

Eternity

Written by Jody LePage and Robert LePage

Acknowledgements

Many people have contributed to this project, beginning, of course, with those mentioned in the autobiographical narrative and including everyone encountered along the way.

Anne Topham of Fantome Farms shared her knowledge of goat keeping and contributed the goat photograph on the website. Derek Gebler created the website. Dawn Gebler shared her photos of the Pacific Coast and Berkeley campus.

Several close friends have given significantly more than encouragement and support to the project. Lillian Sizemore provided artwork, including the graphic depictions of the Walks linked to the homepage. Delightfully serious conversations with Roberta Hanus and Franca Barricelli helped refine the ideas. Finally, we cannot thank Martine Meyer enough for all her help. Her critical readings and editorial suggestions greatly improved all three volumes.

Note

If this text appears grayish or blurry,
you can adjust your computer to make it darker and clearer.
Pull down “Edit” on the Adobe Menubar to “Preferences.”
Choose “Smoothing.”
Check “Smooth Text, Line Art and Images”
Check “Use CoolType.”
Select the preferred sample. Click Next. Then OK.

Introduction

*What? Where was I in this stream?
How spiraling down this narrow stairwell?
How what was supposed to be
Eternity
The otherside
Now like some medieval tower.*

*At the edge of a storm,
I had followed a path
To a chasm raging river'd cut.
Where there had always been a bridge.*

*This time only a Bridgekeeper
Wanting to know how I'd reached her door.
So in the shelter of her hearthside warmth
Spirits burning in the embers,
I retraced my steps reluctantly,
Mixing fragile yesterday with dream,
Impatient — who wouldn't be
With people starving,
Furious, at war
Weather gone mad
And all endangered.*

*When the Bridgekeeper showed me
The fork in the path
And I took the way not taken,
When I hurried 'cross her fabulous bridge,
I never expected the otherside to look like this.*

*Enclosed in these decaying walls,
No opening but window holes
That eye can scarcely see through.*

*Yet unused wings can be no destiny.
And so I spiraled down the crumbling stairs
Until I reached their end.
A wooden door buried in sand
Up to a hammered iron strap
Tapering 'cross the width
Riveted with pyramid-headed nails
Meant to hold the wood together
And pivot an opening in the stone*

*"This door opens inward," the hinge spake,
"The sand inside's the only brake."
I started digging on my knees
Pushing and pulling sand,
As children on beaches search
In the tidemark of forgotten promises
For treasured signs of themselves.*

*'Outside this door the otherside,
Outside, a whole new story.'*

*Grains cascading through my fingers,
Behind me sandhills rising,
Avalanching back, tis true
But not enough to stop
The darker wood discovering.*

*Until at just past halfway cleared,
Where the right-most wood met stone
A metal plate with keyhole appeared,
But neither handle, latch nor key.
I stopped still on my knees,
Leaned back on my legs.
'Even unburied how could it open?'*

*The bridge, Bridgekeeper, and this dream,
 The best of everything
 Welled a moment in my eyes.
 'Had we locked ourselves inside this tower
 Where we self-destruct beneath the press
 Of our definitions
 The meanings we assign
 To world and one another
 Our hierarchies, property and power?
 Could our becoming loving be
 Forever kept from us?'*

*In answer, I returned to digging
 More determined now than ever*

*When less than an inch of sand remained
 At first in silhouette
 And then with hasty brushings truly
 A key emerged with heart-shaped handle,
 Sized for city gates.
 I picked it up as though of glass or karat gold,
 Grasping clutching it to my breast,
 As if to assure myself I wasn't dreaming
 (Though in fact I was).*

*Rising from my knees — 'See if it works.'
 Its shape fit perfectly the magic chamber.
 Turning right it goes a little way.
 Then no further.*

*'Quickly to the left, then.'
 Til with groaning sound,
 The bolt and time
 Were slowly rolling over.*

*Beside myself with joy,
I pushed with all my might against the wood
No movement, none at all.
Yet the sole way out I could imagine was this door.*

*With no idea what it would take,
I started tracing with my fingertips
The swirling stretching grain lines in the wood
Colliding vortices, turbulent swirlings, incense river beds
Blending into infinity
Golden rings recounting years of growth
Layers of memories cells left in time.*

“It opens inward,” something, someone whispered.

*Then my eyes fell on the key
Still waiting in the lock
Turned to the right, it held when pulled*

And slowly the door creaked open.

Chapter One

‘This could be *it!*’ Cal thought, ‘Or at least something that could really help.’

The biology professor had just finished the day’s lecture. But Cal sat transfixed, eyes afire, oblivious to the class-ending commotion going on all around him. Then with a jolt, he closed his notebook, grabbed his coat and headed for the door. Moved as quickly as he could through the crowded hallway.

‘A phase transition. And the examples she used. How life began with molecules passing molecules to each other. Giving. Sharing. And *voilà!* Life begins on planet earth. Reminds me of the story Josh is always telling.’

Back in their junior year of high school, Cal and Josh had learned the atomic theory of modern chemistry — that everything we see around us is composed of smaller units called atoms. And the one hundred and three kinds of atoms identified — called elements — in combination with one another or standing alone, make up our entire physical world. From the stars to iron, water, paper, oil, plastic, our bodies... Everything. The following year in physics they studied about the even smaller particles that compose atoms. Electrons orbiting a nucleus of protons and neutrons. And the quarks that make up these subatomic particles.

Quarks had fired Josh’s imagination, inspired him to read everything he could about them: Quantum Theory, Quantum Mechanics, Quantum Chromodynamics. Josh knew from the start of college that his major would be physics. Once there, he’d gone beyond quarks and into String Theory. But he still loved telling his story about the quarks.

As Cal headed across campus for the library, he could just picture his roommate, the storyteller.

“Now this is a story about the very beginning of the Universe,” Josh would begin, “a time we believe we know something about because of what we’ve learned with particle accelerators like the one in Geneva, Switzerland, where we create and study conditions we think resemble those initial moments.”

Josh often had a quickly passing but obviously distracted look in his eyes.

“It seems to have happened like this. In the very first instant of time, two entities appear, one of them huge. Picture it as big as the sky, while the other is beach-pebble size. The larger of the two takes over the top position; relegating the other to the bottom. Given the imbalance between the ‘Top’ and ‘Bottom,’ quarks, as we’ve come to call them, information easily gets sent downward but not upward. The relationship proves

untenable. In less than a millisecond, this first generation of quarks falls back into chaos.”

Josh would get so into the story, you’d think each time he told it was the first.

“About a thousandth of a second later — as we would measure time anyway — quarks re-appear. This second generation has altered in size so that one is only ten times the mass of the other. And it seems to physicists that the smaller ones are putting on the charm. Hence the name, ‘Charmed’ quarks. The larger ones seem to be acting ‘Strange;’ that is, not knowing how to respond. This second attempt at relationship lasts only slightly longer, then slips back into non-being.”

Now Josh’s face would signal that the best part was coming.

“Then, as time nears the first hundredth of a second, another generation emerges. But this time, they’re nearly equal in size and they’re — well, they’re dancing together. ‘Down’ quarks are going up; and ‘Up’ quarks are moving down. More importantly, the Ups are changing into Downs by converting half their mass into energy and giving it to the Downs; while the Downs are becoming Ups by receiving that energy. And that’s not all. They’re dancing like this in groups of three.”

Here Josh always paused, making eye contact with his audience.

“Within minutes of their emergence, two Down quarks and one Up, are linking with one Down and two Ups. These clusters, which we’ve named protons and neutrons, immediately attract Electrons. And as these formations — the first atoms — draw themselves together, they literally create Space around themselves. This in turn permits the photons, carriers of the electromagnetic wave, to ripple out, causing space to expand and turning time asymmetric. The Universe has begun.”

“Why do the Ups and Downs get into three way relationships rather than simply pairing off?” Cal had once asked.

“Good question... An Up will always give energy to a Down. A Down can always find energy coming its way from an Up. Doing that in threes results in a small amount of excess energy. We’ve come to call that quantum, ‘the strong force’ or the ‘gluon’ particle. This strong force that the trinities generate, brings and holds particles together, without it the positively charged proton particles would repel one another instead of forming atomic nuclei. Like repels like, right? So with three quarks, we have a field of attraction where matter can evolve.”

“Which gets into Complexity Theory,” Cal now imagined Josh saying. Which is why he couldn’t wait to talk with Josh about this lecture. But that wasn’t why he remembered Josh’s quark story.

“Getting back to the point,” Cal imagined Josh saying. “It’s only when the quarks are equal and giving to each other that their relationship becomes the foundation of the Universe. Contrary to our belief that competition is the name of the game, the physical Universe is based on equality, cooperation, reciprocity, sharing and love. Which might explain why we’ve evolved democratic political cultures and why — despite all our cynicism — we still can’t live without love.”

“Physicists are actually saying *that?*” Cal remembered asking.

“Well, no. Not exactly. Most physicists take a different point of view. They note that temperatures were lowering at the same time. And they attribute the unfolding of the Universe to that. I prefer to focus on the Up and Down quarks and the stability of their relationship because of that story’s political implications. But most physicist don’t go there.”

Professor Kensington had carefully avoided any hint of the implications too, Cal noted as he entered the library, showed his ID and passed through the turnstile.

‘Maybe I can do something with this stuff for credit,’ Cal hoped as he sat down at a computer. ‘Maybe not, but...’

He chose Subject, typed in “universe + life + complexity,” hit the Enter key and waited. Somewhere in cyberspace, the Madcat Library System began sorting through its seven million volumes.

Results splashed on the screen. He clicked deeper on several titles that looked promising.

Briggs, John and David Peat. *Turbulent Mirror*.

Dyson, Freeman. *Origins of Life*.

Gleick, James. *Chaos: Making of a New Science*.

Gell-Mann, M. *The Quark and the Jaguar*.

Jantsch, Erich. *The Self-Organizing Universe*.

Kaufmann, Stuart. *At Home in the Universe...*

_____. *The Origins of Order...*

Lewin, Roger. *Complexity: Life on the Edge of Chaos*.

Lovelock, James. *The Ages of Gaia*.

_____. *A New Look at Life on Earth*.

Mandelbrot, Benoit. *The Fractal Geometry of Nature*.

Margulis, Lynn. *What is Life?*

_____. *Five Kingdoms*.

_____. *Symbiotic Planet*.

Margulis, Lynn and Dorion Sagan. *Microcosmos*.

Prigogine, Ilya and Stengers, Isabelle. *Order out of Chaos*.

Stacey, R; Griffin, D.; Shaw, P. *Complexity and Management*.

Symposium of United Nations University, *The Science and Praxis of Complexity*.

Waldrop, Mitchell *Complexity: The Emerging Science*.

Up in the stacks, he added to the volumes from his search by browsing the adjoining shelves. He left with as many books as he could squeeze into his backpack. Outside it was beginning to snow, but Cal barely noticed. All the way home he was thinking about what he wanted to ask Josh.

Their friendship had begun the summer Josh was going into eighth grade, Cal into seventh. One morning Cal happened upon Josh — both knees badly skinned and trying to walk his wreck of a bike — at the bottom of Emily Hill. Josh, tall with black curly hair and glasses; Cal, dishwater blond and slightly shorter, soon became “inseparable,” their parents called it. Years later, Cal decided it had to do with Josh being an only child. Josh thought it was because Cal never had an older brother. Somehow they’d managed to keep their friendship intact as they crossed into high school. By the time they were in college, they’d played on the same sports teams, worked the same summer jobs, camped, fished, dated and traveled together. Everything from their tastes in rock and roll to their favorite eateries conspired to keep them that way. Most importantly, they agreed on the one thing that mattered most to them — how the world should be, could be: all people fed, housed, clothed, cared-for and able to labor in meaningful jobs for the good of themselves and others. In other words, equal access to education and all types of work. They also believed that everyone had a right to participate equally in the making of laws. As they learned about world conditions, they concluded that democracy had yet to fulfill its promise. They also had their differences.

Cal was fire, Josh air. Cal ignited new ideas and possibilities. Josh searched. Start talking with Josh about the weather and three sentences later you might be exploring the philosophical implications of imaginary time. Start talking with Cal about the weather and you’d soon be out in it.

In college, Cal had changed majors twice: from political science to history, then to comparative literature. He thought he’d like to teach high school when he finished. He was taking this biology course to meet requirements for graduation.

Josh, headed for grad school in Physics since freshman year, had been awarded a work-study project in the physics department. “Fiegenbaum Hall was built by architects using slide rules,” everybody joked. The basement, with its gray painted cement floor, low-hanging white insulated pipes and narrow hallways changing direction every sixty feet certainly felt that way. “With Thomas Jefferson air conditioning and non-central

heating,” they liked to add. Josh had built his own heater for the lab where he worked. A not-too quiet fan behind a metal coil he’d wound himself and connected up to a rheostat feedback loop assembly with a temperature sensor that he liked to brag demonstrated some thermodynamic principle. It always made Cal laugh.

What wasn’t funny was how worried they and all their friends were about the world. Even in school, you just couldn’t ignore it anymore.

When Cal got back to the duplex that he and Josh called home, he stood on the front porch for a minute. Swirls of snowflakes appeared then disappeared into the night. You could never follow one for more than a second or two. Down the street, the winter branches — the same but somehow never the same — swayed in the street lamps. The sidewalk was turning white.

“Hey, Josh,” he called as he burst through the door and stomped the snow from his shoes.

An irritated, “What!?” followed a moment of silence, then, “Wait. Wait, a second. Oh, shit — forget it. Hey, did anyone ever tell you that when your roommate is studying you’re supposed to keep it quiet?”

“Let’s see. Yeah, you did if I recall. Like a coupla’ hundred times.”

In years past, crumpled paper wars, flying paperclips, rubber bands or a wrestling match on the shag carpet between two dorm beds would have followed. But Cal and Josh had matured since those days. They now had their own apartment. And besides, with only four weeks left in the semester, things were getting serious.

“Sorry Josh, but—”

“Can it wait til tomorrow? I’ve really got to get this paper done. It’s due first hour.”

“Okay. After class?”

“Sure. Oh, there’s pizza in the kitchen.”

“Hey, thanks.”

Josh swiveled back to his computer. Cal grabbed a slice of pizza and headed for his desk and some serious reading.

Chapter Two

“Triple grande mocha,” the counter person called to her co-worker.

Cal had stayed up almost all night reading. He scanned the room. A few regulars. No one he really knew. And no Josh. Not yet.

“Three fifty-seven, please.”

The coats, hats, scarves, mittens and gloves winter demanded added to the challenge of negotiating through the chairs. Jazz — ‘John Coltrane,’ Cal observed — floated between the almost-too-loud waves of conversation. After unwrapping, Cal plugged in and opened his laptop.

A soft “Brrmming,” a sip of mocha and the outline he’d begun last night appeared on the screen. He scrutinized the second section.

II. Phase Transitions

- 1) Protometabolic activity > life
- 2) Prokaryotes > eukaryotes
- 3) Animal emergence from water > onto land (?)
- 4) Symbol making > language (?)

A tiny spider distracted him. It was nearly invisible, crouching between the cracks of the tongue and grove paneling that went a third of the way up the walls. Motionless. Cal wondered if it could be watching him watching it. If it could even see that far. If it could be thinking the same thing... anything. His mind jumped to the hours of wonder he’d spent with his cat, Phaedra, losing himself in her eyes.

Suddenly that memory connected with one he’d rather have forgotten. High school biology lab where they’d dissected a living frog. And the biology teacher who was so obsessed with the fact that, “cells repair themselves,” but had never explained why doing so was such a big deal. Now Cal understood. In order for cells to self-repair, they must somehow *know* what they look like. It was evidence of some kind of consciousness on the cellular level.

“And why not?” Josh was always asking. “Why not subjectivity from the beginning. Why not spirit inseparable from matter. Some kind of pan-psychism would also help explain how we can be aware of the world at all. And if matter and spirit are one, the Universe is not a meaningless mechanical thing. The object of scientific study.”

‘Which makes more sense because the world is way too beautiful,’ Cal mused. He sipped his mocha.

The more immediately pertinent point was that scientists didn’t seem to want to pursue the implications of certain scientific findings. Cal blew a stream of breath through his tightened lips and refocused on his computer screen.

‘It’s so obvious... We’ve created a culture that sees competition and hierarchy as the only way. Which has brought us to a crisis point. We’ve got to change. No choice. And now these stories about the beginning of life and phase transitions seem to say...’

Last night’s reading had been frustrating. Some authors would allude to the conclusion, but defer from spelling it out. Others seemed to meander through hundreds of pages studiously avoiding the picture they promised to paint. Or an author might describe the elephant in the living room — something that was keeping us from world peace and environmental responsibility — without ever stating what it was. Always on the verge of what never got said.

‘But Josh has always said it.’

Cal scrolled up and down his notes, cutting and pasting bits and pieces into place.

The grating sound of wooden chair legs dragged across ceramic floor tile broke his attention.

“Hey, you.” It was Josh’s smiling face.

“Hey. Where ya’ been?”

“Somebody forgot to put a new tape in last night and we were repeating everything from last week.”

“Oh, no.”

“Yeah.” Josh had taken his coat off and was searching through his ever present shoulder bag. “We’re up again now, though. Let me get a coffee. Need anything?”

“No thanks.”

Cal had closed his files and put his computer to sleep by the time Josh returned.

“Okay, what’d you want to talk about?”

“That course you took last year, Complexity Theory. But first, I’ve got to tell you about yesterday’s biology lecture.”

“Let’s hear it.” Josh poured a packet of sugar into his bowl-sized coffee.

“Okay, so the lecture starts by describing what’s happening like five billion years ago, nine billion years after the Beginning of the Universe.”

Josh nodded.

“The earth is enveloped in an ultraviolet haze of gaseous vapors. There’s volcanic eruptions, falling asteroids, comets, radioactivity, lightning... all that stuff. But then the

fiery showers begin to subside. The temperatures drop. And as the heavy cloud covering condenses, rains create the oceans.” Cal leaned closer to the table. “Then, in these oceanic waters — possibly near super hot volcanic vents, maybe everywhere, but certainly over millions of years — oily droplets form. The walls of these droplets let some things pass through. Yet they shield whatever’s inside from the turbulence going on all around on the outside.”

“Okay,” Josh nodded again.

“Within the safety of the droplets,” Cal continued, “complex molecules meet and start passing smaller molecules back and forth.” He paused, then repeated. “They start *giving* molecules to each other. Primitive metabolism.” He looked at Josh. “Sharing — that’s the first step to life on earth.” Cal was still rapt with amazement.

“Very cool,” Josh slowly shook his head. “Kinda’ like —”

“Like your quarks, I know. And wait til you hear the rest of it. About a billion and a half years later, these first living cells have developed into a multitude of bacteria. But they’ve done so by consuming the carbon from the carbon dioxide in the air and leaving behind the oxygen.” Cal took a sip of mocha, then returned to his narrative. “Can you guess what’s happening?”

Josh raised his eyebrows.

“They’re creating an environment with not enough carbon dioxide and too much oxygen, a gas that only a few of them can tolerate,” Cal answered himself. So eventually — this is about 600 million years ago, now — the whole web of life is threatened. Life on Earth is on the edge of disaster. Hanging in the balance.”

For Cal and Josh, the ambient noise of the coffeehouse had ceased to exist.

“But get this. Among the various bacteria, there was a peculiar minority — Purple Oxygen Breathers. Meanwhile, among the majority of Carbon Dioxide Breathers, there’s a group of Swimmers — descendents from a symbiosis between Thermoplasts and eel-tailed Spirochetes.” Cal surprised himself at how well he was remembering the terms.

“Anyway, the Swimmers were also fermenters, sugarmakers, with an innovative reproductive technique. Instead of a single cell passing the total information to one new cell, they were into a kind of sexual reproduction — moving half the information into each of two cells, which would later come together bringing the total information to the one new one.”

Josh stretched his long legs out to the side. He was seldom out of uniform — khaki pants, loose fitting shirt or sweater and loafers. He compromised in winter by adding socks.

“Okay, so the Swimming Thermo-Spirochetes offer the Purple Oxygen Breathers the sweets of their fermentation labors, the shelter of their mobile homes and the delights of their reproductive activities — in exchange for the secret of using Oxygen and not dying from it. Result — they get together and form nucleated cells. Highly complex and —”

Cal read Josh’s face. “What’s wrong?”

“Be careful,” Josh warned, “your choice of words is making me uncomfortable. The way you’re talking makes the bacteria sound a little too much like present day human beings. Which suggests everything’s leading up to us — like, we’re the apogee of life or something.” Josh sat up. “But I get your point. They get beyond the crisis by joining together. Sharing what they do and have. Again, like the quark story.”

“Exactly. And this gets us to what I wanted to ask you about last night.”

“Ask away.”

“I need to know more about phase transitions.”

“Macroscopic behavior of systems crossing brinks and changing qualities... bifurcations,” Josh recited from wherever he had read and memorized it.

“Yeah, well, Professor Kensington applied the term to the complex molecules learning primitive metabolism. And to the simple carbon dioxide using bacterial cells transforming into nucleated oxygen users. But she says there’s debate about whether or not the emergence of life forms from the sea represents a phase transition. Which puzzled me. Why not?”

Josh thought about it for a moment. “Well, it’s probably because biologists don’t consider leaving the water for the land all that dramatic of a change. It’s not my field, but I imagine they’re seeing it as an adaptation rather than a real symmetry break.”

Cal put a hand to his brow then dragged it across his face. “Hmmm. So what would distinguish an adaptation from a phase transition?”

“With a phase transition,” Josh sipped his coffee, “the end condition is an almost inconceivable outcome of the pre-existent one. Your story about the Purple Oxygen Breathers and the sexual swimming sugar-makers, for instance.” Josh smiled, “Not to encourage you in your anthropomorphizing, but that they would do what they did to solve the problem, would no doubt have seemed impossible — even to them — before they did it. I’m sure you get the point.”

“Yeah. But could you explain Complexity Theory to me again? So I can understand how a phase transition can happen. I mean, if you’ve got the time.” Cal checked his mocha. Empty.

“It won’t take that long.”

Cal's eyes lit up. "Thanks, Josh. Let me get a refill."

Josh laughed. How anyone could drink two espressos in a row without their brains imploding was beyond him.

Cal returned. Passed Josh a napkin.

"Thanks. But before we begin, I need to preface this."

"You preface everything," Cal teased.

"I'll keep it short," Josh replied with a smile. "But I've gotta tell you that if you do a search for Complexity Theory on the web, you're going to find a lot of stuff out there... a lot of interpretation, even misinformation. So stick with university affiliated sites."

A disapproving expression crossed Cal's face, then vanished.

"Okay... anyway. Let's start back in the late sixties, when computers were still number crunching monsters — huge, with no memory to speak of and slower than a dial-up connection — you've got this guy, Lorenz. A meteorologist doing research at MIT. He's thinking if he can program his computer with all the known laws for pressure, temperature, wind, dew points, and all that... he can create a virtual world and improve weather prediction. His computer works to the sixth decimal point. You know, like it's 17.123456 degrees outside. His printer though, is one of those ancient tractor-fed dinosaurs that only goes out to three decimal points. So he sets the whole thing up, comes to work everyday, tears off his printouts, reads the weather patterns and starts to think that he's really making progress.

"One morning, though — I don't know, maybe his computer froze up during the night or the power went out or something — anyway, his computer is down and he has to get the whole thing up and running again. So he takes the last values from his printout, puts them back into the computer and gives it the, 'Go.' He leaves for a cup of coffee and comes back an hour or so later."

"But," Cal interrupted, "instead of the patterns he expects, the weather has completely changed. Totally not doing what it's supposed to do. He checks everything, then finally figures out that it's the missing fourth, fifth and sixth decimal places in the numbers he fed into his computer that have thrown the whole thing off. The butterfly wing effect."

"So you know this story, already?"

"Yeah, well, you told it to me like ten times last year."

"Well, the point is," Josh picked up, "it's not a metaphor. A butterfly moving its wing in South America can actually affect the weather over Texas. Microscopic change produces macroscopic effects. A small, seemingly insignificant action anywhere in a system can cascade up through the various levels and alter the whole system. In fact,

Lorenz had discovered one of the first principles of Complexity Theory. Systems are sensitive to initial conditions. You should write that down.”

Cal woke up his computer, opened a new file and typed. “Then what?” he asked.

“Let’s see, the next installment. Los Alamos National Laboratory... Uhhh,” Josh suddenly stopped.

“What?”

“Nothing.” Josh took another sip of coffee. “I think we should take a different approach.”

“Whatever.”

Josh pushed his cup and saucer to the side. “Okay, Complexity Theory covers three major areas: Chaos, Dissipative Structure Theory, and Complex Adaptive Systems. People working in just about every academic field you can mention have contributed something to it — mathematicians, physicists, ecologists, microbiologists, chemists, psychologists, economists... The list goes on and on. The important thing is that the principles have proven useful. It works.”

Cal nodded.

“We might have had the theory a hundred years ago if we’d had the technology. Well, actually, we could have had it even sooner...” Josh frowned and bit his bottom lip. “Problem was nobody really wanted to deal with chaos. So we just kept sweeping it under the rug — even when it involved basic physics. Newton’s Laws of Motion, for instance. Add a third body to the equations and they’re no longer solvable. All you can do is approximate.”

Cal’s head registered a jolt.

“Yeah. And it’s that way for any non-linear complex dynamic system whether you’re talking about three or more billiard balls, units of supply and demand, species in an environment, people, ideas... you name it. And —”

“Wait. Let me make sure I understand these terms. Complex is obvious. And dynamic means in motion and changing over time, right?”

“Right.”

“But what do you mean by non-linear?”

“Non-linear? That means you can’t line up the elements or agents of such systems in a simple cause and effect sequence. Non-linear systems don’t submit to simple solutions. In a non-linear system everything affects everything else — the causes and effects are involved in feedback loops. You know, when the cause brings about an effect but that effect also influences the cause.”

“Got it.”

“Okay, so Complexity Theory suggests that to study these kinds of systems, instead of asking ‘what,’ you really need to ask, ‘how.’”

Josh could also read Cal’s face.

“Like when I add cream to my coffee, how does it change from swirls of white in black to a consistent brown?”

“So how does it?”

“In ways that demonstrate characteristics of complex dynamic systems — such as sensitivity to initial conditions, self-organization, emergent behavior, self-similarity, unpredictability—”

Suddenly, Josh’s coffee cup with its remaining coffee went clattering and splashing across the table, finally smashing into fragments on the floor. Cal grabbed his laptop just in time.

Someone trying to make their way through the muddle of tables and chairs —

“Oh, man??!! Shit. I’m sorry.”

