

Secret Friends

*The Ramblings of a Madman
in Search of a Soul*



H. M. Forester

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By H. M. Forester

Genre: Psi-Fi.

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Dedication

Dedicated to the Secret Friends and all who seek them out.

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“All the books – both my own mystical adventure and H. M. Forester’s soft sci-fi – have this one surprising thing in common: the largely unsuspected presence of the Hidden World and of the “Secret Friends” who are here to help us in our hour of need.”

~ Etienne de L’Amour



PART 1: The Exoteric

There is an old saying:
“Man is asleep. Must he die before he wakes up?”

~ Idries Shah,
One Pair of Eyes: “Dreamwalkers”.

1. The Outsider

°Whatever are we going to do with you, Robert Llewelyn George?° Louie asked himself, echoing his father's oft-spoken words, long since internalised, and with a mental shake of his own head. Though why this particular phrase had popped into Louie's mind, and not some other, was beyond his ken, unless it was perhaps a sad and critical commentary on some vestige of a storm-tossed dream that still lingered from his sleep, now quickly evaporating and receding into forgetfulness.

A dreadful thought struck him, and he frantically searched his memory to assure himself that he hadn't recently got himself into any trouble that he might have momentarily forgotten about; that might still hang over him like a dark and guilt-riddled cloud, today. Recalling no such recent event – much to his relief – he slowly let his breath out and gave thanks to providence.

Louie threw back the dishevelled bedclothes, pushed himself up in the bed, gave a long, wide yawn, and did his best to rub the sleep from his unfocussed eyes. Then he slid his legs over the side of the bed and pushed himself up to a hunchbacked standing position, like some Neanderthal – even reptilian – throwback.

°Give sunlight. Must have sunlight,° he grumbled to himself, opening his curtains wide. °And coffee. Much coffee.°

Ha, chance would be a fine thing: Breakfast came with Rington's Tea (which was delivered door-to-door by a van driver), and coffee was a luxury afforded to them only when entertaining guests, or at Christmas time, and even then in moderation. And the water must be carefully measured from cup to kettle, in order to save gas. Not a drop more water, and not a drop less. His parents still hadn't fully shaken off the regimentation, nor the thrift of wartime rationing, even after all these years. But then they'd grown up during the Great Depression, too, so he could understand the trials that had made them this way.

°Yet thank the Lord that they'd survived these horrors in one

piece and without being utterly twisted out of shape,° he thought to himself. °There, but for the Grace of God, go I.°

And then it occurred to Louie, checking the bedside clock – and much to his delight – that since he had arisen of his own accord rather than being cajoled through the bedroom door by his beloved mother, or yelled at from the bottom of the stairs by his benighted father, that it must still be the weekend and not another blessed school day.

Louie let out a quiet hiss of delight and punched the air. “Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes!”

After a hasty catlick at the bathroom sink upstairs, and the formality of breakfast at the drop-leaf dining table in the poky living room, Louie took the plates, cups, saucers and cutlery through to the scullery (the old-fangled name his parents gave to the kitchen), where he quickly washed and dried the dishes. Returning the items to their allotted places in the cupboards and drawers, with this chore complete, he dashed back into the living room to ask if he might be excused.

Mother turned to Father and politely coughed to attract his attention, since he already had his face buried in the sports page of the daily snoozepaper, pondering whether to lay a bet on the horse races. Father was developing his own Infallible System and felt sure that he would beat the odds one day and, by selling stakes in his patented gambling system, become a rich man.

°Well, we all have our dreams, and who is to say that our own are any better,° came an inner prompting.

Father looked up momentarily and nodded gravely, and Mother turned back to Louie and gave their consent.

“If you’re going out, though, be sure to take the spare key, in case Father and I have to go to town, and be back in time for lunch at one o’clock.”

“Thanks,” he lilted, already heading for the front door and almost forgetting to pick up the spare key on the way out, since his mind was already racing far ahead and not fully paying attention to what Father called “the Here and Now”. It was probably a phrase that he’d picked up while reading through his monthly subscription to *Reader’s Digest*, and he was determined

to put this, and other acquired vocabulary, to good use.

°Speaking of nags, Louie, I'd climb down off your high horse, if I were you, before someone pushes you off, or you take a tumble. Don't disrespect your elders and betters,° he chided himself. He looked the word up later and discovered that a nag was an old or over-worked horse, though he couldn't recall where he'd somehow picked-up the word. It had possibly been mentioned in casual conversation by his father.

°Haven't you forgotten something?°

He sucked his finger and thought for a moment.

Ah, the keys! Don't forget the keys, or you'll end up stuck in the porch waiting for Mother and Father's return.

°Shit for brains!° a third, antagonistic voice chimed in. Well, it wasn't so much a chime as a resounding and smelly fart, and he cast the thought from his mind.

Perhaps one day they'd let him have a key of his own, and he hoped that he didn't have to wait until he was twenty-one, which was traditionally considered a person's coming of age, when they were gifted a symbolic key. But for now, the privilege of his own key to the door was being withheld from him. Children must be regularly reminded of their rightful place, as Father might say – just as the working class, of which the family were a thoroughly dedicated and hardworking part, must in turn know their own lesser place. Their watchwords, thanks to the horrendous nightmare of the Great War, the Depression, and the Second World War, were “grin and bear it” or “soldier on”, and constantly “mend and make-do”. So there was a strictly-enforced pecking order throughout society in those days, as he himself was only-too-well – and at times painfully – aware.

Louie could still vividly remember one day at infant school. For some time, he'd been the subject of mockery and bullying from one of the local gangs of boys (not least for his old-fashioned haircut and quiff, and his self-conscious fidgeting), and that day something inside him had snapped. He could almost feel it go “boing!” inside him. Without considering the consequences, he'd dashed round the playground looking for these kids, pulling off their purple and yellow school caps, and throwing them in the

muddy puddles that dotted the playground. Serve the little sods right! However, it was not long afterwards that the headmistress had knocked on his classroom door and demanded that he follow her and, after showing him the evidence of his misdeed, she had given him a couple of good slaps on his leg. Since his parents didn't have a telephone in those days, she had also written them a strongly-worded letter. And when that arrived, his mother had given him a piece of her mind and sent him to see his father in the morning room; his father had given his backside a good slapping; and, what's more, his father made him go and apologize to the parents of two of the offended boys who lived further up the street, and they gave him a good ticking-off, too. Well, looking back, it was probably the right thing to do, but it really embarrassed and further wounded Louie at the time.

So, yes, he was pretty far down the food chain in those days: a lowly bottom feeder amidst the urban pond life, and for as long as he could remember (which seemed such a long time in those early years, with their never-ending summer holidays), he had often felt at odds with the world, and something of an outsider, though he did his best to smile sweetly, be polite and helpful to adults, and fit in. Not an outsider like a lipstick lesbian trapped in a man's body, or anything like that, an older and more worldly Louis would ponder: more of "a stranger in a strange land", if you follow me, though from Venus rather than Mars. The world was already too infested with Martian types. It was only later that he came across the sci-fi short story "Eight O'Clock in the Morning" by Ray Nelson, which would later be turned into the film *They Live*, but he was already wondering along those lines. That was in his rebellious, hormone-driven adolescence, however, before the in-your-face rationality of the grown-ups finally kicked in.

In later years, he would come to see himself as a round block faced with an undersized square hole, but he had little inkling of quite what this meant or why this should be so at such a tender age. It wasn't that he lived a sheltered life, simply that this sleepy little seaside town had not fully made it into the second half of the twentieth century, and it was still largely run by creatures of habit who had been brought up by parents and grandparents with their

feet firmly planted in the earlier, even stuffier Victorian age, amongst whom anything cosmopolitan was looked upon as altogether too modern, even cheap and shoddy, vulgar and distasteful. They wanted meat, potatoes, two veg, and gravy on the table at 5.30pm sharp, thank you very much, not “cheap foreign muck”.

As for Louie, he learnt to speak only when spoken to, to get tongue-tied and clam up when required to speak, especially in public, a knock-on effect of being sternly warned “Don’t you ever show me up in public like that again, or I’ll come down on you like a ton of bricks!”, which morphed, as things tend to do, into “Don’t show up in public”. So, he also learned to gradually become more and more introverted, and to painstakingly learn how to deal with the world at a home-schooled psychological level, in order to better protect himself against attack. By that time, however, he had already internalised so much critical parenting that if anyone was giving him a hard time, it was now mostly of his own doing. And, while he did his best to be easy-going with other people, privy to his own thoughts he showed himself little mercy, beating himself up for embarrassments and even minor misdemeanours for years after everyone else had forgiven him, forgotten all about the issue, and moved on. Anything with a negative emotional payload haunted him day after day and on through the decades, and “Sorry” became his adopted middle name, or even “What an Idiot” to give him his full, Sunday name: the name his father would holler to such dramatic effect whenever Ollie was in deep trouble, or “deep shit” as he referred to such matters.

Thank God he had his Secret Friend to keep him sane and on the straight and narrow. At home he largely had to make his own company.

2. A Change of Plan

At that moment, having hesitated at the front door with his hand on the doorknob for several minutes now, Louie finally became aware that he'd slipped into a reverie, and he mentally slapped himself and abruptly snapped out it.

°It doesn't do to dwell on these things,° he chided himself. °You'll make yourself poorly.°

°Yes, yes, I know. But don't you go giving me a hard time about it, because that won't help, either.°

°I'm just saying. You know I have your best interests at heart, Louie.° He abruptly changed the subject. °Anyhow, where are you off to today? And I don't mean Cloud Cuckoo Land.°

°I thought I'd go round to Donald's house and see if he'll come out to play.°

°Sounds like a good idea. Do you good to get out more, instead of being cooped up inside.°

He made a clucking sound. Then realised to his horror that he'd done it out loud.

°Let's be off, then, before you take root. And then what will your dear mother say, when half the street's fussing round trying to work out how to get you out of this mess? Arguing about whether it's best to give your legs a good oiling and pull, dig you out of the porch, chop you off at the knees, or just leave you here as an object lesson to others?°

“What a palaver!” Louie laughed out loud.

Opening the door, going out, and quietly closing the door behind him, he dashed off down the street as fast as his little legs would carry him.

Louie hurried up the garden path and gave two sharp rings on the doorbell. Not long after, Missus Temple appeared at the half-open door, wiping flour from her hands on her floral apron.

“Oh, hello there, Llewelyn,” the petite lady greeted him, running her hand through her curly blond hair unconsciously. “I'm sorry, but Donnie's out. He went round to play with Peter,

but whether they'll be at the house or they'll have gone out to play, I really couldn't tell you."

Louie felt his enthusiasm wilting on the spot, but he put on a broad smile, thanked the lady warmly, and turned to trudge back down the garden path.

"I'll let Donnie know that you came round," Missus Temple called after him as he closed the garden gate behind him, and he waved and politely thanked her again.

°So, what now?° he wondered to himself.

°Well,° he sighed, °if Donnie's off with his best mate Peter, there's no point in going to find him. °They most likely wouldn't like me intruding, and I don't want the embarrassment of being turned away.°

°Plan B, then, Louie?°

°There *is* no plan B.°

°Oh, I wouldn't be too sure of that, Louie. How's about we have a wander through town? You've still got plenty of pocket money, and who knows what treasure you might find?°

°I don't know. Maybe I should just go back home.°

°Oh, Louie, whatever for? There's really no point in moping around at home on a bright, sunny day like this, over some half-imagined snub.°

°"Pull your socks up, lad!" as my father would say.°

°Precisely, Louie. And sometimes the old man's not half-wrong, you know.°

Louie nodded to himself. °Yes, yes. I know. But don't rub it in. Yet where should we go?°

°My advice to you, Louie, would be to put one foot in front of other and to simply follow your feet, wherever they take you.°

Louie laughed out loud. °Ah, you mean like a long walk on a short pier!°

°Now you're being silly. Just head off back up your road, or up Churchill Road if you want to avoid the neighbours' twitching curtains, then along Victoria Street and into town. Is that a deal?°

He nodded. °Sounds good to me.°

There was a pause. °I meant what I said, you know, Louie. Or maybe you *don't* know. You're still young and you have so much

to unlearn. “Who knows what treasure you might find?”°

Louie frowned. °Unlearn?°

°That’s what I said. Make of it what you will. You’ll understand one day.°

Louie thought for a moment. °And anyway, what do you mean “You’re still young”? That makes no sense.°

°I stand by what I said: You’re still young, you have much to unlearn, and you’ll understand someday. And then your jaw will drop and you’ll be like “What the hell?” or even “What an idiot I was!”°

°Now you sound like my father. Just shut the hell up and let me get into town. I’m not going to find any treasure with your constant nagging in my ear.°

°Quite right, Louie, and my apologies. But don’t worry, if I spot anything worth snaffling, I’ll let you know.°

Louie wandered from one end of the high street to the other, briefly popping into a sweet shop to buy a quarter of Pontefract cakes (which were not cakes at all, but made of liquorish formed into coin-like shapes). He also spent quite some time looking through the stacks of vinyl in a record shop, but he didn’t know one musical band from another, and in any case, his parents didn’t as yet own a gramophone to play them on, let alone a new-fangled “goggle box” (a television), so there was no point in buying anything. It would make more sense to ask his parents for a cheap transistor radio, maybe as a combined birthday and Christmas present, and first get to know what bands and what songs he liked. Father was still stuck in the jazz of the Roaring Twenties, though in later years he became more partial to country and western music.

He was just about to turn on his heel, go back down town and then head off home, when he came to Penny Black Lane, a narrow cobbled road off the high street, and it was at this point that, in spite of having no rational reason to do so, he felt a peculiar urge to explore. But no, what was the point? He dismissed the urge and began to stride off down the high street.

°Hey, whoa there, cowboy,° his inner voice insisted. °What have you go to lose by following your feet? If there’s nothing

down Penny Black Lane to interest you, then you can strike it off your list, and learn something from that. And if there *is* something down there to interest you, then you've gained some valuable experience. Maybe even a new interest in life. It'll only take a few minutes, so why not give it a whirl, eh? Come on, be a sport and humour me. Or as your dear mother would chirp up mischievously: "Go on, be a devil!"°

°Okay, you've twisted my arm,° Louie laughed, spinning round, nearly bumping into a passer-by who was not privy to his sudden change of mind, apologising profusely, and beginning to retrace his steps.

"Watch where you're going. Clumsy fucking idiot!" the man cried out. Or at least that's what Louie thought he said. The glare on the man's face certainly amounted to the same thing, and the rest could be well-imagined.

As Louie walked slowly down Penny Black Lane, he was not impressed. He passed a family butcher's, a greengrocer's, an optician's, and a lady's dress and lingury shop (which was admittedly worth a few moments' gander), but other than that, the lane was populated with simple terraced, residential houses and, as far as he could tell, they weren't selling anything, nor of any interest to him, whatsoever.

°But then, who knows what goes on behind closed doors,° he reminded himself. °That "lingury" – or should I say *lingerie* – isn't just there for display, you know, Louie.°

°Oh, I'm sorry,° he snapped back. °Lingerie°, he repeated, mocking the faux-French accent. All the same, he took a few steps back and stood there for a moment or two, admiring the curves on the lady mannequins and imagining them coming to life and smothering him with their affections. Chance would be a fine thing, of course: he had not as yet even gone so far as to ask a girl to dance with him, let alone asked them out on a date, or even exchanged a passionate kiss. He was rudely reminded of the time in school when he was reading out an essay to the English class and happened to mention "the Grand Pricks" that his father had been watching on television. He'd known when he said it that it was the *grand prix*, and yet he couldn't help the words emerging

from his mouth. It was as if his tongue had a will of its own. What an embarrassing moment that was, when Miss Addinall had corrected him and the rest of the class has joined in the ridicule.

And again, there was the time when he'd called at David Henderson's house, to walk with him to the bus stop on the way to school. His father had told him, sorry, no, as David had a broken head. So when he got to school, and David's name was called out, he'd explained that David had a broken head, so he couldn't attend, and again he was subjected to ridicule, because he should have said "a fractured skull", as he knew full well. "That's what I was told," he'd insisted, but it made no difference to them. Just as you couldn't take back an arrow once you'd released it, nor could you take back words once spoken, nor a kiss once delivered, even if by proxy or messenger.

Each time – indeed, on so many other occasions – he had ignored his inner promptings and made a fool of himself.

°Well, I did try to warn you,° he told himself.

°Oh, shut up!° he spat back. °There's no need to keep reminding me. Don't you ever let me forget anything?°

It was weird. Someone could tell him their name and he'd almost instantly forget, if he registered it at all, and yet these incidents seemed to be written in his mind in indelible ink. And some memories were burnt into him, as if with a branding iron. It was as if a special place had been set aside in Hell, just for him.

°You're drifting off again,° came the gentle rebuke. °Focus on the here and now.°

Louie turned away from the window display and sauntered off down the street, trying to act casually as if he had a perfectly valid reason for being here. Not that the neighbours would peer out from behind their lace curtains and question what some idiot was doing in their neighbourhood. In reality, they probably wouldn't give his presence a second thought, being thoroughly wrapped-up in their own little worlds.

°Focus!° came the reminder, and at that precise moment he stubbed his big toe on a protruding paving slab and nearly went head first into the pavement.

"Okay, okay!" he cried out, regaining his balance if not his

composure. “I heard you the first time, and I get the message.”

As Louie straightened himself up, he furtively scanned up and down the lane, to make sure his near-tumble had gone unnoticed. Fortunately, the lane was deserted. And then he saw it.

Across the road was an open door, with a flight of stairs leading directly up to a first floor, and at the side of each and every step was a pile of what looked like second-hand books. A faded yellow sign just above the door read “A. Hewitt: Secret Book Emporium”.

Now that was more like it.

Louie required no further encouragement, striding across the cobbled road, passing through the open door, and already climbing the steep wooden stairs.

“Told you so!” came the voice, but he was too taken by the prospect of exciting new reading matter to fire back a witty, sarcastic, or silencing retort. Yes, sometimes events could stun him into inner silence, be they exciting or desperately frightening; and this was particularly exciting.

Just to the right of the stairs, at the top, Louie spotted a large, battered old oak desk, and an old lady sitting behind it. He smiled at her and, looking up from her knitting, she smiled back, and quietly greeted him: “Good morning, young man. Please feel free to browse. There’s no obligation to buy anything.” And with no further ado, the dumpy old lady quietly went back to her work. It looked like she was knitting a tiny yellow hat, perhaps a baby’s hat for her daughter, perhaps even for her granddaughter, judging by the deep furrows across her brow, the creases in her face, and the way the skin on her face had lost its former elasticity and begun to sink down and gather around her chin. The lady couldn’t be a day younger than seventy. Heck, she could be eighty or ninety for all he knew, and yet clearly she still had manual dexterity and her wits about her.

Louie spent several minutes wandering aimlessly around the shop, trying to make sense of the many shelves, since there was no obvious means of classifying the thousands of books, other than separating them into fiction and non-fiction or pocket size and coffee table whoppers, to best fit the varying height of the

shelves.

Well, he decided that he could discount the non-fiction, as he had zero interest in topics like *How to Ace it as a Hostess*, and *Keeping Your Man Happy*. Mind you, the fully-illustrated deluxe edition of the *Kama Sutra* was definitely worthy of more than a casual and surreptitious glance, though not something he could even dare himself to buy, let alone take home with him, even if the old lady allowed him to. As for *The Art of Taxidermy*, that could rather appropriately get stuffed. So he homed-in on the shelves of paperback fiction and worked his way along the rows, occasionally pulling a book out to examine its cover, in the hope that the title on the spine of some book would magically pop out, command his attention, and appeal to him. He didn't quite know what he was looking for, but he knew that he would know the right book when he saw it. He'd experienced this kind of thing before, and it was as if some unseen eye was guiding him.

Alas, however, such luck seemed to have deserted him that day, and Louie turned toward the stairs on his way out, feeling rather forlorn and deflated at having to leave empty-handed.

"Nothing catch your eye, young man?" enquired the old lady as he approached the desk, and she put her knitting down and took off her reading glasses.

"No, not today, I'm afraid," he replied weakly. "But I'll be back, thank you." Maybe he could find something for Mother and Father's birthdays or for Christmas? There must be whole stacks of books here that would appeal to them.

The lady sat there and studied him for a few moments, then she bent down and reached beneath her desk, to retrieve a small package in a plain brown paper bag.

°Special reserve,° he heard a voice say, though whether the words had sprung into his own head or she'd uttered them under her breath, he couldn't say.

°Special reserve?° he echoed.

The old lady raised her eyebrows, almost imperceptibly, and he spotted a twinkle in her eye. She slid the package across the desk and motioned toward Louie to pick it up. "A little something I have set aside for my more discerning clients," she explained. "I

hate to see you going away empty-handed, as you might say. Take this with you. And may it warm the cockles of your heart.”

°Clients, not customers?° That was a strange choice of word. It sounded a rather professional arrangement, though if you could call prostitution a profession, then surely the same could be said of the noble art of bookselling?

Louie automatically reached inside the pocket of his anorak and brought out his little purse, but the old lady shook her head firmly. “No, no. Take it as a gift. And maybe, if you like it, you might come back at a later date, and see what else Granny Hewitt has to offer.”

That was very trusting of her, and Louie carefully took the package without opening it, thanked the lady profusely, and clambered down the creaky wooden stairs and out of the shop. He’d open the package once he got home, in the privacy of his bedroom. Not that it was likely to be anything racy, like a copy of *Health and Efficiency*, a magazine for naturists and nudists that his friend Trevor Tong had once shown him.

Glancing at his little wristwatch, he realized that he would arrive home for lunch not a minute too soon. Perish the thought that he would arrive more than a minute too late, he thought, and he set off walking at a brisk pace.

°See, I told you. “Who knows what treasure you might find?” Those were my very words, Louie. Now don’t deny it.°

Louie pursed his lips. °That remains to be seen,° he replied. °For all I know, it might be some boring, dusty old door stop like *Motorcycle Mechanics for Beginners*. Or something Mother would swoon over, like *A Heavenly Romance*.°

°Oh ye of little faith!° came back the retort. °Credit Granny Hewitt with more than a modicum of good sense and experience. She’s probably read more good books and met more avid readers than you’ve had hot dinners, my lad!°

°We’ll see,° he replied reluctantly.

°And anyway: don’t be so ungrateful, Louie. As they say, it’s the thought that counts. Besides which, you haven’t even seen the book yet, let alone read it, and you’re already making unwarranted suppositions. You know, sometimes even I despair,

and who can blame me?°

°Sorry.°

°Oh, for heaven's sake, don't go all mopy and sorry for yourself again. That's all we need. Just learn your lesson. And don't keep saying sorry!°

°Sorry,° he replied, with a mischievous little chortle to himself.

3. Read and Inwardly Digest

Home at last, Louie crept upstairs and secreted the package under his pillow and then went down for lunch. It was a humble affair of smoked haddock, buttered bread, and boring conversation between his mother and father, mostly dominated by him, though they had the wireless set (radio) on in the background, playing some jazz music, and that helped to loosen the otherwise stiff and starchy atmosphere. The only time they let their hair down was after a night out at the local working men's social club, Christmas, and New Year's Eve. Even when they were on holiday, his parents were always so prim and proper, not that he would have wanted them to behave like the yobs who frequented the pubs and amusement arcades near the beach, frittering away their meagre earnings and making total asses of themselves.

°Now, now,° came the inner prompting, right on cue: °Let's not get all snarky and Holier than Thou, when you've got so much to learn.°

°Sorry.°

“Did you have something to say, Llewelyn?” his mother piped up at this point, perhaps having caught him lost in thought.

He shook his head. “Sorry, I was miles away.”

“Penny for them,” she smiled. An offering for his thoughts, that was.

He said nothing and took a last swig of tea.

“You're always so secretive,” his father chipped-in at this point.

“No, really. I wasn't thinking of anything useful,” he replied. “I was just daydreaming.”

The real reason that Louie kept his thoughts to himself – even those polite and decent enough to be aired in public – was because his father would so frequently pick holes in his arguments or shoot his dreams down in ribbons. So many times, too, his father would complain that Louie seldom finished projects that he'd started, and again this was so that his father

would be denied the opportunity to criticise his achievements. Of course, Father had his best interests at heart, but he so often had a funny way of showing it. Funny peculiar, that is, not funny ha ha.

°Now, now, you mustn't let yourself be dragged down to that murky level, Louie. That'll undo all our good work, and where will that leave us? Back where we started. Up the blessed creek without a paddle, that's where,° came the insistent inner prompting. Louie smiled, begged to be excused from the table and, after doing the washing up, he went up to his room to finally open the mysterious package, the contents of which were by now gasping to be revealed.

Diving onto his bed, Louie slipped his hand under his pillow and pulled out the package. Well, it was pocket sized, so it certainly wasn't an illustrated edition of the *Kama Sutra* for him to ogle in private, not that there had ever been any possibility of that. It was in fact a slim paperback.

Published by Pan Books for the princely sum of 2 shillings, it was in fact *Lost Horizon*, and the sub-title read: "The strange secret of Shangri-La", a novel written by James Hilton. Louie briefly flicked through the fly pages. First published in 1933, so not long before the Second World War, the significance of which would presently reveal itself.

On its cover in the foreground was a handsome, slightly Oriental-looking, dark-haired young lady in a pink-red delicately-patterned dress, lightly holding the leafy stem of a white or yellow rose – perhaps a token of affection – while to one side and further back, in a pagoda toward which the lady's gaze was cast, a gentleman in a Western suit was engaged in animated conversation with a shaven-headed man, perhaps some sort of monk or mystic, in long flowing greenish-bluish-grey robes. It seemed likely that the lady was attracted to the gentleman, and that the monk was offering sage advice or explaining some marvel to him. And behind them lay tall, snow-covered mountains, and more buildings, perhaps those of a monastery, built into the steep mountainside. So this, then, must be the legendary Shangri-La, a strange name that he seemed to dimly recall, but he couldn't place the origin of this vague memory.

Quite how the man in the suit had ended up there presumably in the distant and exotic wilds of Asia and was able to survive in a mountain community, Louie didn't as yet know, but he was already determined to find out.

Louie made himself comfortable on the bed and began to read solidly, pausing only to go to the toilet, to eat his evening meal, and wash up afterwards.

Looking at his bedside clock as he finished the final, tantalising page and gently closed the book, he saw that it was already well past midnight, and he was grateful that the next day would be a Sunday, otherwise his mother would have had a devil of a job getting him up and ready for school.

He flipped back through the slim book to find two entries which he'd marked by turning down the corners of the pages.

The first was an explanation by Chang, the High Lama's faithful assistant, where he'd been asked by the protagonist and diplomat, Hugh Conway to explain "the motive of this unique establishment", the monastery at Shangri-La in the valley of the Blue Moon:

Chang answered rather slowly and in scarcely more than a whisper: "If I were to put it into a very few words, my dear sir, I should say that our prevalent belief is in moderation. We inculcate the virtue of avoiding excess of all kinds—even including, if you will pardon the paradox, excess of virtue itself. In the valley which you have seen, and in which there are several thousand inhabitants living under the control of our order, we have found that the principle makes for a considerable degree of happiness. We rule with moderate strictness, and in return we are satisfied with moderate obedience. And I think I can claim that our people are moderately sober, moderately chaste, and moderately honest."

And, turning to the second entry, he again read part of a conversation from Conway's audience with the High Lama, where Conway asks about the purpose of the monastery's

founder, Father Perrault:

“There IS a reason, and a very definite one indeed. It is the whole reason for this colony of chance-sought strangers living beyond their years. We do not follow an idle experiment, a mere whimsy. We have a dream and a vision. It is a vision that first appeared to old Perrault when he lay dying in this room in the year 1789. He looked back then on his long life, as I have already told you, and it seemed to him that all the loveliest things were transient and perishable, and that war, lust, and brutality might someday crush them until there were no more left in the world. He remembered sights he had seen with his own eyes, and with his mind he pictured others; he saw the nations strengthening, not in wisdom, but in vulgar passions and the will to destroy; he saw their machine power multiplying until a single-weaponed man might have matched a whole army of the Grand Monarque. And he perceived that when they had filled the land and sea with ruin, they would take to the air... Can you say that his vision was untrue?”

“True indeed.”

“But that was not all. He foresaw a time when men, exultant in the technique of homicide, would rage so hotly over the world that every precious thing would be in danger, every book and picture and harmony, every treasure garnered through two millenniums, the small, the delicate, the defenseless—all would be lost like the lost books of Livy, or wrecked as the English wrecked the Summer Palace in Pekin.”

“I share your opinion of that.”

“Of course. But what are the opinions of reasonable men against iron and steel? Believe me, that vision of old Perrault will come true. And that, my son, is why I am here, and why YOU are here, and why we may pray to outlive the doom that gathers around on every side.”

“To outlive it?”

“There is a chance. It will all come to pass before you are as old as I am.”

“And you think that Shangri-La will escape?”

“Perhaps. We may expect no mercy, but we may faintly hope for neglect. Here we shall stay with our books and our music and our meditations, conserving the frail elegancies of a dying age, and seeking such wisdom as men will need when their passions are all spent. We have a heritage to cherish and bequeath. Let us take what pleasure we may until that time comes.”

“And then?”

“Then, my son, when the strong have devoured each other, the Christian ethic may at last be fulfilled, and the meek shall inherit the earth.”

How Louie would have loved to have travelled with Hugh Conway to Shangri-La, or somehow found his own way there, and played his part in helping to preserve this splendid cultural heritage in this veritable ark. He could see now what had brought James Hillman to write his novel, and lay out his own dream, in the few years after the terrible Great War – described at one time as “the war to end all wars”, the Russian Revolution, and preceding the horrors of the Second World War; perhaps aware that, given our human frailties, even that would surely not be the last.

As mad as it might sound, was it possible that there actually were visionaries like Hugh Conway and the High Lama living in this world and playing their part in similar humanitarian and spiritual enterprises? Or was talk of such “Secret Friends” just so much superstition and make-believe?

°May you find your Shangri-La,° that familiar voice echoed in his mind.

Louie added: °May we all find our Shangri-La,° and as he silently spoke those words, a wonderful and agreeable shimmer ran up and down his spine, and the hairs on his arms and in his scalp bristled and stood on end.

He didn’t know it as yet, but that was Louie’s first true, semi-

conscious contact, and a major milestone in his life. But not in the way he first imagined that things would turn out.

Louie had a vivid dream that night, which was not totally unexpected given the novelty and exotic nature of the adventure he'd embarked upon, reading *Lost Horizon*. Indeed, in his dream, Louie found himself wandering through town, asking all manner of passers-by, total strangers as well as fellow students and teachers whom he recognised from school, even Miss Frobisher at the local sub-post office, if any of them knew of the valley of the Blue Moon. Almost all of them frowned or shook their heads in the face of his excited questions, ignored him, or pretended that they hadn't seen him and hurried on their way. And, of course, some of them subjected him to open ridicule, as is the way of rational, supposed "human beings". Sophisticated apes, more like.

One lady, however, who he vaguely recognised but could not place, did raise her eyebrows and she pointed him to a second person who lived nearby, in a seedy apartment over a fish and chip shop. But to cut a long story short, he found himself being sent from one person to the next, none of whom could help him, except perhaps the next person might. Faced with this challenge, and growing more and more frustrated, Louie was on the very edge of waking when, all of a sudden, and quite out of the blue, a face loomed before him – shockingly! – no more than two feet away and right in his face.

"My son," the man smiled, addressing him directly. Then just as soon the man was gone, and Louie awoke with a start and almost leapt out of his bed. Such was the blood-pumping shock, he might easily have jumped out of his skin. It was as if he was on the end of a stretched length of elastic in his dream, and the elastic had been snatched back with force, taking him with it, back into his own body. Nor was it the first time that he'd felt this violent shock on suddenly waking from a dream or nightmare. And he remembered now the long series of repeating dreams he'd had as a child. Finding a secret entrance, and crawling through a narrow tunnel, to another world where all he had to do was imagine something and it would magically appear before his very eyes. Well, something would appear, and not always the way he

had first imagined it; sometimes his thoughts were twisted and things went horribly wrong. Most of the time, however, it had been like a treasure hunt. He might find objects in his dreams, such as a clock on a mantelpiece, which contained another clue or even a passage that led him still further on his quest.

“When the student is ready, the Master appears,” echoed a quiet voice inside him, but then, like the face – that of an old man with a peculiar bulbous head, he now recalled – the voice was gone. Unlike the man’s face that had flashed before his eyes and just as abruptly been snuffed out, however, the voice gently receded into the back of his mind. Perhaps this was due to the memory of visualising the High Lama in *Lost Horizon*? There had to be some rational explanation for this event. “Think logic, little man,” as his father would say. Anyhow, by now realising that it had just been a dream, after all, Louie sank back down onto his pillow and almost instantly went back to sleep.

The following weekend, Louie fair skipped across town, weaving down side streets toward Penny Black Lane, his pocket money nearly bursting the seams of his little purse to be out and spent, and he in possession of a new and even better book.

But when he came to the faded yellow door of A. Hewitt’s Secret Book Emporium, his heart lurched. For not only was the front door closed, it was definitely locked, and nobody came to the door when he impatiently rang the doorbell. He could hear the mechanical device ping quite clearly, but there was no answer. And when he stepped back to see if there were any lights on in the upstairs windows, he noticed that the battered old sign above the door was also gone. You could still see the two wooden battens that had until recently secured it to the brickwork.

Louie turned round and sat disconsolately on the doorstep and let out a long, deep sigh.

His fervent dreams of finding Shangri-La had been dealt a mortal blow, and would apparently have to wait.

After some time, lost in brooding thoughts, Louie got up and went back to the door to give the bell one last ring, though he knew it was a forlorn hope; and he bent down, lifted the flap of the letterbox and looked through. Where the books had been piled

all the way up the bare wooden stairs, there were just gaps where the dust ended, though he did notice two or three letters in the tiny hallway in front of the door. Dear old Granny Hewitt had clearly moved on in a hurry, and her link in the chain had now been lost.

Louie was half way back down the lane when a thought occurred to him. He stopped dead in his tracks.

°Are you thinking what I'm thinking?° he asked himself.

°Indeed I am, young man. Who do you think put that thought in your thick noggin in the first place, the fairies or the Easter Bunny?°

He started off down the lane again, heading for the sub-post office where they sold stationery and pens, and he bought himself a good thick notepad and one of the new-fangled ballpoint pens. It would have been useful to have bought an envelope, too, but they came in packs of twelve and a whole pack would have only been a waste of money.

Then he headed for the Greasy Spoon, as the locals called it: a little café just off the high street where he could buy himself a glass of frothy coffee and work out what to write. He just hoped and prayed that Granny Hewitt or one of her family went back to the deserted bookshop to check if there was any mail. It was a long shot, but it was the only slim hope that he still had.

°Okay, then. Let's begin. "Dear Mrs Hewitt, I hope this letter finds you well. You don't know me, but you may remember giving me a copy of *Lost Horizon* by James Hillman, last Saturday ..." So far, so good.°

Taking a deep breath as he stood at the door, Louie kissed his folded note for good luck and intoned a little makeshift prayer. Lifting the polished brass flap of the letterbox, he cast the two-page note inside, and headed off back home in time for lunch.

How strange – and poetic – it was, Louie reflected as he turned into the top of William Street, nearly home, that the secret bookshop should be lost to him, too, just like Shangri-La, and after such a brief and enticing glimpse.

4. Lines of Inquiry

A day passed. Well, of course it would: he wasn't naïve enough to think that Granny Hewitt would come beating a path to his door. But then a week passed. Now it had been a whole month, and Louie had given up hope of hearing from the lady and had decided that the only sane thing to do was to stop gnawing at his fingernails and forget the whole matter. Put it down to experience, perhaps, as his inner conscience would remind him, every so often.

However, the next day he happened to be in the vicinity of Penny Black Lane and he took a quick detour. Standing at the door, he lifted the flap of the letterbox and peered in.

°Aha!° he reacted, seeing that though the two or three letters that had previously lain on the floor in the hallway had gone, another larger envelope had since been left. °So, someone has collected the mail,° he smiled, then sighed. °And yet my note has not been answered. Oh, well. Best forget the matter after all. Clearly it's not important or Granny Hewitt would have been in touch by now.°

°I'm not important,° he corrected himself.

The little voice inside him shook his head, but refrained from making a verbal reply.

°Yes, I know,° he told himself: °I'm making unwarranted suppositions again, aren't I?°

°You said it, not me, Louie. Not that I feel inclined to disagree.°

°You really are a regular Mister Know It All,° he hissed back. °You know that?°

°Case of the kettle calling the pot black, if you ask me,° came the terse response. °That's another way of saying that you're projecting your own deficiencies on others.°

°I rest my case,° Louie replied, though perhaps unfairly, and he headed off down the lane toward home. Then another sudden thought occurred to him, and he spun on his heel and headed off

back up town.

°You don't want to be late for lunch, you know,° the voice insisted.

°I won't be. But first of all I need to pay a visit to the local library. I guess first of all I'll have to join, to get a student library card. If the books won't come to us, then we will simply have to take matters into our own hands, and go to the books.°

°Now you're thinking!° came the joyful reply. He already knew full well, of course, but it was his habit to make polite – or at times testy – conversation.

°Thinking?° Louie queried. °More than that, I am *cooking*!°

Time was short that day, however, and he would have to return with proof of his address, so he'd have to have a word with his father and borrow a gas or electricity bill. Still, as long as he didn't get himself put in end-of-day detention again, he could probably make it to the library after school on Monday. As for the school's own library, its shelves were very limited, there was only so much of Frank Richards's Billie Bunter and Arthur Ransome's Swallows and Amazons that he could stomach, and there was very little in the way of science fiction or fantasy. They still offered Latin as a second language there, though he'd at least persuaded his father to get them to swap that for a modern language, German. Which was a shorthand way of saying that it was a terribly traditional, stiff and starchy grammar school and certainly not a county modern. Not that he wasn't glad to have passed the eleven-plus exam after junior school, or else he might have ended up on the scrapheap of life.

Of course, as his father would frequently point out: "If you don't pull your socks up, lad, you'll end up a dustbin man." Or an assembly line worker in a dark and Satanic mill, like him. That's what Father meant, though he was too proud to come straight out and say it. And another big "of course": at heart, though he sometimes found difficulty in expressing affection, Father did have their best interests in mind. This wasn't his fault: it was just the way that he himself had been brought up, and his own mother and father before him. These things took generations to work their way out, just like the troubles in Northern Ireland. But

things were picking up these days, after the war, and with the advent of the rock and roll years of the Fifties and the Swinging Sixties. As yet, however, these modern trends had largely passed them by, except among the grockles (the tourists) down on the seafront and in the local nightclubs. And yes, Louie was still too young and timid to strike out along those paths alone.

°For heaven's sake, stop your grouching and grumbling, Louie!° came a sharp inner rebuke that caught him in mid-stride. He scarcely had the presence of mind not to stop in his tracks and make a fool of himself. °Seriously, you're beginning to sound like ... I was going to say your father, but that would only undermine what I'm trying to say. Your attitude stinks. And you risk ending up a thoroughly bitter and twisted, lonely old man!°

Louie hung his head and walked on. He was right, of course, but that retort had just scored a bullseye, and it really stung.

°You have to aim higher than that, Louie,° the voice pleaded. °Nothing good whatsoever will come of stooping to that dark and pessimistic level. You have to let go and transcend these personal issues. "And yes ...", as you would say, I realise full well that I, too, am allowing myself to be dragged into combat with you. I need to show more resolve, too. This sort of thing can become a vicious circle; a whirlpool, if you like, or a gravity well. I so want to be your friend, not another adversary. I also fully realise that you have more than enough to contend with as it is, without that additional burden.°

°That's one of the reasons I want to start using the library regularly,° Louie responded. °I know that I have to widen my horizons and "up my game".°

°True enough.°

It actually took Louie two or three trips to the public library after school that week before he began to get a feel for the layout of the many shelves, first getting to grips with the classification of the books using the fiendish Dewey Decimal System and the bank of little wooden drawers full of filing cards that you could search for a book title or the name of an author, not that this would as yet be of any use to him, given his ignorance of such things. Then it was a matter of getting to know where he might find books on

religion and spirituality (though like his father he had no interest in the former), psychology, or the various genres of fiction.

Only then did Louie begin his painstaking search for something that might relate in some as yet unknown way to an as yet unformulated interest in his own mind. He couldn't name what he was looking for; it was more an inner urge. An urge to find something different; that would confirm a vague impression in his mind that – how could he put it? – that there was more to the world than met the eye. Something, too, that he might develop a hearty interest in. Really, the only thing that he did know was that he would know that a book was right for him when he saw it, so at this point there was little use in going up to the desk and asking a professional librarian for assistance. At some later date, however, he would no doubt have good reason to regularly pick their brains.

Anyhow, there he was, worming his way through the rows of shelving in the public library. He'd been through the fiction section and discovered by now that there were no other books by James Hilton in which he was interested – he'd lost his librarians' virginity (if that was an actual word) by consulting the filing cards, and he'd located *Goodbye, Mr. Chips*, but that novel really didn't sound like his cup of tea, nor did it appear to advance his new-found – or newly-rediscovered – quest.

Now, the subject of spirituality did seem to fit his agenda, but really: even though the section on display was so limited, he didn't know where to begin, as the field was so alien to him, and all he could actually do was turn to the back cover, read the blurb, hope for the best, and no doubt work his way through the section until he'd read sufficient material to be able to make more informed choices, or had a stomachful of reading in that field.

Louie was standing there, lost in thought, pondering which two or three books he might select, when he became aware of being stared at, and he swung round on his heel and looked down the aisle. Indeed, there was an elderly man perhaps twelve feet away from him, with a book open in his hand, staring directly and intently at him.

The man was dressed in a casual patterned brown jacket, dark

green shirt open at the neck under a bright and jazzy vee-necked woollen jumper; matching brown trousers, and with brown shoes almost as highly-polished as his own bald or closely-shaven head. Breaking into a smile, the man closed the book and strode up the aisle, clearly intent on introducing himself. Hand already outstretched, the man clasped hold of Louie's hesitant hand and shook it firmly.

"Clement Woodward," the man smiled, with a little click of his heels and a slight bow. It's possible he had recently retired from the military.

"Llewelyn George," he replied, echoing the slight bow and wrenching his hand free. "But most people, other than my parents and relatives, call me Louie."

"Pleased to meet you, Louis. Louie, rather. My apologies: I don't know about you, but I'm hopeless with names.

"Anyhow, I hope you'll forgive my intervention, but I couldn't help but notice you scratching your chin and looking slightly bewildered by the array of books on offer. Your plight struck a chord with me because, believe it or not, given my wrinkles, I was once a novice like your good self, and I know how bewildered I was, myself, when I was your age."

A thought flashed through Louie's mind at that moment – a parental reminder about "Stranger Danger" – and he wondered if he should back away and find an aisle where other readers were searching.

°No, no, Louie. This is cool,° came a reassuring inner prompting.

Mister Woodward took a step or two back and smiled. "Don't worry, young man, I promise I won't bite you. I thought, instead, that I might help you out of your quandary."

Louie broke into a smile, and nodded.

Tucking his chosen book under his arm, the man turned to the shelves and asked, "So, Louie, what is it that you're searching for?"

Without thinking, he replied: "Something to show me that there's more to the world than meets the eye."

Mister Woodward raised his eyebrows. "More to the world

than meets the casual or untrained eye?" It was more of a statement than a question.

"Yes."

"Tell me, Louie: what leads you to suppose that such a thing might exist?"

Straight off the top of his head, he blurted out. "A lady who owns a second-hand bookshop gifted me a copy of *Lost Horizon*."

"Ah, I see. That wouldn't be Granny Hewitt's Secret Book Emporium, would it?"

"Yes!" Louie gasped enthusiastically. Then his face dropped. "But the shop's recently closed down."

The man sighed deeply. "Oh, that is a pity. I loved that shop, and I've spent many an hour chatting to dear Granny Hewitt. A kindred soul if ever there was. She's a walking encyclopaedia of knowledge. But what's more, she has oodles of good old-fashioned common sense."

Mister Woodward put his hands up and abruptly changed the subject. "Forgive the digression. You found *Lost Horizon*, and now, like Hugh Conway, you're wondering whether you can ever get back there. Is that it? By which you mean to things *in* the world, but not *of* it? The Real world, as it were. That's if I'm reading you right."

Louie pondered for a moment. "I'm wondering: is there such a thing, or is it just a work of imagination? A supposedly Real world, that is."

The man nodded repeatedly, but more to acknowledge and contemplate Louie's words than to show agreement. "This may not seem much of an answer or much consolation to you, right now, Louie, but that is something that you will have to discover for yourself. Just as I had to discover it; as did generations before us; and, no doubt, generations to come. It's a process we each have to go through, in our own unique way."

Louie let out a sigh, but the man continued. "However, if you will permit me to cut to the chase, as they used to say about early silent films, if you're willing I can at least point you in the right general direction where you may 'begin to begin', as the saying goes."

Mister Woodward turned away and searched through the titles on the shelves. After a moment, he found what he was looking for, pulled out a thick hardback book and thrust it into Louie's hands. Louie examined it carefully. It was a copy of *The Sufis* by someone named Idries Shah, and with an introduction by a Robert Graves.

"A word of warning, Louie: this is not the easiest of paths, and it may not be your cup of tea, or else it may help you through certain stages of your inner journey. But I think you will at least find it an eye-opening read. I do warn you, however, that you may come away from reading it with far more questions, as yet, than firm answers. Though, having said that, that is not such a bad place to find yourself. It's good to have a broad, open and inquiring mind, rather than becoming smug at knowing all the answers."

Mister Woodward turned away and beckoned Louie to follow him, and they wound their way through the aisles of books until they came to the fiction section. "J," the man noted, "K, L, LE, LES ... Ah yes, here we are: Doris Lessing, a sentient being who is going places. And here is what we're after ..." The man bent down and produced a second book.

"*Briefing for a Descent into Hell*," the man announced, thrusting the book into Louie's spare hand. "So now you have two good lines of inquiry. A third would be interpersonal psychology. Read and inwardly digest, as my own teacher once advised me, and you will soon have more.

"Imagination is also key, but you're still young and – if you will forgive me for saying this – very rough around the edges. And you still have so much to *unlearn*, so that will have to wait. Some say that patience is a virtue, but – like trust – I would say it is a necessity. So be patient with patience; be patient with others and, above all, be patient with yourself.

"And gratitude is key, too," the man added.

°Thank you,° came an inner prompting.

"You're welcome," the man smiled.

"Yes, thank you," Louie replied belatedly.

Mister Woodward suddenly had a thought; glanced urgently

at his gold wristwatch. “Good lord, is that the time?” He held out his hand and waited for Louie to transfer both books to his left, then shook it profusely. “I’m sorry, Louie, but time waits for no man, and I really must be off.”

The man was already on his way, calling back over his shoulder: “Jolly nice meeting you, and I hope that you meet with good fortune.”

And then he was gone. And like Granny Hewitt, Louie had no way of contacting him, short of staking out the public library. He so hoped that their paths would cross again.

°Did you hear what he didn’t say out loud?° he asked himself.

°No. What?° queried Louie.

°His words to you were: “I know a lost soul when I see one.”°

°So, how would you know?°

°Because I’m your eyes and ears, while your thoughts are wafting in the clouds, Louie. And my sniffer is not so bad, though your new-found smoking habit is not helping at all. Trust me on this: as the old song goes, “smoke gets in your eyes,” and – not to put too fine a point on it, sonny boy – the smoking habit has been rightly dubbed Suicide by Instalments. Mark my words: sooner or later, it will get you, and get those who love you – and not in a good way.

°In a nutshell, if you’re paying attention, this is my job. Looking after “Number One”: the jumped-up little shit who acts as front man, and all who depend on him. And – though far be it for me to sing my own praises – I’ve had a lot of experience, and I’m actually rather good at it.°

°What do you care?° Louis half-asked, half-spat.

He huffed and puffed, then finally replied: °What do I care, Louie? Everything bad that you do to yourself harms me, too. Now, okay, you can put that down to vested self-interest. But on my heart, I swear that I care deeply for you, and I want you to survive, and live to flourish. And what’s more, we have a job to do. You might not remember just yet but we have a mission to accomplish (that’s actually Mission with a capital M, by the way), and I am not going to let any nonsense, foolishness, or downright

evil stand in its way. Right now, you stand in your own way. Let that little nugget of wisdom sink it, sonny boy: *you stand in your own way.*°

At length Louie felt this inner opposition relenting. °Listen, if I seem hard on you, it's only for your own good, because I have your best interests at heart. Truly.°

Louie nearly retorted °You know what? You sound more and more like my father!° – and he caught himself – but of course he caught himself too late, and that slammed the door on any further constructive discussion on any topic, however innocuous, for the rest of that day.

5. *The Sufis*

Anyhow, once Louie got home and the evening meal was out of the way, along with some bind-bending Chemistry and Physics homework, he settled down on his bed, took up his copy of *The Sufis*, and began to read. It took him four school nights and the best part of Saturday to read the book, and by the time he came to read the final annotation on page 451, he was wide-eyed with wonder and felt as if the top of his head had been lifted off.

There were so many points to ponder, for just as the book itself described, the work was deliberately designed with material scattered throughout it (and other Sufic works, he was informed), and with didactic topics interleaved with imaginative teaching stories, poetry, and humour, so that the reader – or imbiber – was presented with a constellation of minor impacts. He'd recently come across the psychological concept of gestalt in another book, and he was reminded of an old illustration that might explain this: it was, when looked at one way, a picture of a young lady with a fur collar and an earring. Yet, looked at in another way, it showed an old crone with a large chin. Now, being the pattern-seeking creatures that we are, seeking closure, we might settle on one interpretation of an image or of a text, but if we became prematurely focussed or even fixated on that interpretation, it would hinder us from discovering further interpretations and dimensions. And, according to Mister Shah, Sufic materials, such as the teaching stories, rather than being tales with only one meaning or moral, like Aesop's Fables, might have as many as seven meanings, discovered by going deeper and deeper into them, like peeling the successive layers from the surface of an onion.

This then, was what Mister Woodward had meant when he talked of *unlearning*, giving it a subtle emphasis. Because what he (Louie) knew was only ordinary knowledge: things like information, opinion and belief, rather than Real Knowledge which was something altogether different and more valuable.

Shah maintained that ordinary knowledge, for all its mundane uses, could actually be a hindrance or even plain wrong. It was for this kind of reason that students of the mystical Sufi Way were called “Seekers After Truth”. Another titbit of information was that those who were still learning and progressing were called dervishes, the final product being called a Sufi, though he had been reliably informed that real Sufis did not call themselves such, most likely because of its great presumption. Humility, then, was to be added to Mister Woodward’s growing list of valued attributes like patience, trust, and gratitude.

Where was he before he so rudely interrupted himself? Oh yes: information, opinion, belief, and real knowledge gathered through first-hand experience.

He laughed, as an inner prompting presented itself: °Ha! And you know what they say about opinions?°

He knew, but decided to play along, with a mental shake of his head. °No, what do they say?°

°Opinions are like arseholes: everyone has one, and thinks theirs smells the sweetest.

°Boom, boom.°

What else might he single out from the myriad morsels of soul food scattered throughout *The Sufis*?

Well, chief of these – at least for him at that moment in time – had to be two pieces that had been given pride of place at the front of the book, after the introduction by the poet Robert Graves, and the author’s preface: “The Situation”, and “The Islanders”, because these both proposed and described the plight in which large-unregenerate humankind found itself, which loosely followed on from his own reading of *Lost Horizon* and the thoughts that this work had left him with.

The Situation

Humanity is asleep, concerned only with what is useless, living in a wrong world. Believing that one can excel this is only habit and usage, not religion. This “religion” is inept...

Do not prattle before the People of the Path, rather

consume yourself. You have an inverted knowledge and religion if you are upside down in relation to Reality.

Man is wrapping his net around himself. A lion (the man of the Way) bursts his cage asunder.

That piece was attributed by Mister Shah to The Sufi master Sanai of Afghanistan, teacher of Rumi, in *The Walled Garden of Truth*, written in 1131 A.D.

Given their higher love, good humour, mercy and liberality, these people were clearly not narrow-minded pedants nor Bible-thumping zealots. Having said that, Shah did not exactly pander to the ego, nor suffer fools gladly; though Louie did appreciate that perhaps his own take on Shah was in many indistinct ways coloured by the at-times strained relationship he had with his father, and hence other predominantly masculine authority figures. He'd begun reading about interpersonal psychology, which Mister Woodward had also coincidentally prescribed, and he was already beginning to see how the two streams or lines of inquiry might flow together in some ways. Did he say "prescribed", as in "the doctor prescribed laxatives"? He had meant to say "advised", as in "the teacher advised".

°You were right the first time,° came the inner prompting, right on cue. °And you need to learn to trust your intuition, though mindful that it is not entirely trustworthy. Of course, I don't mean in an underhand way, I simply mean that we can sometimes fool ourselves with self-belief.

°But doctor, teacher, mentor, friend, even inner-tuition – it's the same thing, really, and yet different.°

°You mean "intuition"?° he queried.

°I say what I mean, and I mean what I say,° came the reply, which sounded distinctly tongue-in-cheek.

Intuition? As opposed to logic, he meant. Or at least in contrast to it. What had Shah said about opposition? He flipped through the book (since it had no index), and found an appropriate piece to read once more:

"It is necessary to note," says Rumi, "that opposite

things work together, even though nominally opposed.”

That piece was from Rumi’s *Fihi Ma Fihi*. Yes, like the thumb being nominally opposed to the fingers, and yet a necessary arrangement if one were to be able to “grasp” a thing.

And speaking of logic ... Again he hunted through the book to find the short teaching story he had in mind and which had almost leapt out of the page at him, again perhaps because of his father’s obsession with “think logic, man” and “it stands to reason”. It didn’t have a title to separate it from the long and sometimes confusing chain of interlinked text, but he’d christened it “The Fussy Pedant” and it featured the wise fool Mulla Nasrudin:

Nasrudin, ferrying a pedant across a piece of rough water, said something ungrammatical to him. “Have you never studied grammar?” asked the scholar.

“No.”

“Then half of your life has been wasted.”

A few minutes later Nasrudin turned to the passenger.

“Have you ever learned how to swim?”

“No. Why?”

“Then all your life is wasted – we are sinking!”

This is the emphasis upon Sufism as a practical activity, denying that the formal intellect can arrive at truth, and that pattern-thinking derived from the familiar world can be applied to true reality, which moves in another dimension.

So here, then, was a major goal: to learn how to “swim”, which in turn reminded him of the swimming instructors and boat builders in the legend of the exiled islanders, that he’d read earlier. Though quite what that was, or what the skill involved, was as yet very vague and immaturely formed in Louie’s mind. Certainly one major task in this course of self-development was the activation of organs of subtle perception, and that required real effort. The Sufi Way was clearly not something to dip in and out of, or pick-and-mix with other paths, but one requiring years

of even preliminary study and wholehearted dedication. And even then, it seemed that there were no guarantees that one would make the grade. That's perhaps what Mister Woodward had hinted at when he'd said that this was not the easiest path to follow. This was perhaps a casual, or even massive, understatement.

°“*Qadam ba qadam*”, the inner voice reminded him: °Step by step.° Yes, indeed, let's just concentrate on the baby steps for now.

°What's that phrase the Buddhists use?° he enquired. °I read it in a magazine article sometime, somewhere.°

There was a pause but no reply. °No matter, it'll come to me of its own accord,° he decided, and he placed the book on his bedside cabinet and had another quick look at the back cover blurb about *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*. Glancing at his clock, he figured he could get one or two chapters read before lights out.

°Beginner's mind,° came the faithful, belated reply as he opened Doris Lessing's book.

He beamed. °Yes, indeed. That's it: “beginner's mind”. Thank you, friend.°

°You're more than welcome, Louie. And it's from Zen Buddhism, by the way.°

°I stand corrected, sir.°

°Rather appropriately, too,° cackled the inner voice.

°Alright, alright. No need to rub it in, smarty pants.° That was perhaps an allusion to rubbing salt in open wounds, which would sting like hellfire. Of course he could be mistaken, but at that time there was no easy way of looking up such thing, short of mounting a special hunting expedition to the reference section of the public library, or asking the English teacher.

°You're right,° the inner voice replied: it could well be an allusion to rubbing salt in somebody's wounds.°

Louie turned his head and looked askance. °But how would you know that, anyway? Do you have a telephone line connected to the library?°

°No, just something I retrieved from the Miscellaneous

Information Department,° came the reply. °Things most norms would forget all about, that I have filed away.°

°Norms?°

°Normal people, Louie. The sort of people that the hippies call “squares” and “straights”.°

°Squares?°

°People with routine, predictable, boring, blinkered, monochromatic lives. People who “think logic”. People who walk around under a perpetual cloud of doom and gloom. But don’t let that set you off about your father. Your parents do their best, and you should be grateful for that.°

°Ah, I see.°

There came another inner chortle. °You *think* you see, but you don’t *really* see. You either see or you don’t see. Just like “swimming”. There’s no “think I do” about it. One day, you see, you will see.°

A thought occurred to him and he chimed back: °I’ll see what I see when I see it.°

°Yes, you’ve nailed it, Louie. Though again, I have to remind you of the age-old challenge: “You can talk the talk, but can you walk the walk?” And the answer to that is “So near, and [as] yet so far. What is it Shah quoted? “Verily, he [or it] is closer to you than your jugular vein.” Think that over. In a sense, and as an actual lived experience, that’s the world’s greatest open secret.°

°Did Shah say that?°

°Not in so many words, no; and in any case, I made it up. Call it “poetic licence”, if you will. I know the idea seems strange – some things really are “stranger than fiction”, as they say – but I also know that it just so happens to be true.°

Louie was astounded. °But how do you know all these things?°

°That my lad, the inner voice replies with yet another mischievous cackle, is for me to know and you to find out!°

That was straight out of his father’s playbook. A shameless conjuring act involving smoke and mirrors.

Then: °No, actually, I’m just pulling your leg.°

Louie was not convinced. °Please don’t spoil it!

°And by the way, it's "mischievous", not "mischievious".°

°Oh, don't be such a stick-in-the-mud, Louie. What's a little banter between good friends? More to the point, however, why on earth do you consider the dull and orthodox pronunciation "mis-chuh-vuhs" preferable to the heretical "mis-cheev-ious" which is itself appropriately naughty and annoyingly playful?°

He had a point, and a sharp one at that. Particularly so, having just read about the fussy pedant and clearly not as yet inwardly digested and assimilated it.

°Touché!° Louie responded with feigned, yet appreciative chivalry.

°Fake it till you make it,° the inner voice advised. °I mean it. As long as you remember that you are consciously acting, you can play the As If experiment. Act "as if ..." you are relaxed and confident in social positions. Act "as if ..." you really know. I don't mean acting in a superior manner or bragging; just that you adopt a more positive attitude to life and to your new-found studies. And one fine morning – no doubt after much wholehearted dedication – you'll wake up and you'll realise that after all this time, you actually *have* made the grade. And even the golden sun and bright, cloudless blues skies will be in agreement on just such a day.°

There was a brief pause. °You know, people are always saying that the sun's gone in. But of course it has done no such thing. The sun is always shining; it's just that our clouds get in the way. Not "the clouds", by the way, let alone "other people's clouds", but *our own* clouds that follow us round like a bad smell. And we are the ones who stink. "He who smelt it, dealt it", as they say about theatrically misdirected farts. In other words, we can't go around blaming others. In reality, we only have ourselves to blame. We stand in our own way.°

That was deep, and it struck a chord with Louie just then.

°That sounds very much like Shah,° Louie observed, after mulling over the matter in his mind for some time. °Do you think it's possible to absorb and take on a person's mindset, even if you have not physically met that person, in this case through things they've written?°

°Now you're cooking, Louie,° the voice replied. He'd take that as a tacit agreement. °Or at least it's a useful working hypothesis. Something that you can reshape and hone to perfection over time. A considerable amount of time, I might add. Remember, it's still very early days. And yet this is a hopeful sign. Call it "an agreement" or "a minor encouragement", but don't start getting cocky about such things. Remember that you're barely a novice; a neophyte; a diamond in the rough. Or, just as accurately, "like gold dust". That is, you're scattered all over the place and in need of a prospector to gather you up, swill you round in a pan to separate the precious metal from the mud, and in need of much refinement and fashioning.°

That was a useful analogy. Although it reminded him of his lowly place and his dishevelled appearance and inner state, it still offered ultimate hope, even to a reprobate like him.

It was only later, when he'd discovered and acquired his next book, a new paperback edition of Idries Shah's *The Way of the Sufi*, quoting the Sufi master Saadi of Shiraz, that he read something that added another perspective to these issues, in the typical way that Shah deliberately scattered the materials and often looked upon the same topics from several different angles, as if to show off the many facets of a jewel.

Only later – much, much later, and after losing all hope and undergoing a seemingly interminable Dark Night of the Soul – would Louie begin to see how Shah's own work tied in with others. Not only among Sufis, nor in the general fields of spirituality and mysticism, nor in the work of Shah's own family, friends of Shah, and friends of friends of Shah, and people who quoted people quoting Shah, but in diverse fields and in the town's marketplace, mucky alleyways and smoke-clouded taverns of everyday life. That was a whole new vista, a continent beyond Shah's own island – vast, exotic, and apparently self-contained as it had been, and yet not all and everything. Looking back, this wonderful caravanserai had been a very necessary, and much loved, step or two along the way.

It wasn't all and everything, that is, unless you peeled off all the confounded adhesive labels and dispensed with all the

convenient pigeon holes, and foolish talk of Islamic mystics who wore wool, and so many paradigms – which were no more than closed and self-referential conceptual models, each with an attendant ideology – and, since one size does not fit all, simply used loose and open-ended terms, with plenty of wiggle room, such as “People Like Us” and “We Friends”.

But here your humble, far from omniscient, and at-times unreliable narrator is getting ahead of himself, and craves your forgiveness, dear reader.

In any case, this is the piece that later reminded Louie of this earlier and seminal conversation:

A raindrop, dripping from a cloud,
Was ashamed when it saw the sea.
“Who am I where there is a sea?” it said.
When it saw itself with the eye of humility,
A shell nurtured it in its embrace.

And in time, within the motherly shelter of the oyster shell, it grew into a precious pearl.

6. The Briefing

Louie opened up *Briefing for a Descent Into Hell* and flipped through the fly pages, his eyes lighting on the epigraph:

If yonder raindrop should its heart disclose,
Behold therein a hundred seas displayed.
In every atom, if thou gaze aright,
Thousands of reasoning beings are contained.
The gnat in limbs doth match the elephant.
In name is yonder drop as Nile's broad flood.
In every grain a thousand harvests dwell.
The world within a grain of millet's heart.
The universe in the mosquito's wing contained.
Within that point in space the heavens roll.
Upon one little spot within the heart
Resteth the Lord and Master of the worlds.
Therein two worlds commingled may be seen ...

That wonderful passage had been written by the Sage Mahmoud Shabistari, in the fourteenth century in his *The Secret Garden*. And as soon as he read it, Louie recognised the name and book from Shah's *The Sufis*. So Doris Lessing was most likely acquainted with Shah. Perhaps she was an admirer or student of his, or even a Sufi in her own right? He hadn't read many accounts of women Sufis, but then Sufism had flourished in the classical Islamic age, and this might be expected.

°What about Fatima b. Waliyya and Rabia of Basra?° the voice reminded him. °Do pay attention.°

°That's not exactly an overwhelming number,° he countered. °There's no getting away from the fact that it's rather patriarchal.°

He heard a tut-tutting. °Just take the teaching in the good spirit in which it's offered, Louie. Don't get yourself sidetracked or nobbled yet again.°

°Nobbled?° he frowned, sitting up in bed. °Just what do you

mean by that?°

°What I mean is that the very instant you began to take an interest in the other-worldly, you made yourself a target, Louie.°

°A target? Of what, and by whom?°

°To echo the story of Mushkil Gusha, Remover of All Difficulties, “that is another story for another day.”°

°I don’t quite follow your meaning,° he conceded.

°We’ll come to that later, Louie. Right now, you have enough on your plate coping with everyday life and with your studies. I don’t want you to get sidetracked again.°

He protested. °You’re still speaking in riddles.°

He heard the inner voice let out his breath. °Very well, if you insist. When you started investigating these esoteric subjects – albeit that this is no more than an exoteric projection, with the possibility of advancing on to mesoteric work – you opened yourself up to unseen forces. Some of these are quite benign, some are neutral or amoral, some are positively evil, and some are downright dangerous (though more so in occult fields of endeavour). Right now, you are at a dangerous stage because you are still so easily influenced and possess little self-knowledge and discernment, and scant means of self-defence, short of crude, innate self-preservation. That is somewhat offset by an as-yet unconscious –and by definition unacknowledged – death wish. You’re driven in part by autonomous complexes, as our adventurous psychologist friend C. G. Jung would say. And, as I intimated a moment ago, you are at the mercy of unseen forces.°

°That doesn’t sound good,° he murmured.

°Well, that’s one way of putting it, Louie. I’ll spare you the gruesome details, however.°

Louie chortled to himself, as he was reminded of a joke that his friend, Trevor Tong had once told him:

A wee Scots laddie takes his girlfriend to the movies.

After a kiss or two, he whispers in her ear:

“Canna have a feel of your muffins, lassie?”

“Aye,” she replies. “And canna find out what you’re wearing under your kilt?”

“Och aye,” says he.

A minute later she lets out a strangled gasp:

“Och, that’s gruesome, laddie.”

“Aye,” he replies with a big cheesy grin, “and it’ll grue some more if you keep stroking it, pet.”

Louie pulled himself together. °No, do go on. You’d better tell me more, even if I don’t like what you have to say.°

There was a lengthy pause, as if his inner companion had had to go away and consult with some unseen supervisor, or even take the matter “upstairs” for a more official ruling. Louie could imagine them all sitting in a huddle, weighing up the pros and cons.

At length came the considered response: °Well, you’re a bit of a mess,° the voice replied, °and that’s putting it mildly.°

Louie frowned. °In what way?°

°In particular, you have issues at the mental and emotional levels.°

°Sure, I have issues. With my father, for one. But you know as well as I do that I’m working on that, and I’m coping with life in general.°

°You haven’t stopped smoking,° came the immediate reply. °In fact your nicotine intake is rising by the week. It’s becoming an addiction rather than the simple pleasure you gained once you’d forgotten just how diabolical tobacco smoke actually tastes. It’s not called “the Devil’s Weed” for nothing, you know.°

°And? I get the impression that you’ve more to tell me.°

°And you’ve started drinking cider, courtesy of the brother of that older friend of yours – what’s his name? – Tong, Brian Tong.°

°So? What’s wrong with a little scrumpy (strong cider) every now and again?°

°Every weekend. What’s wrong is that sooner or later you’re going to be old enough to go nightclubbing, and “as sure as eggs is eggs”, you’ll be coming home rolling drunk, that’s what. Though the drink will make you feel good on the way up, it will make you feel crap and moody when it’s worn off. And the last

thing you want to become is aggressive while you're up and depressed and lethargic when you're sober. Trust me, sonny boy, that is the start of a vicious downward spiral.

°Then there's the matter of the infamous Tong brothers. You do realise, don't you – or perhaps it hasn't as yet dawned on you – that they take drugs. And it's only a matter of time before they take you into their confidence and get you started down that rocky road.°

Louie hoped that the inner voice had finally finished delivering the lecture, but he clearly wasn't done quite yet: °And then there is the delicate matter of sex. Be careful that you don't let your base, animal instincts get the better of you, and take a tumble.°

Louie's face flushed bright red as he felt the bottom fall out of his guts and all the blood ran to his head.

°I'm not suggesting for one minute that you live a monkish existence, Louie. "There's no monkery in Sufism" as Shah would point out. Simply that you don't end up like *Pinocchio*, or rather experience what he went through. You're no doubt familiar with that cautionary tale, and in your case the ultimately happy ending is not a foregone conclusion.°

°Pinocchio?° Louie laughed nervously. °Surely, that's just a children's fairytale?°

°Good Lord, it's more than that,° the inner voice spluttered. °Far, far more than that. Now that you're older you should give it another reading, in a hopefully wiser light. It really is an eye-opener.

°Unless, of course you are stubbornly attached to living the life of a donkey or, as they say, making a jackass of yourself.

°And then there's *Sleeping Beauty*, though that's yet another story for another time. There are so many writers and other creative people who have worked actively in the underground, the resistance, over a great many years, though by and large they have never been fully recognised for playing that role. Indeed, they may well not even *realise* that they are playing such a role. And it's not so much the Nazis they were fighting as the Big Sleep, the Discord, and the all-pervading and degenerate Earth

Sickness. “This, too, is the story of Mushkil Gussha, Remover of All Difficulties.”, a tale that must always be remembered and re-told.°

°But I digress, Louie. Back to your plight, indeed to the plight of all humanity, save for an elect few.

As the mystic G. I. Gurdjieff once wrote:

Let us take some event in the life of humanity. For instance, war. There is a war going on at the present moment. What does it signify? It signifies that several millions of sleeping people are trying to destroy several millions of other sleeping people. They would not do this, of course, if they were to wake up. Everything that takes place is owing to this sleep.

Furthermore:

You are in prison. If you wish to get out of prison, the first thing you must do is realize that you are in prison. If you think you are free, you can't escape.

And as his student, P.D. Ouspensky also wrote:

Man is a machine, but a very peculiar machine. He is a machine which, in right circumstances, and with right treatment, can know that he is a machine, and having fully realized this, he may find the ways to cease to be a machine.

First of all, what man must know is that he is not one; he is many. He has not one permanent and unchangeable “I” or Ego. He is always different. One moment he is one, another moment he is another, the third moment he is a third, and so on, almost without end.

You'll surely admit, Louie, that these issues that possess you are not good signs of things to come.°

He was right, of course.

Louie could imagine the inner voice as the figure of an old, white-haired man sitting cross-legged before him, and with his hands clasped together against his robed chest.

°It's alright, I'm almost done,° the voice assured him. °But just let me say this: Negative elements have wormed their way into your life, and you have been increasingly compromised and diverted from more noble goals.

°I hear you grumbling under your breath quite often about how you perceive yourself as being thwarted, the most significant of such issues – that you have not been able to shed – being that Granny Hewitt has still not got in touch with you, and no doubt your letters to Idries Shah will go unanswered, when you get round to contacting him.°

°I don't recall contemplating any such thing,° he replied, scratching his head.

°I quite distinctly heard you mulling it over, and my own ears seldom deceive me. But anyway, that's beside the point. The reason that you are kept waiting – and this is just one “for instance” out of many other possible examples – is that what you see and experience is a reflection in the outer world of you keeping yourself and others waiting. It's as if a mirror had been held up to your own face. Please excuse the vernacular, but if you really had your shit together as you think you have, Louie, then you wouldn't be in this mess in the first place. It's as simple – and yet currently difficult – as that.°

°Okay, I again take your many points,° he conceded, feeling more than a little chastised. °I promise that I'll take heed of your warnings.

°Now, do you mind if we change the subject? Earlier, you mentioned something about the exoteric and – what was it? – the esoteric.°

°The exoteric and the mesoteric,° the voice corrected him. °The esoteric is still a long way down the road, if you ever make it that far. Though, as I've said before, the truth is in reality closer than your jugular vein. It's with you every step of the way, if you like, but unbeknownst to you, and hence restricted in its usefulness to you. Well, not that it's there to be useful, like a knife

and fork are useful. It just *is*. That's it, you see. Beyond Learning How to Learn and Thinking How to Think, beyond even Seeing How to See and Knowing How to Know, is what you might term Becoming How to Be, or ultimately Being How to Be.

°You remember the anecdote about the teacher pointing his finger at the moon, and how the novice gets hooked-up about the importance of the finger, or the shadow of the finger on the ground, even to the point of worshipping the teacher, the pointing finger or the shadow? Well, that's what Shah is doing, what he's aiming at: to get you to focus on the reality to which he is pointing. And that reality is ultimately Being.°

Louie nodded. °Yes, I get your drift, thanks. But could you please back up a little and explain about the exoteric and the mesoteric? I'm a bit slow on the uptake.°

°Sure, Louie. There are three levels: the exoteric, the mesoteric, and the esoteric. The exoteric is the outside appearance or form of something, like the shape, colour and texture of a fruit like a peach. Or it's the outward form and ritual of a church or other organisation or enterprise; the shop window for Joe Public, if you like. The mesoteric might be likened to the nutritious properties of the fruit, and the esoteric might be likened to the truly regenerative properties of the kernel of the fruit, hidden at its centre. It's what the fruit – or the enterprise – is really all about to the people engaged in it at that level. Maybe you can think of better analogies? Let's call the esoteric the Work, with a capital W. The mesoteric is a half-way house, a means of guiding a person toward participation and attunement with the esoteric Work and, like the exoteric, it plays a supporting role. And this might well be nothing at all like the apparent, exoteric work. So, you might call the exoteric the work for the self and the group, the mesoteric the work for the Work, and the esoteric the Work itself. I'm sorry if I've botched my attempted explanation, but I'm sure you at least get the outlines of the bigger picture. I'm sure that Shah will be able to give you a far better idea of what the Work, in its many aspects, is all about.

°And finally, as I alluded to earlier, let me remind you that the moon may have little or nothing to do with the finger. That is,

other than an intent and direction behind the pointing of that finger. It is not for nothing that Sufis are sometimes called Directors.^o

7. A New Hobby

°You know, you should consider taking up writing as a complement to your reading,° the voice suggested to him out of the blue, one day. °This would help in more ways than one. Not least with your written schoolwork and exams.°

°Write about what?° he wondered.

°About anything you like, really, whenever you feel inspired and on whatever topic tickles your fancy or touches your heart.

°And you'll be glad to know that I won't be overly-critical of the outcome. I believe that's your department, but please don't be too harsh on yourself.°

°That's my father's department, more like,° he retorted, then mentally slapped himself.

°Nip that thought in the bud, Louie, before it grows and eventually suffocates or strangles you.°

There was a pause: °Though, having said that, and to further develop the metaphor, it may be unwise to show your father what you've written, especially if your writing ventures into metaphysical terrain. Creativity is a delicate flower, and I wouldn't want him to rip it up and stomp all over it, thinking it a weed. That can wait until you're rich and famous.°

Louie laughed. °Ha! There's bugger all chance of that.°

He sensed a frown and a shaking of the head. °Of course, don't get cocky, Louie, but also don't turn the other way and belittle yourself. That's yet another example of a vicious downward spiral. Remember: there's nothing wrong with a moderate amount of quiet self-satisfaction.°

The voice left a pause, perhaps to allow what had been said to slowly percolate through him and sink in.

°Now where was I?° his inner voice wondered. °Ah yes. Back to the creativity. Rather than being a passive or even active consumer, it would benefit you and others if you were a more creative producer. You would be more heartily engaged in the process, and it would help consolidate your learning.

°This would also involve you giving something back to society, rather than forever being “on the take”, which is an egocentric mode of operating, and not conducive to your continued progress of self-development.

°But don’t take my word for it, as if it is the gospel truth. Check these things out for yourself.°

The image of a man focussing a camera sprang into Louie’s mind, and the inner voice immediately picked up on the idea. °Yes, this may be likened to the photographic process: first you frame your intended shot and focus. Then there is exposure to the materials, and development in the darkroom of the subconscious. Then the image is fixed, so it doesn’t fade, through experience. And finally the image may be reviewed in the full light.

°Well, the analogy isn’t perfect, Louie, and there’s more to the process than that. But consider it a useful preliminary sketch. I leave you to turn it into a masterpiece, after it has been developed in your own subconscious. Or like dormant seeds watered and germinating in the dark, fertile earth when spring yet again arrives, as it must.°

Louie checked his watch. It was almost time for lunch.

°Excellent timing, if I do say so myself, Louie,° the inner voice chirped. °And here endeth the briefing.°

PART 2: The Mesoteric

“The degree of necessity determines the development of organs in man... therefore increase your necessity.”

~ Idries Shah, *The Way of the Sufi*. Quoting from Rumi's *Mathnavi-i-Maanavi*: Couplets of Inner Meaning.

8. Let Battle Commence

Louie was fired-up and needed little more encouragement to take up pen and paper. He'd long-ago filled-up the first notebook that he had bought to write the letter to Granny Hewitt, so he dashed into town to W. H. Smith's where they sold all-manner of stationery, and bought two thick, foolscap-sized wads of lined paper and a thick ring-binder in which to collect his writing.

°Perhaps you recall me mentioning that Sufis are sometimes known as Directors?° the voice inquired as he sat down at the little desk in his bedroom and excitedly sucked at the blunt end of his ballpoint pen.

Louie cast his mind back. °Vaguely,° he replied.

°Well, then. Take that as a starting point and follow the idea, as you might follow a golden thread through a labyrinth, and see where it takes you.° Then: °It's just a suggestion. Take it or leave it.°

Louie smiled and stroked his chin. °Thank you. I may well take you up on that idea.°

°So, what are you going to call this first piece?° inquired the inner voice.

Louie pondered for a moment, and then it came to him out of the blue: °“This is the Home Service calling”,° he proudly announced, and he wrote the title across the top of the first sheet and took up his wooden ruler to underline it, adding beneath the title, “by R. L. George”. That sounded suitably impressive.

He caught sight of a finger being held up in his vision. °A word of caution, however, Louie. Don't write to be clever, or to be seen as being clever in order to impress. Write to encourage others. Say to yourself: “If I can manage to do this, ignorant, semi-literate peasant that I may be, then so can you all!”°

°Ha ha! Very funny,° he laughed.

°I'm actually being serious, Louie. Don't deflect, or dismiss, or laugh off what people have to say, because that will tend to abolish what might otherwise be useful impacts. Which is not to

say that you have to act like a sponge to anything and everything other people may have to say. A modicum of discrimination and discernment is what is called for.

°As I said, offer hope, and set a good example for yourself as well as for others who may also have their self-doubts and hindrances.°

The inner voice abruptly changed tack: °Imagination is another key ingredient in all this, you see, Louie. Or at least so you will eventually come to see. Indeed, the whole world is a product of the true imagination. Alas, it is also the product of a wide and rampant spectrum of false imagining ranging from everyday fantasy, and delusion, to pure evil. In a sense, it's all a big Game, but that is a measure of how high the stakes are in this "game". So it is imperative that we each act responsibly and with integrity, compassion, empathy, love, wisdom, and all that jazz. Perhaps above all, with common or garden sense which – alas – is far from common and sadly lacking. As the saying goes: "the tail is wagging the dog." Or as you yourself might aver, "it's all gone tits-up."°

°Arse about face,° he agreed. One of his father's choice phrases. He wasn't one to mince words about the ineptitude and villainy of The Powers That Be and their army of minions. Of course, father himself was an unskilled minion who'd left school at the tender age of fourteen, "but that's different." He was one of the better minions.

Again, Louie mentally slapped himself. Hopefully, there would come a point where he slapped himself first, before he had a chance to think these things, rather than in the wake of the event.

°Ding!° came his inner voice. °Indeed, there is a short gap of maybe a few milliseconds or as long as a couple of seconds, between intending to say or do something and actually carrying it out. And during that short gap, if you have the presence of mind (which can be trained), you get to exercise your veto, if this is advisable.°

That was good news, indeed.

°As for your writing: just "suck it and see", as the saying

goes. In other words, take an intuitive approach, rather than attempting to write to a rigorous plan. You can always go back and “dot the i’s and cross the t’s” at a later point. That way you won’t keep breaking your natural flow. The main thing is to build up a head of steam and fill those pages with ink. There’s nothing worse than sitting there for hours anxiously chewing on the end of your pen and staring at a blank sheet of paper. Write nonsense – or anything – to get your creative juices and the ink flowing.°

He removed the pen from his mouth, only then becoming aware that he’d been absentmindedly chewing the end all along.

°As Shah once remarked, and I’m paraphrasing from faulty memory: “A book like this designs and writes itself.” And, hopefully, “the hundredth monkey effect” will swing into operation.°

°The hundredth monkey effect? What’s that when it’s at home?° Louie wanted to know.

The inner voice huffed a little. °Now, now, Louie. Play nicely and don’t make fun of your dear mother’s catch phrases. I’m not here to spoon-feed you, so look it up sometime when you’re passing the public library. Don’t worry, though: it’s not a big issue, nor in any way a deal breaker. It’s just something else for the archives at the Miscellaneous Information Department.°

°Okay,° Louie nodded, and he again took up his pen and began to wonder where he might begin. °And don’t keep bugging me, or you’ll put me off my stride.°

°My lips are sealed,° the inner voice smiled, and Louie got an image of him closing his lips with a zip fastener.

°Though, having said that, it’s better if you get used to interruptions and distractions, yet learn to carry on unperturbed. That way, you’ll even be able to cope with a house full of excited, energetic and highly vocal children.°

Louie saw a light bulb click on in his head. °One final word, however? Did I ever tell you the anecdote about the Greatest Secret?°

Louie shook his head.

°Then, if you are sitting comfortably, I shall begin ...°

Once upon a time, there was a powerful king who heard that there was a sage who possessed the Greatest Secret. And of course, being a powerful king, he had the old sage brought before him and threatened him with beheading unless he told the king this great secret.

So the old sage crept up to the throne and cupped his hand to the greedy king's ear and whispered the Greatest Secret.

He turned away to leave the throne, then turned back as if he'd had a second thought. "And above all, Sire, on no account are you to think of monkeys."

°Yes, thank you for that sage advice,° Louie laughed. °Now, hop it! Beat it! Vamoose! Be gone!°

9. “This is the Home Service Calling”

By “Home Service”, Louie meant the BBC Home Service radio station, to which his father and his shadow (his housewife, that is) attentively listened every day. Especially to the news, which was a particularly solemn occasion.

Anyhow: where to begin? °Just follow your feet,° came the whispered reply.

°Enough already!° he hissed back, and put pen to paper.

Louie wondered if it would be too bold to have added “The Sufi Way” to the end of the title, with a colon as a separator. Certainly it would add to the context, but no: he was, after all, a mere novice in the Way. Indeed, all his studies thus far had apparently been *of* the way and not *in* it. He still felt very much an outsider, looking in at what little he had been permitted to see, through partly-frosted windows, as you might be allowed an unadventurous guided tour of a pottery and yet not be allowed to touch the machinery or roll your sleeves up and throw a pot yourself.



“This is the Home Service calling”

“This is the Home Service calling; Home Service calling. Are you receiving us?”

We live in a world inundated with information – of fact and fiction, opinion masquerading as fact, misinformation, disinformation, and misguidance, and we exiles from the Real World are in constant and growing danger of drowning in it, and of being buried and lost, like a hidden treasure, beneath an ever-growing mountain of egotism and globalized sham-materialism.

Perhaps we are not in a position to do much, at the present

moment, about the all-pervasive beast of sham-materialism, but as the wise saying goes, “If you want to change the world, first change yourself”. As a part of that more manageable, but nevertheless difficult task – not least the question of how to get in touch with our own self at our authentic core and discover its real needs (as opposed to its desires) – we can turn our attention to how we communicate – with ourselves, with others, and with something transcendent that has risen above our own miserable difficulties.

So, we turn first to facts.

Of course, facts are very useful as correctives to misconceptions or misguidance (if we can sift out fact from opinion, falsity and fake news), and to provide pointers to remedial material and growth – I don’t doubt that for a minute. But it needs to be emphasized that knowing a fact such as “Apples are nutritious” is not at all the same thing as actually eating, digesting and deriving nutritional benefits from a fruit. As Alfred Korzybski is reported to have once said, the map is not the territory, or more accurately in his own words: “A map is not the territory it represents, but, if correct, it has a similar structure to the territory, which accounts for its usefulness.” So the fact that certain fruit are nutritious might be useful in getting us to actually research nutrition and locate and consume suitably nutritious foods; though its limitations would be disclosed if it were to lead a person instead to binge on crisps and chocolate biscuits and eventually become obese.

The statement of facts is useful in some ways, then, if it goes beyond asserting and taking pride in one’s opinion, or hiding behind intellectualism. And yet the facts may contain little or no developmentally-higher information, that is, information that carries with it, or provokes, or invokes, higher development; and a particularly challenging fact may either successfully goad-on the recipient’s donkey, or it might just as easily cast the recipient into a state of self-doubt, collapse, and sad resignation.

Another thing, too. Factual statements largely belong in the domain of the mind, and the organ I’d like to turn our attention to is the heart. As a wise healer once remarked to her students:

“Don’t just stand there and nod. The mind observes and cogitates, the heart engages, and I would encourage you to engage with the process.”

Thankfully, the statement and exchange of facts or niceties, questions and answers, etc., of everyday communication, and their nominal meaning and interpretation, is by no means the only mode through which we are able to communicate with one-another, even in this restrictive and often oppressive shadow-world, which has been described by some mystics as akin to being stuck at the bottom of a very deep, dark well, with only a slight – though very real – chance of escape.

Perhaps you can “get my drift” if I speak of the transmission or relay of a signal using a carrier wave. The sinusoidal carrier wave itself (as in radio transmission) simply enables the wave to travel from transmitter to receiver through the “ether” and to be detected; and we also need an antenna of some description at both ends to direct and amplify the radio signal. The carrier wave needs to be sent in a frequency range for which the antenna and receiver are designed, equipped, or currently set to pick up (“Speak to each at the level of their understanding”, as the Sufi mystics would say).

What we are interested in, however, is the information that is communicated, that modulates this basic sinusoidal carrier wave – which needs to be detected; discriminated to remove the carrier wave and to leave us with the information; and processed at the receiver, for example by adjusting its tone, amplifying the signal, and transforming it back via mechanical movement into sound waves through loudspeakers or headphones. In a broad sense you could say that the original integrated communication is first differentiated, then transmitted, and finally reconstituted or reintegrated at the receiver, just as water vapour is taken up to form clouds, the clouds travel across the land, life-sustaining rain is deposited, and forms streams, rivers, and the like “beyond the distant mountains”; water that is perhaps stored in a reservoir for a time, to smooth out supply and demand, and drawn from a well for eventual use.

The information that we isolate from the incoming radio

waves could contain tapped-out Morse code or spoken facts at its most basic, poetry, music, even electronic data, or in the case of television transmission, images.

Moreover, in the same way that this information modulates the original carrier wave – and ultimately effects change in the recipient – so, too, more subtle, hidden, esoteric things (such as “love”, “real knowledge”, “wisdom”, the “inner state” of the radio host) may be communicated, using the speech, the music or the images as its own carrier wave of a higher order and, in a similar way, these higher communications may be detected and processed, if the transmitter or relay, and the recipient are sensitive and developed in certain ways.

Thus we may be able to detect subtleties or other dimensions in speech, music, art; etc., not only when physically present, but also when present through this mechanism of “remote sensing” or “distant learning”. This method transcends the terrestrial limitations of time and space.

Certain factors will cause difficulties in fulfilling the process, and these are things like adverse atmospheric and environmental conditions, static and dynamic interference, resistance, reluctance, reactance, impedance, distortion, restricted bandwidth, clipping, loss, and so forth, in so-called “real world” (i.e. practical and limited) systems as opposed to theoretical or ideal systems.

The most general requirements for enabling the process, at a human level, would be to develop the overall patience, trust and “capacity” to communicate in this way. Having a high internal signal-to-noise ratio (inner peace, tranquillity); being open, transparent and receptive (willing and able to admit); being directed, sensitive, tuned, discriminating (“Pip-pip-pip – I grr – learnt it from English By Radio!”), being able to correctly error-check, filter and smooth fluctuations; and also being able to relate and integrate this new information intuitively into other personal or collective experience.

Where necessary the recipient may need to refer back to established facts from source material acquired through other means, or from an adept in the field, such as a teacher, in order to perform a “reality check”, and estimate the significance and

relevance of the new information.

Not least, the recipient needs to be open to the idea and reality of induced change, which in the case of human interaction may be a two-way, reciprocal process or “service” of mutual induction and resonance, involving two or more people able to act as “transceivers” (that is, both transmitting and receiving, one to the other).

At a bare minimum, it is desirable to admit this means of operation as at least being one more possibility, rather than unadvisedly limiting one’s options to only those considered wholly rational, because we are not able to ascend this deep, dark well of forgetfulness – toward the numinous Green Light of the celestial Pole or Qutb – by purely rational means.



Well, there you have it. Whether it made any sense or not, Louie couldn’t be sure as yet, since he was still too close to the material to be objective about it. But it sounded quite good to him, and – what’s more – after several false starts, crossings out, scrunching of sheets of paper, a frantic search through his father’s old copies of *Reader’s Digest* for the quote by Alfred Korzybsk, and through the Sufi books for other ideas, at last he’d managed to complete his first piece of serious writing. Quite where the green light had come from, he couldn’t say. It had simply popped into his mind, along with an image of the *aurora borealis*, the Northern Lights, as he’d been writing. Perhaps it was a long-forgotten item from the dusty archives of the Miscellaneous Information Department?

Anyhow, satisfied that the text was good enough for the time being, though no doubt in need of correction, improvement and polishing, he borrowed his father’s hole punch, and ceremoniously placed the piece in his new ring binder. He’d tentatively titled this collection of work as “The Ramblings of a Madman”, though he had felt it more prudent to instead write the word “Private” on the front of the binder. Then he nipped downstairs to see if his parents would like him to make a nice, hot

cup of tea. The answer to that was invariable, “Oh yes, please,” and later, as they drank, an appreciative murmur of “Just what the doctor ordered.”

Instead, he ended up getting a minor lecture about spending so much time in his bedroom, using the house like a hotel, and treating his poor mother like a maid servant, but that was how things were, and there was no point in brooding about it.

°Henry Corbin,° the inner voice prompted him at length. The word looked like “Henry” in his mind’s eye, but the voice had definitely pronounced it with a French accent as “Henri”.

°Henry Corbin?° he queried, unable to fathom the context from this isolated mention of a name.

°I’m 95% certain that he’s the writer who mentioned the deep well and the Green Light,° the voice reliably informed him. °I can’t locate the source, however. It could simply have been a phrase that you picked up by chance while skim-reading through books in the library, looking for something new to take out. Something else for you to look up when you’re next passing.°

°Yes, along with the hundred monkey effect. See, I remembered!° he chimed in. °I’m not just a pretty face, you know.°

°Hmm, that remains to be seen,° the inner voice huffed. °And maybe not *even* a pretty face.°

10. The Tail is Wagging the Dog

Another phrase that stuck in Louie's mind after his earlier briefing was "the tail is wagging the dog", and since he felt as if he was on a roll, that's the next subject Louie turned to in his new-found writing hobby. He nearly said "writing career", but that would definitely have been a sad reminder of "putting the cart before the horse", something he tended to succumb to from time to time during moments of unbridled enthusiasm such as this.

°That's the flipside of your inferiority complex,° the voice reliably informed him. °So, you act all superior in order to defend yourself against the hurt that would otherwise cause you.°

°Thank you, Doctor Spock,° Louie smiled, realising that in actuality he wasn't half-wrong in his self-assessment.

Speaking of carts and horses, he'd once written to the fledgling Buddhist Society in London, and had asked if it was better to aim to become a Bodhisattva of the Household (one who had been offered nirvana but declines, returning to help release others and working in the everyday marketplace), rather than an arhat (whom he imagined to be sitting crossed-legged on some distant Himalayan mountain peak in solitary meditation; though perhaps they were helping out in some higher, esoteric way, perhaps channelling vital energies). The reply from the Secretary that came back suggested that he was perhaps putting the cart before the horse. That had gently, but certainly, put Louie in his place.



The Tail is Wagging the Dog

There is something very precious deep down in each of us,

and this has been likened to a jewel buried in a mountain (of conditioning), which we need to dig out, by applying real effort, to retrieve.

The age-old problem is that this essential part of our being goes largely unnoticed or disregarded. It is usually deeply hidden and held a virtual prisoner by other parts of us who have us in their sway, and is as a consequence largely lost to us. The chief culprit in this affair is what Sufi mystics call the Commanding Self: the mixture of primitive and conditioned responses, common to everyone, that inhibits and distorts human progress and understanding. We are greatly hindered by unbridled ego, the allegedly sovereign intellect, by inappropriate or over- emotion, and by a number of unfortunate traits such as ignorance, impatience, lack of trust, vanity, pride, greed, hypocrisy, delusion and spurious imagination (not to be confused with the more felicitous creative imagination).

Put another way, and though it's not a popular thing to propose, you might say that in the case of the vast majority of unregenerate individuals, we are misguided. Indeed, we are "upside down in the world", "arse about face" or, as they say, the tail is wagging the dog.

In the early stages of the mystical education, it can take a great deal of time and effort before, as in the case of an alcoholic coming to the realization that they are an alcoholic, the person comes to the realization that they are not really a single, unified "I" but as the psychologist Robert Ornstein puts it are run by an inappropriately chosen "squadron of primitive simpletons"; that they are not in command of themselves; that they are essentially prisoners of their own self, and have problems; and that there are alternative possibilities and further dimensions to life of which they are pretty much ignorant or scorn.

These Secret Friends among the Sufis found centuries ago that attacking such issues head-on will not yield positive results and often yields negative results, so they developed a means of tackling such issues indirectly, for example through the use of teaching stories, poetry, and jokes, so as not to raise the aspirant's hackles and make him or her unnecessarily and doggedly

defensive.

One of the aims of the mystics is to transcend the Commanding Self and the unbridled ego and free us from its shackles. The situation might be likened to that of a disenfranchised princess, true royalty, locked and heavily guarded in a dark dungeon inside a castle. In order to affect an escape, messages and materials have to be smuggled into the prison past the guards, sometimes using the unwitting guards, perhaps by appealing to and making use of their desires, such as their greed, and their undoubted talents and resources. They may be led to believe that this is an interesting exercise or swash-buckling adventure, that progress is in their best interests, that there is something, some reward, in it for them, and they may be encouraged to “go with it” or at least turn a blind eye. In actuality, these elements are gradually being turned around and transformed and will eventually assist in staging a series of “test runs” and “coups”.

One of the methods that the Sufis use to aid this process is the teaching story. There’s a tale in Idries Shah’s *The Magic Monastery* which beautifully illustrates the situation, models or exemplifies a successful escape, and – given in the form of a teaching story with successive layers of deep meaning – in itself explains and forms part of the process of smuggling materials in past the subject’s intellect, censors and conditioning:

A man was once sent to prison for life for something which he had not done.

When he had behaved in an exemplary way for some months, his jailers began to regard him as a model prisoner.

He was allowed to make his cell a little more comfortable; and his wife sent him a prayer-carpet which she had herself woven.

When several more months had passed, this man said to his guards: “I am a metalworker, and you are badly paid. If you can get me a few tools and some pieces of tin, I will make small decorative objects, which you can

take to the market and sell. We could split the proceeds, to the advantage of both parties.”

The guards agreed, and presently the smith was producing finely-wrought objects whose sale added to everyone’s well-being.

Then, one day, when the jailers went to the cell, the man had gone. They concluded that he must have been a magician.

After many years when the error of the sentence had been discovered and the man was pardoned and out of hiding, the king of that country called him and asked him how he had escaped.

The tinsmith said: “Real escape is possible only with the correct concurrence of factors. My wife found the locksmith who had made the lock on my cell, and other locks throughout the prison. She embroidered the interior designs of the locks in the rug which she sent me, on the spot where the head is prostrated in prayer. She relied upon me to register this design and to realize that it was the wards of the locks. It was necessary for me to get materials with which to make the keys, and to be able to hammer and work metal in my cell. I had to enlist the greed and need of the guards, so that there would be no suspicion. That is the story of my escape.”

There’s another story in Idries Shah’s seminal work *The Sufis* which illustrates the smuggling process:

Because the average person thinks in patterns and cannot accommodate himself to a really different point of view, he loses a great deal of the meaning of life. He may live, even progress, but he cannot understand all that is going on. The story of the smuggler makes this very clear:

Nasrudin used to take his donkey across a frontier every day, with the panniers loaded with straw. Since he admitted to being a smuggler when he trudged home

every night, the frontier guards searched him again and again. They searched his person, sifted the straw, steeped it in water, even burned it from time to time. Meanwhile he was becoming visibly more and more prosperous.

Then he retired and went to live in another country. Here one of the customs offices met him, years later.

“You can tell me now, Nasrudin,” he said. “Whatever was it that you were smuggling, when we could never catch you out?”

“Donkeys,” said Nasrudin.

As ever, the wise fool Nasrudin hides his light under a bushel.

A third tale, The Indian Bird by Rumi in Idries Shah’s *The Way of the Sufi*, also illustrates the issue and its ingenious resolution:

A merchant had a bird in a cage. He was going to India, the land from which the bird came, and asked him whether he could bring anything back for him. The bird asked for his freedom, but was refused. So he asked the merchant to visit a jungle in India and announce his captivity to the free birds who were there.

The merchant did so, and no sooner had he spoken than a wild bird, just like his own, fell senseless out of a tree on to the ground. The merchant thought that this must be a relative of his own bird, and felt sad that he should have caused this death.

When he got home, the bird asked him whether he had brought good news from India. “No,” said the merchant, “I fear that my news is bad. One of your relations collapsed and fell at my feet as soon as I mentioned your captivity.”

As soon as these words were spoken the merchant’s bird collapsed and fell to the bottom of the cage.

“The news of his kinsman’s death has killed him too,” thought the merchant. Sorrowfully he picked up the bird and put it on the window-sill. At once the bird

revived and flew to a near-by tree. “Now you know,” he said, “that what you thought was disaster was in fact good news for me. And how the message, the suggestion how to behave in order to free myself, was transmitted to me through you, my captor.” And he flew away, free at last.

As well as smuggling messages in, a kind of metalanguage is being taught and developed in the process, so that messages may be smuggled out and two-way communication may be established, beginning the groundwork that will ultimately lead to emancipation, reunion and the re-establishment of a truly wise and loving, and rightly guided, regime.

Sources: *The Magic Monastery*, *The Sufis* and *The Way of the Sufi* by Idries Shah.

11. Tips on Inspiration

Louie knew that there were two main ways of approaching a piece of writing: that of the planner and that of the pantsier. The planner was very logical, methodical and left-brain, creating a carefully worked out skeleton for the story, its characters, and events, and then adding meat to those bones. It might be a better way of writing, but it was an approach that now personally left Louie cold.

In his earlier years, when he suffered even greater personal insecurity, Louie would surround himself with a barricade of reference books, and spend ages pondering over a word or phrase, frequently checking in the dictionary and searching through a copy of *Roget's Thesaurus* that he'd once picked up at a school jumble sale, looking for the precise word or phrase to use in a given context. It was a long, drawn-out and frustrating, mechanised process, and far from enjoyable. In those days he was driven to strive for perfection, and always fell short. Looking back, it's possible that this regular self-defeat and failure might actually have been programmed into him, though whether this was done innocently or for nefarious reasons, he couldn't say. But, thankfully, those days were behind him, though as a lapsed perfectionist, he still felt bad about it. It wasn't until years later that he was introduced to an idea by a counsellor that "good is good enough" – though he sometimes had a niggle in the back of his mind, wondering whether what he thought was good really was good enough, especially when it came to his study of the Sufi Way.

Another even more consequential idea that he would be introduced to still later, and which gradually tugged him toward another Path (with a capital P), was that completion or wholeness of being was a better goal to aim for than unattainable perfection, especially if you didn't want to end up completely insane – and here he was reminded of the Sufi ideal, *insan-i-Kamil*, or the Completed Man, the extremely remote possibility of achieving

such a lofty station, and the very real possibility of being driven mad in the process. That worry was only slightly allayed by the knowledge that what everyday humanity takes to be sane may in many ways be considered insane; just as those who consider themselves wise may, in reality, be fools, and those who are thought of as fools might equally be wise in truth. In this lesser world, so many things were upside down, back to front, or inside out – and sometimes all three at the same time. Just as Churchill once said of Russia: “It is a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma,” so something akin to this could be said of our humankind in general, and their terrible plight – or, for that matter, of the Sufi mystery. The Sufis were “as inscrutable as the Chinese”, as the saying goes.

Nonetheless, that initial striving would pay handsome dividends at a later date. As Shah pointed out, no experience is ever wasted, though with the caveat that since things were so finely balanced, if you didn’t learn from and benefit from the experience yourself, then others would certainly do so instead.

The methodical approach would have suited his father to a tee, however, and it would no doubt have been necessary had he been writing whodunits, but it wasn’t for him. He much preferred the pantsier approach – like flying by the skin of one’s pants; writing “on the hoof”, if you get my meaning – not knowing where the writing might take him, and discovering what happened or deciding what might come next as ideas presented themselves. In that respect, it worked very much along the lines of the inner dialogue with which he was familiar and felt so at home with. And of course this presented him with difficulties, because apart from the fact that the characters had their own ideas about how they might behave, he could easily get lost or tied in a knot, and when the pantsier approach failed, he would have to go back through the text and think about it more logically, before taking flight once more. So, in a way, that was the best of both worlds. In his humble opinion, of course. He was willing to stand corrected.

For this reason alone, as well as for others, Louie knew that he would never look for a job as a junior reporter at a local

newspaper. That sort of “writing to order” was not at all his forte.

So, what on earth could he write about next, if not the complexities of the Sufi mystery? Well, something closer to home, from his own direct experience, and the delightful inspiration that was now beginning to present itself in his life. Well, he used the word “now”, though for all he knew, such inspiration might have been here for the taking all along, and yet he had simply been unaware of it and not seen it for what it truly was.

°Anyhow: onward and upward, Louie. Onward and upward, dear friend!°



Tips for Writers: Inspiration

Inspiration can be a wonderful thing, but it can also be quite fickle. If you want to be able to call on inspiration reliably then you need to work on it with regularity. You won’t become a good cook by reading recipes alone; nor will you build muscles by merely reading the training manual. You have to actually perform the exercises.

Someone once said that if you only go out with a bucket to collect water when it’s raining, sometimes you’ll get water. But if you go out with your bucket every day, even when it’s not raining, sometimes you’ll catch unexpected rain. And also, a strange thing may happen: that the very act of going out with your bucket may actually provoke such rain.

So make a point of writing something – about anything at all, even if you’re not interested in the subject, and perhaps all the more so because of this – each and every day.

12. The Writer's Daemon

Strangely enough, having written that last piece, Louie went through a prolonged fallow patch, and his high spirits took something of a tumble. He did wonder if he'd been indiscreet and actually scared off his Muse or Ally, just as you might frighten a friendly yet shy bird, due to an urge to get closer, and a sudden move.

And then, just as abruptly as his inspiration had deserted him, right in the middle of breakfast one Saturday morning, it came back to him in a flash, and like a conjurer on stage, he finally managed to pull a rabbit out of his hat. Well, let's say that he was ably assisted in pulling off the trick. Perhaps this was the *baraka* – the divine grace, or gift, or honey-like substance – of which the Sufis and the secret brotherhood of the Sarmouni (“the Bees”) spoke?

°Thanks!° he whispered under his breath: °You dug me out of a hole there. And right on cue.°

°You're welcome,° replied the inner voice, quickly adding: °As Gandalf the Grey once spoke: “A wizard is never late, Frodo Baggins. Nor is he early. He arrives precisely when he means to.”°

So, without further ado, and thankfully being excused the chore of washing up, Louie dashed up the stairs (though careful not to “clomp about the house like a roughshod horse”).

And then a thought occurred to him. Was this a mere conjuring trick, or could it actually be real magic? Did such a thing even exist, or was it just another figment of his wayward imagination?

He looked back over his study of the Way thus far, and his previous interest in the metaphysical, and he realised that the Sufi Way was the way of the mystic and not the way of the wizard as he had initially hoped. Surely, these were two very different things? And yet had Shah himself not written quite a bit about oriental magic in his early adult life, and even involved himself

with the self-styled witch, Gerald Gardner?

Shah had also written about astrology, though under a pseudonym, which was strange, given that on the face of it, astrology was just ancient superstitious nonsense, now dressed up as superficial New Age “woo” in the daily newspapers and women’s magazines. Even more strangely, however, many years later Louie was to be confronted by the possibility that planetary astrology might actually work at the archetypal level – indeed that at that level it made perfect sense. As they say, that was certainly an unexpected “turn up for the books”.

Since he’d been studying Shah’s works, however, so many of his previous interests had fallen by the wayside and been abandoned in his one-pointed dedication.

Again, only later was he to come to the realisation that he had actually become too narrow-minded and too-serious a student of Sufism, and that this had cost him so very dearly. At one point, it cost him his sanity, and in a terrible knock-on effect it had alienated him from his friends, his colleagues at work, his family, his wife, and it had eventually cost him his marriage. And yet, at the time, it had felt like the right thing to do.

It all stemmed from a letter he had written to Shah’s Society for Sufi Studies. It was eighteen months before he’d received a reply, from someone who signed their name as G. M. Adamson, and in the terse reply it had been pointed out that he had a chequered past – and this was before he’d sent them a list of his previous interests, as requested, and a copy of his curriculum vitae (a CV or résumé). The latter would clearly document his underachievement in his Ordinary Level (O Level) exams, the gut-dropping failings in his Advanced Level (A Level) exams, and the unmitigated disaster at a college of further education.

And, as his inner promptings had warned him so clearly, years previously, that was in turn due to a fall from grace: drinking too much, smoking and spending his time dazed and confused under the influence of cannabis and LSD.

But back to that reply, which might even have been typed out by Shah himself: To this terse reply had been added an admonition that would remain with him for the rest of his life,

deeply etched into his psyche, along with the drive to do better and turn his life around: “I don’t think I need to tell you that half-hearted study does nobody any good.”

If his life had been guided in any way, then up until he first encountered Shah, it was surely dominated by Fate. Only recently had he made a deliberate attempt to re-broaden his interests and had Destiny begun to play an active role in his life. And, then again, in spite of appearances, had his life actually gone the way it was meant to go, so that he would learn things through trials, tribulations and suffering that he otherwise might not? Or was that just rationalisation and wishful thinking on his part, and in reality life had been one wilful cock-up after another?

°Who knows,° Louie concluded at length, having been still lost in thought about the possibility of real magic, and as yet blissfully unaware of the sad fate that would later befall him. Oh, if he only knew then what he knows so well now! And yet, in a sense, he already did. Unbeknownst to him, the seeds had been planted, and they were already beginning to germinate. There would be rose blossoms for sure, but also stinging nettles and poison ivy.

Louie sucked in his breath and turned his attention back to the present moment and to the writing. Intent on striking while the iron was still hot, he quickly put pen to paper.

The Writer and the Creative Daemon

In *The Lucian Uprising*, the author Winifred Rawlings talks of her writing process, and this is not unlike my own. She doesn’t mention the involvement of a creative daemon or guiding spirit or other unseen muse in the process, nor does she offer a psychological explanation, but I think that she would be kindly disposed to such an idea. The benevolent, mythological daemon is certainly not to be confused with the malignant demon of Judeo-Christian belief systems. Anyhow, here’s what Mrs. Rawlings has to say on the matter:

“The final thing that I’d like to mention before we

move on and before I forget, is that when I write, I don't plan it out as do many who write to patent formulae. Though I've tried, that approach just doesn't seem to work for me. Very often, indeed most often, I'm not at all sure where the words come from; or for that matter, even a good share of the subsequent copy editing. Certainly not from the conscious mind. The words just seem to appear in my mind and write themselves of their own accord.

"The writer never seems to sleep. I've lost count of the ideas and storylines that have come to me while sitting on the throne, or in the middle of the night; ideas that I always think I'll remember when I wake up in the morning and, over and over again, have been singularly unable to recall. I take a pen and paper to bed, and go to bed determined to stir myself and write the ideas down, but once asleep that resolve seems to evaporate, and I wake up frustrated by my weakness and incompetence.

"You could say, in a way, that I'm not actually a writer, though perhaps I might be called a recorder? And when I come to edit the work afterwards, it's not so much the writing which I correct as the faults in this recording. Or perhaps I'm merely an actor learning and reciting her lines? Some have asked whether I'm a medium, but that's not a term I care to use: it has so many unfitting and bizarre metaphysical connotations. So I call myself a recorder. I just happen to be one of those holding the pen, that's all."

13. Once Upon a Time

Louie had this piece safely filed away for almost fifty years, and by the time it again saw the light of day, it had become hopelessly outdated, so he recently edited it, applying much red ink, to bring it more up-to-date for a twenty-first century audience.

It was startling how life had changed in those intervening years; and even more startling how he had changed with it, though this was largely imperceptible to him at the time. It is as if, according to the blueprints of the plan, his “sealed orders”, he simply wasn’t meant to know; that the details were “on a need to know basis”, and that quite clearly he didn’t need to know.

It’s even more startling to find that the pace of change was becoming so fast, and things were getting so bad, that the piece would require regular updates to avoid passing its sell-by date.

And, speaking of things becoming so bad and the machinations of the opposition being so evident, Louie did wonder whether this might be one of those critical times in history when sensitive types and other reservists were called forth to awaken from their slumber and come to the aid of our humankind.

°This, too, is the story of Mushkil Gusha, Remover of All Difficulties,° came an inner prompting. °And we must always remember and give our thanks.°



Once Upon a Time, Before We Ran on Clockwork

ONCE UPON A TIME, not so long ago nor a thousand miles away, life was a lot simpler and far less regulated and we didn’t rush around like clockwork soldiers or rats on steroids.

If you go back fifty or sixty years, to the 1950s and 1960s, we were quite content if our parents bought us some packs of Lego building bricks, an Action Man doll or Thunderbirds pyjamas for

our birthday or for Christmas. We weren't all fired up by the media to demand all the latest, must-have gadgets; we didn't spend our time glued to television screens, computer monitors or mobile phones; and these machines didn't use us, we used them. Instead, we'd go off on wholesome family outings and play outside with our friends, with far less fear of being molested or abducted by some pervert. In those days, there was a far more neighbourly and community spirit.

Back then, our play and our everyday lives weren't hampered by the over-zealous implementation of often-ridiculous health and safety regulations. If you fell over and hurt yourself (perhaps because a good neighbour had thoughtfully cleared the snow from the path outside their door), you wouldn't call in a solicitor and take the matter to court to obtain compensation, you'd simply clean the wound and stick an elastic plaster on it, or seek medical attention. Period. And we weren't as obsessed with cleanliness and beauty products in those days as we are now. A bit of muck probably did us good, because it allowed us to build up our own immune system, rather than becoming reliant on medicines.

Perhaps the greatest changes in our recent history came about with the Industrial Revolution. But it wasn't just the introduction of machinery that brought grief to casual and skilled manual workers and their families. The humble mechanical clock, which was mainly introduced in towns to further regulate the lives of industrial and commercial workers, also caused great change. And of course, industrialization brought about further regulation by the introduction of two further classes of workers: the overseers (who often actually would have an office with windows looking down on the shop floor) and management. Prior to the introduction of the clock, people's lives – though often harsh – were more carefree in the sense that they could largely choose for themselves when they'd get up, when they'd eat, what they'd work on, when they'd finish work for the day, and when they'd dance and drink themselves silly. And if you asked someone what time it was, they'd maybe reply "two more logs till lunch."

Of course, we've made some wonderful advances over the years, notably in the fields of medicine, science, technology and

education. Therefore, it would be wrong to generalize and call those days “the good old days” without noting just how hard life could be for those out of work or struggling on a low income or at times in need of medical or surgical intervention before the advent of antibiotics, vaccines and effective anaesthetics. One only has to read Dickens to get a taste of the grim reality of these former years. And, thankfully, these days we are generally less authoritarian, more broad-minded and more accepting of differences in others.

However, our lives are becoming more and more regulated and run on clockwork or quartz crystals these days. If you walk down town, your every move is likely to be recorded by CCTV cameras on the high streets and in many of the shops. If you use a mobile phone, your every move will be recorded as the phone syncs with nearby base stations, or whenever you browse the internet. And just recently, there have been plans to introduce ill-thought-out legislation to record every communication by phone, text, email or internet.

If you use your credit or debit card, your transaction and location will be recorded. If you walk down many town streets, you’ll see that council workers have painted parking spaces on every available stretch of road or empty space and installed parking meters or parking payment machines, and you’ll see traffic wardens patrolling these same roads to impose penalties for non-compliance; even charging you to park outside your own house or whilst carrying out work at premises. Many hospital authorities now charge patients and visitors to park in their grounds, and some have actually had the audacity to attempt to charge their own staff for parking whilst at work. If you smoke, you’ll probably have seen other uniformed inspectors patrolling the streets and local businesses, to make sure that the regulations outlawing smoking on premises are not being flouted, and issuing penalties for non-compliance.

More and more the advertising and social media are creating passive consumers, and that’s the way they like it. More and more they are playing on, or actually inventing, new hopes and fears to entice these consumers to buy their often unnecessary products.

Gone are the days when if something broke, you fixed it. These days, products are designed to fail not long after their warranty ends and, having no user serviceable parts, they are designed to be thrown away when this happens; and models are quickly superseded by something yet more desirable and rendered obsolete. This is all a part of the Big Con or, as some say, the Big Lie.

And of course, we're slowly but surely losing touch with nature. Even childbirth is becoming less of a natural event and more of a production line, these days. If there is any possibility of complications, then doctors will advise a Caesarean section; and some women are simply opting for a section or for an epidural anaesthetic for purely personal reasons. More and more are being conned into believing that they must have breasts that make them look like a blow-up rubber doll; pouting lips like Mick Jagger; even a designer vagina (I kid you not). More and more people, even children, are being prescribed psychiatric drugs. And some day we're going to find out that the chemicals used in plastic products; in the manufacture, enhancement, preservation and packaging of food; in our drinking water; strewn throughout the oceans, and in the food chain, are more dangerous, even catastrophic to us than many now think.

Conspiracy theories abound, of course, about plans to tag the population using radio-frequency identification (RFID) chip implants. Well, the technology is already there and some companies actually want to allow consumers to volunteer for such implants. And in the UK, soon pet dogs will have to be registered and have a chip implant fitted. So this possibility is really not so far away.

In the world in which we live, as yet things aren't that bad (meaning that they could get a whole lot worse), at least in democratic countries, but in the Hive depicted in *The Dissidents: A novella*, the New World Order isn't just a conspiracy theory, it's already a reality.

14. Wisdom and Common Sense

“They haven’t got the sense they were born with,” Louie’s father would so-often lament, with an angry shake of his head, as he perused the sensational reports in the pages of the daily snoozepaper.

°Your father’s not half-wrong, of course,° he told himself. °He’s caught a scent – or in this case, an odour – and his sniffer is fully operational. And kindly note that you are in danger of regression. It’s not healthy to keep playing these variations of the same old blame game.°

This was true enough, of course, but his father was apparently unaware of the deeper meaning of his own words: “the sense one is born with”, that is, prior to a creeping forgetfulness of one’s true origins and the real meaning diffused throughout – even coexistent with – everyday life. A subtle dimension to life, if you like. Like Dark Matter occupying the spaces between the atoms that make up the as-yet largely unknown universe.

°*Inner space* is the final frontier,° the voice chipped in. Then: °But forgive my intrusion. Please don’t let me keep you from your work.°

That was a not-so-subtle dig, and by that he meant the writing, of course.

°Back to Reality. Back to the Here and Now.°

Indeed. Back to “the grind”, which was, by now, no longer a grind, but rather a frequent source of deep joy.

He was reminded of one of Professor Stanley Unwin’s strange utterances that he’d once learnt by heart to recite to his bemused classmates:

Now, of cause like all real-life experience storie, this also begins once a polly titto.

And Happiness Stan, whose life evolved ni

ephemeral colour dreamy most, had his pure existence
and this being a deep joy of the multi-colour of the
rainbold.

Oh yes. His home's a Victoriana Chari bold, this is a
four-wheel folloped ft-ft-ft out the back grove.

Now, as eved on his deep approachy, his eye on the
moon.

All-time sometime deep joy of a full moon
scintyladen dangly in the heavenly bode.

But now only half!

Oh blow your cool man he do this deep thocus, what
is the folly of this half diapering of the moony most.

And as the light d discintyladen changed through
timely most, stop it still and he did a deep thocus.

What absolutely smash and flaked he was.

So, gathering all behind in the hintermost, he ploddy-
ploddy forward into the deep fundermold of the
complicadent forry to sort ni this one out matey

Where at mand he thocus where at mand. Oh Dear.

“Deep joy!” indeed, though as you might imagine, Louie’s
amateur recitation had gone down with his classmates like a lead
balloon, although they had at least been polite enough not to
interrupt and make him lose his place in the chain of thought.
That came as a big disappointment, because at the time he really
believed that he had “aced it”. Had he not been so certifiably self-
conscious at the time, he’d have liked to have been an actor. But
then that was the equivalent of saying “if this water wasn’t so
wet.” And, boy, was he so “wet behind the ears” in those days –
that is, naïve and inexperienced. So, sadly, as with so many other
opportunities in life from which he was cut off, this was simply
not going to happen. No happy ending. Just “end of story”.

But thank God he’d found himself a viable niche in writing,
even if he were never destined to win a prize. Except perhaps a
booby prize (a prize like a wooden spoon or a chocolate teapot,
given to the person who comes last in a competition). Which
reminded him of why he favoured cooperation: because he so

hated, and fared badly in, competition with others. He could still see the word “Loser” indelibly tattooed across his forehead, and even that had lost its colour, though it was fading with age.

Still, thank God for writing, though of course this was decades before the advent of self-publishing (except for older writers who perhaps had a limited edition printed privately) and well before the droves of young people who jumped on that bandwagon. Back then, it would be called “vanity publishing” and looked upon with considerable disdain.

There came an impatient cough.

°All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy,° he retorted. Then: °Okay, okay, I get your message. Back to work it is then, Mister Slave Driver.°

°Master Slave Driver, if you please, Louie.°

°Yeah, yeah. Whatever.°

He shuffled his backside on the padded wooden chair at his desk, to make himself comfortable.

°Okay, so let’s have a closer look at wisdom and common sense,° he decided. Either that, or the topic had already been decided for him.

Time to turn off his Personal Computer, and the many distractions this new-fangled gizmo posed.



Wisdom and Common Sense in the Sufi Way

In *Learning How to Learn: Psychology and Spirituality in the Sufi Way*, the writer, thinker and Sufi mystical teacher, Idries Shah wrote:

There is no wisdom where there is no common sense:
it cannot under those conditions find any expression.

In response to this quote, in a recent discussion, a friend wrote: “We are, as Al Ghazali points out in his *Niche for Lights*, surrounded by symbols and metaphors in our ‘everyday life’ that

potentially, if looked at carefully, can act as a bridge to higher realities i.e. ‘the metaphorical is the Bridge to the Real’ but if we cannot understand those metaphors or symbols in their most ordinary sense and what they mean in commonsensical terms, it will do us little good to ‘fly’ toward the ‘esoteric’.”

Whilst I agree with that up to a point, and agree with the need to first carry out the preliminary work of learning how to learn before moving on to higher things, I’d still like to take this further.

Shah’s use of the term “common sense” might not be quite what we think it is. When people say that “you haven’t got the sense you were born with”, this perhaps comes a little closer?

Have you come across a phenomenon which we might call “parallel conversations” before? What do I mean by that? I mean where one thing can be said at a rational and everyday level, and yet something else, some other message or signal, modulates that basic carrier wave.

So, for example, let’s say it is your birthday and someone sends you a lovely and witty birthday card, on which is the image of a male with tussled hair and a slackened and displaced tie, obviously enjoying himself at a celebratory party. That is the outward meaning. But the card might also convey other meanings (to different people). If the recipient had a problem with drink, for example, which might be of concern to the sender, either at a conscious or subconscious level, then it might convey other messages to the recipient at psychological or emotional or subconscious levels.

Or someone might use a metaphor or a common saying (either knowingly or unconsciously) such as “There’s no point in mending fences while the wind’s up”, which might rationally fit in with a physical task that they were carrying out at home over the weekend, and yet might convey other meanings to whomever they were talking to.

Shah actually organized a meeting and he had two guys up on stage talk about whatever came into their minds. Then they asked the audience what the conversation meant to them, and each could relate it to different things that applied to them, that were in

their minds at the time or in their lives. The details were very different, but those details nevertheless fitted a broader pattern or template.

Of course, this will sound like – or even be – madness to one, and yet perfect sanity to another.

At the basic level, then, common sense means simply “common sense”, just like it says on the tin. But I think in the upper reaches, it is the ability to communicate using a shared, subtle or hidden language, and to act (without the intervention of thought-out purpose) in accordance and harmony with what the Sufis call the Necessity or the Design. And in part, Shah’s works help one to learn that language and to sensitize one to it. The program is one of “attunement”, “mutual induction” and “resonance” (initially under direction) far more than instruction; of something that is “caught” more than taught; of unlearning as much as learning; of “know how” more than know what, about which there is – and can be – no linear A to Z. It is a journey of self-discovery and a re-awakening into an enhanced reality.

Making use of the language of the heart, however, is perhaps not easy, as the thing can be distorted by all manner of human limitations and by delusions, and it also requires one to be able to discriminate between the false, the spurious and the real and also the level from which such things are emanating (since everyone is capable of acting as a receiver/transmitter/transceiver to a greater or lesser extent and with varying degrees of clarity). Is the communication, for instance, head to head or heart to heart? And, when faced with often conflicting advice from apparent “sensitives”, which advice most closely accords with one’s real needs and the needs of others (requiring one to be master of the option: to do what is right or what has to be done)?

So clearly, one’s first need is to carry out the preliminary work of learning how to learn, and the first stages of familiarization and sensitization, before venturing into deeper and more esoteric areas ... and that is the vital subject of most of Idries Shah’s work, which he conveys through lectures, lateral thinking, counter thinking, the challenging and examination of assumptions, poetry, multi-layered teaching tales, anecdotes and

jokes.

15. Ancient Wisdom for Modern Times

Again, this is a piece written much later in Louie's life, though still during the main phase of his study of the Sufi Way, yet long after Shah's death in 1996, so it's included in this section, prior to his branching out into other fields of study.

After a great many years of solitary study, and with few people he knew in what we commonly call "real life" who had the slightest interest in such matters, though he would later encounter many more with the advent of the Internet, finally he found the opportunity to physically meet with like-minded people on an occasional basis. Occasional by necessity, because he wasn't a particularly social animal, and due to the expense of long-distance train journeys and hotels.

Alas, however, he felt like a fish out of water at these events and, embarrassingly clamming up or getting all tongue-tied, he again retreated from such supposedly "real world" encounters. The jury is still out on whether this was the emotional acceptance of humiliating defeat or a rational appraisal of his strengths and weaknesses. Either way, he knew what allowed him to feel comfortable, and what made him feel distinctly edgy and strained.

Above all, he was acutely aware of how other people, including many who didn't have an overtly spiritual bone in their body, so often "had their shit together", and cared for one-another, far better than he. Some of them might simply be "naturals", as Robert Graves alluded to in his introduction to *The Sufis*. Meanwhile, he was still so rough around the edges. Perhaps, in some ways, rotten to the core. Yes, sometimes and in some ways, Louie despised himself.

And then there was the matter of being able to handle the "energy" – or rather, energies of varying wavelengths – present at such gatherings, which at the time was a little more than he could comfortably or safely handle, without suffering overload and

perhaps blowing a few “fuses” or tripping his “circuit breakers”. This is something that he was slowly but surely building up capacity to handle, but at that time, he was still feeling rather fragile. Sensitivity is a fine thing, but it sometimes comes at great cost.

One thing that Louie vividly remembered, though, was the night before he attended his first lecture and workshop. That night, he had a lucid dream in which he met a young lady with long blond hair and glasses with circular silver frames (like the ones that John Lennon used to wear). He felt instantly attracted to her and he found himself laid on the ground and pulling her down on top of him.

“You’re rather forward, aren’t you,” the lady remarked, and at this point he abruptly woke up.

The very next day, as he took his seat ready for the lecture to begin, Louie noticed a young lady sitting on the front row, ahead of him, and when she turned her head to one side, he was pleasantly surprised to see that she was, indeed, wearing a pair of glasses with round silver frames – just as he had pictured her in his imagination.

As Jacob Kowalski would later remark in the film *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*: “What are the odds of that?” and also (boggle-eyed): “I ain’t got the brains to make this up.”

Furthermore, as Louie discovered later, the lady was none other than the wife of the lead speaker, and he actually took the opportunity of briefly chatting with them in “real life”.

That was to be the first of a whole series of lucid dreams he had, after many years where such encounters were conspicuous by their absence; as, too, had been his “inner voice”. His years in the wilderness, as he referred to this apparently barren, wayward period in his life. Yes, he’d served his self-imposed sentence, and he was still so full of remorse. ...

°Anyhow,° a familiar voice prompted him, with a polite cough.

Anyhow, this was a strange phenomenon that Louie would later refer to as “Night School”.

What had Shah written in *The Way of the Sufi*?

Many of you who have been at my school think that you have been taught by me. In actuality, you have been physically present in our assemblies, while you were being taught in another assembly.

Some things really are stranger than fiction. Thank God and His Good Lady.



The Sufi Mystics: Ancient Wisdom for Dire Modern Times

Just over fifty years ago, in 1964, the writer, thinker and Sufi teacher Idries Shah's major work, *The Sufis*, was published. Writer and later winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature 2007, Doris Lessing, writing in *The Washington Post*, described the work as "a seminal book of the century, even a watershed," and the poet Ted Hughes wrote that "the Sufis must be the biggest society of sensible men on Earth." Men and women, that would be. At the time of his death, in November 1996, Shah's thirty-or-so books on travel, philosophy, psychology and spirituality had sold over 15 million copies in a dozen languages worldwide.

Although others had come before Shah, such as the Sufi teacher Hazrat Inayat Khan, at the time Shah wrote his first work popularising the subject, the Sufi Way was largely unknown outside of specialist academic and Sufi circles. The closest many had come to Sufism would possibly be to have read the tales in *One Thousand and One Nights*, which were actually of Sufic origin and designed to surreptitiously convey certain teachings and survive through their popularity.

Many of Shah's books have teaching tales scattered throughout them, or are collections of such tales, which have multiple layers of meaning that can be revealed like the layers of an onion, rather than the simple morals that we have become accustomed to in the West, via the likes of Aesop. Some, such as the tales of the folksy philosopher and wise fool, Nasrudin, use

humour as a vehicle.

According to the Sufis, a wholly scholastic or logical approach to study, or closed thinking, is restrictive and ill-advised, and this is preserved in one of Nasrudin's jokes:

Nasrudin, ferrying a pedant across a piece of rough water, said something ungrammatical to him. "Have you never studied grammar?" asked the scholar.

"No."

"Then half of your life has been wasted."

A few minutes later Nasrudin turned to the passenger.

"Have you ever learned how to swim?"

"No. Why?"

"Then all your life is wasted—we are sinking!"

I know you've probably heard this tale before, perhaps a hundred times or more, but it bears repeating.

What the Sufis advocate instead, as correctives, are the development and use of perception and intuition, and learning a practical skill which they technically term "swimming". One of the aims is to awaken what Shah calls our vestigial organs of higher perception, which will help us in our quest toward Truth.

The Sufis talk of finding a hidden treasure of inestimable worth, but since it is buried under a mountain of misbelief and conditioning, a lot of digging has to be undertaken first, a preliminary phase which Shah refers to as learning how to learn. To use an organic metaphor: first of all, the ground has to be cleared of dead wood, undergrowth and weeds before the seeds can be planted; then the seeds are watered and grow out of the ground, and into the air, to be warmed by the sun; and finally they come to fruition and may be harvested. That sequence of psychological and development steps, then, follows the ancient and misunderstood formulation of Earth, Water, Air and Fire; and with Spirit as a fifth element. The Sufi materials help clear the ground and scatter those seeds, in the mind and heart of the seeker, and the teacher provides the "water".

Or, to put it another way (as the Sufis so often do), imagine a

princess locked in a dungeon and placed under guard. That is our common plight. It is possible to use the Sufi stories to smuggle hidden messages to the princess, who represents our heart or a higher part of us, via those unsuspecting and greedy guards – guards who are equally a part of our own makeup. By establishing a common language and a secret dialogue, messages can in turn be smuggled out about the princess's plight. To cut a long and involved story short, by such means, the princess can be freed from the dungeon and regain her rightful place.

So who are the Sufis?

Many would say that Sufism – a word actually coined in the West in the nineteenth century – is a stream of Islamic mysticism or, in a certain sense, the Heart of Islam. Shah and others, however, would aver that the Sufi Way, or Path of Love, is universal and pre-dates Islam, even that religion itself has been used as one of a number of possible vehicles. It might be described as the Heart of all true religion, though it grew to maturity and blossomed in the classical era of Islamic culture. Classical Sufism had many practitioners, followers and sympathisers from all walks of life, such as the Persian poet and hagiographer Fariduddin Attar; the Andalusian polymath Avërroes; novelist, poet and playwright Miguel de Cervantes; the Islamic scholar, poet and philosopher, Ibn Arabi; the poet and Persian polymath Omar Khayyám; the Persian poet and theologian Jalal ad-Din Rumi, and St Francis of Assisi. Both Islam and Sufism had a profound influence, in architecture, the arts, science, culture and so many other ways, in Europe and Christendom, especially during the Middle Ages.

According to Shah, Sufis are those who have realized, and submit to, Truth, and those who are still learning (or unlearning a great deal of their social and cultural conditioning), are called dervishes and seekers after Truth (or, some might say, Essence, or the Source, or God, or the One). But to even call oneself a dervish – let alone a Sufi – would be a rather bold and audacious claim.

In more modern times, those drawn to or influenced by the

culturally rich, diverse and tolerant Sufi Way, include in the West: poet and diplomat Sir Richard Burton; leading politician Winston Churchill; actor James Coburn; historian William Dalrymple; professor of psychiatry, Arthur J. Deikman; popular poet, novelist, critic and classicist, Robert Graves (who wrote the introduction to Shah's *The Sufis*); diplomat and economist Dag Hammarskjöld; award-winning novelist Doris Lessing; psychologist and pioneer in split-brain research, Robert Ornstein; writers J. D. Salinger and Alan Sillitoe; writer, broadcaster and consultant on psychology and human belief systems, Pat Williams; and animation director, Richard Williams.

Shah removed much of the cultural accretions, emotionality and religious “trappings” (and I use the word advisedly) from the projection of the Sufi Way that he brought to and seeded in the West, describing it as a holistic action-philosophy and presenting it, in part, as a traditional science or psychology, and at times using humour as a vehicle for truth. In other words, presenting it in terms that those in the modern West might more easily understand and take on-board.

Since Shah first wrote *The Sufis*, there has been great upheaval in the East. Whereas many of the classical Sufis were polymaths, knowledgeable and often excelling in a wide range of fields, with the rise of fundamentalists in Islamic countries, such a broad and liberal education has been replaced by narrowly-focussed studies in religious schools or madrasas, and increasingly these young people are being actively radicalised. This really is the antithesis of both Islam and the Sufi Way. They hopelessly and misguidedly misinterpret and hijack the letter of the law, and are oblivious of the essential spirit of that law.

More recently, the fundamentalist Islamist terrorists of the Taliban, Al-Qaeda and Daesh (unfortunately and insultingly dubbed “ISIS” or “Islamic State”), have destroyed so many cultural treasures such as the Buddhas of Bamiyan, libraries, Sufi shrines and other UNESCO World Heritage sites in places like Timbuktu. They have imposed terrible restrictions and barbaric practises on populations in their thrall, and the most notable victims are women and girls, who have had so many of their

freedoms and basic human rights taken from them.

In the East, then, from where Idries Shah originally brought the Sufi materials, much of that noble and ancient heritage is being lost; and in the myopic and amnesic consumerism and neoliberal capitalism of the West, that newly-rediscovered heritage is in danger of being forgotten and lost once again.

The Idries Shah Foundation

It is against that backdrop that The Idries Shah Foundation was launched as an educational and cultural charity, superseding Shah's earlier charity, the London-based Institute for Cultural Research (ICR).

At the penultimate Annual General Meeting of the ICR in 2012, Director of Studies, Saira Shah, had this to say of the changes:

Idries Shah's work is entering a critical period: it is becoming forgotten. It is getting hard to maintain or create interest in it among the general population.

In the West, the type of interest that exists is unsuitable: already people are taking selections of his work and offering 'teachings' from it. Because his work has not yet entered the canon, where it is remembered in total, there is now a danger that only misrepresentative selections will survive – and that his legacy will therefore be lost.

In the East the situation is possibly even more bleak. The original stream from which Shah drew his material is drying up. Islam is becoming more and more extreme and it is being forgotten, even by Muslims, that there is a centuries' old tradition within Islam that teaches people how to think for themselves, to use humour and common-sense, to ignore externals and, through developing their inner selves, to realize their full human potential.

Between 2014 and 2020, the Foundation aims to re-publish

paperback, ebook and audiobook editions of Idries Shah's books in English and other Western languages, together with some limited editions. They also aim to translate the works into Arabic, Dari, Pashto, Urdu and Turkish, and make them readily available throughout the world – and especially in those Eastern countries where the original streams of Sufism are in such grave danger of being corrupted or lost, and where narrow-minded and violent fanaticism has taken hold. The first book they published was *The Sufis*, timed to coincide with the fiftieth anniversary of its original publication (1964–2014).

One of the first things that The Idries Shah Foundation did, as Shah's Octagon Press was superseded by the Foundation's new publishing arm ISF Publishing, was ship 32,000 of Shah's books and related Eastern classics, for distribution to schools, universities and libraries in the Shah family's original homeland, Afghanistan. Nobel Laureate for Peace 2014, Malala Yousafzai wrote in support of this initiative, that "The Idries Shah Foundation is doing a commendable job by sending thousands of books for children in Afghanistan. This war-stricken country could be healed by books and learning. Reading makes a nation great and the books sent by The Idries Shah Foundation will really help."

A huge task lies ahead for the people in the countries where the lunatics have taken over the asylum, and also of course for the millions of unfortunate refugees, and for the countries where acts of terrorism are being carried out, but it is charitable efforts such as this – and initiatives by other agencies such as the Institute for the Study of Human Knowledge (ISHK) in the United States, the Institute for Cross-cultural Exchange (ICE) in Canada, and Books With Wings in Canada and the UK – that will make a vital and welcome difference to people's lives, and children's lives in particular.

As the exemplary activist, Malala Yousafzai spoke so eloquently at the United Nations Headquarters in 2013: "Dear sisters and brothers, I am not against anyone. Neither am I here to speak in terms of personal revenge against the Taliban or any other terrorist group. I am here to speak up for the right of

education of every child. I want education for the sons and the daughters of all the extremists, especially the Taliban.”

16. “Why am I here?”

This question often popped into Louie’s mind, all the more so after reading Shah and books by Doris Lessing such as her *Canopus in Argos* sci-fi series, which begins with *Shikasta*, or *Re: Colonised Planet 5, Shikasta* to give it its full title.

A joke popped into his head at this point:

“Knock, knock.”

“Who’s there?”

“Shikasta?”

“Shikasta who?”

“Shikasta spell on me.”

°Oh, dear,° groaned a voice inside him. °Please don’t give up your day job for a career in comedy. Trust me on this: it is not your forte.°

Louis chose to ignore the advice, however well-intentioned.

But yes, Doris Lessing’s works of fiction– or perhaps that should read “works of faction” (fiction based on or extrapolated from fact, shall we say) did, indeed, cast a spell on him.

°Why am I here?° the inner voice gently reminded him.

°Ah, yes. And that raises yet another question: “Why are *you* here?”° he replied. But that would have to wait for another day.

However, Louie didn’t mean something like “I wonder if I was sent down here on a mission?” like the King’s Son, but a few steps back from there to the question of why anything should exist at all, at all.



“Why am I here?”

“Why am I here?” is a question we sometimes ask ourselves.

What if we take a step back from there to the question of “Why is there ‘something’? Why not simply ‘absolute nothingness’, with no conscious awareness of this nothingness?”

I can only imagine that this is because there exists an inherent (and self-evidential) possibility or potential of “something” existing, and able to manifest under the right conditions. This reminds me of Schrödinger’s cat.

In other words, we have not emerged from the ground of some futile void, but from a fertile void, and the presence of an observer, and consciousness itself, may well be two of the requirements for manifestation.

As the famous, mystical Hadith Qudsi, one of the sayings attributed to the Islamic prophet Muhammad, tells us: “I was a hidden treasure and wanted to be known.”



Louie’s mind turned back to the story of the King’s Son, which he’d scribbled a note about to jog his memory, but didn’t want to have to think about, and get distracted by, before writing this short piece. He first came across an abridged version of the story titled “The Precious Jewel” in Idries Shah’s *Thinkers of the East* and a later a fuller version in his *Tales of the Dervishes*.

The King’s Son

Once in a country where all men were like kings, there lived a family, who were in every way content, and whose surroundings were such that the human tongue cannot describe them in terms of anything which is known to man today. This country of Sharq seemed satisfactory to the young prince Dhat: until one day his parents told him: “Dearest son of ours, it is the necessary custom of our land for each royal prince, when he attains a certain age, to go forth on a trial. This is in order to fit himself for kingship and so that both in repute and in fact he should have achieved – by watchfulness and effort – a degree of manliness not to be attained in any other way. Thus it has been ordained from the beginning, and thus it will be until the end.”

Prince Dhat therefore prepared himself for his journey, and his family provided him with such sustenance they could: a

special food which would nourish him during an exile, but which was of small compass though of illimitable quantity.

They also gave him certain other resources, which it is not possible to mention, to guard him, if they were properly used.

He had to travel to a certain country, called Misr, and he had to go in disguise. He was therefore given guides for the journey, and clothes befitting his new condition: clothes which scarcely resembled one royal-born. His task was to bring back from Misr a certain Jewel, which was guarded by a fearsome monster.

When his guides departed, Dhat was alone, but before long he came across someone else who was on a similar mission, and together they were able to keep alive the memory of their sublime origins. But, because of the air and the food of the country, a kind of sleep soon descended upon the pair, and Dhat forgot his mission.

For years he lived in Misr, earning his keep and following a humble vocation, seemingly unaware of what he should be doing.

By a means which was familiar to them but unknown to other people, the inhabitants of Sharq came to know of the dire situation of Dhat, and they worked together in such a way as they could, to help to release him and to enable him to persevere with his mission. A message was sent by a strange means to the princeling, saying: "Awake! For you are the son of a king, sent on a special undertaking, and to us you must return."

This message awoke the prince, who found his way to the monster, and by the use of special sounds, caused it to fall into a sleep; and he seized the priceless gem which it had been guarding.

Now Dhat followed the sounds of the message which had woken him, changed his garb for that of his own land, and retraced his steps, guided by the Sound, to the country of Sharq.

In a surprisingly short time, Dhat again beheld his ancient robes, and the country of his fathers, and reached his home. This time, however, through his experiences, he was able to see that it was somewhere of greater splendour than ever before, a safety to him; and he realized that it was the place commemorated vaguely by the people of Misr as Salamat: which they took to be the word

for Submission, but which he now realized meant – peace.



Very much the same theme is found in the Hymn of the Soul in the New Testament Apocrypha. The philosopher Ibn-Sina (died 1038), who is known as Avicenna in the West, has dealt with the same material in his allegory of the Soul's Exile, or Poem of the Soul.

This version appears in a wandering dervish's transcription from a recital supposedly given by Amir Sultan, Sheikh of Bokhara, who taught in Istanbul and died in 1429.



Louie searched through his old notebooks and eventually found an abridged version of the gnostic Hymn of the Pearl:

The Hymn of the Pearl

When I was a little child,
and dwelling in my kingdom of my father's house,
and in the riches and luxuries of my teachers,
I was living at ease.
[Then] from our home in the East,
after they had made preparations,
my parents sent me forth.
[...]
Then they made with me an agreement,
and they inscribed it in my heart so that it would not be forgotten:
"If [you would go] down into Egypt
and bring [back] the one pearl,
which is in the middle of the sea
surrounded by the hissing serpent,
then you will put on your glorious garment
and your toga which rests (is laid) over it.

And with your brother, our second in command,
you will be heir in our kingdom."

[...]

I went straight to the serpent,
around its lodging I settled
until it was going to slumber and sleep,
that I might snatch my pearl from it.
Then I became single and alone,
to my fellow-lodgers I became a stranger.

[...]

But in some way or another,
they perceived that I was not of their country.
So they mingled their deceit with me,
and they made me eat their food.
I forgot that I was a son of kings,
and I served their king.
And I forgot the pearl,
on account of which my parents had sent me.
Because of the burden of their exhortations,
I fell into a deep sleep.
But [because of] all these things which happened to me,
my parents perceived [my oppression], and were grieved for me.

[...]

And they wrote a letter to me,
and every noble signed his name on it.
"From your father, the king of kings,
and your mother, the governor of the East,
and from your brother, our second in command,
to you, our son, who is in Egypt, peace.
Awake and arise from your sleep,
and hear the words of our letter.
Remember that you are a son of kings,
consider the slavery you are serving.
Remember the pearl,
on account of which you were sent to Egypt.
Think of your glorious garment,
remember your splendid toga,

which you will put on and wear
when your name is called out from the book of the combatants
(athletes).

And with your brother, our viceroy,
With him, you will be in our kingdom."

[...]

I remembered that I was a son of kings,
and my free soul longed for its natural state.

I remembered the pearl,
on account of which I was sent to Egypt.

Then I began charming it,
the formidable and hissing serpent.

I caused it to slumber and to fall asleep,
for my father's name I named over it,
and the name of our second in command (our double),
and of my mother, the queen of the East.

Then I snatched away the pearl,
and I turned to go back to my father's house.

And their filthy and unclean clothing,
I stripped off and left it in their country.

[...]

and my glorious garment which I had stripped off,
and my toga which was wrapped with it,
(from Ramatha and Reken), from the heights of Hyrcania,
my parents sent it there,
with the hand of their stewards,
who, on account of their faithfulness, could be trusted with it.

[...]

I clothed [myself] with it and ascended,
to the palace of peace and worship.
I bowed my head and worshipped him,
the brightness of my father who sent it to me.
Because I had done his commandments,
so also he did what he had promised.

And in the palace of his scribes
I mingled with his teachers,
because he rejoiced in me and received me,

and I was with him and in his kingdom.
And with the voice of praise,
all his servants were praising him.
And he also promised that to the palace
of the king of kings I will hasten with him.
And with my offering and with my pearl,
I should appear with him before our king.



So there you have it. As Shah wrote of the *Precious Jewel* in *Thinkers of the East*: “All wisdom, according to Daudzadah, is contained in the various levels of interpretation of this ancient traditional tale.”

17. Squaring the Circle

Over the decades, Louie had often wondered about the impossibility of the task that Shah had once set him. Yes, the exercise with the camels was never far from his mind. A task which he'd willingly – dare he say “gullibly” accepted?

Well, initially he had attempted to begin reading the written teaching materials with a degree of scepticism, and yet hopefully with an open mind; and later he would become increasingly “hooked” on the ideas presented to him, and “want into” a Sufi circle, or at least a study group: if he could ever find one, that was.

At first he took the materials at face value, unquestioningly, but in later years he felt secure enough to begin questioning what he'd read and measuring it up against his own experience, and not least his own distinct lack of progress, except at the intellectual, emotional and moral levels, the latter involving coming to recognise his depraved self and tackling it with his accusatory self, something he had a whole dung heap of experience dealing with; a mountain full, indeed.

And then, still later, through unofficial and heretical experimentation, he began to find himself bumping up not only against his own limitations, but the opposing views of other students, and also the very boundaries of Shah's island. This latter phenomenon came about because of a great pressure he felt to break out of the intellectual study and in some way get into “real study”, not study *of* the way, but study *in* the way.

There were some major obstacles to that. Indeed, Louie began to wonder if one of two things applied: that he and others were deliberately being squeezed until the pips popped out; or, if something had actually gone wrong after Shah's death, or even with his plans when he was still active, and the Way that he presented was in some way actually blocked. Sure, students like him could bar the doors in their own way, but perhaps the door that Shah offered was itself barred for some reason? Perhaps even

he had fallen asleep at the wheel or succumbed to the Earth Sickness that affects us all?

With that in mind, Louie began to explore other options. As Jimi Hendrix's version of Bob Dylan's song, "All Along the Watchtower" went:

"There must be some way out of here," said the joker to the thief.

"There's too much confusion, I can't get no relief."

The apparent lack of a way out was a personal thing to Louie. Some had "moved on" by converting to Islam, but that wasn't something that appealed to him; nor were any of the traditionalist Sufi schools. Others had found Shah earlier and taken part in real world study groups, and they were happy to just keep on studying, or had found other teachers such as Shah's brother Omar Ali-Shah and later his son Arif Ali-Shah, or had found other schools like that of Alfredo Offidani, or A. H. Almaas and the Diamond Approach. Or they'd switched camps and begun to follow other streams like Buddhism, Zen, the Fourth Way, Freemasonry or the New Age. And many just dropped out and pursued more conventional or activist lives.

One of the troubles was that Shah had set up his own projection and the Sufis as some rather elite community, and he had so much to say about what constituted a real school or teacher and what was likely false. And if you went through the lists, checking or crossing out the many boxes, then about the only school that would fit the bill, short of travelling back in time and studying with a classical Sufi Master, was – you guessed it – Shah himself. Except that he had unfortunately died and left no named successor, other than his books, and the advice to keep reading them.

What a pickle, to put it mildly.

As Gurdjieff is reported to have told the followers gathered around his deathbed: "I leave you in the *merde*." In the shit, that is, if you will forgive the vernacular.

As well as this, there were of course many sceptics and

detractors, not only of Shah but of his students and his would-be or wanna-be students. They'd say things like "You've been studying for – what? – 10, 20, 30, 40, 50 years. And where has it got you, eh? Eh? Nowhere." And there really was no answer to that, other than to simply try to show a good example, and hope that some might sense subtle signs of progress having been made. But no: they wanted to see Gandalf with his whizz-bangs. Unlike Rabia, we couldn't magically produce an onion out of thin air – an incontrovertible act – and later retort: "What? Do you think that God is a greengrocer, or something?"

°Having said that, however ...° prompted his inner voice, and Louie searched his memory.

Then he remembered an incident in his own life, and he had a search through his old notebooks until he found the relevant entry. Yes, there it was, and he could remember it quite distinctly, even all this time later, so it had clearly made an impression upon him (and his friend):

Years ago, after separating from my wife, I was lying down on the floor (since I no longer had any furniture), flicking through a glossy magazine, and I was engrossed in a colour photograph of the Dalai Lama with American photographer and actress, Koo Stark. I was struck by the warmth, vitality and dynamism of the photograph.

At that moment, a large insect like a cricket appeared out of nowhere and landed on that very page (I had bought a house plant a few days earlier and I had it in a basket suspended from a hook in the ceiling, so I guess that's where it emerged from), and not only was I struck by the fact that its colour matched the saffron in the Dalai Lama's robes, and the apparent synchronicity but I had a feeling that the insect was sentient.

I was feeling pretty "high" at the time (not a chemical high) and when a friend came round later, I can't remember what the conversation was that we had, but to answer him, I pulled a copper coin out of my pocket and tossed it, calling "heads", knowing – though I

don't know how – that my guess would be right. I tossed the coin twelve times, calling “heads” each time, and the coin landed on heads each time. Then I chickened out, as I didn't want to push my luck.

At that point, my friend got to his feet, went to the passage and returned with our coats, and took me to the local casino (no prizes for guessing why), and he lent me £10 for chips, and also went to get us some free sandwiches before we started to play. At the end of the night, after playing roulette for some time, he left having lost all his money, and when I came to cash in my chips they came to £10 exactly, which I returned to him. It didn't surprise me in the least that my earlier “luck” didn't work when personal profit was involved.

Though perhaps things would have been more poetic had I been able to also compensate my friend for his own losses that night: I'd been preoccupied with the worry of having to pay him back. Things are often so much clearer in hindsight, where we each hopefully have 20/20 vision. In contrast, the Sufi has been called “the Man of the Moment” and does not have to look back in regret.

So that (and various other experiences) have given me a satisfied sense that “there is more to life than meets the eye”, and that life has meaning – though I always try to err on the side of caution and discount anything that could be more easily accounted for as a “mere coincidence”.

To which Louie would later add a quote from C. G. Jung, that: “Synchronicity is an ever present reality for those who have eyes to see.”

And yet still the self-doubt and the apparent lack of progress generally prevailed at that time.

But we mustn't become disheartened or disillusioned and give up yet: because – and this is a big “because”, as well as big “ifs” and “buts” and “maybes” – we're past the point of no return, and almost half-way home.

Anyway. Back to the impossible; squaring the circle. Louie could at least write about it, or act as an open channel, even if he was not as yet in a position to accomplish it. And to do that, he'd try to couch the response to his mathematician friend in technical terms that she would more-fully comprehend. "Speak to each in accordance with their understanding," as the Sufis would say:



Squaring the Circle: The Sufi Way

A friend and colleague who was a mathematician once remarked, in relation to my Sufi studies, that I was "trying to square the circle". What this is in her field of work is to construct a square equal in area to a given circle, a problem that you can't solve using geometry alone, though what she meant, of course, in layman's terms was that I was trying to do something that is considered to be impossible, or even insane.

But perhaps we could at least approximate? The Sufis' use of the octagonal symbol may, in one sense, represent an approximation, or half-way house, for Squarelanders who need to understand circles – the Sufic materials, according to the writer, thinker and Sufi teacher Idries Shah, being half way between "mere literature", shall we say, and active Teaching. In a sense, mesoteric.

In the case of the constant, pi – which is the numerical value of the ratio of the circumference of a circle to its diameter – we simply cannot calculate the exact value of this irrational number, because even if we calculated pi to a million digits (and this has been done, indeed some can even recite the first hundred or so from memory), the answer will still, and always, be no more than an approximation of pi. "It's turtles all the way down," as someone once remarked.

There are ways around such difficulties, however, and we need not despair. pi expressed as the fraction 22/7 will be sufficiently accurate for many everyday uses, while those with more precise needs might use 3.142 or 3.14159. These values will

be perfectly adequate “for most practical intents and purposes”.

In a similar way, even something as simple at first glance as calculating the square root of a number like 2 is not a trivial task, since it is also an irrational number, 1.4142135623730950488016887242097... (*ad infinitum*), but again we can satisfactorily make use of an approximation like 1.4142.

In a sense we could say that the task of attaining Sufihood, or of coming to comprehend the answer to “life, the universe and everything”, is a similarly boundless and irrational task.

Thankfully, there’s another way in which we can tackle such difficulties and it is known as “successive approximation”. Without going into the details, suffice it to say that, given an equation which we can treat as a “black box” – not necessarily knowing how it works but content in the knowledge that it does work, without peering inside – we can quickly arrive at an approximation of our desired answer.

In the case of calculating a square root, even that of a complex number like 4.56789, we initially make an educated guess (here, for example, that the number is going to be greater than 2 and less than 4). So we plug that guestimate into the equation and out pops an answer. Now, this answer will not be the precise answer, but it will be a little more accurate, most likely, than the initial guess with which we seeded the process.

What we do now is plug this new value into the equation, and we repeat the recursive process, and again out will pop an answer that is still more accurate. All we have to do is repeat or reiterate this process perhaps five times (or more, depending on the exact nature of our needs), and we will quickly arrive at a good-enough approximation of the square root (let’s say 2.137), and we don’t even need to resort to a calculator or a computer to arrive at this answer.

One thing to take into consideration (for example in calculating the square root of a complex number), is that the process of successive approximation will not just generate “real numbers” (like 1.234), but also “imaginary numbers” (such as -2.345), and the process needs to be able to set aside the

imaginary, and utilize the real.

What we're talking about here is the mathematical use of successive approximation, but this process of gradual honing is basically a negative feedback process, and it applies to a great many other things, such as steering a boat down the centre of a winding river, avoiding the banks to either side, by making mid-course corrections, robots that follow white lines, and automatic gain (volume) controls on amplification systems. In the same way, it also applies to many things that "home in" on a changing, moving target, such as a bird of prey or a ballistic missile.

And, most of all for our purposes here – though there are other more rigorous approaches possible (utilizing powerful "flux linkage" and magnetic attraction, for example) – this gradual, often heuristic, intuitive orientation, induction, assimilation, and polishing process applies just as much to our progress along the Way, with more than a little help from our friends, who have successfully walked this Path before and returned from a higher sphere, bringing with them a precious secret formula of love-wisdom.

Meanwhile, as the physicists and mathematicians pore over the complex calculations, through experience, "touch", synchronicity and serendipity more than anything, the batsman or woman simply hits the ball for six, right over the boundary, and lovers will simply share a kiss. What was once thought impossible has become second nature for such people.

As for me, I'm still at 22/7, and this is still very much a work-in-progress.

By the way, did I mention that pi is what is known in the trade as a "transcendental number"? Rather appropriate, don't you think.

18. Exercises: The Sufi Way

Another issue that often cropped-up in Louie's discussions was that of exercises, all the more so since Shah did not prescribe the sort of things that his more knowledgeable readers would take to be spiritual exercises, such as *zikr* (or *dhikr*), which was used in Sufi groups. Nor was he in favour of the dervish whirling that had once been prescribed for a certain type of follower, and which had since become a superficial tourist attraction in Turkey. Indeed, he was against all forms of exercise given for all-and-sundry, rather than individually prescribed, following a professional diagnosis, the necessity of the moment, and so forth.

Louie laughed out loud as he remembered a short piece from Shah's *Special Illumination: The Sufi Use of Humour*:

There was once a man who took a correspondence course in muscle-building. When he had finished, he wrote to the firm which supplied it, saying, "Gentlemen—I have worked through the lessons. Please send me the muscles."

And this, in turn, reminded Louie of the need to go beyond the talking to actually "walking the walk". The Sufi, and Shah in particular really did have an answer for everything; something that was both exciting and often challenging, even infuriating at times, especially when used to dramatic effect, or as ammunition and incendiary devices, by his own students. Worst of all were those who acted as Malamatis or itsy-bitsy petty tyrants, blaming others or deliberately stepping on people's corns, when they should correctly have been incurring blame.

The subject of exercises, then, was a proverbial and perennial "bone of contention", and something that Louie was determined to set down on paper, if only to clarify his own thoughts, and to see what inspiration had to say on the matter. So, as ever, it was an open-ended exploration, if you like, rather than a formal

dissertation or the sort of base regurgitation of facts we have come to know as “education”:



Exercises: The Sufi Way

“Did the writer Idries Shah give people exercises?” someone recently asked, while another asked rhetorically, “What is the value of merely accumulating data points from reading?” Elsewhere, someone contributed to this question, as it relates to the teaching stories, an important element of “the course”, like the poetry, that is sometimes neglected.

Please forgive me, I certainly don’t mean to teach our good friends here how to suck eggs, nor preach to the highly experienced and talented choir! But someone did ask these questions.

Zikr (an exercise used in other traditional circles) is a repetitive, iterative exercise in remembrance, that helps you connect, and leads to improvement in certain senses.

In certain early groups, Shah had everyone chant the Tibetan “*Om mani padme hum*” at the commencement of group meetings, just as Alfredo Offidani, a one-time responsible of Omar Ali-Shah, gives a “rosal of the new phase” to all neophytes, so at a certain level there can be exercises given to all-and-sundry, as well as individually-prescribed exercises, such as those involving the *lataif*, higher organs of subtle perception.

Reading Shah is also a daily exercise in remembrance, for many, and he is adept at keeping one on one’s toes. It’s not simply a matter of accumulating data points, though in the early stages there is a necessity to take the raw material on-board. If anything, rather than carrying a large inventory, knowledge arrives “just in time”, without the expensive overhead of warehousing, in response to the needs of time, place, people and circumstances.

We go through four stages in our development: Earth, Water, Air and Fire, and this can be likened to the way in which a farmer or gardener first prepares the ground (at a societal or cultural

level, and also at a personal level), essaying the dead wood and the rocks (such as our unregenerate and base nature, unnecessary religious accretions, erroneous beliefs, intellectualization and opinions – opinions being like arseholes: everyone’s got one and thinks theirs smells sweeter). As I say, first pointing out and essaying the dead wood, and getting the pupil to contribute some of their energy to removing it. Next, and also at the same time, as part of the ongoing process, the materials are introduced as dormant seeds, and with the application of “water” and as the air becomes warmer, and with a vestigial instinct to direct themselves toward the light, these seeds begin to sprout and burrow up through the prepared soil, and out into the open air, where as the “season” progresses, the seeds become plants, gradually mature, begin to fruit, ripen, and are harvested. After which time, the “food crop” may perhaps be ground up, mixed with water, salt and the magical ingredient of “yeast”, and baked into bread, (again, EWA of a higher order), which is in turn eaten, digested and its nutrients assimilated. In the process, there are shocks to the system and other interventions (provoking real change), and these are all, in a sense, a part of the broader set of exercises, and these are the sort of things that are often “individually prescribed” as a result of the unique way in which individuals will approach and interact with the Teaching, or facets of it.

°Earth, Venus, Mercury, Sun?° the inner voice queried, at this point. Now *there* was a thought to conjure with.

Things change as we develop. Some have laughed at students being stuck in a hamster’s wheel, but the apparent circle is in fact a spiral. At a certain stage, we’re going to be carting dead wood around with us; later we may fashion clothes pegs or other artefacts from it, or burn it on a fire while in the process of baking bread; at another stage, we’re going to dump the wood and instead haul water from the well or spring; take the grain out of storage; and so forth, and so it is with the materials themselves and our interaction with them.

All of this requires work and dedication on the part of the seeker, through the application of effort every bit as real as that

encountered in traditionalist exercises. At the expense of technical impediments such as ignorance, vanity, pride, greed, hypocrisy, intellectualization, over-emotion (and so forth), qualities must be developed such as patience; trust (in the Teacher, in oneself, in the process itself, and in what one can glimpse of the Greater Plan or Design); service (working for oneself, for the group, for the Work; etc.); sincerity; remembrance; Love; Peace; Truth, and Unity. Not least, the three Fs of “flexibility”, “fluidity” and “fluency” to help accomplish all this.

Of course only a part of this actually comes from one’s own effort, while the efforts of others, of the Friends, and Grace (such as *baraka*), play a huge and vital role, in essence.

One major factor about the materials and how we are able to benefit from them is that they are richer and more varied and more voluminous than the models we have adopted in our everyday life; and they have been brought to us by someone who is at a higher degree than that at which he is teaching, so he “knows the ropes” and the knots (impediments to progress, as well as useful things).

Sorry, I know you know this already, or that you would beg to differ. I’m just muttering to myself, in reality. To be followed by blissful silence, you’ll be glad to hear.

19. Being How to Be

For quite some time now, Louie had come to see that the materials produced a dynamic tension, and had read somewhere or other that the aim of the teaching was actually designed, in large part, as a means of goading one's donkey down the path, and wearing out various approaches, such as the intellectual and the emotional, as well as smuggling in the seeds and other subtle materials which would eventually lead to further inner developments.

°Do you think that you have been “led up the garden path”?° his inner voice asked.

°That's a distinct possibility,° Louie replied; °though hopefully not without good reason.°

It was possible that he and others were being deceived.

°Though much more likely that we deceive ourselves,° the voice chipped-in.

Yes, it seemed likely that there were more false students than false teachers.

°Back to the “wearing out”,° the inner voice reminded him, and Louie brought his mind back to that topic.

But, of course, he had had so much practice at “soldiering on”, and had become something of a “long-distance writer”, that stubborn mule that he was, he could keep up the pace, however slow that may have been, day in and day out; night and day; and for week after week after week. Did he say “long-distance writer?” Well, it was “long-distance learning” for sure; and, in a sense, a love affair.

At length, however, and that length was measured in more decades than he chose to recall, he began to get sick of all the “Beginning to Begin” and the “Thinking How to Think”. This, even “Seeing How to See” and “Knowing How to Know” were all very well. But surely the path had to be about “Becoming How to Be”, the goal being “Being How to Be”?

This, then, was a further example of bumping up against the

perceived boundaries of Shah's island, and – not only that – actually feeling the walls push back.

So, pen ever-ready, Louie began to lay these fresh thoughts down on paper; hoping that one day, perhaps like Archimedes in his bath, he would have his own “*Eureka!*” moment:



Being How to Be: The Sufi Way

In the course of his lifetime, the thinker and teacher in the Sufi mystical tradition, Idries Shah wrote many books, including *Learning How to Learn* (a preparatory stage of study); *Seeker After Truth*; *The Commanding Self*; and *Knowing How to Know*. Some of these works alternate between more-didactic passages and narratives (which can sometimes come across as “dry” when written down rather than hearing them “live”), poetry, and specially-designed teaching stories which, like an onion, contain layers of deeper meaning. Other works such as *Tales of the Dervishes* are collections of traditional teaching stories.

“Learning how to learn”, “seeing how to see”, and “knowing how to know” are abilities to develop and goals along the way, I would say, toward a more distant and yet immanent goal experienced in the here and now, which is “closer than your jugular vein”, as the Sufis would say — awakening and “being how to be”, which is a way of Being.

One of the tales first introduced in Shah's seminal work, *The Sufis* features the wise-fool Mulla Nasrudin, who is tasked with ferrying a pedant across a stretch of water.

Never Know When It Might Come in Useful

Nasrudin sometimes took people for trips in his boat. One day a fussy pedagogue hired him to ferry him across a very wide river.

As soon as they were afloat the scholar asked whether it was going to be rough.

‘Don’t ask me nothing about it,’ said Nasrudin.

‘Have you never studied grammar?’

‘No,’ said the Mulla.

‘In that case, half your life has been wasted.’

The Mulla said nothing.

Soon a terrible storm blew up. The Mulla’s crazy cockleshell was filling with water.

He leaned over towards his companion. ‘Have you ever learnt to swim?’

‘No,’ said the pedant.

‘In that case, schoolmaster, ALL your life is lost, for we are sinking.’

Regarding grammar and swimming, I liken the long-term effect of the Sufi materials to learning to swim, to ride a bike, or to play the violin.

What were once mechanical actions that involved logical thought processes, get shunted out of conscious awareness, which frees up our mind for other things to enter and to develop. What was once sub-conscious is made conscious (including, for example, flaws that we need to work on), and what was once conscious becomes sub-conscious “second nature” (or “original nature”, if you prefer). Answers come as if out of the blue, without apparent effort, but the processes are still taking place behind the scenes (though modified by familiarity with the materials).

In order to avoid the dangers of falling asleep due to “automisation”, it is important to keep one “eye” on the everyday, differentiated detail, whilst the other is operating in a more integrated, intuitive,* holistic mode, and also to develop the ability to reconcile the two “views”. A third eye, if you like, that acts as a gateway to higher consciousness.

The Sufi does not need such a rationale, however she can provide a rational explanation if that is required by others. I say “without apparent effort”, yet a great deal of Real Effort and Work on oneself is required, in order to progress and later be of service to others.

At first this will reveal itself as sporadic inspiration, which becomes more and more dependable (given patience and trust) and, having set aside impediments such as egotism, hypocrisy, vanity and pride, matures into serenity and quiet satisfaction and fulfilment, rising above emotion (“walking on water”), and intellect (“flying through the air”), on the path to completion.

At least that’s how I see it, in essence, at this moment in time.

The Sufis are unanimous that beyond the books — if they are used at all in a stream or school — you need a Teacher who has successfully walked the Path before. Personally, I would broaden that out to become “you need to be connected” — and that does not necessarily mean being in the physical presence of a living teacher. However, I don’t agree with the view espoused by some of Shah’s detractors and critics of his students, that the written and oral materials are simply “collecting data points” or “warehousing”. The smuggled “goods” are transformed or transmuted (especially through their interaction with, and integration into, one’s everyday experience), and in the process, so is the bearer. I see the reading as being a necessary early stage toward familiarization and attunement, and leading toward other things which culminate in a vacant “purged house”, the entry of something higher,** completion and unity, in which both deeper knowledge and higher love play essential and crucial roles.

It’s just a different way of going about things.

If you have experienced and know the goal of your search, you can devise a means of getting there. Or perhaps I should rephrase that? If you know the object[ive] of your search, you can devise a means of achieving it, and you may retrace your steps and help others along the way.

The Sufi knows and trusts in the process, though the aspirant may find those means rather strange and unexpected. Advice may even appear mundane, such as being requested to simply “keep reading the books”. Shah (and students of his like Doris Lessing) said on many occasions that “the answers to all your questions are in the books.”

One final thing to ponder, before you leave: What do you make of the passage [over water] and the storm itself, that would

sink the boat and drown the pedant, and Nasrudin's ability to "weather the storm"?

Notes

* I prefer the term inner-tuition.

** Such as the descent of *baraka* (divine grace). See the annotation "Qutub" in Idries Shah's *The Sufis*.

20. The Inspired Self, and Intuition

Louie had been beavering away at his studies for many years now – indeed it had taken him far, far longer than he cared to think – and still he hadn’t managed to get his camel over the wall.

That was a reference to a piece in Idries Shah’s *Seeker After Truth*, titled “Intelligence and Obedience”:

Intelligence and Obedience

There was once a Sufi teacher who was approached by two men, who begged him to allow them to become his disciples.

He agreed, on the understanding that they were on three months’ probation.

For nearly ninety days the Master gave them no tasks, told them no stories, invited them to no meetings.

Then, when their time was nearly up, he called the two into the courtyard of his house, and said:

“I want each of you to go outside, where there are camels. Each of you is to take the leading-rein of one camel, and to bring it to me, climbing the wall, and making the camel climb the wall.”

The first disciple said:

“Master, it is written that man must exercise his intelligence. My intelligence tells me that what you ask is impossible, and my good sense tells me that you have only asked this in order to test whether I am intelligent or not, and whether I use my common-sense or not.”

“Then,” said the Master, “you will not attempt to bring the camel over the wall?”

“I shall not,” said the disciple, “I ask forgiveness for appearing to disobey.”

Then the Master turned to the second disciple, and said:

“What is your answer to my request?”

Without a word, the second disciple started to go out of the courtyard, through the gate. The Master followed, motioning to the first disciple to accompany him.

When they were outside the high wall where the camels stood, the second disciple took the leading-rein of one of the beasts and walked it to the outside wall. He then made an attempt to climb the wall, with the camel's rein still in his hand, making encouraging noises to it.

When it was obvious that he could not succeed, the Master said:

“Return this camel to its place and follow me within.”

A few minutes later, when the three men were again standing within the courtyard, the Master said:

“Everyone knows, since the earliest days of humanity, that the Path demands various capacities. These include the use of intelligence and the application of common sense, and also obedience.

“Obedience is as important as intelligence and common sense. Everyone who has ever taught will know that almost everyone will try to use intelligence and common sense in preference to obedience, thus putting these three qualities out of balance. The vast majority of humanity considers that to obey is less important than to think of a way out of a situation. But it is in fact known that none of these things is more important than another, except in the performance. Now we can find men of intelligence anywhere, but where can we find people of obedience?

“The first disciple is dismissed, because he placed too much importance upon intellect. The second is retained, because he did not jump to the obvious conclusion which men tell each other is the best thing to do, and yet which as often as not deprives them of full

capacity.”

He turned to the second disciple and asked him why he had tried to do the impossible.

The disciple said:

“I knew that you knew it was impossible, so there was no harm in obedience, to see where it led. I knew that the easy way out was to say ‘It is impossible, I shall not attempt it because of common sense’, and that only a superficial person would think in that way. Everyone has as much common sense as would be needed to refuse to obey. Therefore I knew that you were testing my obedience and refusal to choose easy options.”

Now, long after Shah had died, Louie was no longer sure whether he should still be attempting to complete the exercise, or whether, by this time, he should have been told to, or volunteered to, stand down, and perhaps openly admit defeat.

It was only later that he would find reference to the wrestling match one had with one’s personalised Angel – a struggle that one could not win, and which would ultimately lead to concession and surrender for one’s own good. But, as they say, that’s yet another story for another day.

He’d tried so many approaches: over, under, around, through, thinking “there is no wall” – you name it. But still he was faced with that confounded, immovable wall, and found himself in a position of what you might call “stuckness”, even experiencing a long Dark Night of the Soul.

Times had moved on, and Louie had, as we’ve mentioned, by now acquired a computer and found a Sufi-related group on the fledgling Internet. For the first time in his life he could hold daily conversations with like-minded folk from all around the world.

There was plenty of talk about Shah’s work being no more than preparatory work, the stage of learning how to learn, as Shah called it, and some dismissed his work altogether as, at best, kindergarten material (that would be Annemarie Schimmel), and at worst the work of a mere channel which does not itself drink, or even a Neo-Sufist charlatan (that would be James Moore, the

Cornish author, and L. P. Elwell-Sutton). And most other schools in the Tradition worked on the heart first, whereas Shah's projection first concentrated on the impediments to progress, things like erroneous thoughts and beliefs, and the Commanding Self, that doggedly stood in the way, all a part of the preliminary stage of learning how to learn.

But due to an interest he had in inspiration, he did wonder if studying, digesting and hopefully assimilating the works, and taking on something of the Sufi mindset, would be sufficient to, shall we say, achieve a critical mass and a possible self-sustaining fusion reaction. That is, was this long-distance love affair sufficient to activate and develop the heart centre, *qalb*, and the inspired *nafs*, the inspired self? This wasn't mere intellectual or idle speculation; it was linked to his own experience as a fledgling writer, and his own mentation. However, he was aware that in this regard, and at that time, he found himself in a minority of one; at best two or three others quietly shared his own or similar heretical (that is, freethinking and perhaps deluded) views. At that stage, Louie had little more than an inkling that such a thing might be possible; if a strangely persuasive and compelling inkling.

Louie flipped back through his notebooks where he maintained a sporadic and largely-disorganised diary, mostly interspersed with odd thoughts that occurred to him, and some little of which made it into the essays he was writing. He always wrote things out beforehand, even if he was going to post them on the Internet, because so very often there would be a glitch of some kind and precious work would be lost in the ether or in "cyberspace" as someone had dubbed it.

Eventually he found the entry that he was looking for:

My take on this – and this is something that "Octarian" [not their real moniker] keeps hitting me over the head with, because it does not meet with his way of working (the "only" way of working, in his mind), is that working with the materials – and not skipping the stories as he tends to do – certainly gets the inspired *nafs*

working, at first sporadically. And I believe they take you further than that, because even at the stage of the inspired *nafs*, the person is still looking back. They've moved on from battering themselves over the *nafs-i-ammara* (the depraved or commanding self), with the *nafs-i-lawwama* (the accusatory self), but they still take pride in "their own" accomplishments, which are in reality gifted to them. The question is whether working with the materials, and on oneself, the thing becomes even more self-fuelling, a fusion reaction, and moves into the area of the heart, the *nafs-i-mulhama* (the inspired self), the *nafs-i-mutmainna* (the serene self); and so forth.

I think that this idea, that the materials and self-work can take you far enough for other things to kick in, was Shah's innovation, his "big gamble", to fit a 21st century community of which very few would actually have physical contact with a living teacher. It goes beyond the need for physical contact with a teacher, in my opinion.

At the minimum, reading all the books several times, and bringing the materials into one's life on a daily basis, one takes on the teacher's mindset ... and more.

He becomes an intuitive guide ... and more.

It starts with Shah, and friends of Shah, and people influenced by Shah, but it needs to broaden out into areas where "Shah" and "Sufis" are unknown, too.

Louie turned the page and read on:

Shortly before he died, Shah is said to have stated that his books form a complete course that could fulfil the function he had fulfilled while alive. But rather than take him at his word, we're in a position to test this possibility against our own perceptions, through direct personal experience. This was reported at a later date by his son, Tahir Shah, in his wonderful book *In Arabian Nights: A Caravan of Moroccan Dreams*.

And, with that in mind, Louie once again took up pen and paper and began to write about his own thoughts on the topic of inspiration and intuition:



The Inspired Self, and Intuition: The Sufi Way

“How will I know if I’m being inspired and intuitive?”

In individual instances, you may every now and again realize that something you’ve thought, or said, or done, was in some way inspired, and you may congratulate yourself on what you take to be **your** inspiration, or you may assign congratulations to some “other”, perhaps someone who has influenced you, or to a psychic Muse.

Overall, however, you may not think “I’m inspired” or “I’m intuitive” and label yourself as such, in the early stages of such mastery. These instances may be few and far between, apparently random, or sporadic, and the process may well be prone to error.

Let’s move on a few years, though, and say that one of your interests is computer programming, which most people would take to be a logical or “left brain” task. After that time, you may be able to look back, and see that in the initial stages, the tasks you set yourself were all very mechanical, approached in a very logical and methodical way, and perhaps that you surrounded yourself with a wall of reference books that you frequently consulted, out of necessity, to “borrow” material, or “just to be sure”. But now, years down the line, instead of being unsure about your abilities, when you are presented with a task, you may know instantly that in some way or other the project is feasible, and even if you don’t yet know how to complete it, you know whether or not you’re likely to be able to find a solution either by yourself or with the aid of others who have already completed similar tasks. While initially it was more a matter of theoretical “know what” (which you can now see is “ten a penny”), now the primary approach is practical “know how”, and you can rest on the assurance that you have successfully completed similar,

complex tasks before, and at the same time you realize that you may have to attempt several different approaches to the task, and often hit “brick walls” that you cannot get over, before you eventually complete the task.

You may also notice, looking back, that many of the linear actions that you took to solve smaller parts of your overall task, have now been replaced by a mental thought or picture in your head of patterns of prefabricated building blocks (just as a chess master will visualize a game-in-play), and that you no longer have to mechanically think about the task, rather that thoughts are presented to you as and when and if you need them (“just in time” or JIT), even that for the most part, you just trust your fingers to do the typing. In the case of an author writing text, you will probably find that the words flow effortlessly from your mind, via your fingers, to the page, and that somewhere, some inner editor / correspondent has done most of the work for you. That is not to say that thought has no role to play, it’s just that thinking has been shunted out of the “left brain” and is now largely sub-conscious. And also, you will most likely find that you still need to step through the code sequentially, and apply logic, in order to debug the code, or look for typos, grammatical errors, repeated words, and also to refine and add to what you originally wrote (again running it past your inner editor and gaining fresh ideas and insights – which in turn generates fresh errors, such as typos, which require yet more painstaking proofreading!).

And there will come a time where, though you may not be able to say “I’m a great programmer” or “I’m going to be a bestseller”, you **will** nonetheless be able to say, “I still have a long way to go, but my patience has paid off”, “I’ve learnt something”, “I’ve changed for the better”; “I am more fluent and fluid”; know that you are being inspired and intuitive; that trust has been established; and also be eternally grateful that you are being helped along the way by something greater, and that we tend to consider “other” — even that you are “well connected”, and well cared for, at a psychic or heart level.



°You’ve come a long way since you were a poxy-faced youth delivering advertising leaflets door-to-door, Louie,° his inner voice piped up, as he put down his pen and settled back in his chair to relax. °But remember that you still have such a long way to go. And you *do* know what that means.°

°I’ve come a long way?° he queried. °Heck, since they don’t give out diplomas or issue stripes to denote one’s rank, let alone medals and robes of honour, for all I know I may still be on probation. Or, for that matter, they might never have accepted me into their school in the first place. I really have no way of knowing.°

Louie pictured the raising of eyebrows, and heard the reply:

°Louie, Louie. What are we to do with you? While it would be foolish to get your hopes up or to inflate your ego, nevertheless I think you know the answer to that – and a few other things besides – deep down, in your heart of hearts.°

Louie sighed. °I’d like to think so, but I still don’t know for sure. The fabled “infallible intuition” that the Sufis supposedly possess as yet eludes me.°

°Everything that you have been through – and yes, I’m aware that you’ve been put through the mangle. You and me both! – may well have been *deliberate*, Louie,° his inner voice responded, placing a particular and deliberate emphasis on the very word “deliberate”.

°What is it that Rumi said about the need to develop higher organs of subtle perception? Think back, Louie. He advised increasing one’s necessity, that’s what.°

That was certainly food for thought.

°Don’t give up hope,° the inner voice consoled him. °Relax and give it time.°

°Give up hope?° he queried. °Actually, I have come to a decision. A painful decision, and yet at the same time an immense relief. It is time for me to give up this “lark” as Doris Lessing once described it, and move on.° He didn’t say it out loud, but that never-ending exercise with the camels had been the final straw – and the pun was fully intended.

He felt his lips purse. °Bit late in the day to be telling me that, isn't it, Louie?°

°What do you mean by that?° he asked. °That I should have consulted you first, to gauge your opinion?°

°What I mean is that by my reckoning you already have moved on, except that you don't know it as yet. Or at least have not, until this moment, accepted the possibility.°

Louie pondered those words for a few moments, and then responded: °Well, let's just say that the long days and nights of "beginning to begin" are finally behind me. I think that even you will allow me that one "quiet satisfaction".°

He looked askance. °Come, come, Louie. I'm not really such a hard taskmaster, am I? You know that I only have your best interests at heart.°

Louie chortled to himself. °No, X, I'm eternally grateful for your company and good sense, as I am for all the help that Shah has given me. He picked me up from the gutter, brushed me down, and showed me a better way of life for which, as I say, I will be eternally grateful.°

°That's the ticket,° the inner voice smiled. Then: °Who is this "X", by the way? I take it that you are referring to your better half; to me, that is.°

Louie frowned. °That's strange. I don't know. It was just a name that popped into my head.°

°Well,° replied his inner voice, I guess you can call me "X" for the time being, though it's not my real name.°

°Hmm? You know I've never thought of you having your own name, real or otherwise,° Louie replied. °I've always thought of you as simple "You". You know, that's most peculiar.°

Then: °So, what is your real name, if you don't mind me asking?°

There was a mischievous little laugh. °That, my son, is for me to know and you to find out!°

A dreadful thought just occurred to him at that moment. °There's just one thing, X,° he began, searching for the right words. °I have this vision in my mind of waking up one day and suddenly feeling very foolish, having discovered to my horror,

that while I was banging the big Sufi drum all this time, I was the only person on Earth who had actually been asleep; that the “joke” had been very much on me, if you get my drift. In other words, I am the one who has been holding up the whole show, all along. The only one not “in” on the joke – or privy to the suffering and tragedy.°

°Perish the thought, Louie. Don’t beat yourself up about such things,° was the only reassurance forthcoming from X – and it was only very minor reassurance.

Then, later that day, perhaps after X had given the matter more thought himself: °Try not to worry, Louie. You’ll earn your wings one day. You mark my words.°

“Try not to worry?” he wondered. If anything, advice like that just made him worry all the more. And he could imagine X berating himself: °I shouldn’t have said that. I should *not* have said that!°

And that, in turn, made Louie worry all the more that crucial facts of life were being withheld from him for some reason.



Louie placed his latest manuscript into the green ring binder and clicked it shut. Well, Jung had his *Red Book* and would later have his black books; and this was Louie’s very own *Little Green Book*. He thought that one day he would title it *Secret Friends*, since that was what this is all about, deep down. Perhaps with a sub-title like – what? – *The Ramblings of a Madman in Search of a Soul*? Yes, that sounded like it would fit him like a tailored glove. And he’d concoct a pseudonym like “H.M. Forester” (having had a quick flick through Shah’s notes on the numerical abjad system).

So let it be. Even “Hail Fellow well met”, and “Blessèd Be”. At that moment, he felt quite intoxicated, though hardly a drop of alcohol or quick suck on a joint had passed his lips in many a moon.

°An’ it harm none, do what thou wilt,° a voice whispered in his head.

Then he went over to the armchair in the corner of his room and settled back to relax and to quietly mull things over in his mind.

He cast his mind back to the times he'd had with Idries Shah, even though he had never met the Master face-to-face.

Louie remembered the time, in a particularly vivid dream, when a sleek black limousine had pulled up at the kerb beside him. A rear door had opened and he saw a colleague inside, one of the few people in real life who shared his interest in Shah, and Shah was there, too, beside him.

"Would you like a lift?" he or Shah had asked, but he had politely declined, since he had "to get back home". Home, that was, to his wife and children.

Only later did he realise that he had foolishly missed a golden opportunity, and opportunities like that did not come around very often.

For crying out loud, this had been *his* dream, and he could have said anything he wanted to, like "Yes! Fly me to the moon / Let me play among the stars" or even "actually, if you just drop me off at the deli, that would be wonderful, thanks." But no, he'd remembered his worldly duty to his wife and kids, as if it were a once and only "either/or" situation; a matter of "take it or leave it."

But, of course, in those days he was still wedded to rationality and domestic responsibility.

In the second dream that Louie recalled, his family were lined up in a study. Shah came in through a concealed doorway in the bookshelves, to their left. He was wearing a thin plastic Macintosh (a temporary coat to keep one dry in rain), and at first Louie thought he was Bhagwan Shri Rajneesh who would later be known as Osho, and he presented a comical parody figure, but then he took off his Mac to reveal a sober grey suit. It was Idries Shah himself.

Shah stood in front of the family and even though he spoke no words, Louie could tell that his profoundly deaf son could understand what he was "saying". When he got to Louie, he said something about them (the family or his students) all getting the

same time. Then he bounced Louie, as if he were on a pogo stick, to stand beside his then wife. At the time, they'd been slipping apart, but alas this rekindling of affection would only be a temporary measure.

A little later, Shah had the family all form a circle, with him inside, at the centre. Louie remembered that the circle was a little askew, and Shah told him that he was "doing some fine tuning". At which point, he awoke.

And then there was a third dream, though of less consequence. Louie remembered entering a room and seeing some people there close to the door, sitting in a circle round a table.

"Do you mind if I join you?" he has asked politely, and they just laughed. Anyway, he entered the room, and shortly after another guest arrived, as if he had just been beamed down from a starship.

The only thing was, the man had arrived in his birthday suit, having neglected to dress for the occasion, and again this caused the other guests much mirth.

At which point, Louie had gone over to a nearby window, opened it, and flown off into some other, unremembered dream.

Louie had many such dreams, especially when his interests broadened and he first encountered talk of the imaginal realm. Most of these early dreams involved carrying out tasks, such as going to a shop to select a teapot, cups and saucers, and having to make calculations and count out change. He had many where he'd be in a tavern and tasked with ordering drinks; his predictable preference being Guinness.

Tasks, that is, that would have been simple in real life and yet which he often felt difficult or frustratingly-challenging in his dreams. That was the down side, if there was one, since his growing frustration would often wake him up. The upside being that, having been suddenly and rudely awoken, he would remember much of the dream, and was thus able to write it down, for future reference.

This, then, was Night School. And, other than Shah and his work colleague, the only other person Louie knew by name at that

time, since she had made a special point of him seeing her name neatly embroidered across the neckline of her clothes, and spelling it out in a dream, was Eugenie.

It was, perhaps, a play on the words “You Genie”. And for the first time, Louie did wonder whether or not this might be the lady behind his inner voice, whom he’d previously pencilled in as “X” for want of a better name.

PART 3: The Esoteric

“Suhrawardi wrote of an initiatic chain, a school of adepts reaching back into the dim past, and which included the fabled Hermes Trismegistus, Zoroaster, Pythagoras, Plato, Plotinus and others. All were informed by the same primal revelation, the *prisca theologia* or ‘primal theology’, which it was his task to resurrect.”

~ Gary Lachman,
Lost Knowledge of the Imagination.

21. The World Teacher

Mind demons had plagued Louie's life during his formative years, though we haven't mentioned them until now, as we didn't want to confuse or misdirect or deter the reader.

In those early years, Louie had scant means of differentiating between the conflicting factions, the "full house" that he had in his head, except an instinct to discount the most crude and derogatory of these voices (the ones who frequently nagged at him, "effed and blinded", and generally put him down). These were entities which he should banish from his mind, or at least turn a deaf ear toward. These, then, he termed his "mind demons".

These mind demons were not, however, to be confused with the more rational and clearly benign "inner voice" who became known first as "X" and later as – perhaps – Eugenie.

In between these two stages, however, Louie had great difficulty in discerning his true inner voice, both amidst the loud hubbub of inner conversation, and between his own ego's wishful thinking and games playing, and his real inner voice. His Self, his Ally, his Angel, his Celestial Twin – whomever and whatever that was.

Louie recalled a small piece by Idries Shah in his book, *The Subtleties of the Inimitable Mulla Nasrudin*, that he'd read such a long time ago. It was the sort of piece that you could read and think that it was of little consequence, or dismiss as nonsense – even the ramblings of a madman – and yet it was so relevant to some of the things that he'd been through:

Radio

When Mulla Nasrudin arrived at the immigration barrier in London, the officer in charge asked: "Where are you from?"

Nasrudin said: "Grrrr ... The East."

“Name?”
“Mulla, sssssss, Nasrrrrgrrudin!”
“Have you an impediment in your speech?”
“Wheee-eee – no!”
“Then why do you talk like that?”
“Pip-pip-pip – I grr – learnt it from English By Radio!”

Which is not to say that the story need mean the same thing – or anything – to you. And this, in turn reminded Louie of a reply that Doris Lessing had once kindly sent him. She could be terse, but she was so very often spot on in her responses:

Doris Lessing once said that she picked up *Seeker After Truth* (having read it several times before) and the first story she read lit up like a Christmas Tree. Mrs Lessing said that she would have found this extraordinary had this kind of thing not happened many times before. This is not to say, she continued, that the story need mean the same thing, or anything, to you.

And then came a momentous event in his life, though at the time it hardly made a timid squeak.

Louie had recently come across the works of Henry Corbin and Tom Cheetham, who is able to usefully interpret Corbin’s dense and difficult writing, and he was especially taken by the idea of the *mundus imaginalis* or imaginal world, an intermediate realm between the everyday physical world and that of spirit.

Then, after a spate of editing at Wikipedia, proofreading, and reading the new Idries Shah anthology, funnily enough, Louie had an inner experience – one of stillness and serenity and the final silencing of any lurking mind demons – and a whole new vista and fresh avenues to explore opened up to him that he couldn’t see before, and he could feel movement in his life once again.

This wasn’t the first time that Louie had had such an experience after wearing himself out through a spell of hard work, and it wouldn’t be the last. But as a word of caution: the

very first time that Louie burnt the candle at both ends and wore himself out, he ended up suffering from a psychotic breakdown and in a psychiatric ward. So, please “don’t try this at home”, as they say.

Actually, that bittersweet and deeply traumatic episode would be forever indelibly etched into Louie’s psyche, and in the aftermath, when he’d finally managed to return to a semblance of normality, he’d written down his experiences in a fictional account titled *Thank You, I Understand*, with a character called Richard “Rocky” Rhodes playing a stand-in role. It had been such a shattering experience that, in spite of his trepidation, even after all this time, Louie thought it well worth reviewing at this point.

Louie left his laptop computer to power-up while he wandered through to the kitchenette to brew a coffee, then returned to log-in and hunt through the filing system and open the Word document. Yes, here was the account, in a chapter aptly titled “Communication Breakdown”. Well, breakdown, breakthrough – it was a potent mixture of the two ...



Communication Breakdown

Rocky [Rhodes] had the old stereo turned up loud. He hadn’t changed the needle on the turntable for a while and the records were consequently a little fuzzy, but he was past caring. He was having a private party, to which only he was invited, and was already three cans short of a six pack, both literally and metaphorically.

Led Zeppelin I, the first album he’d bought and his all-time favourite, was playing on the turntable and, with a can in his hand serving as a makeshift microphone, he was singing away and dancing wildly to the strains of “Communication Breakdown”, telling a girl to stop what she was doing before she drove him to ruin.

Quick pit stop to grab a fourth can from the fridge. He’d stowed it in the tiny freezer compartment and by now it was ice-

chilled. Chilled he was not. He was on heat.

The chorus kicked in as he returned to the living room, about being driven to insanity. The lyrics were so apt, it was almost as if the guys had written this song just for him.

He'd been working himself silly recently: at college all day; working in a local bar in the evening and not getting back home until nearly midnight after shooing away the drinkers, clearing the tables and washing the glasses. The shit in the bogs could wait until bottling up time in the morning. Then he'd be up until gone two or sometimes three, writing away, and up by seven the next day. Rocky had put aside his novel for now and he was sending off a flurry of short stories to magazines. Women's magazines like *People's Friend* provided a decent market, strangely enough, not that they'd accepted any of his work as yet. One or two of the rejection skips which now papered his walls were quite hopeful, though. It was reassuring when editors went out of their way to offer a little constructive advice instead of just doling out the usual, pre-printed shit.

It couldn't go on like this, of course, Rocky knew that, but he was desperately in need of some bread to help pay the bills. He'd gone a bit overboard with his credit card recently and had just received a stropmy letter from the company telling him to cut his card in half, send it back to them and pay off the whole of his debit balance forthwith. For crying out loud, he'd only gone five pounds over the £100 limit. All for the sake of a late night takeaway at the local Indian restaurant: blood sucking bastards. And it wasn't as if he'd got his money's worth, having vomited up the curry ten minutes later. Well, he wouldn't bank with those creeps again. Okay, so the feeling probably was mutual.

°This has to stop,° called a stern voice inside him, °and it has to stop now.°

You think I don't know that? And yeah: it wasn't the girl who was to blame; he was the one driving himself to ruin. Okay, God? You happy with that? Lighten up on me a little, huh? Take this shit out on someone who really deserves it, God.

°Get some sleep,° the voice directed him.

"I've been asleep for most of my life," he countered. "Now is

the time to wake up.”

He rummaged around in the books on the shelf until he found the passage he was looking for. It was in Sanai’s *Walled Garden of Truth*:

Mankind is asleep – men of this world have gone to sleep concerned with what is useless, living in a disordered sphere. And religion itself does not rise above this, it is mere habit and usage, not devotion. Such “faith” is in fact inept. Do not prattle to the People of the Way. Rather consume yourself with shame, like rue, which is burned to avert evil. You are yourself upside down to Reality, and thus have only an inverted “wisdom” and “faith”.

Man should not weave a net round himself. A lion bursts his cage of self asunder.

Amen to that, brother! Rocky closed the book and thrust it back on the shelf. And then he was struck by the memory of one of his lecturers. He’d taken a copy of *The Way of the Sufi* with him that day, with the intention of reading it at break, and having seen the book, the lecturer had snatched it up in passing and was waving it around in the air to emphasize his point, as a devout and pious clergyman might wield the Bible. Was that what had become of him: nothing more than a bible basher?

°Turn your computer off and get some sleep,° the voice strongly advised. He complied without reluctance: the fact was, he’d been burning the candle at both ends and even when he did go to bed, his mind was still racing and he couldn’t get to sleep.

°And don’t forget, you need to eat. You’ve got to look after your donkey.°

Hah! That sounded like Shah himself. Or was it God? Or just him thinking aloud? The voice of reason in a mad, mad world. His inner-tuition, maybe?

There was a Sufi story about a man being warned that there would be a catastrophe and the water would be changed. Anyone drinking it would be driven mad. He stored up water before the event, but in the end he couldn’t bear his isolation any more. He drank the water and became mad like the rest of them.

99% of the population had sold out and drunk that water.

It was the last day of term tomorrow, with the Christmas holidays just around the corner. His father had taken it for granted that he'd be returning home to spend the time with them, especially as his elder brother Ronald was coming through with Leslie, his wife.

Ronald was father's blue eyed boy. He always had been and probably always would be. Ronald couldn't put a foot wrong, at least not in father's eyes, and his high flying exploits had become legendary. And so had his reputation for being arrogant and hot-headed.

°Ronald and Leslie have been very good to you,° he was reminded.

As for Rocky, well, he'd been a mistake from the start. When he'd been born, and the nurse had announced his sex, mother had blurted out "Oh, no: not another boy." Every now and again, with no sense of propriety, his mother would trot out this story to relatives and friends, much to his chagrin. Alas, the finer points of the social graces were lost on his mother ...

°What you see is a reflection of your own lack of grace, young man.°

Rocky nodded absentmindedly, without really taking-in the truth of those words, and carried on unabashed.

... As for mother, she and father had grown hopelessly confluent and co-dependent. Over the years, he gradually eroded mother's self-confidence and ground her down, and she had become little more than a shadow puppet. It had never been Mrs. Mary Rhodes and Mr. George Henry Rhodes in their own right, let alone Ms.: they'd grown up in an age where she was considered to be Mrs. George Henry Rhodes, as if she were worth no more than his other goods and chattels. Sometimes Rocky would hear her chuntering away to herself in the privacy of the kitchen, out of father's earshot. "My sainted aunts," she'd say and "Lord, give me patience" and whisper things about George Henry.

Anyhow, Rocky finally got to bed, but he tossed and turned for ages, his mind frantically going over all manner of strange subjects, before he finally fell asleep. He'd been so over-tired that

every time he nodded off, he'd jerk awake again with a start. Like his soul was attached to a long, thin yet apparently strong rubber band.

In the morning, the strange thoughts had not abated. It was as if someone had presented him with a little silver key to his head – or was it to his heart? To a treasury. A vast underground chamber filled to the brim with the secrets of the Universal One, which explained so much about how life on Earth had turned out. And, more to the point, how this tied in with his own individual destiny. Well, maybe not individual, because he could see now how he was much more than a few brain cells and a beating heart locked inside a body of flesh and bone on this mortal coil. He'd been given wings and he could look down on Toy Town and see it for what it really was. And he'd expose their Big Lie once and for all, so that even the blind might see.

In his dreams, Rocky flew higher and higher until he could look out upon the whole starscape of heaven. More than look out at it, he was a part of it. And so was the Goddess. After all this time apart since the Fall, they were back together again. They made love, just as they had done in the beginning and as they came together they were one. And he was star-spangled-splattered, all-knowing across the universe. Talk about blowing your mind on God. All was forgiven. All was love. All was One.

When he awoke early the next morning, in a hot sweat, these thoughts had not abated and Rocky phoned his parents to tell them the Good News and that he would be home for Christmas. His mother answered and there was a bit of fumbling about and crackling on the line as his father came to the phone and held it between them so that they could both hear and talk at the same time.

After listening in silence to Rocky's excited tale for a few minutes, he could hear his parents whispering to each other and then his father came back on the phone.

"I'm sorry, Richard, but I have to say that you're not making much sense, son."

"I'll be seeing you at the weekend," he told them eagerly. "We can talk about it then."

“Listen, son, I’ll be frank with you. These last few weeks your mother and I have been worried about you, you know. And so has your brother. Do you think you’ll be up to taking a train home?”

“No problem.”

“You’re sure?”

“Sure I’m sure.”

“All right then, son. Do me a favour would you? I don’t think you should leave it until the weekend. Your mother and I think you should come here as soon as possible. Today, if you can make it.”

“Well, it’s the last day at college, but I guess they wouldn’t be too fussed if I skip a day. Okay, I’ll get a taxi straight to the station and catch the first train.”

“Oh, that’s great, Richard. That’s such a relief. We’ll air your bed and look out for you. Your mother and I have to slip into town to pick up a few things at the butcher’s and the fishmonger’s, but we’ll be back long before you arrive. I look forward to seeing you. Then we can have a proper natter.”

“Bye son,” chipped in his mother.

“Great. See you soon,” he told them, then the phone went dead.

Rocky was just locking the front door and about to set off when he saw Shelley, his next door neighbour picking up the milk bottles from her doorstep.

“Oh, Shelley. I’m going away for a few days. Listen, would you do me a favour? I’ll be eternally grateful.”

“Sure, how can I help?” she asked without hesitation. Good job she wasn’t committing herself to a quick shag. Chances would be a fine thing.

He went back inside and took the spare key off a hook in the passage.

“Here’s a key to the flat. Would you mind popping in every now and again and watering the plants on the windowsill?”

“Sure, Richard.”

He felt around in his jacket and produced a card with his name and address on. “And if any letters come for me, would you

mind sending them on to me?" The postbox was only a few doors away.

"No problem."

"Thanks." He leant against the wall and hastily scribbled his parents' address on the back. "That's great. Sorry, I must dash: destiny awaits. Have a lovely Christmas."

"And you, Richard. Merry Christmas."

And, as the taxi pulled up at the door, he set off for the city station to catch a train to York, then on to Wycliffe-on-Sea. Still his mind was racing as he journeyed home, but he must have fallen asleep on the final leg – and thankfully not on the first – and he was woken by the guard.

"Yes?"

"End of the line, mate. All change."

°It most certainly is,° called the voice within, but he chose to ignore it.

"Oh, thanks. Must have dozed off." He hurriedly grabbed his trusty old haversack and headed for the door.

Rocky stepped out on the platform and looked towards what should have been the way out into the town centre. And only then did he realize that this was not Wycliffe-on-Sea. Catching sight of a sign further along the platform, he realized he'd missed his stop at York after all and had ended up in Leeds.

Don't you dare say it, he muttered to himself.

°Say what?° enquired the voice.

You know damn well: that pride comes before a fall.

°My lips are sealed,° came the reply. °My lips are sealed.°

He wandered down to the barrier at the end of the platform and caught the attention of a porter, explaining his predicament.

"Don't worry, you're not the first and you certainly won't be the last," the man laughed. "There's a train going to Wycliffe in about ten minutes, from platform 13. You should easily make it if you don't hang about."

"Will there be an additional charge?" He had very little money left in his wallet.

"No. Just tell the conductor about the mistake and it'll be okay."

He thanked the man and headed for the train. Two hours later and he was home. They had a good laugh when he told his parents what had happened.

“Same thing happened to me, during the war,” his father reminisced. “Only in my case, I caught a train from Edinburgh thinking that it stopped at York. There I was, waiting by the door with my suitcase, ready to get off when it went chugging straight through the station without stopping. What a chump I felt. I’d caught the ruddy Flying Scotsman by mistake. So I ended up at London Kings Cross. Worried your mother sick, I did, since she was expecting me several hours earlier. Of course we didn’t have a phone in those days. Nearest thing we had to phones were telegrams delivered by a lad on a bicycle or a moped. And you only got one of those if there was bad news. Well, you’re here and with friends now, and that’s all that matters.”

“Anyhow, how are you doing?” mother asked. She looked concerned.

“Let’s leave it until your brother Ronald gets in, shall we? Then we can have a proper natter. Could you go a cuppa, Mary? I’m sure our Richard could. You must be gagging after your journey.”

At this point, after the obligatory tinkle of the doorbell, the front door opened and closed again. Then a face appeared at the living room door.

It was Ronald.

“Richard, you made it. Good to see you,” the man smiled, shaking his hand in an iron grip and patting him heavily on the shoulder.

“Hi,” he returned. “Good to see you, too. Where ...”

“Leslie? Oh, she’s just popped up the road,” Ronald told him. He had an annoying habit of interrupting people in mid-flow and completing their sentences for them. “To the ...”

“Undertakers?”

“No, the ...”

“Hardware shop?”

“You cheeky imp: she’d gone to the newsagents.”

“Sorry, just playing you at your own game, bro’: finishing off

each other's ..."

"Sentences?" his brother laughed. "Sorry, Richard, I wasn't aware of myself doing it."

Well, he was now.

"So, what have you been up to?" Ronald wanted to know as Mother passed him his tea. "I gather you haven't been very well."

Rocky did his best to provide a concise précis of his cluttered thoughts. It was a bit like trying to knit a mass of writhing spaghetti. $E = mc^2$ and all that jazz. But his brother kept interrupting.

"Jeez, will you chill out and let me tell you without your constant interruptions, Ronald?"

"Just trying to be helpful," his brother said firmly. "No need to get narky with me. I've come a long way to see you, you know. And we only have your best interests at heart."

Just like Father, Ronald automatically assumed that his time was more precious than anybody else's. Well, Ronald was on a thousand a day as a consultant, whilst all he earned was maybe ten, so I guess he was right if you insisted on using this as the primary measure of a man's importance or worth.

Ronald drew back his shoulders and fixed him with an altogether too direct stare.

"Sorry." Rocky hung his head.

"So, I gather you're a very important person," his brother said, out of the blue. "How many followers do you have?"

That was a bit cutting.

"Well, I don't think the sun shines out of my arse, like some people I know," he retorted. "What gives you that idea?"

"No need to get bolshie with me, Richard. I was only going by what Dad told me earlier."

"And one of your tutors phoned us today, too," his father added. "They've been worried about you for some time, son. There are dark rings under your eyes. Are you having problems sleeping?"

"Yes," he nodded. "But I've come to the conclusion that we don't actually need as much sleep as we think." Ideally, we wouldn't have to sleep at all.

“That’s bollocks! We’ve all got to sleep and eat. To be straight with you: you look like shit warmed up,” his brother added. “Let’s call a spade a spade. How much are you drinking these days? And how often? And what about drugs?”

“I haven’t touched drugs in years.”

“You sure you haven’t been spiked? Maybe we should get the doctor to carry out a full blood biochemistry?”

It was like a verbal assault. And on and on it went.

Finally, it was Mum who headed for the cupboard to help herself to some aspirin.

“Have you got a headache, Lady Mary?” Father asked.

“Yes, I have,” she nodded, knocking the tablets back. “And is there any wonder?”

“Sorry, Mum,” his brother said.

“Nearly done, Mary,” Father told her. “The question remains: what are we to do to help you, Richard?”

“Judging by what I’ve heard, I think perhaps we should call the doctor,” Ronald advised. “In all seriousness, I think this is going to get worse before it gets better.”

“You think I’m mad, don’t you?” Rocky spluttered.

“No, Richard, I don’t. But I do think that you’ve been under a great deal of strain.”

“It won’t hurt to call the doctor in, to give you the once over.”

The doctor came and looked and listened and then he went. On the way out, he had words with Father and Ronald out in the passageway, but Rocky couldn’t quite catch what was said.

In the late afternoon, the doorbell went again. Another doctor; a bald-headed man with one independently-moving eye that seemed on the verge of popping out of its socket as he came in and quickly scanned the room. It turned out he was a ruddy psychiatrist from the local hospital.

“I think we should take him in,” the man said to Father and Ronald who’d been hovering in the wings. “May I use your phone?”

Father directed him to the phone in the passage and when he returned, he told them that he’d arranged to have Rocky admitted for observation. He suggested ordering a taxi straight away and

asked if one of them would accompany Rocky.

Rocky wasn't quite following what was being said, his head reeling by this time, and when he saw the decorations in the corridors at the hospital he thought they must have organized some kind of celebration in his honour. And then there was the matter of the Bomb. Dear Lord, he hoped he'd be safe here if the thing should explode.

"So, why do you think you're here?" asked a pretty looking young doctor, as she examined him. Ronald had gone with him to the hospital and she'd asked him to wait outside for a few minutes.

"I have the answer," he told her.

"The answer to what?"

"To the Bomb."

"I see."

"Trust me," he told her. "I'm perfectly lucid," and went on to tell her about the box of Black Magic chocolates he'd recently bought that had somehow poisoned his mind.

"I've been nobbled," he told her. "Two angels saved me, you know. I was sitting on top of a mountain peak freezing to death and these two angels saved me. One of them was black and the other was white."

"Interesting."

"By the way, do the names Boaz and Jachin mean anything to you?"

The lady doctor merely smiled and shook her head. She took out a torch-like object from her pocket and went to shine it in his eyes. He flinched, fearing that the laser beam might blind him.

"It's all right," she smiled. "I just want to look in your eyes."

She ran the beam of white light over the back of her own hand without ill effect. That was thoughtful. "You see, it's quite safe."

The doctor issued instructions and two of the white-clad nurses escorted him to a room and gave him a jab of something in his arm. Then they took him to one of the communal rooms and left him with his brother for a while. Shortly after, he began to have the most awful sensation in his neck. It felt as if his head

was being wrenched off his shoulders.

“Don’t indulge in it,” his brother advised, not really understanding the nature of the problem. It sounded more like something out of Carlos Castaneda’s peyote-fuelled trips with Don Juan.

He felt helpless and could hardly speak. “I’m not indulging. It’s the muscles in my...”

“Neck?”

“Yeah.”

Ronald called urgently for a nurse. Thankfully, it turned out to be a simple case of muscle spasms, a reaction to the sedative drug they’d administered, and after a second jab of muscle relaxant in his arm, the head-wrenching subsided.

His brother hung around for a few minutes longer and then he left, promising that he’d call to see him the next day.

That night was awful. Previously he’d been to spiritual heights that he’d never dreamed of...

°That was hubris,° his inner voice reliably informed him.
°Ego inflation, pure and simple.°

Thank you, Doctor, Rocky replied, dismissing the thought.

As he re-read these words, however, Louie could indeed see that he had been incapable of containing himself at the time; utterly unprepared for this cosmic experience.

... But now, it was like he’d flown too high, too fast, too soon and, like Icarus, had scorched his wings and fallen. Down, down, down from Godhead through the tarot spread to land back down on Earth with a resounding thump.

The realization suddenly struck him with enormous force that all this time he’d been blaming others for what were his own woes. Where the hell did that thought suddenly spring up from?

°You only have yourself to blame,° that inner voice insisted.
°Or, to use one of his father’s pet phrases: You made your bed, and now you have to lie in it.°

Rocky was utterly shell-shocked and acutely aware of his sinful state. He should have found his way to the Spiritual Heart, not allowed himself to be carried up to the Godhead. Leave the Godhead for his father and for Ronald. It was their realm, not his.

He was too weak. For some obscure reason, he was reminded of the time he'd visited the wife of a friend of his, an old friend. She'd smiled at him and said: "Rocky, you're a woman at heart," and yet he didn't get the impression that she just meant he was a wimp.

God, he hated it there in the psychiatric ward. Most of the time he couldn't bear to keep still. He had to go walking around the corridors or sneaking off to the smoking common room for yet another hasty cigarette. He didn't like it in there, he much preferred the non-smoking room, which had an almost heavenly atmosphere to it and no TV. Rocky was quite pleased about that as everything on the television deluged him with suggestions and bizarre hidden meanings. It was like he'd plugged into God's mainframe computer system, belting out some subtle wake up call like *Freedom radio*, but to which he'd become hypersensitive. He was inundated and overwhelmed with sensory input and his own consequent machinations, as he tried to make sense of it all. The fact is, he didn't have to try: everything was so pregnant with meaning. It was like a gusher at an oil well. A bonanza. He'd hit the mother lode. Christ, he nearly said he'd "hit the fucking mother lode" just then. Now that was a Freudian slip, if ever there was.

Sometimes Rocky went back to the beds to sit there on the floor, cross-legged, trying to meditate to still his mind. But one of the nurses asked him if he'd stay in the communal areas so that they could more easily observe him.

He had a carrier bag with him which had two woollen jumpers in it, one his mother had knitted for him, the other he'd bought in a shop. The first was blue with a wonderful decorative rope design to it. The other was a red and white design that made him look like an eagle or a king. Maybe that was rather presumptuous? He couldn't decide which one to wear and kept switching back and forth. You see everything in the world was filled brim-full of meaning. Every big thing and even every little thing. It was vitally important to get it right according to that meaning. So easy to make a mistake and bring the whole grand design tumbling down like a house of playing cards. This was a

Changing Time. The time when people woke up – all sorts of ordinary, everyday, common or garden people. A time when these people realized what a mess they were in, set about making amends and put their house in order before they fell asleep again. A time when everything made sense – if you could handle the truth without it being corrupted and twisted inside your head. They were all conditioned. Brainwashed, to one extent or another.

Everything was so connected. The whole living, breathing universe at one end of the scale and a tiny insect at the other. And inside each atom was a universe. It was a time when answers came like magic, if you watched and listened and didn't let yourself get in the way. Time and time again. He'd been ill-prepared and had fallen again before his mission was complete. But he was still awake and knew that he was awake. There was still hope.

The longer they could keep doing the right thing and staying awake the better. Someday everyone would get it right, be perfectly in tune with the flow, and there'd be a new Golden age. A heaven on Earth. Every now and again, someone would wake up and they could be used like a bridge to escape the Sleep. A bridgehead could be established to help others escape while the window of opportunity remained open. Maybe Shah was one of those people and yet maybe he himself might have fallen asleep again by the time that Rocky got to meet him, if ever? And there were others, too, with evil intent, who would go out of their way to make sure the operation failed.



But, anyway. Louie closed the Word document and closed-down his laptop.

Back to the present moment, and his second major awakening experience which had – by the Grace of God – been free of psychotic symptoms.

Louie didn't know it at the time, but he had stumbled upon a whole “invisible college” of writers and philosophers of whom he had, until then, been utterly unaware.

This, then, is where Louie's story really begins. At the end of the day, all the rest was just a long, drawn-out preface; an *hors d'oeuvre*, if you like, before the main course. Or, as his dear old Dad would say, "horses' doofers".

What's more, Louie re-found something of the poetry of life, as well as dear old Mother Nature, and once again attempted to set that down on paper before the joyful after-glow of recent events faded away:



The World Teacher

That toe you stub accidentally on purpose; that cup you drop in a moment of unconscious clumsiness – and miraculously catch in mid-air. That gulp you instinctively make when someone addresses you and subtly and quite casually – or all-too-directly – expresses a deep truth you thought well-hidden. That moment of hair-raising joy when you dare to connect – through written or spoken words and word-play; music; poetry; film; dance; art – a thousand and one arts, crafts and sciences; that “chance” meeting and kiss of lips, that tender union; that resonance and synchronicity; archetype; symbol; subtle alchemical fragrance of something distantly remembered; that coming to your senses – awake and alive; inspiration; inner-tuition; whisper, nudge, sign or affirmation; perfection embracing imperfection; unity in diversity; that king or queen – nay, goddess – in a shabby grey cloak, carrying a beggar's bowl; that face behind the face behind the mask.

That moment of hair-raising joy when you dare to connect – through communion with Mother Nature; that longing; or that serene, soulful, eternal silence and clarity; that receptivity, acceptance and admission, and loving gratitude and reciprocation. That meeting through physical contact or psychic, with a person – whether an earthbound misfit or – joy of joys! – homeward bound mystic, whether near, remote, or even supposedly fictional. That social media post you briefly scan – yet register, perhaps

unconsciously or perhaps with increasing awareness – as you casually or rapidly scroll through reams of text and images and memes in your web browser, with one eye on the ever-ticking clock – looking for the proverbial needle in a haystack, that hidden gem that makes it worth your while. Yes – even in cyberspace as well as in this virtual reality; as above, so below; as within, so without.

In a way – in its own inimitable and mysterious style – the world, your oyster, is telling you something, if you care to listen. Sometimes as a still-small voice; if needs be with a lively bugle call or – as a last resort – as a host of angels bearing mighty trumpets. And you are telling yourself something that in a sense you already know – but in a new light. Behold a world of quality beyond “I” and “Thou” – never mind the utter, mechanistic separation of “I” and “It”. A world that softly sings, and rings with Freedom, “Welcome”, Remembrance and “Peace”.

This is the mysterious realm of magic and co-creation unveiled and revealed – in beauty, in warts and all. Real magic, mark you: long-lost to but a few like you and largely forgotten, along with so much of our ancient heritage, and now miraculously rediscovered. This is your very own, individually-tailored, finely-tuned course in Reality – from the Heartlands, amidst and in spite of deception and illusion – a direct communication in the Here and Now, of which everyday life itself is School, Teaching, Teacher and Taught. It may take time (“and pomegranates”) to free yourself from the unseen snares of the death-dark underworld of the unconscious, and arrive here, but there’s no rush – as ever, you’re just in time – nor is there a need for recrimination, nor to fret over particulars. All that matters is that you have made it to the ever-open door and caught a timely glimpse of the sheer delight that lies beyond. Light upon lights!

Soul food (12 Nov 1990)

In every grain of sand
In the palm of my right hand

In the sleazy brothel bed
In the lowly cattle shed
In the slate-grey cloudy sky
In the frown of the passer-by
Behind the greasepaint smiles
And the drunkard on the tiles
In the salivating dogs of war
In the troubadour's chansons d'amour
Idly eyeing an opportunist fly
Watching life passing me by
In the heated climax of lust
In patience and in trust
Reading between the lines
Listening to my own whines
In a children's fairytale
In the morning junk mail
In the two-bit comic's joke
Meeting common or garden folk
– Here's food enough for every fool
Who ever set out to find
What it was they were looking for,
Or what there *is* to find.

~ A.N. Other, *The Ramblings of a Madman in Search of a Soul*.

Louie had finally removed the peel-off label (the one that had the word “Sufi” written on it), and now, as someone had once said of his life, a great many years earlier, and which had meant so little to him at the time, other than offering him some a glimmer of hope:

The world will be your oyster.

22. The evolving structures of consciousness

Louie recalled an extract from Idries Shah's *A Perfumed Scorpion* that had stayed with him over the years, that had not aged, and was indeed now coming to maturity:

What the self-imagined mystic seeks only in his meditation is visible to the Sufi on every street corner and in every alleyway.

Except it wasn't just "Sufi" and it wasn't just some street corner or alleyway: read correctly, the whole world was part of the school that was teaching him now.

As the years went by, Louie came to see many of these teachers out in the world (alas, too many to give each of them their due credit), and one of the early luminaries he came across was Gary Lachman, who had a lot to say about teachers in the largely-overlooked Western esoteric traditions, and about the lost knowledge of Real Imagination, and of our human plight.

Louie thought it best to remain silent at this point, and let the writing do all the talking:



Gary Lachman on Jean Gebser's evolving structures of consciousness

"The central argument of [philosopher, linguist and poet, Jean Gebser's] *The Ever-Present Origin* is that human consciousness is not static. Throughout its history, it has gone through several changes—what Gebser calls 'mutations'—before arriving at our own form of consciousness. These mutations transform consciousness from one 'structure' to another."

“There have been four such structures so far, what Gebser calls ‘the archaic,’ ‘the magical,’ ‘the mythic,’ and the ‘the mental-rational,’ ranging from our prehistoric ancestors to modern times. Gebser also posits a fifth ‘structure of consciousness,’ what he calls ‘the integral’, which is an integration of the previous four structures, and he believed that we, in the late modern world, were beginning to experience the effects of the shift from the mental-rational to the integral structure.”

~ Gary Lachman, *The Secret Teachers of the Western World*.

According to Gebser, we are in the late stages of “the deficient mode of the mental-rational structure”, and the rise of left-brain dominance seen by psychiatrist and author, Iain McGilchrist – up the proverbial creek without a paddle, you might say. Hopefully, we will make it more fully into the “integral”, but such an outcome is far from guaranteed.

23. The Lovers' Inner Sense

Louie had acquired an interest on poetry at an early age, and then he had long-forgotten and neglected it. What had originally sparked his interest, thanks to a wonderful teacher in his last year at junior school were mystical pieces written by Walter de La Mare, such as “The Tryst”, and Louie could imagine the poet as a kindred soul:

Flee into some forgotten night and be
Of all dark long my moon-bright company:
Beyond the rumour even of Paradise come,
There, out of all remembrance, make our home ...

He said “kindred soul” rather than spirit, because whereas the Sufi Way was interested in perfection, spirit, the stars, and the Sky Gods, these Western esoteric traditions were more interested in wholeness of being, soul, daemons, depth, imagination, a sense of wonder, and the Soul of the World (the *anima mundi*).

And yet, at the end of the day, the unfathomable depths of psyche and the vast ocean of the cosmos were One.

As for the poetry, Louie wasn't striving for perfection. It was more of a shorthand way of exploring and setting down his thoughts and experiences, at a time when he felt unable to tackle and string-together a longer, coherent piece of prose. That was like a massive jigsaw puzzle, and as yet he was missing – or simply couldn't see – a great many of the necessary interlocking pieces.



The Lovers' Inner Sense: A Poem

Softly-spoken, sentimental words, they arise welcome yet
unbidden,

like affectionate rays of sun, through dense woodland crowns.
Lighting up a sacred space in the undergrowth and
glinting in the swirling, gurgling waters of the nearby brook.

A rustling in the autumn leaves draws my attention.
“Hello, Lickle Sleepy Eyes”, she whispers, both strange yet
so familiar.
And I catch a snatch of a voice I haven’t heard for many
moons,
cooing softly: “We, too, love to be recognized and loved.”

And that subtle scent in the air – beyond the wondrous smell
of wild garlic – the moist earth after revivifying rain.
What’s that aptly-delightful word on the tip of my tongue?
Ah yes! “Petrichor” comes the reminder from beyond
Beyond.

I feel the warm and tender touch of breeze on my arm,
And pause briefly on my rambling along the scrunchy gravel
path,
as a wonderful shimmer runs races up and down my spine
and lifts the vestigial hairs on my arms and balding scalp.

I sense a gentle kiss on my ready-parted lips
and break into a spontaneous, beaming, – even primal – grin.
Such an intimate and moving moment cannot go un-noticed
as it stirs old yearning buried thrice-deep within my heart.

Then my billowing white clouds roll across the hypnagogic
sky
and the sunlight abruptly leaves the enchanted clearing.
“Alas!” In a moment, my joyful reverie is broken –
though an unvoiced “See you tonight!” seems to linger in the
air.

“Yes, yes!” I cry aloud in heated, hasty reply,
hoping my words do not come too late. Not caring

that some passer-by might take me for a blessed lunatic.
A benighted, and breathless, would-be escapee, no less!

“Thank you!” I exclaim, turning and jiggling on the spot.

“Oh, yes: a thousand-and-one times ‘Yes!’”

“A lovers’ tryst! At dead of night, the witching hour ...”

“... and every night thereafter, until blissful reunion!”

°Though words might evoke a sense of wonder, sometimes you don’t need words at all,° Louie mused, as he sat, gently breathing, in the armchair by the warm and welcome hearth, in his little cottage by the lakeside.

Funnily enough, this delightful rural retreat of his was just like the vision Louie had once had, even as a small child, of where he would like to have spent his days when he was more advanced in years.

Later, Louie stirred his creaky old stumps, pushed himself up from the armchair and tottered over to his beloved bookshelves. He pulled out a book which contained some of the Romantic poet William Blake’s writings:

The tree which moves some to tears of joy is in the
eyes of others only a green thing which stands in the way.
Some see Nature all ridicule and deformity, and by these
I shall not regulate my proportions; and some scarce see
Nature at all. But to the eyes of the man of imagination,
Nature is Imagination itself. As a man is, so he sees. As
the eye is formed, such are its powers.

And what was it that Gary Lachman had written in *Lost Knowledge of the Imagination*? Time to consult the Miscellaneous Information Department. Though Louie did not have a photographic memory, he could very often remember which part of a book an item might be in; often on which side of the pages, and even whereabouts on the page he might find it.

Ah, yes. