engender support from the gullible, traditionalist non-critical thinkers, the compulsive flag-wavers and cross-wearers, whom, through their votes, purchases and investments, and the careers which they seek and believe to be lucrative, enable the globalization of the methods by which the core injustice is committed against humanity: the consolidation of most of the means of fostering quality of life in the hands of the few.”

“And this is lost on many people, to the great loss of them and their progeny,” Henry states.

“Yes. They’re enabling their own perpetuating oppression,” Alex continues. “For tied to corporatism *this* is what imperialist use of end- less military

expansion really represents: one of the gravest of injustices against life; the continued short-selling of total quality of life and the health and sustainability of planetary environments through the same course that kills, mentally-enslaves and physically maims the least advantaged, and anyone else that stands in the way. I mean, look at the PTSD rates and onset of mental illness and susceptibility to criminality and suicidal ideation of veterans, and how pathetically ineffectual and underfunded has been our government's response to their suffering *after* they've served their purpose and been discarded! It's disgusting! And, considering the wide-ranging, endlessly rippling effects of our imperialist incursions, that inestimable expense represents only a tiny fraction of the cost of our historical misuse of military might!"

"And with that incalculably immense cost in mind, we must ask: What constitutes a patriot, truly? Someone who does what those that profit the most and control the political policies and processes tell him or her to do without question, perfectly willing to invade nations and fight for traditions regardless of their motivation and cost?! Or does the true patriot fight for the greatest good, the best interests, the highest total quality of life of all those within their country, and all those with whom their country- men may establish mutually beneficial, peaceful relations?!"

"Though of course never outright honestly expressed, for propaganda is inherently deceitful in its misleading intent, every military commercial attempts to conflate patriotism and love of country with the agenda of the military industrial complex that actually fights to *reduce* overall quality of life, including the overall quality of life of the vast majority of Americans, by increasing the globalizing disparity touching every aspect of every life here and abroad. In the process, countless civilians and 'terrorists' are murdered, many of whom don't target civilians but are merely defending themselves from invaders, occupiers and oppressors."

"Such a hollow form of patriotism is patently false. It's morally empty. It's absurdly biased, narrow-minded, prejudicial and extremely costly both to those that endorse it and those run roughshod over as a result of that endorsement. This hollow brand of patriotism is, to any thinking person of moral scruples and relative worldly awareness, the exact *opposite* of true, morally-concrete patriotism. It's another example of where the paradigm, the basis from which something is commonly understood and judged for its relative correctness, is near the opposite of its greater truth, needing to be flipped on its head. In this case such a form of 'patriotism' is closer to *treason*, actually, because you're

betraying the greatest good of the vast majority of people whom a *real* patriot fights to defend and serve.”

“Such a false form of patriotism also completely fails to put the shoe on the other foot, so to speak. It’s entirely hypocritical. Were those killed by military forces *Americans defending themselves from Middle Eastern invaders*, those same conservatives and *Fox News* would call them freedom fighters and patriots. And such a truly patriotic defense of national sovereignty is exactly what progressive movements countering colonialism, imperialism and its more recent hegemonic corporate globalization have done throughout history. Every one of these commercials is evil in its propagandist manipulations, yet the majority seem not to be offended and are okay with these mind-controlling campaigns and their conflation of the entire nation and its populace with total-quality-of-life-decimating military adventurism. Their claim to fight for freedom and democracy and ‘in defense of all we hold dear’ and in support of ‘the best and the brightest,’ even going so far as to call us the greatest nation on Earth... for anyone that can see with an open heart and informed mind knows that there can never be one ‘greatest nation.’ It’s all lies disseminated at *immense* cost to humanity.”

“Just look at a map of US military bases and deployments across the planet. Look at the sheer number and geographical span. If you look at such a map and still think it reflects a ‘defense of all we hold dear back home,’ then either you’re entirely brainwashed and deluded, or what we hold dear is the spread of greed for wealth and power. For what that map *truly* reflects is a leveraging of force and its threat across contested profitable areas of the world for the sake of billionaires as a result of a plutocratic system of lobbying, and of financing the careers of and making quit-pro-quo deals with hawkish politicians running our sham of a ‘democracy.’ And if you wonder why the taxpayer-supported debt is trillions upon trillions, you’ll find much of the answer in the same place.”

“It’s not the impoverished receiving welfare and health insurance benefits, it’s the absurd and growing cost of fielding such a global threat of force for the excluding few! Our tax dollars are going to the weapons developers who get rich off of making things that kill people that get in the way of the ambitions of the major shareholders of globalizing multi-national corporations! Not to mention the fact that the tax proceeds meant to benefit the majority, a great many of whom so desperately need any opportunity the government might grant them to improve their substandard quality of lives, are drastically reduced through the tax-cutting and loophole-making policies purchased through the same plutocracy, adding egregious insult to the injury incurred by the fiscal policy supporting our foreign policy.”



“The costs of gullible, generally uneducated, non-critical-thinking, easily manipulated Americans of supporting what amounts to fascism for the profits of a small slice of the population that, in the long run, costs most of the people immense quality of life value and their greatest potential...” Henry summarizes.

“Yes, well said,” Alex replies. “That’s the essence of neo-imperial propaganda. And Americans in general should possess the same type of grasp that you and I demonstrate, because they and everyone else are affected by that grasp, what amounts to a grasp around our throats... well... maybe not *your* throat,” Alex can’t help but add. “But this should be a part of the public awareness, because we’re *all* affected by it, regardless of the extent of that awareness and the knowledge of the long-running forces behind ever-evolving imperialist tactics; tactics continually reflecting an adaptation to the countervailing ideas and tactics of its objection and resistance. And that is, of course, a long- running theme in the history of ideological conflict.”

“In fact, the falsely misleading propaganda in contemporary armed forces commercials reminds me of Orwell’s *1984* and Hitler’s Germany. Amongst Hitler’s infamous lines was: ‘Repeat the same lies over and over again, and eventually they’ll be accepted as the truth.’ Eventually all but the most critically-thinking members of the public will accept the falsehoods. And if your methods of brainwashing and indoctrination of the newly minted youth are effective enough, this will remain the case even if, as in *1984*, you change the story next week; even if, in the rewritten reports, the allies suddenly become the enemies, and always have been, and must be invaded immediately as a ‘preemptive attack.’”

“A few steps further and Big Brother, in this contemporary case the Big Brotherhood of the globalizing corporate oligarchy and its major stakeholders plutocratically-pulling governmental strings while consistently finding legal justifications to eradicate privacy, like the propagandistically-entitled Patriot Act, will force you to say our allies have always been our allies and our enemies have always been our enemies, even as the brave and moral refuse to forget that our enemies used to be those our government financed and supported when those corporations considered it profitable to support their regimes; the regimes of dictators like Pinochet and Saddam Hussein, and the organizations that we branded freedom fighters when it benefited the wealthy and powerful, like Al Qaeda and the Taliban, even when such regimes and outfits actually crush democracy while murdering countless civilians and violating every known human right.”

“It’s not much of a leap to imagine much of Orwell’s dystopian prediction coming true; to imagine this oligarchic brotherhood backed by the perfectly penetrating public and private surveillance apparatus from moving ever closer to the extremes of actually transforming language and revising history in order to sell whatever narrative supports their current objectives, ever improving upon crimes like impeding critical thought and the fight for more justice and opportunity for the disadvantaged.”

“And the commercials for our Armed Forces do this, though not as overtly as in Orwell’s Stalinist vision; a vision many unfortunately equate with socialism when, in fact, the past failures of socialism were mostly due to the failures of *tyranny*, not socialism. Said failures are simply used to undermine socialistic principles that contradict the greedy agenda, because socialism was adopted as the official ideology of many dictatorial regimes in the nations they ruled, from the USSR to Maoist China to Castro in Cuba, all historical epochs within those nations whose failures were the failures of too much consolidation of power in the hands of government controllers and their small oligarchic bands of beneficiaries. So, ironically, the more that we move in Trump’s direction and away from Bernie’s, the closer that we get to creating such a state, just under the false auspices of democracy rather than the false auspices of socialism.”

“The problem, in other words, is and always has been the consolidation of wealth and power and the publicly-disempowering control measures that produce them, whether through corporatist control of government and commerce and the exclusion of its greatest benefits, as in modern America, or through communistic means of making every- thing ‘public,’ which is then controlled by the head figure, or figures, of government, as in the previously cited examples. The plutocratic neo- imperialist, of course, can’t acknowledge this, because they want people to associate communism and socialism with the economic failure and fall of the Soviet Union, not with the failure of tyranny.”

“They don’t want you to realize that socialism, when judiciously applied to certain economic segments under any true democracy, can lead to *more* freedom and *far* greater quality of life for the general public by granting them increased opportunities and protecting them from having their needs for certain products and services exploited, among many other measures such a semi-socialistic democratic state can institute on behalf of the best interests of the vast majority.”

“And you think the commercials you mentioned are a part of this deception?,” Henry asks.

"It's all part of the same propagandist, revisionist, mind-controlling strategy the plutocrats and corporate oligarchs use to take advantage of people's ignorance and critical thought deficit in order to pave the way for increasing future profits from which those same targeted people are excluded, and from all the lost opportunities to increase their quality of life this exclusion and its directly perpetuated and broadening disparity leads to," Alex replies. "None of what's in US Army, Air Force and Navy commercials is supported by historical evidence. The Vietnam War was fought on the premise of the 'domino effect,' which was essentially greed-based fear; the fear held by the super wealthy plutocrats pulling our government strings of one nation falling to a cultural ideology closed to capitalistic profiteering leading to nearby nations and regions influenced by this ideology falling to the same closure in profitability that might, in turn, continue to grow to influence more and more nations and regions."

"This motive was, of course, packaged and sold as something other than what it was, and led to our youngest, most disadvantaged and vulnerable young men, before they could develop the critical capacity and knowledge to uncover the *true* impetus behind our violent aggressions, being pushed to become killers of Vietnamese defending their right to sovereign self-determination. The counter-cultural and anti-war movements were a direct result of this, of course, as non-conforming free thinkers saw through the lies and recognized the moral repugnancy of our invasion."

"And the over-advantaged have sent the disadvantaged to kill the disadvantaged ever since! Since World War II virtually every conflict our military and intelligence wings has forced themselves into, and us with them, from Korea to Vietnam to Iraq and Afghanistan to Cuba to supporting Middle Eastern, North African and South American dictators in their brutally repressive fights against populist movements seeking to improve the paltry quality of life of their fellow citizens, to using funds from narcotics traffickers to fund the regimes of those that seek to crush pro-democracy parties while holding the door open to western multinational corporations to tap their natural and emerging consumer markets for profits pulled by those dictators and their excluding cadre of aristocratic colluders and on and on..."

"All the evidence contradicts the claims made by these commercials. All the evidence points to a history of consolidating and colluding power between the super-rich, their corporate interests and every wing of the intelligence and military commands. I hope you don't take offense at this, but one thing I've learned from my time with you and your family is that these

corporations and government organizations are not isolated, self-contained units. Once people leave the office, the boardroom and the command center, they talk and scheme for greater control and profits. And the upper-class tends to scheme amongst itself within its excluding social circles, because it's a well-known aspect of greed that it's contagious, pressing those it sickens to seek more profitable angles. And such collusion is encouraged by our plutocratic republic; by a political system masquerading as democracy for the sake of sustaining the status quo. It's time for true democracy!"

"Yeah, after a while you don't even think about it," Henry replies. "All those commercials. We've all been exposed to them for so long, over and over again, that it supports reflexive, non-critical thought, which I suppose is the intent. I think people are especially susceptible to supporting the bullshit and open to being brainwashed because they aren't protected by the truth; by the evidence you allude to. They haven't been set free by the truth. They have to truly see the evil before they're able to target it."

"People are hypnotized by the flag and peer pressured and conditioned by conventional, conservative standards to believe that 'our government' truly is *our* government," Alex continues. "But consider this... When the gang grows to sufficient size and strength, it becomes an army. When the army is well enough equipped and organized and lays claim to sufficient territory for which it receives sovereign recognition, it becomes the government. And politics is simply the competition for control of governance within whatever system oversees that competition, which is why it's been said that 'politics is simply war without the violence.'"

"A government, in other words, isn't innately different from a gang, especially when it isn't directly empowered, and its policies and actions aren't directly authorized, by the people. Nor is it innately honorable. The honor of government and leadership in general is entirely dependent upon the principles underpinning the system of government and the way in which its members comport themselves. 'Serving one's nation' is not the same as serving the army or the government until such time as the government is truly, *directly* directed by the majority of its constituents, and until the army takes its commands from that truly democratic government. When this preeminent prerequisite *isn't* met, government will serve those that control it, and the army takes its orders from that government. And we are clearly a lobbyist, special interest, corporate-billionaire-controlled plutocratic republic above all else. How then can serving in government or the Armed Forces be legitimately considered the same as serving one's nation of people? To the critical thinking, it can't."

"I've never thought of it quite like that before..." Henry mutters.

"If I had the funds I'd devise a commercial campaign of my own that satirically mocks the evil-fostering lies of American military propaganda," Alex adds. "Something that shows all the bases and weapons deals and tanks and assault vehicles and the deadly wares of 'defense contractors' our government pays trillions for... that shows them going into offensive actions and the bombs dropped by drones with massive collateral and property damage and our invading and occupying legions marching through nations whose resisters are branded terrorists and all the dictators we've supported and populist movements we've helped topple for access to natural resources and expanded opportunities for multinational corporations entering and building up their oil derricks, pipelines, ore mines and chains of businesses in the blood-soaked rubble."

"Show the dead bodies, the suffering of the people of underdeveloped nations whose oppressive regimes we support, the aftermath of our invasions with our corporate behemoths extracting the now unprotected natural resources auctioned off by our puppeted foreign presidents and the establishing of modern-disease-making *McDonald's*... show all these images and video clips in short, dramatic succession, and then have a member of each military, intelligence and defense contractor wing come together in a shot where they proudly puff out their chests and put their hands on their hips and say something like: 'The US Military Industrial Complex: the greatest mass murdering, terrorizing, exploiting, democracy-killing, globally-spreading force for one percent profit in human history.'"

"If you produced such a commercial I'm betting that you'd wind up experiencing a premature death for your troubles... *after* being branded a traitor, of course," Henry says with an uncomfortable little snicker.

"Exactly," Alex responds. "I'd be the communist terrorist for speaking the truth and fighting the evil and attempting to stand up to the greatest injustice-promoting, quality-of-life-disparity-disseminating force on the planet. This is what pisses me off so much when I hear arguments that anything less than supporting every military action is a treasonous offense, as well as a failure to support the military men and women 'defending our nation.' This argument is wrong and wrapped in propagandist falsehood on every level."

"There's an *immense* difference between supporting the people duped into putting their lives on the line in our invasions and occupations and supporting those invasions and occupations themselves. It goes without saying, or should to

thinking people, that I don't harbor ill will for the actual troops. It's the campaigns, the policy, the human and taxpayer costs, the fact that foreign policy and military actions are waged under the pretense of righteousness while usually perpetuating immense evils and increasing disparities in quality of life that I take umbrage to."

"I saw a T-shirt for sale online the other day that said: 'If my American flag offends you call 1-800-GET-OUT.' These arrogant, destructive, stupid asses. *You're* the force of evil! You're a purveyor of the dark side. No, I won't abandon this country to deluded, ignorant, immoral supremacists like you! *That* would be unpatriotic. I'm not offended because I hate this country and the rights and privileges it grants us. You don't have to be a mindless drone, a sacrificial pawn, a part of the empty-headed herd or a puppet on a string to belong to this country. And if you do, then this country is anything *but* what it purports itself to be. What offends me is what any person that would wear that shirt represents, and all the injustice they foster here and abroad by spreading the narrow, ignorant-minded belief that any one nation or people can ever be the best, and that we're all united in support of a government in which we possess no true share."

"When you speak of 'Americans' and 'the nation' in conflated, simplified terms, as if we're all united in purpose and share the same goals and opportunities and benefit equally from the status quo and the overriding pursuits of our government's domestic and foreign policy, then you commit a *grave* injustice against the *vast* majority of Americans by perpetuating the myth that those controlling the nation and consolidating most of the wealth and power of American corporations and political institutions speak for all of us; even as those corporations and institutions maintain both literal and figurative command centers mostly separate from and not beholden to any public scrutiny, ramification or influence, and largely act *against* the best interests of American citizens and citizens of the globe in their continued efforts to extract as much value from the people and the planet as they can, thereby minimizing the total quality of life potential of the human race."

"Such a shirt is emblematic of the divisiveness that destroys the best things in life; that fails to see that we're all the same in every way that matters most; that every nation, culture and people has many things of great value to offer all of us; that there can never be such a thing as the one best nation; that God and spiritual unity and total quality of life are all betrayed by this mentality of the blind, morally hollow, progress-crushing false patriot, one of the true traitors that would adorn such a shirt. It's the parlance and symbolism of the flag-waving, globally-bullying, murdering and exploitative American

supremacist form of patriotism that's akin to fascism and costs the global majority incalculable quality of life, crushing and blocking all that's best!"

"So we need to supplant this immensely detrimental form of patriotism with a full, moral, progressive form that creates and protects increasing quality of *total life*," Henry suggests.

"Yes," Alex continues. "We need to educate our youth along progressive lines away from the 'might makes right' imperialistic and aristocratic lines and traditions forming the true core of American military history that's concealed from our kids from elementary school through college and beyond. All of my economic and business courses in college were steeped in the same consolidation of value objective, completely ignoring total quality of life, which is the *far* greater, *far* more progressive objective. The simple truth is that total quality of life is that which is of greatest value, for the most valuable thing in life is life itself; the quality of its existence in total. Yet this principle is never taught and, arguably, all that which contradicts it takes precedence, beginning in the earliest of classes. We're indoctrinated in mistruth from our first Pledge of Allegiance at the latest."

"But a slim minority muster the courage and conviction to teach their kids to *always* question where their lessons come from, and *why* they're lessons in the first place. The motive is always the most important factor. *Why?* Why is this being taught? What's the objective being pursued? Who benefits? Is this what I want to support? It seems that very few even bother to ask these absolutely imperative questions. Instead, it's all about finding your most lucrative possible place within the status quo, regardless of its costs; regardless of the fact that doing so may very well render you complicit in wide-ranging, long-rippling crimes against humanity, against the planet, and against life in general."

"It's but a minority that tells their kids that the economy primarily serves the wealthy few; that everyone else has to fight through the unjust control measures of the profiteers just to survive, much less to gain the comforts of the dwindling middle class; that the under-privileged are exploited as a rule; that the wealthy and powerful control the country and the world and that their constructs have tendrils penetrating every societal system."

"*Everything* is corrupted by greed in most so-called 'advanced nations,' and America is the standard-bearer of this corruption. Shedding light upon and extracting those tendrils will take a very extensive commitment of time and energy coupled with courage and unwavering conviction by those that realize

the truth. Putting politics, economics and business to work for people as a whole to improve quality of life as a whole will take years of gradual awakening and education led by *many* of understanding and conviction.”

“This isn't a new struggle, of course, but one that must be amplified by a growing popular determination while remaining adaptive to the ever-evolving tactics of those conserving and concocting new methods of oppression, themselves representing adaptations to evolving methods of progressivism. Our children will have to be taught the truth, and their children after them, and gradually the majority will have to summon the strength, resilience and resolve to fight for true democracy, and ideally some version of the other ideological concepts I talk about, in order for those immensely valuable concepts and systems to have any chance of being embraced and instituted in the service of increasing total quality of life.”

“A progressive purification of our democracy has so many deeply entrenched obstacles to overcome that we're unlikely to see it in our lifetimes. It could take centuries. But I think it begins with those of us that realize these things, that know the root cause of globalizing injustices, to refuse to back down from the truth when others, cowed by fear and ignorance and peer pressure and mental weakness and corruption and ego attempt to bully us into dropping truly righteous causes. You can't be a good, progressive person if you realize the truth and refuse to act.”

“And the first act in this ongoing war is spreading the truth until enough people possess it pursuant to banding together to fight for true progressive change. And I believe that our Declaration of Independence may be interpreted as imploring us to dissolve our current plutocratic republic in pursuit of this change. Consider its iconic second paragraph: *'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government.'*”

“I say that we've clearly been alienated from our consenting right to such self-government. When our consent consists of choosing from a handful of overly privileged persons strung upon plutocratic strings to represent our interests, and when those interests tend to be mutually exclusive with the interests of their puppet masters, no true consent exists, only deception and widespread delusion. It's therefore our right to alter or abolish all the plutocratic



mechanisms that deny us true democracy, obstruct our political and economic liberty and impede our capacity to pursue our happiness; our highest quality of life, especially among the least advantaged of us. These prohibitions of authentic democracy include, at the very least, not only the manner in which our representatives are preselected and their campaigns are financed and their relationships with the plutocrats are maintained via the lobbying and backroom, corporate colluding, quid pro quo system, but also the limited nature of our representative government that denies us the right to choose whomever we wish to represent our interests and help us pursue the best opportunities for finding happiness.”

“This quest must include the possible existence of representatives that’ve suffered disadvantages and their pains and pressures, and thus possess the experience to truly be able to understand the nature and effects of injustice in the West and thereby grant us the clearest path around such injustices, and in avoidance of such suffering effects, up to and including the possibility of our representing *ourselves*. So long as such representation doesn’t deny anyone certain inalienable rights, as Jefferson says; rights specified in the Constitution, especially its first amendments, the Bill of Rights. I believe that we’re thereby empowered to abolish the false democratic system that has become destructive of the aforementioned ends, and to erect, or ‘institute,’ new, true democracy.”

“So, say people are starting to accept such a truth, what then?,” Henry asks. “How do you create a form of true democracy that can pull up the diseased roots of the plutocratic republic and see through its society-wide propagandist control? What system will enable people to remove its self-serving, greater-good-sacrificing tentacles in order to pursue the greater collective good? What, exactly, does your true democracy look like? How would you structure it? What are the fundamental features of its design?”

“Those features are revealed in the contrast between true democracy and the nature of modern plutocratic republics, and by how much better the greater good of the vast majority will be served by true people power,” Alex replies. “People have to understand, first of all, that the nature of representative politics, especially when that representation is restricted to a set number of seats and open to unlimited big-money influence, is one of inherent, unavoidable deceit that’s mutually exclusive with true democracy.”

“Deceit is a prerequisite of survival in the plutocracy. If politicians aren’t charlatans, if they aren’t ably duplicitous, if they can’t convincingly say one thing while believing another, if they aren’t able to make contradicting promises

to different segments of the population, to accept what amounts to bribes and favors for access and fealty in matters of special interest to the wealthy that fight to maintain any and every means by which they can take advantage of the weakness and lack of protection of people and places to consolidate ever more of the finite value available in the world, then they've chosen the wrong profession. Their career probably won't even get off the ground, much less last."

"Under the modern faked democracy, if you tell the truth, say what you think, fight for what you believe in when that belief isn't supported by the prevailing voters, beliefs which change from the primary to the general election in national politics, then you die a political death. If you don't vote and construct policy in a manner calculated for control, if you don't deliver on the quid pro quo nature of taking money for making speeches, for advertising yourself and campaigns... if you refuse to be wined and dined, you cannot triumph over those that can and will. Surviving and public-oppression-based thriving in the plutocratic republic necessitates that your words and actions don't represent progressive convictions that tend to appeal to a thin, critically-thinking, morally-developed slice of the constituency. As I was just reading in Machiavelli, everyone has eyes, but few can truly see, which generally means that appealing to the truly sighted is a losing cause. Thankfully, there are signs that this is changing."

"Bernie Sanders' popularity suggests that this slice is growing, but it's still not large enough to enable its champions to take command. And so long as the plutocratic structure and mechanisms undermining men and women like Sanders persist, people like him are unlikely to make much headway, even if they take the presidency, because the parties and their reinforcing system of representational limitation prevent it. They obstruct it."

"Thus, modern plutocratic republics deny the pursuit of the greatest total quality of life due to their very nature. They are mutually exclusive with the greatest good, because that good is antithetical to plutocratic aims. Justice demands the plutocratic republic be overturned by true democracy; a democracy in which the best interests of the majority may be fostered without the professional death of its champions who'd instead be *encouraged* to speak the truth; to inspire; to possess passionate conviction rather than a political survivalism demanding duplicity. Future democracy, the authentic form purging all elements of false form, allows *unlimited* representatives and self-representation."

"The new, true democracy as I envision it is a system wherein both the self-represented and those that would act in representation of others can

actually fight for what and who they believe in without being thrown out. It's a democracy wherein politics can't be bought and corrupted because, instead, it possesses the inherent dynamic of being both direct *and* representationally-unrestricted. But in terms of designing that true democracy, in terms of the specific constructs of a system that gives the government to the people and enables them to directly exercise control over the government... you read my book. You tell me."

Alex can't help but test the validity of Henry's assertion that he'd read and been inspired by *Time for True Democracy*. If this is the case, then he'll have some idea of Alex's description therein of a possible future form of such government.

"Well," Henry begins after a reflective pause, "you'd build every- thing upon an online, social-media-paralleling platform." Henry looks at Alex for confirmation, who nods slightly. "As I recall, you compare the system under which you envision true democracy best being fostered and administered to a political version of *Facebook*. Every person of voting age, everyone legally eligible to vote, is automatically granted their own profile page after being registered to vote; the same with every registered party, of which there can be innumerable; as many as there are voters, in the extreme hypothetical case of everyone starting their own party."

"Right," Alex confirms, pleased by the accuracy of Henry's recollection.

"And there are pages for different groups and for different party affiliations," Henry continues, "including pages for different portions of the political spectrum wherein those that identify with those positions can go for relevant information, and can post and share information and ideas. The pages are used for multiple purposes, including tracking the political perspective and opinions of people that're being followed for their politically-relevant insights."

"And for every vote relevant to the voting individual, relevant to the city, county, state and, for every- one, the nation of their primary residence, people are informed as to upcoming ballot initiatives and approved measures, with a set number of votes to occur per year, perhaps two per year. Anyone can propose initiatives, and those initiatives that receive enough support, using something similar to the 'likes' feature on *Facebook*, become officially supported initiatives, and the top supported initiatives receiving the most nominations by relevant voters pass to a democratic review board, with

every voter permitted a set number of nominations per voting period, perhaps ten per period.”

“In this manner,” Henry continues, “the most demanded initiatives have a chance of becoming actual ballot measures for referendums; for pure popular vote. The democratic review boards check the highest nominated supported initiatives for clarity and lawfulness, making certain that they don’t conflict with established law or act to deprive anyone of constitutionally inviolable rights. I think you mention at one point that the review boards might work with public law and political science schools and their students and be led by professors that review the work of those students, and that final arbiters must sign off on their reviews; as a way to encourage an understanding, appreciation and perpetuation of the true democracy through relevant fields of study and their educational institutions.”

“Every voting period must possess successive steps leading to the ballot posting on the website, including blocks of time for initiative, nomination, review, ballot initiative posting and finally an open ballot vote for every city, county, state and the nation. Time is permitted for several rounds of back and forth between the reviewers and the author or authors of the original initiative, in case of the need for clarification or correction. Those highest nominated initiatives that pass the review process make the ballot.” Henry pauses to think, then asks: “What am I forgetting?”

“I’m impressed,” Alex replies. “Excellent memory. There are other details and ideas for how the system might work. The highest possible cyber security would need to be put in place, for example. And it cannot be forgotten that the process which you just so ably recited in which every voter at every governmental level of jurisdiction is able to participate in the initiative process through the website and the support of his or her fellow voters would be monitored by a panel of policy experts and accountants whose task it would be to assure that certain matters requiring political attention aren’t overlooked.”

“When there are budgetary issues, including shortfalls and excesses, and when previously successfully adopted measures expire, and when there are changes at the federal or state level that supersede lower levels, this panel possesses a straight line to a section of the system, call it the mandatory agenda, where these issues are posted for popular resolution. In this way, proposed initiatives for every voting period would overlap this mandatory agenda. This panel would also be tasked with assuring that all initiatives that make the list of final ballot measures for vote are posted therein in as neutral, objective, clear and concise

wording as possible so that voters receive the necessary information pertaining to what they're voting on in as unbiased a manner as possible, so as not to be confused and misled, as they often are now."

"Another thing that shouldn't be left out of the description of the true democracy are its perfectly open, voluntary, customizable aspects," Alex continues. "It is *this* that makes it workable for everyone. People that don't pay attention to politics or don't care or don't feel like they're well enough educated or up to date or able to judge the merits of ballot measures can simply pass their power to other people or parties for application to all or any number of the proposed initiatives. For example, voters can choose to vote on one or a few measures that they have strong feelings about and pass their voting power on all others. They can make another person or party their default representative because they like what they posted and said and how they've voted in the past, with each individual and party's voting record fully transparently presented by necessity. And unless the voter de-selects this default on the site, their vote continues to be automatically passed."

"Every person and party's profile page is a running log of opinion, past votes and shared information used to educate and influence based upon their convictions. And each personal and party page displays their popularity and political pull based upon the number of people that've passed them political power for the coming ballot vote, with their relative power continuing to change, and with people able to retract their pledge at any point up to a certain cut-off date."

"It should also be made clear that most governmental departments would remain intact, they'd just be subject to the system of true by and for the people, except in the case of the day to day decisions of the intelligence and defense wings that would have to maintain a disconnected secrecy for the protection of operations and operatives. Their larger scope and mandate of operations, however, especially war proposals or anything requiring the use or the threat of the use of force, would be subject to this true democracy. Most governmental branches, departments and positions would remain, but would now be directly plugged into the authentic democratic will of the majority of the people, and thereby be not *perfectly* shielded, but certainly *far better* shielded, from corruptibility, for the current system is corruptible *because* of the limited number of, and thus the targetability, of the holders of political power. Distribution diminishes corruptibility."

"So you'd keep the Presidency, Congress, State Department etc. all intact?" Henry inquires.

“Yes,” Alex answers. “They’d retain the same responsibilities and powers, for the most part. The central differences would come in those ways demanded by for-and-by-*all*-citizens democracy; specifically the ability of the people to *directly* impact government policy, agenda and action *without* that democratic impact being filtered out by a controlled system of restricted parties and pre-selected representatives hand-picked by those with the wealth and power necessary to be a part of the excluding sect of the population. Currently, our so-called representatives are, upon election, immediately predisposed to represent and be loyal to those that supported their candidacy; that finance their campaigns and lobby them throughout their career on Capitol Hill, which, of course, amounts to buying votes and corrupting the political process, turning it *away* from the democratic will. *Real* representatives of the people cannot possess this corrupt basis, for it innately precludes democratic rule.”

“Our plutocratic republic is, in other words, mutually exclusive with true democracy. This corruption can, again, only be remedied by making *anyone* available to be a representative and *everyone* able to propose legislation and policy in a manner where such propositions may be democratically judged. Democracy demands that the majority will be the metric of merit *regardless* of campaign war chests, and without being compromised by the currently legal bribery of lobbying and closed-door quid pro quo deals offered to those in carefully controlled and restricted partisan power centers.”

“All people must be able to propose laws, policies and actions, be open to being nominated for office by popular democratic demand, and must be not only free to do so, but effectively able to do so, as promoted by a system that naturally fosters the best ideas and policies with the broadest public appeal and benefit, all free from big money special interests and the power those interests have under today’s system to effectively block any initiative that contradicts their greedy will.”

“Which a website such as the one you envisioned naturally does, because it’s based upon sharing, discussing and advancing information and ideas judged upon their own merit, not upon buying advertising campaigns and legions of lobbyists and the writing of legislation dictated or even written directly by corporations and their major stakeholders,” Henry adds.

“Yes, that’s right,” Alex concurs. “Such a system would be designed to keep the plutocrats out and encourage people to engage in real political discussion in order for the most valuable ideas and policies to naturally rise above the rest. Not because they fit the agenda of half the political spectrum and their financing beneficiaries, but because they’re the true democratic cream of the crop.”

Drastically curtailing inherently anti-democratic big money influence and inherently divisive, progress-stalling or outright blocking partisan politics from government would be one of the natural, invaluable benefits to be derived from the institution of such a form of true democracy.”

“The two party dominated primary system is a major impediment blocking true democracy, as it encourages the divisiveness that suffocates progress. The two party system polarizes politics and puts the power in the hands of those that attract the most extreme ideologues on the right and left side of the spectrum. It’s built to encourage conflict and, rather than prudently slow the course of progress so that it may be judged before being instituted, which is worthwhile, it more often acts to hobble or outright kill progress. There’s plenty of evidence that the two party political system is a product of a divide and conquer tactic descendent from the aristocratic playbook of which our founders were contributors; a playbook preventing us from interrupting the course of those with the most to gain from upholding the status quo.”

“The argument was that the people in general weren’t educated or well-reasoned enough or, indeed, trustworthy and level-headed enough as a mob, to see to their best interests, so systems of control had to be put in place so the people could be ruled over by those better suited to rule, under the semblance rather than the authentic existence of democracy. All for the people’s benefit, of course. And yet a well-designed democratic system can be effectively insulated from the risks of the mob mentality, using safeguards such as those I’ve already noted, and, using an online social media platform as a hub for political discourse and power distribution, great wisdom and prudent action can naturally be derived from the collective mind pursuant to the greatest good.”

“The arguments against true democratic rule by our founders are, in the face of today’s technology, and with hindsight upon the true motives of our original American ruling aristocrats, mostly moot, and certainly not in the interests of the vast majority. For, instead of the true collective best interest being pursued by a collaborating majority, that majority is almost entirely precluded by a primary and representative system that effectively disempowers anyone that falls into the so-called ‘centrist’ or ‘moderate’ camps; anyone between the polar extremes, which is the vast majority.”

“Is it any wonder, then, why voter participation is so low, and why such a minority of the population feels that they’re truly included in the so-called ‘democratic process’ currently in place?! We’re kept constantly at odds with one another, and little gets done that’s not eroded or outright reversed in the next,

inevitable exchange of power amongst the parties. It's almost impossible for the majority of people standing inside the extremist edges of the two parties to have their voices heard, and this polarization keeps the majority will from being realized; it keeps that will fractured. In the true democracy design that I envision, party loyalty is unnecessary, and candidates aren't elected through the party-dominated primary environment. Everything must be opened up so that those that act to corruptively control have too many people and paths to target and direct in their attempt to control the political course of the nation, thus rendering their corruptive plots mostly impotent."

"This system of true political representation of genuine democracy should be connected to the same online system in which every citizen maintains a *Facebook*-esque page on their political positions, ideas and objectives, and where the same system by which people follow your page and propose initiatives that may eventually become ballot measures for democratic vote also tracks people's popular following and the accruing of nominations for elected office, followed by the actual voting for those nominees."

"All other wings, the State Department, Judiciary etc., that're nominated by the President and confirmed by Congress will be filled the same way they are now, but the Congress and Presidency underpinning all those posts are nominated and then elected through the online, purely democratic system. And they're nominated free from the gerrymandering that further conflicts with democracy by consolidating political power in pre-designated and perpetually re-edited geographical areas that would be abolished by a system of ideal power distribution within every relevant legal jurisdiction. And, of course, everyone would be nominated and elected free from the necessity of hob-knobbing with the super-rich and special interest groups in order to even be in contention for office. Essentially the political point system, which we can review if you wish, that's awarded and utilized by the online system, also creates the basis for the election of members of the national and state legislature, the county and city government, and even the United States Presidency."

"The passing of points from the people at every jurisdictional level determines the nominees for office at each of those levels, correct?" Henry recalls.

"Right," Alex confirms. "Again, I think it's useful to compare the *Political Point System of Democratic Governance* to *Facebook* and its use of pages and likes and friends and such. The true democracy website will serve as an online accrual of ideological popularity, information gathering and idea sharing that can be very useful in instituting true democracy. When people post their stances and ideas on political issues, and when they propose ballot initiatives



either from their elected posts or as private citizens, for now any and every voting-age citizen can propose legislation, not just those holding public office, those that follow them as their political 'friends' will see their comments and be able to weigh in on their ideas. And if those ideas gain enough popularity they'll have the popular force behind them to propel them through the proposal and initiative processes. In all these democratic matters people spend or pass political points or fractions of points to be spent by their directly selected representatives in the initiative and ballot measure voting system. Some will retain the points to use themselves, and some will pass them to other people or parties."

"I anticipate, again, that many people would pass their points and empower representatives for a variety of reasons, such as feeling as though they're not well enough informed or up-to-date or simply don't care enough or think someone else is better informed and able to represent their system of values. Those that receive these passed points are thereby truly and directly made into duly empowered representatives, with citizens no longer being limited to choosing from pre-selected upper-class politically-connected and plutocratically propped-up, necessarily duplicitous professional politicians."

"And this passing of points can, and I think should, serve the purposes of the nomination process for the most popular of those point-passed representatives that thereby go on to have the opportunity to hold public office. Those individuals that receive the most points passed from their fellow citizens at every level of government are automatically nominated for public office. They may, of course, decide not to accept the position and remain private citizens, at which point the nomination goes on to the next person on the list. If and when there's a tie, a simple referendum vote takes place to determine the nominee."

"And this nomination process is incorporated into the currently existing term limits, correct?," Henry asks.

"Right," Alex continues. "Throughout every block of time representing a term of service at every local, state and national representational post, points are accrued that represent the popular, democratic nomination. And because this would lead to a clear democratic-republic hierarchy being created across *all* jurisdictional levels, with the president considered the top dog followed by national Senators and members of the House of Representatives before moving on to the state level, I think that you could combine the whole nomination process. In fact, I think it would be quite natural and conducive to authentic democracy to do so. You don't even need an 'election season.' It's

always going; always accruing and changing, with the merit of each future post constantly being assessed and reassessed through the majority.”

“After the current term expires for the presidency, for example, the highest national point recipient becomes the next president, assuming they accept the role, the highest two per state become senators, assuming one of them wasn’t elected president, of course, the next set, with the number of course depending upon the state, become men or women of the House of Representatives, the next are nominated and elected to the state senate and on down the line.”

“The best men and women for the jobs as determined by democratic demand are automatically nominated and elected, all without the money spent on campaigns and the Super PACs and the lobbyists and the gerrymandering and the electoral college and all other control-ling corruptions that undermine and are mutually-exclusive with true democracy. It’s all one wide-open yet appropriately ordered system of democratic will. It goes from our current plutocratic republic platform that’s exclusivist, closed-off, concealed and controlled by the wealthy and powerful political influence peddlers to being perfectly inclusivist, opened-up, fully disclosed and ultimately subject to the will of the people who’re mostly free from having their voices silenced by a corruptive minority.”

"In this system, the president and senators and congressmen and women are the true leaders as demanded by the people, and can pro- pose legislation and use their democratically-passed points to vote on initiatives and ballot measures at every level of government, just like everyone else. And they’ll play much the same part they currently play, from the operation of every congressional committee to keeping tabs on budgetary considerations that they bring to the people’s attention to the president being the commander-in-chief and leading diplomatic efforts and so forth, except now they’ll be the *true* representatives of the people, and no longer the sole source of legislation and policy decisions. Instead, they’ll be looked to for the value of their ideas and the passion of their convictions as proven by their online popularity. They’ll also put the final touches on the formal legislation, bringing our demands to term, so long, again, as they don’t violate our basic rights, protections and privileges.”

“So how are the political points assigned again?,” Henry asks.

“The democratic design I proffer in the book could function without the point system and stand as a perfectly valid democratic system,” Alex continues. “But I

added the point system for the purposes of incentive and meritocracy that I believe are vital to motivating and justly rewarding people's efforts. Incentivized meritocracy is central to the Business Collectivism theory I advocate in the book as well, for the simple reason that people tend to put forth their best effort and produce their greatest value when best motivated; when ideally incentivized. Within this democratic construct, the principle of meritocracy is instilled through a two part point system. Every citizen of every jurisdiction votes with these point values directly or passes them to others to represent their political positions through the aforementioned system."

"Those points are granted to each individual based upon the previous years' tax records. They can be granted upon any clear-cut scale, whether from zero to one, as in the book, or zero to one hundred, as obvious possibilities. For the purposes of this discussion I'll use the zero to one point scale. The first of these two points is what I call the Citizen Point, and is the same for everyone. It equals one full point for every of-age voter within every voting district."

"This is the purely democratic portion of the two-part system, and it balances the influence of the second part, what I call the Contributory Point. This second point is granted based upon the intertwined principles of merit and incentive, with the idea being that those that contribute more to the functioning, departments and programs of government, and to the welfare of their citizens through government and through charitable donations to well-vetted, integrity-confirmed institutions, have earned the right to a greater influence over the agenda, policies and publicly-benefiting programs of their government than those who contribute less."

"The Contributory Point is thereby graded on a curve based upon the primary residence of registration of the voter at every jurisdictional level of government. It's calculated based upon government taxation combined with the donations made to select, highly-vetted pre-approved charities, and thereby encourages generosity, goodwill, an investment in the public well-being and a communitarian mindset, while also rewarding voters based upon the merit of their contributions."

"And because this Contributory Point is based upon the primary residence of the voter, it even encourages a greater distribution of financial resources and spending across the nation, as well as less gentrification and less geographically-isolated areas of wealth and poverty concentration, generally speaking, because those with more money moving away from more wealthy areas receive a greater Contributory Point total than those who don't, because their contributions will be greater relative to the area in which they live."

Using the zero to one scale, the second part of the point system is graded between 0.01 points and, for the greatest contributor per jurisdictional level, one full point; or, again, between one point and one hundred points, if the one to one hundred scale is used."

"You combine the two point totals to get the total amount of points that every voter is awarded and may use to influence the outcome of every vote relevant to their respective jurisdictions. In this way the plutocracy is prevented at the same time as those that *contribute* more deservingly *earn* more influence over the democracy, but only up to a degree justly falling *far* short of today's disparity, because the richest, highest-taxed, most charitable citizen can possess no more than double the influence of the least-contributing citizen. As things currently stand, of course, a Koch Brother has *incalculably* greater influence than the vast majority of those not committing millions to buy political power. Can you imagine the impact, the buttressing of true democracy, if such an individual could never possess more than twice the influence of any other democratically-empowered citizen?!"

"Of course, those like the Koch's will still seek ways to corrupt the democracy, but will be *far* less able to do so with such a distribution of political power, especially if, ideally, you make all such attempts illegal, and empower a white collar crime watchdog group to enforce such protections of the authentic power of the people. The truly democratic system *itself*, of course, won't recognize extreme political power disparities; disparities that are mostly accepted and ignored in our current 'democracy,' regardless of empty rhetoric about cleaning up corruption that will *always* be endemic to shams of democracy, and can only be prevented through systemic overhaul."

"With the true democracy I speak of, and will always advocate for, people in similar economic positions will possess very similar point totals, and even the so-called 'lower class' won't be far removed from the 'middle class,' or the 'middle class' from the 'upper class.' The plutocracy that prevents democracy can, in other words, be traded for a form of democratic meritocracy."

"That last part's interesting. I like it, but it would be considered controversial..." Henry comments. "I like the idea of rewarding people for being charitable and contributing to the public spending of government and the welfare of their fellow citizens. I like the possibility of encouraging a 'we're all in it together' attitude, and of acknowledging the value and importance of taxes in maintaining and promoting the public good, as taxes are most commonly seen as a negative..."

“What they provide is taken for granted and undervalued,” Alex adds, “which such a meritocratic aspect of democracy could go a long way toward changing. Charity and taxation would be better valued.”

“However,” Henry interjects, “I suspect some would argue that rewarding people for their contributions *isn't* democratic and bolsters inequality.”

“Democracy is still there,” Alex responds. “Again, it’s a meritocracy democracy. And I think that, for the reasons that both of us just cited, what may be gained by the point system outweighs any subtraction. And can you imagine the level of civic participation and sense of popular empowerment and the ideas and increased goodwill that might flow from people *actually* composing, directing and being an incorporated part of their government?!”

“They’d learn and feel the difference between true democracy and its false façade almost immediately. Instead of being pandered to and, unless sitting on the extreme fringes of the two parties, being all but ignored and powerless, they’d be truly plugged in. Their voices would be rendered loud and clear. Democratic input would be direct and consequential. Students could be taught the system in junior high and high school so that by the time they come of voting age they know its ins and outs, and are prepared for their integration into *real* by-and-for-the-people democracy; a true part of the governance of their city, county, state and nation. People actually knowing that they have a say.”

“It’s hard to imagine, actually,” Henry admits, staring off into space. “I could see how, over time, people might say: Can you believe what *used* to stand for democracy?!” He pauses. “Is that it, then? The whole system?”

“Those are the main points, I’d say,” Alex replies. “You can refer to the book of course. It not only covers all this but delves into all the reasons why American government does not qualify as a true democracy, and attempts to anticipate all the ways in which the American people, and most any government that adopts this or a similar system that puts political power directly in the hands of the people, stand to benefit.”

How about moving on to your economic theory then, Quality of Life Economics?,” Henry requests.

“Okay.” Alex takes a deep breath and pauses to collect his thoughts, then plunges ahead: “Quality of Life Economics essentially argues that traditional conservative economics, hailing from unrestrained, laissez-faire capitalistic theory and

prioritizing and encouraging the accumulation of wealth by a very select ownership class that leads to an immense and ever-growing disparity in the distribution of all things of value, and to total quality of life, or the life experience of the total populace, fails in its duty to stand as an economic theory serving the best interests of people *as a whole*; it fails to promote the creation of the greatest total quality of life for the totality of life, which *must* be the goal of progressive, morally-grounded economic activity.”

“The theory asserts that it’s the ability of the economy and its contributing companies, organizations, individuals and practices to increase the quality of life of the citizenry as a whole that constitutes true success. This as opposed to pure ‘free market economics,’ which stresses the one-sided version of freedom for those with relative advantages to freely take advantage of those with relative disadvantages in order to extract as much value from the efforts of the relatively disadvantaged majority as possible, as well as from the insufficiently protected resource-rich regions of the world, in the course of funneling that value into the hands of a consolidating minority of wealth amassers.”

“Quality of Life Economic theory points to the fact that this bottom-line-is-absolute, labor-and-resource-cost-minimizing business exploitation being heralded as 'successful' by our economic analysis naturally promotes the perpetuation of immense and growing disparities in income, wealth and directly connected quality of life between the ownership class and the working class; between the equity-holding class and the equity-excluded class. It also highlights the fact that most of this disparity in value distribution equates to a squandering in quality of life value, because the ownership class consolidating ever more of the finite value in the world continues to do so indefinitely, even long after having reached its ability to use that financial value to increase its own quality of life, as illustrated by the law of diminishing returns; by the fact that as wealth is accumulated, the quality of life return per dollar begins approaching zero.”

“That value is therefore wasted after a certain point, incurring an *immense* opportunity cost considering how many suffer such a low quality of life that could use the aforementioned squandered value to *radically* increase their quality of life, because they’re positioned at the front end of that diminishing returns curve, when it’s still ascending precipitously upward. Hopefully you can envision the graph, as we’ve both seen examples of it in the econ classes that we took at UCSB.”

“Yes, I can envision the diminishing returns graph,” Henry replies. “Good,” Alex responds. “So, as illustrated by this graph backed by any accurate assessment of the diminishing correlation between financial accrual and quality of life return, it becomes clear that traditional free market economic theory encourages an *immensely* inefficient conversion of total value to total quality of life. In this way Quality of Life Economics advocates for a paradigm shift in what constitutes success for individuals, organizations and the business practices tied to economic theory; a shift from deeming the extraction, consolidation and immense waste of value as ‘successful’ to success being defined by the ability of the economy to increase quality of life as a whole. To this far more valuable end, then, for the purpose of life is to maximize its quality, the goal of every commercial entity is to create more value in the world than they consume, and not to consolidate more value than can reasonably be used to increase the quality of life of their owners, when that entity is a business, as beyond a certain level of accrual more and more of that value *isn’t* convertible into increased quality of life, and is effectively wasted, representing a horribly tragic and unjustifiable opportunity cost.”

“That’s quite the shift...” Henry replies. “A redefinition of economic and commercial success based upon its total life impact.”

“Yes, precisely,” Alex responds. “Total life. The goal of the Spirit as well, I’d argue: the maximization of the life experience of its totality of individualized manifestations. The only *moral* goal of *any* social system, political, economic, business, spiritual or otherwise, is to *serve total life*, not to have life serve it, as much as conservatives would like to confuse this issue. So, in a very real way the paramount principle of Quality of Life Economics pays homage to that quote by Einstein I’m sure that I’ve mentioned to you before, where he said: ‘Try not to become a person of success, but rather try to become a person of value.’”

“He saw the stark contrast between conventional societal values focusing on material and monetary accumulation as the measure of success, and the creation of true *value* for life. He only needed to take this insight a step further: fight to redefine success *in terms of* added, total value. This is the crux of almost everything to me; the center of my moral universe. Simply stated, the nihilists are flat wrong about morality having no value.”

“Morality is *about* value. The best moral principles are based upon increasing or, ideally, upon maximizing total quality of life value, the highest value, at least from my perspective. For, in my mind, the ‘point’ of life is life itself. Life is innately of the highest value. And the purpose of moral people is to increase that value. That’s *the* moral code: protecting and increasing the value of life. It’s the

service of life that matters; the ability of government, the economy and the businesses, of the whole of society and its systems and contributors, to continually increase and protect from reduction the quality of life *as a whole* of those whom it's its fiduciary duty to serve, including by protecting and serving the healthiest, liveliest, most sustainably vibrant planetary environments that underlie and support every form of life."

"So this, then, is the core of your economic theory... You put it in front of all other considerations?," Henry asks. "Including the profitability of enterprises, the traditional cornerstone?"

"That's the conventional, immoral motive," Alex replies. "The premise that profit, what's *extracted*, is the bottom line, rather than how much the quality of life of all those involved increases, including the consumer and the worker, not just the extractors and excluding owners. *Net quality of life impact*, in other words, is the only *moral* bottom line. As I believe I've mentioned to you before, all the profit in the world means nothing if it turns to cash or capital that sits or accrues unapplied to the service of life."

"If people's commercial and economically-measurable endeavors produce unused or poorly applied profit after passing through the commercial system and into the hands of its claimants, it has little to zero to *negative* value. It's dedicated to those that have maxed-out the ability of wealth to improve their quality of life, and is thereby sucked down an endless hole of opportunity cost and very often used *against* any movement towards increasing overall quality of life, further applied to strengthen the mechanisms, practices, systems and structures that have the ultimate effect of severely *restraining* total quality of life potential."

"Everything starts for me at the moral center: What's most moral is *always* what's best for life as a whole. Which is why the total quality of life calculation is the core. The question is always: How do we produce the greatest life value? How do we best serve life in totality? It's a moral, progressive imperative to ask the total quality of life question of *all* things, before and with priority above everything else. To do anything else is to morally fail to some degree."

"Achieving total quality of life value is the marker of true, progressive success, while the question of how to maximize profit is usually the opposite question, especially when that profit is narrowly distributed and comes by way of exploiting disadvantage and causing environmental devastation and planetary warming. So, from the total value perspective, traditional economic theory and our conventional value system and understandings have the measure of



success mostly backwards. And that inverse measuring system is a reflection of a society and a globalizing cultural system of values that reveres wealth and greed above all things, which means the championing of the extraction, consolidation and, ultimately, the *waste* of value. This twisted western version of success is a clear betrayal of honorable, righteous cause.”

“The woman that volunteers at the local homeless shelter when she’s not working for a nonprofit that assists the underprivileged in finding greater opportunities and earning higher qualities of life for themselves and their families is the *true* success,” Alex continues, “while the oil baron polluting and warming and generally degrading and increasing the severity of costly weather extremes across the planet to enrich himself and his few major shareholders beyond the point where they can utilize that continued wealth accumulation to increase their quality of life, and therefore wasting that value at immense opportunity cost to life, is the *true* failure. For the woman successfully adds *far* more value to life than she consumes, while the oil baron and his cronies fail to do the same, extracting, consuming and *wasting* far more value than they add. And yet we’re taught to look up to the oil baron and merely give the beneficent woman a condescending, sympathetic pat on the back for her efforts.”

“So traditional free market teachings actually promote a loss of total value, you’re saying, because they purposely disregard the net effect on quality of life that matters most,” Henry offers.

“They disregard it, else fail to seek and assess for it in the first place,” Alex replies. “The traditionally cited numbers mean little without the application to life and, in fact, are more often a sign of true failure than success. All the profitability, the stock market statistical growth, the employment numbers and the housing starts have no value without creating quality of life value. These numbers belie quality of life value and can conceal the fact that overall quality of life may not only *not* be improving, but may be decreasing.”

“Traditional economic statistics could scream ‘success!’ while people’s lives scream ‘failure!’ If one percent of the population receives all the profits generated by business while everyone else’s income remains flat because the profitability produced by that ninety-nine-percent is absorbed by the other one percent, and because that one percent responds to any domestic labor and environmental challenges by outsourcing its labor and the harvesting of its resources to underdeveloped and preyed-upon places and their people, how is profitability increasing total value? It’s not. Therefore, it can’t be the measure of success to anyone moral and progressive, only to conservative-minded big business beneficiaries and those they deceive through marketing, political

propaganda and other mind-control methods. Most conventional economic stats have the same misleading quality.”

“A very small percentage of the population owns any considerable amount of stock, for example; any significant amount of privately-held equity in general, actually. Not only this, but stock price increases are based upon the aforementioned profitability that generally stalls or reduces quality of life measures for the majority of the population, especially the globalizing population. Therefore, stock market levels are not suitable measures for evaluating the success of the economy at increasing the quality of life of its citizenry. The movement of financial markets tends to be inversely correlated with total quality of life changes, actually, because the improving stock prices of a company represent an increasing capacity to extract as much value as possible.”

“And such extracted value comes directly from the majority of the people and the planet, for there’s a finite amount of value to go around at any one point in time. Don’t believe the conservatives: wealth, income, resource and value statistics are always a zero sum game at any given moment. The more that goes one way, the less that goes the other. Let’s consider some other economic indicators and see how they correlate with the difference between promoting absolute wealth and promoting total quality of life.”

“While in many respects it’s certainly better for a person to be employed than unemployed, if the majority of jobs are wage-based and pay so poorly that many of their holders are barely surviving, much less thriving and opening doors to greater opportunities, including equity possession, to what degree do unemployment levels indicate changes in quality of life? Most of those measured in this statistic remain excluded from the profit-based fruits of their labors because they can’t afford to buy into an equity position; a disadvantage that’s unscrupulously taken advantage of as a rule by the ownership class. Few people even bat an eye at this accepted truth, but we all should. It’s unacceptable on the total quality of life level of morality.”

"And with housing starts, if one percent or even the top ten per- cent of the population is responsible for the vast majority of the new construction starts, putting up the developmental funds for their own vacation homes and rental homes and apartment complexes to take ad- vantage of those individuals and families that can’t afford to mortgage a home and are forced to lease them at rates of financial hardship that preclude them from saving up for their own homes, to what degree do housing starts indicate more than the rich getting richer? If and when increases in income aren’t generally confined to the top tier

of earners, then housing starts might indicate increases in overall quality-of-life. But as it now stands and long has, they more likely indicate *decreases* in total quality of life; more exploited tenants, fewer first time home- owners.”

“So, then, the idea is to find indications of quality of life improvements for the population as a whole, instead of increases in the very things that indicate a broadening quality of life disparity?,” Henry suggestively asks. “Almost to flip the analysis on its head, from service to the exclusive to service to the excluded?”

“Yes,” Alex continues. “Flip from a focus on statistics that ignore and conceal quality of life disparities and reductions to putting indications of total quality of life increases at the forefront. A flip from the small, narrowly-serving assessment to the big picture, totally inclusive assessment. Refocus the questions on the impact of economic activity on the lives of people.”

“What’s the total value to overall quality of life of this individual, this economic entity, this system or program or policy? To determine total value, the amount of value that’s contributed by that individual, entity, program, policy etc. must be considered, as well as how much value that same entity removes from the system, stockpiles and consumes. Are injustices promoted? Is the environment and all the people and lifeforms that rely upon it put in jeopardy? Are the quality and the extent of people’s lives increased or decreased through the consumption of the goods or services offered by the entity? Take, for example, those companies perhaps most directly responsible for reducing the duration and quality of people’s lives; those companies that under- mine health for profit: the fast and processed and artificially-sweetening and unnaturally-preserving food producers and distributors.”

“Americans suffer from an epidemic of modern diseases and dis- orders directly traceable to the consumption of empty calories, blood- spiking high fructose corn syrup and processed wheat, artery-clogging unnatural fats, laboratory-derived preservatives, flavor enhancers, growth hormones and antibiotics in the food supply, plus inflammation-increasing high Omega 6 plant oils and diets composed largely of the gut-disturbing seeds of plants, including all grains, nuts, seeds and legumes that evolved inflammatory, toxic lectins to protect their propagating mechanisms; all those seeds we have to process to eat, all spiking the risk of the biggest interconnected killers and quality-of- life-reducers in the nation, including heart disease and its strokes and heart attacks, insulin resistance and adult onset diabetes, autoimmune diseases triggered by overactivated immune systems and obesity and the cancers that come from ingesting the chemicals and hormones and having a

degraded system unable to compensate, and the resulting degradation and mutation of cells. If there were such a thing as Hell, all the pushers and profiteers of this industry would have a special place reserved there for their crimes against humanity.”

“Considering that health is the most important, valuable, indispensable aspect of quality of life, our existential basis, I’d estimate that no other industry creates a greater negative value. No other industry produces more suffering, disease, low quality of life and unnatural death, not to mention the fact that our productivity dives and healthcare costs skyrocket because of them. The *McDonald’s*, *Coca-Cola’s* and *Lays* of the world, to name a few, degrade and cut short more lives selling hedonism and gluttony disguised as happiness than our military does selling globalizing profits and imperialism disguised as freedom and democracy.”

“And their profits are made off of the same people that prepare their debilitating fare,” Henry adds, having had this conversation with Alex before. “It’s adding insult to injury. Or perhaps you’d say just two versions of compounding injury. They eat the food because they can’t afford any better, and thereby grow weaker and decrease the quality and extent of their lives while their work and sickness enriches the major *McDonald’s* and healthcare industry stakeholders, all while that same profit could do so much more to increase the overall quality of life of those same workers were some of it distributed to them as earnings.”

“Yes, exactly,” Alex continues. “Opportunity cost of value consumption must be considered as well. In fact, opportunity cost is a highly valuable concept because, like all the most valuable concepts, it has near limitless, universal application. It represents not only an economic principle, but can be applied to essentially everything, every purchase, action and, arguably, every thought, and is directly connected to the cost-benefit analysis that everyone performs before doing anything, whether they’re aware that they’re doing it or not.”

“And, with sufficient moral development and knowledge of the root causes most of the suffering in the world, it sheds clear, harsh light on the immorality of western cultural standards and values. If I look at a businessman getting out of his *Porsche* wearing a *Rolux*, I’m supposed to look *up* to him; to think him a success. In the morally hollow West that pays perpetually dishonorable disrespect to the value of life, we’re inculcated in this manner of thinking from the moment we can reason. Yet morality dictates a total quality of life consideration of that picture. How can I wear a *Rolux* or drive any vehicle worth over, say, thirty grand, knowing that I can exchange that watch for

something that works just as well, or drive a fully functional automobile for a fraction of the cost of the *Porsche*, and exchange the difference for *immense* increases in the quality of lives of those experiencing compounding daily stresses, pains and pressures?"

"Yes, this businessman successfully played the business game and likely put in a lot of work to get there, assuming he wasn't born into it, but is this really how we should be taught to view success? In terms of the value extraction and immense opportunity cost column rather than the value *addition* and service to total quality of life column? There's a simple truth about business: Businessmen are legalized crooks, as the art of business is the art of manipulation and exploitation. I'm not talking about the production and marketing of products and services of value, but of extracting *far* beyond that value."

"The better you are at extracting value from the world and consolidating it your shareholders' hands, regardless of the value of what you're offering in return, the more successful a businessman, or woman, you are. And extraction is based upon maximizing revenue and minimizing costs, which, in turn, is based upon taking advantage of every possible weakness and pre-disposition of the buyer, worker and planet, and reinvesting in these profit-making sacrificial pawns as little as possible in order to keep costs as low as possible and profits as high as possible. This is the *modus operandi* of both the successful businessman and the successful parasite. Keep 'em *just* strong enough not die or be induced to rebel and fight you off so you can suck as much blood from them for as long as possible."

"We revere business people because we're spellbound by all of the trappings, inconsiderate of the total effects of the derivation and costs to life and planet of those trappings, and because we're *conditioned* to revere them by our conservatively dominant culture historically hailing from empires and their consolidating aristocratic classes. This value system is inherently immoral, and based not upon the creation of total value and the overall quality of life of the lifeforms of the planet, as morality demands, but upon much the opposite: upon sacrificing quality and opportunities of life for the greed of the few. Thus, no moral, progressive person can be in business, unless they're against 'business as usual,' and are working to redefine the practice."

"It's not something that most consider, that's for sure..." Henry grants.

"No, because the conventional, conservative confines of Western Culture dictate otherwise. Yet it's crystal clear to me that there's a much higher standard of success, and it's based upon adding more value to life than you

extract. This, in turn, creates a *spiritual* reward; a currently commonly undervalued fullness of heart built around things like finding compassion through connectivity, and fostering solidarity of identity and purpose; becoming fuller by making others fuller; comprehending and living by the irreplaceable value of morality as tied to the *total* impact of our lives on the lives of the others. The creation of financial value, wealth and its materialistic trappings is often produced and stockpiled in manners *reducing* total quality of life, which can *never* constitute a moral basis for success.”

“How financial value may be used to *improve* the value of life, improving its quality of life utility value, is the *far* more moral, progressive consideration, and is connected to the moral and spiritual heart of it all: service to total quality of life; to the whole of the manifestations of Spirit. The imperative question becomes: What's the best way to apply our abilities and the finite financial and natural resources of the world to increase total quality of life?”

“What most people don't seem to realize is that this moral form of success *isn't* mutually exclusive with feeling happy, or even with being well-off financially. In fact, it's very much possible to contribute to one's own increases in quality of life at the same time as serving increases in the quality of as many other lives as possible. This, in turn, should lead us to ask: What's the difference between this ideal and whatever we might be endeavoring towards for whatever organization we labor on behalf of... i.e. what's the opportunity cost of our profession? And, in truth, some form of this opportunity cost question touches everything, not just our professions.”

“Economically, and as an aware, moral worker and consumer, is the product or service that I'm purchasing or spending my life providing *worth* that price, especially considering the money and energy invested could be dedicated this or that product or service, or to fund this or that relief instead, and considering the extent and severity of some people's suffering and inability to meet their needs... considering that there are so many people that suffer such low quality of lives that you could grant them an opportunity to shoot into a skyrocketing improvement of their existence with prudent use of the value squandered upon poor, even *negative* total quality of life utility returns?”

“Within these questions, it's also clear that inherent to this universal principle of opportunity cost is that everything is a trade-off; *everything*. Everything of value that's purchased, consumed or hoarded is traded at a direct cost, a cost of earning, paying for or stealing that thing of value, and an indirect opportunity cost, the cost of sacrificing what might otherwise be gained with the effort, money or other thing of value used to acquire it. In the pursuit of

anything of value, a trade's being made; you're trading direct *and* opportunity costs for the desired thing."

"The key question, therefore, is always: Are you getting as much value as possible for that cost? For that trade? And if there's to be any progress we must go beyond the corrupted conservative cultural consideration of this question, and think not just in terms of are we getting as much as we can for *ourselves*, but are we getting as much possible total quality of life value as we can in exchange for the money or other traded thing of value? Everything is connected, and we must therefore attempt to see not just the immediate, direct consequences, but the *total* effect of our thoughts and actions. So, in the case of our consumerism, are the costs of acquisition, the direct costs and the sacrificed opportunities, worth more than what we're trading it for? What is the best value to pursue at the lowest opportunity cost, made so because that pursued value *is* the best opportunity?"

"What's the best trade? What should I do with my time, energy, money and all the other resources at my disposal? What's the best opportunity for my own benefit, in the conservative mindset, or for life as a whole, in this progressive, total quality of life framework, considering that every action we take, including the acquisition of goods and services, has a rippling effect across the market and the whole of life? It is, of course, not possible to grasp the *full* extent of this rippling impact, nor to keep it ever present in your mind when making *every* decision. But it is, nevertheless, the nature of causality, one of life's prime principles; that there's a rippling causality connected to *every* action, including all financial, commercial and professional decisions, especially with ever increasing globalization. Thus, every true progressive should strive to keep the concepts of *total* causality and value in mind as much is possible."

"And we're all conducting some level of cost-benefit analysis all the time, even if it's not to this idealized extent..." Henry offers.

"Yes, most definitely," Alex replies. "From the small, the 'do I want the beer enough to expend the energy to get up off the couch and get it, when I could just lounge?', to the big, 'will this profession earn me the most wealth and happiness considering I could be pursuing this other profession instead?' or, in total value terms, 'will this profession put me in the best position, considering my aptitude and convictions and all the other things I could dedicate those characteristics to, to produce as much value in the world as possible, and through this purpose allow me to earn the most satisfaction; the greatest happiness and spiritual dividends for myself and others?' With every minute,

ounce of energy, disposable dollar, indeed with every *thought*, within the context of attitude, ideology and all things, the tying together of the concepts of total value and opportunity cost compels us to ask: Can this be better spent to increase total quality of life?"

"In economic evaluations, how efficiently is monetary value being translated into quality of life value? From a business standpoint, when monetary value is removed, stockpiled and consumed, the type of value that's perhaps the easiest to measure, how much quality of life improvement is made in exchange? As an example, take a business that extracts a billion dollars of net profit for its collective efforts; efforts contributed by *all* of its employees and independent contractors."

"To simplify things, is that billion dollars going to someone who's already a billionaire in order to create little to no increase in his or her quality of life that, in considering the opportunity cost, could instead be dedicated to *dramatically* increasing the quality of life of countless others? If it is, a *massive* total quality of life opportunity cost is being incurred, and that money was most certainly *not* successfully utilized. Much, if not most, of its total potential value was squandered. From a broader analytical standpoint, this quality of life opportunity cost can be evaluated within the 'value-to-total-quality-of-life-conversion' concept I've alluded to."

"This conversion concept is essentially a measure of return on investment assessed from the standpoint of quality of life return instead of financial return, and can be extended to assess the potential quality of life increases that can be produced by *anything* of value, whether that value is financial or otherwise. It asks: What's the best use for this thing of value for life as a whole? And this is but the post-production assessment, as, in this example, it doesn't even take into account *how* that billion was extracted; only, in the case of the billionaire, its abysmal value-to-quality-of-life-conversion; its horrendous opportunity cost and absurdly inefficient, likely even *negative*, conversion to quality of life, considering what billionaires tend to invest in: things that broaden the quality of life disparity across all segments of society. But, again, this is the post-production, or *utilization*, value, which is only half the assessment. In almost all cases *how* the billion is extracted is *just* as abhorrent, if not more so, than the unjustifiable opportunity cost of its distribution and squandered quality of life conversion, involving exploitations of every form of human weakness and non-protection of the workforce and the environment."

"Yes, that's right," Henry recalls. "In your book you emphasize the fact that to get anywhere near a complete total value picture of any commercial



enterprise you need to assess the total value of both its profit derivation *and* utilization, involving the quality of life value of its products and services and all those individuals and practices involved in supplying those products and services, *as well as* the distribution of those profits from the enterprise to its claimants. How much value is being produced, how much is being consumed, and how ably is the consumed value leading to quality of life increases, with consumed value being a general term for value being taken out of the economy through income, including equity compensation. And I remember how you joked that the value-to-quality-of-life conversion principle is an almost invaluable tool because it can be used for evaluating the best use of *anything* of value, not just those things of traditionally assessed financial value... including anything from a billion dollars to a bicycle to a kiss from an attractive woman.”

“What was it you said...” Henry continues, “something like: You give a multi-billionaire a billion dollars and little to no increase in their quality of life is achieved; a *massive* misallocation of funds considering the quality of life increases that would be produced by distributing that same billion amongst families facing food insecurity and the daily stresses of survival. You give a bicycle to a kid with a closet filled with unused toys and it's almost always just sitting in the garage, producing next to no quality of life improvement, whereas that same bike given to a kid whose parents can't afford Christmas presents will end up being the center of his activity and enjoyment, considerably increasing his quality of life. An attractive woman kissing a wealthy, charming, good- looking lothario swimming in sex has little impact upon him, whereas the same kiss could sustain the sad sex-deprived guy for a year. Were you joking when you wrote that?”

“Not really,” Alex replies. “I mean, it was meant to be a tragicomic example of the principle, but jokes are based upon reality, are they not? There's some truth to every joke, right? That's what makes it identifiably funny and sad. If it was pure fantasy, if it wasn't grounded in reality to some degree, no one could understand or relate to it. It would have no impact; contain no humor. People tease others, and when those others get upset the teaser will commonly reply: 'Come on, I was just kidding.' But nothing is ever really 'just' anything.”

“The kidding comes from some fractional truth at the least, not from pure imagination, which itself is drawn from what the imager has some knowledge of. Nothing comes from nothing. But, anyway, that last example you mentioned comes from personal experience, unfortunately. I say that that it's tragicomic because, while someone that can't empathize with the agony of such severe sustained deprivation might find it funny, those that can will see it for what it is:

tragic; inestimably painful. I was that guy for years on end, struggling with serious health and drug problems, lonely and deprived, uncomfortable in my own skin, seeing gorgeous women and feeling sheer heart-rending torment at how badly I wanted *anything* to do with them. A smile. A hug. *Any* type of interaction.”

“And yet I was unable to naturally earn such satisfactions, because I was locked into a highly unnatural, afflicted state of existence. I felt like even a hug would lend me the strength to persevere. *Any* of it would have increased my quality of life *dramatically* for a time; briefly filled my heart and made it that much easier to carry on. But that’s not how it works. Women smell that desperation, and such suffering thereby snowballs into increasing isolation and despair through the impact of the cruel, cold psyche of those so desperately desired. And a *lot* of people are in that general position, though not for the same reasons that I was.”

“Socrates said: ‘Those that are the hardest to love need it the most.’ They don’t readily receive love or the associated forms of intimacy, so they get far more out of the rare instances when they do. This is a truth applicable to *anything* of value, including all that which we’ve been discussing. And, again, the psyche exacerbates the costs connected to this truth, as there’s an inverse relationship between our desire of anything of value and our ability and likelihood of attaining it.”

“This is, of course, why we feel compelled to disguise anything approaching need in personal matters, and why, in a tragic form of irony, we tend to feel the need for something right up to the point where we can actually attain it. I also can’t help but feel that this need is intrinsic to our spiritual nature. Since our divide from singularity to plurality, from the singular Spirit into its infinite forms, we have this constant need to move back towards singularity, our natural state; to seek unity; to feel connected mentally, physically and spiritually, which is what’s behind our being social beings and, after survival, I believe constitutes our primary existential drive, fulfilled through the force that we call ‘love.’”

“That’s sad, in a way, but beautiful too, I suppose,” Henry says. “But you’re right, us good-looking wealthy guys don’t get as much out of such things as others would,” he says with an awkward little laugh. “But back to Quality of Life Economics... Can you talk more about how and why traditional free market economics short-sells quality of life?”

“Traditional economics makes few, if any, of the Quality of Life Economics considerations,” Alex replies, “and asks few, if any, of the questions it poses in the pursuit of maximizing total quality of life. It’s my belief that this is

because traditional economics hails from the aristocratic ownership class that's only really concerned with feeding its greed and consolidating value within its excluding minority, only really *pretending*, owing to the corruptive, biasing influence of wealth accumulation, to care about moral considerations; considerations like the greatest collective quality of life for people as a whole and the health of the planet that hosts every moment of every life, with its most decimated regions, of course, tending to host the most miserable individualized existences, because the rich buy themselves out of the areas which their 'interests' tend to decimate."

"The economics I was taught, like most every other western collegiate student, was geared towards maximizing profits for the excluding class, *period*. And with few reservations. And both my spiritual beliefs and the concept of Quality of Life Economics assert that productivity and wealth generation are of no value absent total quality of life increases, for increasing total quality of life *is* the core value. *All* disciplines, economics, commerce, politics, theology... *all* of them should serve *total* life, else they're immoral; immoral exactly to the extent which they betray this one moral imperative; the one basis by which almost all evil effects are created. What's known as 'Free Market Economics' actually purposely ignores people in its assessment of economic success, because it's not the welfare of the citizenry contributing to the economy that's of concern, either historically or contemporarily, it's the ability of the economy to make the rich richer that irresponsibly constitutes success, regardless of the cost to total life."

"'Free Market Economics' is itself a propagandist term, considering that it's concerned with the freedom of big business and its owners to do as they please, no matter the cost to the broader public whose freedom to be protected from its trespasses and the gross limitations it places upon their ability to increase their quality of life is all but entirely disregarded. This, of course, is tied to the broad ideological inability of conservatism to acknowledge *positive freedom*, pretending, and perpetuating through its rhetoric falling upon the uninformed, gullible people that it manipulates to fight for their own oppression, that only negative freedom, the lack of obstacles, exists."

"Again, this is consistent with the motives from which conventional economic theory was sourced: Empire; dynasties; aristocracy; those that write history and prevailing theory, backing it with force and money to make certain that it prevails. It's the conquerors that generate and perpetuate the commonly understood theories and ideas in order to advance their wealth-and-power-consolidating agenda. Ideas that survive the conquering fires of history, and

which are thereafter spread by literal or figurative sword, are seldom those that have the greatest good of all the people in mind, precisely because that greatest good contradicts the consolidating agenda of established powers and interests. And when those ideas *do* spread, such as with democracy, they tend to be but preserved in name for the sake of controlling people.”

“Conservatism is oppression. Oppressing people by way of repressing our greatest total quality of life realization. Think about economics class and every economic assessment you’ve ever read. Almost all of them rely upon statistics that leave people’s lives out, as if economics has nothing to do with people and the quality of life that they lead. Our hearts and their communication of the Spirit’s instinctive knowledge and wisdom knows better than this, of course, as do our minds when they heed this communication. The quality of *every* life matters.”

“Traditionally, however, this spiritual truth is subdued by the greed that controls political, economic and business theory. The result is that humanity is ever under assault by its oppressing, dividing and conquering enemies: the value-consolidating ownership class actively excluding us from holding any considerable share in the bottom line, politically and commercially. Think about our economics and accounting classes at UCSB: misdirection is built into what are meant to look like unbiased, objective statistics. And the cost to the people and the planet we depend upon are left out because they reflect negatively upon the bottom line that goes mostly to a small slice of the population, with most people remaining in the liabilities column of the balance sheet as to-be-minimized costs of doing business.”

“So you think the statistics themselves are biased and misleading...?” Henry asks.

“Definitely,” Alex replies. “Again, take the economic statistics we hear and read about and are taught at the university level in economics, accounting and business courses. Gross domestic product is a total production statistic that disregards the connection between economic productivity and the lives of the people. But, in the most extreme example, all the production in the world means nothing if the goods actually being produced, and the profits extracted by the business entities through their production and distribution, don’t do anything to improve the overall quality of life of those that produce, consume and are otherwise impacted by those products. You can hypothetically have an economy producing an *immense* quantity of useless crap that adds little value to the lives of those that feel the need to buy that crap thanks to effective, psychologically-manipulative marketing. In such a case you’d have an

immense total GDP and GDP per capita accompanied by meager, if any, quality of life increases from the consumption of such products.”

“Per capita, of course, has nothing to do with the impact upon people in and of itself, it’s just a production per person statistic. Yes, countries with higher GDP’s tend to experience higher qualities of life compared to those that don’t, because much of that produced value ends up in the hands of the citizenry. And yet there’s *far* more to this quality of life conversion than the production value itself, especially the relative distribution of that value and the protection of the people, the planet and inelastic goods and services like healthcare that continue to be demanded almost regardless of cost due to their so directly connecting to and influencing the quality of life of the demanders.”

“But even when that production is near to valueless in terms of improving the quality of lives of those that produce and consume it, an economic value will be assigned to that productivity based upon the cost of its absorbed labor and material resources, all the way through its chain of production, through to its final sale. It’s the value that those products and services add to the quality of life of their consumers, and the distribution of those products and services across the population, and the financial value extracted by the entities that produce and sell them and how that value is distributed amongst those that contribute to the production and sale of the goods and services that determines *total* value; value additions minus value extractions. GDP entirely ignores this most salient of statistics: the impact upon people’s lives. And it’s certainly, again, not the only statistic that paints a false picture of the well-being of the total citizenry.”

“Stock market scores reflect investor confidence and profitability, ignoring the fact that a very small percentage of the population holds any considerable stock or equity of any kind, and that increases in stock scores and GDP measures more than likely are gained via the same mechanisms that increase the disparity of quality of life experienced across society, and especially between the ownership class and the working class whose lack of privilege is exploited by the ownership class to cut costs, keep profits high and maintain investor confidence.”

“And while the unemployment measure is relevant to quality of life, a very high portion of the workforce is barely getting by and experiencing a very low, subsistence level quality of life in which no money is being saved and over half their income goes to their landlord that’s preying upon their inability to acquire their own home. From a moral standpoint, leases are larcenies; theft from those

who are deprived the opportunity to build equity because of their financial disadvantage. If there were *any* morality there, the law would dictate that all leases must be equity-building 'lease-to-own' contracts. But when it comes to economic statistics, perhaps the most misleading, salient fact of all is that most of them are *mean averages*."

"Why do you say that?" Henry asks, suddenly feeling a creeping sense of guilt enter his heart and mind as he reflects upon a life of lavish indulgence and cool, detached assessment of the same statistics working for his father's investment firm, which plays with hundreds of millions of dollars in family funds.

"Well," Alex continues, "to illustrate, take the most extreme hypothetical case of one person in our nation of three-hundred-million-plus people receiving all of the income and wealth derived from our gross domestic production, and everyone else receiving nothing, starving and surviving on handouts from the one person, and from whatever they produce off of the land when they can escape this absolute rulers' compulsory servitude. And while productivity would be lower because starving people have a hard time working, let us just pretend that GDP is exactly what it is now."

"Because the per capita scores are mean averages, the stats would say the same thing they do now. They'd say that income per capita is, whatever it is, around fifty thousand dollars per year, because the one absolute rulers' trillions of dollars is averaged against the other three- hundred-million-plus with nothing, producing the fifty thousand per year mean average. So non-critical-thinkers without any understanding of socioeconomics or economic statistics and averages would look at that number and say: 'Okay, the people in this nation have it pretty good. The average person makes fifty thousand dollars per year.' But this isn't true."

"It paints a rosier picture for, arguably, public-placating propagandist purposes, in order to make the public believe things are better than they are so that they're less likely to demonstrate dis- content through their beliefs, dialogue and actions, including through their political participation which, of course, is already abysmally low considering people are all, to varying extents, aware that they're dis- connected from any true, direct influence upon government. To paint a true picture and emphasize what should be the priority, the quality of life of the people, the *median* average and an altogether different statistical set needs to be used."

“And what would that statistical set include, exactly?,” Henry inquires with genuine interest.

“To begin with, again, it would include median averages and the percentage of the public that meets certain quality of life indicators that are purposefully given very little attention, if not outright ignored; indicators that are submerged and undervalued by traditional immoral conservative economists and their ownership class beneficiaries. Since income and wealth are the primary means by which quality of life is determined, as it is wealth that buys greater opportunity, greater access to high-quality goods and services, comfortable, secure homes, the ability to travel and generally get more out of life etc., the median income and median wealth per capita *relative* to GDP is a core statistic in the Quality of Life Economic assessment of the relative success of any economy; of how successfully the economy converts production to total quality of life.”

“And, again, as a median score it’ll much better reflect the *actual* financial resources available to people and families used to create and maintain quality of life, as it won’t be a number falsely inflated by those very few making millions of dollars a year from large financial portfolios of stocks of those companies most successfully increasing the disparity in quality of life, or from private equity in the bottom line of major business interests not being publicly traded but typically producing the same negative total value result.”

“So long as equity is by and large held by a small segment of the population its fundamental role in determining the growing disparity in income, wealth and quality of life can only continue, and most likely grow. Only by spreading equity, by allowing the majority to be sharing members in the bottom line success of commercial enterprises rather than simply being cost-minimized, exploited tools of enterprise can this growing disparity be reversed, and most of the national and global injustices along with it.”

“But I’m getting ahead of myself. That’s business theory, and I assume we’re coming to that... For the purposes of Quality of Life Economics theory we start with median income and wealth per capita relative to GDP as a primary barometer of how successfully the nation translates its economic productivity into quality of life. We can call the income statistic median income per GDP, a statistic created by dividing median income per capita by GDP per capita, and can call the wealth statistic median wealth per GDP. Perhaps this pair of statistics is already in use by the more liberal economists, though I’m unaware of them, and don’t hear of it. Access to IRS records would also be necessary to generate this statistic.”

“And you couple these median income and median wealth per GDP stats with one or more disparity measures. Disparity statistics are already in use, of course, though underemphasized from the standpoint of any moral assessment, as nothing highlights the failure of the so-called 'free market' to serve the people as a whole; to oppress their ability to 'freely' pursue open avenues towards improved life circumstances. I imagine my own such stats.”

“In one such dreamed-up disparity statistic, you cut the population into five pieces relative to their aforementioned median income and wealth per capita per GDP numbers, giving you five quintiles and ten total statistics, five median income quintiles and five median wealth quintiles. You can then add the differences between each quintiles' median numbers and divide by five to get a mean average disparity for both income and wealth across the nation.”

“This set of statistics, the median averages per GDP and the disparity numbers derived from them, will demonstrate how ably or how poorly a nation's economy is dedicated to the benefit of its total populace. You can round-out this assessment with related statistics, such as by asking: What percentage of the workforce is able to save at least ten percent of its income for non-essential future purchases? A disposable income statistic that can be approximated without a survey by comparing average living costs with the median income statistic per living region.”

“What else?” Henry asks. “Let me try to remember... something to do with stock distribution.”

“Yes,” Alex continues. “The fewer people that own stock in any company, or in an equity fund or any other financial security, the less that its changing valuation influences collective quality of life. So you need to track the distribution of securities, not just their performance. You can do this for every security by tracking the number of share-holders per dollar amount of valuation, say the number of shareholders per million dollar valuation. And you can apply the same statistic to the financial market as a whole, and to the various segments of the market. How many shareholders are there for every million dollars of value placed in all the firms in the S&P 500?”

“Along with this you can track the percentage of households that have at least, say, five thousand dollars' worth of equity in any combination of privately held or publicly traded companies. And you can do the same thing with all the other traditionally tracked economic indicators, turning them on their head such that they're indicative of quality of life. Housing starts, for example, are generally used as an economic indicator; as an indicator of the health of the



economy. But are they, or any of these traditional statistics, *truly* indicative of the financial health and quality of life of *all* those participating in that economy?"

"That is, of course, the most important question, and the one too infrequently asked outside of progressive economic theory such as Quality of Life Economics. For, in this case, the problem is that a very high percentage of these housing starts, these approved new construction projects, become primary residences, with far too many of them representing secondary vacation homes, real estate market speculations or investments by the wealthy that rent them out at extremely high rates to those individuals and families that can't afford to acquire a residence for themselves, and are thus ripe for exploitation."

"So, instead, you track the percentage of home purchases made for the purpose of primary residency and the percentage of adults that are at least partial owners of their homes, and what the median valuation of primary residences is across states and the nation compared to the median income and wealth in those states and the nation in order to determine how difficult it is for people to purchase and afford to keep their own homes, and how much of these average homeowners' wealth is tied up in their one home. How feasible is homeownership for the average individual and family? And how much risk does this entail, in terms of their overall financial position? The primary residence consideration is a critical component in the whole quality of life equation; a major marker of the population's financial and connected mental and emotional stability, both because it tends to represent a *major* source of financially-induced stress for the less well-off, and because living conditions are central to quality of life."

"So you do the same for the affordability of rental units across different cities, states and the nation by comparing the median income of those living in rented units in each area to the median rental price in said areas. What type of financial burden is placed upon individuals and families that choose to live in these areas? By asking these questions and gathering these statistics we have at our disposal information relevant to seeing the connection between the real estate market and the average citizens' financial stability, even granting us a significantly enhanced ability to predict when real estate becomes an overvalued bubble to the great risk of those overly invested in it and set to lose their homes and fall on hard times when that speculative bubble bursts."

"For history tells us that those most responsible for these collapses are those who are the *least* exposed to the resultant risk, because related regulation is gutted or non-existent. I was a real estate broker when the last bad bubble burst,

and saw firsthand the results of the tying together of the financial and real estate markets, and the unjust exposure to risk position the millionaire and billionaire investors put the majority of the nation in.”

“Is that it...?,” Henry asks, attempting to remember the economic section of Alex’s book.

“No, not at all,” Alex responds immediately. “Ideally, you want to generate as complete a picture as possible. So you also have to track the effectiveness of government and the national culture at generating and ensuring a high quality of life, and at protecting the sanctity of the environment that guarantees that quality of life into posterity. This includes, at the very least, statistics related to higher education, healthcare, incarceration and energy production and utilization. What percentage of graduating high school students go on to attend college, and at what level of long term burdensome debt commitments? What’s the average cost of a bachelor’s degree relative to median income?”

“Considering its role in assuring mental enrichment and the overall quality of life of its beneficiaries, I personally think that higher education up to the bachelor’s degree at state universities should be a free, guaranteed right of citizenry, as should health insurance, if not healthcare itself within reasonable limits, and that, short of this, they should be paid for in a way least burdensome to those least able to be further burdened. Trim down the defense budget, tax carbon use and inheritance, cut tax write offs and tie taxation to profitability and distribution of equity. The more profit claimed by the fewer people in the enterprise, the higher the tax rate.”

“Healthcare and education are among those select things that *shouldn’t* be profitable, because the quality of life cost of taking advantage of those that so desperately need such products and services is particularly exorbitant and morally repugnant. Assuring that young people receive a quality education and the improved prospects and general opportunities to go with it throughout their life *without* being forced to take on the stress of life-long debt, and that individuals and families don’t face financial burden and even bankruptcy due to health woes, are among the most vital indicators of progressive nations.”

“Guaranteeing that such basic opportunities to live a decent quality of life are not preyed upon by the unscrupulously opportunistic that believe nothing is off limits in terms of seeking out a lack of advantage to exploit for value extraction is an indispensable marker of national success. The societal benefits are *well* worth the tax-paid cost, and nothing the conservative politician can

ever say will convince progressives that anything other than greed dictates otherwise; that fiscal policy should be set to serve *the people as a whole*, not the over-lording parasites so tragically revered by so many.”

“From where do you think the money needed to pay those costs might be drawn?,” Henry asks. “Do you have any specific fiscal policy ideas?”

“Again, trimming the defense budget and increasing the capital gains and inheritance taxes would be good places to start,” Alex responds. “As would, as Warren Buffett has pointed out, preventing business executives from passing investment and business income through so many loopholes and write-offs that they pay a lower *effective* rate of taxation than their secretaries, even as they’re the ones most able to absorb the cost of greater taxation rates.”

“Those making the most money off of the efforts of everyone else contributing to the economy, and off the planet’s natural resources, *should* pay *effectively* more, not just nominally more. Then there’s the possibility of upping the taxation of anything that lowers collective quality of life and costs us all immensely in the long term, such as industrial carbon emissions, coal and petroleum extraction and the sale of things like cigarettes, fast food and inefficient, polluting vehicles. Tax and fiscal policy is its own immense ball of wax, but suffice it to say that they’re typically horribly inefficient at creating improved quality of life opportunities for the majority, owing mostly to the greed acting on *both* sides of the equation, taxation and spending equations.”

“But back to the educational system. Quality of Life Economics asks: What’s the financial burden entailed in a university level education? What’s the median cost per year of tuition, board and other expenses at the state university level compared to the median income per year earned for the average graduate? And what percentage of students are forced to take out loans for state level education, and what’s the median debt upon graduation? You do the same evaluation with health insurance.”

“Compared to median income, what’s the median cost for the higher-quality health insurance policies? Don’t allow the statistic to be artificially watered-down by allowing the lower standard policies to be included in the average. Non-risky, full peace of mind, high quality, low deductible health insurance plans are the only plans worthy of inclusion, so factor in only those with near comprehensive coverage. Ideally, of course, the government pays for bachelor level education at state universities, and for all health insurance policies. Or, taken to the progressive extreme, healthcare is socialized, making it a right,

entirely cutting out the profits and business model of the insurance companies that we finance.”

“Healthcare should be about making the body stronger to cure and stave-off disease through a ‘food is medicine’ approach making *much* better use of the extraordinary array of medicinal compounds offered through nature, and by backing healthier stress-coping mechanisms, like yoga and meditation, and by educating the patient on the invaluable rewards of exercise, turning away from pharmaceutical and surgery dependencies that tend to mask disease and weaken the patient over time. Not only are these approaches wiser in terms of being far better aligned with our organic constructs and being sustainable and mostly free from possible negative side effects, but they’re *far* less costly and *far* more likely to lead to a nearing of complete health, as opposed to a healthcare dependency.”

“Then there’s the so-called ‘correctional system’ that usually doesn’t correct a damn thing, and which influences the law enforcement side in a particularly reprehensible manner by fighting for lower standards of crimes deserving of incarceration and longer, harsher sentences in order for private, for-profit prisons to turn suffering into patronage. What percent of the adult population is in prison, and what percentage of these are from non-violent offenses? And what’s the recidivism rate? And what percentage of those that are imprisoned are incarcerated at prisons privately run for profit?”

“All told, the more a nation is able to create the type of socioeconomic environment that keeps opportunity and general quality of life high, thereby reducing the pressures, disadvantages and desperation that tend to lead to criminality, the better the indication the nation’s economic system serves the least advantaged members of its citizenry. And the less often those that are incarcerated are imprisoned again in the future, the more likely the underlying causes of criminality, whether they be in the individual and/or their environment, have *actually* been corrected. And the less profit is made off of incarceration, the less likely the profit motive is corrupting the system of law enforcement and imprisonment. Then you move on to the environmental considerations.”

“Right, the environmental assessment, starting with the carbon footprint that’s connected to general environmental ruin through pollution and the precipitation of global warming, climate change, gradually more extreme and destructive weather patterns, and environments less accommodating to life,” Henry offers. “The less pollution and the more green energy is used, the less the

environmental degradation, the stronger the ecosystems, the more the environment can sustain life and support us.”

“Yes, spot on,” Alex concurs. “And for me, and for anyone even somewhat in tune to the spiritual channel, so to speak, it’s not just a human concern. The quality of *all* life is environmentally dependent. The healthier the environment, the more environmentally responsible the business practices within any economy, the greater the overall quality and longevity of life that can be supported. And so the Quality of Life Economics analysis must include some environmental assessment taking into account the costs to the environment of economic and energy production and utilization. The total amount of energy that’s produced within the nation through carbon-zeroed or carbon- minimized means is one critical statistic.”

“But this statistic should be a part of the overall assessment also taking account of the source of all energy production and its relative polluting and carbon-burning rate, and which calculates a total score by multiplying the percentage of the state and nation’s energy production from each means by the environmental factor of each score and adding them together, and then dividing this by the number of people this energy serves, such that an environmental cost per capita can be calculated. This same cost can then be applied to different businesses, such as by determining this environmental costs per dollar of revenue.”

“The more that the individual households, businesses and general organizations utilize energy derived from green sources, and the more they produce their own energy, such as through solar panels and wind turbines, and the more high-energy-efficiency standards that households, businesses and organizations enlist in their operations, the lower this cost per capita or per dollar of revenue will drop. Transportation pollution and carbon emissions must also be estimated and, as more and more vehicles become not just hybrids but entirely electric, the transportation assessment must take into account the energy production assessment behind the powering of said vehicles, as it matters little if you drive an all-electric vehicle if the electricity your vehicle uses comes from a pollutive power plant. So the average miles per gallon of new vehicles sold per year must be combined with an appraisal of the environmental cost of the hybrid and all-electric vehicles sourced from powerplant statistics.”

After a long pause, Henry asks: “Is that everything?”

“I’m entirely certain that you could come up with more,” Alex replies, “but I can’t think of any more at the moment... So what you do now is create a

composite of the combined scores for every state in the nation. You add all the scores together to get your Total Quality of Life Value. How successfully does that state or that nation promote, produce and protect a high and increasing quality of life for its citizens as a whole? You can then compare state against state and nation against nation, even subdividing into county and city comparisons, depending upon your ability to gather economic data. And, of course, you can attempt to learn from the comparison. And you can compare changes over the years and decades in order to determine relative improvement and its causes.”

“You can apply lessons gleaned from the relative success of one against the relative failures of another. And if you really want to do a comprehensive assessment, you apply Quality of Life Economics principles not just on a macroeconomic level, as per the statistical set we’ve been discussing, but on a *microeconomic* level as well, as the compendium of micro constitutes the macro, and the details of the micro can be very telling, revealing valuable information. This means evaluating individual companies, institutions, systems, and potentially even people. What total value is the company responsible for?”

“With many companies the answer would be a negative value, depending upon your assessment. What quality of life addition does its products or services offer relative to the price at which it offers them? What total added quality of life can be attributed to its sale of goods and services after subtracting what it extracted from the people of the economy and from the planet’s environments for its efforts? To what extent are its business practices ethical and environmentally responsible? How much pollution does it create? How much of its energy use is sourced from green, renewable generation? To what extent does the profit that it produces improve the quality of life of those involved, including its patrons, workers and owners, both domestically and, if it’s a multi- national company, globally?”

“This, of course, includes how well its employees are compensated, in terms of salary, benefits and, ideally, equity sharing. The same median, disparity and quality of life measures applied to the broader economy can be applied within each business by, for example, comparing the median executive pay with the median non-executive pay, and determining the quality and general value of benefits offered to the median employee and the environmental costs of its business practices, both in terms of its production and the source and quantity of its energy consumption. And the whole supply and distribution chain that feeds the company must be considered, from raw material extraction to production to sales and distribution. If it’s sourcing the raw materials for the

production of its wares and/or is having its wares produced in an area of the world with few, if any, labor and environmental regulations and policed protections, this must be accounted for, as must the carbon costs of transport.”

“Okay... So, ideally, with enough people dedicated to deriving, compiling and calculating the statistics, you’ll derive a massive database of Total Quality of Life Values for every entity, from the national and state governments on down,” Henry offers. “And... right... if I remember correctly from your book, you advised this database be used as a guide for everyone involved in the economic paradigm shift, correct?”

“Correct,” Alex confirms. “These measures would serve as effective signposts in directing the shift away from economic analysis supporting the consolidation of value and quality of life toward that analysis supporting a pursuit of *total* quality of life maximization. The total quality of life impact assessment can be referred to as a basis for every economic input and output, and for any decision with economic implications, with statistics such as those we’ve discussed supporting the effort. The consumer, worker and investor can all take heed. Like many, I long ago realized that everything is connected, and that the causal chain stretches from the past through the present into the future in ways that are impossible to perfectly estimate with our limited perception, instrumentation and other means of data-gathering and calculating.”

“Nevertheless, we possess a moral imperative to at least *approximate* the causality of anything substantially impact total quality of life. We must all be aware that economic and business causality are as real as any other form, and are inseparable from total quality of life concerns. There may be nothing more imperative to this paramount pursuit, in fact, for quality of life requires a wherewithal more dependent upon economic policy and business endeavors than perhaps any other matter. Most people don’t seem to think about it or take responsibility for much of this causality, but they’re a part of it nonetheless. It’s an inescapable fact of interconnectedness.”

“When we buy a product or service, we financially support every- thing and everyone that goes into creating, marketing and distributing it. We contribute to the demand that perpetuates its supply, and the manner in which it’s supplied. Most everyone has heard the Latin expression ‘caveat emptor,’ or ‘buyer beware.’ Usually this is a reference to the consumer protecting his or herself from an overpriced, poorly produced, even dangerous product. But within the context of Quality of Life Economics ‘buyer beware’ has *far* more profound, far-reaching implications. Beware of who and what you support, the

total net quality of life value of those persons and things being supported, and the practices and chain of causality being perpetuated for all those impacted by that support.”

“When I consume chicken or eggs, for example, I contribute to the manner in which most of these beings are treated, when they’re conventionally raised and slaughtered, at least. Most of the males are killed at birth, and the chicks are packed into foul, crammed confines, beaks rounded off so the squabbles inevitably resulting from their forced proximity won’t harm the merchandise, separated from their offspring, stuffed so full of growth hormones that they can barely stand, and then sent through a conveyor belt slaughtering system. It’s torture of a feeling being followed by murder, plain and simple.”

“The combination of our detachment and associated ignorance encourages our complicity because we don’t witness the evil first-hand, even when we’re aware of it on some level. Out of sight, out of mind, but *never* free from effect. For our ignorance and detachment, willing or not, never relieves us of our responsibility when we financially reward those directly involved. It makes us complicit aiders and abettors of the moral crimes against life, regardless of the law’s failure to reflect that crime. A true progressive must ask why the crime isn’t recognized in the first place, and who undermines the necessary regulations that *would* criminalize it. But that’s another big ball of wax bound up in the plutocracy’s perpetuated evils.”

“That’s why you don’t eat meat?,” Henry asks.

“Some wild seafood,” Alex replies, “at least on my current diet,” he adds with a self-deprecating snort. “But the average American consumes four times the protein they can healthfully utilize. Amino acids, the constituents of protein, are in almost everything, and, generally speaking, plant-based protein sources are *much* more nutritious than animal flesh, in terms of all the micronutrients that accompany the protein in the plant, and contain little to no heart-disease-precipitating forms of animal-based saturated fat. Those plant foods contain *far* more of what we need and what protects us, and minimal to nothing of what threatens the quality and extent of our lives.”

“So if you’re consuming whole grains, beans, nuts, seeds and other plant-based protein sources in addition to meat, something which I don’t recommend for most people owing to the fact that these plant seeds produce inflammatory responses, you’re likely overloading your system with protein, the excess of which your body processes as waste, stressing the kidneys, or converts into body fat, encouraging obesity, especially when combined with an overconsumption of



carbohydrates, and especially still unnaturally processed sources of carbohydrates; the so-called 'enriched' grains, which is actually a euphemism for 'stripped-down with a few essential nutrients added back' so that those who foolishly rely upon them don't become malnourished, as they did in the past, the historical cause of the deceitful 'enriched' terminology."

"'Enriched' is but one example of food industry propaganda, essentially. Too much animal product consumption also opens the door of dire consequence for your cardiovascular and digestive systems while supporting a factory farming industry that's irrefutably immoral, and that uses more water and energy and releases more planet-warming gas into the environment than almost any other sector of the economy. Because of energy lost in the conversion of plant food into animal protein, it takes somewhere on the order of five to ten plant calories to produce one calorie of animal protein. Therefore, for reasons of health, morality and environmental protection, I try to eat as little animal-derived food as possible, as such consumption breaches irrefutable codes of ethics and personal responsibility on several critical fronts: health, morality, environmentalism and economics. And when I *do* eat it, I make sure it fed upon its natural diet, as we're not only what we eat but what we eat eats."

"Ruminants like cows or bison naturally graze and eat mostly grass, not grains, one of the effects of which is that the *naturally* fed animals possess *far* healthier, Omega-Three-rich fat profiles. I prefer wild seafood overall; not 'wild-caught,' as this is another misleading, propagandist term, but *truly* wild. 'Caught' is the operative word there; it means originating in a farm, then released and allowed to experience some of its life cycle in a natural environment before being caught and killed. Such misleading of the consumer *should* be illegal, of course, but industry buys the law, to a large extent; an extent *far* exceeding moral acceptability. Just more proof of the plutocracy, as if anyone the least bit observant needs any further proof. Anyway, when you combine the fight for progress across these fronts of the food production and distribution industry, you find that the highest dietary standard is organic, whole vegetable and fruit centric, wild and as raw and local as possible."

"Organic for environmental ethics," Alex continues; "for sustainable high levels of soil health and the microorganisms they host, and to prevent the pollution of rivers, lakes, the ocean and the water table from the runoff of unnatural elements. Vegetable and fruit centric for health reasons, for such a diet means you're likely consuming a ton of micronutrients, but also for moral and spiritual reasons; to prevent the torturous suffering of lifeforms raised in horrid conditions with no lives or purpose other than to be fattened for the

slaughter of *far* more protein than we need, plus the food, land and carbon cost of raising animals for slaughter.”

“Raw, uncooked food, because such food is in its whole, unprocessed, uncooked form, and is thereby the most nutritious, quality-of-life-boosting form of the food that you can eat, as the heat of cooking and the mechanisms of processing destroy nutrients and degrade the health of the consumer. Local for many reasons, including the carbon cost of transporting foods, the unnatural, health-degrading preservation elements packed into foods that need to pass very long periods between production and consumption, the mentally and spiritually-enriching benefits of being more directly connected to cultivating crops, the fact that the closer to the source from which your produce is derived the fresher and more nutritious it’ll be, as it begins to degrade upon being harvested, and the economic ethics of supporting local growers instead of massive, irresponsibly-pollutive agricultural and shipping corporations. Ideally, everyone will be supporting a local CSA and growing as much of their own organic produce as their circumstances permit. It has been the dream of many progressives, going back to Thomas Jefferson, that we *all* become enriched in this immensely undervalued way, through the running of our own familial and communitarian gardens.”

“The absolute pursuit of profit absolutely sacrifices what’s best. And on this localist front the ideal is obviously food grown by those that consume it; grown on the very property they inhabit. Such food is the freshest and most nutrient-dense because, again, degradation begins the moment of harvest, and there’s almost zero cost of transport, environmentally or monetarily, and no need for chemical preservatives. But it’s also critical to realize that ‘organic, vegetable and fruit centric, raw and local’ needn’t be an all-or-nothing practice in order to serve as a highly valuable guide. It’s the platinum standard; the pinnacle of progressive, quality-of-life-supporting consumption, in my opinion. The total value your dietary habits create or cost the world, and especially yourself, is relative to your level of adherence to this highest standard. My own consumption is closer to a gold standard. This property doesn’t produce everything we eat, for example. And, again, I eat some wild seafood and cook some of my food.”

“The extent to which I’m a proponent of Hippocrates’ ‘food is medicine’ approach to consumption can’t be overstated, as nothing is more vital to the quality of one’s existence than health, that which impacts every thought, action, outlook and potentiality of the individualization. And nothing is more determinant of health than what one consumes. And to that end, with all my research and experimentation, I’ve learned that the Standard American Diet,

perfectly acronymized as 'SAD,' leads to gut damage, inflammation-spiking fatty acid imbalances, the displacing of more nutrient dense foods and the conditioning of the body to build rather than burn fat.”

“I’ve come to wholeheartedly embrace an approach to consumption that adheres to the way our ancient, pre-agricultural-revolution, even pre-fire ancestors ate; an approach that consequently honors our evolved biology’s by keeping as much of our food as possible in its most nutrient dense, natural, entirely unprocessed and uncooked form, as cooked food not only drastically degrades nutrient density but creates toxic, carcinogenic and inflammatory compounds. If over half our food is cooked our bodies react as if to an invader, triggering what’s called ‘digestive leukocytosis.’”

“To all these ends, to maximizing all the vitality-maximizers and minimizing the vitality-and-longevity-minimizers, I’ve become a raw-plant-centric paleo eater, and close to a ‘Raw Pesca-Paleo.’ That is, I emphasize an approach that I believe is in line with human evolution, how we evolved to eat for highest health, and which doesn’t cause autoimmune and inflammatory issues. One principle that I’ve picked up along this front: if it sprouts directly, *don’t eat it*, as Mother Nature protects *all* of her unborn and newly born offspring, flora and fauna alike.”

“This means cutting out grains, legumes, seeds, dairy and nightshades due to their toxic lectin counts, instead emphasizing raw, organically-sourced healthy fats, vegetables, fruits and truly wild sea-food, not deceptively labeled ‘wild caught’ seafood, which isn’t actually wild. Wild seafood has the healthiest fat profile amongst the animal products while being a lot less carbon intensive and not promoting the environmental ruin and abject cruelty of conventionally raised-for-slaughter land animals. I also eat probiotic fare like kimchi, sauerkraut and kombucha and eschew inflammatory excess salt, plant oils and added, unnatural concentrations of carbohydrates, especially all forms of sugar.”

“Over time such a disciplined, educated diet cleans out the system, solves the unnaturally permeable gut issues rampant in our society, the ‘leaky gut’ underlying all autoimmune issues and most modern health ills, remedies inflammation, strengthens the immensely symbiotic healthy bacteria colony in our guts and gradually makes the body a natural fat burner, rather than a carb dependent body fat accumulator. I consider this approach, which runs largely parallel to the popular Ketogenic, Whole 30, Paleo, South Beach, Atkins, Wahls and similar approaches, the ‘Evolution Diet,’ meaning that which we

physiologically evolved through the vast majority of our genetic history to consume for complete health and vitality."

"It's a natural, organic diet of whole, nutrient-dense foods that places your body and brain in the mild fat burning state of ketosis in which we evolved to thrive as hunter-gatherers, entirely eschewing all those post-agricultural-revolution foods, cooking and processing methods traced to modern consumption-based ailments, which are *most* ailments. It's disturbingly telling that somewhere around *three-quarters* of healthcare costs and health industry profits are based upon *lifestyle choices*, the majority of which are made up of *consumption habits*. These entirely preventable ailments *drastically* diminish the quality and extent of our lives while enriching the doctors and surgeons and pharmaceutical companies that we'd largely run out of business with anything like the aforementioned approach."

"So you're basically saying that, ideally, we must be aware of the full impacts of our economic choices..." Henry says. "Which includes every aspect of our lifestyles. An immensely tall order, indeed."

"Ideally, yes, we'd be fully aware of the total extent of our impact upon the world; upon the quality of our own lives, upon the lives of others, and upon the health of the environment," Alex replies. "But, as you imply, this isn't feasible. It's the target for which we aim, but rarely hit dead center. Alas, with the right economic tools and tracking mechanisms we'd at least have the ability to see the target, making it all the more likely that our arrow could come near to its mark; a mark we can't currently see. It's near impossible to hit a target in the dark, after all. And it's only the progressive or idealist that has the strength and courage to search and shoot for the target in the first place, and that strives to be principle-bound. This includes the principle that knowledge is not only personal power but, through causality and conviction, empowers all of life; everyone and everything our choices touch."

"Quality of Life Economics is about focusing on the production and gathering of information relative to the connection between economic activity and the impact upon the quality of life of the people and planet as a whole. *That's* the knowledge that it seeks to accumulate, champion and disseminate in service of life. The easy route, of course, is usually the opposite route; the route of lowest value. In this case, the easiest route is to pretend that the target doesn't exist. The easiest route, in other words, is not to pay attention or, not far from the lowest standard, to pay attention only to conventional, blindingly-misleading indicators that betray the service of life."

“Most seem to consume based upon whim and pure hedonistic desire; based upon instant gratification alone. And this method of buying and consuming is *extremely* costly when extrapolated across the entire global consumer base. Also, of course, the progressive practice of analyzing the total costs involved in the things we purchase, use and consume goes well beyond application to the food industry. It applies to every sector of the economy. When we buy a product or service that has a negative total value we’re complicit in that reduction in total quality of life. If you patronize a company that does evil, *you* do evil. If you patronize a company that produces great value, that does great good, *you* do great good. There’s no way around it, regardless of your ignorance, detachment or justifications.”

“It’s the same when we interview for a position with a company, or decide to invest in a company; we’re supporting and encouraging that company, and whatever profession we decide to vie for and whatever practices the company continues thanks to our support and the support of others like us. Investors don’t generally take this into account. It’s only profitability and future stock market valuation increases and decreases that’re prioritized. This is pure greedy irresponsibility. It’s morally and spiritually hollow, as it ignores the negative total value impact produced when we invest in, buy from or work for companies whose endeavors yield negative values for life as a whole. This is why it’s *highly* irresponsible and detrimental to life for us to determine our professions based solely upon our compensation, the way of the bourgeoisie.”

“While it takes great moral development and discipline to live by this principle, it’s irreplaceable and undeniable: Not witnessing or being directly adversely affected by your actions *doesn’t* eliminate the effects that you cause, or absolve you from your contribution to those effects. You’re part of the causal chain, admitted or not. The same goes for value-adding effects, of course. If a tree falls in the forest and you didn’t see it or hear it fall, *it still fell*. And if you took a hack at it with an axe before handing the axe over to someone else and walking away, you’re inseparable from its fall. Don’t be self-centered, be selfishly rewarded from fostering the greatest quality of life with what you contribute.”

“Is this why you decided to become a writer, and to work to develop a property that would sustain all the needs of its occupants without depending upon the production of food, energy and other commodities from sources you feel as though you can’t trust, and don’t want to depend upon?” Henry inquires.

“That’s what I’m shooting for,” Alex replies. “What *we’re* shooting for, I should say. We still depend upon the outside world, and to a great extent this might be seen as unavoidable, especially considering the fact that the world has so much to offer that we can’t, or shouldn’t, dismiss or ignore... so many people, places and ideas that stand to enrich us in ways that financial enrichment can’t come close to approximating. I think that determining your profession, what you’ll dedicate your life to, is a *very* difficult decision that shouldn’t be taken lightly. It’s one of the most important determinations anyone can ever make, in fact, and will have wide-ranging effects rippling across the world, most of which we won’t be privy to. I think that when we strive to make this decision, we have to consider two factors above all else: conviction and aptitude. Developing your own outlook on life must come *before* determining your profession in order for that profession to truly represent you... for you to be ‘true to yourself,’ as is said. I discussed this with someone the other day...”

“Unless your work represents who you are, unless you contribute to what you believe in to the best of your ability, you won’t feel that highest sense of fulfillment that comes from finding your purpose. And, again, this is a two-fold objective. You have to combine your conviction with your aptitude. Determine how you’re best naturally endowed to contribute to the outcomes you most believe in *through* the organization that provides the best avenue by which those outcomes may be pursued. And if that avenue can’t be found, *pave it yourself*, or along with other men and women of shared conviction. Ultimately this will yield the most satisfaction and sense of purpose *because* it’ll represent your best possible personal total value contribution, or close to it. This satisfaction will be all the more attainable for those that do the required self and societal examination and research in order to, again, find their conviction, aptitude and the best organization through which to apply them.”

“If, on the other hand, you forsake such a total value greater good in the pursuit of mere profitable extraction of the most exploitable people and places of the world, following the purely capitalistic model, there’s no way to avoid feeling unfulfilled and morally and spiritually accosted by your personal contribution to such an unjustifiable opportunity cost. This is the curse of those that serve the greedy impulse encouraged in the West and most of the globalizing world. Unless they’re a sociopath, amongst the Trumps of the world to whom capitalism tragically caters, they feel an internal conflict, guilt and hollowness because they’ve forsaken their truest self and their greatest possible total value contribution to the world, trading it for the pursuit of profit and material accumulation.”

"And while not *necessarily* the case, the more profitable a company is the more likely it is to have a negative total value. This tendency is due to cost-cutting measures and to artificially inflating the sales value of products and services by controlling supply. Most practices centered upon minimizing the cost of doing business can be traced to worker and buyer exploitation and environmental degradation and lack of protection; to taking advantage of people's disadvantage and to extracting natural resources and manufacturing products in places with the poorest environmental and labor protections."

"The lower the protection, the lower the cost. The less educated and privileged the worker, the more desperate they are for a job, the less they can be paid, the lower the cost of their productivity dedicated to a bottom line made larger through their exploitation. In fact, the stock market encourages *decreases* in total quality of life by rewarding companies and stock owners for this exploitation; by creating a competitive environment in which companies and their executives and investors are *rewarded* for their ability to extract as much value as possible from life and the planet, and reinvest in that life and planet as little as possible. For this reason the more profitable the company and the more appreciative its stock market history, the more likely it is to have a negative total value. This is what stockbrokers, investment bankers, equity fund managers and the like are *really* selling: *reduced overall quality of life*. And if consumers, job seekers and investors are armed with quality of life scores, then they'll at least have what they need to make a more positive total life value decision."

"From what I recall the business structure that you advocate for in your book is designed to facilitate the economy's capacity for increasing overall quality of life by drastically curbing the exploitative nature of the equity-consolidated company that delivers the vast majority of the value produced by its growth and its profitability, its bottom line, to a very select, excluding group of owners," Henry says.

"Yes. Well said," Alex replies, impressed with Henry's representation of his concepts. "It's the exploitative nature of commercial enterprises that extract value from the vast majority of those contributing to the economy, and that funnel that value into the hands of a very exclusive class of major equity holders whom thereby possess the wealth to buy into newer and ever more consolidated ownership positions, positions of privilege that exclude the vast majority. This causal chain produces the disparity in income, wealth, opportunity and general quality of life which is itself the cause of the vast majority of national and global injustice, and most of the suffering caused in turn."

“It’s the consolidated equity of the conventional business, and especially the sprawling, market-dominating corporate model, that makes modern business practices and the effects they produce in the world inherently parasitic. The host, the global populace and natural environment at large, remains far weaker and unfulfilling of its greatest potential quality of existence because the one percent parasites keep us in that state by leeching away our potential through their disadvantage-based oppressions. And, as I recently stated, the traditionally one-sided ‘Free Market Economics’ model and the plutocracy that controls the political establishment and the messages beaming through our TV’s maintains this parasitic status quo, corrupting, corroding and eroding everything in its path, which includes almost everything.”

“The greedy and brainwashed will condemn this truth as socialistic, but they don’t actually *understand* socialism, or how and why morality dictate that socialistic principles be balanced against capitalistic principles: The absolute pursuit of profit corrupts and degrades every- thing that it touches. And the fewer that claim that profit, the truer this becomes. The more that profit is consolidated by fewer corporations and their ever fewer major stakeholders, the more wealth and power is given to an ever more exclusive few and their paid cronies, the more the profit motive corrupts, both because it’s more easily and efficiently controlled and wielded, and because it better represents the few taking from the many.”

“This is one reason why the establishment and spread of a business structure such as the model that I conceive of, what I call the Business Collective, is so imperative: it counteracts this movement of consolidating quality of life value that’s costing humanity and the planet so immensely and unsustainably. The pervasive success of the Business Collective would represent a major shield against the corruptibility of the human mind, as well as a countervailing force fighting disparity in all things, including and boiling down to the egregiously growing global quality of life disparity.”

“Don’t get me wrong: Profit is, at least at our current stage of mental development and spiritual awareness, integral to incentivizing the productivity, innovation, risk-taking and meritocracy of just reward that are fundamental to the ability of any economy to increase the overall quality of life of those that participate in and benefit from that economy. But it’s my belief that if any economic contributors are denied that incentive and meritocratic justice, then they remain mere tools in the profiteering tool belt. They’re oppressed victims whose value is extracted by bloated and ever more bloating, unscrupulous parasites.”



“Which is why you focus on equity, correct?,” Henry inquires. “On a claim to the bottom line?”

“Right, because it all starts in that one place: business structures that use the majority to enrich a small and decreasing minority,” Alex responds. “The inherent injustice of the traditional capitalist model of consolidated business ownership and its major equity holders’ claim upon the vast majority of profits accumulated into wealth is revealed in the zero-sum concept: Every dollar of profit claimed by one individual or group is a dollar that can’t be claimed by all other individuals and groups, such that increasing the profitability of the one to five out of every hundred individuals with any significant equity holdings must necessarily decrease the profitability of the other ninety-five to ninety-nine individuals. That profit is produced through *many* inputs, including some innovation and risk-taking, but mostly through hard work, extracting finite resources from the planet, and taking as much advantage of workers and consumers as possible. Nothing is free. Everything has a cost. That cost has *always* been unsustainable, both socioeconomically and environmentally. And both that cost, and the opportunity cost paid by the vast majority through the conventional equity-excluding business structure, remain both beyond calculation and mostly unrecognized.”

“So when, as we often hear, up to five percent of the population claims ninety-eight percent of the profits through their consolidated control of the equity of a business, most of the cost is incurred by the other ninety-five percent of the population and the planet, both in that those ninety-five percent of the people lose the right to claim ninety-eight out of every hundred dollars that the global economy produces, dollars that they’d use to increase the quality of their lives in ways that *far* surpass what the exclusive ownership class does to increase the quality of their lives with more money, *and* owing to the fact that much of the rest of the negative side balancing the zero-sum equation boils down to the business being profitable *because* its products and services are marked up so high above their cost to produce, and because every disadvantage of the workforce and lack of environmental protection is exploited to create the negative side balancing the zero-sum equation.”

“Not to mention the fact that it’s that vast majority that tends to live in proximity to the environmental ruin, and is vulnerably exposed to the increased risks of pollution and extreme weather patterns which the excluding minority tends to be insulated from thanks to spending some of their extracted means on said insulation. It is, in other words, the consumer, and especially the vast majority constituting the workforce, and the planet which that vast majority depends upon to assure its continuity and basic quality of life, that pays the

negative, balancing side of the total value equation. Most people, most forms of life, are zero-sum losers, paying these costs entirely unrecognized and unaccounted for by traditional economic and business paradigms.”

Henry says nothing, poking at a mound of Redwood needles with a stick while reflecting upon all the companies that his family’s investment firm has speculated on over the years, and how many of them he’d subsequently heard about on the news and in liberal publications with regards to everything from bribing public officials to denying employee benefits to constraining supply in order to artificially boost profits to outsourcing production to cost-effective locales like India, China and Southeast Asia.

Alex continues: “Honestly, it pisses me off that I had to uncover these truths on my own, because their popular dissemination, that even hinting at the existence of such ideas in school, would threaten corporatism and the plutocracy it puppets and that wields that power in so many deceitful, concealed ways, including by influencing lesson plans from elementary school all the way through the highest ivory towers of academia. Why? Because truth and profitability tend to be inversely correlated. There’s no money in teaching the moral, progressive perspective. It isn’t just history that’s written by the inheritors of lands and fortunes wrought by military and economic conquest.”

“Every academic discipline has been tainted by the twisted motives of those afflicted with the disease of greed, and it takes a questioning, skeptical, historically-informed and so-called ‘cynical mind,’ which simply means recognizing the inherent nature of being a self as it relates to motive, just to break free from the confines in which conservative tradition attempts to cage our minds before we can even *begin* to see the truth: that the interrelated motives of greed and power are the driving forces of history, and that but a select sect of morally and intellectually developed men and women, many of whom have been adversely affected by those driving historical forces and have witnessed first or second hand the suffering its injustices have wrought upon those unable to defend themselves, that’ve found the conviction and courage to battle the brainwashing on behalf of the brainwashed.”

“Thankfully the pressures that push for moral progressivism have been mounting for so long that it’s starting to break through to the political stage, as evidenced by the idealism-killing obstructionist tactics that had to be used against Obama and, more recently, by the rising popularity of rare progressive politicians like Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren. While I don’t know if

she's the original source of the quote or only the most recent individual credited with saying it, Warren may have summed up this whole fight as succinctly as possible when she addressed the winners made through losers, zero sum nature of profit and power consolidation with one astute aphorism: 'If you don't have a seat at the table, you're probably on the menu.'"

"It reminds me of that scene in the film *Braveheart* when Gibson's character, William Wallace, is attempting to rally the Scottish clans to his cause of fighting for Scottish independence, but, in so doing, has to prevent those clans from fighting amongst themselves for the bribes that the King of England extends in order to keep them divided and conquered, for if those that may oppose a ruling system fail to unite and form an indivisible front, then it's easy to divide, repel and scatter that opposition... Wallace says something like: 'You're so busy fighting for the scraps that fall from the King's table that you've given up your God-given right to something far greater.'"

"Whether we're fighting for the falling scraps or are the main course itself, the message is the same: We don't truly have a seat at the table, even though those that *do* possess such a seat do everything in their power to convince us that we sit beside them, citing such fallacies as 'we're a democracy' and the 'everyone can get rich' American Dream that sidestep the truth: We're a plutocratic republic in which most of us have been rendered effectively voiceless, and in which not everyone can get rich, as this would leave no one to get rich *off of*. In *Braveheart*, Wallace was talking about Scottish nationhood and the right of his people to determine their own destinies, but the principle holds true today across the U.S. and the globalized world in the broader political and economic context dramatically affecting all of our lives."

"And that broader context is..?," Henry asks, playing along.

"Again, that 'we the people' have no true control of or ownership stake in commerce or the plutocratic republic that, especially through the Republican Party, does everything in its avaricious power to prevent any popular movement away from the ability to exploit the people for the consolidating of value in as few hands as possible," Alex replies. "Regardless of what they say to conceal it and dupe the gullible, this objective defines the conservative agenda and has throughout American history, both domestically and in our foreign policy, from the Cold War to Vietnam to the surreptitious undermining of countless populist rulers and the insertion and propping-up of brutal pro-corporation dictators."

“It’s their one *true* motive. Freedom, democracy and the like are merely used as justifying façades to fool the non-critical-thinkers; to trick those that can only see what’s said, not the truth concealed beneath the façade of misinformation. And so long as we remain dogs domesticated for *their* self-serving purposes, strapped to *their* sleds, mushed to pursue *their* greedy interests while content to fight amongst ourselves for the scraps that fall from *their* tables, possessing but an illusory seat at those tables, we can never be ‘we the people,’ only the ever conflicted, divided, distracted, oppressed, fractured factions of a nation and a race sacrificing its greatest total quality of life potential in delay of our greater destiny.”

“Now, I’m *not* saying there shouldn’t be a table, so to speak; that there shouldn’t be private ownership and interests and a market economy, as forcing everything to be held in common regardless of contributed value is unjustly non-meritocratic, and I strongly believe that you need incentive, reward and private property in order to encourage productivity, efficiency and innovation, to permit people autonomous developments and to avoid the pitfalls history has demonstrated when it comes to outright socialism, such as the inefficiency of planned economies and communism’s invitation to tyranny, as few individuals and governments can be trusted with the essentially absolute power possessed by the communist regime.”

“What I *am* saying, however, is that everyone needs a seat at the table and that, for the best interests of the vast majority, not everything, not items of inelastic demand due to their immense quality of life value, should be on that table. Commerce requires the same in order to be just and promote total quality of life: seats for everyone at the table. No, it doesn’t require an equal position at that table regardless of merit. But business must be made of people working *with* one another as fellow owner-operators rewarded a merited equity share of the bottom line, not *for* a greedy minority that hoards all the equity. *Equity or exploitation.*”

“I was always taught that it’s but a matter of hard work and determination,” Henry replies after a moment of reflection. “That anyone can become wealthy and prosperous if they want it bad enough...”

“There’s no denying that hard work is irreplaceable,” Alex replies. “And that through ability, hard work, education and determination a person hailing from an underprivileged family has a chance to fight their way through the parasitic business structures that economically enslave and repress the potential of most lower classmen, so to speak, and can, through that fight, hope to improve their station and enter the thinning middle class. And a very select,

determined, capable few even break through to the upper class that does everything it can to exclude them from its thin minority membership, for the greater the number of owning upperclassmen, the less each may own, something which is understood at least on a subconscious level by those in the ownership class.”

“But by and large, the lower and middle classes are tools in the belt of an ever more exclusive class of profiteering major corporate equity shareholders. And the fewer advantages these tools of profit possess, the more they’re taken advantage of, for exploitation always exists relative to the ability of the exploited to fight off exploiters whose exploitation is not only sanctioned but encouraged within any few-holds-barred capitalistic economic system such as that which reigns over the western and globalizing world. And when the vast majority still believe in that version of the American Dream that you just cited, all of the injustices inherent to systemic exploitation remain concealed behind the lie that this is all simply the inalterable economic reality, and that you might as well accept it, else be naïve.”

“In fact, the immoral exploiter often calls his or herself a ‘realist’ when justifying his or her actions, for, as has been said since the ancient Athenian Empire ruled the Hellenic world: ‘The strong do what they can, and the weak suffer what they must.’ This is where mankind’s overall evolution has been more or less stalled for the last twenty-five- hundred years. This immoralist-labeled-realist ideology is still used to justify evil action today; a so-called realism that denies the *true* reality of man’s inherent *corruptibility* for the commonly accepted belief perpetuated by religion and aristocracy that man is inherently evil. This belief is encouraged in order to coerce and control us in the facilitation of wealth and power consolidation. For if we believe that we’re inherently evil, we can justify our evil and the evil of others as unavoidable.”

“Similar to believing the American Dream, this misleading, disempowering belief permits the justification of the commonplace American Nightmare as an unavoidable aspect of the one and only possible reality. And businesses taking advantage of weakness is the most common form of evil that everyone involved in business, including the consumer supporting reprehensible business tactics, as I mentioned, contributes to. Saying ‘it’s not personal, it’s just business’ is one of the most cliché and misleading of justifications, for nothing impacts more persons, more workers and consumers and qualities of people’s lives, than business; than commerce.”

“True, the losers in business are typically not personally *targeted*, they’re simply in the way; they’re set between the profiteers and their profit. But that’s

precisely the problem: people and planet are bulldozed over as if they aren't only *not* sacred, but as if it's entirely natural and even ethical to do so. That's the business ethic: run roughshod over anything set between you and the almighty dollar, only pretending to possess a different ethic as a marketing ploy to manipulate public perception for profit. Most 'persons' lose, so the results are *very* personal."

"Implying that it's okay to wrong people and destroy the planet because that's simply the nature of business is essentially what's being said. It's an indictment of conventional business structures and tactics, and a concealed admission that Free Market Economics is a moral failure. And, as we've discussed before, evil can never be logically justified as an inherent quality of humankind or an inevitable outcome of humankind's interactions, as the truth is that evil isn't an inherent characteristic of humankind, isn't an inborn quality of humankind, regardless of what the Church says to guilt us into submission, and what the corrupted big business interests repeat to justify their evil actions. In truth, evil is an action and outcome born of *inherent limitation and corruptibility*. This is a fact, not an opinion. I've proven it both to myself and many others, including our group here, I hope."

"There's an *immense*, indisputable difference between inherent evil and inherent corruptibility built upon mental and physical need and limitation, as we've discussed. And, in the difference between them, the lies of the aristocratic ownership class, the conservatives, the 'realists,' and those historically controlling minds through the Church are revealed and rendered erroneous. They're the unjustifiable justifications of the weak-minded and immorally greedy."

"The consolidators are leading people away from truths that, if known and well enough spread and accepted, would set people free from their yoke," Henry adds. "They're perpetuating falsities that keep people bound to pull the plows of profit, the yields from which they're excluded."

"Nice," Alex says. "Not a bad metaphor. And you're absolutely correct. For without a share in the bottom line, you're essentially a modern day servant or workhorse, segregated from enjoying the sweetest fruits of economic production and relegated to a cost of doing business. This has long been the case. And it's of course due to the fact that the prevailing societal status quos across the western and globalizing world hails from conservative traditions and values perpetuated by political and business empires and their ruling dynasties."

“And most of these largely irredeemable traditions and values, and the beneficiaries that invest in their continuity, will have you believe that anything else, any economy comprised of anything other than the traditional equity-consolidated businesses, is non-free-market, and is therefore not free and evil and akin to communism. As clever as this lie is from the standpoint of propagandist efficacy, it's still a lie, and the collective cost of believing it is beyond appraisal. It's tragic that the majority, very sadly, and to their own disservice and the disservice of everyone with whom they come in contact, swallow such propaganda whole without mentally chewing and digesting it, letting it pass through them to be excreted out the other side as the crap that it *should* be considered.”

“As we've discussed, the freedom to be protected from the exploitations of those with greater wealth and power is just, if not more, important to the well-being of the people as being free to do whatever you like. The greatest freedom comes from denying the corrupted the freedom to do whatever they wish, including controlling the government, preventing true democracy and setting about tearing down anything that inhibits their capacity to extract as much of the world's finite value as possible, for such abuses deny us the possibility to freely pursue our greatest potential and highest happiness. The wiser individual knows that the more valuable freedom is this freedom *from*; the freedom from the aforementioned evils, in the broader context of protecting society from the unlimited, unrestrained trespasses delivered upon it by the prevailing powers ruling over it, and the freedom from one's more self-destructive inclinations born of need and the mental and physical corruptibility that go hand-in-hand with being a physical and mental self.”

“The personal type of ‘freedom from’ granted by the development of discipline; by way of the difference between knowing what's right and *doing* what's right; by knowing what's in one's best interests and having the will to enact it, and deny anything that precludes it. A wise friend of mine once asserted that *this* form of freedom, positive freedom, is the truest and most valuable form. And it's a form that laissez faire capitalism purposefully ignores and undermines. We can't have slim customers who refuse to give over to powerful parasites, now can we? Furthermore, absolute capitalism and absolute socialism are the extremes. It needn't be such a simple dichotomy of all production and property being either commonly or privately owned and operated.”

“The notion that capitalism and socialism are inherently at odds and even mutually exclusive is false. I believe the best system lies in their considerate convergence, protecting certain segments of demand from being taken advantage of, using tax revenue to do a better job of paving the way for broader

public benefit and guaranteeing that those that contribute to the bottom line receive a merited share of that line, not a restricted, cost-minimized straight-line compensation regardless of profitability and contribution. In the modern day political parlance, the word 'socialism,' much like the word 'terrorism,' has become mostly hollow demagoguery; propagandist terms used to rule over people by taking advantage of their ignorance, fear, vulnerability to peer pressure and other mental shortcomings. These terms are largely insubstantial."

"That's quite an assertion," Henry responds. "And, I imagine, not one that would curry much favor with most people."

"And that's by design," Alex immediately replies. "Those terms are part of the compendium of tactical terminology used to produce knee-jerk, prejudicial, emotional reactions of condemnation of anything that conservatives deem 'un-American' or 'un-democratic' or 'unpatriotic' or infringing upon our 'freedom,' as if, again, freedom is a one-way street that everyone benefits equally from keeping wide open, even as the overly-privileged minority plow over the vast majority and keep us under their tread by way of that street *being* so wide open; wide open to exploitation. It's mass mind-control strategy used to tear down anything that challenges the ability of the ownership class to continue to reinforce and expand their capacity to extract and consume the vast majority of the world's wealth and power to the gross detriment of the vast, excluded majority of people."

"If you read, watch, write, talk about or otherwise support any idea or activity that shines a spotlight on the injustices produced by this one-and-only conservative pursuit, then you paint a target on your back as an 'anti-American.' And if people start to listen to your 'socialistic' ideas and 'unpatriotic' posts or writings or group meetings, you're an insurrectionist primed for NSA surveillance. Call me delusional, but I've reason to believe that I'm being monitored myself, as a couple of *Facebook* ads I've created in the past and a *Kickstarter* campaign I concocted as attempts to drum-up support for projects that dealt with such subjects were mysteriously wiped-out. And when I contacted customer support for those sites I was informed that my accounts were hacked, and had to be deleted as a result. Now, who would have the motive, means and opportunity to pull that off? It reminds me of that line... what was it again? Something like: 'To find out who rules over you, find out who you're not allowed to criticize.'"

"The freedom to think, speak and act in any non-violent manner is supposed to be sacrosanct and guaranteed by the Constitution, but as soon as you speak against prevailing systems and commonly-held conceptions you're looked upon



and potentially treated as an enemy of the people, even as you're *actually* a champion of the people dedicated to their best interests; to their collective victory. And if you become too active in your pursuits than half the American public and the imperialist hawks in Washington and anyone loyal to them in the intelligence and armed services wings is comfortable calling you an anarchist on the verge of terrorist ideation. Ironically, however, the US military and the actions spurred by imperialistic neo-conservatives have terrorized more people across the planet since World War II than anyone. And yet, those that resist their violent meddling, incursions, coups, puppet dictators and occupations, whether in their beliefs, writings, thoughts and actions here, or through the violence-against-violence resistance in invaded and occupied lands abroad, are the ones branded 'terrorists.'"

"Of course, not all terrorists are created equal, and there are some that attack indiscriminately that're deserving of the condemnatory moniker. But that doesn't change the fact that non-critical-thinkers on the right of the political spectrum are conditioned to believe that any- one that fights against corporate-sponsored imperialistic adventurism designed to expand the ability of the few to extract natural resources and profit off of the many, but packaged and sold as the spreading of freedom and democracy to the unjustly ruled, is immediately 'evil' or 'unpatriotic,' when, in fact, most of the time the exact *opposite* is the case."

"It's outright Orwellian: the truth being masqueraded as lies, and vice versa. Fact puppeted as fiction, fiction painted as fact. For, in the aforementioned cases, evil is what's being *resisted*, and true patriotism is fighting for the best interests of the majority of citizens, whether that fight is political, macroeconomic or in the microeconomic business environment. And that current conventional business environment is most certainly *not* the best that we can do; it's *not* in the best interests of the majority, and it isn't 'free' as a form of business organization either, because we're *not* free to own any piece of the pie until we can afford a buy-in price that most will never be able to ante up. That said, the type of business structure that grants us all the freedom to earn a merited share isn't purely socialistic either."

"Because you're not arguing for public, governmental control of property and the means of production in all but the most sensitive and select segments of the economy, correct?," Henry asks.

"Right," Alex continues. "Socialism is public ownership of industry and property. What you want is a system that naturally fosters a broader distribution of opportunities and benefits, *not* mandated equality regardless of

merit or total public takeover, both of which would be both unjust and, in the long run, ineffective. Except in the case of selected segments of the economy supplying necessities for guaranteeing a decent quality of life, and that are always in high demand regardless of the price of their products and services due to this necessity, what are known as inelastic markets because demand doesn't stretch with increases or decreases in the price of supply, I don't think that socialism is the answer."

"As I said, certain markets of inelastic demand, such as for higher education, utilities, health insurance and even, in my opinion, healthcare itself, *should* be socialized, because people, especially people that can least afford it, shouldn't have their needs, often their very financial and even literal survival, exploited for profit, increasing their stress load and their financial burden and lowering the quality of their lives because they aren't free from having their *needs*, not their desires, but their direct-line-to-basic-quality-of-life *needs* taken advantage of. This is why these foundational goods and services *shouldn't* be subject to the profit motive, because exploitation in these markets is *particularly* costly to the total quality of life of the people. And certain such vital goods and services can be cost-effectively provided if freed from profit. With fiscal policy supporting the best interests of the people as a whole, they can even be taxpayer paid, rendering this immense popular value at a minimized cost-to-benefit ratio."

"Take higher education, for example. Except for the inevitable political backlash and obstruction that would come from for-profit educational institutions, teachers unions and student-loaning financial schemers, there's no good reason why the instant, unlimited communication and edifying capacity of the internet couldn't be used to encourage programs following a model like *Khan Academy* to take over a *major* portion of the higher education system at an *astronomically* decreased cost to the student, or, ideally, to the state."

"Add some regional test-taking facilities and the ability of all of these purely internet-based educational institutions to award degrees signed off on by accrediting boards, and any properly motivated individual could receive a college degree acknowledged by employers at minimal cost, such that even if the students and their families have to pay that cost they're nevertheless freed from crushing debt as they virtually attend courses that can be just as educational, empowering and professionally-applicative as the education provided by any brick-and-mortar institution. Of course, they'd miss out on the social skills development and fun of attending a 'bricks and mortar' university, the only major drawback to such a system."

“You’re suggesting that the prestige of attending and receiving a diploma from well-reputed higher education institutions comes at too high a price, especially without financial aid,” Henry says.

“Definitely,” Alex agrees. “I mean, don’t get me wrong, I personally see immense value in a lifetime of learning and in being liberal about the education process, challenging and asking questions and constantly expanding one’s edification and perspective, never discontinuing the learning process which, for the most part, can’t really be discontinued anyway. For experience is the greatest teacher, and books can be read anywhere, and are only restricted to the academic experience for people who detest and generally underestimate the value of reading. And discussions with learned individuals are, of course, possible everywhere as well, and offer an equally valid educational pathway.”

“It’s the *social experience* of attending a physical university that can’t be simulated, and which I, myself, have missed since leaving academia, as both that level of socialization and open-minded learning, the energy and attitude and communally-fostered intellectual expansion, are hard to find outside the ivory tower. While it doesn’t fit the conservative paradigm of education and the way that conventional society equates degrees framed and mounted in your office as an indication of your worth, I long ago realized that *far* more is learned *outside* the walls and books of the formal educational environment than within, especially over an extended timeline, and even more so when it comes to naturally inquisitive individuals whom insatiably consume and digest ideas and information.”

“Again, personal enrichment is about experience of *all* kinds, from reading to exploring to every interaction we have and every observation we make, and this empirical edification occurs far more extensively outside the traditional classroom than within it. But to the extent that formal education is beneficial and required by employers, it need not place an unnecessary financial burden upon those that’ll *always* have a demand for it, especially the young that’re currently commonly saddled with a burdensome debt for what should be a guaranteed, cost-minimized opportunity.”

“And while we’re discussing education, I’d add that there are at least two subjects that I believe are *highly* undervalued in conventional curriculums, to the great disservice of students: aptitude as it pertains to careers, and nutrition as it pertains to quality of life. There’s nothing more important to quality of life than health, and nothing more important to health than consumption. And there are few bigger decisions anyone makes in their lives than

determining what they want to do with their lives professionally, and a lot of young people need guidance in this, especially if they're anything like me: predisposed to find interest in most any subject."

"What are you suggesting, exactly?," Henry inquires.

"There should be dedicated courses in high school that continue through at least the freshman year of college on aptitude testing, the exploration of career courses and financial aid planning, as well as on budgeting and paying off loans, and the best grants and loans to seek etc.," Alex continues. "It shouldn't all come down to the student finding the motivation to go to a career center and doing all their own research, for the simple reason that not everyone is that highly organized, self-motivated and disciplined, and we must, if we deign to become a truly progressive society, aim to serve everyone, perhaps most especially the indecisive or the vulnerable, stressed or otherwise disadvantaged; those whom, in this case, can't summon the courage or, in my case, are too overwhelmed by the endlessness of options, to do what's required to discover the best path for them; those lacking the ability to fully take advantage of everything required to put them in the best possible position to succeed in the future."

"I mean, if you're not preparing students for the best possible future *post* matriculation, how are you not failing them? And how is extensive aptitude testing, career exploration and navigation of the financial student aid system, which shouldn't be necessary, as it *should* be free... but how is the absence of these services being integral to the educational system *not* representative of such a failure? High quality education should do a greater service to the students through such alterations in the curriculum, and by not placing a huge financial burden upon those that can't afford what *should* be a right. And this setting up the youth for future success, and for the providing of great value to society, is but *one* example of how making the guaranteed, inexpensive yet immensely valuable supply of a commodity approaching an inelasticity of demand the priority over the profit motive can yield a *far* greater total quality of life output."

"I believe I've said this already but, because of its importance, I feel the need to reinforce the fact that the core Quality of Life Economics principle isn't applicable to just private pursuits; to the activities of privately owned businesses and their effect upon people's lives through the economy. Rather, it's a highly valuable, even invaluable principle in that it can and, I believe, *should* be applied to any consideration of the expending of resources, including not just money but time, energy and general effort. The question

should always be: How best to translate this resource into *total* quality of life? To the improvement of the existence of ourselves and as many others as possible? Politically, the subject of inelastic goods and services is directly applicable to the moral imperative of good governance to provide for and guard against the exploitation of anything that's necessary for assuring a high quality of life."

"Earlier I alluded to the fact that our government's fiscal policies are woefully inefficient at translating public resources to total value for the public; limited resources that're commonly tragically spent to maintain avenues for the wealthy to maintain or increase their wealth, including through our 'Defense Department' and its positioning our corporations to tap into overseas markets of all kinds. Tax write-offs, or deductions, as well as government-paid subsidies to big business, also sacrifice fortunes every year to those already sitting on massive fortunes. Tax code and fiscal policy is complicated, of course, but they all too commonly render a paltry, even negative value of return on the public's limited resources, especially if you account for the opportunity cost of such misuse."

"What cost?," Henry continues to play along.

"The cost of sacrificing the opportunity to use such funds to invest in anything that substantially, even incalculably adds to the public welfare, even, and I'd say *especially*, if this involves spending public money to help the wealthy increase their wealth, as that wealth tends to be used to consolidate more of the limited wealth and power to the disservice of anyone but the already wealthy. It's crystal clear to anyone with progressive inclinations that governmental budgets, federal or otherwise, require a *drastic* overhaul in this Quality of Life Economic manner; in ways imparting great, broad benefit across society."

"We all know the spending categories that I'm alluding to: increasing environmental protections, improving opportunities for the disadvantaged, upping green energy investment and spending on social services, providing free or at-cost higher education and healthcare, increasing spending on parks and communal areas; increased 'public spending' in general; even the financing of collectively owned businesses like the Business Collective that I advocate for, which would, over time, produce *massive* total quality of life improvements. With our current fiscal policies we're missing inestimable opportunities to provide for the public good, to equally inestimable reductions in total quality of life return."

“So, in line with such taxpayer-paid or cost-cut, broadly-benefitting goods and services, your business concept, Business Collectivism, seeks to close the disparity in quality of life across society further by better distributing the profits produced by the majority of the economy, reinforcing the lessons and priorities advanced by Quality of Life Economics, going from a macroeconomic to a microeconomic, business by business basis?,” Henry asks.

“Yes,” Alex replies. “The economic theory I put forward in *Time for True Democracy*, Quality of Life Economics, is a theory of economic assessment aimed at promoting success in terms of how successfully an economy supports the continued creation and maintenance of the greatest possible total quality of life. This as opposed to other traditional measures of success that disregard the quality of life measure that I believe must be made paramount if your economic analysis and policies are bent on producing just progress. And its principles, statistical focus and studied indicators are based upon facilitating the only moral goal: the creation of as much total value for life as a whole. On the level of the individual business, the just, or most meritocratic, progress is made possible by plugging people into the bottom line; by making people *partners* in the institutions to which they dedicate their efforts and much of their lives. This is, of course, not unlike the purpose of true democratic design. For no system can truly serve all the people if the people don’t have an actual seat at the table; if they’re not a directly plugged-in, directing part and bottom-line beneficiary of that system. And, again, there’s no reason to be tied to black-and-white, all-or-nothing conventional concepts.”

“When it comes to the theoretical contest between socialism and capitalism, between the private and public ownership of property, and in consideration of the means of production and the distribution of economic value, it’s clear to me that it shouldn’t be a contest at all, but a calculated collaboration between the two relative sides of the spectrum. Dispensing with the unjust aspects of the two while preserving and promoting the most valuable aspects of each promises the greatest output and total quality of life impact. The goal should be to maintain the merited incentive and reward of hard work, risk-taking and ingenuity of capitalism while supporting socialism’s increased opportunities to pursue the best interest of the people as a whole. This would include redirecting the tax dollars of, ideally, a purified democracy towards removing certain economic segments from the total pursuit of profit and the prevention of the exploitation of need, as well as preventing unjust over-consolidation of commercial profit and all the disparities in opportunity and quality of life and the evils that such disparity lead to.”

“So, just to be clear, you’d leave commerce open to private business and market mechanisms in all but select inelastic, fundamental economic sectors,” Henry summarizes, “like education and healthcare and... maybe utilities and basic foodstuffs. And when it comes to basic foodstuffs, if my memory from past discussions serves me, you help protect them through federal, state and local governments advocating for and investing in widespread, affordable community supported agriculture subsidies, and in low-rent plots in community gardens and the like whereby most anyone is granted access to affordable, locally, organically-grown produce. And you say that you design your business concept around the blending of the most valuable aspects of capitalism and socialism...”

“Yes,” Alex concurs. “You don’t preclude profit or force a redistribution of wealth or command the economy or foster government participation in or ownership of anything but the most vulnerable markets most sacrosanct to the guarantee of basic opportunities and quality of life. Instead, you naturally encourage an environment that preserves the complementing qualities of the two systems in terms of how they naturally synergize to support the best interests of the vast majority. Again, pure socialism fails for many reasons, including because it tends to consolidate too much power in the hands of those controlling ‘public property,’ thereby inviting nepotism and tyranny. Of course, outright capitalism causes much the same calamity, except that the oligarchy which *it* invites lives through corporations rather than public institutions. But pure socialism also fails because it decimates the incentive to work hard, innovate and take risks; because it undermines the motives and rewards which render so much of the value within any economy and its individual commercial operations and their operators.”

“Even if you were to discount merit and fair reward, the simple fact is that we’ve not yet evolved to the point where we can depend upon most people to provide their best effort, harness their greatest ingenuity and take the type of chances that lead to the best rewards for the greatest numbers, including themselves, based solely on love for their country, on a sense of honor or community, on a strongly ingrained and well-developed morality, on a heightened spiritual awareness of the inseparability and interdependence of life, or on any of the other aspects of elevated consciousness. This was Mao’s naïve overestimation in communist China before the country began to blend in more of the ‘free market:’ that patriotic zeal was sufficient to compel people to follow a planned economy, regardless of the contribution-to-reward ratio.”

“But even if you could produce such a non-compensatory-based emotional, spiritual, patriotic fervor, it would remain unjust to remove commensurate

reward for hard work, innovation and risk from the commercial system. It's reasonable to argue that people *should* personally benefit from providing more value, whether that benefit is financial, moral, spiritual, political or otherwise. Ideally, reward should be multifaceted, actually, involving all of these forms for their combined force of motivation, if for nothing else."

"But, of course, financial reward tends to be preeminently motivational in a society in which most forms of value are for sale, including many forms that shouldn't be, as we've discussed. So where the choices of consumers, or demanders, of any commodities nearing desire, rather than anything nearing necessity or fundamental opportunity, is driving the demand, natural market mechanisms tend to produce the best, most just results, both because they justly reward those that produce more value, and because more value is created for the people to benefit from, with this increased value production being due to value-to-cost increases made from the existence of reward-based incentives and market competitions. Not to mention the fact that the more markets that're socialized, the more powerful, bloated, slow-moving and open to corruption and nepotistic collusion between industry and the government that controls those markets becomes, which often leads to tyrannical regimes and their commercial cronies that've historically given socialism a bad name, betraying its ideological core."

"Pure socialism places all of the nation's wealth and power in the hands of the government and its hierarchy which, again, is just as great of a threat to the people as capitalistic consolidation moving towards oligarchic plutocracy, as in the US. Possessing such total control only encourages corruption, cronyism and nepotism on the way toward tyranny, as Nazi Germany and the socialist regimes prevalent in Russian, Chinese and Cuban history, citing some of the best-known examples, have essentially proven."

"Again, however, I feel compelled to emphasize the fact that these are only failures of outright socialism in states lacking sufficient democratic controls balanced by well-spread private business interests and equity distribution, which is why so many progressives, like Senator Sanders, call themselves *democratic* socialists, recognizing that socialism unbalanced by true democracy is treacherous, inviting the cronyism, nepotism and tyranny of the past. But to consider the failures of these aforementioned historical regime to be demonstrative of *socialism's* futility is erroneous and misses the point; it misses the lessons offered by the respective histories of these states as applicable to the political, economic and business theories and structures which we've been discussing."



“So pure socialism and especially communism destroy merited incentive and lead to tyrannical regimes and autocratic rulers that suck the life out of the people,” Henry offers. “But the same thing happens if economic and political power are too wide open, too ‘free’ in the traditional sense of those with power having too little restriction on their power, such that those with all the advantages are ‘free’ to do much the same as autocrats and their backing bands of cronies.”

“Yes, exactly,” Alex replies. “Going too far the other way, from the socialistic extreme to the capitalistic extreme, produces a similar result. When politics are plutocratic, when prevailing economic theory emphasizes wealth creation while paying little more than lip service to the total quality of life application of wealth and all other resources of value, when business structures funnel all the profit generated by the economy to an excluding clan of owners who use those funds to buy politics, you end up with the same unchecked, unbalanced wealth and power inviting the same collusion between business and politics; the same corruption, cronyism and nepotism. Except, with unchecked, no-holds-barred, entirely *negatively* free capitalism, you move towards corporate oligarchy, with mega corporations and political factions hogging all the wealth and power in a contentious yet often cooperative relationship with one another whilst the disparity in quality of life between them and everyone else, those lacking the *positive* freedom from having their disadvantages, including their inability to buy into equity positions, can only grow.”

“This is due, again, to the zero sum nature of the control and extraction of the ownership class produced by equity-consolidated profit-producing business, resulting in a thinning middle-class and a large portion of the population living a painfully low quality of life struggling to survive because far too much of the reward produced by the economy and all the power divvied-out politically is passed to a very select and excluding group of people, encouraging greed and corruption and sucking an extremely disproportionate portion of the value out of the majority’s endeavors. Therefore, it’s clear that the only just forms of politics, economics and business empower, motivate and reward all people in a merited manner while protecting them from over-consolidation and its propensity to propel corruption and destruction of the greatest good.”

“People are, in other words, generally unaware that communistic and capitalistic extremes are *equally* enemies of the people. And the government has to be well enough insulated and power-distributed to protect people from traditional versions of purely capitalistic business structures that’re just as unmerited as communism, but for the opposite reason: instead of

communism's destruction of just reward because everyone is theoretically given an equal share and disallowed from owning and operating the means of production regardless of merit, regardless of their contribution of value, pure capitalism perpetuates injustice by rewarding the privileged few that can afford to buy into an ownership position, and that'll inevitably use their equity exclusion to further consolidate their grip on commercial revenue and its amassed wealth, the only set claim to any major piece of the business bottom line. This places everyone else in the exploited position of being parasitically preyed upon and excluded from the best benefits of profitability. What all this amounts to is that the best way to promote an economy that works to improve total quality of life while maintaining merited treatment of economic participants and encouraging of innovation and hard work is by restructuring the balance sheet."

"Into the Business Collective," Henry preempts.

"Right, the Business Collective," Alex replies. "That's my recommendation, at least. Whereas Quality of Life Economics aims at nurturing a more naturally fertilizing macroeconomic framework, the overall nurturing and supporting of the root systems of the tree, if you will, for growing the greatest total quality of life, Business Collectivism aims at training the tree branch by branch, bringing it fully into the photosynthesizing light and assuring it doesn't grow out of balance. It's the more micro-focused part of the growing process; the daily watering, tending and disease prevention, ever-vigilantly protecting against imperiling pathogens."

"One of the critical concepts here, one that I feel I need to mention right off the bat, and which I discussed in the book and may have mentioned to you before as well, is that while there are many ways to *reduce* injustice, that it's vital, if one aims to *permanently* rectify those injustices, to target their *causes*, not merely their effects. You always, if at all possible, target the disease so that you eventually don't have to alleviate the symptoms."

"In this case Quality of Life Economics attempts rectification by pointing at traditional businesses' and prevailing economic theories' failure to focus upon the correct indicators of the quality-of-life-based success of the economy. It's all but impossible to clear a path toward the greatest good when you're failing to look in the right direction. This theoretical failure of the prevailing 'free market' economic theory supports a massive disparity in the distribution of the financial value created by all economic activity and enterprises amongst all those that contribute to that value creation, which in turn produces all manner of injustices based upon disparities and opportunity, freedoms and privileges of

all kinds, the vast majority of which aren't free and guaranteed, as we're taught to believe through conservative dogma, but, instead, must be *purchased*."

"The proper application of socioeconomic principles traces this causal chain of injustice and resultant suffering from the few fundamental sources to the far more numerous effects, as if from the trunk of the tree, the disparity in income, wealth and opportunity produced by prevailing economic theory and business structures, to its multitude of branches and leaves. Crime, poverty, homelessness, drug abuse, alcoholism, neglect and misery of every order spread across the spectrum of low quality lives, all that evil which tends to grow commensurate to disadvantage, might make up the tree's smaller branches, with the victims being like the leaves."

"Granted, there are factors that go beyond business and economics, like education and even the inherent capacities of the person and those who raise and nurture him or her and all of their roles in assuming some responsibility for not being more resilient; for allowing the pressures and horrendous inequality of opportunity they face to lead to crimes and abuses that tend to be passed on to their children, in one example of the cold, cruel, crushing snowball effect's cyclical, perpetuating nature. But I find that those that suffer are placed in their position more by a failure of the overarching systems serving them, or *failing* to serve them, and all of society, than by any other factors, *by far*."

"Remove the pressures and disadvantages that directly lead to crime and abuse, and crime and abuse will inevitably plummet. And those pressures and disadvantages are largely political and economic in origin; in source cause; in root disease. And we can take *many* measures to address the symptoms of that suffering, building and administering homeless shelters and drug abuse treatment centers, promoting food drives, pouring capital into charities that direct their funds towards giving those born into low income families toys and cost effective education and better professional opportunities and on and on."

"Again, the short-term acts of misery mitigation are at least as numerous as the number of smaller branches on a massive, fully grown tree," Alex continues. "But these are treatments of *effects*, not treatments of the causes. If you don't cure the disease itself, if you don't address the core, root sickness infecting the trunk from which everything else branches, the symptoms will only continue and you'll forever be scrambling to minimize effects, spraying fungicide on the leaves as they continue to fall away."

"You have to go to the *cause* if you want to create the greatest quality of life value improvement, and if you want that improvement to actually last. What's making the tree susceptible to fungal and bacterial outbreaks in the first place? Rather than spending all of your energy and resources examining and trying in unsustainable vain to treat every leaf, dig down into the infected root system and inspect the diseased trunk, identifying the one or few core causes which, in turn, will illuminate potential cures that, when successfully, sustainably treated, will naturally set the leaves up to flourish."

"When you look at the billionaire that steps over the homeless man sleeping in front of his office building, and that makes his fortune off of cost-minimizing, highly pollutive manufacturing operations in India, paying workers a fraction of what they'd earn in the West, and that daily fight to keep their families alive on their subsistence wages, you can't allow yourself to be content with merely attempting to enact short-term treatments of the symptoms he spreads; of the disease of greed that has infected every system failing the human race, which he may be said to represent. If you *really* want to rectify the situation, you can't stop at feeding and sheltering the homeless man and fighting for labor and environmental protections here and abroad. These are noble causes, but not the noblest; not the ideal, most valuable, most fundamental and universally-impacting of causes."

"You have to go to the *source* of the symptoms that he's perpetuating: where his company's profits come from and how they're distributed, and why his company's structure prevails, and how and why the economics and politics props up and protects that lopsided structure. Look at the root disparity feeding up into everything, across the totality of the socioeconomic, business and political landscapes eventually spreading out to deny the homeless man all the many possible paths he might pursue toward an improvement of his circumstances, or which might have prevented the reality of his circumstances in the first place, were the root injustices not obstructing such a pursuit, or had they not led to the pressures, suffering and insufficient opportunity giving rise to his pitiable, desperate situation. Your remedy has to be *systemic*, in other words. And the parasites feeding off of the general population *through* that system will *always* fight to conceal this fact."

"If I recall from your book you say that the only direct treatment of the disease is creating a system in which everyone involved in the production of profit receives a merited share of that financial value such that its creation symbiotically benefits all contributors, instead of being parasitically drawn from the majority to expand the financial value of the few major equity holders," Henry recalls. "This is the only way to assure the profit serves to increase

rather than stifle or reduce all the opportunities for the total populace of commercial contributors to improve the quality of their lives, ideally both domestically and abroad.”

“That’s right,” Alex continues. “It’s about systemic parasitism versus systemic symbiosis. The first is about suppressing the life and potential of disadvantaged agents in the greedy service of those that take advantage of their disadvantage, oppressing the disadvantaged at best and weakening them at worst, while the second is about just, merited mutual benefit. As with the political and economic theories we’ve discussed, and in parallel with my monoexistential theory as well, the Business Collective is a design for encouraging justice on the micro-economic level by ensuring that enterprises are inclusive and symbiotic, rather than promoting the imbalanced exclusivity and parasitism of the conventional business structure. Quality of Life Economics explains the macroeconomic angle; why traditional economic theory and business practice stifles or reduces total quality of life improvements, and why it’s a moral imperative that this economic theory is thereby dispelled and displaced by a theory that encourages a far greater total value result.”

“In league with this, Business Collectivism offers a general structure for addressing this inherent injustice on a microeconomic, business-by-business level, instilling justice on a case-by-case, grassroots basis. The idea is that businesses, the constituent entities of the economy, should serve the best interests of *all* of their contributing members in a merited manner, and thereby naturally encourage the pursuit of the greatest total quality of life in partnership with Quality of Life Economics. Similar to the cooperative model, and largely in parallel with the concept of the ‘employee-owned enterprise,’ enterprises which are typically employee-owned only to a minor degree in order to deceive and placate employees and patrons, in order to buy goodwill, Business Collectives are privately owned enterprises that diverge from conventional private business structures in one critical manner: everyone that works for the enterprise owns some piece of the enterprise, with that piece determined by merit.”

“Ownership is the key, then,” Henry suggests. “Like stock sharing programs? But these already exist, do they not?”

“Yes, ownership is key, because that’s how profits are distributed: based upon the accounting equation,” Alex replies. “But you don’t stop with the conventional ‘employee-owned’ paradigm; with reserving some paltry portion of the equity for the employees vis-à-vis a stock sharing program in

which a miniscule fraction of company stock is reserved for employees, essentially in order to trick them into thinking two percent of the company's equity being reserved for otherwise salary-and-wage-capped, straight-line-compensated, poorly-incentivized employees qualifies the company as being 'employee owned.' You start by *eliminating* the position of employee; by reordering the balance sheet and making everyone a legitimate owner-operator."

"The basic accounting equation dictates that you subtract the cost of liabilities from the value of assets in order to derive equity. Without putting everyone that contributes to the enterprise in the equity column, cost-cutting exploitation of those remaining in the liabilities column is inevitable, as will be that enterprise's contribution to the growing disparity in income, wealth and quality of life and all the resultant socioeconomic injustices that result across America and most of the globalizing world as an effect caused by the equity-consolidated model that makes most everyone a cost of doing business."

"And there are many ways that the merited share of equity may be calculated for everyone contributing to each enterprise, but the way that I usually envision that calculation is through a two or three part evaluation. And this evaluation is pretty basic. The first part is based upon personal financial investment, and might be called the 'investment value' that's translated into equity, with all equity to be paid to owner-operators through dividends derived from the net profits of the subject business per assessed time period. As in traditional business, when you invest in the start-up or continuity of the going business concern, it's just that you receive equity in return."

"When the Business Collective is launched everyone brought into the fold, from the CEO to the janitorial staff, is awarded the opportunity of a capped amount of money that they may invest, and, later, when people cash-out or the stock is split or in need of more cash to maintain or grow its operations, that they may invest or reinvest in the company, with these investments translated into increasing equity shares with, of course, increasing risk if the company were to go bankrupt. However, the total equity that can be garnered in this fashion must be limited, as it can never be the case that any owner-operator may simply throw funds into the business for increasing equity shares and control of the enterprise to the disinterest of their fellow owner-operators, as this would defeat the very purpose of the Business Collective."

"However, generally speaking, when there's room for investment *all* owner-operators, regardless of their position within the company, must be awarded an

opportunity to increase or maintain their equity interest, with all said owner-operators given advance notice of said opportunity regardless of the cause, whether it involves expansion plans or the company being 'cash poor' and not 'liquid' enough or whatever the case. No owner-operator can be excluded from the opportunity, and they must all have the same capped amount that they may reinvest whenever this takes place. And, obviously, to maintain the meritocracy, the more money that the person puts in the more of the enterprise they own, and the more of the net profit that they're entitled to as dividends paid out at predetermined intervals based upon a contract that every new member of the company, every owner-operator, agrees to when they join the company."

"The second part of the merited equity share evaluation is also fairly conventional and intuitive: it's based upon the importance of the person's role within the enterprise, and might be called the 'positional value' assigned to the owner-operator. The more value the individual contributes to the Business Collective, the more responsibility they take on, the more skill, knowledge and experience they bring to the table, the more their performance translates into the relative financial success or failure of the operation, the greater the equity share they merit. Each owner-operator receives a 'positional value score' that translates into a part of their equity share. This, too, is a part of the contract every newly joining owner-operator signs upon being officially brought into the fold. It goes without saying that everything must be comprehensively detailed in the Business Collective formation and new owner-operator contracts."

"And the third part is the owner-operator survey, correct?," Henry attempts to recall.

"Yes," Alex replies. Henry definitely read the book. He didn't just skim it. "This part *might* be deemed less necessary than the first two parts, but I think that it can play an important role in motivating and incentivizing improvement and consistency of performance, as well as in creating a positive atmosphere that encourages greater collaboration and an increased sense of communally-reciprocated respect between the owner-operators."

"Of course, it might also be argued that it increases the chance of internal company politics, diplomacy, duplicity and popularity contests playing too large of a roll in the compensation of owner-operators and the decision-making within the organization... it could go both ways at the same time to some degree, but I think that it has more potential to increase incentive and goodwill than not. This

value, which might be considered the 'democratic value,' could round- out the picture and help keep everyone honest."

"Essentially, what this third part entails is the distributing of a form via paper or an email or a log-in on the company website where, once a year or every six months or every quarter, based upon the contract the original owner-operators sign when the Business Collective is launched, it's disclosed to every current owner-operator where every owner-operator's positional value score currently stands; at least the score for every owner-operator of the subject, relative branch of the company, if the company has branched-out to include multiple locations. After reviewing this information, each owner-operator then marks for every relevant owner-operator included in the survey, including themselves, whether or not they believe that they deserve a higher score, a lower score, or already have a score accurately reflecting their relative contribution to the company or branch."

"There might be five options, say: deserve a much lower score, deserve a lower score, possess an accurate score, deserve a higher score and deserve a much higher score. They'd go through the entire owner-operator roster in this manner. Alternatively, and perhaps most effectively, every owner-operator may dedicate their total assigned democratic point value, which should be equal amongst all owner- operators, to someone or something *other than themselves*, and wouldn't be required to consider *every* owner-operator or other entity, but only those whom, or that, they want to benefit or improve."

"Perhaps, for example, everyone is awarded ten democratic points to assign per quarter. Someone might choose to distribute five points to one owner- operator that they consider grossly undervalued, and five points to, say, the retirement fund or the office party fund. Another owner-operator might dedicate one point each to ten different owner-operators. And with all three values, investment, positional and democratic, the original Business Collective contract must recognize the percentage of net profit dedicated to each portion of the calculation."

"The percentage of equity owned by every owner-operator won't be static, obviously, but will be dynamic based upon at least the first two portions of the evaluation, and upon how many owner-operators are brought in or move on over time, and is calculated using a pre-established equation for calculating all equity shares. If this third portion of the evaluation is included, a final adjustment is made to the overall equity distribution based upon the averaging of these responses, with this adjustment being based upon whatever the



forming owner- operators agree to when they establish the enterprise. They might, for example, permit this democratic value to make up to a ten percent adjustment in the positional value score, or, in the alternative that I just mentioned, to have up to a ten percent impact upon the total value, or total score, assigned to every owner-operator and eligible fund or other entity. And, I would guess, the contract and founders would rarely allow this adjustment to go over a third of the total calculation."

"So, for example, if there's no faith in the current CEO who's currently contractually awarded a ten percent positional value score, a company-wide survey reporting that he or she deserves a much smaller score might drive his or her share down to somewhere between seven and nine percent, with that other one to three percent re-distributed to those voted as deserving of greater value contribution scores, and with all of this being separate from the first portion of the score, the investments and reinvestments. Everyone that's ever had a job knows the type of thought that this honors: this person is undervalued, and that person is overvalued. This third portion of the evaluation will allow every owner-operator the satisfaction of expressing that sense of injustice in a tangibly rewarding or correcting manner that alters the net-profit dividend awards for the owner-operators until the next survey is completed."

"I like it," Henry replies. "So the three factors are plugged into the equation and the share of the net-profit-based-equity is distributed as dividends accordingly. One thing that occurs to me, however... one possible issue with this whole scheme of yours. Won't this distribution of equity make the decision making processes more difficult – next to impossible? What if all the owners disagree on a direct course of action for the business? Does it come down to which decision has the most equity backing? And even if total equity breakdown is how decisions are made, won't this take too long? It just seems like it would be inefficient; like business would suffer because by the time the decisions are made it's too late, or too much is lost... I think that you'd have a competitive disadvantage compared to more traditional business structures."

"Just because equity is distributed amongst all the owner-operators in a merited manner such as we've just discussed doesn't mean that all decisions have to go through all the owner-operators," Alex replies. "That's one possible means for making decisions, but I think that voting through equity would only apply to certain big picture decisions as spelled out in the common-most organizing contracts for the Business Collectives. The day-to-day decisions would likely go through the head officers of the Business Collective, just as they do in more traditional structures, and for the good reason that you mention."

"The CEO would have the final say in most decisions, and, compared to traditional business structures, would be just as motivated, and likely more motivated, to make decisions for the best long term interests of the company; for the benefit of all of the owner-operators; because he or she would be one of the foremost of those owner-operators and, having the most responsibility, would tend to possess far more equity than he or she typically would under any traditional stock sharing plan."

"At the same time, you could make certain that the other owner- operators feel like they have influence over these day-to-day decisions *through* the CEO and other chief officers by having the organizing contract include a one to four year service period for those officers, or at least the CEO, similar to the terms served by politicians, except with unlimited term potential. If the other owner-operators, who vote based upon the percentage of equity they control, have confidence in the CEO, they keep him or her running the company when they vote every one to four years; otherwise they vote for a replacement. Providing the possibility of ousting owner-operators at every level and compensating them for their equity shares, if they're vacated from the company entirely or demoted to a lower equity-holding level, would be another possible element spelled out in clear language in the contract."

"I see," Henry responds. "So, is that it, then, the entire structure of the Business Collective?"

"Well, there's more that can and probably should be said about the Business Collective concept," Alex replies. "Like the fact that this business structure not only distributes the bottom line in the merited manner that I just described, but also stands to *drastically* improve the morale within these businesses in comparison to the typical morale experienced within and used to motivate the contributing members of the conventional business model. Most everyone that's an employee in a contemporary, conventional business, especially wage earners, and especially still those working for the larger businesses more disconnected from any sense of real community identity, feels the truth of their subjugated position."

"Even if they don't conceptualize it as such, they know to some degree, or have some sense, that they aren't *really* an honored part of or partner in the enterprise, but are closer to a tool; a piece in a profit-building machine that's excluded from experiencing the greatest benefits of its production. This certainly affects their attitude, their self-esteem and the regard with which they view, think of and treat not only their organization and co-workers,

especially their bosses and owners whom are the likely focus of their negative, resentful feelings and low morale, but society as a whole. With orthodox workers, their only real incentive to work hard is to maintain their jobs in order to survive, but even then they'll work only as hard as needed to keep their jobs; for no other reasons."

"In the Business Collective, most of this emotional deadweight and animosity will be removed, and executives are more likely to be seen as respected, leading partners than as overlords. And I think that owner- operators that receive any share in the bottom line will not only be better motivated because they know they'll see tangible financial benefit for their harder work, but they'll inevitably possess an improved attitude and state of mind when they feel that they're a legitimate part of their enterprises and the economy at large. It's similar to true democracy's ability to instill a sense of belonging and contribution to society as a whole, rather than our being given mere lip service as contributing members, which most of us sense is false to some degree and which, in turn, inevitably breeds a persistent low-level sense of disrespect and discontentment in its disconnect, and a low voter turnout and concern for political matters as a result."

"Regardless of the efficacy of the lip service, we all sense the difference between the pretense of inclusion and its authentic form. And when it comes to feeling like a contributing partner in the businesses for which we work, I believe that this will, in turn, have a positive impact upon not just our professional lives and relationships, but upon *all* of our relationships, and upon our general outlook on and approach to life."

"And since everything is connected," Alex continues, "I believe that these effects will positively snowball. The increased motivation that comes with receiving a share in the bottom line and the increased self- esteem and regard for their coworkers-turned-partners will encourage more productivity which, thanks to the Business Collective structure, and especially if backed by Quality of Life Economics and true democracy, will be better utilized in creating and sustaining improved total quality of life. All contributing citizens will be more optimistic and even, dare I say, possess more faith in and carry greater goodwill for the human race. This will ripple across society, combining with the waves emanating from all the points in which Business Collectives are established. People's hearts will be better fused with their efforts as a result."

"It's like the love of Spirit, of feeling you're a true part of the whole, that the true identity is an infinity of one, rather than our being individual, separated cutthroat combatants divided between the over- advantaged exploiters and the

disadvantaged whom they exploit *as a rule*; an unevolved, oppressive rule that the so-called 'realists' would have us believe is natural and inevitable. People sense the disunity, and that they're being used and forced to squabble amongst one another to secure a decent piece of the commercial pie in order to live a decent quality of life, and this has an undeniable effect upon all of us, even when we aren't consciously aware of it, for we're inevitably still sub-consciously accosted by it."

"I can see that," Henry agrees, thinking of the constant lack of enthusiasm, the sour scowls and the general sense of unhappiness he sees in the faces of most every worker that he comes into contact with.

"Compared to traditional employees, the fully inclusive membership of those individuals comprising Business Collectives will be in the position to benefit in all these ways," Alex continues. "They'll make more money and be less vulnerable to all the injustices created by the disparity of income, wealth and opportunity across traditional societies; they'll be better motivated to work and possess greater self-esteem; they'll likely create greater value for the world and will hold their enterprises and fellow owner-operators in higher regard, and are likely to develop superior attitudes and general outlooks on life and their prospects. They'll feel like they're vested members in their enterprises and in society in general, a benefit that would be magnified were they to become contributing members of any form of true democracy such as the form which we've discussed. Their voices would *truly* be heard."

"They'd have some direct control and be duly rewarded commensurate with the value they produce through the enterprises in which they'd finally be legitimate, vested members. They'd no longer be tools. They'd no longer be marginalized, subjugated or unjustly taken advantage of. They'd be a real, directing, much-better-benefiting part of the economic chain and the political system, and there's no way that they *wouldn't* feel this, regardless of how they'd conceive of it within their minds. Can you imagine what this might do for humankind were it to spread nationally and, ideally, globally?!"

"It's hard to imagine what might be engendered, but I think that I have some sense of it," Henry says while staring up through the branches of the canopy of the little grove, the clouds briskly banking across the sky, propelled by the accelerating winds of the warming morning atmosphere.

Alex continues: "Most evils endured by the global populace are rooted in socioeconomic injustices; in the fact that people experience stresses from the pressures and disadvantages that they face, with these stresses tending to

be commensurate with their resources and opportunities, and tending to snowball into further compounding stresses. There's little risk to health, wellbeing and quality of and outlook upon life that *doesn't* connect to financial, material, opportunity and basic necessity disparities, and which doesn't compound as these risks and disadvantages cruelly roll together. All of it correlates. Abuse, neglect, drug and alcohol dependency, homelessness or living in squalor and abject poverty, shorter lifespans... all of it connects to not having the means to avoid an increase in the risk of experiencing such ills."

"And all of this, in inseparable turn, connects to overarching economic, commercial and political systems that fail to serve the majority due to being corruptively dedicated to siphoning off far more than a just share for the minority. Yes, personal responsibility, work ethic, determination, resiliency and the like play a role as well, and it's also true that the more ability that one has the more one is likely to escape his or her disadvantages. And yet there's no greater cause of misery than *systemic* failure, including the failure of systems to assist those experiencing the aforementioned disadvantages. Social studies support this fact, but I don't need them, only logic. For it's simply cause and effect. The more pain, pressure, disparity and disadvantage endured by any person or group, the more likely they'll endure resultant misery in turn, and the more likely all said ills will compel them towards criminality."

"So, with regards to the ideal which every progressive is driven to seek, considering the concept's potential for increasing socioeconomic justice by cutting such disparities and all of their connected ills, it would be *extremely* valuable to find any and all means to encourage the spread of the Business Collective structure and its benefits across as wide a swath of the national and, ideally, the *global* economy as possible," Alex continues. "One major means for accomplishing this might be through government support of the Business Collective based upon a broad public understanding of its vast potential benefits for the people as a whole."

"To promote Business Collectives the federal and state governments could, for example, establish a new business filing type that grants Business Collectives tax advantages, or could subsidize or provide part of the start-up funds in the Business Collectives in exchange for an equity share, up to a certain max amount, say ten percent, in the Business Collectives that voluntarily apply for and receive this government investment. I can even imagine cutting out taxation of these enterprises entirely by trading that business income taxation and the typical tax dodging of business income write-offs for the share in the dividend-based equity held by the government at all levels that government

contributes. Government could, in other words, be a small albeit empowering vested partner in collectives.”

“In addition to or in lieu of these promotions, the local, state and federal governments involved could grant people the right to give money directly to a general Business Collective start-up fund in a manner which would be treated as a donation that could be used as an income deduction. Or, if this is seen as unfair to conventional businesses, the government could allow these tax-write-off donations to be made to an organization whose mandate it would be to assist applying owner-operators with the logistics of establishing Business Collectives, and which would be empowered to serve as consultants for those Business Collectives. To serve as a bastion for this total-quality-of-life-expanding business structure, I envision the establishment of a new governmental agency that would help organize the processes involved in establishing new Business Collectives, and would be on call when problems arise that the Business Collectives need assistance with.”

“The agency would devise and implement a system for bringing people together based upon mutual interest and qualifications vetted for complementing qualities of experience, ability and the possession of available funds for start-up investment. Working from a default contractual template, the agency would arbitrate the discussions and negotiations under which new Business Collectives would be contractually established between the original owner-operators. The agency would then help the newly established Business Collectives file with the relevant city and state agencies. It may also assist in procuring all necessary licenses, and might even assist in other details, like finalizing a business plan, seeking additional start-up funds, or locating suitable commercial real estate for lease or purchase by the Business Collective.”

After a long pause, both Alex and Henry lost in the imagination of such a structure and what it might mean for the people were it to spread, Henry inquires: “So that’s it, then?”

“There are many more details that would be included within a comprehensive founding contract for the Business Collective in which all possible contingencies are covered, but that’s the crux of it,” Alex replies. “I might also say that the potential of the Business Collective concept and its underlying realizations and principles goes beyond privately held business concerns. People banding together in common cause in order to prevent being preyed upon by profiteers that exploit our division... coming together to create the buying power and combined, collaborative strength to avoid being taken advantage of in every way, politically, professionally and commercially, is

the general theme here, as you may have noticed. And that theme possesses *massive* potential for protecting and benefitting the lives of the vast majority that it would seek to include as beneficiaries: working people as a whole. And those benefits, and the prevention of parasitism, is also the only reason that individualism and the reflexive dismissal of socialism are focal points of conservative propaganda.”

“It’s very simple: Divided we’re weak and easy to control and take advantage of for the greed of a small controlling sect of the population; the aristocratic ownership class. Most of my ideas are based upon this realization; on how much this costs us; on feeling a moral, spiritual imperative to do as much as possible to prevent people from collectively paying the unscrupulously profiteering bill imposed upon us and grossly restricting our collective quality of life by the controlling few through all the major systems of society, in politics, in business, commercially in what we pay for to live and have what we need to lead fulfilling lives, even theologically, in the chance for pure spirituality to overcome what I consider a corruption of spirituality: religion.”

“This is the general, all important theme, and for me it begins with understanding. It begins with fostering the most broadly-beneficial ideological beliefs and social systems, fanning their incalculable value in service of total quality of life. In terms of specifics, in the commercial arena you have the Business Collectives we’ve been discussing that are designed to prevent the people’s equity exclusion, and their general exploitation and exclusion from the benefits precluded by parasitism, but there are many other opportunities as well, as I just alluded to.”

“For example, I had this idea recently that I called ‘collective condominiums.’ It’s a concept constructed around the objective of preventing people’s inability to afford their own place, their residential equity exclusion, from being taken advantage of in the landlord system whereby we pour *massive* amounts of money down the proverbial tubes just to have a place to live; another inherent injustice of parasitically conservative systems. Landlords are leeches; a subset of the leeches sucking away total quality of life across the intertwined corporate and plutocratic realms. So I imagined a protective construct.”

“How would that work?,” Henry inquires.

“By cutting out the profits pulled from this particular personal disadvantage of those with limited means as much as possible through a banding together of those with similar situations, and with complementing tastes and capacities,” Alex responds. “By bringing people together in such a way where their

collective abilities, tastes in construction and interior design and combined buying power puts them in the position to avoid paying the profits of the landlords and new home developers and their sales forces. You're cutting-out the middle-men, and cutting-out the landlords, excising the residential leeches to as great an extent as possible."

"Create a company, likely funded by a progressive set of philanthropists or angel investors, that facilitates the bringing together of people and the providing of services like identifying property, filing new construction permits and, most importantly, funding what would typically be seen as an overly risky form of debt, a collective mortgage, that allows an agreeing collective of people and families to finance the construction of a new condominium development. A subset of these people might possess construction experience and be involved in the construction of the development, being compensated by paying less into the collective mortgage payments. This would reduce the cost of construction by avoiding paying part of the profits of an outside construction company."

"A 'Collective Condos' company could oversee all of this, allowing those playing host to leeching landlords the ability to pry them off. And the concept needn't be restricted to condominiums, of course, but could be applied to any property in which portions would be reserved for private use, and in which the remainder would be open to any members of the collective, like large properties with parks and community centers mixed with private homes. Countless such project types could be collectively financed for direct construction and ownership, with portions collectively owned and legally-accessed, and portions privately owned and accessed."

"And this concept could be applied to other sectors of the economy in which people are paying the profits of those that take advantage of their disunity, disadvantage and lack of collective buying power. It's comparable to the difference between paying retail and having the means to buy in bulk. It's economies of scale. When we're individuals forced to pay retail costs, the costs which we collectively pay are maximized, and our capacity to create greater opportunities in our lives are thereby limited, as we're prohibited from, in the case of traditional businesses, earning a fair ownership share of the bottom line and, in the case of conventional residential rental arrangements, from owning our own place. In general, we're prohibited from being protected against paying too much for invaluable needs and life opportunities. We, in other words, pay a *massive* collective price for our lack of *positive* freedom."



"And I could see the people coming together in similar ways to provide one another with cost-minimized healthcare, utilities, insurance, produce... the possibilities are endless. At least, taking such direct, collective economic actions should be considered an option in the face of a perpetually obstinate plutocracy obstructing the people from realizing their greatest collective quality of existence by refusing to support the socialization or semi-socialization of such select industries in which we're most vulnerable, and in which the exploitation of our disadvantage is most costly to our potential to improve our collective quality of lives. And I'm not, again, advocating for a communistic total takeover of industry, as the small-minded, reflexively-condemnatory conservative will likely dismiss such an idea as representing. What I *am* advocating for are the best possible means by which groups of people may be empowered by coming together in combined stakes in exposed areas in order to grant great advantages and protections against preclusions in the realization of our greatest collective quality of life."

"And, again, I'd reemphasize the fact that this is the *only* reason that exploiting profiteers hate any sort of collective action and label it 'communism,' or 'socialism,' knowing that most propagandistically-primed conservatives will thereby dismiss it: because, by being in the best interests of the people, it cuts into the ownership class profits made *off* of the people. Attempt to pry away the glorified, overfed leeches of our western systems of oppression, and those leeches cry 'communism' as a conditioned rule. And manifestations of the collective concept needn't be full-on 'publicly owned' and nationwide in order to impart irreplaceable benefits."

"Any scale of compatible individuals forming equity-sharing groups granting them immense benefits of profit distribution, cost cutting and other innumerable advantages, such as learning from one another and sharing a sense of identity and commonality and spiritual togetherness and all the other examples of power in numbers... any scale upon which such formations come into existence will reflect the scale of gain from such collaborative formations and pursuits. In connection, so much is being sacrificed to the American culture of individualism; all the best things, including the spiritual currency of love."

"Honor those things that make us unique, yes, but never forget that the rewards of unity *far* out-weigh any benefits of staying too starkly divided as individuals. This may, in fact, be the crux of the American cultural injustice: individualism. It's tied to egotism, me-versus-you tribalism, wealth worship and all the ways in which we're inhibited from coming together for mutual gain, and thereby costs the world more than can be estimated in countless ways, economically, politically, in business, in social interactions, in sacrificed love... All of these

elements, cleverly disguised by right-wing propagandists as the 'virtues' of individualism, exemplify how divided *is* conquered."

"The fourth and final cornerstone supporting the ideal basis for building and housing the greatest quality of life for the greatest numbers is the supplanting of religion with what I call monoexistential spirituality. Replace narrow, weakening, dividing, idolatrous, hierarchal, imperially-propagated theology with fully inclusive, empowering, unifying, philosophy-backed spirituality. What I call the Spirit, the source energy to which no one pronoun can ever perfectly fit, is the core element composing and encompassing everything in existence, all parts of itself existing within its Self, its expansion from singularity to bound- less plurality producing all spacetime and each of its contained beings and the canvas upon which every such being paints every experience of their lives as individualized manifestations of this one shared essential Self. It's a spirituality that can never be housed by any one religion or their confining, reducing, narrowly-defining theological systems."

"Spirit is the essential, indivisible, irreducible component of not just every fundamental element, but of every atom and particle composing every element. For if you break everything in existence down as much as possible, you're left with the part that cannot be broken down or divided any further. It's a logical certainty that the reduction of every material form and type of energy must stop *not* at zero, at nothing, for everything that exists cannot be composed of nothing, cannot be built upon a foundation of nonexistence, but must be composed of the one original thing that was never created and cannot be destroyed or even broken down. It, and thus the indestructible essence of we, as elements of It, are free from the illusory concepts of 'beginning' and 'ending.' Spirit is the source and core substance of all things, and everything that exists is differentiated from everything else that exists only by the relative distribution, concentration and arrangement of this source substance."

"Things only appear different to our limited sensory capacities because of the relativity of this one source substance, so that we may sense for our survival and our limited spacetime frames. For to sense beyond this would make it impossible for us to focus on the requisites of our survival in our endlessly adapting, mortal material forms. Common knowledge will one day include the fact that our essential Self is never created nor destroyed and isn't constrained by or dependent upon time, space or the ephemeral nature of each of the relative arrangements of Spirit into different forms of energy or matter, including into beings that developed the neurological qualities that gave rise to consciousness, self-perception and the illusion of individuality."

“Everything is a facet of this one thing, essentially...” Henry summarizes.

“Yes, that’s right,” Alex agrees. “We speak of things as if they’re distinct and separate from one another, but they never truly are. Nothing is truly spaced from anything else, because the core of all things, including us and the relative space between us, is composed of this one thing that we all exist within and are entirely based upon as semi- autonomous versions of. The Spirit is not bound by time or space or matter or energy because all of these things are relative only to its willed plurality lying atop an endless singularity. It’s the only constant, other than the relative change of its arrangement and accumulation into different forms. This is a truth that’s very, very difficult for our minds to capture and live within, as we think and sense in terms of distinctions for the sake of survival, differentiation and understanding. But the fundamental truth is that distinction is an illusion born of ignorance, sensory and mental limitation and our existential constraints. And during those rare moments when I’m best able to lodge this truth in my mind as triggered by its tenuous grasp upon the communications cast from my heart, the world seems to wash away, as I sense in my deepest, truest Self that our existence, and the world that seems to encompass us, is far grander than we can conceive or perceive.”

“We’re inseparable from that which is all things. The starting point that had no start, but has always been. *This* is God, communicating with us and guiding us through our hearts, the greatest point of energetic consolidation within our impermanent material forms. And how, I ask you, can such a universally-applicative basis for everyone and everything’s existence ever be consigned to any theological construct that in any way bars anyone or anything from *perfect* inclusion? How can any constricting identity, any specific set of myths, deities, prophets turned to idols, or any artificially conceived hierarchy, ever be the one and only, in exclusion of all the others, without perpetuating ignorance and prejudice leading to conflict, division, a lack of harmony and solidarity and the destruction of our highest potential as a race? A potential that can only ever be approached in a collaboration boosted by perfectly inclusive shared identity such as is offered by the truth of Spirit.”

“Religion is false and destructive of our highest personal and collective potential on *many* levels, as we’ve discussed as a group many times. Theological specificity is pure folly; pure arrogant, self-righteous presumption pretending to stand for a purifying, all-inclusive truth that it can’t come close to representing, and which it betrays by its pretense of absolute representation.”

“So you see religion as the greatest enemy of mankind,” Henry interprets. “You see it as the greatest impediment to our unification and evolution.”

“So long as religiosity maintains popular acceptance and is practiced over all-inclusive spirituality it’ll ironically remain the greatest force of evil in mankind’s present,” Alex responds, “just as it assuredly exists in our past, seeing as how it effectively acts to corrupt and divide us and misdirect us away from the one truest, indivisible, incorruptible identity. It’ll continue to cost us more than any other construct in history. The value religion offers, the principles and sense of comfort and community religion provides, are far outweighed on the negative value side by what it costs. I was thinking about it again this morning, in fact...” Alex removes a cluster of post-it notes from his pocket. He’s long been in the habit of writing down anything that comes to mind that he thinks may be of value. Post-it notes, magazine covers, the inside of book jackets and within their margins, any scrap of paper that he can get his hands on is fair game for being scrawled with thoughts on an endless array of subjects, often inspired by what he’s reading or watching or discussing at that moment.

Reading from the first post-it note, Alex says:

“Consider what religion is, its attributes and its effects. Through its denial of science, reason and critical thought, it encourages and, within its bubble of adherents, rewards and perpetuates ignorance. It rewards a refusal to learn about and take advantage of the boundless body of knowledge offered across all disciplines that in any way contradict religious teachings, and that *could* empower people in priceless, countless ways, were they not controlled by their religion. Instead this empowerment and quality of life improvement entirely bypasses them. They are lost to it, and it to them, at incalculable cost both to them and anyone and everyone to whom they may contribute.”

“By teaching that there’s an omnipotently-overbearing God that’s in charge and is the driving force behind all things and punishes evildoers by casting them into eternal hellfire, the wrathful puppet master stringing us all along rather than the essential guiding force of indivisible universal Self possessing no such motive, nature or desire, but much the opposite, religion promotes disempowering ideas like divisible, controllable souls subject to punishment and the possession of zero free will and, via that promotion, encourages its adherents *not* to take responsibility for their lives and *not* to proactively improve themselves and the world around them because they’re ultimately not in control and not responsible for what happens in the world they’re meant to treat as a test or a warm up for the real thing ever-after, which itself is an invention. This even though they’re still judged and held eternally accountable

for the choices they aren't really making, since it's God who's in charge. To live by such false, often contradictory, always disempowering ideas is *inestimably costly.*"

"Saying 'God's in charge' makes for no accountability, and little encouragement to make the world a better place for its lifeforms left tragically underserved. Teaching that there's a heaven or hell only exacerbates these costs by further encouraging people *not* to be overly concerned with this plane of existence, and with positively affecting change in people and the world around them, because this life is said to merely be a prelude to everlasting life, where existence is far superior or, as a way to scare followers into controlled conformity, where existence is torturous. But there's no afterlife, only life itself; only infinite variations of energy born into biologically-enlivened and evolving matter."

"And, like the denial of science and reason, this same belief in the afterlife and its arbiters, agents and forces, encourages people to perpetuate the anachronistic practice of filling gaps in their knowledge and understanding with myths; with blind, un-seeking faith; with internally-affirmed fantasies requiring no logical support or confirmation of any kind, further blunting the intellect and robbing the education of its adherents. This archaic practice dates back to the pre-scientific era, where non-evidentiary myths filled gaps in our knowledge. Such a practice possesses no place in an educated, progressive populist seeking truth and all its innumerable empowerments and emancipations."

"It's one thing to have faith in God, especially when you actively seek Spirit. It's quite another to pretend that your faith is the only true faith, which, in its specifications and exclusions, denies the legitimacy of all other forms of faith, all without reason or logic or your own seeking, doubting and experience; without those indispensable characteristics and self-improving practices protecting you from believing whatever the *human* powers tell you about faith, with the perspectives and objectives of those human powers inherited from *long*-running traditions of power and popular control, sucking you into a narrowing form of faith that ultimately deprives you of seeking the truer, purer, all-encompassing forms of spirituality that are *actually* capable of elevating, empowering and freeing you. I know from experience that when that fuller form of God is found you'll find religion and its pretensions so offensive that you'll want to scream self-defensive, or capital 'S' Self-defensive, revelations from the rooftops, like: Religion doesn't own God! Spirit doesn't fit into religion! You don't have to be religious to have faith!"

"What else?" Alex unravels more post-it notes, then continues: "Religion is and has always been a champion of mind-controlling tactics and manipulation; the epicenter for coercing and conning people into doing what they, what the political and religious empires and their aristocrats, want people to do for the advantage of those aristocratic empires and at the great loss of their adherents who're encouraged to move with the unthinking, unquestioningly obedient herd. This same heart of the herd mentality is the center of age-old patterns of idolatry and hierarchy, where people are put on their knees and subjugated in positions beneath where they naturally belong, on the same existential plane with God, as the Spirit's material formations. Instead, religion's gullible, brainwashed believers are made to feel small and beneath gods, demigods, prophets, saints and disciples and all those mythological God-like beings said to exist above them and naturally fated to rule over them." "People are made to believe that they're powerless over any afflictions which they suffer, such as in the twelve-step Alcoholics Anonymous mantra; that they were born into inherently evil sin against which there's no control, only acceptance. The truth, however, is that people are but corruptible through their mental and physical limitations and vulnerabilities, most of which can be greatly shored-up and reinforced with adequate understanding and discipline. People are misdirected from finding the truth of their oneness with Spirit, and from the greatest strength and potential within themselves. Low self-esteem, subjugation and limited potential are inevitable results."

"People are made to be less than they should be, always looking up for guidance and encouraged not to think for themselves, not to take responsibility or to be proactive, not to come together with the rest of the Spirit's divinely-sourced community. In competition with other faiths, the practice of religion has always encouraged unnecessary division, strife, hatred, violence and the 'us-versus-them' mentality that our evolution will gradually overcome on all societal fronts. Then there's religion's quest to control people through the family unit by way of monopolizing the sanctioning of marriage."

"If you have sex outside of religious approval, regardless of the love that emanates from our hearts communicating *true* spiritual sanctioning, then you face being scorned and cast out of the herd. Marriage is by and large a product of state and religious control. Religion sows guilt and repression of sexuality, as well as a self-righteous judgment of those courageous and intelligent enough *not* to fall victim to the longest running con in history. Peer pressure, self-righteous disdain and mental coercion are amongst its cracked, unstable cornerstones."

“So not falling victim to that con when you’re young, ignorant and impressionable... when you’ve yet to develop the knowledge and rational capacity to defend yourself from its tentacles, that’s the first step to overcoming its disempowering grip upon you, I suppose?,” Henry asks.

“Yes, it begins with doubt, with asking questions,” Alex replies. “I sometimes see the question of God as giving way to a typical trajectory, one that I walked myself, to some degree.”

“What trajectory is that?,” Henry asks, pushing Alex’s oratory forward.

“I sometimes see the quest towards spiritual truth as being a kind of journey in which religion is ironically the *furthest* from the truth,” Alex replies. “Actually, I believe that we all begin with an instinctive awareness of God, of Spirit, before there’s any intellectual conception existing in our minds. On a subconscious level we know it, for we’re inseparable from it. We *are* it. We are Spirit, pre-conceptually, before we begin to conceive of it. And the first conception is handed to us in the hopes that we’ll stop there. Religion is the default conception. It’s the starting point; that which the youth are spoon-fed in order to remain under the control of those that control religion which, historically speaking especially, means the state and its aristocratic ownership class, traditionally extending down through the father and the rest of the familial hierarchy. Religiosity is the position in which we are small, beneath God and his ‘representatives on earth’ in a hierarchical structure.”

“Religion relies upon scaring and pressuring the impressionable to believe on blind faith alone, convincing you that if you’re worthy of God then you’ll accept ‘him’ on faith. Only the fearful, gullible and non-questioning remain here, at blind faith; at what might be considered gullible obedience. You accept the commands of those that claim to have power over you in spiritual matters, failing to well enough consider the possibility that they may not actually have such power. Yet on some level you likely sense, but can never fully admit to yourself, that blindly having faith isn’t the answer.”

“You kill doubt as you’re commanded, because doubt leads to a denial of religion and a discovery of the path towards truth. For the first step on the journey toward spiritual truth is doubt. The asking of questions is always what leads to truth. You begin to ask things like: Do the assertions made by my religion make sense? Is there any evidence, logic or anything concrete to back what’s being claimed? How can any one religion reliably claim to have the best answers to these questions? Perhaps most critically, you begin to think in terms of motive and history, asking: *Why* am I being fed these particular ideas?”

“Ralph Waldo Emerson said: ‘Mysticism is the mistake of an accidental and individual symbol for a universal one.’ This to me is the distinction between mystically, mythically-infused religion and spirituality. It’s the attempt to label, divide and control people’s instinctively-embedded spiritual awareness and connected search for meaning through the enforcement of specific, artificial, irrational, non-evidence-based rituals, symbols, idols and mythical narratives.”

“And if you never ask questions, if you simply accept, simply submit, then you’ve yet to even find the trailhead leading to truth. But if you have the courage and intellect to ask questions, your questioning will inevitably reveal the fact that religion not only *doesn’t* have the answers, but, ironically commits hellacious sins against its adherents by killing their search and enforcing untruth. And if you’re strong enough *not* to give into religion’s sticks and carrots, its heaven, hell and peer-pressuring coercions and other deplorable, manipulative tactics of mind-controlling the masses, similar tactics used in conservative politics to get you to support the power, control and wealth consolidation of the few historically at the helm and benefitting from the Church’s power over society, then you’ll move towards *rejecting* religion.”

“Those that ask the questions and develop the knowledge and strength to defend themselves from religious coercion may end their journeys with rejection, and with the belief that the falsity of religion is to be conflated with the falsity of spirituality. To me this answer, the rejection of the notion that there’s any truth whatsoever to the concept of God, atheism, is based upon anger and arrogance as much as upon intelligence and its naturally-coinciding quality of inquisitiveness. You’re angry that you, likely beginning when you were very young, were brainwashed into believing in such a hollow answer to the question of God. This anger is very understandable.”

“Furthermore, you likely make the mistake that’s common to the scientifically-inclined, believing that no evidence is the same thing as no truth; believing that if you can’t see the truth, or any evidence or concrete logical proof, then it must not exist. The next step for those that possess or find humility, that let some of this anger and arrogance go, that realize that no proof *doesn’t* necessarily mean no truth, that science teaches, above all, that there’s *always* more to uncover, and that their doubt continues, is to admit that you don’t know. You begin to think that maybe the religious answer isn’t so much *entirely* hollow as it’s too small, specific or certain.”

“At this point in the path you likely identify as agnostic, taking the position that there’s no way to prove the question of God one way or another. But



underneath it all you retain what you've always had, an instinctive awareness of Spirit; the Spirit speaking to your mind through your heart. And you may continue to ask questions. And this instinctive awareness may implore you to continue walking the path; to continue asking questions that may eventually end in *discovery*. You discover that you've known the answer in your heart all along, and you find ways for your mind to wrap around that truth."

"You begin to sense the implications of the fact that there cannot be such a thing as nothing, that nothing can be created or destroyed, that the starting point of everything that exists has always existed, that this source cannot possess a beginning or an end but has always existed and always will exist and must, by all of these properties, be the essential most thing inherent to *all* things, must encompass all things and be intrinsic to all things. And perhaps in this framework you begin to see the purpose of matter, and of the semblance of separation and the relativity of distinctiveness. You begin to see the role which these things play. You begin to see their purpose in providing an existential framework for the irreducible energy of oneness, Spirit, to be manifested into infinite forms for the endless variety of existence. That's the likely evolution; from religion, to atheism, to agnosticism, to a purer spirituality."

"I'd add that I call my own gnostic spiritual revelations those of 'monoexistentialism,' because I believe that it only *appears* as though they're multiple independent existences when, in truth, in the pure energetic, metaphysical heart of the matter, both literally and figuratively, it's God, one existence, having innumerable experiences of Its, of Our, existence. An infinite of one. I've since uncovered the fact that the Eastern theological traditions have long called this, or a similar concept, 'non-duality.' Separation is an illusion. Spiritually, it's the first illusion, and the one making for most of the evil in the world, for to act as though everyone is One, as We ultimately are, by what I call The Spiritual Rule, would remove the impetus behind most evil action."

"So, let's see..." Henry says after Alex ceases his oration. "Replacing the plutocratic republic that effectively puppeteers politicians pulled by corporate masters at immense cost to humanity with a true democracy made for the communications age that allows the people to take control of government and avoid paying that cost. Replacing what you call the one-way version of freedom's 'free market economics' that ideologically facilitates funneling the majority of the economy's produced value into the hands of the few by ignoring the quality-of-life-boosting potential of that value with the double-edged-sword-swinging freedom of economic evaluation that you call Quality of Life Economics."

“Replacing the equity-consolidated business model that places the vast majority of the economy’s contributors in the to-be-minimized liabilities column of the balance sheet, and which thereby directly facilitates the funneling of profits to the few and the expansion of the disparity in income, wealth and quality of life with a justly meritocratic Business Collective that places everyone in the equity column, and thereby halts and eventually reverses that disparity. And, perhaps most importantly, replacing brainwashing, dividing, idolatrous, hierarchal and subject-producing religions with a purer, scientifically and philosophically-backed spirituality that you call monoexistentialism that empowers humankind and gets it off its knees so that it may spur its own evolution towards its highest collaborative form.”

“And I’d emphasize that this monoexistential spirituality should act as a foundation for the rest. For if you begin to see existence and identity through its elucidating, fully-inclusive lens, then the rest will begin to follow naturally. Also, while dichotomies tend to be over-simplified and thus at least partial misrepresentations of the nuanced truth of any matter to which they’re applied, all of these systems can be said to split ideologies, attitudes and pursuits, as well as their purveyors and pursuers, into two general groups. The first and generally prevailing group, for it’s far easier and more seductive to give into and prey upon the weaknesses and limitations and resultant corruptibility of the human mind and body and, therefore, this group will be larger, is the group composed of the ‘for me,’ the ‘take all you can’ and the ‘us-versus- them’ *parasitic* type, at least in effect, if not in understood or admitted belief.”

“They are those that, though they’re unlikely and unable to admit it even to themselves, choose or at least act to sacrifice total quality of life in self-absorbed service of greed of all types, as well as to satisfy their overblown and typically insecure egos and narrowly-perceived excluding identifications and interests. The second far smaller and generally overwhelmed or outright dominated group that will, nevertheless, prevail in the long run is the cohort of moral champions; those that refuse to give into the evils of the first group; that foster our progressive evolution as the ‘for us’ *symbiotic* group that refutes and refuses to think in terms of ‘us-versus-them’ for interrelated intellectual, moral and spiritual reasons.”

“This second group is made up of those that, again, though they may not think of it in these terms, act *against* those that sacrifice total quality of life, and whom stand for and support those ideas, attitudes and pursuits that aren’t purely centered upon themselves, their self- conceived egos and any narrowly perceived identifications in which we’re commonly compelled to

place ourselves, but instead see the potential for life as a whole and think in far broader-minded terms along inclusive conceptual lines which effectively act to move humanity and the entirety of life on the planet and the planet itself toward its greatest potential. It comes down to that simple dividing line: you're part of the problem, short-changing humanity and reducing and suppressing total quality of life in service of greed and ego, or you're part of the solution, investing in humanity's highest potential and ever prevailing upon yourself and others to act in body and mind for the maximization of total quality of life and in resistance to the first, historically-prevailing group."

"The symbiotic group standing upon the ultimately prevailing side of humankind's evolution, further along our spacetime passage in the long bending arc of the moral universe, knows, or at least senses, that what's best for humankind may never be achieved whilst warring amongst itself, with everyone fighting for the biggest possible piece of the pie for its petty, narrowly-identified factions. Their prevailing knowledge or instinctive sense is that they're not truly a part of any such faction anywhere near as much as they're part of the whole, and, thus, they sense or know that they don't fit into any constrained identification nearly so much as they're an indivisible member of the universally-shared identity of life. They're on some mental level, and in parallel with the Spirit speaking through their hearts, aware that 'their people' is the same as 'all people and all life,' for it's to *all* forms of life that they truly belong, and refuse to divide and reduce. Of course, most people stand somewhere between the ends of this scale, but that's the scale. Those are the two general sides to this seemingly endless war of and for humanity, and we all weigh into it on one relative side of the scale or the other."

"And this dichotomous truth either isn't realized or doesn't prevail over the weaknesses of the other group," Henry prompts, "the first group. The weaknesses they falsely affirm as inescapable 'realities;' the mistakenly 'unavoidable realities' of the 'realist' that you say is actually the cowardly immoralist. Those that've commanded humankind through said weaknesses; through greed, ignorance, fear, ego, prejudice and the like, selling us all short."

"Yes," Alex agrees, "the misleading immoralists short-selling our greater potential and inhibiting our evolution. They're those that, whether or not they admit it to themselves or others, which they typically won't, for it'd entail an ego-destabilizing level of self-perception, are ideologically akin to those rapacious ancient Athenians that eventually took command of the ever-more twisted, oppressive, greedily-corrupt embryonic democracy and, during the Peloponnesian War, created the man-is-inherently-evil-so-evil-is-inevitable

decree of the might-makes-right 'realist,' attempting to coerce the Melians into submission by saying something like, what was it..."

Alex searches for the memory before finally saying: "We both know that into the discussion of human affairs the question of justice only enters where the pressure of necessity is equal, and that the powerful exact what they can, and the weak grant what they must.' Justice, in other words, is only relevant when it has the power of enforcement behind it. This is the dark side; the side of mental corruption; the side that reveres greed, that has no legitimate grasp upon morality and that sanctions narrowly-received gain for the excluding few at incalculably great loss for the vast majority. They're the consolidating group championing limitless opportunity cost through funneling as much value as possible, including political, economic, financial and natural resource value, into ever fewer hands, while the second group is the merited distribution of value and opportunity-cost-quelling group that fosters the greatest total value for humankind and life as a whole."

"And, again, the first group, the mentally corrupted and exploiting group, is winning by a *long* shot. Yet history has constantly been pushing back through men and women of conviction belonging to the second group that's *always* had Spirit on its side. And the pressure of this conflict and the injustices suffered at the hands of the first group continues to mount, propelling gradual progress in the slow bend of the moral universe towards an evolution that the first group can't *prevent*, only stall. I've vowed not to bend to the injustice, but to apply my own force toward doing anything that I can to help bend us towards justice, as any true progressive feels the absolute moral imperative to do. And, again, most people fall somewhere between the extremes of the groups as I've just described, with many applying a near to neutral force upon that arc."

"I've met many people of progressive conviction that play some part in helping bend the arc toward justice, but many more that, unaware of it, help to maintain the status quo in thought and action, pushing against that bend and thereby requiring the greatest progressive champions to apply more force than would otherwise be necessary to compensate. Most of those that resist the bend seem to be unaware that they do so, as so successfully indoctrinated into the prevailing culture of the first group are they that they believe that the prevailing course of history is the correct course, the course pushing *against* the bend; the course that's destined to be seen as ever more unevolved the more that we evolve. And so they speak and act to back the subjugation of the people. They've been deluded into acting against the best interests of total life."

“And yet it’s only a matter of time... a matter of how long and gradual the bend... which is determined by how many add force to the bend and how many are corrupted and brainwashed into opposing it,” Henry offers.

“Yes, something like that,” Alex replies. “It reminds me of the *Star Wars* saga, one of the more recent episodes of which, *The Force Awakens*, I watched recently. I was struck to the core of my heart by many spiritually-resonant scenes in that film. The series obviously takes dramatic liberties with the kinetic power of ‘the force,’ which is believable in the fantasy context of being set in ‘a galaxy far, far away,’ and yet I see the clearly spiritual core of these films to be an indication of the spiritual awareness that Lucas and I and many, *many* others share and, indeed, everyone likely instinctively senses to various degrees.”

“The force surrounds, binds and guides us. And you can turn away from its total-quality-of-life-guarding-guidance when the corruptible aspects of the mind and body, when the gratification of the ego and the senses, when the ‘easier, more seductive’ side of self-absorbed gratuitousness overwhelms the drive to seek truth, serve life, deny the greedy amassment and subdue the egotistic self-identification that drive people to betray total quality of life. And while putting people on one side or the other of this conflict between ‘the light’ and ‘the dark’ is an obvious oversimplification useful for the dramatic narrative, for all people contain the corruptible ‘dark side’ and the incorruptible ‘light side’ within them, in the end every person will serve one side more than the other through their thoughts, words and actions; through everything they do; through their work, through their purchases, through their associations, through their votes, through their actions and words in total.”

“Every person is, in fact, forever engaged in the struggle between the choice of selling out the greater good, the greater total value for life as a whole, for greedily perceived self-interest, or choosing to fight against this dark-sided force *for* that far greater total quality of life. Do I serve ‘we’ or ‘me,’ or might I finally come to realize that I can best serve me *through* the rewards of serving we? This war is perpetually waged within every individualization and, extending outwards from every one of us, engulfs the entire planet.”

“We all must choose to enrich the over-advantaged few at the unjustifiable cost of the many, to be paid to play a part in the exploitation of weakness for the greed of the plutocratic ownership class, to do what is the easiest and the most egotistically or gratuitously gratifying in the moment, or to follow the spiritual guidance of ‘the force,’ of the Spirit, and its encouragement of our

moral development and its creation of the conviction to defend against exploitation; to conceive and support the ideas and systems best equipped to build the greatest quality of life for the greatest numbers, and to develop the principles best suited to this preeminent objective, followed by the discipline to live by them.”

“And for me this seemingly eternal fight between the dark side and the light side, between the corruptible nature of the needing, vulnerable body and the limited, egocentric mind and the way in which they act to bend our will against the best interests of ourselves and others, and the incorruptible nature of the Spirit materially manifested into spacetime to permit infinite variety and perspective of life and the experience of existence, and most clearly communicating its will through our hearts... this fight is best won with spiritual realization shedding light upon the heart of morality and the learning of paralleling principles, the acquisition of quality knowledge and the development of conviction and discipline, all of which coalesce to create the capacity of true progressive champions.”

“Once the champion is made, or while being made, he or she must decide *how* to fight for progress. And I personally believe that this should involve fighting to help build and serve those systems ideally suited to support the greatest total quality of life’s limitless manifestations. For all that which is *systematic* is that which impacts life the most. Socially-governing and motivating *systems* are the roots from which most of humanity’s endeavors grow.”

“Ideally, it begins with infinite of one shared identity, stepping naturally from this into principled moral development precipitating courageous conviction and a fight for true ‘demos kratos,’ the original Greek root of the word ‘democracy,’ directly translated as ‘people power.’ The people have never *actually* known that power. And until we do, we’ll never be able to sufficiently wield the force of light to drive the dark side from its excluding, inherently-exploiting posts pretending to be by and for the people in all things, but *truly* being such in *no* things.”

“This seems a focal point of your ideology,” Henry says. “That in order for true democracy to be pursued and eventually realized, a critical first step is for the popular realization to set in that this democracy does not currently exist in anything but name... it’s all essentially a masquerade. And that makes sense. For how can the people demand people power if they all entertain the delusion that it already exists?”

“Exactly,” Alex states. “The plutocratic republic has erased true democracy from our minds in its brainwashing masquerade, in its misleading show of democracy, with most believing the song and dance, it seems, and to the *incalculably* immense loss of the *vast* majority. But so long as those exist that know what true democracy looks like, that erasure is not absolute, and cannot last. The ‘freedom’ propaganda in everything from ‘free market economics’ to the idea that America righteously spreads freedom across the planet has blinded us from the fact that freedom is *always* a two-way street, and that the freedom to be protected from those abusing their consolidated wealth and power and acting against our greatest collective interest is just as important as the freedom to act. In fact, the less wealth and power you have the greater the value of the ‘freedom from’ and the lesser the value of the ‘freedom to,’ as the freedom *to* is largely purchased, else made by power, and the freedom *from* is based upon being protected against the abuses of those that buy or use power to act against those lacking the knowledge, resources, regulations and other advantages, protections and privileges that shield them from victimhood. This victimhood is inflicted and upheld in ways and by means that are now so deeply, culturally imbedded that most don’t see them as wrongs, and are largely unaware of their own victimhood, though they may sense it on some level, and simply accept things as part of the ‘reality’ that actually need not be. It’s not the one and only reality, only the immoral, long-ingrained status quo.”

“And so long as there are those that see through the blindfold they, we, will act to remove it from the eyes of others so that they, too, might see the fact that a far superior reality is available to us as a whole when we find the awareness, conviction and collaborating, common cause to bring it into being. The corporations that once supported a prosperous middle class and blew life into the American Dream have locked the American and globalizing workforce into the hamster wheel of economic production, feeding us only as much as is necessary to keep us running while dissuading us from realizing that the American Dream is now more likely to be a bad dream about surviving until the next paycheck, and that the only justifiable position for any economic contributor is to possess a stake in the ripened fruits of economic growth and productivity.”

"It's a position far surpassing the sad, traditional standards of successfully raising the nibbling minimum wage and reducing the rate of those unable to find a wheel to spin for those subsistent morsels; those taught to see success in mere employment while exhaustingly, stressfully laboring the whole time to pay their rent or mortgage and, if they're lucky, set aside enough to experience some comforts or to get out of town one week a year, having a hell of a time financing an eventual retirement and ever more

commonly racking up a mountain of debt many will never pay off, but will pay fortunes in interest to bloated major shareholders in credit card companies just to maintain. So long as there are those who fight to pull people from the wheels and cages made of mental manipulation, corporate leverage and social and familiar pressure, the people that compose the economy will someday have an *actual* ownership stake in the ripened fruits of profit denied by every 'free' economy in history."

"You've placed a toweringly tall order in front of you, my friend," Henry replies after a few silently reflective seconds. "As tall an order as possible, I'd say. You mean to take on the whole world, it seems. You'd fight to remake the entire western landscape: the political system, the economic system, the structure of business and the theological realm... to turn all the paradigms of society on their head, reordering the ways in which all the major ideas and systems are understood. You'd remake the whole Western Culture, and maybe the world, if you could. I think that many people, perhaps even most people, would say you're naïvely unrealistic."

"Yes," Alex replies. "I know that I'm speaking idealistically: that is, that I'm speaking in terms of courageously and honorably fighting for the best interests of humanity in our quest to overcome the so-called 'realist' conservatives that would have us believe that the long-entrenched systems, powers and interests are justified and permanent, and that those with advantages taking advantage of the disadvantaged will always constitute the prevailing reality such that it's naïve to oppose this one and only reality and the systems, powers and interests that promote it. I don't accept this, of course, and I never will."

"It's but the contemporary reality ever-changing relative to the proportion, conviction, determination, organization and ability of progressive people, and it's a reality that'll one day be seen as existing on the unevolved side of history. Fighting for the ideal, regardless of whether or not that ideal is reachable in your lifetime or *ever* reachable, frankly, is the only just course. Accepting the status quo as the one and only reality is cowardly and progress-stalling at best, regressive at worst, and profiting from it is immoral and self-absorbed, selling-out the far greater potential of humankind in the process."

"True conviction based upon this undeniable knowledge and the inviolable principles underpinning it knows no compromise, nor do those compelled by it, as this would constitute compromising justice and the greater potential and happiness of humankind. And the inevitable idealistic state of the world



is reached relative to the victories of men and women of such true, uncompromising conviction and courage.”

“We may make compromises when this is the only short-term action available, like seeking to take three steps forward, but being restricted to one. But we can never compromise the long-term objective, because that’s what idealism is: seeking to identify, understand and pursue the one right way; to locate and find the strength to climb the challenging, uphill path toward the one greatest good. No truly honorable individual can see anything but cowardice, ego, greed and, taken together in the creation of suffering-inducing disparities, *evil* in justifications like ‘it’s just business.’”

“Considering the nature of profit and wealth accumulation, such truly progressive people know, or at least sense, that, as illustrated by the creation and extraction of value analysis of Quality of Life Economics, the most successful modern business people are amongst the *least* successful human beings. The Business Collective concept is made to aid in a balancing of the value equation, such that this need no longer be true. But I also know how well dug-in the societal systems supporting the modern reality, the reality my four cornerstones seek to supplant, really are.”

“So I know how immensely difficult it’ll be to remove them from the conventional mindset of false wisdom so that the four cornerstones, or anything like them, may be pounded into their place in support of our gradually rising to our greatest heights as a species. I know it’ll take a very long, hard, determined fight, building upon the effort of past progressives and relying upon a forming future army fighting for life as a whole. But, of course, nothing all that good comes all that easily. The level of reward is usually commensurate with the level of difficulty.”

“All this being the case,” Henry responds, “what can you *personally* hope to accomplish?”

“Going with the foundation and building greatest good metaphor,” Alex replies, “what I hope for is to be able to contribute to the blueprint designed to provide the best structures for supporting the greatest potential and quality of life for life as a whole, regardless of how long it takes for that structure to be built in the place of the current edifices of greed and corruption that have long stood, having been built upon the traditions of the monarchies and aristocracies and empires of the past constantly being restructured to fight progressive movements mounted in the best interests of life as a whole.”

“This evolution of repressive, excluding tactics includes ever-remodeled variations of pretend democracy, of perpetuating the masquerade of contemporary governance being by and for the people, as in our plutocratic republic colluding with corporatism moving toward oligarchy; a prevailing history of strategy in which anything or anyone challenging the ability of the few to take as much value from the planet and the people as they can is instantly derided and dismissed using reflex-triggering, propagandist, demagogic rhetoric.”

“Such rhetoric includes labels like ‘socialist,’ ‘terrorist,’ ‘conspiracy theorist,’ ‘naïve idealist’ and ‘cynic.’ These labels usually mean, and should respectively be redefined to mean, ‘not exploitable for the profiteering of the few to the great loss of the many,’ ‘resisting forced globalization and the cultural homogenization of classism and consumerism through violent invasion and occupation or their threat,’ ‘seeing the motive, means and opportunity behind the drive to conspire inherent to greed,’ ‘courageously seeking the best interests for the greatest numbers,’ and ‘realizing that it’s inherent to the nature of self to benefit the self, even when those acts also benefit others, which moral selfishness demands.’”

“Progressives such as myself must band together and keep repeating these truths until even those not disposed towards asking questions and thinking critically begin to see the nature of the corporation- controlled, value-robbing world that’s destroying humankind’s greatest potential and quality of life. I can only hope that my ideas become part of the dialogue and help to inspire action leading to more people joining that progressive fight against the systems that sell-out the greatest quality of life value of humankind.”

“It’s only a matter of time, a matter of the long arc of moral history bending toward the establishment of systems such as the four cornerstones I speak of: The Political Point System of Democratic Governance, Quality of Life Economics, Business Collectivism and Monoexistential Spirituality. Four cornerstones promoting the highest quality of life as a whole by supporting the strongest structure best able to house mankind’s greatest collective quality of life. Four cornerstones lifting us above the injustices born of greedy traditions that’ve stalled the evolutionary progress of our species. Establishing these cornerstones of society won’t immediately place us on the higher plane of human evolution, but they *will* facilitate it, naturally motivating our evolution.”

“How to proceed...?,” Henry wonders aloud. “How to get people to push for that evolution?”

"Therein lies the greatest challenge," Alex immediately replies. "For if there's one thing that has been consistently demonstrated to me in my attempts to breathe life into my constructs and writings, in my attempt to get people to even consider them, it's that the realization of vital truths and the creation of substantial concepts and principles grown from such truth is only a fraction of the challenge, and perhaps the smaller part of the fraction. Of just as much importance is the strategy of seeding and spreading that content and cultivating its growing development until its immense unrealized potential value can no longer be ignored."

"Clearly, conclusively and effectively deploying the truth is just as important as the truth itself, for without mass understanding and solidarity of purpose rallying behind and demanding that realization, the truth itself is only of value to the few that possess it, and its far greater potential is forsaken. Therefore, progressing towards human-kind's higher evolutionary states requires creating a progressive momentum built upon universal principles and ideas that most everyone can, and ultimately will, embrace; principles that exclude no one and which, when effectively, patiently, persistently and respectfully communicated, can't fail to rally anyone with any progressive inclination to the cause which will eventually break through the barriers of greed, ignorance and prejudice and the related ego, fear and ignorance held by those that fight to prevent that inevitable, only-a-matter-of-time evolution. And I see this cause as a two-part process."

"The first part: bring together the like-minded, those already disposed towards universal justice, into the same course of conviction. It's well understood that significant progress, especially at the level of the paradigm-shifting, belief-status-quo-makeover necessary for the US and those following our lead to become agents of human evolution, isn't possible without moral men and women uniting in shared conviction. Many are aware of the injustices in the world and of the inherently unjust consolidations of wealth and power, and the systems that perpetuate it. But this isn't enough. The Occupy Wall Street movement clearly demonstrates this fact, that we need to unify behind and organize our efforts pursuant to clear, unbreakable objectives."

"I've heard an apt metaphor signifying the inimitable value and necessity of this union: Place stress upon one stick and it'll easily break, but the more sticks that you tie together, the harder it becomes to break the bundle, until, eventually, it becomes all but impossible to break an innumerably-bound bundle of such sticks. We *are* those sticks, and the greed, ego and other shortcomings of

the conservative mindset compel its agents to disperse or bend us, hoping we'll scatter or break so that our resistance can be burned in the fire of greed and weakness that has engulfed the greater good throughout the history of humankind. We must, therefore, tie ourselves together, aligning ourselves as uniformly as possible, caring not who gets the personal credit. Only divided can we be conquered. United in common cause we can't be broken, and will support our greatest potential total quality of life."

After a pause Henry speaks up: "And the second part of the process...?"

"The second step," Alex continues, "is convincing those that, out of the aforementioned, intertwined mental shortcomings, out of ego, fear, ignorance, prejudice, greed and the like, act to effectively prevent progress, regardless of how aware they are of their complicity. This is perhaps the greatest challenge of all. And in this matter, the question becomes: How do you communicate your own realizations clearly, effectively and especially *non-threateningly* enough to compel people to actually listen, and ideally change their views and desire to act in league with life? Formulating such a highly effective, efficiently-delivered strategy of progress-propelling communication is doubly important when your target are those that, for a variety of reasons, are predisposed to resist or immediately reject your convictions and the concepts upon which they rest; those with conservative backgrounds and view- points, in other words."

"Many in my own extended family possess such positions. The issue is that challenging those costly perspectives isn't merely a matter of challenging ideas, but a matter of challenging their *entire world*; the only way they see and understand the world and themselves and their place within it, compelling a great proportion of their thoughts and actions. If your goal is to get such people to look at the world and themselves differently, how reasonable you are is nowhere close to as important as the manner in which you convey that reason, or so it seems to me. Attempting to overcome their objections by demonstrating the logical superiority of your ideology is almost always an ineffective strategy in such cases, because their egos and connected insecurities will take control of their minds and they'll close themselves off to your ideas, *regardless* of their merit. They'll still be able to hear you, but they won't be able to *truly listen*. I'm gradually learning that winning arguments is of little progressive value; it's but a hollow, prideful, egotistic type of victory."

"If someone holding an opposing viewpoint understands or in any way senses that your contentions are compelled by pride, that your arguments are

motivated by a desire to defeat them, they'll wall themselves off, defending the fortress of their own ego from your assaults. This is why no headway is possible when the discussion is construed as a debate by either party, because a debate implies a winner and loser, and most egos are of the insecurity and size whereby an admission of being in the wrong is unfeasible, especially when it comes to major values and beliefs."

"And so the possessor of said ego is immediately put on the defensive when they feel they're under assault, when they see you as sieging their fortress, so to speak. Being in this position in their own minds renders them unable to truly listen, as they're, instead, always formulating an attempt to prevail. They'll only think of the rebuttal, if not becoming outright emotionally unhinged, even feeling violent. They'll never truly absorb what's being proposed, or, as your words will be perceived while they're in this mindset, to what's being *argued*. The perceptive difference between a non-invasive, respectfully, ideally *lovingly* made proposal and a pride-infused attacking argument is the difference between most people being opened or closed. It's the difference between the bridge being lowered, or raised and defended. I read something on a bottle of kombucha yesterday that concisely puts the principle to which I'm speaking, actually... I can't recall to whom it was attributed. Whomever it was said: 'When you talk *to* people, they hear you. When you talk *with* people, they listen.' The difference is everything."

"All such dialogues are like egotistic battles, in other words, with the person's idea of themselves being walled off within them. And most egos are invulnerable to head-on attacks. You're wasting your energy. Even if you crack their walls they'll busily work to reinforce those weak points. Headway is only possible when a contest *isn't* implied or inferred, except perhaps in those rare cases when speaking to those with a well-controlled, minimized ego. You have to approach the gate while waving the white flag."

"So don't attempt to win a debate, for, in the course of making progress, you'll end up falling into the moat, so to speak. Instead, you must come at them with love and respect and an understanding of *why* they believe what they believe as much or more than you employ reason and evidence backing your own position. You must calmly listen to and attempt to understand the person whose heart and intellect you're trying to engage and lead to a more valuable set of truths for themselves and others, for they, of course, most likely believe they already possess them, and will defend them, and repel you, if they feel at all under threat. Egos lashing out in the perception of being under threat is a *huge* part of almost all human conflict."

“Preventing selective deafness and egotistic self-defense is an exceedingly difficult practice that begins within yourself,” Alex continues, “for you must let go of your own ego, your own ‘small self,’ for the greatest progress to become possible. Be respectful. Even when you don’t respect their stance, if they at least sense that you possess respect for them as a fellow human being, you’ve already gone half the distance. You’ve already begun crossing their drawbridge.”

“And truly listen to them without thinking of your own position when they wish to speak. Try to see things through their eyes and methodically, patiently move toward the point of penetration, removing the walls between you from the *inside*, and not with blunt rational force or even cutting evidential precision, but with calm, considerate, steady stone removal, making sure not to push them into a defensive position where their mind and capacity for reason and listening shuts down. For once this happens it doesn’t matter if you express your argument flawlessly; they’ll put all their effort into maintaining their fortification, and nothing will get in. Only such a tactic based upon listening, patience, releasing ego and demonstrating mutual respect while making well-reasoned, logically- concrete arguments has the potential to change the minds of most that see your beliefs as wrong.”

“I imagine that most people don’t possess the principles, discipline and patience to enact such a strategy,” Henry comments. “Which, I suppose, is why so few people ever seem to change their minds. So I’d guess that makes this is one of the biggest obstacles to progress.”

“This is the way it goes with the restructuring of belief systems,” Alex adds, “especially if this prospective reconstruction threatens the person’s egotistic identity wrapped up in the deeply-ingrained concept you’re attempting to break down. For, in these all-too-common circumstances, they’ll persistently hang on to a prideful inability to admit any fault in their beliefs and ideas of themselves that they’ve so long built up and are comfortable being housed within. It takes a lot of calm, persistent, actively-listening, respect-reciprocating effort to effectively compel mental reformation, but it’s possible.”

“I’ve heard it argued that it’s so gradual that it can scarcely be observed, and must be expected to take generations to accumulate to the point where any major shifts take place within certain families and sectors of society. But you have to break down the old before you can build up the new, and they have to actively participate in that mental demolition and reconstruction, so to speak; you can’t do it for them.”

"It's like the proverb 'you can lead a horse to water but you can't teach it to drink,' though I suppose some might find this insulting considering the context. Perhaps it's better to say it's reminiscent of the line from the original *Matrix* film: 'I can only show you the door, you have to be the one to walk through it.' You can't pound in the truth. Force is ineffectual. *They have to let it in*. They have to *realize* it, it can't be realized for them. They have to cross the threshold of their own accord. Thus, it's *very* difficult to accomplish this task, not only because it requires immense patience and a sustained strategy of active listening combined with their willingness and ability to step across the threshold between mindsets, but because your own ego will push you to win the debate which, again, is usually futile. Any attempt to force the change will fail."

"I have to admit I think you've nudged me towards the threshold," Henry responds, though a bit unconvincingly, at least to Alex's ears. "And I see your point: One of the biggest challenges is fighting through people's misconceptions, such as that they're part of a 'democracy,' that they contribute to a 'free economy,' that the American Dream is open to everyone equally, rather than largely being the purchased ability to funnel increasing quantities of the value produced through our economy to one's self, leeching off of the people and the planet. And that we're a righteous, Christian nation earning our way into heaven, rather than the truth being closer to people being marked for conning and becoming self-righteously blinded and deluded... that religions turn the truth that we're all variations of the same eternal being into empire's need for hierarchy, mind control and costly, violently-competing mythologies of the one version and words of God."

Henry submits his summary of Alex's morning exposition before reaching over and stopping his phone's recorder. With a heavy sigh and deep breath, he adds: "I'm heading back to Austin with your ideas in tow. I don't possess the same conviction or grasp of the concepts as you do, but hopefully the force will guide me," he adds with a little grin. "That is, if I'm able to keep my ego at bay. Hopefully I can summon the strength and words to inspire my pops to support us."

Having already packed his belongings, Henry finishes loading his vehicle with Alex's assistance, and moments later drives his Range Rover down the hill, vacating the property. For good?, Alex wonders. Knowing full well that Henry lives a lavish life of luxury lacking nothing once within the sphere of his family's influence, it's more likely that the corruptibility of the ego and the flesh will win over the drive of the Spirit willing him to be a part of the push toward realizing a more prosperous future for humankind as a whole, whether by Alex's conceived

route or another. His case is particularly difficult, Alex thinks, seeing as he can have it so well so easily and would be forced to trade this unobstructed path for a strenuous uphill path replete with obstacles. The body and mind's corruptibility and the connected consolidating pursuits of his family's investment firm, despite his father's easy nature and philanthropic predilections, are overwhelmingly influential forces to anyone but the most disciplined and motivated people of steadfast conviction and spiritual attunement.

And therein lies the problem. Not just with Henry, of course, but with anyone possessing any shred of progressive will: the limited ability of that will to overcome the mental and physical seduction and corruption of wealth, power, materialism and gratuitously-addictive sensory gratification when it's dangled in front of them, and the similarly limited ability to overcome the demands and expectations of family and conventional society that steer us down the well tread path. Which is why progressive willpower must be potent and bound to the ironclad will of others in order for the individual *not* to take the bait; for the progressively-inclined not to be divided and conquered so that total quality of life progress may break through sooner rather than later; so that a greater existence and less misery may be realized by ever greater numbers as soon as possible. Without that will and solidarity, progress is easily stalled by greed and conventional cultural values and expectations, if not by the demands of survival and the potentially overwhelming distractions of modern life; by appetites, ambitions and conventions. The easier, more seductive path. The path of culturally- encouraged winner-eat-loser cutthroat contention, overindulgent consumption and narrow identification.

"Divided we're conquered by the consolidators and their political, economic and commercial machines," Alex thinks while looking out across the unspoiled forest. "But together we have more power than we've ever come near to realizing." Most power is forsaken when its possessors don't realize they possess it. But when they *know* they possess it, and when they realize that power is exponentially greater when woven together with the power of other people of progressive conviction, and when it's pulled upon by the right leaders propelled by the right ideas, the whole world can be pulled up to a higher plane of...

"Lost in meditation?," Stacy asks, sneaking up behind and startling Alex, causing him to jump. "I wouldn't say lost," Alex replies, smiling and steadying himself. "Meditation is closer to being found, I'd say. Wouldn't you? It's when you stray from the Spirit, when you're outside the truest Self, when you follow your body and ego and allow the corruptible drives of body and mind to compromise and send your



truest Self off course, away from following the guidance given through the heart... *That's* when you're lost. For a body and mind failing to serve as extensions of the heart assuredly fails to be true to truest Self. Yet I suppose that it's also true that to forever follow the heart in all regards would render all things settled, and who would want to live with such certainty of self-control that every event is guaranteed? Then, of course, there're the incalculable benefits of practicing mindfulness; of being in the present. It reminds me of something I journaled last night: Only when the mind is quiet can we fully hear. Let go of your thoughts and you shall arrive in the present."

"Always with the full-fledged response," Stacy teases. "Can you ever just give a simple yes or no answer? Does it always have to be the sermon from the philosophical mount?," she chides.

"I can't help myself," Alex replies. "I naturally tend to dive beneath the surface. I harbor an overwhelming need to understand more than what's immediately visible to all, for surfaces can be misleading and concealing."

"Yeah, I know. And it works, at least for me, so please don't take my kidding the wrong way," Stacy says with a smile. "That's one of the reasons that I'm here, staying on your property. You're interesting. There's more to you than most of the men that I've met. You get me to consider ideas that I might never have contemplated otherwise."

Both Kate and Amanda flash into Alex's mind as she says this. "Good," Alex says uneasily after a long pause. "Though I'm not certain that Amanda would find that all too good..."

"I don't think that she likes me very much... I don't think any of them do, really, except for you, perhaps," Stacy replies with an endearing smile.

"I think they like you well enough," Alex says. "Maybe they like you a little too much, and that's why they don't like you, if you take my meaning..."

"No... I can't say that I do," Stacy responds. "That sounds a bit paradoxical to me, actually..."

"You have to take into account that you possess many appealing qualities of body and mind which others, both men and women, don't possess, and desire greatly," Alex offers. "And, thus, they'll desire, envy

and resent you relative to the extent which they lack those things which you have and they want, especially if they're unhappy. I don't know you well, obviously, but from our encounters to this point this principle seems highly applicative. It's from this that your sense of being disliked comes."

"That's sweet... So, you want to go for a walk?," Stacy asks, looking away as if embarrassed, her face becoming flush.

Alex glances towards the house and, through the glass walls, sees no one stirring. "You seem to be one of the earliest risers this morning," he says. "Though I'm a bit surprised that there's no one else out and about yet considering how long Henry and I were talking."

"How long *you* were talking, you mean," she says with a beaming smile.

"What've you been up to, stalking Henry and me from the forest?," he asks.

"Well... I could tell you two were deep into something..." she replies. "And sometimes even the *girls* go hunting, when they start to feel like the value of their prey is worth the risk of the hunt." Nothing is said for a good five seconds as they look at one another, performing their assessments.

"When the traditional notion of what constitutes 'right' begins to fade with the idea that the right thing is not always staying on the comfortable course of absolute fealty..." she continues. "Even when you like that course... when it's sweet and beautiful and offers great joy. Sometimes even then there's a better course promising even sweeter views and higher summits. Do you simply bypass that pathway, pretending it's not there, ignoring its potential?"

"I had a similar discussion recently, and a clear answer seems to elude me," Alex replies. "Though I can say I still have great love for the current course, and it's eroded to the point where I'm afraid it'll crumble..."

"It reminds me of a piece of a sermon I caught last Sunday," Stacy interjects. "I'm not the least bit religious, more one of a pure, unspecified spirituality like yourself, but every so often you run into a preacher that has some truly valuable insights to offer. And this televangelist was talking about how we should never fully adapt to our environment. Never get too comfortable, because it's a trap. The more

comfortable you get the less likely you are to climb to greater personal heights; to keep learning and growing. The more likely you are to settle for simply being safe and secure, forsaking progress. Which is an ironic thing for an evangelist to say when you think about it. But I realize how valuable that lesson is nonetheless: Never get too comfortable. Constantly push yourself outside your comfort zone. Become comfortable with being uncomfortable, in other words, for the precious rewards of growth are seldom comfortably attained, but are commensurate with tolerating the discomforts of risk, uncertainty and difficulty. I find that I have to push myself this way..."

Alex's heart begins to pound as he imagines that Stacy is alluding to certain intentions. He looks away from her down the canyon, thinking of the discussion he'd had with Kate just before agreeing to the bonfire party precipitating his fall from grace. At this instant a slight breeze hits and parts the canopy, and the sun suddenly shoots through the tightly packed Redwoods of the little grove for the first time, striking and warming Alex's face. Standing in the center of the small grove, he looks straight up and feels as though a cathedral of the Spirit is stretched out above him, its tallest, most magnificent manifestations sheltering him in their ruddy-walled embrace, the rays of the rising sun shimmering through in rhythmic harmony with the gently swaying grove soaring hundreds of feet into the blue sky splotched with wisps of white cloud. As he gazes out across the hillside, he thinks of the fast climbing temperature and its acceleration of the rate at which the dew collected by the flora over the course of the past evening is being warmed, approaching the point where it's readily evaporated along with the disappearing dusk-to-dawn fog.

The flora's overnight capture gradually warms, rising to meet the final wafts of that fog rolling through the river canyon, sucked in from the coast, and the two points of precipitation swirl together energetically, as if the one is meeting the other for the first time and each is invigorated by the dynamic dance, jockeying for the proper position in their partnership. It takes a few seconds, but an accord is struck, an equilibrium is established, and the rising and rushing fronts of moisture fuse in the balance between them. They're now indistinguishable. All things become one. He looks back at her, and is again struck by her beauty. He sees in her eyes an attempt to discern his feelings, and in his eyes she sees attraction; a yearning that he both sadly and joyfully appears powerless to contain.

"I must say, you look very nice this morning," Alex says nervously, as if

clumsily sidestepping an obstacle that's suddenly been placed in the very course Stacy had described moments before, when alluding to Amanda. To go over it, around it, or seek an altogether different path?, Alex wonders, silently invoking the Spirit for the strength to choose correctly.

"Thank you," she says. "Yet physical attraction is simply the spark. It takes more to set the fire fully ablaze."

The parallel with Kate's words before the bonfires is uncanny. A warning?, Alex wonders.

"Without a meeting and mutual challenge of the minds," Stacy continues with a distant look in her eyes, "the flames of that fire can never be fanned to the point where they rise to their highest, hottest potential. The blaze will never burn particularly bright, and will diminish, losing its passionate fury, lacking the fuel necessary to feed the flame to its fullest force. Such fires are certain to diminish and eventually sink to the point where neither the body nor the mind can draw any great warmth or strength from their flames, and ever-increasing effort will be required to keep such dying fires from extinguishing. I hope you don't take this the wrong way, but, as sweet as some girls are, and as cute a couple as they appear to be a part of, I can't help but notice that some will likely burn brighter with a more naturally synergistic match. I think that your personal bonfire has yet to be set fully ablaze. Do you deny its existence for the sake of what seems to be a sinking, insufficiently-fueled flame?"

Stacy stares with a piercing intensity into Alex's eyes as she says this, her curly brown hair hanging close to her emerald green eyes flashing with nervous excitement as they reflect the intermittent rays passing through the parting branches. She's knows that she's put herself out on a limb.

"I'm not sure, Stacy," Alex replies hesitantly. "But walking gets the blood pumping. Maybe enough of it will be pumped to the point where my brain can draw such a determination... After you..." he adds while motioning down the road leading into the shadows, beckoning her to take the lead.

Stacy beams broadly and takes her first step towards the tumbling river running through the canyon below. Alex takes in her pleasing form with his peripheral vision before being pulled along by her magnetism, soon

matching her stride for stride. Yet even with this alluring, bright woman lapping at his shore, Alex's mind is on the river below. Poetic thoughts suddenly flood into his brain, and he finds himself speaking them aloud:

“With the water winding forever down the river at varying seasonal force, thrashing and rolling with the pressures of the time, our lives are as the drops. Regardless of the quality and the content of the mind, each drop is subject to the coarse, crashing stones and the cool, calming pools, from their precipitous fall into existence to their coalescence with the sea's collective. There its irreducible nature awaits to be called up and cast forth anew. Yet, even in the same river no two drops are drawn along the precise same course, with some long swirling in the pleasing, peaceful pools, while others are continually cast through violent cascades, waiting to plunge down lofty waterfalls before momentarily resting in relief. Each is dropped at different points upon the planet, propelled through every manner of environ. Yet all innately need to be bonded, reaffirming their interdependent nature, cutting through even the most ancient and intimidating mountains with sufficient consistence and combined force of flow. Many drops are tempted by the barren, hottest stretches to make a run for the assurance of the sea, believing that only by the best, most direct course are they certain to forever be. And only here may each drop go dry, for by fleeing from the suffering swelter the ecstasy of the river's meanderings are missed along the way. The bay is forever welcoming. You cannot long go astray, and not one drop may ever be turned away.”

Stacy takes Alex's hand in hers, and he gives it a soft, reassuring squeeze. The waters ahead are bound to be turbulent long before the calamity calms, allowing life's still pools to collect them in their peaceful embrace. All that's known for certain is the final destination of the water, the reentry of their unique compositions into the perfectly-pervasive, universally-distributing collective, and that every unique drop experiences the forever flowing river in its own way, an experience never to be repeated precisely the same ever again. Concern over previous plummets, current travails and future falls from the proper course distracts the drops from experiencing the full effect of the fleeting experience, dashing much of their moisture upon the rocks as lost opportunities to maximize the full, uniquely inimitable moments making up their journey. Being completely immersed in the river's course as it cascades inexorably toward the ocean, naturally compelled to seek the ideal path for the entirety of the current, fulfills both the river's, and every drop's, greatest overlapping purpose.



## APPENDIX

### *The Economics of Existence*

**On the Double-Edged Sword of Freedom, the Free to Exploit Economy, and How Extreme Disparity of Wealth and Possession Demonstrates an Unjustifiable Waste of Life**

#### **Introducing the Theory: Quality of Life Economics**

As a philosopher with strong progressive convictions, I'm compelled by the belief that all systems made to serve humanity and to organize and channel its pursuits, including economics, must be first and foremost concerned with creating the greatest possible total quality of life for humankind. Production absent total quality of life increase is not only morally hollow, but it betrays all those whom contribute to it. Therefore, the 'point' of all human systems is to best serve humanity as a whole, and, thus, the crux of this project is to create a basis for reframing the economic debate and, indeed, to refocus the very *purpose* of economics upon total quality of life. This belief, in turn, is based upon the implications of what I assert to be 'the point of life:' As life is inherently valuable and constituting of its own purpose, the point of life is to strive to maximize its inherent value for both oneself and for as many others as possible.

There's nothing more important to any life than its quality; than the quality of one's experience of existence. Furthermore, the quality of every existence is equally important. If we accept these premises, we must also accept that the foremost concern of any system impacting life is to facilitate the greatest possible increase in the quality of all the lives which it serves, while simultaneously protecting those lives from reductions in existential quality. Thus, all things of value, including all financial, natural and manmade resources, are only of value to the extent which they serve this preeminent quality of life objective. This may be considered the *quality of life utility value* of the resource.

Based upon this moral impetus, we are honor-bound to construct, maintain, support and otherwise influence every system in a manner conducive to maximizing its total quality of life utility value. We pursue this *not* by communistically enforcing a perfectly equal distribution of financial and material resources and opportunities regardless of merit, but by working to assure that every system we craft or influence that has an impact upon life naturally cultivates a merited means of granting financial rewards, material resources and opportunities to *everyone* contributing to and depending upon those systems. Being compelled by this morally-sound impetus of economic evaluation highlights the failure of unrestrained capitalism; it is both unmerited in its conferral of benefits *and* grossly underserving of total quality of life, leaving the wealthy and powerful and those that buy political patronage the freedom (hence 'free market economics') to exploit every vulnerability of life and the planet in a manner which ultimately severely restricts total quality of life. Put another way, we must craft and contribute to *symbiotic* rather than *parasitic* systems. And Quality of Life Economics serves to examine and ultimately shed corrective clues upon the gap between parasitism and symbiosis within the context of economic study and its modes and means of analysis.

The purpose of Quality of Life Economics is to seek to understand the constituents of quality of life as much as possible in order that those whom rely upon it may work to provide as many opportunities as possible for the people as a whole to improve the quality of their lives, and thereby the total quality of life. Once these constituents and the means of their creation and expansion are understood, they must thereafter be made to inform the ethical foundation, policies and procedures of business, economics and politics in ways which are conducive to the foremost objective of maximizing the quality of human life *as a whole*.

For economics to truly serve life, this pursuit must be uncompromising with conflicting pursuits, including those of excluding business owners and those



suggested by the prevailing 'free market' economic theory in the West and most of the world at large, as said conflicting pursuits hail from the priorities of those entities which, regardless of motive, effectively act to undermine the majority best interest. It's clear to me (and *many* others) that the U.S., and most of the globalizing world following our lead, does a horrendous job of utilizing its total available resources in the facilitation of improving total quality of life.

This simply isn't the prevailing motive within our overlapping political, economic and business spheres; spheres which are heavily influenced, even dominated, by individuals, corporate entities and theories concerned with maximizing production and wealth for the benefit of an ever more exclusive class of profiteering individuals who effectively bar the vast majority from possessing the opportunity to pursue a maximization in their respective and collective quality of life. Worse yet, it's not only the people who pay the unsustainable price of the greed served by the one-sided form of freedom underlying the 'free market,' but the planet and most of life.

"Free Market Economics," the prevailing system of economics in the United States, is defined as the price of goods and services being determined by the 'free,' open market through the buying and selling of consumers. "Capitalism," the prevailing system of commerce in the United States, is defined as 'capital goods' being owned by private individuals and business interests whose production and supply of goods and services is dictated by demand in the 'free,' open market. Under a 'laissez faire' capitalist system "private individuals are completely unrestrained in determining where to invest, what to produce or sell and at which prices to exchange goods and services, operating without checks or controls (Kenton, 2019)."

Most modern economies are not entirely 'unrestrained' in this manner, with their governments enforcing regulations to protect the worker, consumer and environment to some extent. In the U.S. and most of the world following our lead, this extent is rather minimal, as those controlling most of the wealth and the power that it grants them *freely* work to assure that little inhibits their interests. The funneling of cash and connected influence into a political system that fails to bar such plutocratic influence amounts to systemic, culturally ingrained and indemnified corruption effectively undermining any concrete capacity to serve the best interests of the vast majority, interests which, by and large, are mutually exclusive with those of the laissez-faire-fringe capitalists controlling every apparatus of our nation. Core to these considerations is that Americans, and most of the world, it seems, has reduced 'freedom' to mean only *negative freedom*.

What's seldom discussed and sometimes even understood in economic, business and political circles, and amongst the people of the U.S. in general, is that freedom is *not* a single-edged sword. Almost all truths, in fact, aren't absolute, but are relative, exist on a spectrum and 'cut both ways,' per the double-edged sword metaphor I find to be near universal in its capacity of illumination. Within the conceptual context of freedom, this means that there exists both 'negative freedom' and 'positive freedom,' essentially and respectively meaning the freedom *to* and the freedom *from*, as in the freedom to do something and the freedom from having something done to you. On a relative scale, one can't cut one way without cutting *away* from the other direction, making the need for balance between the two, for the desire and attempt to cut down the middle, imperative, and, I'd argue, an essential function of government related to assuring the rights connected to both forms of freedom.

Critically, one can deduce from U.S. history, especially the founding of its government and leading institutions by wealthy upper class aristocrats from Europe, that U.S. cultural norms emphasize the negative form of freedom, the elimination of obstacles, due to the fact that this benefits those that own equity in commercial interests and all its connected controls and door-opening opportunities, and whom wield directly connected political power in a country whose political class remains mostly comprised of and financed by the upper class, and whose laws, again, don't prohibit the financial influence (even the outright purchase) of political parties, institutions and leaders through the lobbying and campaign finance systems. This has been all the more true since the *Citizens United* ruling cleared the way for private citizens and their corporations to funnel funds through political action committees (PACs) in avoidance of campaign contribution limitations, thereby undermining the very purpose of such limitations.

Amongst the innumerable cascading effects of these national historical, cultural and systemic influences is a nation whose disparity measures are outlandish and continue to grow, with the top 1% of the nation's population receiving over 20% of its total income while experiencing a rate of increase in their incomes *seven times* that of the income increase of the bottom 20% of the nation's population (Inequality.org, 2019).

As another disturbing piece of pertinent statistical information, *Wikipedia* states near the outset of its article "Wealth inequality in the United States," that: "The net worth of U.S. households and non-profit organizations was \$94.7 trillion in the first quarter of 2017, a record level both in nominal terms

and purchasing power parity.<sup>[4]</sup> If divided equally among 124 million U.S. households, this would be \$760,000 per family; however, the bottom 50% of families, representing 62 million American households, average \$11,000 net worth. From an international perspective, **the difference in US median and mean wealth per adult is over 600%.**<sup>[6]</sup>”

Personally, I often see these statistics relative to the zero sum game concept, and in the metaphorical light of a stretching rubber band. That is, there’s only so much income, wealth and resources to be allocated across humanity at any one time, and there’s no way for the exclusive few to take ever more without the remainder having ever less. This is all the more true when we consider that the few make most of their profits *off of* the many and the planet; off of the working, mass-consuming class and the ever more taxed and destabilizing planet paying for the unsustainable profits of the ownership class. A dirty little secret that conservative economics denies, of course, using misleading arguments like the forever growing pie, concealing the truth that the pie is fully baked and set *at any given time*. The effect is much like wrapping a rubber band around the classes. As the equity owners pull in their direction, the lower classes must be pulled in the opposite, and the ever thinning, insecure and under-increasing-tension middle class sits in the middle of this rubber band. “The middle class is shrinking, stagnating and becoming less secure, even as the world enters the 10<sup>th</sup> year of economic growth and the U.S. experiences a decade-long bull market (Arends, 2019).”

This unsustainable stretch ultimately impacts almost every aspect of life, as our ‘free’ capitalist market, in which the socialization of any market is viewed with suspicion at best, reflexive condemnation and purposefully-fanned, misleading association with history’s most brutal dictatorships at worst, dictates that almost everything that impacts quality of life must be paid for. Immorally, this includes necessities like healthcare and education. And, generally speaking, the higher the quality of the good or service being purchased and consumed, the higher its cost and the greater its impact upon the quality of life of the person, family or group consuming said good or service. This being the case, there are objective means to analyze the quality of life disparity experienced by the population of the United States as a whole, including the use of economic statistics, and to extrapolate from this that the total quality of life experienced by the U.S. population, taken as estimating a quality of life value for every citizen and adding these values up across the nation, is *far* lower than it could be were we to do a better job of improving the equality of the distribution of the means and opportunities available to the nation’s population at large. While certainly not a novel concept, it’s nevertheless a commonly mis- understood and under-appraised concept, and leads back to

economic, political, business and even spiritual theories, institutions and cultural norms and their failure to prioritize *total* quality of life. Tracing such a concept backwards in time may also lead you to the work of previous economic theorists who concerned themselves with the utilization, or utility value, of all resources.

William Jevons (1835-1882) was one of the greatest champions of the so-called 'marginalist economic revolution,' with he and his cohorts drawing attention to a principle which I myself landed upon in my own thinking, entirely independent and ignorant of Jevons' work and the theoretical revolution which he helped inspire. It is, obviously, not uncommon for thinkers operating within any discipline to come to similar, if not perfectly overlapping, conclusions, entirely free from one-another's influence. "Value," Jevons said, "depends entirely upon utility." "Jevons went on to define the *equation of exchange*, which shows that for a consumer to be maximizing his or her utility, the ratio of the marginal utility of each item consumed to its price must be equal. If it is not, then he or she can, with a given income, reallocate consumption and get more utility (The Library of Economics and Liberty, 2019)."

I'm in total agreement with Jevons, and believe it a moral imperative to evaluate political, business and economic theories and practices based upon their aforementioned quality of life utility value. One of the central concepts of Marginalism is 'marginal utility,' which essentially attempts to evaluate goods and services based upon their increased or decreased usefulness when their supply to an individual is increased or decreased. For most resources it's clear that what may be highly useful in the earlier stages of supply becomes less and less useful as supply is increased; that is, with most resources, it does less and less to improve the quality of life of those who consume or otherwise utilize it as its supply continues. This is an example of the Law of Diminishing Returns.

While only recently looking into Marginalism, and thus being un- aware if this theoretical framework might reach the same conclusions, I believe that the total quality of life utility and connected marginal quality of life utility are preeminent considerations in whether or not a resource should continue to be supplied to any individual or group beyond a certain quality of life return. The marginal quality of life re- turn to anyone from the supply of any resource dictates that resource's quality of life utility relative to its supply, and can be graphed and analyzed for its connected return, which, again, almost always diminishes per unit of supply as said supply increases.

What I believe to be most revealing from the analysis of these curves is that there comes a point in the supply of any resource to any one individual, family or other group where the quality of life return is *minimal* and, therefore, instead of increasing supply to said entity, said resource must, by the moral dictates of Quality of Life Economics, be distributed to another entity who has not come near to reaching such a minimization of return. If I can move the supply of some quantity or quality of a resource from one person to another and increase the marginal quality of life return significantly with this redistribution, then it's clear to me that I've done a 'good thing.' The difference between these two, between the quality of life return experienced by the former and the latter individual, family or group, respectively, defines the *marginal opportunity cost*. And it's my moral position that any economy and connected society that pays too much of this cost should not be deemed successful and hailed as 'advanced,' regardless of its total productivity. If being 'advanced' ignores honoring the quality of people's lives, and thereby dishonors those lives, then it's certainly an empty form of advancement suggesting that *true* advancement has yet to be achieved.

Another way to state this position: it matters little if a country is the most productive (in terms of GDP) and possesses the highest mean income and wealth in the world if the difference between its mean and median income and wealth is immense and, in connection, if its increases in production, income and wealth have little to no impact upon the total quality of life experienced by its population. This foremost principle can be illustrated many ways. For example, we can compare someone in the top 1% of U.S. income earners to someone in the bottom 20% of U.S. income earners and consider the relative marginal increase in quality of life experienced by the two individuals for every, say, one thousand dollar increase in their respective incomes. Or we might measure the quality of life impact upon each of their respective families if we were to give them each, say, twenty thousand dollars, or provide their children with free healthcare or university level education, or grant them innumerable other increases in their resource bases or wider-opened doors of opportunity to increase their quality of life.

What we'd invariably find is that the former would experience little, if any, increase in his or her quality of life and the overall quality of life of his/her family from most of these increases, while the latter would experience a *dramatic* increase, and that this gross separation in quality of life return continues to increase as the disparity in where- withal between the two parties grows. And it's not just money, but the overall quality of life value of *any* resource being supplied to each that determines its impact upon the

particular marginal quality of life return disparity. This, in turn, is mainly based upon the *necessity* of the resource.

For example, a starving homeless individual will receive *immense* quality of life increases from even a bare-bones allowance restricted to food and shelter expenses, whereas a billionaire would receive no such increase from the same gift. For the homeless individual, the immensity of the quality of life return in this instance relates to resources of 'inelastic demand;' resources whose level of demand remains consistently high, even unchanged, among those who need it, even with substantial increases in the price at which the market supplies it. Inelasticities of demand draw attention to resources that should be protected from having people's need and immense quality of life correlation exploited by those that use that need against them, in order to unscrupulously profit off of every form of vulnerability, entirely without legal consequence (largely because the suppliers have undue influence upon the law that morality dictates *should* restrain them). But even with-out delving into inelastic markets, simply considering our immense income and wealth disparities in the United States and their quality of life impact, it's feasible to posit that our country is highly *unsuccessful* in its servicing of total quality of life, paying an unjustifiable opportunity cost in quality of life through our major social systems and their dominating operators who refuse to take responsibility for the quality of life opportunity cost paid by everyone else. They are, in essence, committing a crime against their countrymen that goes unrecognized by the law; a law that, instead, protects their exploitative capacity.

That said, there's clearly a subjective component to this quality of life discussion which also deserves consideration and, thus, which must be accounted for in *any* study of the quality of life of the U.S. population that comes anywhere near to being considered comprehensive. That is, not everyone views quality of life the same way, with some placing great value upon certain contributing factors which others value very little. This, in turn, is driven by beliefs and lifestyles, which, in turn, is driven by everything that impacts the person's attitude and outlook, from their genetics to their upbringing to their geographic position and demographic profile. Thus, while these innumerable contributing factors can't be perfectly measured and accounted for due to the fact that there's a subjective interpretation of their quality of life impact across any population, we nevertheless *can* study the perception of quality of life and attempt to distill its greatest contributing factors. Through such study, we may derive a set of 'data points' for tracking, surveying and analyzing the impact upon the quality of life of the average U.S. citizen with changes in the supply of relevant resources. The revelations from such examinations shall inform us as to the factors possessing the most universally-judged and significant impact upon

quality of life which, in turn, may guide our ability to craft not just systems of economic analysis, but of commerce and politics, which are best able to put the greatest number of people upon a path to increasing the quality of their existences, which *should* constitute the 'point' of every such system.

While building an entire system of economic analysis around the goal of maximizing quality of life, rather than GDP, wealth and the other traditional 'free market' indicators of economic success is not something that I'd heard of before beginning work on this theory, the study of quality of life within an economic context isn't new, of course. Let us turn to two online economic resources for examples, *economicshelp.org* and the European economics institution *Eurostat*.

*Economicshelp.org* published an online article (originally in November of 2017) entitled "Quality of Life Indicators" in which it opens with the statement:

"Measuring economic welfare is not an exact science. Often in economics, we focus on GDP statistics (measuring national output). However, quality of life depends on many other factors apart from just GDP (Tejvan, 2017)." This in-depth article goes on to lend its own interpretation of those elements most impacting quality of life based upon its own extensive trove of gathered information, references and analysis, and to evaluate nations and even provide a color-coded global map of this 'economic welfare' experienced across the planet. Amongst the indicators this *economicshelp.org* article emphasizes are:

**GDP.** The total output of an economy. This is a guide to national output and influences the level of consumption. Higher GDP enables a country to alleviate levels of absolute poverty.

**Distribution of Income in society.** e.g. looking at the Gini Co-efficient and how income is distributed. Some countries have high GDP per capita while many of its people still live in poverty.

**Employment / Unemployment.** Unemployment is one of the main economic causes of poor life changes. Also, quality of employment, e.g. widespread part-time/temporary contracts may suggest underemployment in the economy.

**Life Expectancy.** Dependent on health care standards, environmental factors and cultural factors.

**Education Standards.** One simple measure is the rate of literacy in an economy. For example, Sri Lanka has a higher rate of literacy than Saudi Arabia, despite a lower GDP per capita.

**Housing.** The standard and quality of housing and related amenities. Also, include the rate of homelessness.

**Air Pollution.** The quality of air can influence the quality of life and also health issues.

**Levels of Congestion and Transport.** Congestion can lead to time lost sitting in traffic jams as well as being frustrated. For example, average traffic speeds (11mph) in London (2010) are similar to 100 years ago when we still used the horse and cart.

**Environmental Standards.** Quality and quantity of 'green spaces' where people can escape pressures of cities, e.g. London does quite well on this measure.

**Wildlife Diversity.** Protection of wildlife and areas of natural beauty are important. e.g. a new road may reduce congestion but damage areas of outstanding natural beauty.

**Access to clean drinking Water.** Basic necessity is often taken for granted in the West, but is a big issue in the developing world.

**Climate.** Climate can make some areas inhospitable leading to defensive spending, e.g. spending on air-conditioning or heating. Global Warming could tip the ecological balance in some countries with fragile eco-balance.

**Social Investment v Present Consumption.** GDP doesn't measure what is actually produced and consumed. A state with high military spending will have lower living standards than a country that invests heavily in public transport, education and healthcare.

The online European Union statistical analysis website *Eurostat* makes a similar case for needing more than the traditional economic indicators of the health and 'success' of an economy in order to compose anything near a complete picture of the total quality of life experienced by the contributors to that economy. The organization provides a link on one of its main pages to a section entitled "The need for a measurement beyond GDP," in which it opens with the following statement:



“Quality of life is a broad concept that encompasses a number of different dimensions (by which we understand the elements or factors making up a complete entity, that can be measured through a set of sub dimensions with an associated number of indicators for each). It encompasses both objective factors (e.g. command of material resources, health, work status, living conditions and many others) and the subjective perception one has of them. The latter depends significantly on citizens’ priorities and needs. Measuring quality of life for different populations and countries in a comparable manner is a complex task, and a scoreboard of indicators covering a number of relevant dimensions is needed for this purpose (Eurostat, 2019).”

The article goes on to make its case for why the production of an economy is an insufficient indicator of the quality of life experienced by its contributing and dependent constituents, citing factors such as income and wealth disparity, potential negative correlations between production and household consumption and possessions, environmental sustainability etc., before providing its own list of pertinent factors:

“Based on academic research and several initiatives, the following 8+1 dimensions/domains have been defined as an overarching framework for the measurement of well-being. Ideally, they should be considered simultaneously, because of potential trade-offs between them (Eurostat, 2019):”

- **Material living conditions (income, consumption and material conditions)**
- **Productive or main activity**
- **Health**
- **Education**
- **Leisure and social interactions**
- **Economic and physical safety**
- **Governance and basic rights**
- **Natural and living environment**
- **Overall experience of life**

The *Eurostat* article goes on to provide information on each of these “8+1 dimensions/domains” and their importance in determining the quality of life experienced by the constituents of the population.

These two websites and the organizations behind them are but a couple examples of some of the valuable work done by others related to illuminating the

insufficiency of traditionally-relied-upon 'free market indicators' in the determination of the quality of life experienced by the citizens of a nation and, therefore, in the determination of the relative success of that nation within the context of Quality of Life Economics which, of course, is the focus of this paper. But before composing my own list of indicators to study, track and bring together within a predictive framework for estimating the quality of life of any person or population, I'd like to highlight and/or revisit some key interrelated Quality of Life Economics concepts so that we have a stable theoretical foundation upon which to build in connection to said indicators.

## **Foundational Concepts in Quality of Life Economics**

### **Total Quality of Life**

This is the core conviction and driving principle of Quality of Life Economics, and may be stated thus:

With any great consideration of one's fellow members of humanity, ideally not just in one's nation or family or other isolated group, but the world over, and with any correlation between what might be considered 'good' or 'successful' and the existence of life as a whole, we inevitably come to the moral conclusion that the relative quality of the existence of all the members of any society added together is the best indicator of the relative success of that society. In order to make this assessment in as just a manner as possible, we should also consider the level of financial, natural and manmade resources available to that society relative to the total quality of life produced with said resources.

On a person to person, organization to organization level, it may be argued that the extent to which they contribute to total quality of life dictates the extent to which they may be judged 'good' or 'bad.' Such a judgment must itself be made in consideration of their relative available ability and means.

### **Law of Diminishing Returns**

The utility value that we receive from anything of value, of any resource, tends to diminish as more of it is supplied, such that we inevitably reduce our demand of said resource and the price at which we're willing to acquire it.

In order to illustrate this point of decreasing demand, utility and return (or value received), the formerly cited economic theorist William Jevons liked to use the example of supplying the most essential of resources for life, water, and the spectrum of going from dying of dehydration to drowning. Of course, this is but one dramatic example, and for our purposes herein it's critical to realize that this is an economic law applicable to most things imparting benefit, whether a good or service or opportunity or anything else of value or perceived value, and is a core principle in Quality of Life Economics, as it illustrates the waste and opportunity cost which we collectively pay when this law is neglected.

There are limitless examples of this law being played out, but perhaps the most fundamental example in modern society is based upon financial resources; upon income and wealth. The disadvantaged with very limited income and often zero to negative wealth (debt) might be seen as existing within the 'needs' spectrum of the resources that they demand and pay for, as they haven't the means to acquire most of those resources that might be considered 'desires' or 'luxuries.' Existence at this end of the demand spectrum is highly stressful, and this stress accumulates and correlates with almost every quality of life measure, as well as with the pressures precipitating criminal activity and anything that may temporarily reduce this stress. This, in turn, typically leads to many unhealthy habits, such as narcotics and alcohol abuse and the reliance upon extremely unhealthy foods, which, over an extended time-line, only exacerbates their low quality of life, inducing a perpetuating diminishing quality of life cycle.

One example of this phenomenon being played out: If I give a significant sum of money to the responsible head of a household whose members exist on the far extreme of the needs spectrum, a household suffering constant food insecurity and forced to live in an unsafe area in substandard conditions with very little opportunity to extricate themselves from such a perpetually stressful situation, the potential for this money to increase their respective quality of life is *immense*. If, on the other hand, I gave this exact same sum of money to a billionaire and their household, the potential for it to increase their respective quality of life is minimal to none. In fact, it's very likely that this money will simply be placed in an interest-accruing account that not only has no quality of life utility but which increases the billionaire's ability to take advantage of the disadvantaged, and thereby to reduce the total quality of life of any society and the qualitative state of any environment that they may thereby influence, which, in today's ever more internationally-interconnected world of economic globalization, can come to include anyone and everyone, and every place. Such an impact may be so widespread and rippling through relative degrees of separation that it may ultimately impact the global climate,

resulting in rising ocean levels, enfeebled ecologies and increasing emissions, waste and weather extremes, all of which are *much* more likely to adversely affect the uninsulated first family.

Between these extremes on the respective quality-of-life-return-to-resource-availability graph illustrating the Law of Diminishing Returns, we can position other households whose quality of life return/ utility per increase in financial resource availability spans the spectrum between the two aforementioned extremes. Furthermore, this same principle is applicable to most anything that increases or has the potential to increase quality of life, which is what makes the principle so valuable (its philosophical/elucidative utility), from natural resource availability to the supply of most goods and services to educational and professional opportunities to the quantity/quality of available relationships and on and on...

## **Opportunity Cost**

Working from the previous Law of Diminishing Returns concept and its examples, if we accept the premise that the total quality of life of any population is what matters most, and that the extent to which that quality is increased is based upon the relative availability of beneficial resources, it's clear that as the disproportionate distribution of said resources increases amongst that population, so too does the opportunity cost. The opportunity to increase the quality of life of one household decreases substantially as increasing resources that *could* have gone to that household are instead granted to a wealthy household.

With all of these foundational concepts being tied together, it's likely already clear to you, the reader of this paper, that opportunity cost is applicable to the quality of life utility of *every* measurable resource.

## **Distribution Morality:**

### **Quality of Life Utility Value, Marginal Utility, Marginal Opportunity Cost**

These concepts are heavily tied to the previous three, yet they're also worth considering on their own, providing their own relative perspectives. Simply put, the quality of life utility value of any quantity or quality of any measurable resource is the relative extent which it impacts the quality of life of the recipient. While not every recipient will receive the same impact, owing

largely to their subjective consideration of the resource being supplied, as well as to other factors, we can, nevertheless, approximate and generalize the quality of life impacts of both objectively-measurable and subjectively-evaluated resources. Generally speaking, the greater the income and wealth of an individual, the less the quality of life impact/return/utility value they receive with increases in resources. In fact, all resources, not just income and wealth, tend to correlate this way, and the more resources one already possesses (with 'resources' being a very general term in this context for anything possessing the potential to impact quality of life) the less the marginal quality of life utility of any more of said resource. If we supply further resources to one individual whom receives minimal quality of life return from them instead of supplying them to someone whom would receive substantial quality of life return from those same resources, then we can be said to pay a substantial opportunity cost based upon the value in quality of life sacrificed by the latter individual (or family or other group). This is an immoral, wasteful distribution. In fact, the greatest quality of life utility return would be experienced by someone most in need of that resource.

### **Total Value (i.e. Net Value)**

This concept is based upon the moral position that the relative 'goodness' or 'badness' of anything is based upon the impact that it has upon the quality of existence of life in total. If life is inherently valuable, even invaluable, and constitutes its own point, then it's 'good' to increase its quality and 'bad' to decrease it. While the exact numeration may be impossible to decipher, we can nevertheless assert that every individual, nation, state or other entity can be held to account for their quality of life impact. Thus, in direct connection to Total Quality of Life, the Total Value of any one entity is based upon their overall contribution to the Total Quality of Life of their nation, or, ideally, to the world as a whole.

While many other economic and social theorists and philosophers have concerned themselves with the concept of quality of life, my personal history with this question began with the realization that many of those people and organizations that we're taught to revere in the West actually have a *negative* impact upon Total Quality of Life, and that, therefore, our cultural foundations are, in fact, largely laid upon morally-unstable grounds. If an individual, organization, nation or other group extracts, consumes and hoards more value from the world than they create and distribute, their net quality of life impact is *negative*.

I've since realized that we can, and likely should, apply this analysis to anything and everything, including not only people, organizations and other groups, but even to theories, policies and practices. Is the best that we can do as a society to lionize those that *reduce* the total quality of life of the world by taking the greatest possible advantage of all the disadvantages and insufficiencies of protection of the people and the planet?! Of course not. Thus, we need a paradigm-shift in success *away* from promoting the parasitism that produces low total values.

This personal epiphany and its connected moral imperatives and convictions are what led to my calling this developing socioeconomic ideology *Total Value Economics* in my philosophical novel *Infinite of One*. I've since, however, edited the novel and connected works to call the theory "Quality of Life Economics," as I believe such a terminological change better reflects the overriding purpose of the theory.

## **Zero Sum Game**

If we look closely at the interconnected realms of economics and finance as global machines, with the activity of the first producing the relative increase or decrease in the financial position, the wealth or debt, of all its claimants, what we find is that there's only so much profit being produced and distributed at any one time, and that, in turn, only so much wealth that can be derived at any one time. Furthermore, we find that this wealth isn't generated from nothing, but is based upon an extraction of economic value through service providers and from the planet through which the raw materials are harvested, as well as from the producing workforce and consumers. Thus, there's always a perfectly balancing equation between profit and its derivation. There's always, in other words, a profit *to* balanced by a profit *from*. Therefore, the greater the profit and the fewer its recipients, the more that every- one and everything else, the planet, the workforce and the consumer, must lose to balance the equation. If the workforce was entitled to equity and a share in the bottom line, and if our global business practices treated the planet as a partner to be reinvested in and sustained, the effects of this Zero Sum Game would be *very* different (see the concept: "Business Collectivism"). At this time, however, most people and places of the planet are the losers of this game.

## **Business Morality:**

## Equity, The Accounting Equation, The Bottom Line, Exploitation and the Ownership Class

While some might consider these to be independent concepts, I believe them so inextricably interwoven that they're best considered together.

The first lesson of any accounting course is based upon the accounting equation, which tells us to subtract the 'liabilities' from the 'assets' of any entity in order to determine the 'equity' of the subject organization. Equity is another term for 'net worth,' which itself often seems to be associated with people's absolute assessment of the 'worth,' or 'value' of the entity, whether that entity is an organization, individual, family etc. Capitalism conditions us to equate the concepts of 'wealth' and 'worth,' conflating personal worth with financial worth.

Without delving too much into the major cultural and moral implications of this tragic conventional wisdom, what's objectively clear is that wealth buys access to most of what imparts quality of life benefits today, and that wealth and equity are overlapping concepts. So while income has a direct connection to equity in that the more income generated by an entity the greater the likelihood that it may use that income to generate a greater 'net worth' via wealth and equity ownership, income itself is insufficient in determining the financial welfare of any entity and, in fact, pales in comparison to equity, for equity is composed of monetary and other capital resources free and clear of expenses.

Furthermore, when we look at the balance sheet of any entity based upon the aforementioned accounting equation, we see that most of those people involved in commerce, in the activity of any business organization, fall into the liabilities column of their respective organizations. And since the foremost concern of conventional business practice is to maximize the 'bottom line' equity evaluation by maximizing the value of assets and minimizing the cost of liabilities, we can very reasonably conclude that any entity considered a liability is in an unenviable position of being targeted for financial *minimization* by their organization.

It is, in fact, my position that *to not possess equity is to be exploited for the inability to acquire it*, and that this moral precept holds true no matter the type of equity being considered, whether it's equity in the business for which one works, being forced to pay rent because one can't afford their own home, not possessing the ability to purchase equity in the stock market and thereby losing this opportunity, etc. In the U.S., in fact, equity distribution is so

severely lopsided that the nation might be considered to exist in a dichotomy of those working to enrich those that possess equity and those equity possessors themselves. It is for this reason that, in my own thinking and writing, I often think in the dichotomous terms 'Working Class' and 'Ownership Class.' This might also be considered the 'Exploited Class' and the 'Exploiting Class,' and isn't far removed in concept or ethic from the 'plebian' and 'patrician' divide of the Ancient Romans thousands of years ago, this fact alone constituting an indictment of our 'advanced society.' In fact, when we consider this moral precept's connection to Western Society, we come to a disturbing conclusion: *The disparity in equity distribution is the degree of exploitation and disparity in quality of life.*

It is for these logically-tied-together reasons that equity and wealth considerations are preeminent to the consideration of total quality of life and societal success, and are core to Quality of Life Economics (as well as to the concept of Business Collectivism).

## **Freedom is a Double-Edged Sword (or Two-Way Street)**

As previously discussed, it's my experience that most Americans, especially those identifying as conservative, seem to view freedom in a linear, black-and-white, absolute sense; that is, from the perspective dictated by those in power: a lack of obstacles. For why would someone with immense wealth and power corrupted by greed and the need for control want anything to infringe upon their ability to profit, including the truth that *freedom is relative*. For what's known to moral thinkers is that *the purposeful imposition of protective barriers can be just as valuable*, especially in those places, to those people and in those specific contexts wherein this highly misunderstood and under-appraised second form of freedom, positive freedom, is lacking. The examples demonstrating the two sides of freedom and the need for their balance are endless.

If a business is free to extract resources and produce however it pleases without regulatory restriction and enforcement (which it will typically do in a cost-minimizing manner), it can create as much pollution as it wishes through said extraction and production which, in turn, runs off into rivers and streams and can impact air quality and every natural environment, and, adding all such businesses together, even affect planetary health and a globally-warming climate that, in turn, can drastically reduce the quality of life of *everyone and everything*, including those humans and wild animals unable to insulate themselves from this impact. If the same business, operating in an area lacking



environmental and labor regulations (the barriers protecting positive freedom) is free to exploit any and every disadvantage of a work- force forced to fight for the limited poorly-compensating jobs amongst themselves in order to survive, all so that that business may keep its costs as low as possible and its profits as high as possible, the quality of life impact upon that workforce will be one of minimization and immense opportunity cost compared to a well-protected, i.e. *positively free*, workforce. This is why, of course, so many products are made in relatively unprotected regions of the world.

And these are but two examples where positive freedom is invaluable, and why progress has created environmental and labor regulations/ movements, unionization, activism etc. Morally sound government must regulate business such that it cannot 'freely' reduce the sustain- ability and environmental health of the planet and everyone and every- thing that relies upon it, and cannot exploit every possible disadvantage of the disadvantaged. Try to think of some of the countless other ways in which such negative repercussions are faced by an under-protected society experiencing imbalances between negative and positive freedom, and you'll soon get the point. In fact, this is the entire purpose of law and, many would argue, of proper governance able to guarantee necessary rights and protections of a fully-inclusive prosperity.

Unfortunately, the wealthy have too large a hand in the formation of law, and in deregulation. Yet our illusory democracy, which is more akin to a plutocratic republic, is outside the purview of this paper. What *within* that purview is that the aforementioned protection of in- elastic markets is directly linked to this discussion, and many 'idealists' and 'progressives' such as myself would go far beyond merely protecting consumers within such markets, emphasizing positive freedoms to protect the disadvantaged from the unscrupulously over- advantaged that use their wealth and power and underdeveloped morality against the best interests of the people and the planet as a whole which, again, is especially costly to the under-protected that perpetually pay the price for freedom's imbalance. It is, in other words, ninety-some-odd per- cent of the public that pays for our national ignorance and prejudicial bias on the extremely important subject of freedom.

## **Cultural Values (Conserving the Status Quo)**

As already alluded to and grounded in years of my own thinking and theorizing, it is my steadfast belief that most, if not all, of these underestimated and undervalued foundational concepts and connected principles are underestimated and undervalued *because* U.S. culture is derived from a

European history steeped in the means and methods of conquerors and controllers; of those whose consolidations are oppressive to the potential and extremely restrictive of the opportunities made available to the great majority. U.S. history is by and large a tale of how Europe's aristocratic class evolved into today's equity-excluding ownership class, gradually reformulating and disguising their exploitative and manipulative tactics in response to the pushback of progressives.

In fact, I strongly believe that this highlights the ironic basis of the word *conservatism*: tricking as much of the population as possible into supporting that which permits those in wealth and power to *conserve* their means of generating wealth and power; to *conserve* the status quo that excludes the vast majority from any great or increasing measure of political, economic and financial control, reward, development and self-determination in this 'land of the free.' This true meaning of the word 'conservatism' overlaps with a long running history and prevailing school lesson plans 'written by the conquerors' in which the aristocratic class, what I call the ownership class, continually attempts to stall or reverse moral progress to the gross disservice of the vast majority.

Examine the history of the U.S. and the European nations from which it hails and assimilated its lessons of gaining and holding power, and our cultural course is clear: morally-void Machiavellianism prevails. Genocide, slavery and indentured servitude paved the way for the original wealthy U.S. ownership class, the new aristocracy, to take control of the land and resources of our nation, and progressives have been fighting to bring that nation onto honorable, mutualistic ground ever since.

## **Environmental Health and Sustainability**

There isn't a living being on the planet that isn't affected by their natural environment. This is especially true for those humans and other animals living without the resources and regulated protections to insulate themselves from the impacts of natural disasters, extreme swings in weather patterns and resource availability and the effects of things like pollution and general uncleanness. With global climate change gradually eroding environmental health and the extent to which agricultural production can be sustained and safe, stable living conditions can be maintained, it's impossible *not* to include the environmental impact of economic activity in any sound form of economic theory.

This consideration, in turn, has *many* contributing subcomponents to consider, including emissions, carbon fuel dependency, carbon sequestration

technologies, green energy rates and subsidies, the cleanliness of food production, the sustainability and efficiency of land use, automotive fuel efficiency, waste minimization and green disposal methods, the countercultural encouragement of minimalism etc. In fact, the environmental, economic, financial, social and spiritual losses sacrificed to the prevailing ways in which we profit the few at the loss of the many through our residential developments and divided means of living *alone* is inestimably vast. (See “What’s A Collective” at [infiniteofone.com](http://infiniteofone.com), as well as the following, for more).

## **Communalism**

Related to the last concept and, indeed, to all the aforementioned concepts, Americans sacrifice untold quality of life increases to the prevalence of divisiveness and individualism endemic to our culture. My examination of our political landscape and U.S. History in general suggests that it has *always* been in the avaricious interests of the owner- ship class and their plutocratic mechanisms to keep us divided, and thereby more readily controlled. We are all, in other words, victims of the age-old success of the ‘divide and conquer’ strategy long deployed by the ruling classes since at least the time of Caesar. A divided population lacks the unity which any successful resistance requires. Walled off into our ‘private property – keep out’ areas and perfectly politically divided and controlled, we lack the sense and benefits of community central to wiser, more unified, far more sustainable cultures of superior solidarity and shared identity.

The fact of the matter is that there’s a significantly greater quality of life utility to be gleaned from a better sharing of resources and connected social connection, cohesion and cooperative endeavors. Yes, we’ve been conditioned by conservative interests to see ‘socialism’ as a dirty word, yet, used judiciously, and in balance with private interests, freedoms and pursuits, socialistic principles are indispensable to any just, progressive, *truly* advanced society.

While this subject is itself deserving of an in-depth research project likely leading to all manner of predictive models, equations and endorsements, what my own examinations, experiences and imagination suggests is that a much better, more balanced mix of publicly, privately and communally owned and employed land and resources offers incalculable potential for more common identification, solidarity, support, satisfaction and greater total quality of life than our current inefficiently wasteful isolation and dedication to ‘private

interests.' The impact of human connection upon quality of life cannot be overstated. Sharing spaces and resources not only makes for more efficient, effective use of that space and those resources, but takes account of the fact that we're social beings naturally driven to connect and share with one another, something which our divided-is-conquered, individualism-centric culture denies us, to a large extent. Many would argue that the greatest fulfillment human beings can derive from life is dependent upon interpersonal relationships and endeavors; upon mutual understanding, cooperative pursuit, shared identity and loving connections. What are we sacrificing when we spend most of our lives in cutthroat competition for the benefit of corporate masters, separated into little social niches with minimal integrational enrichment?! What do we lose by allowing the few to isolate and feed off of the many?!

The design elements that might be folded into a greater appreciation of communal value are near to limitless, but some general elements to consider include greater communal ownership and use of residential and commercial properties, increased cooperative buying power and more mixed-use communities. Residentially developed areas, for example, would likely be better served by incorporating communally owned, operated and enjoyed recreational, commercial and green areas like playgrounds, clubhouses, parks, green-energy-producing energy systems, community gardens and collectively owned businesses wherein the residents and owner-operators are awarded a greater say and share and may derive *far* more social and spiritual value from their personal and professional environments.

## **Traditional Indicators of Economic Success:**

As already explained and referenced through multiple sources, traditional 'Free Market Economics' fails to lend an accurate assessment of the extent to which the subject economy serves the best interests of its population as a whole. I'd argue that this is *by design*, but that's a Pandora's Box that, again, is outside the purview of this paper. For now, let me demonstrate how and why some mainstay economic indicators are misleading indications of what makes for economic 'success:'

### **GDP (and GDP per capita)**

Taken from the total value of consumed goods and services, having a high GDP (or GDP per capita) *does* indicate a high *availability* of potentially quality-

of-life-increasing goods and services within the subject society, but it does *not* indicate the efficacy with which that production of consumed goods and services increases that people's *total* quality of life. The *quality* of the goods supplied, their relative distribution and consumption amongst the disparate segments of society, and the disparity of financial benefits bestowed upon those same disparate segments through their production and consumption are ignored.

### **Mean income per capita**

If I sample a population of ten individuals and find that nine of them gross twenty thousand dollars per year each while the tenth grosses a million dollars per year, the income per capita based upon its traditionally calculated *mean* average income is \$118k each. Looking at this number, one would consider this a high-earning population. It's not. More likely the one owns the enterprise employing the other nine!

### **Mean wealth per capita**

As in the last example, the *mean* average is entirely misleading because it is heavily influenced by the outliers on both ends which, per disparity statistics, skew the results immensely, especially due to the most wealthy individuals. Take it from someone who has experienced firsthand the life of a Fortune 500 family: The wealthiest of Americans exist in a reality that is not our own and, in fact, this wealth is used against most of us to increase the ability of their business interests to take advantage of our disadvantage.

### **Housing starts**

Based upon the number of building permits applied for, it's typically seen as a good sign for the whole population when more houses, apartments, condos etc. are being built. But where's the assessment of the following contributions to this indicator: the number of housing starts that become 'secondary homes,' vacation homes and dwellings to be rented to those that can't afford to buy a primary home? Not being able to afford a mortgage or a direct path to home ownership/equity is one of the ways that the few leech off of the many in a few-holds-barred nation wherein almost everything is a racket, to inestimable oppressive popular impact.

### **Stock market performance**

If the *vast* majority of 'publicly traded' equity is owned by a *tiny* fraction of the population, how does an improvement in stock market indexes indicate an improvement in the quality of life of the majority of the population? *It doesn't*. In fact, it can be logically asserted that it more likely means the *opposite*: Increasing stock market scores indicate increasing investor confidence in the ability of corporations to profit off of the taking advantage of the disadvantage and lack of protection of the planet, the workforce and the consumer base. This is the basis of most of what constitutes a profit, the unsustainable driving force of stock scores.

## **Corporate tax rate**

Flying in the face of centuries of conservative propaganda, and belying the preconception of its indoctrinated victims, the public benefits *greatly* from taxation, *especially* with liberal governance dedicated to increasing the opportunities afforded the majority to increase the quality of their lives through *manifold* public spending pathways, something which conservative interests downplay because their only *real* concern is that corporate taxation reduces the bottom line that they extract through their control of equity. Yes, reducing the corporate tax rate makes it more enticing for multinational corporations to do business in the U.S., but who benefits the most from such business, and what's lost for the vast majority when government receives less tax revenue to pay for public expenses and opportunities? As in the previous stock market example, few hold equity in corporations, with most of us treated as a liability of doing business and, thus, being more likely to benefit from *greater* corporate taxation, so long, of course, as it isn't so extreme as to lead to corporate bankruptcy and unemployment.

## **Inheritance tax rate**

Without getting into the moral quandary of whether or not someone born into a wealthy family deserves to receive a fortune someday simply because they were dealt pocket aces at birth, what's clear is that very little of the population inherits much of significant financial value during their lifetimes, making this indicator relevant to the previous taxation consideration; that is, most of us benefit more when it's *higher*.

## **Mean total taxation rate**

Thanks largely to the tax code being open to editing by wealthy private interests through our 'public offices,' we must consider the ability to 'write-off,' or 'deduct,' expenses from total taxable income when considering overall

taxation rates and how such deductions *heavily* favor the owners of business and other assets. Listen to Warren Buffet: Gross and net taxation are often *very* different things.

## **Employment rate**

Yes, being 'gainfully employed' is almost certainly better than not being so, yet such a great extent of the workforce is paid in wages, as opposed to salaries or directly from equity dividends, that having a high rate of employment is nowhere near as important as it may seem. If ninety percent of the population is employed in minimum wage jobs and their cost of rent, healthcare, education and overall living is so high that they're barely surviving and hopeless about the future, is this indicative of economic success? Certainly we can do better than equating mere 'employment' with labor market success.

## **Traditional Indicators of Economic Success, in Summation**

Taken together, such conventional indicators of economic health, or 'success,' emphasized in economics and business courses in the 'western world' through the collegiate level, and modeled upon the prevailing 'Free Market Economics' theory, misdirect us from the fact that productivity and wealth statistics taken on their own are *highly* misleading. In truth, when analyzed from a total quality of life impact perspective, most mainstay indicators of economic success relied upon by economists to determine the 'health' of the economy can be challenged. In fact, increases in many of these indicators actually mean the opposite: it's *unhealthy* for the population and its total quality of life.

## **Progressive Indicators of Economic Success: The Quality of Life Impact of Income, Wealth and Production**

While, again, there's most certainly a subjective aspect to what constitutes quality of life, as well as near universal aspects, such as having a rich social

life, that're highly difficult, if not impossible, to judge, quantify and track, there nevertheless remain *manifold* clearly- impacting factors that can be quantified, tracked and analyzed for their impact upon the quality of life of the subject population.

Before I list some indicators, a caveat: each of these indicators is deserving of its own explanation as to why it was included herein, and consideration of the extent to which it might impact total quality of life. Alas, such a level of examination is outside the purview of this paper, though I sincerely hope that this theory will be better hashed-out and studied in the future, by myself and/or others that recognize its merit. Thus, for now, I'd invite anyone reading this paper, or listening to the connected presentation, to consider why they were included.

### **A Set of Proposed Quality of Life Economics Indicators:**

- Median income per capita and median income per capita per GDP – typical income stats are *mean* averages, which are misleading indicators of the financial position of the public because they're averaged against the incomes of the super-rich
- Median wealth per capita and median wealth per capita per GDP
- Median net taxation rate
- The difference between the mean and the median incomes and mean and median wealth taken as a percentage of median income and wealth (used as a statistic for disparity)
- *Many* other disparity measures across measurable factors contributing to quality of life should also be generated and tracked, including the Gini Coefficient
- Cost of healthcare through life (including the cost of health insurance)
- Cost of healthcare relative to healthfulness of the population (a measurement of the effectiveness of healthcare relative to its cost, measurable as cost of healthcare through life relative to the percentage of the population that suffers from chronic disease)
- Cost of an education through bachelor's, masters and doctoral degrees at the average university
- Criminal justice – average cost of a successful legal defense of felony charges (cost of not guilty verdicts compared to guilty)
- Criminal justice – crime rate



- Criminal justice – incarceration rate
- Criminal justice – recidivism rate
- Criminal justice – percentage of the incarcerated being held in private for-profit institutions
- Homelessness relative to total population
- Receipt of public assistance (welfare) relative to total population
- Cost of inelastic goods and services, such as healthcare, rent, utilities and education, relative to *median* income – owing to their being indispensable to quality of life, these goods and services are in demand almost regardless of the cost of their supply – the financial burden that they represent to the public relative to their ability to purchase them is a strong indicator of the extent to which the political, economic and business systems meant to
  - serve society as a whole protect the public from having their needs taken advantage of by immoral systems and suppliers
- Write-off utility value (percentage of population able to use tax deductions; average % used)
- Percentage of the public that owns any significant amount of investment equity (at least \$5-10K)
- Investment equity distribution and disparity (% of total equity owned per sector of the population)
- Median average quality of housing supply
- Percentage of housing starts that represent primary residences
- Percentage of the public that owns their own residence
- Average cost of rent relative to median income
- Percentage of the public able to save at least 10% of their income (disposable income statistic)
- Freedom of the press (relative consolidation and control of information dissemination)
- Social Spending (percentage of the federal budget dedicated to social spending, green spaces, education, public transit and other public infrastructure, public health initiatives like mental health, and other expenditures with a direct correlation to public welfare)
- Public infrastructure quality
- Political satisfaction levels – surveys
- Political participation levels – indicative of the extent to which the public feels politically empowered and believes that they have a true voice in, and may actually impact, their political system

- Political corruption levels (including the average wealth of national representatives as indicative of their ability to connect to, empathize with and improve the circumstances of the public)
- Minimum wage relative to the cost of living
- Percentage of the work force that's compensated with hourly wages (as opposed to being compensated through salaries and/ or equity dividends)
- Median annual value of work force benefits paid by employers
- Median government-paid benefit rate (composite of benefits like social security, familial leave, unemployment etc.)
- Healthfulness of population (prevalence of disease etc.)
- Life expectancy
- Median annual number of vacation days per family
- Median annual value of travel expenses per individual
- Median cost of utilities
- Population density
- Pollution levels (and/or a general 'Environmental State and Sustainability' score)
- Air quality
- Drinking water quality
- Healthfulness and environmental sustainability of supply of food supply relative to price (accounting for % of produce that's conventionally versus organically grown, % of livestock that's CAFO versus at least partially-pasture and, ideally, free range raised, greenhouse emissions, pesticide runoff measures etc.)
- Percentage of energy production considered 'green/sustainable'
- Carbon sequestration rates
- Divisiveness vs. Unification in the Nation (cultural/social cohesion score)
- Family and/or cultural support considerations

A composite of these and other statistics correlative to total quality of life can be produced and compared across states, nations, regions etc. such that the relative extent to which each respective economy serves the betterment and total quality of life of its population can be compared and contrasted pursuant to finding the best possible means to progress.

## **Predicted Outcome, A Moral Assertion**

The relative 'success' of any society is based less upon its total resource production than it is based upon its efficacy at and efficiency of converting its resources into *total* quality of life, for even a society dominated by a ruthless dictatorship may be highly productive, and yet entirely fail its people. A much more morally concrete indicator of economic success is based upon *total quality of life relative to production*.

Societal Success =

**Quality of Life Score per capita / GDP per capita**

or

Total Quality of Life Score / GDP

From this point of view, I'd hypothesize that the United States and those following our cultural lead might be seen as relatively *unsuccessful*, and needing of extreme revisions, if not outright revolutions, in our socially-impacting systems in order to become the honorable nation(s) that we're capable of becoming. This progress begins with a paradigm shift in what constitutes the 'success' of any one entity or society at large, reformulated along the lines of *total/net value*. Words like 'worth,' 'value' and 'patriot' require similar, connected paradigm shifts. That is, the successful, high-worth, valuable, patriotic entity is the one that provides more value to their nation, and to humanity and total life, than he/she/it costs said life through extraction, hoarding and consumption.

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***Everyone's worth is based upon the value that they make, not the value that they take.***



## About the Author, By the Author

Born in the redwoods of coastal Northern California in the blue collar town of Fort Bragg, my early years were trouble-free times of active, youthful exuberance. I was very much a rural kid, playing sports with friends, catching critters, exploring the forest, shooting bb guns, swimming in the river and ocean and eating blackberries off the bush until my hands were stained purplish-black and my stomach ached. At the age of six my father was transferred to the rapidly urbanizing town of Santa Rosa, CA, in the heart of the Sonoma County Wine Country, an hour north of San Francisco. There, I gradually transformed into a video gamer with a strong creative streak. In my adolescence I concocted elaborate games for friends that captured their attention for hours on end, often during school hours. Some of these games were centered around toys, but the more popular were produced on paper, which I called “paper games.”

As I matured I came to the same conclusion that most young, observant people come to: money is the root of freedom, for freedom is *purchased*, not freely given. I knew that I had to do everything possible to accrue as much cash as possible, so that I could do what and be who I pleased. This culturally-pervasive mindset continued through most of college, during which I attended the University of California at Santa Barbara and studied Business Economics, entering the real estate business post-graduation. I was highly motivated by the orthodox ambitions inculcated into western youth by way of our aristocratically-hailing conservative culture and, through them, decidedly driven to pursue what most consider the hallmarks of ‘success:’ a lucrative career, the socioeconomic rank and all the trappings. This was before I realized the subjectivity of ‘success,’ and the fact that the greater form is that which Einstein alluded to: “Try not to become a person of success but, rather, try to become a person of *value*.”

Thus, I’d begun developing doubts during my last couple collegiate years that following the traditional path was what I was meant to do; that it was the best use of my abilities. Upon inspection, and in tracing the full

causality, I realized that this path produces parasitism and suffering. The more you're said to 'make,' the more you *take*. Nothing materializes from nothing, and capitalism unbalanced by socialistic principles and equity sharing is less about freedom and hard work than exploiting disadvantage.

My heart and conscience thereby began to coalesce around the greater concept of success: defining it in terms of the *creation* rather than the *extraction* of value. Later, as my spiritual awareness grew and I began to sense that 'listening to your heart' is more than mere fleeting emotion, but a tapping into a truer, fuller form of universal Self, my earlier doubts began to crystalize along with my ideology and convictions, and everything changed for me. Though I continued to struggle with some serious health issues at the time, much of which continues to plague me, on another level I came into myself and began to harness a deep sense of purpose. I realized that I'm meant to translate the spiritual messages I receive which, combined with my intellectual inspection of the world, have led me to some profound conclusions about the nature of existence and the greedy heart of western culture compromising our collective potential. My innate creativity found a grander outlet in conjunction with my naturally-philosophical mindset, and I began seeking the underlying nature of reality, formulating my own ideologies and envisioning the type of societal systems that might someday steer mankind away from a 'greed is good' attitude that necessarily short-sells total quality of life on Earth.

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