Several heads turned as the background din of conversations paused. Only the jazz continued uninterrupted.

Josh was up in a flash, then back with a rag from the counter-person. Cal had already done the best he could with their napkins. The man whose backpack had hit the cup was picking up the pieces.

When they’d settled back down, Josh continued. “As I was saying, whether it’s sand grains cascading down the sides of a sand pile, stock market fluctuations, commuter traffic... patterns emerge from chaos. And the really interesting thing is that the emergent patterns are not imposed from above or outside, but come from below by way of the interactions among the constituents of the systems. The individual constituents themselves create the order. That’s what they mean when they say Complex systems are self-organizing. You should write that down, ‘self-organizing.’”

Cal brought a hand to his mouth in thought, typed then looked up.

“And in every complex system you’ve got these feedback loop relationships —”

“Bam-bam-bam-bam!” The pounding clean of coffee grounds from the espresso maker broke through Josh’s words.

“What each member of a system does affects its neighbors,” he continued. “They in turn, affect the member that affected them, as well as their neighbors — and so forth. So a small fluctuation at a local level can cascade through all levels of a structure and completely transform the pattern.”

“Every time?”

“No. The outcome’s not predictable.”

Cal paused. “So a particular agent could do something and nothing happen?”

“Well, yes. Chance is involved. I like to call it freedom. You can’t predict the response of free agents to a stimulus, so you can’t predict what’s going to happen. Every action — in other words, a perturbation, a fluctuation or an instigation — meets with either conflict, indifference or resonance. When there’s enough agreement you get a transformation of the whole system in a phase transition.”

“Which is why I’m thinking this is so important,” Cal interjected. “But I can just hear people — like my dad — saying, ‘So? Where’s this getting us? If Complexity Theory holds that everything is so complex that nothing can be predicted, what does it matter?’ How would you answer that?”

This time, Josh leaned over the table, glanced around the room as if checking for spies, then whispered over the din. “It matters because it says the Universe is not determined. Nature, our nature, all of nature, none of it is fixed. It’s free. We’re free.” He raised his eyebrows and sat back again.

A loud rush of steam from the coffee machine frothing another cappuccino mixed with the twenty or more conversations and the on-going jazz.

“I’d also tell him that it matters because our fundamental descriptions of the world have been too far from what the world is really like,” Josh went on. “The earth is not a ball. Or take the surface of this table,” Josh tapped, “if you magnified it, what you thought was a plane would turn out to be so rugged, it’s actually a fractal. You know, all of our geometry — the very notion of a straight line between two points — is so far removed from actuality. And *that* matters.”

“Big time,” Cal responded. “You want another coffee?”

“No, thanks. Okay, so where were we again? Oh, right,” he recalled. “Let’s say you have a system that’s changing patterns — it could be a species, a business organization, an individual, whatever. And as it moves from one condition to the next, it’s multiplying its possibilities, improving. What would you call that?”

Cal thought a moment. “Evolving. Growing.”

“How about a system that retreats from an improved condition, back to where it had been? Or arrives at some kind of equilibrium state and then resists change, becomes static, no longer grows at all. What then?”

“Not doing anything? Dead or dying, I suppose — but wait,” he hesitated. “This talk about growing is getting to sound like teleology. Like everything is part of a progress. Isn’t that a no-no?”

“Not if it’s what a group of British researchers are calling ‘transformative teleology.’ Not a fixed goal, but ‘a future under perpetual construction.’”

Cal typed that into his file.

“Okay,” Josh continued, “So Complexity Theory then, is going to be interested in where systems are going and how they’re getting there.”

“So how can you tell where systems are going?”

“The one place all of them are going is toward the edge of chaos.”

Cal dropped his arm on the table. “How can that be true? Doesn’t chaos threaten the very existence of a system as a system?”

Josh nodded quick affirmatives. “Yes, correct. It does. And something more, chaos not only threatens the existence of the system that evolves to its edge, but it also threatens whatever other systems that might be intertwined with that system. Chaos isn’t the goal — it isn’t even the means. All the same, it’s where the activity of a dynamic system inevitably leads. But it’s what the system does when it reaches that threshold that makes all the difference.”

Cal’s face looked half-way between his initial bewilderment and a new state of disbelief.

“Look, here’s why,” Josh explained. “An organization, a society, an organism, an individual, a whole species... any complex dynamic system utilizes a certain set of solutions in response to a certain set of problems. Maybe it’s even balancing pretty well between equilibrium and openness to new possibilities. But every system is inextricably bound up with other systems; and those systems are also evolving and changing. Anyway, however it comes about — maybe the initial solutions weren’t the best, or even if they were — eventually they begin to fail. The system arrives at the edge of chaos. And then—”

“Then a phase transition,” Cal enthusiastically concluded.

“Well actually, at the edge of chaos you don’t always get a phase transition. You have three options. One: attempt to retreat from the edge by insisting on using the failing solutions. Two: drive off the edge into chaos. Or three: make a phase transition.”

Cal added to his notes. After a few seconds, “How about some detail on the options?”

Josh raised his eyebrows. “Okay. Going over the edge is tantamount to what happens when individual members of a system fail to respond to what’s going on. It could be they don’t recognize the crisis. Or maybe they deny that they’re at a crossroads. Could even happen that there’s nothing they can do. What follows is that uncontrollable events begin to cascade through the system, leading to complete dissolution. They perish.”

“Hey, you skipped the first option,” Cal peered over the top of his laptop screen. “Like a typical professor already, Josh.”

Josh chuckled.

“Okay. The option of attempting to retreat from the edge. Now that scenario is interesting because you might have some members of the system recognizing the need for profound change and pushing in the direction of a phase transition — but meeting with obstruction from others canalizing the system.”

“Canalizing?”

“That’s the term they use for trying to force the system back into old solutions. It means strategies aimed at controlling the flow of information — introducing noise into the system, disempowering agents urging change, stuff like that. In modern human societies, canalizing would be like trying to control the media. But the key to successful complex systems is communication. So the outcome of canalizing is the same as driving off the edge, extinction.”

Cal caught up with his note taking. “Then there’s a phase transition,” he prompted with a hint of excitement.

“Right. So first of all, keep in mind that a phase transition means *radical* change. It’s not just a re-structuring or an adaptation.” Josh asked with a look whether Cal understood. “A phase transition is beyond a revolution. It’s a complete transformation of identity.”

“A metamorphosis?” Cal suggested.

“Well, yes and no. The point to remember is that the emergent pattern, the solution, isn’t programmed to unfold the way a caterpillar is programmed to metamorphose into a butterfly. In a phase transition, the solution is *created*.”

Hands poised over the keyboard, Cal asked, “So how does a phase transition work?”

“Here’s how. When a successful system arrives at the edge of chaos, it opens its doors to its inherent potential by searching through all its options — alternatives available because of diversity preserved on the individual level.”

Cal thought a moment. “Like the Purple Oxygen breathers.”

“Right,” Josh was elated. “Alternative solutions may have been around all along. Tolerated, maybe even nurtured — just not used much. But now, those minor fluctuations that represent the new solution meet with unprecedented assent and — Voom!”

Cal looked up. “Let’s say a system runs into the — uhhh,” he glanced at his notes, “a canalizing problem. Especially if there’s a hierarchy, some constituents exercising power over others. How does it get past that?”

“Well, remember now, we’re talking about a system at the edge of chaos. And what that means is that those in the upper levels are not insulated from what’s threatening the constituents at every other level. And, at the same time, they’re also as free as any other member to choose the pathway to a phase transition. Everything can change when it becomes clear that the alternatives to a phase transition — that is, either denying the need to change or clinging to the old solutions — will carry the system into extinction.”

“Hmmm...” Cal thought aloud. “Let me get this straight. You’re saying that what it all comes down to really... is freedom.”

Josh nodded.

“That leaves everything so wide open, though... I mean —”

“Has to be. Anything less couldn’t accommodate the horizon of possibility that the Universe expresses. Cal, just think about the variety of flora and fauna in the world. We haven’t even seen it all yet.”

“But what about survival of the fittest, what happens to that?”

“Nothing happens to that.” Josh looked puzzled. “It’s a question of *what* proves to be fittest. Fitness in the old way often becomes the opposite of fitness when a system reaches the edge of chaos.”

Cal returned to his screen for a minute. Typed something. Scrolled a bit. Then, “Okay, I think you’ve given me what I need — at least, to get started. In fact, you affirmed what I was so excited about last night. Listen to this.”

Josh tilted his head.

“The humans, a species with a highly evolved brain, come up with a sign system — language. Maybe even the human brain emerges through interaction with the sign system itself.”

“Feedback loop relationship,” Josh smiled.

“Exactly. But the acquisition of language doesn’t represent a phase transition. It’s just a great — uhhh... tool or adaptation.”

“Okay.”

“Anyway, the mix of behaviors before and after language remains essentially the same.”

“You mean like the strong taking from the weak.” Josh moved Cal’s laptop to the side.

“That’s in the mix, of course. Along with loving one another, caring for the children and stuff. But competition and hierarchy wind up playing the dominant role in constructing identity.”

“So where are you going with all this?”

“Just let me follow it out. The sign system gets elaborated through culture, becoming more and more sophisticated. Mathematics, science, the Industrial Age, technology. Humans completely transform the appearance of the planet. Their population explodes. Megacities. Expressways. Pipelines. Satellites—”

“Global warming. Forests and oceans dying. Disappearance of species. Weapons to obliterate the planet,” Josh added.

“Yes, because all along we’ve been institutionalizing competition and keeping hierarchy in place with violence.”

“And now we arrive at the edge of chaos,” Josh concluded.

“Right,” Cal said with dead seriousness.

They both fell silent for a moment.

“But luckily,” Josh raised a finger, “we never completely stamped out alternative values — love, equality, cooperation. In fact, we’ve always cherished them, even though we run our world on the opposite. We do have the equivalent of your Purple Oxygen Breathers.”

“The question is,” Cal replied, “what else does it take?”

“Excuse me,” a voice interrupted from the next table. “I couldn’t help but overhear. And when you asked that last question, I just had to say something.”

Dreadlocks asymmetrically framed the speaker’s deep brown face.

“You guys should really check out this brother, Alon Jordan, a Poli Sci professor at Berkeley. He’s been saying exactly what you guys have been talking about. We’re on the edge of chaos and we need to make a phase transition. In fact, at first I thought you’d been to his website.”

“No,” Cal responded, “never heard of it.”

“You asked what else it would take. Well, Professor Jordan sees a possible answer to that question in the proto-democratic structures born of the eighteenth-century revolutions. Even though the Age of Democracy left the real political power in the hands of a small sector of society, democratic ideals nonetheless informed the constitutions. He argues that Article V of the U.S. Constitution could be an important gateway in a phase transition. You should check it out. Here’s the address.”

The speaker rose, handed them a napkin with a web address and disappeared through the café door.

Chapter Three

“I can’t believe it!” Ann said aloud as she watched the last of her visitors pass under the exit sign, listened to them rumbling down the concrete stairwell.

‘Oh, you argued a good case,’ she thought to herself, ‘Which is why I didn’t say too much. But... God, I just can’t believe it.’

Ann’s mind reeled — back to another scene. Lee and Earl waiting for her in the lobby of the dorm earlier that morning.

“Hey, Ann.”

“Hey, what’s up?”

“How you doin’?”

“I’m doin’ all right. What are you two up to? I’m sure this is no chance meeting.”

“Well, we got something we thought you might be interested in.”

“And what might that be?”

“You tell her, Lee.”

“Well, what it comes down to is that there’s this brother at Berkeley, a Poli Sci professor, who’s come up with a theory.” Eyebrows raised, Lee went quiet.

“Tell me.”

“It’s about the kind of changes we’ve always been talking about. You know what I mean. And this cat is saying that the impossible can happen. That it’s happened before.”

“Yeah, he says the impossible happening is actually a natural thing. It’s called a phase transition. And it could happen again.”

“What could?”

“A phase transition,” Lee and Earl said in unison

“A what? Hey, it’s eight o’clock in the morning. You guys been up all night again?”

“No, listen. It’s like this. Sometimes when things look really hopeless, a whole new pattern emerges.”

“It’s happened throughout the evolution of life on earth. And this time it’s the humans’ turn.”

“This professor’s suggesting that we’re ready, right now, that we could move to a whole new level. See things, do things, completely differently.”

Anne had set her backpack on the couch.

“So like everybody tomorrow morning is just gonna—”

“No. That’s what’s really cool about this brother’s theory. He says that people need a focal point, something they can rally around.”

“And they need to know they’re not alone.”

“So he’s proposing we use Article V of the United States Constitution, call for a Constitutional Convention. It’s written into the constitution, a way for us to totally re-construct our political and economic systems. Real democracy. Real equality.”

“Like the whole thing could come true,” Lee concluded.

“C’mon you guys. You can’t expect—”

“C’mon yourself, Ann. Okay, you gotta go some to believe it. But dig, what if it’s true?”

Ann had picked up her back pack and had started walking for the door. She had an eight-twenty and didn’t plan on being late. Earl and Lee fell into step with her.

“Yeah. Get with it, girl. Everybody’s gonna be talkin’ phase transition real soon. Train in the station.”

“And ready to roll.”

They crossed the lobby, pushed open the double glass doors and stood together outside.

“Check out this brother’s website. See for yourself.” Earl pulled out a tiny rainbow notepad, scribbled down a web address and handed Ann a purple note. “You might wanta pass this on to some of your white friends, too.”

“My white friends?” Ann stopped in her tracks. “Have you two gone completely mad?” She examined their faces. “You messin’ with me?”

“Would we mess with you, girl? About something like this?”

“Look, whatever you... I gotta go. Really.”

As Ann hurried to class, she had glanced at the address, folded the note and put in her backpack. Now, back in her room, the flashback dissolved. She reached for her pack and dug out the note. The URL matched the address given her by the delegation that just left. Left her in shock.

‘Wanting to bring in white people! Just when you’d finally persuaded me that we need to work separately! Even activists working for change,’ you always said, ‘are still white in a racist world.’ And now *you* want to include them... I wouldn’t have thought any of you... Okay, maybe Jamal — with his dreadlocks and his Bob Marley. *One Love* and all that. Yeah, Jamal. And his friends. Reggae lovers. But the rest of you? I never... And most of you don’t have *any* experience trying to ally with white people.”

Ann did have that experience. She’d been all there too often. The only black person in the group, the token. Looked to for the black point of view.

‘Even if they know, on an intellectual level, that there is no such thing as homogenous black community or point of view. That’s what it comes down to in practice. When they

want to hear what black people would think, you're it. And you're supposed to be grateful that they care to hear at all.'

Ann stuck a tack through the two bits of paper and pinned them to the bulletin board above her desk.

'Meanwhile, you're putting up with — oh, nothing blatant — merely all those little remarks, facial expressions, gestures that just scream disrespect. To African American ears anyway. Then, if you say anything, they're like, "I didn't mean it *that way*." And it really isn't intentionally cruel. Usually. But whatever the intention, it hurts. I'm so tired of it. Just might refuse this time. Except...'

Ann changed clothes and put on her running shoes. It was time. Past time. She faced the wall, stretched her calf muscles, then moved automatically through her floor stretches.

'Except that they're talking about real change. And I know the white students they've recruited so far. Sarah, Ben, Kelly, Lisa, Travis, they actually recognize that they've benefited — even if they would not have chosen it — from the unfair advantage a racist society gives anyone who happens to be born white. And I've got to give them credit for their response. "Take whatever position you have," they say, "and turn all the power it gives you to the purpose of changing the system."

'So now these brothers come telling me about a plan. Which sounds very workable. And I know their white recruits better than they do. Being one of the few blacks on campus willing to spend time outside class with whites.'

Grabbing her keys, Ann headed out for her run. Echoing down the concrete stairs.

'Because I just happened to grow up surrounded by almost nothing but. Unlike the other black students here. Yeah, I'm different. In so many ways. Both parents with Ph.D.s. Tenured professors in an out-of-the-way white college community. Mom and Dad feel so guilty about that. Always explaining. How lucky it was for an academic couple that one college offered jobs to both of them. How they had to seize the opportunity. Even though it meant we kids would be raised almost exclusively with whites. How many times have we heard it?'

Ann hurried through the lobby. Out into the sunlight. It was four blocks to the path. Nice warm-up.

'But we kids, that was all we knew. The only black... Well, most years the college did recruit a black student or two. But if I wanted friends my own age — and when you're little, you... What are you going to do? Play alone? Not if you're a normal child. You have playmates, friends. Ours had to be white. And their parents and our teachers.'

Nothing but whites. That was it. All there was. So Tyrone and I are like, “What’s the big deal?” When we were younger anyway.’

Lots of people out. Going to class, to early lunch. Air heavy with the smell of food. Ann’s stomach growled. ‘Patience. We’ll get there.’

‘Of course, we knew about racism. You can’t be black in this society and not be aware of that. And Mom and Dad tried to prepare us. Because you encounter it, no matter how well-positioned your parents are. But we went to private school. And *our* friends looked down on racists. *Our* social circle was polite, highly educated. The dreadful history that Mom taught — and we saw on TV, in movies — seemed almost unbelievable. So remote.’

Checking her watch, Ann started running.

‘When I got older though, I started really noticing the subtle forms of racism. Too subtle for my friends. Who thought I was imagining things. Unless it was blatant like when that new kid in school came out with the ‘n’ word. But I was picking up on the less obvious signals. From certain teachers. Or that guidance counselor. Or the parents of guys who asked me out. And my friends, they just... Well... No white person can really know what it feels like to be black in a racist society. So, all I had was Mom, Dad and Tyrone. At an age when it feels humiliating to lean much on your parents, much less you’re your little brother. At graduation, there I was. Covered with honors, surrounded by friends, but — deep inside — feeling depressed, isolated. Couldn’t wait to get to college and meet some black people.’

Her left knee interrupted Ann’s reminiscences. ‘Just a little reminder. Watch your stride, now. You want to go the distance. We’ll see when we get to the bridge.’

‘What a shock college turned out to be! At home, people at least knew me. Knew I had always defined the top of the class. Knew I wasn’t going to steal their purse. Here it was whites acting scared of you in the elevator. Security following you in stores. Teachers undervaluing your work. Assuming you only got into college because they lowered their standards. Which never enters their minds with legacy admissions. Party boys telling me what a big advantage I’ll have finding a job because I’m black and a woman. Discrimination in reverse. It’s an article of faith — maintained only by careful avoidance of any actual statistics. And I am so tired of it.’

Shins threatening splints. ‘What’s this? The new shoes? Look where you are, girl. Get off that hard pavement.’ Ann assigned one thread of attention the task of staying on the softest surfaces along the path.

‘But this movement they’re talking about is tempting. And it’s not just heart. It’s brain, too. Because they’re talking about language, cultural systems, mentalities. My field.

Which I've said for a long time held keys to making change real. They've got something new, too. New to me anyway. From physics, microbiology. Quarks and the beginning of the universe. Complexity theory. New ideas about what's "natural." And therefore what's possible. What my field might call new "narratives." Stories that say it's "only natural" for matter — and therefore, human beings — to move in the direction of cooperation, love, freedom, democracy. Even to take a giant step, a seemingly impossible leap in that direction. Bigger than a revolution. Besides, they're saying, the word "revolution," has too many links to violence, competition. The old ways. Now the word is "phase transition." Like the transition to life on earth. New narratives. A credible plan. And God knows we'd better do something soon.'

Shins settling down. Knee, too. 'Good. Just watch that lateral movement.'

'But working with white people? After all we've been through over the fact that I have white friends. That and the way I speak. Oh, it was painful at first. Getting snubbed. But I resolved to keep being myself. Spoke up in class. Wrote for the paper. Grew a big 'fro. Now more of my friends are black than white. And all the blacks on campus are friendly. Even those who grew up in the ghetto. Which is pretty amazing.'

Lakeside now. 'Watch out for clouds of gnats. You know what it's like to breathe them.'

'Because my background is like unreal. Fantasy. I've known so little, nothing really, of what black people go through. Including most of those who made it here to college. I don't have to consume mental energy worrying about money, for one thing. And not just for school. They're worrying about their families. About losing the hard-bought family home or not being able to pay the rent. About brothers and sisters skipping school, dropping out. Getting stopped by the police, arrested, thrown in prison, gunned down in the street. Living in war zones. Buildings where nothing works. Plumbing, heating, elevators. Plagued by rats. Conditions I can scarcely imagine.'

Up ahead, decision-time. That little detour through the woods. Soft path, but...

'Because Mom and Dad were so determined to keep us away from anything like that. They even worried about my friendship with Tanisha. Especially when they heard my first attempts at Black English. Until I brought Tanisha home. Then, of course, the professors fell in love with her. A miracle that she befriended me, though, I can't even grasp all the ways racism has hurt Tanisha. No wonder the things I talk about sometimes strike her as trivial — to the point of being offensive. But she has that captivating way of telling me what's what. The teacher. She could really contribute something to their group. But she won't join.'

Ann took the detour, picked up her pace. ‘Beautiful in here. Dark and so deliciously cool. But scary. Always reminds me of that Kurosawa movie. The rape in the woods. What if some guy...? I could outrun him. If I could get away. I *can* run.’ Out of the woods and into the dazzling sunlight.

‘No, Tanisha will not join a group that includes whites. Because you don’t have to be stung more than once to make a policy of avoiding bees. But I don’t know a single black person who’s never been stung. And some of my friends have been through so much that they find it painful even hearing white people talk sympathetically about us. So avoiding whites is the only rational thing to do. If you have a choice. Which I didn’t.’

At the bridge, another decision. ‘Turn back for a respectable three miles? Or go for the five? Go. Let’s go!’

‘Okay, so I have a very different experience. But even if I could magically transfer that — to further the coalition-building process — what good would it really do? Because I’m not so sure myself anymore. True, there’s a basic trust that comes from being sheltered and oblivious. Established when you’re little and you don’t grasp what’s going on around you. But I’ve been a lot more aware for years now. A lot less sheltered. That trusting impulse has gotten me stabbed in the back more than once. I was leaning towards avoidance myself. Which is why they could finally persuade me that separation was the way. Then they come at me with this. And here I am wondering how I could help them get along with whites. How could I? Not by talking about personal experience, that’s for sure. Because even if mine were less mixed, their own is going to carry more weight. So what could I...? I really wish I could talk about things I’ve studied.’

She passed by the swampy place that smelled like something rotting.

‘European history, for one thing. Which details the unbelievable cruelty of whites toward whites. They enslaved each other for centuries. And after that, a brutal class hierarchy. Beatings, torture, sexual abuse. Constant wars. Kings, aristocrats and later the bourgeoisie with their exaggerated display of wealth and leisure. While the people who worked went hungry, cold and miserable.’

“‘Why should we care? Do *they* care about people going hungry, cold and miserable in the ghettos right now?’ Oh, I can just hear it now. I hear you. I really do. Which is why I’ve never talked about European history at the table. But now that you’ve decided to try working with whites, I wish I could. Because this stuff still affects white people’s behavior.’

The beach. The other fork in the path.

‘Because this history left white people with family lore about things their ancestors went through, like the potato famine. Or how their nationality was mistreated as

immigrants. Or those bloody labor struggles. Which helps explain how some whites can think their ancestors were just as oppressed as ours. And feel — whether consciously or not — that *they* are oppressed right now.’

‘Oh, I can just hear you on that one, too. Like everyone at the table in chorus. “Yeah right. Like I’m *so* sure.”’

‘But whites do feel oppressed. Because in a way they *are*. The old European tradition of hierarchy still has force in it, even here in the United States. You’re born to a certain social rank. Which narrows or expands the array of opportunities that open up to you. Readily, anyway. And what about politics? It’s getting totally obvious that political offices — and influence — go to big money. Which leaves out most whites as well as blacks.’

Turnaround point. Ann circled to the left, started back.

‘But how could I ask Tanisha to think about whites being oppressed? I wouldn’t. Except that now this all-black delegation asks me to help form a coalition with whites.’

Left leg getting tired. ‘Careful, girl.’

‘But there’s another side to the coin. Because whites are not as sold on *this* world as they may look. They go along in order to get by. But they benefit unevenly. And even if they feel favored — which most of them don’t — they still aren’t really happy. Don’t feel free. Which they won’t admit unless you catch them with their guard down. Because there’s so much confusion about what happiness is. What freedom is. Yeah, confusion that serves a purpose. Social control.’

‘Which goes back to European history again. And how the revolutions that led to what we call democracies were compromised by those who didn’t really want anything like democracy. The people are out there in the street shouting about freedom. So you tell them that’s exactly what you want, too. Grab this powerful word and turn it to your own purposes.’

The bridge again. One and a half miles to go.

‘Besides, controlling the people by force takes too much effort and doesn’t work that well, anyway. So get the people to police each other by social pressure. Get ‘em to police themselves by internalizing the norms. Exercise control in smaller theaters, micro-theaters of power. Schools, workplaces, families. Language. Call it democracy. Let them vote. But get them to vote for you.’

‘Slipping into lecture mode, girl. Which is exactly the problem. I’m going to teach my friends? The people who’ve been teaching me? No way. I knew nothing, still know very little, about what’s going on in real life. What it’s really like out there. My knowledge

comes from books. Most of them written by white men. From their point of view. Yeah, but some of it can be used for change. I'm certain of that.'

'Like the language stuff we've talked about at the table. Racist vocabulary. Grammar rules that make relationships of domination and subordination seem "only natural." Subject/object. Foundations of that mania for sorting everything into pairs of opposites. Either/or — but with one always *over* the other. Good/evil; white/black; male/female. Everybody at the table is interested in this. Because we internalize it. Absorb the very mentality that oppresses us. Until we develop a keen enough awareness. "Emancipate yourself from mental slavery," Jamal is always quoting. But we never talk about the effect language and cultural systems of social control have on white people.'

'But it may be that the more privileged you are, the more bound your mind is by chains of mental slavery. Understanding this could help us work with whites. Because unconscious racism may not be as hard to cure as it might seem. You can change cultural systems. Like language. We're doing it all the time.'

'This is it. Stop pacing yourself. Time to kick.' Ann concentrated on running hard. Checked her watch as she crossed her finish line. Walked a few wide circles to cool down. 'What a feeling! My natural high.' She headed back to shower before hurrying to lunch at the cafeteria.

"Here she is!" The whole table seemed focused her arrival.

"Hey, Ann. Are we glad to see you!"

"Our expert on white folks."

"Girl, where you been?"

"Running. As I always do before lunch. What's up?"

"We need your expertise, Ann."

"Yeah, and fast! There's this meeting tonight."

"Everybody's going and we know we..."

"Tanisha, they actually persuaded you? What could they possibly have said?"

"The magic words, that's what they said. 'Phase transition.' Which means change. Deep, wide, serious change."

"So much change that 'revolution' is too small a word for it."

"Yeah, like no more racism. No more poverty."

"Real equal opportunity. Real democracy. Real liberty and justice for all. Real love one another. Make it *real*."

"Don't tell me they didn't convince *you*, Ann."

"No. Yeah. They did. But I had to think about it. During my run. You know you all... I figured they'd *never* get Malcom and Tanisha to go along."

“You underestimate us, girl. Okay, we’ve been doing our own thing, engaging in our own activism, when it didn’t look like anything really could be accomplished working with them. But we’re ready to take far greater risks than just getting dissed by some oblivious white kids. For real change.”

“And this looks *very* real. Did you check out the net?”

“Didn’t have time.”

“It’s more than just this campus. It’s nationwide. Like overnight. Spreading like wildfire.”

“Something’s going on. Something big. Everybody, every kinda people involved.”

“And so we hope you can... We all know from experience that the more understanding you have, the less likely you are to get angry when...”

“When somebody disses you.”

“So, of course, we thought of you, Ann. You not only grew up with ‘em, but you got your A’s in all those European history courses, European literature, languages, too.”

“Yeah, and that other course you talked about: Intercultural Communications.”

“Yeah, that’s what we want. Intercultural Communications. The mini-course. You’re the professor, girl. But you’ve only got time for one session before the first exam. Can you do it?”

“Well, I... Yes, I think I can.”

Chapter Four

“I’ve been dumped!” Jenny wailed as she burst through the front door. “He dumped me. Got another girlfriend.”

Sheila book-marked her place, jumped up and helped Jenny take off her heavy backpack. Jenny sank onto the couch, crying and talking at the same time.

“I thought it was like strange when he didn’t come over yesterday. Didn’t even call. Told myself, ‘It’s just mid-terms.’ Since I was so busy, too. Then after my exam today, I went to the library. And I saw him in a study room with this other girl. They’re all over each other... And I’m like totally staring. I can’t believe it. So then he comes up and pulls me into the hallway. Tells me it’s over. He’s found somebody new. Just like that. It’s over. After two years together. He trades me in on a new model. She’s a lot prettier than me, too. I... I can’t handle this, Sheila. I can’t.”

“You can, Jenny. You can.” Sheila sat down next to her distraught roommate, put an arm around her. “If I could, you can. I know how much it hurts. I really do. But Jim is obviously... Jenny, anybody who would dump *you* has to be stupid. You’re not just pretty, you’ve got brains, personality. You’ve got... You’re so much fun. And you care. You care about the whole world. You’re... Everybody loves you.”

“Not everybody. Not Jim. Not anymore.” Jenny pulled away, turned to face Sheila.

“Which is why I say he can’t be too bright,” Sheila continued. “Besides, if he was going to trade you in, you’re better off finding that out now, rather than later. Better to know *before* you’ve sacrificed your career to putting him through grad school — or having his babies.”

“Babies! Ohhh, my babies, my...” Crying too hard to talk, Jenny leaned back into Sheila’s shoulder.

‘Error,’ Sheila scolded herself. ‘Mentioning babies only makes it worse. Be more careful.’ She hugged Jenny with both arms and waited for this wave of weeping to subside.

“Sorry, Jenny. I sure didn’t mean to make you cry harder. I —”

“Just want to help. Thanks, Sheila.” Jenny pulled back again and looked into Sheila’s face. “And I’m sorry, too. Bawling when you’re trying to study. But you know how it is. And how I feel about babies.”

“Yeah, me too. I should never have said the word. I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault, Sheila. It’s mine. The whole thing’s my fault.” Jenny put her face in her hands. “But what?” she asked into her palms. “What did I do wrong?” She let her fingers slide down and come to rest on her chin. “What did I do? Or not do?”

“Hey, you can’t put all the blame on yourself, Jenny. It might not be anything you—”

“But it must be. How could it not be? I’m not perfect. I know that.”

“Who is? But you can’t say it’s all you, like Jim did nothing wrong. I mean, the guy must have lied to you. And I still say it’s better to find that out sooner than later. If you couldn’t trust him...”

“He did turn out to be a good liar,” Jenny admitted. “He’d been seeing this girl for a month. That’s what he said. A month! And I had no idea. I thought he just had like harder courses this semester.”

“Jenny, I’ve got to tell you — I can’t not tell you now — I always had my doubts about Jim. Of course, I never said anything. Because I knew you just wouldn’t be able to hear it.”

“So what you’re really saying is that he’s just a jerk and I’m better off without him. Maybe you’re right. But I’m in love, Sheila. That’s the problem. I can’t just say, ‘Take him. You can have him. I didn’t want a jerk like that anyway.’ Because I’m still in love. And what you’re saying just makes me feel worse. I mean like what’s wrong with me? Doesn’t my brain work? I fell in love with a jerk.” Jenny reached for the throw pillow and let her upper body fall away from Sheila. She half-lay on the couch, hugging the pillow and sobbing.

“Hey, the most intelligent women in the world fall in love with jerks — like all the time. You’re in good company.” Sheila’s tone fell flat. This was no time to lighten up. ‘Okay, so let’s try getting serious,’ she thought.

“Hey Jenny, remember that course we took last semester? All that stuff we thought was so cool about construction of gender identity and sexuality?”

Muffled weeping.

“Remember how we got this feeling of freedom — we both said that — when we learned that masculinity and femininity... Jenny, are you there? Can you...?”

“I hear you,” Jenny said into the pillow. “But I wish you’d just let me cry.”

“Okay. You cry. I’m here though, if you need anything or decide you want to talk.” Sheila went back to her chair and her book. She couldn’t concentrate too well with Jenny crying her eyes out, but wasn’t about to leave the room. ‘She could need me — any minute,’ she figured. ‘And how important is a mere exam, compared to a friend’s whole

life in crisis?’ Sure enough, it wasn’t very long before Jenny’s sobbing lessened, then stopped.

“Sheila?”

“What?”

“I’m sorry I like told you to shut up before. I’m just... I don’t know.”

“Well, I do know. Been there. Remember? No need to apologize, Jenny. You feel like talking now?” Sheila closed her book.

“Yeah. You were trying to say something when I cut you off.”

“I had started talking about that Women’s Studies course. You feel like hearing that?”

“Sure, anything. Just talk.”

“Okay. Remember how we both felt like something had been lifted off our shoulders — something we’d never realized was weighing us down — when we learned that masculinity and femininity aren’t biologically determined. Just sets of ideas, that actually vary from culture to culture. Remember that?”

“Of course.” Jenny sat up and reached for the kleenex box. “But what—?”

“And do you remember the part about how women are programmed to be attracted to whatever their particular culture says is masculine?”

“Sure. I got an A in the course, you know.”

“Okay, so women fall for whatever’s masculine. And in our culture... Like how masculine is it to be emotionally attached? Or faithful? It’s like you’re joking, of course. Even to ask the question. So, men—”

“Whoa! Wait a minute, Sheila. Women are unfaithful, too. As much as men I bet, maybe more. Women are notorious for being fickle. Have been for centuries.”

“Come on, Jenny. You know you’re just repeating a negative stereotype.”

“Yeah, but I’ve seen it. You have, too. Seen couples where the girl drops the guy because she found somebody better looking. Or with more money, better prospects. Look what happened to Brett.”

“Okay, okay. Women do it, too. In fact, the way this culture does femininity, it’s femmy to be a total air-head. Like don’t worry your pretty little head with anything weighty — like loyalty or strong convictions. I don’t know how many women actually get into that kind of femininity anymore. But that’s the tradi—”

BZZZZZZZZZZT. BZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZT.

Sheila jumped up and grabbed her wallet off the coffee table. “Gotta get that Jenny. I ordered us a pizza. Mid-term time. So forget cooking!”

“Hey! Hi, Courtney. I thought you were...”

“Hi, Sheila. Looks like you got a pizza delivery, too.”

“2906A. Someone order a pizza?”

“Yeah, I did. How much?”

“Let’s see. Sixteen dollars and eighty-nine cents.”

“Here. The rest is for you. Come on in, Courtney. Maybe you can help me eat this. I doubt that Jenny’s gonna want any.”

Courtney spied Jenny crumpled on the couch.

“Jenny! You’ve been crying? What’s the matter?”

“Jenny just found out she’s been dumped,” Sheila answered, as she set the pizza down and offered some to Courtney. “Jim’s got himself a new girlfriend. Jenny’s in shock.”

“Dumped? Oh, no. I’m sorry, Jenny. That’s awful. Poor girl.” Courtney bit into a slice of pizza, twirled the cheese threads. “God knows you’re not alone,” she went on. “It’s broken hearts unlimited out there. You’ll get over it though. Most everybody does. Mmmm. Hey! This is good! Am I the only one eating? Sheila, have a slice while it’s still hot.”

“I don’t feel much like eating. Go for it, Courtney.”

“Jenny, you look terrible!” Courtney had taken a chair across the room where she could see Jenny better.

“I feel terrible.”

“What you need is to go out and buy something. That’ll cheer you up. There must be something you’ve really—”

“Courtney! How can you even...? Can’t you see this is serious?” Jenny shouted as she fled the room and slammed her bedroom door.

“Sorry, Sheila. I’m... But I actually *was* serious. That’s what I’d do. Time-honored method. Learned it from my mom.”

“Well, obviously it’s not the thing for Jenny right now.”

“Sorry. Guess I’d better go. It seems I’ve only made things worse. Tell Jenny I said I’m sorry, okay?”

“Okay. Bye Courtney. Just pull the door shut. I’ll go see how she is.”

Sheila knocked on Jenny’s door, then went in. “Hey, Jenny. Courtney’s gone. Said she was sorry.”

Dry-eyed for the moment, Jenny sat up on the bed. “I guess I’m sorry, too — for slamming the door. But I still can’t believe she said that.”

“She actually *was* serious. Trying to help. Said she learned that from her mom.”

“Yeah and I learned it from my Aunt Jenny. My favorite aunt. You met her.”

“The beauty queen, right?”

“State finalist. Yeah, Aunt Jenny fulfilled every little girl’s dream: prom queen, beauty prizes, fairytale romance, marriage to Prince Charming — right out of high school.”

“And she said the same thing Courtney said about buying stuff?”

“Oh, yeah. That’s Aunt Jenny’s answer to just about everything. Buy, buy, buy. I’ve always adored her, you know. Still do. Loved that buy-mad stuff, too — when I was younger. Thought it was way cool that she knew every item on every rack of her favorite stores. I mean, she like had it all memorized. Back then it was malls. Now it’s the net. She was always buying me stuff, too. So I... But later, when I really started thinking, I’m like, ‘What a waste!’ Because she’s so smart. Could’ve done something important. For the world, I mean. And it’s not that she doesn’t care. She just believes you can’t do anything.”

“But Jenny, don’t make such a big deal of it. I don’t think Courtney was suggesting full-time consumer escapism. Just an emergency measure.”

“Yeah, but... Okay, I know she meant well. Courtney always does. She’s sweet that way. I’m just all over the place emotionally right now, Sheila. No mood for company.”

“I know. I really do know how bad you feel. Wish I could do more about it. Hey, I’ve gotta run or I’ll be late for class. Exam review in history tonight. Can’t afford to miss it. Can you deal with being alone?”

“Yeah. Might be just what I need.”

Jenny was standing in front of the full-length hallway mirror when Sheila got back. “Courtney was right. I do look terrible. But even when I haven’t been crying, Jim’s new girlfriend is so much prettier.”

“I don’t agree.”

“What? That I look terrible?”

“No, that she’s prettier.”

“Oh, so you saw them?”

“Yeah, and I totally disagree with your assessment. Totally. Oh, she obviously spends much more time — and money — *trying* to be beautiful. The make-up, the hair, the clothes, the nails. And her looks do send different signals than yours. She’s like, ‘Here I am, boys. My only aim in life is to be your toy. So don’t worry, you’ll always feel smarter and more important.’ You never wanted to be like that Jenny.”

“Yeah, but I’m sure that’s one of the reasons he chose her over me. Her kind of beauty, those signals. That’s what guys like.”

“Not all guys, Jenny. I’ve got brothers. So I know.”

“But weren’t you telling me earlier that all men are alike? You know, unfaithful. Just before Courtney interrupted.”

“Jenny! Okay, I know you’re in the worst possible state of mind. So I’ll just ignore the insulting side of that remark. But has your broken heart totally erased your hard drive? How could the girl who got the ‘A’ forget that talking about masculinity is *not* saying all men are alike?”

“Sorry, Sheila. I’m pretty messed up right now. I guess I took it that way because I was like defensive. Defending, I don’t know, Jim, I guess. Myself, too, in a way. Maybe that’s why I wouldn’t let you make your point.”

“The point that our culture defines masculinity as just about the opposite of loving. Power. Conquest. Not sentimental. Not emotional. Not vulnerable. And there’s an emotional vulnerability when you’re in love, right?”

“But men do fall in love. I’m sure of that. Jim was in love with me. I know he was. Said he wanted to marry me. I’m certain he... You can’t say men don’t love.”

“Of course men love. Human beings can scarcely live without it. Besides, not all individuals relate in the same way to the gender norms, remember? All I’m trying to say is that the more a guy identifies with *this* culture’s version of masculinity, the more he struggles — consciously or not — against being in love. He’s torn between the masculine ideals he’s trying to live up to and what it takes to love.”

“Where’s all this stuff coming from, Sheila? You’re sounding like the big feminist all of a sudden.”

“Me? Don’t worry. I’m not becoming feminist. No, no. I’m just trying to convince you that it’s not your fault. Because girls are programmed to get turned on by more masculine men and programmed to go cold around the less masculine ones. So it’s not your fault for falling in love with—”

“A jerk. Then it’s not really Jim’s fault either,” Jenny cut in, “for being a... for being the way he is.”

“True. That’s one reason I’m bringing this stuff up right now. Because these understandings helped me finally forgive Bill. Because, male or female, nobody asked you to think it over and decide whether you really wanted to buy society’s gender ideas when you were little. They just fed it to you with your graham crackers and milk; or even earlier, like with the baby food they spooned out of those little jars.”

“My mom made our baby food, ground up stuff in this little grinder thing she had.”

“Is that a hint that I should stop trying to pull you out of the pit? Just sympathize?”

“Sorry, Sheila. I know you’re trying to help. And I do appreciate it. I really do.”

Jenny struggled to hold back another wave of tears.

“And if sympathy is what you need, I sure can sympathize. Totally. Remember when I went through it freshman year? I don’t know what I would’ve done without your shoulder to cry on. But I keep thinking it might have been different if we had already taken that course.”

“Maybe not.”

“Hey, if you want me to stop talking...”

“No, I... I’m not just being contrary. I know it’s important, what you’re saying. I tried so hard to communicate that gender stuff to Jim. He totally refuses to recognize that we’ve been gender programmed. Still thinks masculinity and femininity are biological... universal. Wouldn’t even let me tell him how gender norms vary in different times and places. We talked, er — actually argued about it several times. Got totally nowhere.”

“Figures.”

“Now I wonder if that had something to do with him falling out of love with me. My cousin Pam, when I tried to tell her what we were studying, she was like, ‘Get that stuff away from me. Nothing turns off a man faster.’ Now my mind keeps going back to that.”

“If it was that, Jenny, you don’t want... Well, I know I don’t want a guy like that. If he can’t grow with you. I think I’ve grown from learning this stuff.”

“Yeah. But... what I’m trying to say is what good did it do me, anyway?” Jenny’s lower lip started quivering. “It’s one thing to study gender construction, to know about it and deconstruct it — on an intellectual level. But it’s another thing altogether to overcome the feelings your own programming generates. That’s the problem. You’re trying to reason with me, Sheila. And I’m in love. Love that my lover no longer returns. And I want babies so bad. Wanted to have them with Jim. Reason can’t touch that stuff. It’s emotion. Feelings.” Tears were streaming down her face again.

Sheila resolved to stop trying to talk Jenny into feeling better. For a while at least, she would just let her cry. You have to let the tears out. But she knew from doing it herself that you can let crying go on too long. Cry all the time for weeks and just feel worse, not better. Jenny was right about reasoning, though. It just won’t work when you feel like that. Sheila remembered the moment when Jenny finally pulled her out of it. It was with emotion. ‘Jenny’s feeling, a feeling so strong that... A counter-emotion. That’s what worked. Maybe I can return the favor. But not now. Gotta give the poor girl time to grieve.’

Jenny cried on and off for days. She didn’t go to class, didn’t go out at all, didn’t eat the food Sheila brought home and prepared for her. Not even the chocolate cake Courtney baked from scratch. She didn’t comb her hair, didn’t change clothes, didn’t wash.

“Girl, you’re starting to stink the place up,” Sheila finally said, throwing open the window. “You’ve got to get out of those clothes, shower and brush your teeth — for my sake, if not for your own self-respect. And if you ever want to get a comb through your hair again, you’d better get on that, too.”

Jenny mechanically obeyed. Felt better for it. All cleaned up, she even ate some of the avocado and cream cheese omelet — a favorite of hers — that Sheila ran out to get from the restaurant on the corner. While she was eating, Sheila tried again.

“Try to get ahold of yourself, Jenny. If you don’t start going to class, you’ll trash your grade point, obliterate your hopes of getting into grad school.”

“I don’t care. I try, but I just can’t care about that kind of stuff right now. It’s... it’s a question of values. Like my values have changed. Well, shifted. The emphasis has shifted. Things like achievement, success, even my career, just don’t feel that important to me. Love is what matters, all that really matters. Love.”

“Yeah, but what do you mean by love? My Jenny can’t be talking about love on the small scale. Not just you and your lover, your family and friends, your tiny little world and that’s all. Not my friend Jenny. Not the Jenny who opened my eyes to a much bigger love. Love with a capital ‘L.’ You completely changed my life with it — in just one conversation.”

“When was that?”

“Back when I had my heart broken. I guess it’s only natural that it doesn’t stand out as much in your mind. But I’ll never forget it. I had been crying for weeks, just couldn’t stop sinking. Then one night you turned the tables on me. You started crying.”

“Oh yeah, I remember. But I—”

“You shed such real tears that night about... Oh, you talked about it all. All the creatures whose habitats we’re destroying. Pandas, cheetahs, elephants, monarch butterflies. And species we’ve never even named. Endangered, going extinct. Just for profits. Those were your exact words — choked out through tears. You cried about war, too. The human beings, families and friends behind the statistics and terms like ‘collateral damage.’ Homes, fields, workshops — people’s means of making a living — laid waste. And world hunger. Children searching for food in garbage dumps. The parents who can’t get work or work all day but still can’t feed their families. So they watch their children slowly starve. Or... Oh, you went on and on. Homelessness. Racism. The pain of trying to explain racial hatred to little children. Or of not being able to get your family out of the ghetto no matter how hard you try. You covered a lot of ground. The whole mess we’re in. Tears streaming down your face, like they are right now.”

“Yeah. I remember. Of course. You were just... Like you’d gotten so wrapped up in your own pain that you’d completely forgotten the really big stuff. I thought you were wallowing.” Jenny pulled the last kleenex from the umpteenth box Sheila had bought for her. “And now I’m doing it. That’s why you’re reminding me of what I said, right?”

“Well, yeah. Er, not exactly. It’s more that, when you said reasoning couldn’t help, I remembered how you helped me. Your feelings at that moment were strong enough to pull *me* out of the emotional quicksand. So I hoped that maybe now those feelings — your own feelings — could pull you out. You still feel them, don’t you Jenny?”

Jenny closed her eyes for a long moment. “Rhetorical question, right? You know how I am. Like last semester, when I finally made the move to change my major. So I could do more with my life, make a career of working for change. And my parents... You remember how hard it was to hold my ground on that. I really...”

She looked into Sheila’s face. “Okay, I know you mean since Jim dumped me. Do I still care? I do. As much as ever. Maybe more. Because I feel how important love is. It’s not like romantic love is opposed to love for the world, you know. Love between equals. That’s exactly what the world needs. Love without power trips. If we could learn to love that way we could have a future on this planet. Love between equals. Romantic love is one way we glimpse what that would be like. Another can be friendship. Thanks, Sheila.”

“Hey, no problem. Are you gonna be okay while I go to class?”

“Yeah. See you later. And thanks again, Sheila.”

“Hey, no problem.”

Jenny was at her computer when Sheila got back, Courtney sitting next to her.

“Hi, Sheila.” Life had returned to Jenny’s voice. “Hey, have you been on the net lately?”

“No, I’ve been—”

“Too busy studying and taking care of me, huh? And I was too busy bawling. So Courtney had to show me this. You’ve got to check it out. Something’s going on. Something big. Like a movement. A...”

“They call it a phase transition,” Courtney contributed.

“A what?”

“A phase transition. They got the word from physics. Complexity theory. Microbiology, too. A lot of different fields. It’s about how change happens in complex dynamic systems. A phase transition is like a complete transformation. So great that the new state would have seemed impossible in the prior state.” Jenny made eye contact with Sheila, smiled.

“But in fact, it *has* happened,” Courtney interjected. “Like when life began on this planet.”

“And now it’s humanity making the changes we’ve all been wishing for, but considered impossible.”

“Yeah, realizing ideals like democracy, freedom, compassion.”

“And love.”

“Come, see for yourself.”

Chapter Five

Three clicks and Paul was back into the discussion forum he'd been following for the past several days.

RE: Identity

In an earlier thread, Jason wrote:

>> Okay. I agree with Karl's statement that an ego identity, that is, thinking of ourselves as separate from each other and everything around us, is based on faulty data, gathered by senses that perceive only a narrow range of what's going on. I also agree that seeing yourself as not-being a woman if you're a man; not-being black if you're white; not-being poor if you're rich; etc -- is killing us. And I'm sure not going to argue against the understanding that gender is constructed by culture. But I have a real problem with the thought of giving up my masculinity.

I feel the same way. I can see what everybody is saying about masculinity being tied to violence. And even that masculine sexuality is accurately described as predatory. But I'm really struggling with the obvious conclusion that I need to somehow cut masculinity out of my identity. How do you do that?

Gary01

RE: Identity

I'm sick and tired of everyone saying that masculinity is violence. I consider myself masculine but I'm not violent.

Mendoseeno

RE: Identity

We've been through this before. In at least two earlier threads. Let me save you the trouble of searching the archives.

Masculinity is a set of ideas that each individual male, such as yourself, relates to in his own way. (Depending on how he was raised, what his father was like, older brothers, friends, classmates, teammates, co-workers, etc) And in this culture there's a link between masculinity and violence whether you think so or not -- like the mayhem in football and a lot of cinema, video and computer games etc. Open your eyes. Masculinity is virtually synonymous with the competition that a phase transition will leave behind.

steve

RE: Identity

The problem for those of us who understand that masculinity doesn't fit with a phase transition has to do with how it feels trying to re-think yourself without it. Like I have no trouble letting go of any identification with whiteness, but masculinity, that's a tough one.

Gary01

RE: Identity

Gary01,

It feels easier to stop identifying with being white because you probably never thought about it as much as you've thought about being a man. This culture makes whiteness so much the norm that most whites don't have to put much energy into it. While for some reason, you do have to work at being manly, or at least, not appearing effeminate. So you probably never needed to see yourself as white in the same way you feel you need to see yourself as masculine.

But I agree with you about masculinity. I'm more strongly attached to that part of my identity than I am to my beautiful blackness. The question is, if I give up identifying with divisive things like masculinity, what am I supposed to replace them with? What's to fill the identity vacuum?

mack

RE: Identity

I don't think that blackness is in the same category as masculinity, since blackness doesn't mean powering over others. Besides, it's not like we all have to be exactly the same. We want to keep diversity. It's what makes the beautiful, beautiful. It's a great strength. Not to mention our source of the alternative possibilities that make a phase transition possible.

To answer your question, we can replace ego ideas of ourselves with something better. We can model or imagine ourselves as naturally loving, cooperative beings, for instance.

Amy

RE: Identity

Too generalized. And naïve. Any comparative religions course will show that every religion known advocates love and cooperation. But that's had so little effect on our behavior or who we believe we are. What makes you think that, after all these centuries, telling ourselves we should "love one another" is going to make a difference now.

Mariner

RE: Identity

Mariner,

One thing is that we know now from scientific studies that love and cooperation have been a very important part of our physical being all along. It's just a matter of learning to tap into that neglected side of ourselves.

Amy

RE: Identity

I'd like to suggest identity as connected with the position of the sun, moon and planets at the moment of birth. Such an identity builds on our connection with the universe, with one another and our equality, yet distinguishes each of us as individuals, too.

Gloria

RE: Identity

Oh right, Gloria. You come into our discussion group and suggest we loop back into superstition. Astrology, UFO-phobia, conspiracy theories, tarot cards, crystal balls, take that shit to a dot alt site, please. If Complexity Theory establishes anything, it's that we each have free will. You can't predict.

Bluestreak

RE: Identity

Somebody told me and my boyfriend about our stars and we had to admit, it fit. And the person didn't know either one of us before.

Kadymae

RE: Identity

You just found ways that you could make sense of what was said. The mind does that all the time. Finding meaning is a subconscious activity that language depends on.

And as for astrology, go visit a dozen websites and copy down what they're forecasting for you today. Then compare. Hello? There's nothing out there.

Bluestreak

RE: Identity

Don't throw out the baby with the bathwater, Bluestreak. What I'm suggesting is not prediction. Just a description of personality based on where the planets were at the moment of birth. It's as empirically

verifiable as any psychological profile you'd consider credible. Have you ever seriously looked into it?

Gloria

RE: Identity

How do you know what the signs mean, anyway? I've had two astrology readings and each described very different personalities for me. And neither sounded very much like me at all.

Abigail

RE: Identity

I totally admit that there's a lot of misconceptions and contradiction out there. And I'm not sure how all the erroneous descriptions can be cleared up. Everybody has to judge for themselves, I guess.

But what's really important is that, if there are descriptions out there that do fit what you know about yourself and your friends, we've got grounds for an identity based on connection instead of separation.

Gloria

RE: Identity

I don't find this thread about Astrology very enlightening. Seriously. That kind of identity would be too constrictive anyway. I'm not interested in being pigeon-holed into a set of expectations. It can't be identity at any cost. We don't want to replace what we've got with something worse.

Jason

RE: Identity

You got that right, Jason. Besides, you're not going to get me to believe that everybody born at any given time is exactly alike. It's just not true and repugnant to anyone who believes in freedom. I can't believe we're even discussing this.

Bluestreak

RE: Identity

Bluestreak,

Recognizing that a dimension of personality is connected with the time and place of birth doesn't deny free will. We are free whether we like it or not. People choose how to use or not use their inherent gifts and inclinations. For instance, you can be born a Taurus, with qualities of great value to a musician (Taurus' natural propensity for sensual ascetics) yet never pick up an instrument or even listen to music. And you're free to develop un-Taurus-like skills, too.

Personality is complicated. The way I see it, we've got environmental factors, our conditioning, our culture; and there's free will; plus the connection with the Universe at the moment of birth. These factors (and maybe others we don't even know about yet) are in play.

Sorry for the long post.

Gloria

RE: Identity

Astrology isn't even conceptually coherent. What exactly are the causal factors responsible for producing the effects. Until you can establish that, it's totally unscientific.

Miromax

RE: Identity

Miromax,

Last year I did a study on the skills that homing pigeons demonstrate. It was a research paper inspired by my cat who found her way home months after she ran away from the veterinary clinic – ten miles from home; and a turtle that returned every year to my parents' cottage to lay her eggs. It wouldn't bother me if we didn't know exactly how astrology works. Superstring theory insists on more than four dimensions.

I would be interested in seeing the kind of descriptions Gloria is talking about, that I could judge as relevant or not.

Frankelee

RE: Identity

The signs don't align with the constellations. Period.

Titano

RE: Identity

Titano, that's not a problem; it's part of the answer. When the constellations were mapped out, they did align with the signs. Earth's slight axial wobble causes what's called the equinoctial precession, so they no longer line up.

What hasn't changed is the internal relation between the sun and earth at the equinoxes and solstices. And those relationships affect the life of earth in the same ways they did thousands of years ago.

Gloria

RE: Identity

Most academic studies on Astrology begin from a mind set on trying to disprove it. But if we really are a part of the Universe, we're missing the point if we don't look for our identity where we could actually find it. Wouldn't the principle of self-similarity suggest that the parts (in this case – we, ourselves) reflect the whole?

Just thinking out loud.

Mirach

RE: Identity

Like the universe has personality? Or the solar system? Where is this taking us?

Jason

RE: Identity

Hey Gloria. It sounds as though you know something about it. Maybe you'd like to point us in the direction of some descriptions out there that you've found to be accurate. So we can judge for ourselves.

Gary01

RE: Identity

My favorite site uses the seasonal changes as a metaphor to describe the signs. You can find it at thestars.omega.com

Gloria

Paul double-clicked the URL. He found himself at a homepage with a row of clickable items down the left side. He read the introduction.

YOUR STARS and their MEANING

To begin, there are places and there are celestial bodies that move through the places. The places are traditionally called the signs. The celestial bodies include the sun, moon and planets.

The signs or places represent phases in a cycle. I like to use the seasonal changes as they occur in the Northern hemisphere as a metaphor to convey their meanings. You could also use abstract terms for the phases. Or you could sort through the traditional descriptions. You could probably even start from scratch by asking thousands of people about themselves and assembling a schema from the material. The larger your sample, the better. Of course, not everyone has time for that. The following descriptions

represent a collective effort, blending many peoples' feedback with some of the traditional meanings associated with the Stars.

Click on "Calculate" to find out where the planets were at the time of your birth. Click on "Celestial Bodies" to see what the sun, moon and each of the planets mean for human personality. Click on "Signs" to see their meaning. And Click on each of the celestial bodies at the moment of your birth to see the specifics of your own stars.

Paul decided to click on "Celestial Bodies" first. He chose "Brief" descriptions, rather than "Full."

The sun is the center of the solar system, most important to biological life and most apparent of the celestial bodies. Wherever the sun occurs will mean: the center, the most important, the most apparent factor in the picture.

The moon is the next most apparent of the celestial phenomena, what psychology might call the subconscious. Wherever the moon occurs will describe that which is underneath the most apparent and will tell us something about our emotional life.

Mercury is closest to the sun, moves very quickly yet never goes far away (from the centermost experience). It describes your everyday rational and communicating mind. Mercury tells something about how you think and communicate.

Venus is the beautiful star that paints the sunsets and sunrises. Named for the Goddess of Art, Beauty, Love – wherever Venus occurs describes one's art, one's beauty, what one loves.

Mars, a red star, attracts our attention like a small red light amidst all the white ones. Mars accentuates, draws our attention inescapably to wherever it is found.

Jupiter, the largest of the planets, carries some twenty-eight moons and radiates more energy back to the sun than the sun sends to it. Jupiter acts like an exponent in mathematics, multiplying or magnifying the characteristics of whatever sign it occupies.

We recognize Saturn by its rings. For personality, Saturn indicates what's constricted, the experience you need to open up, the missing piece. Saturn therefore indicates the key to self-realization.

The planets beyond Saturn were only discovered after the humans developed the telescope. The best way to understand their meaning is to consider the context in which each was discovered. Because they move so much more slowly than the other planets, they remain in the same sign for a number of years. So their meanings define peer groups,

Uranus was discovered in 1781, coinciding with the Age of Enlightenment and the Age of democracy. Uranus is associated with the writings of Rousseau, Voltaire, Montesquieu, Diderot, Thomas Jefferson,

Thomas Paine, Mary Wollstonecraft and others of this era. Uranus represents the recognition that everyone – not just kings and nobles – is important and should participate in decision making. Uranus describes a Consciousness of significance in the World – a knowledge of the ability to make changes in our social and political institutions.

Neptune was discovered in 1848. Its discovery coincides with the Age of Romanticism and the articulation of utopian visions. Its meaning is reflected in the work of Blake, Thoreau, Emerson, the Bronte sisters, Keats, Mary Shelley, Melville, Hopkins, Marx, Darwin. Neptune brings to mind the recognition of our connection with Nature. Neptune describes a Consciousness of significance in the Universe – the awareness that each of us are words in a living poetry.

Pluto was discovered in 1930. In the twentieth century, humans waged two World Wars, perpetrated the Holocaust, used the atomic bomb. These enormities prompted us to recognize our responsibility for reality itself. The work of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, de Beauvoir, Buber, and Einstein brought us the insights of Phenomenology, Existentialism and Relativity. Pluto describes a Consciousness of our Cosmic significance, our authorship of reality, our responsibility for meaning.

“Hmmm... interesting. I never heard historical stuff like that from people talking about astrology,” Paul commented.

He clicked on “Signs”

ARIES (MARCH 21 to APRIL 21) marks the beginning of the cycle, the Spring. It's all about Beginnings. Possibilities. Forward-moving energy. Enthusiasm. Buds on trees. Initiative Independence.

TAURUS (APRIL 21 to MAY 21) is when the flowers scent the air. The world is turning green again. Taurus is about birds singing, flowers blooming. Sensuality. Desires. Roots. Down to earth practicality.

Life communicates during Gemini (MAY 21 to JUNE 21). The gardeners can read their gardens. Gemini is about words, communication, reading, writing, speaking. Adaptation from the ground into the air.

CANCER is the summer (JUNE 21 to JULY 21), when many animals have their young. The crops are in their growing season. Cancer is about making things real, concrete. A business sense. It's also about home and family. Warmth.

In the time of Leo (JULY 21 to AUGUST 21), the sun demonstrates clarity and assertiveness. No matter how hot it gets one day – 'too hot,' people might say – the sun may be even more expansive the next. Leo is definitive, assertive to the point of being laid back. Natural leadership and individuation.

In the time of Virgo (AUGUST 21 to SEPTEMBER 21), temperatures mellow out. People return from their vacation, go back to school. Virgo is a time

of getting everything back into order. Carefulness, patience, organization, making everything perfect, nurturing and nourishing.

The equinox (September 21), an equal day and an equal night, marks LIBRA. This is the harvest time, when everything is brought to completion, fulfillment. Impressive. LIBRA is about Justice and honesty. Balance. Seeing both sides of every story.

SCORPIO (October 21 to November 21) is when leaves and hillsides turn scarlet, yellow, purple, orange. A touch of magic. Mysterious and secretive. Theatrical, expressive and passionate. Like its namesake, SCORPIO can sometimes have a sting.

SAGITTARIUS (November 21 to December 21). When the first frost touches, though winter isn't yet here, most creatures know it's coming. Some hibernate, others migrate or gather supplies. It's a time directed toward what is not immediately present. Social activity. Friendliness. Deep thinking. Goals.

In the time of CAPRICORN (December 21 to January 21), winter's grip is strongest. Long, cold nights, ice, snow. Like mountaintops – a great struggle to reach, but once there – strong and enduring. CAPRICORN means reliability, dependability, perseverance through difficulties – with a touch of the capricious.

During the time of Aquarius (January 21 to February 21), the winds disperse cold air masses, bringing a midwinter thaw, carrying a promise of spring. Aquarius is a time of change, kindness, doing service for others and giving gifts.

Winter clouds turn to rain and galleries of crystal snowflakes melt during the time of Pisces (February 21 to March 21). Everything is sacrificed to bridge from the old to the new. Pisces is altruism, self-sacrifice, forgiveness, letting go, holding nothing back, giving more than taking.

“I suppose you have to pay to get your stars calculated,” Paul said aloud, “Or at least, register. Let’s see.”

He clicked, “Calculate.”

“Nothing but panels for your birthdate — and time, if you know. Which I don’t. But it looks like you can do it anyway.”

He scrolled the panels to: August - 07 - 1982

He hit, “Go.”

A small model of the solar system appeared on the screen, which Paul guessed was the celestial arrangement at the moment of his birth. Then words appeared.

Sun in Leo

Moon in Pisces

Mercury in Leo

Venus in Cancer

Mars in Scorpio

Jupiter in Scorpio

SATURN IN LÍORA

URANUS IN SAGITTARIUS

NEPTUNE IN SAGITTARIUS

PLUTO IN LÍORA

As he passed his pointer over the various symbols, he saw they were links. He clicked on “Sun in Leo.”

Leo is Latin for lion. People with the sun in Leo are decisive, unperturbed by what others may think and certain of doing what they want to do. They may seem quite easy going. Loveable while fiery and individuating, they demonstrate natural leadership qualities. In the drama of life, Leo's choose whatever role they will. Leo is a straight-forward, up-front and open-hearted leap into the world. A Leo can be stepping on other peoples' toes without realizing it – but golden-hearted Leo's will respond magnanimously if you let them know.

“Ha-ha,” Paul laughed aloud. “It really does fit.” He knew he wasn't like his brother. Kevin never wanted to rock the boat, could even be intimidated.

He clicked on “Moon in Pisces”

Selfless love is what Moon in Pisces describes. These dreamers embody compassion. Emotions play a very big part in their lives. They love water, the ocean, dancing.

‘Wouldn't deny I always liked the water.’ Paul thought to himself. ‘On the swimming team. Could be coincidence though.’ He clicked on Mercury in Leo

A Leo mind. You see things in black and white. On or off. Clear. You know what you mean. Your world comes into ever sharper focus. Your words can light it all up. And they can burn.

“True. But things usually are black and white, aren't they?”

He clicked VENUS in CANCER

A great love of home and family is indicated when VENUS is in CANCER. Such a person's art and beauty is found in the presentation of things and in making things concrete.

'I am pretty good at making presentations,' Paul thought, 'if I do say so myself.'

He clicked the next.

In no other sign is MARS more characteristic of itself than when it is in SCORPIO. Here the color red accentuates drama, passion and expressiveness. You might have an intense secret.

Paul grinned. 'Doesn't everyone have one?'

He clicked JUPITER in SCORPIO

Many secrets and much passion are indicated when JUPITER is in SCORPIO. You rarely have difficulty expressing what you feel. You're abundantly theatrical.

"Who me?"

He then clicked "SATURN in LIBRA."

If you have SATURN in LIBRA you need to cultivate a sense of justice and fairness. Concentrate on finishing projects that you begin. Practice balancing. SATURN here also requires constant attention to honesty, lest one cut corners with the truth.

'Blunt,' Paul thought. 'But can't say it doesn't fit.'

Then he remembered an earlier post. Someone had said something like... 'It's *because* we're expressions of the Universe that we're free.' Now Paul got it. No matter what gifts the Universe gives — or does not give — at the moment of birth, we decide what we'll do with our allotted time.

"Oh, I'm late," he suddenly realized. 'Have to come back and read the rest another time.'

Next day, Paul returned to the Identity forum and posted his conclusion.

RE: Identity

I went to the site Gloria mentioned and it worked for me, remarkably well. I suggest you try it. It offers an identity that might help bridge the way to a new world.

Paul

Interlude I

*When the tower door opened
A burst of searing light
Sent me reeling
Covering my face*

*A moment of eyes the blind know
Where I could see
Plants drinking the bloodstream of the Sun
Animals consuming vegetables
Predator and prey in Communion
Around the altar of the Earth
A Litany of Matter
Coming from returning to the hallowed ground.*

*From a time hundreds of millions of years ago
Eons after cells beating hearts and skeletons appeared
When ferns and forests stretched across the land
And using fins for feet
Tetrapods dared leave the sea
Lingering there amphibians
Developing eyes ears noses
Thick scaly skins to keep from drying out
Shelled eggs to lay outside the water
Transforming into reptiles.*

*Then dinosaurs
Flying Pterodactyls and Tyrannosaurus Rex
Plus all those other named and unnamed monsters
Conquering swamp forest plain and desert
Ravaging one another
Unto disappearing
In collision with a falling star.*

From their shadow

*Emerging now their kin on wing and singing
 And another kind of ancestor
 Born without a shell
 Crawling sticky through their mothers' hairy skin
 Warm blooded suckling creatures
 With pouches for their young
 And not long after them
 Placental mammals giving birth
 To fully developed babies.*

*Our co-travelers and then us
 Laying our heads to rest
 Beneath the disappearing reappearing moon
 Watching lightening storms
 From the mouths of caves
 Arranging stepping stones to cross a river
 Sharpening flints planting seeds
 Donning others' skins and furs
 Taming dogs and horses
 Goats cows pigs chickens sheep
 Befriending fire weaving joy and children's laughter
 Singing playing instruments and dancing
 Making masks revering others' faces
 Joining voice in love and praise.*

*Life held its breath
 When we began signifying
 Dividing the night sky and naming the stars
 Emerging spellbound a Storytelling species
 Little did we understand
 What Cocoon
 We with our words might spin.*

*And pressing forward
 Free
 Only the moment's possibilities*

*And the horizon
Of our own imaginary
To hold us back
We wound up turning jungles into deserts
Changing rivers' course
Smashing atoms racing thunder
Lighting up the night
Treading on the moon
Standing ready to obliterate the Earth.*

*Breaking too
The codes that brought us here
Perforating our Cocoon
With awe with art with violins
Sitar Caribbean drums and rock n' roll
Dancing
Gospel blues jazz all carrying
Our yearning for lost love and for belonging.*

Chapter Six

‘No VIP lounge, of course,’ Elliott grumbled to himself. ‘What can you expect of an airport that doesn’t even have air conditioning?’ The sweat running down his back felt like crawling insects. ‘Surely they’ll have air at the hotel Jessman booked for me. Where the hell is he anyway? He was supposed to pick me up at four. Don’t the clocks work either?’

Realizing that pacing only made him feel worse, Elliott sat down. Stared at the worn linoleum. Tried to get comfortable in the plastic chair. He was irritated about this whole trip. Out of nowhere, officials in this country had declared that they could not finalize any manufacturing agreements except in a face-to-face meeting with the corporation’s highest ranking official. The head of state considered it beneath his dignity to put his signature next to that of an underling like Jessman. So Elliott had been obliged to travel here — just when the kids were coming home for spring break rather than going to Florida. With fatherly firmness, Elliott had insisted that the family get together — since Alex would be away this summer. Now Elliott himself would miss half the week.

But there was more to it than that. This was the very country that Alex’s college had chosen for its summer global ecology program. And Elliott’s trip would make the firm’s operations here a likely topic of conversation when he got home. Which might ruin what precious little time they would spend together. Sometimes he wished they had stayed the spoiled, selfish and greedy kids they used to be. Focused only on the latest expensive toy — computer equipment, jet skis, sports cars. Happy that they’d been born to a position where they wouldn’t have to work hard to succeed. Never thinking about the rest of the world. Other kids in their social circle were still like that. But not Alex and Sandra. Not anymore. They’d both grown so passionate in their opinions, too. He couldn’t bear arguing with them. Because they were right. In theory. But that’s just not how the real world worked. How could they have seemed so cynical before and sound so naively idealistic now? In a way, he was as proud of that inexplicable innocence as he was of how articulate they ‘d become. But they put him on the defensive. Made him feel like a hypocrite.

“Kids,” he muttered too himself.

Elliott had made fathering his number one priority. His own dad had been driven by an insatiable desire to expand the business, dreamt of putting the family fortune into the top ten. The old man hardly knew his children. At age eleven, Elliott had resolved to behave differently when *he* had children. And he kept that resolution. He always made time for the kids — despite the many demands of the corporate world. He gave orders that he should be

interrupted whenever Alex or Sandra phoned or visited him at work — no matter what he was doing. Of course, he could more easily get away with unconventional behavior, since he was the son of the firm's founder. But even with that advantage, he could easily have fallen into neglecting his family. He felt a constant pull in that direction — the sheer competitiveness of corporate culture. But Elliott believed that children needed their father. And he adored his own daughter and son.

Alex would turn twenty this year. He'd held his own in sports all through school, had a great sense of humor and lots of friends. But he also did well in academic courses, especially the ones he liked. He was terribly enthusiastic about his global ecology major. And now he'd grown long hair and a beard. Which made him look more handsome than ever. Elliott could admit that, but worried a little that the kids seemed to think the Sixties so 'cool.' Sandra had influenced Alex that way. She'd turned pretty granola in her last year of high school. It was really her boyfriend, Elliott figured, expecting her to get back to normal after they broke up. But she did just the opposite. Wore bell-bottoms, tie-dyed tees and dreadlocks all through college. Now that she was about to graduate and go job-hunting, Elliott had persuaded her to get a stylish hair cut and buy the proper interview clothes. But he couldn't do much about the kind of job she was seeking. Sandra had majored in social work and wanted placement with the very worst-off people she could find. 'A little too serious,' Elliott thought, 'but a wonderful human being, the kind of person you could trust with your heart. And one of these days, someone's going to take her heart away from me. But where in this world is she going to find someone she can—'

"Mr. Burns!" It was Jessman, moving as fast as his short legs could carry his heavy middle. One of the locals hurried along with him.

"Sorry for the delay, sir," Jessman panted as he approached. "We got stuck in traffic and just couldn't get here any faster."

"Come on, Jessman. You lived in the big city long enough to take traffic into account."

"Yes, I did, but this is—"

Elliott's attention had shifted from Jessman's excuses to the man standing behind Jessman — listening. 'Don't chew out the boss in front of an employee,' Elliott reminded himself. He forced a smile, shook Jessman's extended hand and handed his carry-on to the other man.

"Did you have a good trip?" Jessman ventured, as they walked toward the doors.

"Bearable. Considering that I would never have chosen to come here."

"Sorry about that. But it will prove worth it, believe me. Everything's already been negotiated. And what we're getting! Wait 'til you see the numbers."

It was flatteningly hot out in the sun, hotter yet on the black surface of the parking lot — and even worse in the car.

“Turn on the air conditioning for God’s sake!” Elliott barked at the driver.

“He can’t. It’s out. I’m sorry. I tried all week to get it fixed but just couldn’t make it happen. I did find a mechanic who believes he can do it. But it takes time to get parts, you know. We should have it by... Well, you’ll be gone by then.”

“Open the windows, then, damn it!”

The driver looked at Jessman.

“But — ” Jessman began.

“Open!” Elliott roared. “It’s like an oven in here.”

The driver complied as he pulled out of the lot and headed towards town. Jessman returned to crowing about the terms of the agreement. They rolled along quickly at first, then slowed as they entered the outskirts. Elliott had never been to a country like this. Well, Jamaica and other places where they had isolated tourist resorts and you could avoid the rest. He much preferred vacationing in Europe where he was assured of the finest amenities. Teased his friends who traveled in the Third World. Now here he was. On streets where motor vehicles met carts and wagons hitched to — what were those? Oxen? Donkeys? And men. Men pulling taxis on foot or pedaling bicycle-like rigs. The noise, the stench of garbage, animal waste and a noxious chemical smell were almost enough to make Elliott order the windows shut. Jessman kept on talking, as if he didn’t notice that Elliott wasn’t listening.

They drove into an area where the streets looked like they were piled with trash. “Don’t tell me the sanitation workers are on strike,” Elliott mumbled under his breath. Then he realized — as the car passed slowly between the piles — these were people’s homes. And it *was* trash. A shantytown made of refuse. Scraps of metal, wood, plastic, cardboard — lots of used packaging material — cobbled together to form roofs and walls, with people moving in and out of openings that served as doors. In one doorway, a ragged madonna tried to give her baby an empty-looking breast. With the car barely moving now, Elliott took a long look at the naked and nearly-naked children sitting around on the ground, some of them dreadfully skinny, others looking swollen. Showing no sign of that kid energy that fuels playing and running, laughing and squealing. There was a group of children playing, though, just ahead in some kind of stream running down one side of the street. ‘God, it’s an open sewer!’ Elliott realized in disgust. Almost immediately, these more active youngsters had abandoned their sewer and were clamoring at the car window. One of their little hands touched Elliott’s face before it pulled back to avoid getting caught in the closing window.

“Sorry. Tom here is a little slow on the draw,” Jessman apologized, looking rather smug. “They’ll do it every time. That’s why I never drive with the windows open. That and the stench, of course. Never.”

All four windows were now shut. The car ground to a halt. The driver laid on the horn as more and more begging children surrounded them. Elliott examined their faces. No baby fat at all. Skin thin and wrinkled like people in their eighties. ‘They’ll never reach old age,’ Elliott figured. ‘They’re dying already. And if I can see it, what must their parents feel?’ The children began to recognize that they’d get nothing and fell away from the car, some rejoining those who had not gotten up to try. As he watched others returning to the sewer, Elliott felt as if the spot where he’d been touched was crawling with something. He’d had enough of this scene.

“What’s going on?” he demanded. “Why aren’t we moving?” The truck in front of them had stopped, too. Horns were blowing.

“Traffic jam. Maybe somebody with an animal that won’t budge. Or a vehicle broken down. Who knows? No telling how long we’ll be here either.” Jessman’s tone of resignation made clear that he’d been stuck like this many times before.

“So? We just sit here? At least send this man up to see what the problem is.”

“I—”

The traffic began to move again, ending the discussion. Jessman went back to chattering about the agreements. Elliott listened for a moment, then looked back out the window. He felt as if his head would burst if he didn’t get some air — but dreaded even the thought of being touched again. He could still feel the spot. ‘God knows what that hand had on it.’

The car picked up speed. Now they were driving alongside a river. People were bathing in it. Women were pounding laundry on rocks.

“Open the windows,” Elliott commanded. “I need some air.”

This time, the air that came in carried a strong chemical odor. Elliott gagged.

“Okay, close them, dammit. Close the windows,” Elliott gasped.

Jessman refrained a little too obviously from saying anything. Then he returned to his favorite topic. Elliott tried to listen, but just couldn’t. His mind careened from one mad thought to another. ‘Have I died and gone to hell? Is this some hideous nightmare? No, it’s real. Too real.’ He didn’t have to pinch himself to know. ‘Will I make it home alive? God, what about Alex? I can’t let Alex come here.’ But Elliott couldn’t tell Alex what to do. Not anymore. Besides, he had never just ordered the kids around if he could reason with them, even when they were little. And now it was out of the question. Elliott had stayed friends with them all through adolescence by listening to them, letting them make

decisions. Alex would never agree to drop out of the program. ‘No, Alex is coming here. This summer. What will he think?’ Elliott knew only too well.

The car came to a stop in front of a sprawling one-story unpainted cinderblock building. ‘This couldn’t be the hotel,’ Elliott thought.

“What are we doing here?”

“Well, since you can’t check in for another hour, I thought you might like to see the factory,” Jessman replied.

The smell that had gagged Elliott by the river greeted him as he stepped out of the car. Jessman seemed to think nothing of it. He led the way to a small door on the side, unlocked and opened it with a flourish. “This part of the building houses sewing and assembly,” he proudly announced.

Inside, the smell was upstaged by other fumes. Elliott blinked, repressed an urge to clutch his throat. “That’s the glue,” Jessman explained. “Won’t hurt you. You won’t be here that long anyway.” The door they had just entered was in the middle of a wall. Just above eye level, a row of one-foot-square windows abutted the doorframe on either side and extended the length of the wall to just short of each corner. One window in each long row was open. The opposite wall looked exactly the same. Large barn-like doors in the middle of the back wall were flanked by rows of the same small windows. Six open windows total. The front wall — Elliott thought it the front because that was the direction most of the workers faced — had a closed door and no windows. Jessman was leading towards the back, talking and gesturing about the workers and workstations.

“Why aren’t more of the windows open?” Elliott asked.

“They don’t open. Built that way.”

“What about the doors, then? Why don’t you open the doors? A person could breathe better in here if you did.”

“If you want, we can open them. For *you*.” Jessman walked quickly to the back wall, unlocked the padlocked chains at the middle of the barn-like doors and swung them open. As the air poured in, Elliott felt as if he would at least survive the tour.

“We normally keep the doors closed. Because these people... Well, you have no idea. They’re desperate. Been that way for centuries. In desperate need of everything, anything. If we left the doors unlocked, they’d be stealing equipment and product. They’d leave the line, too. Some of these women try to run home and check on their children, right in the middle of their shift. No daycare centers here, you know. That’s one reason we prefer to hire ‘em young. But any age, they’ll just walk outside if we leave the doors open.”

Elliott wondered how that could happen with so much supervision. There were foremen all over the place, several of them yelling. Jessman called one man over and instructed him to lock the doors again when he and Mr. Burns left.

“Looks like an awful lot of supervisors here. Isn’t that expensive?”

“No problem. True, they get a little more than the others. But even then, it’s peanuts. Actually, everybody here gets paid more than the going local rate. So we’ve got workers lined up competing for these jobs. When we fire somebody — if they’re insubordinate or can’t make their quotas — we replace ‘em in minutes. We pay a few pennies more, but less than a dollar an hour, even for the foremen. It’s nothing, nothing compared to what we were paying workers in the United States.” Jessman laughed, then rattled on.

“And they don’t expect benefits here either. No medical. It’s just the rich who get health care in this country. Always been that way. And no retirement. They work pretty much ‘til they die. Most of ‘em don’t live to retirement age anyway. The labor laws here... We can legally work ‘em 72 hours a week without paying overtime. Twelve hour days. We keep the plant open twenty-four seven with two shifts a day instead of three. And there might as well be no safety or environmental regulations. Because they don’t enforce what’s on the books, anyway. And the agreements we’ve negotiated this time will keep us free of anything like that for twenty years. The savings are—”

“You don’t have to sell it to me, Jessman. I’m well aware of our reasons for locating in places like this.” Elliott followed Jessman as he led towards the front along the other side of the room, opening the side door as they passed. Resigned to a few more minutes of the smell, Elliott turned his attention to the workers. ‘Amazing how fast they can work in this heat,’ he marveled. ‘And how they manage to sew that fast, run those presses without getting their hands...’ Some of them maybe hadn’t managed. But then, those missing fingers could have come from non-work-related accidents.

Jessman led Elliott to the door at the front and opened it. Suddenly, noxious fumes fully enveloped Elliott. They burned his eyes, constricted his throat and made him feel like vomiting.

Unable to speak, he headed towards the door on the left side of the room. The smell was outside, too, but less powerful. Jessman appeared

“You don’t want to see the molding room?”

“Not without a gas mask,” Elliott gasped. “Get me some protective gear.”

“Of course. I’ll get you a mask if you want. But really, those fumes aren’t that bad. Most of the men who work in there never buy one. They do have some trouble with their eyes but—”

“Buy? You sell the masks?”

“Sure. Why not? But like I said, the workers in there don’t use ‘em anyway. They do buy gloves though. Almost have to. Operating here, we make money in so many ways. Would you like to see the numbers?”

As Jessman looked to Elliott for his answer, he seemed to register what he saw for the first time.

“You must be tired from traveling. We could go to my office, if you like. It’s a lot more comfortable. Air conditioned. And I have those numbers for you to look at.”

Elliott gladly followed. Jessman led him past a group of cheap prefab buildings.

“What are these?”

“Bunkhouses. A lot of our people leave their homes in rural areas and come here to work. We put a roof over their heads, the single ones, that is. No married couples, no kids. No hanky-panky either. We keep the men and women separate. Two of these buildings are for women, one for men. We hire more women. Easier to control, you know. I suppose you might think it an unnecessary expense, housing ‘em. But we slapped these buildings up so cheaply. And it helps keep ‘em on the line every day.”

The office building was the first normal-looking space Elliott had seen since he’d gotten off the plane. Good walls, air conditioning, carpeting. Elliott washed his face in a restroom with all the amenities, then joined Jessman in his office. Large windows offered a view of the river — which looked beautiful even if you knew about the smell. Gazing at the moving water calmed Elliott’s jangled nerves.

“Nice office,” he remarked, as he sat down in a comfortable leather chair, separated from Jessman by a considerable expanse of desk.

“Would you like a soda? Lemonade? Iced tea? A beer? Something a little stronger?” Jessman asked.

Elliott chose iced tea. “With extra ice, please.”

Jessman pushed a button on the phone and gave the order. Within minutes, a local man wearing a white shirt and tie brought the drinks. Elliott went over Jessman’s numbers, making an effort to look duly impressed. Anything to stay a little longer in this comfort. Even if the hotel had air conditioning, they’d have to get back into that car to get there — and pass who knows what on the way.

When they finally did leave the office and drive into the crush of buildings, people and vehicles, Elliott tried hard not to look at everything with Alex’s eyes. He was relieved to find that the hotel not only had air conditioning but afforded a surprising degree of luxury. An acceptable meal in a tastefully decorated and deliciously cooled restaurant. A well-stocked bar. A large room with a good shower and a refrigerator filled with French bottled

water and cans of soda. A TV that worked, even though there were only two channels. A square of fine chocolate wrapped in gold foil on each pillow.

Exhausted, Elliott undressed and crawled into the crisp, fresh-smelling sheets. He let his muscles relax into the excellent mattress. But just as he was falling asleep, something suddenly snapped him wide awake. It was Alex. Alex's face. Wearing that expression of righteous indignation and a touch of... what?

'A feeling that I've betrayed him.'

Yes, it was definitely betrayal. 'He doesn't want to feel it, though,' Elliott told himself, 'doesn't even want to think it. But...' But Alex was coming here and would see.

'They won't tour the factory,' Elliott tried to assure himself. 'Something like that wouldn't be part of an ecology trip.' But the plant did harm the environment. Elliott knew perfectly well why the river near the factory stank. In any case, the professor would certainly talk about the impact of multi-nationals on the ecological picture. 'The firm isn't the only multi-national in this country,' countered Elliott's tired mind.

'*Dad*, that's beside the point!' answered the imagined Alex. Elliott could hear his son's every argument. In fact, the group might tour a factory. Elliott had heard Alex talk ecology enough to know that how people make a living was considered part of the picture. Poverty, too. 'They might go through that very shantytown on the way,' Elliott's eyes opened wide. 'Or other shantytowns. I'm sure there must be others.' Besides, Alex knew about the firm's operations in the Third World.

"And now that I've just been here, just seen the place," Elliott said aloud. "He'll —" Elliott stopped himself mid-sentence, shook his head and went back to thinking silently. 'And Sandra will ask about the people we employ. Sandra. She'll be concerned about the poverty, about the children. Like the children I saw playing in the open sewer. The one who touched me. Or the ones too weak to play. Sandra will want to know how they live, what we're doing about it. And I'll have to tell the truth.'

Elliott tried not to lie to the kids. He didn't volunteer information he knew would upset them. But when they asked directly, he preferred not to lie. Especially now. They were in a phase where honesty really mattered to them. They would indignantly point out any lies and half-truths they heard in the news. They were still angry about their high school history books. Lies they had believed. That's what really irritated them. Being duped. And Elliott wouldn't risk lying to them about what he'd seen here.

'And then what?' Elliott closed his eyes but couldn't sleep. He argued in his mind with Sandra and Alex all night long.

At 5 a.m., he got out of bed and opened his laptop. As he typed, he talked out loud.

“Lets see. Start with pay. It should be equal in buying power to that of workers in the United States. Equal pay for equal work. And equal benefits, too. Medical insurance. If they don’t have enough doctors and nurses here, the firm will bring them in, build and equip a clinic. Great! And retirement pensions. Not a 401K plan. We really should go back to pensions for our U.S. workers, too. Make quick note of that in a new file.”

A couple of clicks, two windows open, then back to the most pressing task. Elliott had to get the new set of agreements keystroked, shaped up and printed out before the meeting at ten.

“Okay, benefits. Vacation pay, sick pay, family leave. Ummm, don’t forget hours. All overtime voluntary, with time and a half or double time just like you have to do when you manufacture in the United States. Oh, and onsite childcare. That would help the women Jessman said were running home to check on their kids. We should really have that stateside, too.”

Deadline or not, Elliott could not remember when he last had this much fun.

“All right. Now the plant itself. First, insulate it so we can keep it air-conditioned. And put in a top-of-the-line ventilation system. And decent lighting. Have a plant engineer upgrade safety features on the machines — and make sure the workers use them. And the right masks — and the other protective equipment, too. Free, of course. It’s almost unbelievable, charging for that stuff. Okay. We should have an ergonomics expert look at the workstations, too. And then there’s the whole question of pollution. Air and water, I’m sure. We’ll have to get some engineers in here to figure out what to do. Hey, don’t forget the dormitories. Umm, re-vamp — or we’ll have to re-build them — so they can be air-conditioned. And then we’ll...”

Forty-nine hours later, Elliott drove up the long driveway, ran up the steps of his home and unlocked the door. Alex and Sandra came running to greet him, as they always did.

“Hey, Dad! It’s about time.”

“Welcome home, Dad.”

After many hugs and kisses, Elliott stepped back and showed his two children the biggest grin they’d ever seen him wear.

“Wait til you two hear what I — er, we really. Let me tell you what *we* just did.”

Chapter Seven

“What!!?” Charles awoke with a start. “Who’s making all the noise?” No answer. It was coming from Chantal’s room. Couldn’t possibly be the maids. They would never be cleaning at this hour. The whole staff knew he liked to nap before dinner. So... Chantal? What could she be doing?

Charles lowered his recliner, his exasperation mixed with curiosity. Soft slippers and deep carpeting muffled his footsteps to the door that joined his room to his wife’s. Locked. During this marriage, it was kept locked — one of many unwritten arrangements. Charles never entered Chantal’s room unless she clearly indicated that she desired his presence.

Still, the marriage had gone rather well in Charles’ opinion. Considering the age difference. And the way the children had behaved. Children! Julie and Paul were both in college now, nearly the same age as Chantal. That was the kids’ problem with Chantal. Her age. It certainly wasn’t feelings for their own mother. She had never cared much about them — other than her obsession with raising them for their social class. Put them in boarding schools as early as possible. Sent them away every summer. Charles had scarcely known the children until after the divorce. Still, when he told them he was marrying again, they reacted negatively. Treated Chantal with all the hostility two adolescents could display. It had taken her three years to win them over — completely. She was thirty years younger than Charles. But no one could call her a gold digger. She had her own fortune. All of it earned rather than inherited, however. Charles’ grandparents would have objected to that — to her lower middle class background — as well as the crass publicity that came with being a fashion model. Her face had been everywhere. And Charles had felt his ancestors’ disapproval reaching down through the centuries. As if they were all still alive.

Charles pressed his ear to the door between his and Chantal’s room, but couldn’t figure out what was going on. It had to be Chantal. ‘But what’s she doing, for God’s sake?’

Charles saw more of Chantal, now that she was working less. She had relaxed, too, no longer feeling that need to prove herself. And to the fashion industry, a model nearing her mid-twenties was almost over the hill. Charles thought that was ridiculous. Her beauty still utterly enchanted him. He delighted in seeing her here, in this replication of the old family chateau in France. She inhabited these rooms, moved through the museum-like furnishings with a grace that made Charles feel he was living a medieval romance. And the triumph of having her on his arm in public! As if Charles didn’t already have every reason

for pride. But money and family didn't signal manliness. Centuries ago, Charles' ancestors were warriors who seized wealth and power by force. Now men of his class were considered wimps. With Chantal on his arm, however... She wasn't a brainless beauty either. She had a real appreciation of the family history. In fact, she loved reading and talking about history in general. And she spoke French.

Charles padded over to the other door of his room and down the hallway to Chantal's room. He knocked, announced himself and heard a muffled invitation to enter. Chantal was in the depths of her closet. She was throwing shoes out into the room, making a gigantic heap in the middle of the floor. The wide canopied bed was piled high with evening gowns, dresses, suits, skirts, blouses, everything.

"I'm getting rid of this stuff," she declared, stepping out of the closet. "It makes me sick to have it."

"Time for a whole new wardrobe, is it?" Charles responded with a knowing smile.

"No, that's not it," she said, with an uncharacteristically serious face. "It makes me sick to have all this superfluous luxury while other people — children — are shivering in the cold, going hungry. It's just not right, not fair. That's why I'm getting rid of it. And you certainly won't see me replacing it."

Trained all his life to maintain composure, Charles did not show his astonishment. 'This from Chantal? She who would only look at the most expensive line of anything? Her gowns, furs, jewelry, shoes, even the jeans she was wearing. Her Park Avenue residence and furnishings. Her cars. Her... Chantal concerned about poverty? About rightness? Fairness?' The incongruity might have made Charles laugh — except for the seriousness of her tone, her face. 'Did she really think...? True, she had spent enough to feed a family for a year on any one those evening gowns. But...'

"I don't think you'll have much effect on poverty by getting rid of these clothes," Charles calmly observed.

"Oh, this isn't all I'm doing," Chantal asserted. She brushed a wisp of hair from her face. "I have my attorneys and accountants working on the larger stuff. It's just to feel better in the meantime that I'm unloading these personal items. My clothes, my cars, my apartment in the city and... This is where you come into the picture, Charles."

"You're unloading me, too?"

"No, that's not what I meant. Not necessarily, anyway." Chantal's smile and the touch of her hand took a little of the sting out of her words. She led Charles by the hand around the pile of shoes and across the room. "I have to ask you about these," she said. She stopped in front of a full-length mirror.

Charles' felt what was coming, felt it in the pit of his stomach, even before Chantal touched the switch that moved the mirror. She opened the safe and pulled out the worm-eaten carved wooden box that contained the diamond tiara that Charles' ancestress, the Countess of Untel, had brought from France — and the leather case that held the diamond necklace, bracelet and earrings. “It’s these I want to ask you about,” she said. “Of course, I know I can do whatever I want with anything I bought or you bought for me. But these and the other pieces that have been passed down. You gave them to me. But... Well, are they mine to...”

“To unload?” Charles' horrified tone of voice said as much as the look on his face. “How can you even ask me that, Chantal? What’s going on?”

“That’s the trouble with you, Charles. You have no idea what’s going on. You’re a good person, not in the least bit mean-spirited, not even a snob really — despite your fixation on your illustrious family history. But that’s just it. You’re obsessed with history. Don’t get me wrong. You know I majored in history. And our conversations about it have been truly fascinating sometimes. But you bury yourself in the past, Charles. You don’t know what’s happening right here, right now. And something big is happening. Have you spoken with your kids lately?”

Too shocked to answer, Charles sat down on the bed between two piles of designer dresses. Chantal’s question about the jewels had stirred a tumult of feelings greater than he had ever known. An effect heightened by the realization that he had not in fact spoken with Julie or Paul for months. Too absorbed in his work to return their calls. Overwhelmed, he watched Chantal’s lovely face change expression — to what? Pity? Suddenly, she smiled — not the camera smile, but the private one that said something like, ‘Believe it or not, I love you.’ She shoved the dresses aside and sat down next to him.

“Listen Charles, everything’s changing. It’s the only way we’ll have a planet to inhabit and be able to live in peace. What’s happening is a change as big as the emergence of life on earth. The kids are calling it a phase transition. Talk to them about it. And decide what you’re going to do. You’re part of this moment, too.” She reached out and gently turned his head so that their eyes met. “Oh Charles, we could..., you and I, we... But wait. I don’t want to put that kind of pressure on you. You really have to decide for yourself. That’s the only way it can work. Because it’s all about freedom. The free choices of individual agents in the system. Julie and Paul can explain it to you. We’ll just suspend the question of the patrimonial jewels. Otherwise, I’ve finished with this room for now. Tell James that I won’t be here for dinner. I’m going into the city. You know where to reach me.”

Charles had forgotten to tell James that Madame would not be dining with him. And it didn't help that the perfect butler removed her place setting with the utmost discretion. Charles ran his fingers along the linen-covered edge of the long table. He had dined alone in this room many times before. Tonight though, the solitude weighed on him. Alone in the immense space of this house. Except for the servants, of course. But the social distance between him and them was so great that they might as well be in another world.

Charles yearned to talk with someone, anyone, about the confusion of thoughts and feelings cascading through his mind. After watching Chantal's car disappear down the long drive, he had phoned Julie and Paul. The two conversations had illuminated — and seconded — Chantal's words and actions. Charles felt as if he faced the most formidable challenge of his life. He took one last sip of wine, then rose and left the table.

As always, Charles climbed the stairs to take his coffee in the library, passing the full-length portraits of his illustrious ancestors on the way. Charles, the family historian, had enhanced the display with gold plaques engraved with each patriarch's birth and death. Father at the bottom of the stairs in his business suit and tie, 1922-2001. Then grandfather posing in a tuxedo, top-hat and cane, 1896-1966. Great grandfather looking the man of leisure in smoking jacket and ascot, 1870-1934. Great, great grandfather in a velvet-collared jacket and cross-over ribbon tie, 1842-1909. Great, great, great grandfather, bearded in waistcoat and tails, 1816-1882. Great, great, great, great grandfather, 1789-1854. Charles' favorite portrait hung in the library — an 18th-century oil painting of the first family member to come to the United States, Charles' great, great, great, great, great grandfather, the Count of Untel. From above the sculpted stone fireplace, the dashing young aristocrat — sword ready at his waist — ruled the room. The artist had given him fiery eyes that danced with the real fire burning below.

As a child, Charles had played at sword fighting and performed imaginary daring deeds beneath this portrait. And years ago — he could no longer remember exactly when — he had begun a mental conversation with the portrait.

'I have the feeling you know what I'm thinking, Monsieur le Comte,' said Charles to the portrait. 'And you ask how could I think such traitorous thoughts? Me of all people! After all these years of devoting myself to the cause. Preserving the historical artifacts and documents of the all-hallowed family. Getting the degrees, establishing my authority, staking out a position in the historical debate. Exposing the horrors of the Revolution. Of course, it's not difficult to cast the French Revolution in a bad light. All that ugly violence. A bloodbath.'

Charles took a deep breath. Rested his hand on one of the gargoyle-like sculptures.

‘But that’s not why you left France, is it, Monsieur le Comte? No, you departed before the bloodletting began, horrified by the signs you saw everywhere of creeping democracy — signs such as the Enlightenment fever infecting your own class. That new kind of authority that came from presenting persuasive ideas in a reasoned discussion. You and your friends could see how that threatened kings’ and fathers’ rule? You wanted nothing to do with it. Didn’t wait for the mob to seize the Bastille. Packed up your family and headed for Spain long before those who fled the guillotine.’

Charles stopped the mental conversation for a moment. James entered the room with the coffee tray and placed it on the elaborately inlaid 18th-century table next to Charles’ chair. Examining his butler as if he’d never seen him before, Charles spoke just as James turned to leave.

“What about you, James? What do you think of democracy?”

“I beg your pardon, sir?”

“You heard me, James. What do you think about democracy?”

“Think, sir?”

“Yes. Well, maybe ‘feel’ is a better word. What are your feelings about democracy?”

“Sir?”

Charles had never before asked James anything of the sort. And the perfectly poised butler momentarily looked quite unsure of himself. His body language and face showed such discomfort that Charles relented.

“Never mind, James. I’ll ring if I want anything else.”

“Yes, sir.”

‘You see,’ Charles resumed gesturing to the portrait after the door closed. ‘There’s the problem with hierarchy. You can’t get reliable information. James is a man of intelligence. I’m sure he has thoughts and feelings about democracy. But would he tell them to me? Certainly not. Same with a political system based on social hierarchy — where only those at the top get to govern. They can’t do it well because they don’t have accurate information. The steeper the pyramid, the worse it gets. Even businessmen realize that now.’

Sitting down, Charles sipped the coffee James had poured and sugared for him. ‘But how could you have recognized it? You couldn’t. Precisely because you didn’t have enough information. And if anyone had dared contradict your beliefs, you wouldn’t have listened. You didn’t want to see anything wrong with the Old Regime — or anything good about the least hint of democracy. That’s where I differ with you, Monsieur le Comte. Differed with you all along, I guess, but never fully realized it. Until today.’

Charles stopped to savor his coffee, noticing the nuance of flavors, the aroma, the warmth and shape of the cup in his hand. Then he returned his attention to the portrait.

‘Strange that you came here, Monsieur le Comte. Came here just as this new country, the United States of America, was enshrining democratic ideas in its Constitution. Of course, you meant to return to France as soon as they restored the Old Regime. And you did go back, when the monarchs and aristocrats of Europe won their war against the Revolution. You expected to reclaim everything — the seigniorial rights, the lands, the manors, the Paris hotel and, most important to you, the old chateau with its medieval turrets. But the restored king didn’t dare put everything back as it had been before. He let the commoners keep some political rights — and much of the property they had bought during the upheaval. Including your chateau. You swore never to set foot in France again.’

Charles opened the pearl inlaid ebony box on the table, took out a cigar, then put it back. Chantal had never said so, but he sensed that she didn’t like to kiss him when he smelled like cigars. And he might still see her tonight. He had never really liked smoking them anyway. He reached across the tray to pour some cognac, swirled it in the snifter, took a sip. He turned to look at the portrait again.

‘What a haven this democracy turned out to be for anti-democratic men like you! You yourself never realized it. You kept aloof, associated only with the handful of other French aristocrats you found here. Even refused to invest in anything but land. But your son and his sons increased the family’s wealth exponentially. Shipping, banking, mining. They didn’t believe in democracy any more than you did, but found they could get along with it. They usually could get what they wanted in the way of legislation. Such as the clause that permitted wealthy families to buy draft exemptions during the Civil War. Instead of risking life and limb in horrible battles, your great grandsons profited handsomely by producing war materials. After the war, the family prospered in railroads and heavy manufacturing. The newspapers they bought along with campaign contributions helped persuade politicians to resist the growing pressure for industrial regulation and labor laws. For a while anyway, your descendants had no problem playing along with the idea of a government of, by and for the people.’

Charles got up and walked over to the window. A full moon lit the carefully sculpted artifice of the French garden below. Charles’ eyes moved beyond the garden, sought the wilder, darker tangle of woods further down the drive. He opened the window, felt the wind’s chilly caress. Continued the conversation.

‘But things had changed by the time great grandfather died. Democracy had made concessions to other social classes — middle-class reformers, even workers. The ban on

labor unions had been lifted. Russia had gone Communist. Scandinavian countries had adopted Socialist policies. And President Roosevelt was talking like a Socialist here. Take from the rich and give it to the poor — that's what his New Deal amounted to in the eyes of our family. And the other hundred or so families that had gotten used to running this democracy.'

Charles shivered. He shut the window, looked through the glass at the garden, turned and walked back to his chair.

'I'm sure that you would not have shared grandfather's admiration of the Fascists. But all that mattered to him was that Fascists and Nazis suppressed Socialism. So grandfather and his friends plotted to do the same here. Seize control of the government, oust Roosevelt and rule through a dictator. They bungled it though, when they chose General Butler to lead the coup. True, Butler had the popularity to rally the WWI veterans — but offers of money and power couldn't shake Smedley Darlington Butler's commitment to democracy. A commitment incomprehensible to men who had no personal experience with it. They just couldn't grasp it.'

Charles stopped squarely in front of the portrait, looked up.

'This is where I differ. With them — and with you, too, Monsieur le Comte. Because I must admit that I do cherish democracy.'

Charles sat down in his chair, crossed his legs.

'As a specialist in political culture, I can at least partly explain how that happened. In my case, it began with Mom and Dad. You would object to calling them that, of course. But they encouraged informality. They wanted to be "modern."

Charles refilled his coffee cup with piping hot liquid. Held up the insulated carafe for the painted eyes to see.

'You couldn't begin to imagine the benefits, the refinement of comforts, that modernity would bring. You hated everything modern. Tentacles of the democratic monster, you would have said. You built this place with every inconvenience of the old chateau. Mom and Dad modernized it, made it livable. And they very consciously raised us differently than grandfather's generation had raised them.'

Charles stepped over to one of the bookshelves.

'I still have their copy of Dr. Spock... Mmmm... Somewhere here.'

He pulled a well-worn book from the shelf, held it up.

'There was one of these among Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis' things, too, when they went up for auction. It wasn't, "Do as I say just because I'm the authority and I say so." They reasoned with us, even as toddlers. Not just our family. A whole generation. Even upper class parents raised children that way because they felt the effects of a

democratic political culture. You can't isolate people completely, you know. Especially in a society so profoundly caught up in entertainment media. Mom and Dad went to movies, listened to pop music, memorized the words of all of their generation's hits. And danced. Oh, they loved to dance. As we did — later — to rock and roll.'

Charles was on his feet again. He started singing out loud. "Gimme the beat, boys. Free my soul..." Eyes closed, he swiveled his hips, gyrated his whole body. Rocking out to imagined music.

'Rock and roll, Monsieur le Comte. Freedom! Oh, we know we're not *really* free yet. But we've gotten free enough to have a sense of what really free could mean. We know we want *more* freedom. Down with tyranny in all its forms! Even the micro-theaters of power — the rules, the pressures. The words. Yeah! Break the sign system's hold. Kick out the jams!'

Playing an imaginary guitar, Charles kicked as he danced. He dropped into a Chuck Berry duck walk, then stood up. Stretching out his arms. Snapping his fingers. Grinding.

'Oh, you couldn't have imagined moving your body — even feeling your body — like this. But it's not just the rock and roll era. It was already underway in the jazz age before Mom's and Dad's generation.' Charles sat back down. 'Everyone wants to keep up with the times, have fun. With people. Yes. Unlike you, Mom and Dad wanted to rub elbows with people. Know what was going on. During the war, Dad insisted on going to the front even though Grandfather had secured him a safer position. Dad went over there and got to know all kinds of men. Bonded with his mess-mates. Learned through experience that people's real worth has nothing to do with social class. Meanwhile, Mom worked as a volunteer for the Red Cross, helping as people gave blood. The empirical refutation of one of your most hallowed beliefs.'

Charles stood up, started pacing, looking at the floor.

'You felt so certain that our "blood" was better than that of other people's. That's how you could consider heredity a valid basis for unequal rights. But science has disproved your hereditary principle. Human beings are something like 99% alike genetically. Even if we come from opposite sides of the globe. Which vaporizes the foundation of your hierarchy.'

Making eye-contact with the portrait, Charles stretched out the fingers of both hands, imploring.

'I wish you could understand. I truly believe in democracy. On deep personal levels, I love it, cherish it. I've wedded it. The more I've learned about political cultures, the more I've come to recognize this. Even though I set out to argue your case against the

Revolution. But now I really understand what democracy is. Or should be. Not the sham where a small group manipulates and uses the people. But a system that would truly tap the as-yet-untapped riches we have in our diversity of points of view. All the talent we have yet to cultivate. In order to find the best possible solutions for the problems we share as human beings and as inhabitants of this planet. And now my son Paul tells me that democracy is the political equivalent of what makes complex systems work. Societies, eras, the Universe, itself.'

"I have this feeling," Charles said aloud, "that if you knew what I know today, you — yes, even you Monsieur le Comte — might do what I'm about to do."

Stepping back, Charles looked deeply into the fiery eyes of his ancestor. "Yes, I feel sure of it."

Beaming, Charles spun around to his desk and picked up the phone.

Chapter Eight

The janitor's closet. Someone had left the door hanging open. Ellen didn't have to see it to know. She could have identified the smell in her sleep. Floor wax, cleaning solutions and a touch of ammonia. Long ago, as a preschooler, she had associated that odor with something exalted, important. Daddy's work. That, of course, was before she had any idea what was happening in this world. Before she heard other kids make unkind remarks. Before she realized where Daddy's work put him — and her — on the social ladder. The janitor's closet. Fifty years ago, Ellen had thought of it as a wonderful place. Now she hurried to shut the door. Before anyone else noticed.

Down the corridor and to the left. Yes, there it was. Hanging wide open. But ten feet away, Ellen abruptly stopped, transfixed. She stared as if she'd never seen a janitor's closet before. After what seemed an eternity, she turned and retraced her steps. Leaving it open. Forgetting why she had entered the corridor in the first place.

Absorbed in her thoughts, Ellen drifted through the luxurious furniture and cherry wood paneling of the traditionally decorated law office waiting room. She passed the smiling receptionist, opened the door with her name on it and closed it behind her. She looked out the window at a panorama that no longer thrilled her. Through the glass walls of this corner office on the thirty-third floor, you could see the city on one side, the lake stretching off into infinity on the other. Clients, out-of-town attorneys and first-time visitors found the view dazzling, spectacular. But Ellen couldn't get her kids to come here anymore, even when they were hanging out downtown. And long hours had made this space just the same old... At the moment, however, she was feeling something quite unusual. Confused. What the hell was going on? Something was affecting her kids, her clients. And now it seemed it was getting to her, too.

She speed-dialed Vern's number. Maybe he could make sense of it — or at least make fun of it. She and Vern had been friends for nearly thirty years, ever since that summer the firm hired them. Tokens. The only woman attorney and the only black attorney. Back then. Realizing how much they had in common, they had joined forces. Laughing at the ironies, helping each other with the work, offering a shoulder to cry on when their marriages broke under the strain. Raising a toast at each other's second weddings. Vern's had lasted. Women, it seemed, could more readily accept that kind of ambition in a husband. After fifteen years with the firm, Vern had left to become a partner in a black-owned firm. Ellen had stayed on, fought her way to the top of the hierarchy. Hers was now included in the firm's name. She and Vern still met regularly for lunch, went to the same parties and visited each other's homes at least once a year. Now Ellen

telephoned Vern, as she always did when she needed to talk with someone who truly understood what drove her.

“Hi, Vern. How’s it going?”

“Ellen! I was just going to call you. How are you doing?”

“Well... Actually, I’m kind of... er, stymied. With work and... But business first, right? I’ve got an unusual question for you. Have you ever set up a cooperative? Not from scratch, but converting an existent business into a worker-owned and operated cooperative? I know this must sound really odd...”

“The only odd thing is that you seem to have read my mind, Ellen. I was going to call and ask you the same thing. So you’ve got one, too?”

“Two. I saw the first one today and talked on the phone to another one. Never saw this before and I must admit I don’t know the laws involved. I’ve got the paralegals working on it. Interesting that you have one, too.”

“Not one, Ellen, three. Two small business owners — retailers— and a man with a medium-sized machine shop. They all want to transform their companies into cooperatives. And not just in name. The real thing. Workers fully sharing in decision-making and profits. Cooperatives! Hello? What year is this? Anyway, it seems to be a trend. Eric — you remember Eric Franklin? Well, Eric called me today with the same question. It’s weird.”

“Too weird for me. For the first time in I don’t know how many years, I’m feeling lost. I don’t get it. I’ve had all these Estate Planning clients wanting to dismantle their foundations, terminate their trusts, undo everything we’ve done to protect their wealth. And you know my clients, Vern. My core clientele. Some of these women have clawed their way up the ladder, broken through the glass ceiling. Seen their success as fulfilling some kind of sacred mission. As a victory in the fight against oppression. And now they seem equally determined to throw it all away. Can’t talk them out of it either.”

“Uncanny! I’ve had a dozen of the same requests. Mostly from black entrepreneurs. Clients, like yours, who made it to the top against the odds. And see their success as helping all black people. And they have improved black America’s statistics. Which is not to say I find it less strange, really, for my white clients to decide they want to hand their money over to the taxman. I contacted the Estate Planning network I belong to. They told me it’s happening all over. Did somebody put something in the water or what?”

“What the hell is going on, Vern? I have to admit that something seems to be affecting me, too. This morning, I stepped out of the office and noticed that the janitor’s closet was open. I smelled it.”

“Of course, those of us whose fathers...”

“Yeah, that’s why I called you. So I realize that the janitor’s closet is hanging open and hurry around the corner to close it. You know. But as soon as I lay eyes on it — I... I don’t know, I... It was as if... Kind of like I was seeing it the way I did when I was four years old. But not exactly. Something really strange happened to me right there in the corridor. I mean I didn’t want to close it anymore. Left it open.”

“That might be a healthy sign, Ellen. Seems to me. But you... What’s your take on it?”

“I don’t know. I’m confused. My kids. They’re home from college. Yours must be, too. Right?”

“Yeah, it’s great.”

“So the kids were talking last night about this big change they say is happening. A phase transition, they call it. Seth went on and on about Complexity Theory .”

“Hmmm, interesting. My kids are talking Complexity Theory, too. And one of my clients is into it. Corporate management theory. Flattening hierarchies. Horizontal structures instead of vertical”

“Yeah, but my kids are insisting that it means all of humanity could make — *is* making — this incredible leap to a new level where we’ll save the planet, treat each other as equals. I know it sounds ridiculous.”

“Ridiculous? That’s just what I said to Nicole and Junior. They answered that it’s characteristic of a phase transition to look impossible — hence, ridiculous — when you’re still in the state that precedes it. What I’m trying to say, Ellen, is that after arguing with them for three days, I’m beginning to think they could be right. I mean, we all know we’re headed straight towards planetary disaster. And *that’s* truly ridiculous, isn’t it? Isn’t it a lot more reasonable — and more intelligent — to change direction?”

“But, Vern... It’s...”

“I know, Ellen. You fought hard. You overcame enormous obstacles to get where you are. So did I. But wouldn’t we both rather see the kind of world they’re describing? If it were possible? No doubt in my mind.”

Interlude II

*That our Love and we exist
Has never been the issue
Only a Garden of Living Circumstance
Could have gathered us together
As pieces of rainbow
From across the room
Converge out of thin air
In crystal rendezvous
Or kisses of purple lightning
Open shelled worlds
With omega watts of mountain moving power
Ecstatic conception of everything
Love ever promised.*

*At issue only how
And when
As in the casting room
Where you bring the torch tip yellow-blue
To beads and scraps of gold
Heating them to burning red
Walls crumbling in the crucible
You stir the velvet melting into satin
Feathering the howling welder's flame
Add a pinch of flux to liquid loaf
Glowing with solar brightness
Heating heating stirring ever faster
Until the precious pool shimmers for release.*

*Too early the golden river chokes
Too late a pit full disaster
No moment chosen ever without risk
You've got to let the gold
Tell you
When the time is come.*

Chapter Nine

Recently constructed homes set in the midst of cornfields told that you were approaching town. The feed coop with its recalcitrant gravel drive defined the city limits. The new regional high school, the Lincoln-Ford dealer, two motels and the shopping center with its superstore announced your arrival. In seconds, you were down to twenty-five miles per hour on streets with curbs and manicured front yards.

The pharmacy, the hardware store, the post office and bank were all located within five blocks of the corner of Main Street and Second. Its stoplight, the only one in town, had been there since before the interstate went through. Downtown also featured a remodeled six-story office building with a dentist, a gift shop and three bars. A once proud furniture store had been transformed into a youth center. Margie's Restaurant, run by the same family for three generations, hosted a morning ritual for many townsfolk. It was the kind of place where you knew if Sheryl was busy taking other people's orders, you were welcome to serve yourself your own first cup of coffee. From counter to booth, Margie's was where you heard what was happening.

"The way I see it, there ain't much of an alternative. If the roof is leakin,' you get up there and fix it. You gotta do whatcha gotta do."

At Margie's, regulars had their regular places. The mechanics from Ted's Garage sat in the corner booth.

"It doesn't take a genius to figure out that if you've got a world where some people have everything — cars, computers, any kind of food you want — other people are hungry and don't even have safe drinking water. And the one group begins to see how the other group is living because of television and stuff... Something's got to give. For one thing, you're not going to be able to build walls high enough to keep 'em out. And terrorists in with 'em."

"Damn straight, Carl. You know I've been sayin' the same thing ever since 9-11. Last night I was helpin' Heather with her homework and we went on the web and saw that nearly a billion people in the world are so poor that they don't get enough to eat.

Twenty-four thousand people starving to death every day. A child every seven seconds. You can't expect people to be reasonable when they're watching their kids starve."

"Yeah. Then let some guy come along and tell 'em it's all our fault. Get 'em all riled up. It's a no brainer. They're gonna go for it. At least some of 'em. They're desperate. Make sure everybody's fed and the world will be a lot more secure, believe me."

"What gets me, is that we can see it clear as day, but the politicians don't seem to get it."

"Too busy linin' their own pockets, I say."

Occasional guests sat wherever they felt comfortable. Which could bring a doctor or a lawyer into the conversation.

"Hey, Steve, you tell us. Do they think we don't know what's going on? Come on, I can read. I understand what I'm seein' on TV, even if they're not explaining it. Wasting our tax dollars on their cronies... Tell you what — if the corruption had a smell to it, we'd have done something about it long ago."

"I hear you, Dave, I hear you. But just remember, you're talking about my kid brother. You and Jimmy grew up together. He's no worse a person than the rest of us. You heard him last time he was home. Not that easy to get things done up there, you know."

"Yeah, I do. And that's exactly why we need this convention. It's the same as down at the garage when somebody brings in a mess — like that guy with the SUV who never changed his oil. We tell 'em straight out, 'Needs a whole new engine block.'"

"Well, that's what we're all talking about here. I'm for it. And you know my brother Jimmy will help us do it, too."

Margie's three copies of the morning paper would circulate the room several times before noon.

"I never did want to pass this sorry world on to the kids."

"None of us did, Irene. And for the first time, I think we can do something about it." That was Marilyn. She owned the local beauty shop. And she was a talker. Want something spread around town? Just tell Marilyn.

"People tend to put up with a lot before they reach a point—"

“Yeah. And, we’re there.”

“I don’t know. It kinda worries me. If it’s a Convention to re-write the Constitution... I mean, what if they got carried away and threw out the Bill of Rights? Or other things we want to keep? What if the delegates got manipulated by some group of smooth talkers?”

“You don’t hafta worry about that, Larry. Didn’t you read the proposal we’d be voting for? It says... a... Hey, Margie. You got that Proposal layin’ around up there somewhere?”

“It’s on the shelf above the coffee machine.”

“See Larry, it says it right here. The new Constitution will only be valid if it protects the Bill of Rights and if the Convention sticks to the mandates. So if they did something else, it wouldn’t stand. And besides, three-quarters of the states have to ratify whatever they do. You’re not gonna get that many states to go for repealing the Bill of Rights.”

Charlie always had a good word. “Hey, how’s that old song go? ‘Chance in a million is better than none.’”

It was happening all across the country. And not a day went by without someone bringing the subject up at Margie’s.

“Never thought I’d see a candidate like *that*. Sure is different.”

“Alls I know is I trust this one to call for the Convention.”

“Never woulda run for President, I don’t think, except for that.”

“You think this Convention can win?”

“Look around you, Tom. It’s happening everywhere you look. You hear what those high school kids are doing with the vacant lot down on Third? Turning it into a park. I gave ‘em some money. It’s the least I can do.”

“All my life, I never thought I was going to be able to make a difference. Now my son keeps telling me, ‘This is history, Mom. History. You can do something. *Everybody* can do something.’ It just tickles me. I never knew him to work so hard on anything.”

“I think some of those *As If Your Life Depended On It* television ads are great—”

“Like those Superbowl ads.”

“Better, ‘cause they’re trying to get us to do whatever we can for the world, not just buy stuff.”

“Radio talk shows, too. When I realized what I was tuned into — well, I never thought I’d ever hear anything worth listening to coming out of that man’s mouth...”

“Did you see that special last week on the group of millionaires that’s tackling world poverty?”

“Yeah, and that group that was originally organized to reduce taxes for themselves.”

“Can you believe it?”

“Honey, with all the unbelievable things going on, I could believe just about anything.”

*

Why they chose his church, he could only guess.

“Pastor.”

“Yes?”

“We have several visitors who would like to speak with you if they could.”

“Sure, send them in.”

The pastor turned from his computer and gathered scattered pieces of paper in an effort to straighten his desk.

“Here we are,” the secretary held the door.

“Welcome,” the pastor stood up and greeted his guests. “Grace, I think we’ll need one more chair, please. Thanks. Jim, right?” They all shook hands. “And Mike. Glad to see you.”

“Thank you, Pastor Wilkins. And this is our friend, Pamela.”

“Hi, Pamela.”

The four sat down.

“Well, how can I help you?”

Mike was in his late forties. A church elder. His great grandfather had helped put up the first building. “Well, Pastor, we’ve come to talk with you…” He paused, glanced over at Jim. “Because we’ve been noticing something in your sermons lately.”

“Yes?”

“Well, it sounds to us like you’ve taken on a theme.” Jim had been a church member since his parents had moved to town some thirty years ago.

The pastor swallowed. This had been his first assignment since divinity school. And except for last year’s controversy over introducing a weekly youth service with electric guitars and drums, things had been going relatively well.

“Sort of encouraging everyone to take a stand,” Mike continued. “I mean, not that you haven’t always been preaching that but—”

“No, on the contrary, Pastor.” Pamela belonged to one of the other two churches in town. In a small community though, ‘Everybody knows everybody,’ as the saying goes. “Over the last three years,” she continued, “you’ve earned the respect of most everyone in town.”

“Well, to get back to the point, Pastor,” Jim said, “we were talking about your sermon last Sunday. The one about how small acts can have big effects. Well, that got us to thinking…”

The pastor brought his hand to his chin. He remembered where he’d gotten his inspiration for that sermon. At last month’s ministerial meeting, the discussion had slowly turned to the perennial complaint of ministers everywhere. “Why is modern life so compartmentalized? Why God over there — and the workplace, the marketplace, the business world, even friends, family over here? Why does it seem we live our lives as if there were no God at all — except for that forty-five minutes on Sunday morning?”

One of the ministers, Pastor Kleist, had earned a doctorate in psychology before entering divinity school.

“It’s all about the connections we make or don’t make. How and with what we link our perceptions,” she asserted. “We’re constantly connecting personal psychic activity — understandings, expectations, interpretations — with perceptions of others, nature, pieces of memory, dreams, images, our experience in general.”

“Oh,” Pastor Keenan responded, “you mean individual ways of looking at things, points of view...”

“Of course, each individual to some extent chooses which connections to make,” Pastor Kleist replied. “But culture encourages the making of certain connections and discourages the making of others. A necessary function, since not all possible connections are healthy. And because we’d all be re-inventing the wheel so to speak, if we didn’t have culture to carry information about what works. But some cultures encourage more connections with the Sacred than ours.”

“But something new seems to be happening,” Pastor Stone observed.

“Yes,” agreed Pastor Kleist with an enthusiastic smile. “Now there’s a real possibility of connecting everyday reality with an ubiquitous Divinity.”

Suddenly Pastor Wilkins realized that Jim was waiting for a response. “Well, I’m honored that you should want to stop in and tell me that I’m doing something right,” he smiled broadly. “Of course, I do try my best. Though I don’t always know how much influence I actually exert.”

“So back to why we’re here,” Pamela prompted.

“I’m sure you’re aware, Pastor,” Mike picked up, “of this movement for a Constitutional Convention. We’d really like to know what you think about it.”

“And not just you, Pastor,” Jim quickly clarified, “we’d like to know what everybody’s thinking about it.”

The pastor raised his eyebrows.

“So we’re wondering, Pastor,” Pamela said, “if you could make the church hall available for a series of open discussions.”

“We know, Pastor,” Jim put in quickly as he moved to the edge of his chair, “the church doesn’t take political stands. Christ said ‘My Kingdom is not of this world.’ But maybe Christ was talking about the way the world has been up til now. You know, everything based on everybody just taking care of themselves.”

“Instead of love,” Pamela added. “Which is what I understand the phase transition and convention being about. Love one another. Isn’t that what Christ told us to do.”

“We wouldn’t announce that the church was taking a stand one way or the other,” Mike continued. “Just that the community would have a place and time to get together and air all sides of the issue.”

The room fell silent.

“This is very interesting,” Pastor Wilkins cleared his throat. “I’m sure you know that the churches in town have been working together for many years now. Once a month, Pastors Keenan and Stone, Kleist and myself get together for our Ministerial Association meeting. Last month, after we finished business matters, this phase transition topic came up. And as it turned out, we all wanted to do something.” He read the expression on their faces. “Pastor Stone is already working with several other ministers in his denomination, drafting a plank to be offered at their national conference this summer.” Leaning forward he asked, “What do you have in mind?”

**

The local bars were another matter. For years, two of the proprietors had been locked in a rivalry over who could book the better band. Customers hopped from one bar to the other, always looking for another night when something truly extraordinary happens. Like the time at Harmony’s when everybody just got up and started snake-dancing. Or the night at the Ironrail when everyone went on singing, “Corinna, Corinna,” til there wasn’t a dry eye in the place. Weekend after weekend passed less memorably, of course. But these days, something utterly unexpected was keeping the humdrum at bay.

Both were strictly union bars. Everybody knew that. If you didn’t like politics, you didn’t go. But if you worked at the plant — and almost everyone had a relative in town who did — you stopped in every now and then. If you wanted the latest gossip, it was Harmony’s. If you wanted to talk with your shop steward — informal like — you went to the Ironrail. That’s where the first meeting took place.

One warm summer evening, three management people crossed the threshold. Dressed down, but everybody recognized them. Two men from the main office and a woman from human resources. A half dozen heads turned. Looking around, you had to

wonder if the union leaders had been expecting them. The bar was way too crowded for a Tuesday.

People say it was John — looking like he was speaking into his beer mug, but loudly enough for the whole bar to hear — who broke the silence. “Some guy tells me he’s got a problem with sittin’ down and dealin’ with a situation we both are facin,’ I don’t need to know much more to figure we ain’t seein’ things with the same set a’ eyes.”

Everybody could read the expressions on the faces of the newly arrived, ‘Well, there’s our welcome.’

Luckily, that first moment turned out to be the worst. Ian, acting president of the local, broke the ice. Within a half-hour, people were crowding around the several tables pushed together in the center of the room, taking turns sitting and talking. At first, they aired strong feelings.

“We were only dollars and cents to you guys. Replaceable parts. Takin’ us for whatever you could. Yeah, you said we mattered, but did you ever think about what it might be like living on what you were paying us?”

“Yeah, while you guys had company cars, business lunches and trips, executive insurance plans, special bonuses, golden parachutes, company profits, salaries five times ours... As if we weren’t working just as hard as you were. And you able to fire us for insubordination or lay us off at the drop of a hat. How do you think that feels day after day, year after year?”

“Look, if we pushed you, it was only because we were being pushed. Our jobs were never that secure for us either. You think we liked working in an environment where everyone was ready to stab you in the back? We had nothing to say about policy. Everything came from up above. The issue was the bottom line. Always the bottom line.”

“Stickin’ us with 401K’s while you set yourselves up with real retirement plans. Where’s your excuse for that?”

“Listen, we’ve heard these things a thousand times from your union reps. Legitimate grievances. There was just nothing we could do about it. We were on opposite sides of a wall. It’s how every corporation operated. But we’re all gonna’ have to let go of the past if there’s going to be a future at all.”

It took an hour to get down to the purpose of the visit.

“Last week we spent three days at Corporate Headquarters. To make a long story short, some high-ups are expecting this Constitutional Convention thing to fly. And they want to create a model for a new work environment. They want to turn ownership of the plant over to everyone who works here. And they’re interested in your ideas on how to do it. That’s why we’re here.”

Pin-drop silence.

“What?!” Someone in the room finally asked.

“It’s in the proposal for the Constitutional Convention,” one of the guests replied. “You’ve seen that. And you’re going to be seeing a lot of corporations making the move on their own.”

No one knew exactly what to say next.

“We’ve got to work out the details,” the human resources manager explained. “Together.”

“Obviously, there’s a lot we need to discuss.”

That first meeting lasted past midnight. Back at the plant, talk at breaktimes would never be the same. Nothing was the same.

The unheard-of was also happening within communities of more recent arrivals to the town. Davonne had come to the United States several years after the war in Vietnam. During the war, her village had cooperated with the CIA. Afterwards, Davonne and her family narrowly escaped being killed. Following a series of nightmare refugee camps, they finally found their way to the U.S. and this town. Government agencies had originally located twenty such families in the area, now there were nearly thirty.

“For many years,” Davonne addressed the small group assembled in her living room. At parties, community help projects, weddings and funerals, the people spoke Laotian. This evening, Davonne spoke English because of the young people in her

audience. She had made a special effort to bring high school and college students to this meeting.

“We have been saying how it hurt our hearts when we have gone back to visit our relatives and see how our villages are not like before. How the people are following the ways of wanting to buy things. How the young people want to leave, go to college in Japan or Australia, make lots of money, drive a big car, have a big house. Never return. No one cares like before.”

Noticing how the young people in the room were squirming, Davonne quickly added, “I’m not saying that all the old ways are better. I — a woman — maybe wouldn’t be standing up here talking. And our young people like the freedom. More freedom. But some of the old ways — the ways of caring...”

The Asian Committee had arisen with the need to help one another. Not only did the group sponsor English classes, but volunteers also explained the laws, assisted with filling out forms and negotiating the bureaucracies for green cards, visas and citizenship. On occasion, they provided material support. In general, members of the Committee did everything they could to help individuals living in a new country to appreciate the dominant customs and adapt to ways so foreign they were nearly unimaginable.

“Certainly you are hearing about the big changes happening,” Davonne continued. “And being citizens now of this country, I think we have something important to contribute. We must send some delegates to this convention. And we should tell everyone how we lived. How it is not the nice things someone can have, but the nice things someone can do that makes happiness.”

Davonne was creating a website. A website of her peoples’ memory. A website that would publicize values she believed could help everyone.

“Many of us can still remember the villages where we grew up. The person who helped others was naturally the leader. Leaders never took more for themselves. Always the leader was serving, sharing, giving to the others — never taking more, never bossing. Their reward was respect from the people. They are the example for how leadership in the whole world could be.”

“Sounds just like my neighbor, Milt,” a member of another audience would comment — later when Davonne was campaigning to be a delegate to the Convention.

“He’s the leader of our block because he’s always doing everything for everybody. It’s just spontaneous. He’s the one.”

Davonne had gotten the idea for a website from links that were appearing on the home pages of Native American websites. Several nations had begun sponsoring guided camping trips into remote areas. One description explained, “Deep contact with Nature can foster the awareness of the mystical inter-relation of one’s inner being with daily events and encounters. Respect for the trees, plants and other beings, the wind and rain can open the heart to the Spirit living in everything that is.” Programs of weeklong stays at lodges on reservations were also being offered. The Hopi and Navajo in the desert Southwest were teaching a course called, “Understanding Dreams and Dreaming.” From the Kwakiutl, you could learn about potlatch, a sacred ritual of giving. Cherokee women, traditional leaders and providers of their people, were sponsoring conferences on gender roles. “The Earth our Home” seminars by the Lakota included studies in mythology, storytelling, dancing, drumming and vision quests. The offerings went on and on.

Felipe had never visited such websites. Truth be told, he’d only surfed the web a couple times at the public library. The way he learned about the Convention was from a friend at the Maison Blanche restaurant where he worked. What got him interested was something he heard on the radio. After the lunch rush, the dishwashing room went quiet. And his employer didn’t mind if he listened to the educational station while putting the final touches on silver and glassware.

One afternoon he happened to tune into an interview with a lawyer versed in Constitutional Law. The interviewer asked the guest how a new Constitutional Convention could do any better than the first Constitutional Convention. “Which after all,” the host pointed out, “over a single summer produced the foundation for a government that has lasted for over two hundred years.”

The lawyer began with one word, “Values.” “It’s all about values,” he said. “The original framers of the United States Constitution were eighteenth century white males who saw no problem with denying women the right to vote, believed themselves

physically, culturally and morally superior to Native Americans and Africans. So they scarcely realized how they were compromising their best aspirations — equality and freedom — when it came to slavery and taking over this continent. Theirs was obviously a very different set of values than ours. For example, they valued property rights so highly, that the First Convention gave only property owners the right to vote. The Andrew Jackson generation changed that. Just as we should now change the Constitution to express the values shared by our diverse population.”

“Since everyone will be given an equal voice at the new Convention,” the lawyer stated, “marginalized citizens can inform a new Constitution with values that will make the world a better place for everyone.”

The host pressed his guest to be more specific. “What values are you referring to? How exactly could our country be made any better than it is right now?”

“We don’t have all the answers to those question yet,” the lawyer replied. “Because some of us have not yet had a chance to offer answers.”

Felipe could not get the program out of his mind. He began to sense that his life had greater significance than he had previously believed. For the first time, he felt as though he belonged.

Felipe’s grandparents had come from Mexico. For years they’d traveled back and forth across the Texas border for “peisca,” the harvest. Going from farm to farm, city to city, bringing in the corn, cotton, watermelon, potatoes — sometimes traveling to California to help pick oranges, always returning to Mexico. Their children, however, stayed on in the United States where they’d been born. During World War II, one of Felipe’s uncles became army buddies with a landowner who invited him to live and work on his farm. Years later, when Felipe’s uncle was given the chance to buy the farm, he invited his brother to help out — that was Felipe’s father.

Felipe spent his boyhood summers beneath the same unblinking sun as had his grandparents — weeding, cultivating, blistering, sweating. Encouraged by his parents, he graduated from the local high school. But no better job ever materialized. And the factory never seemed to have an opening. So Felipe left home for what he hoped would be greener fields. At first he visited his sister just outside Houston. She worked forty hours a week for a big name bank. Struggling to raise four children on tellers’ wages, all

she could afford was a house with no indoor plumbing. Felipe moved on to stay with one of his brothers in a trailer court on the outskirts of Santa Fe, then spent three years with another brother doing seasonal agricultural work. By the time Felipe returned to his home town, he'd figured he'd set foot in just about every county with an apple or a pear orchard from Northern California to the Canadian border. And he'd learned a lot.

Thinking about a new world, a better world, Felipe asked himself, "What is it, really, that makes people happy?"

He knew money could buy neither true friendship nor health. And sure as anything, money couldn't buy love. From where he stood, Felipe saw happiness as associated with family. Oh, his own family did their share of bickering. But family still meant everything to him. He asked himself how family could fit into the formula for a new world, given how many different kinds of families there are. As far as Felipe could see, families did generally have certain things in common. Feelings of attachment and belonging, compassion and the willingness to help one another.

'If everyone thought of everyone else as family,' Felipe concluded, 'then the meaningful jobs, fair wages, healthcare, decent housing, education — all those things that the children of the privileged have always taken for granted — would be made available for everyone. Willingly. And across all borders.'

Felipe decided that he would work for the Calling of the Constitutional Convention. And run as a candidate for the Convention itself. Not for just the Raza, his people, but for all people. And he would campaign on a simple theme, "Felipe Corazón for the Family of the Earth."

Chapter Ten

The title, “Sunday Morning,” appears on the television screen. As the white letters slowly turn gray, then disappear, a familiar scene emerges. Three men and a woman are sitting at a conference table. The show’s theme music plays in the background. A stark light bordered with shadow focuses on one of the men. The music fades. The camera closes in.

“Welcome to Sunday Morning. I’m Edward Roberts and for the next half hour, I’ll be your host.” He speaks in a deep baritone voice. He’s wearing a dark gray suit with light gray shirt and dark blue tie. His eyes are rather deeply set. The lines in his face belie his thick, dark hair. “With the Convention getting underway and the country abuzz with talk, this week we’re honored to have three distinguished guests to offer their observations.”

The ambient lights brighten as the camera pulls back to capture the entire well appointed set — table with glasses and water carafes, host and participants.

“Our first guest is Senator Alexa Handlin. Senator Handlin is president of the Senate and presided over the passage of the Bill calling for the Constitutional Convention. Welcome, Senator.”

The senator’s face, framed by silvery hair, fills the television screen. She wears a serious look. The mauve silk of her conservatively cut suit contrasts with the dull colors the men are wearing. She nods but says nothing.

“Our second guest is retired Five Star General Claude Stemper. General Stemper was recipient of the Congressional Medal of Honor, three purple hearts and numerous other awards during his distinguished military career. Before retiring, General Stemper served on the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Thank you for coming, General.”

The General acknowledges his introduction with pursed lips and movement of the eyebrows. Ribbioned bars and dangling medals cover the front of his army uniform.

“Our third guest this morning is Paul Sampson, acting CEO of Comcon International, a conglomerate of global communications and integrated media systems, including — at last count — twenty-seven book publishers, fifteen hundred radio

stations, five television networks, and numerous cinema and recording entertainment interests. We also thank you, Mr. Sampson, for being with us this morning.”

“Honored.” Mr. Sampson is also wearing a dark suit. He shifts uneasily in a chair too small for his girth.

The camera, which had been moving from close-up to close-up as each guest was introduced, now switches to an overhead, wide-angle shot.

“Senator Handlin, if we could, I’d like to begin with you, please. What’s your take on the progress of the Convention?”

Senator Handlin leans back from the table. “Well, I myself am generally a ‘wait-and-see’ kind of person.” The camera changes to a close-up of her face. “I certainly hope, of course, that the delegates can hammer out the details.” She glances toward Roberts. “My colleagues and I are cooperating in every way we can. But I’ve been around long enough to know that it’s going to be anything but easy. There are some difficult issues involved.” She punctuates her last observation with a quick raise of the eyebrows. “And you’ve got to remember that no matter how strong the trend, not everybody is yet on board. Which means that the Convention delegates have a formidable challenge on their hands.”

“So do I understand you correctly, Senator Handlin,” the host begins again, “that you think the enthusiasm for the Convention doesn’t run as deep as it seems? You feel that support may dry up, once the difficult issues come up for debate?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t go that far. Because of what’s at stake here. And because this whole movement came from the people themselves, rather than being generated and sold to them by those of us in leadership positions. We were surprised by it. Weren’t we gentlemen?”

The camera moves to show the assenting faces of her co-guests, then returns to a close-up of the senator.

“There’s an enormous amount of excitement and cooperation in the air. So much so that the Bill passed both chambers of Congress in less than two weeks — and by unanimous votes. In a way, that was a foregone conclusion once the Supreme Court ruled that, although the primary impetus to stimulate the State Legislatures to petition Congress for the Convention was — I think they used the word ‘creative’ or ‘innovative’

or something like that — once two-thirds of the States had submitted their petitions, failure to call for the Convention would have violated the Constitution. Another point you want to keep in mind, there were nearly seventeen thousand friend-of-the-court briefs arguing for the legitimacy of this Convention — and only a handful opposing. You put that together with the polls, the daily news stories, the engagement of the media in general... Personally, I think this whole thing is still snowballing. And remember, too, the international support. Our European allies —”

“Thank you, Senator,” the host cuts in, “and we’ll try to get back to you in just a few minutes and follow up on that. But your last point suggests a question that I’d like to ask General Stemper, if I could.”

General Stemper sits comfortably at the table, arms folded. He turns slightly to hear Roberts’ question.

“General Stemper, the senator mentioned that the Calling for the Convention was a foregone conclusion once the Supreme Court handed down its ruling. What was your reaction to that ruling?”

The General nods slowly. “It didn’t surprise me. Not at all. I’m sure you know that the men and women in the armed forces take an oath to uphold and abide by the Constitution of the United States of America. We don’t swear allegiance to any individual, political party or private interest group. The duly elected President is our Commander in Chief. So once the candidate was elected...” The General gestured with an open right hand. “Besides, this entire movement for a Constitutional Convention is clearly in tune with the spirit of the Constitution. In a democracy such as ours, the people have the right to redress their government. And the candidate’s platform, the petition for the calling of the Convention, made that claim outright. It was plain and simple — perfectly legal.”

The General casts a quick glance at the other guests. “Among my colleagues, the only real question was whether or not the people themselves had the Constitutional Right to define the scope of the Article V Convention that they were petitioning to call. Most of us concluded that in a government of, for and by the people, citizens not only have the right to vote, but should also have the right to propose which issues they want to vote for or against. Now in this case, the people certainly voted. From a thirty-some percent

turnout rate just a few years ago to over ninety percent of eligible voters casting ballots — that’s something none of us should ever forget. And it would be blatantly arrogant to suggest that the people didn’t know what they were voting for. So the situation was pretty well defined even before the Supreme Court was called in to guarantee the constitutional integrity of it all.”

“Ummm, General Stemper,” Roberts glances down at his notes, “one of the mandates for the Convention is unilateral disarmament. Do you think that’s realistic?”

“Realistic? Certainly. Think of the alternative,” the General frowns. “I’ve stated my position on this issue many times. I’m fully in accord with Admiral Dural, Generals Betts, Waverly and others. Ever since the end of World War II, we’ve been spending no end of dollars on military strategies. Seven fleets. Air Force bases, advanced command posts and control centers all over the world. A global reconnaissance satellite system. The CIA, NSA, Homeland Security plus departments and operations I’m not even allowed to mention here. Yet the terrorist attacks have clearly demonstrated that this approach is antiquated.” The General’s tone grows increasingly urgent. “Defending ourselves by escalating the threat of violent retaliation is a strategy that has run its course. It never worked that well anyway, as we in the military understood all along.”

A moment of uncomfortable silence falls on the scene. “I’d like to explain if I could,” the General goes on. “Weaponry is not going to protect us from individuals bent on wreaking havoc. A complex society such as ours has too many points of vulnerability. If we want to ensure national security, we need to think globally. Only in providing security for everyone can we guarantee our own. That means everybody’s got to have the basic needs for survival... food, shelter, clothing, healthcare, meaningful jobs. Those of us who’ve spent time in the Third World know this from first hand experience. Eradicate world poverty, then we can all disarm. Yes, I firmly believe it can work.”

“Thank you, General.”

Roberts now turns from General Stemper to Mr. Sampson. “Our final guest may be able to shed light on some of the strange happenings associated with the Convention.”

The camera focuses on Paul Sampson. He is staring down at his folded arms, his lower lip pushed out.

“Mr. Samson,” Roberts begins. Sampson looks up. “You’ve spent your whole life — or I should say, your whole life up to now — expanding and consolidating your hold on mass media markets. Yet in the past seven months, you’ve given more than half your holdings away. State governments, municipalities and various non-governmental groups have suddenly received pieces of your media empire. Could you explain to us, please, what exactly you are up to? What does all this mean?”

Mr. Sampson nods. “Where to begin,” he says slowly as he turns toward Roberts, then takes a deep breath. “In the Gettysburg Address, President Lincoln stated that we are a country dedicated to the proposition that all men — ” Sampson pauses a moment, “that all people are created equal. Yet with some of the people earning multi-million dollar salaries and others struggling to make ends meet, it doesn’t seem to me that we’ve even come close to realizing that ideal. So how do we move closer to equality while preserving the liberties of a free society?” Sampson’s face asks whether everyone understands.

Before Roberts or the other guests can comment, Sampson begins again. “To answer your question from a more personal perspective,” Sampson now looks at his fellow guests, “Let me say that I feel a particular responsibility for the successful outcome of the Convention because of my role in the communications industry. For years, many of us have recognized that private ownership of the media works against true democracy.” Sampson scans the faces of his fellow guests again. “News media — and entertainment media, too — are analogous to the nervous system of a living body. The people, who are ultimately the decision makers in a democratic society, are like the brain. They depend on the information they’re getting from the media to make their decisions. But if the media is controlled by private interests, it’s as if one body part, say the right hand, controlled the nervous system. So that the brain’s decisions would only serve the whole body if all parts had the same needs as the right hand.” In a startling gesture, Sampson stares for a second directly into the camera. “Some of us thought we wanted it that way. Until now.”

“Well, that’s quite an indictment, Mr. Sampson.” Roberts looks a little taken aback. “One that would explain the steps you’ve been taking. But what about media owners

who might not want to give it all away as you have? What about their First Amendment rights of free speech — not to mention property rights?”

Sampson tilts his head toward Roberts. “It’s hardly surprising to hear you say that,” he begins with a fatherly smile. “We who controlled the media taught you to equate ‘free speech’ with buying access to public debate. Which leaves most people with free speech rights in theory — but not in actuality. Of course, we never said that straight out. Just as we preferred not to use the direct approach when suppressing contrary views. Usually, it took little more than an approving or disapproving phone call.” Sampson adjusts his weight. “That kind of blockage is what the kids now call ‘canalizing.’ I didn’t think of it as anything more than strategic free market competitive practice a few years ago. But today... today, I believe there’s a chance to create a better world, update our understandings of democracy itself.”

“At this point,” Roberts suddenly says, “I’d like to open the discussion to the panel. Would anyone like to comment?”

“I think Mr. Sampson’s point is well taken,” General Stemper puts in. “And I especially like your reference to Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address. Because if the rest of the world comes to see us as truly representing democracy, freedom, equality, justice — if we live up to our highest ideals — we’ll be secure and safe as well. People everywhere will love, not hate us.”

“Exactly,” Senator Handlin adds. “And it’s not that we’re talking about giving up a middle-class standard of living in order to accomplish that, either. As I understand the economics, we just need to slim down some, I mean, consumption-wise. A little dieting might do all of us some good.”

Sampson’s burst of laughter relieves the tension in the room.

“So far it seems you’re all very positive in your forecasts,” the moderator observes. “What about the obstacles?”

The room falls silent for a moment. “What obstacles do you see that might check the success of the Convention?” Roberts presses.

Senator Handlin speaks first. “Well, as I said from the start, it’s not going to be easy. It’s a significant challenge for individuals to change how they’ve been thinking about things. We see a lot of people who seem to have turned around on a dime. But I

suspect that for some, it's not going to be that simple to drop their psychological dependence on property and replace it with a whole new attitude. Some of us may have gotten so lost in evaluating ourselves on the basis of money, property and power that learning to feel secure in a whole new identity may take time."

"I would agree with you, Senator," Mr. Sampson responds. "Change in itself presents a challenge. A psychologist might be able to articulate this better than we three. But it seems to me that some of the problems go deep, exactly because they involve our identity. Whether we see ourselves as separate, isolated individuals — or as fundamentally part of something larger. It's not easy to give up long held notions of who you are."

"I agree," interjects the General. "Especially if one of those notions is what you thought of as your manhood. The old masculinity idea. We've been grappling with it ever since we admitted women into the military. I'm sure you remember the Tailhook and Air Force Academy scandals. But there are other obstacles as well."

"Such as?" The moderator's sweeping look invites comment.

"Such as whether people are going to work hard if the Convention sets caps on personal property accumulation. Right?" Mr. Sampson ventures. "If you had talked about such a possibility four or five years ago, you would have been branded a communist, or a utopian-nut or something. Despite these obstacles, I believe it can happen. Cooperating for the good of all, sharing wealth with Third World nations — however, improbable — now seems possible. Look at the stock market. Investors aren't pulling stakes and running. They're demonstrating that they're willing to pay for a better world. The logic has changed."

"Over the past two years, we've seen a lot of improbable things happen," General Stemper contributes. "Take the near disappearance of those neo-fascist associations and hate groups that used to be out there. Or the sudden lack of consumer demand for guns. You could never have produced such results by force of law. Who could even have imagined it?"

"Or," Senator Handlin adds, "the decreased popularity of pornography. It seems we may finally be moving beyond Victorian morality and objectification of women. Another surprising sign of the times."

“Could each of you characterize what these times mean to you personally?”

Roberts asks. “Mr. Sampson?”

“I used to think the law of the jungle justified what I was doing. Not any more. I don’t know if there’s an afterlife or not. This much I am sure of, we’re here right now and if we fail to do what needs to be done... I don’t even want to think about the consequences for our children. The way I see it, we’re on trial. And it’s not beyond us to pull through. What it really comes down to is that humanity isn’t out there somewhere, it’s you.”

“General?”

“My personal experience has been about war, death and destruction. I know, as few people know, that war is hell. Life is a miracle that we now hold in our hands. My heartfelt hope is that Life will be able to continue on a peaceful planet because of what we did at this point in human history.”

“Senator?”

“I feel as if I just woke up from a deep sleep. Woke up and asked myself, ‘What’s the one thing we just can’t live without?’ It’s love, of course. To be part of building a society based on equality where freedom and love can flourish — in the home, the workplace, the marketplace. To leave such a world as a legacy for my — our — grandchildren. That means everything to me.”

The music that began the show returns. The ambient lights dim. A spotlight picks out the moderator.

“It always comes to this time,” Roberts says in a voice-over. “Always too quickly. I want to thank our guests for their candid and informed discussion. And until next week, from all of us on the production staff and crew, we wish you a good — .”

Chapter Eleven

No one could pinpoint exactly when, where or how it began. Everyone agreed, though, that young people had started it. College, high school and grade school students who just couldn't believe we would let things continue as they were. Such as the eight-year-old who made adults think twice with her simple declaration that, "History has not been good. All these wars and ough!" The more you knew about history, the worse it looked. Slavery, colonization, genocide. War, mass starvation, ecological destruction. Brutal dictatorships. Or cynical manipulation that made a mockery of democracy.

Yet the human story had always had another side, too. Nothing — not tyranny, not cynicism, not even despair — could extinguish the inner flame of human love and compassion. Anyone could cite evidence. The sacrifices of parents for their children; the altruism of care-givers, firefighters, police officers, emergency medical personnel; the valor of men and women in the services; the dedication of teachers and clergy; the daring of artists and entertainers; the labor of factory and construction workers, farmers, garbage collectors, truck drivers, mechanics, grocers, technicians, launderers, cleaning staff, cooks, waitresses. Even the good intentions of the misguided entered into the positive side of the equation.

The older generation had been raised to believe that goodness was a moral choice that worked against "human nature." Now youthful leaders asserted that human goodness was "natural," an expression of the strong connecting force inscribed in the molecules making up our physical self. A kind of "instinct" for cooperating and giving that made the needed changes easier than we had thought. A deep wellspring that the species could draw upon as we negotiated the high mountain pass of a phase transition. It was a tall order. No less than shifting from the old world that had programmed and institutionalized selfishness to a new one that would cultivate — and institutionalize — loving one another.

In the United States, that institutionalization took the form of a new Constitutional Convention, as provided for in Article V of the original U.S. Constitution. The electorate had chosen a President whose sole platform had been the Calling of a Convention with a specific set of mandates, such as creating a new economic system based on cooperation and caring. Communities had then chosen delegates they trusted to fulfill those mandates. And now the people's transformation of themselves was helping the Convention delegates to shape the legal basis for realizing those goals. What was happening outside the hall was as important as what was happening within.

In homes, apartments, dormitories and barracks; in cars, buses, commuter trains, planes; in workplaces and classrooms; in grocery stores, cafés, restaurants and bars; in

newspapers, talk shows, novels, museums, movies, sitcoms and songs on the radio — in every microtheater imaginable — people were stepping beyond the boundaries previously set in their minds. Re-visiting ideas of the self, others, the world. Pondering what got them out of bed in the morning. Reconsidering their definitions of success. Reviewing what they wanted to leave as their legacy. Re-evaluating the significance of their lives — every day, every hour, even in the smallest acts and thoughts. Many individuals got involved in larger actions, too, since the Convention's work would take time — and some problems cried out for immediate attention.

One of the most stunning mass actions swept the nation's metropolitan areas. It started with groups of college students contacting churches and aid organizations in the nation's urban ghettos — asking what they could do to help. Almost overnight, people of all ages and all walks of life were flooding these organizations with phone calls offering money, food, clothing, equipment, construction materials, vehicles and their time. Doctors, dentists, lawyers, teachers, social workers, architects — professionals of every kind — gave of their expertise. Skilled workers such as plumbers, carpenters, painters, masons and electricians began repairing buildings, fixing furnaces, appliances, elevators — with all the unskilled helpers they could possibly need. Initially skeptical, ghetto-dwellers soon joined enthusiastically in transforming their world. Suburbanites drove into neighborhoods they used to avoid — where they helped clean buildings and streets, landscape parks, install playground equipment. Suddenly every city had an abundance of living spaces for the homeless, food for the hungry, high quality clothing.

“It's the miracle of the loaves and the fishes!” exclaimed one pastor with tears in his eyes.

Once the phase transition got going, it perpetuated itself. The pleasure people felt fueled an explosion of activity. Volunteers all over the nation echoed those who described such experiences as “the greatest joy” or “the deepest satisfaction” or “the most fun” they had ever had. It was as if human beings had forgotten and were suddenly rediscovering how much they delighted in getting together — and accomplishing something amazing at the same time. Momentum grew as individuals and groups inspired each other, fired each other's imaginations. When a few corporations started sacrificing their “competitiveness” by ceasing practices that harmed people or the environment, consumers invented what they called “reverse boycotts,” buying and promoting the products of such companies. Investors bought stock as their variation on the “reverse boycott” theme. People played with the possibilities. Gone was the boredom that had plagued routine daily life. Ideas moved in waves across the country. In cafeterias, lunchrooms or at water coolers, talk about sports and consumer goods gave way to opinions about what else could

be done and, later, conversations about the progress of the Convention. With competition falling out of style, more people were really hearing and appreciating — instead of putting down — each other’s perspectives. Everyone was reading books, forming discussion groups, signing up for night classes. College professors and administrators quickly set up new courses. They also arranged for students to get credit for participating in aid projects at home or abroad. And on many campuses, departments such as history, philosophy, psychology, art and literature engaged in collaborative projects with screenwriters, filmmakers, television and movie producers.

Hollywood leapt at these possibilities, since interest in the old formulae had evaporated causing box office receipts to plunge. Moviegoers simply shunned violence and clearly indicated their preference for another kind of sexuality. The season’s only hit was thoroughly sexual, deliciously sensual, a garden of delights that explored sexuality’s connection with the many faces of human love. Romantic love, love of Nature, love of the larger community, love with a capital “L.” Courage, daring, endurance and heroism remained in vogue, but with a focus on overcoming a different set of obstacles. Obstacles to love, forgiveness, freedom; to people bridging differences and getting together. Moviemakers could respond quickly, since they had always made a few such films. The renaissance in filmmaking and lower ticket prices soon had movie theaters filled to capacity.

The new cinematic trends reached the small screen, too. One star-studded miniseries dramatized the emergence of democracy in Europe and the United States. Beautifully filmed and brilliantly acted, this production gave viewers a vivid sense of what it was like to live under the tyranny of kings, queens, czars, emperors, empresses — and the aristocratic class that these regimes permitted to exploit and oppress the vast majority of people. The series explored the relationship between the political culture of Old Regime Europe and such worldwide abuses as serfdom, the slave trade and colonization. It shed light on the wild fury — and the passionate ideals — of the revolutions that swept Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries. Later segments carried the story of democracy through such key moments as the Civil War in the United States, the World Wars, the U.S. Civil Rights movement and the worldwide youth revolt of the 1960s. The series sought to help viewers play their own role in answering such questions as — What is freedom? Equality? True democracy? How can democratic societies ensure that citizens are equipped to think for themselves?

One answer to such questions was a television production called “Wordgames.” This interactive sitcom/game show quickly became a popular weeknight entertainment. Comedians and participants in the studio audience and in living rooms across the nation

kept everyone laughing as scenario-based games taught and tested understandings of how language works. “Wordgames” playfully approached the very serious aim of helping individuals gain more control over their relationship with language. Clowning and laughter made it easy to grasp concepts that had always seemed extremely difficult in the academic world.

Televised news changed, too. Programs began including brief “Introductions” in which news anchors let viewers know where they and their editors stood in society and on the issues. The nightly news presented — and prime time news programs thoroughly explored — the background of news stories. And of course, when the Convention began, radio and television networks provided gavel to gavel coverage — both in broadcasts and on websites.

Whether it was a plenary session taking place in the Grand Hall or a committee interviewing expert witnesses in a meeting room, you could watch it. Miss a proceeding because you were at work or following a different proceeding? No problem. The web offered replays in streaming video of every session — in whole, part, or just those segments containing keywords of your choosing. No television or internet access? Libraries set up special Convention Rooms with banks of high-speed connected computers. Have an opinion on some issue? Every delegate had an extensive support staff waiting to hear from you. The Pennsylvania Convention Center was wired with a twenty-first century fiber optic network — and the Constitutional Convention was making full use of it.

Article V Constitutional Convention activity flooded the web. Some called it the Second Great Dotwave. Churches, unions, social clubs, civic groups, schools, organizations and hundreds of thousands of individuals posted their positions and cross-linked with one another. Hundreds of new sites appeared each week. Convention-dedicated search engines sorted the sessions by topic, association, keywords and points of view.

Interest in the Convention surpassed anything anyone could remember. It wasn’t difficult to imagine why. Up to this time, humanity had never faced so great a crisis nor had so many reasons for hope. Never before had so many people tried on so grand a scale to realize humanity’s highest ideals. It was a great leap of faith that inspired and demanded everyone’s best.

The Reading Terminal Market located across the street from the Pennsylvania Convention Center had long been a popular tourist attraction. You could visit a seemingly unending row of food shops everyday for a month, and still not exhaust the possibilities. Vendors served specialties from all over the world. With the choice of Philadelphia to host the Constitutional Convention, the University of Pennsylvania set up video kiosks all

through the Terminal where visitors could express their opinions. Graduate students saved, categorized, cross-referenced and posted every contribution. People flocked to the area, happy to stand in line, for a chance to say something.

A confidently smiling teenager with short pixie-like hair and a sweatshirt appeared on the screen. She had a tiny nose and wide mouth. She wore no make-up. “Hi,” she said. “My name is Margaret Spheres. I’m from Berkeley High in Berkeley, California. I’d like to invite all of you to visit our website. Our motto is, ‘Let’s dissolve what’s been keeping us apart.’”

A man with graying hair, maybe in his sixties, with roundish face and twinkling eyes followed. “My name is Stanley,” he began. “My friends all call me Stosh. I was born, raised and still live on the Southside of Chicago. We’ve had our good times and our bad times. One thing I can tell you. Love is a choice.”

A man in a gray pin-striped suit and burgundy tie stepped into the kiosk, his white shirt a strong contrast with his ebony skin and close cropped hair. “Times of great historical significance ask more of us than ordinary times,” he said. “It’s about each individual moving to a whole new level, while the Convention translates our collective transformation into new political institutions.”

The next person wore a hardhat plastered with stickers. His face suntanned, his hair dark. “We need to do whatever we can to deal with cancer,” he said. “Just about everyone knows someone who’s got it, or had it. I figure there must something we’re doing that’s causing this. And we’ve got to find out what that is. Thank you.”

A college-aged man with long blond hair and large smile said, “We need to ask black people to tell us what freedom means.”

The next speaker was a young woman. “I’m from Montgomery, Alabama,” she said. “And I just wanted to tell everyone what we do on every Tuesday in our city. We call it, ‘Kindness day.’ And that day, all day, everyone tries to do acts of kindness. Ever since we started it, our police department has reported fewer traffic accidents.”

A pudgy-faced man with hair neatly combed over to one side appeared next. He was wearing a cleric’s Roman collar and black suit. He adjusted his glasses, then read from a small of piece of paper. “My name is Father Raymond Williams and I would like to go on record as associating the phase transition with the Last Judgment and the Final Redemption in the eschatological vocabulary of Christian Theology.”

Next came a man in a polo shirt. “My name is Steven Lorkin. I’m from Tuscaloosa, Alabama. Before this year, whenever I opened the paper, I always turned to the Sports Section. I read that section ‘cause I’m a guy. And sports writers don’t expect you to know something they don’t tell you. They explain everything in language that you can

understand. The players' backgrounds, what to watch for in the next week's game, and things like that. It's always there. Now I read the Convention Section first. And the writing is like how that sports' writing— ”

One thing about the cameras and recording system at the kiosks, it was technology. If you went beyond the allotted fifteen second spot, you were simply cut off — like voice mail. You had to speak between the beeps. Sometimes people identified themselves. Sometimes they didn't. Only on rare occasions did a person opt to speak without the camera. But you could do that, too.

A man with a bushy mustache and slicked back light brown hair appeared. The rolled-up sleeves of his white shirt revealed forearms filled with tattoos — illegible words, blotches and shaky geometrical shapes, long hours of nothing to do. “Prisons ought to be places where you get help to get yourself together,” he said with unblinking eyes. “Not like what goes on in there right now.”

A gray-haired woman, with a kindly face, eyes bespeaking intelligence and authority. “A woman's rights as a citizen of a democracy and her dignity as a human being,” she said, “demand that she have control over her own body — including the right to end an unwanted pregnancy. Equally important, every child has the right to be born wanted, since love is as necessary to a child as food.”

Into the kiosk stepped a young dark-haired dark-eyed woman with an elderly woman leaning on her arm. The elder's wrinkled nut-brown skin gave her face the look of someone superhumanly aged. “My great grandmother doesn't speak English, but she has something important to say.” The ancient one said something in Spanish. “Our history,” the young woman translated, “we can redeem it.”

A light brown-skinned man with shoulder length dreadlocks under a yellow, red and green crocheted beret appeared. “What's happening across the street wouldn't be happening unless white people were smarter and better than we thought. Bob Marley didn't live to see the day, but he saw it coming.”

The next young man had angular features, wavy hair. Perhaps in his early twenties. “My name is Brian Simmons and I'm from Georgia. I just wanted to say, this is the land of the free and the home of the brave. That's a lot to live up to. But that's who we are. And if we can't do it here and now, I don't think anybody is ever going to get the chance to do it later.”

A group of twelve-or thirteen-year-old girls, dressed in tee-shirts and jeans looked at one another, giggled, then suddenly got serious. One said, “One-two-three.” Then all sang the John Lennon song in unison, “All we are saying, is give Peace a chance.”

Two young men appeared on the screen. Both very handsome. The one with black hair looked as if he came from a Mediterranean country, Greece, maybe North Africa. The one with brown hair had a fine aquiline nose.

“Remember what the Count of Monte Cristo said to Maximillian,” the one said into the camera.

“Yes” the other continued, “the word ‘miracle’ wouldn’t be in the language unless there were the reality.”

“A young Asian woman, with an elegant scarf, used her hands to sign a message as she spoke. “We don’t have enough teachers in our schools,” she began. “Our classrooms are overcrowded. Here and almost everywhere in the world. Yet people who finish graduate school and would like to teach, are unable to find a job. Why not give more money to the schools to hire teachers? And why not create jobs for artists — just doing their art?”

The kiosk idea proved so popular that universities and colleges all over the nation set up kiosks in the small towns or cities where they were located.

In addition to the kiosks, street interviews became a key part of televised Convention coverage. Most stations aired such programs daily.

“What’s happenin’ is what’s been cryin’ to be happenin’.”

“Would you like to explain further?” The interviewer offered the microphone back to the man standing in a circle with four or five others.

“It’s like this,” the speaker said with an uncommon intensity, “Some things go down that should never happen. Been goin’ down for a long long time. People mistreatin’ people. You know what I’m talkin’ about. They’ve been puttin’ that history on TV. But what we’re doin’ now is what needed to be happenin’ all along. Cryin’ need.”

“So you’re saying we’re getting it right this time?” the interviewer asked.

“Yeah, that’s right. You got it.”

“I’d like to add somethin’ to what the brother’s sayin,’” one of the men in the circle volunteered.

The interviewer offered him the mike.

The second speaker took the mike and looked into the camera. “It’s like this. People only do somethin’ when they feel they got more to gain than lose. Like everything in the end is a free choice, right? I mean, you’re never gonna get people to do somethin’ they don’t wanta do, right? Well, maybe you can force ‘em to do somethin’ for a little while. Like hoodwink ‘em into thinkin’ they wanta to do what they really don’t wanta. But that can’t last. Now if we’re talkin’ about a better world, we’re talkin’ for ever. Right?”

“Yes, right,” the interviewer encouraged.

The second speaker handed the mike back to the first speaker. “The world’s a mess, right?” the first speaker observed. “I mean, we do agree on that.”

“Yeses,” “Yeah’s,” “Right on’s,” and heads nodding in unison replied.

“So last election, instead of doin’ nothin’ or just hopin’ things was gonna get better, we all voted to do somethin’ about it. And that’s what I was sayin.’ What’s happenin’ right now is the best that can be happenin’ given what we got. And that’s all.”

“Thank you.”

In another scene, a business man was walking by.

“Excuse me,” the man with the microphone hurriedly caught up, “Could I ask you to share your opinion with our viewing audience?”

The man stopped and turned around. The camera caught up.

“What do you think about the rumors that small groups might take over the Constitutional Convention,” the interviewer began, slightly out of breath. “That the Bill of Rights might be rescinded or worse. Does that frighten you?”

The businessman scrunched his eyebrows. “You’re always going to have fears and rumors,” he replied. “But global warming is no rumor. People not being able to find a job is no rumor. Terrorism is no rumor. It’s obvious that we really do need to change. Besides, only after three fourths of the states ratify the new Constitution does it become the law of the land.”

The next to be interviewed was probably in her thirties. An oval face, an unmistakable enthusiasm in her eyes. “Yes,” she said, “there is something I’d like to say.”

The man with the microphone waited.

“Thank you to the owners of the diamond mines for returning mining rights in the poor nations of the world.” She held up her hand to show a little diamond. “I’m happy to have this diamond on my hand. Now that the people of Africa are getting the money for their precious stones and metals. This diamond not only reminds me of my very special someone; but also of the changes that we’re making to raise everyone’s standard of living. And with no one hoarding diamonds anymore to drive the price up, they’re so plentiful that everyone will be able to have one. It’s like love sparkling all over the world.”

Chapter Twelve

The speeches, dancing and music on Day One of the Convention reverberated through the international media with a greater Spirit of Hope than had encircled the globe Millennium Night. People everywhere applauded the inaugural reading of the mandates. In a short three weeks, the addition of delegates had resolved all issues of fully inclusive representation. Two weeks after that, committees specific to each of the mandates had been formed.

The Committee on the Environment would address the immediate crisis that threatened life on earth. The Committee on the Economy would take up the task of replacing an economic system based on competition and exploitation with one based on sharing, cooperation and caretaking. The Committee on Human Resources would concern itself with ensuring truly equal opportunity for everyone. The Committee on Justice and Internal Security would create a new justice system, replace prisons with rehab institutions and focus on eliminating the causes of crime. The Committee on Global Security would likewise work towards the goal of global disarmament and peace on earth by addressing the causes of conflict — world poverty first and foremost. The Committee on Government and Politics would seek to give the United States a more democratic government and political system.

With the help of experts and “reality check” testimony from ordinary citizens, each committee set out to prepare a set of proposals. They were given only twelve weeks time before they had to make their initial presentation to the plenary Convention. Everyone agreed there was no time to waste, especially on the environment. So the Convention gave itself only nine months to complete its work. At first, many commentators predicted that the Convention would never be able to meet such deadline. By the end of the seventh week, however, it looked as if all of the committees would report early.

Extraordinary behavior speeded up the work of all committees. No one had expected experts to agree readily and cooperate. Most had built their careers in extremely competitive environments. But that kind of competition was rapidly going out of style. Besides, many past disagreements had revolved around whether or not changing the world was necessary, desirable or humanly possible. Now, however, most experts agreed with the vast majority of non-experts that humanity could and must make profound changes — without delay. This near-consensus on the need for change made it much easier to reach agreement on how to proceed. And “reality check” testimony proved extremely useful, often clarifying a point with brilliant economy of words.

The Committee on the Environment took only four weeks to complete its work. Experts in the field had known for years how human activity was destroying the environment and how to halt and repair the damage. The technology had long been available and developing. All that had been lacking was the will to do what was necessary. Now that the will to act was there, it was as if someone threw a switch that drained the power from corporate-funded studies that had muddied the waters for decades. Of course, it helped that many CEOs themselves no longer wanted to delay. Corporations indicated a changed attitude even before the Convention. For example, lumber companies declared a moratorium on cutting down forests. In response, a grassroots movement quickly emerged and tackled one of the toughest environmental issues: what to do about the people who would lose their jobs when corporations stopped their destructive activities. Beginning in Seattle and spreading through the net, a nationwide organization raised funds for the displaced workers and tried to find them new jobs. The Convention's Committee on the Environment took this a step further by proposing a public works program that would employ displaced workers in restoring and sustaining the very ecosystems their former jobs had damaged. By the time the Committee on the Environment reported, it was already clear that the Committee on the Economy would fund such a program.

The Committee on the Economy ran ahead of schedule almost from the start. Nothing did more to quicken the pace than the wealthiest citizens' willingness to do everything they could to cooperate with creating a new economic system. Before the Convention began, they demonstrated good will in a surprising wave of self-taxation that poured immense sums of money into the treasury. The Committee on the Economy could begin its work with more funding available than anyone had imagined — and with a profound sense that all social groups were on board.

“Clack!” the gavel announced the end of preliminary remarks and the beginning of Economy's first two-hour session. “The Chair recognizes the delegate from Oregon.”

“We, from a state where mountains reach the heavens and forests touch the sea,” the Oregon delegate began, “and in the spirit of cooperation that has inspired this second Constitutional Convention of the United States of America, move that Article One of the new economic system shall read: ‘All citizens shall be guaranteed the right to food, shelter, healthcare and employment.’”

A hand waved furiously in the middle of the room as Oregon sat down.

“The delegate from Minnesota wishes to comment?” asked the Chair.

“To add. Minnesota wishes to add heating and clothing suited to weather conditions to Article One.”

“Don't forget air conditioning,” interjected another delegate.

“Clack! Clack!” replied the gavel. “Minnesota has the floor.”

“Air conditioning,” said Minnesota, with a slight bow towards the other delegate. “Of course, let it say that, too. Or some language that includes both heating and air conditioning. But please, let Arizona speak.”

“Arizona?”

“Arizona would like to thank Minnesota — and move on.”

That same day, the Committee on the Economy agreed to propose a shift from private to public ownership of all essential utilities: water, electricity, gas, oil, transportation, telephone, as well as the major television and radio stations. Owners would be encouraged to make this change voluntarily, as the Committee expected many would.

Before week one ended, the Committee on the Economy had also decided to propose shortening the work week. With no cut in pay, full-time employees would move to a thirty-two hour, four-day week. The measure would help decrease unemployment, since employers would need to hire more employees. Businesses that needed help with this would get tax breaks or federal grants.

Although economic issues proved less contentious than expected, obstacles did arise. Both expert and “reality check” testimony indicated a marked mistrust of the federal government’s ability to get anything done effectively. This was a fundamental problem since most of the proposals under consideration relied heavily on federal administration. As the discussion bogged down in week three, a well-known career politician and political strategist requested permission to testify.

“I’ve got a confession to make,” he said. “We deliberately cultivated the idea that the federal government can’t do anything right. For political purposes. I myself instigated that campaign.” He ruefully shook his head. “It was politics. Just politics. Oh, we knew that once the journalists started digging they’d find plenty of evidence the government wasn’t working well. Because it was our own cronies who were profiting from such things as \$800 hammers. But all the corruption and inefficiency we’ve had in the past doesn’t add up to some kind of principle that the federal government can’t be trusted. Please understand that,” he pleaded.

An even more fundamental issue was how to change the economy while satisfying the undeniable human thirst for freedom. Some delegates argued that everything should be done voluntarily. They pointed to the changed behavior of wealthy people and the efforts underway everywhere to replace hierarchy with democracy. But economists and business leaders were almost unanimous in opposing a purely voluntary approach. They cited the out-of-control character of the old economic system. One year inflation, the next unemployment. The stock market up, the stock market down. Most agreed with the

Harvard team that information technology now made it possible to improve the system's efficiency through coordination. Committee members found these arguments persuasive, but remained extremely concerned about freedom. All agreed that giving more than taking is an act of love, therefore an act of free will by definition. So the Committee aimed to write proposals that would serve more as guidelines than dictates.

During week four, the Committee took up the problem of income disparity. Everyone agreed on the importance of reducing the difference between what a full day's work brought the lowest paid and the highest paid members of the workforce. A white-haired psychology professor from Santa Cruz argued that, with the phase transition, ego cultures would no longer be programming people to desire and admire symbols of wealth. Acquisition was already losing its hold over people. Personal fulfillment would prove so much more satisfying that differences in pay would not be necessary at all. Most delegates did not find this idea entirely satisfactory, since it left a key question unanswered. How could you create incentives, reward individuals for hard work, extraordinary effort, special skill, or for doing less-desirable work — without creating harmful inequalities?

At the start of week six, a team from MIT presented a plan with different salary levels. The plan ensured everyone in society a subsistence wage, whether they worked or not. That wage would be doubled as a base rate for everyone who did work. Using hypothetical figures of 20,000 for subsistence and 40,000 for workers, the team suggested a maximum salary of 80,000 units. There would be three Categories in which a working individual could receive higher rates of pay. Category One rewarded merit in all occupations with 5,000 extra units for "Good," 10,000 for "Very Good," 15,000 for "Excellent" and 20,000 for "Super." Category Two provided additional remuneration for doing less-desirable work. The team cited sanitation and sewer workers as exemplifying the higher paid of two levels in this Category. Their work would qualify to receive 10,000 units; while the 5,000 unit level would include any work not being chosen enough to meet society's needs. Category Three had two levels of extra pay for work that required extra training, extra effort or extra responsibility. The team cited physicians, teachers and bus drivers as examples.

Some delegates felt that such work as caring for the sick and teaching was more rewarding in itself and therefore should not be paid more.

"I know plenty of young people who would love to be doctors but never got the chance," declared one committee member.

Experts agreed that any salary guidelines would need the flexibility to deal with unexpected results when millions of formerly deprived individuals began to pursue their career dreams. But witnesses also reminded the delegates of problems with "burnout"

among people whose work carried extra responsibility and demanded intense concentration. During week seven, the Committee began hearing “reality check” testimony on the point.

“In my job,” testified one worker, “it really doesn’t matter that much if I make a mistake. No big deal. One of my co-workers down the line might have to make a slight adjustment, or the thing can just be redone. But I sure don’t want my doctor taking mistakes that lightly. Making ‘em as often as I do. No way. Or the pilot of a plane I’m on. There’s some jobs where it really does matter. Big time. And those people should be paid more. The ones who have to, you know, pay attention every second. Reward ‘em for it, I say.”

“I could have gone to college,” said another witness. “I had the brains. But I just didn’t want to study. I liked partying. Still do. My job isn’t very fulfilling. But I don’t have to worry about it after punching out. The trade-off is okay with me. But I figure that people who do choose to put out the effort and get the training ought to get some kind of compensation. If they want it. They can turn down the extra pay if they enjoy their jobs so much. You never know what people might do — with this phase transition thing going on. I’ve seen things I never thought I’d see.”

“Thank you, Ms. Keller. The Committee will hear the next witness shortly. But first the Chair would like to make an announcement. We’ve just received an e-transmission of the completed proposals of the Committee on Human Resources.”

Thunderous applause.

Interlude III

Still standing outside the tower

I returned to eyes

Now able to take the light.

A cool breeze

Fragrant with earth

Wound about the sound of moving water

Whispered through my musings

“This then truly is the otherside.”

Where flowers bank Eternal Bliss

Where descendants of slaves and Zen masters

Share their secret Freedom

Where humanity breaks the ego spell

As when we learned not to soil our nests

And to stand upright.

Now we create ourselves again

Surrendering our baby teeth

To grow into a Loving World

The One we’ve always longed for

Where we learn who we are

In the eyes of sparrows lobelia sequoia deer

Unbound from chains of signifiers

In this Sacrament of Becoming

A moment given and returned

Eternity.

Chapter Thirteen

The prime-time news special opened with the familiar photograph of planet Earth from space. Slowly the planet grew larger until the continents emerged from the clouds.

“Tonight, our series on the latest developments of the Phase Transition continues as we investigate, ‘The Heart Project.’” Two anchors were seated behind a wide, sweeping desk. “We begin with this brief background.” Irrepressible excitement colored the speaker’s voice.

“The Heart Project — or as most people call it, simply ‘Heart’ — began as one of several international aid programs created by the Second Constitutional Convention,” continued the second speaker. “Heart was inspired by the proposition that if we could walk on the moon, we could also feed, clothe, shelter and care for everyone...” The memorable image of two silver-clad astronauts standing on the moon, one reflected in the mirrored face-mask of the other, filled the screen.

“Stage One of the project moved into action on two levels simultaneously. The first was an immediate increase in funding and goods to the many NGO’s, UN and governmental programs already operating all over the world. The second level involved meetings at the United Nations with representatives of these and other organizations. The aim being to coordinate and improve pre-existing efforts.” Scenes of crowded discussion rooms and hallways, the outside of the UN Building and a view of the Manhattan skyline.

“Informed by these meetings, administrative centers were set up at eight strategic locations around the globe — Sub-Saharan Africa, North Africa and the Middle East, Central Asia, India, Southeast Asia, Central and South America, the Pacific Rim and Eastern Europe.” Across the screen, oceans, islands, continents, mountain ranges and cities folded into one another. “During Stage Two, outreach programs staffed these administrative centers with people from countries and cultural groups in each region. These administrators refined the regional strategic goals, and set up vast networks of local offices — staffed and advised at the neighborhood level.”

The scene shifted back to the studio. “Nightly for the next eight weeks, we’ll be reporting on Stage Three of the project — the actual implementation of local plans of action.”

Planet Earth returned to the screen. The sphere of swirled blue, set in the blackness of a heaven sparkling with stars, drew closer. The shape of Mexico and Central America came into focus. Closer up, the coastlines turned into sandy beaches. Farther inland, the green of jungle canopy hugged the lower slopes of rugged mountains. And beyond, desert terrain stretched out to the horizon.

“We begin tonight with a close neighbor.”

The camera was following a rustic road, which transformed into a highway that led to an expressway. Suddenly you were gliding over rooftops of an enormous city, then hovering over an outlying section of the megalopolis. The sound of a descending helicopter grew louder until, at ground level, it fell completely silent. The camera then began a three hundred and sixty degree take of the scene. Quonset huts in neat rows covered a little more than half of the area. New two story adobe buildings filled most of the other half. Between the two a construction zone bustled with activity.

“This used to be a shantytown that extended for miles,” said an on-the-scene reporter dressed in a tan jumpsuit and holding a microphone. “Home for a million and a half people.” Archive footage of the former shantytown showed tin and scrap wood hovels. Cardboard boxes. People in rags. Mud. Open sewers. Horrendous poverty.

“Exploitative economic systems — slavery, colonization, then economic imperialism — forced people to live in this kind of poverty, generation after generation, for centuries,” the reporter explained. “Until the Heart Project began, there was little hope it would ever end.”

The camera focused on the Quonset huts. “The first thing the Heart Project did was to replace the shanty-town with these temporary lodgings. The huts have electricity and are a lot more comfortable than what the people here had before. In less than a month, Heart had all the huts assembled — along with temporary sanitary facilities: clean water, showers, toilets. The underlying strategy was to provide immediate relief while permanent new homes were being built.”

The focus shifted to the construction zone. “Most of the work is being done by the people who will live in these homes,” the reporter observed. “They know exactly what they want and how to do it best. Heart Project workers assist as needed. They’re the

ones in uniform.” The camera lingered for a moment on a group of seven or eight workers, two of whom were wearing military-looking uniforms.

From there the camera slowly swept over all the finished homes then zeroed in on one of them. “The Rivera family has agreed to let us see their new home,” said the reporter, walking up the sidewalk to the building. As the large wooden door swung open, a man appeared and welcomed the visitors.

“I’d like to introduce Victor Rivera,” the reporter said, “the eldest son of the family.”

Victor smiled at the introduction. “Bienvenido. Please, come in,” he said.

Inside was a small open-air courtyard, half of it a garden. An elderly man was working amid the vegetables and flowers. Children were playing in the open area. Two gray haired women sat on a bench in the shade of a balcony that ran along three sides of the building’s second story.

“My whole family lives here,” Victor began. “That’s my father, tending his vegetables. These children are mine, my brother’s and my sister’s. We each have our own apartments upstairs — my wife and I in that corner over there. My sister and her husband in the middle. And my brother and his children over there.” The camera followed his gesturing hand.

“My brother’s wife didn’t live long enough to see this. Neither did our mother. My father and his sister live together in one of the downstairs apartments. My in-laws are in the other. That’s my aunt and my mother-in-law resting there in the shade. They’ve been working in the big kitchen preparing our evening meal.”

Victor led the journalist and crew toward a door on the left. “I don’t need to show you the apartments. They are simple. Not so fancy as you have in the United States. What I really want to show is this.” He opened the door onto a large room with a long rough hewn dining table and chairs. “We can all eat together here — the whole family. Sit down at a table together. And now we all have jobs, so we can afford enough food for everyone.” A close up caught the glow of joy in Victor’s face. “That’s how it is in these new homes. Every family can live and eat together like this.”

The scene suddenly shifted to a bird’s-eye view of a bustling seaport. Bright sunlight sparkled on the water of a harbor filled with ships. Next you were dockside, on

a wide concrete pier. Overhead, the long arms of construction cranes were swinging shipping containers from the deck of an aircraft carrier to a long line of waiting tractor-trailers. In the distance, you could see flatbed railroad cars loaded with odd-shaped materials crawling from the area. The noise of engines, horns, whistles, calls of workers and occasional loud bangings and thumps blended in the background.

A man drove up in a jeep-like vehicle, turned its motor off and jumped out. He was wearing a tee-shirt with “Semper Fi” in bold red letters and combat fatigues tucked neatly into heavy-duty black combat boots. He removed his narrow brimmed camouflage hat.

“Welcome to Alpha Section of the port of Acapulco,” he said over the din. “We’re part of the Heart Project. And proud of it. It’s an operation of massive proportions.” The camera moved past his shoulder to the ship behind him and then rose high overhead, where, looking down again, you could see several more piers with freighters unloading at each.

“No military, no nation has ever attempted anything like this in the history of the world.” The camera returned to the man standing by the vehicle.

“We’ve named the operation here, ‘Friend Next Door,’” he continued. “The destination of almost all of these containers is Mexico City, located 265 miles inland. That’s our first target area and will eventually serve as the regional distribution center. We’ve already built homes for at least a half a million people there and temporary shelters for about a million more.” His gentle voice seemed an unusual fit with his muscular arms, angular jaw, closely shaven, tanned face and short cropped hair.

“Within the next year, we expect to have constructed permanent housing for everyone up there. Two, three and four family homes with plumbing, electricity, air. Most of the people didn’t want single family homes, you see. And we build ‘em the way they want ‘em. In the end, it’s less expensive — but that’s not the point.”

He shifted uneasily from one leg to the other. “For me, personally, this has been — an emotional experience. I mean, I joined the military after high school because me and my parents sure couldn’t pay for any more education. Got good training in the service. I stayed on ‘cause I figured I might end up unemployed if I left. But I always felt kinda’ bad about being, well, a hired gun, it seemed to me. We’d be deployed in places where the people were all skinny-looking and ragged. You’d see ‘em burying little kids. And

couldn't do anything about it. Couldn't even talk to 'em. You just feel so helpless. But what we're doing now, this has been great. Me and my platoon, we even learned to speak Spanish. And we've gotten real close, too. Bonded, you know. So like I said, it's emotional — but in a good kind of way.”

He unfolded his arms and put one foot up on a step of his open-topped vehicle, an arm over the front windshield.

“Anyway, what we do, our main task is providing logistics, materials, assistance. In this region, that's meant housing, food, farm implements, healthcare facilities, machinery, technology, infrastructure, jobs and skill-training. We initially had to bring in a lot of our own engineers and support staff. We'll all be redeployed soon though. The local people are ready to take over.”

He wiped the sweat dripping from his brow with the back of his forearm.

“We meet once a week with local representatives. They keep us updated as to what they need. They say, ‘Computers’ — we get 'em for 'em. They say, ‘Roads or schools or a healthcare center or a television station,’ we get 'em built. That's why we've been able to accomplish so much already. Input from the ground up. Like the local people are directing the whole thing. Even here at the port. Very smooth. Me and my platoon, we're scheduled to be out of here in another month. Know how many people we've trained to operate one of those?”

The camera followed the nod of his head to a bright yellow forklift.

“Hundreds. This is gonna be an important port for a long time to come. I'm gonna miss the friends I made here. I'll be back, though. They made me promise that. Friends are forever.”

The camera lifted higher and higher...

Chapter Fourteen

The camera is moving through narrow cobblestone streets — panning left and right, highlighting the display of gifts being offered by small shops that line the way. Shelves of souvenirs, brightly colored clothing, dancing mobiles of silver and tin. Sunlight falters a moment, then returns, as the camera slips beneath an archway connecting one side of the street with the other.

“Ten years ago, people would have said, ‘Impossible,’ observes a TV anchor voice. “The two sides seemed just too far apart. The conflicts irresolvable. The violence unstoppable. Mutual retaliation was producing endless hatred. International peace efforts always seemed to fail. Historians, tracing the struggle back into the past, offered little hope. Yet, with the Phase Transition spreading throughout the world, the people here rose above it all. Daily, weekly, monthly, each person worked at creating a path to Peace. ‘We chose Love,’ they say in this region, ‘and Love showed us how to move to another level.’”

The narrator pauses as Middle-Eastern music — oud and doumbek — grows louder. A group of young men and young women, wearing jeans and sunglasses, moves subtly to the rhythm as they walk on down the street. Women carrying baskets smile as they pass. At a triangular corner, men with untrimmed beards bow reverently. The music gives way to the laughter of children as the video lingers over a group of youngsters gathered in play.

“We’re talking, of course, about the citizens of Israel and Palestine, who just seven years ago unified Jerusalem and made it the capital for both their sovereign nations. Institutionalizing what’s now referred to as ‘The Miracle.’ For Jerusalem has become a city renowned for tranquility and friendship.”

As the camera continues up the winding street, it begins shifting up and down — hopscotching from deep green curtains here to baby blue curtains wafting there; from someone standing and waving in a doorway to smiling faces at an open-air café.

“How Jerusalem?” the narrator asks. “That’s been the question in everyone’s mind. Perhaps the answer has to do with the spirit of the city itself. From time immemorial, Jerusalem has served as the capital of the Holy Land. Shrines, mosques, temples,

synagogues and churches fill every quarter. It's here you'll find the rock where Abraham prepared to sacrifice his son, Isaac. It's here that Christian pilgrims honor the places of Christ's crucifixion, burial and resurrection. Here you'll find the Wailing Wall, one of the holiest of Jewish sites. It's here that the Prophet Mohammed ascended into heaven. Theologies of forgiveness, understanding and compassion. Yet religions divided this city for centuries. Now the religious character of Jerusalem unites it."

Suddenly, a blend of rock n' roll and Middle-Eastern music with a touch of reggae beat replaces narration. The screen fills first with a shrine of incredible artwork and architecture crowned with a golden dome. Then comes a great stone wall where people are bowing and praying. And finally a scene of people coming out of a medieval cathedral.

"Behind me you hear the refrain to what's become a theme song for the ceremonies this week," the narrator resumes. "'World be free as in the Land of Zion,' the people are singing. We're here today neither to mourn past sufferings nor celebrate accomplishments, but rather to participate in humankind's continuing creation of a Phase Transition."

The music gets louder. People are dancing in the streets. Playing cymbals. Ringing bells.

"Here in the New Jerusalem, a once unthinkable geo-political identity is about to emerge."

Dancers in long lines holding one another's hands are cascading up and down the streets.

"Today, the Nations of Israel and Palestine, secure in their identities, their cultures, their connection with the land and most importantly, their love of one another —"

The narrator's voice slips under a great wave of sound — music, tremolo, cheering.

Chapter Fifteen

“Bob!”

“Oh —” I opened my eyes.

“Time to get up.” Jody gave me a good morning kiss. “Didn’t you hear the alarm?”

“No. Must have been in a deep sleep.” I pushed back the covers.

Jody was already out of bed. Reaching in the closet for her robe.

“I had this dream,” I said, trying to hold on to the recollection.

“What about?” she asked, putting on her slippers.

“It must have gone on all night. There was a Bridgekeeper. Then some guy in the middle of a woods wrapped in a cocoon.” I was standing now at the chest of drawers, gathering my clothes. “Then there was a Phase Transition. That must have something to do with all the Complexity Theory I’ve been reading.”

“And we’ve been talking about.”

“Yeah. And there was a Convention. I’m sure of that. I dreamt that the people called for a Constitutional Convention.”

“Cool! How did it end?” Jody started out of the room.

“It didn’t end.”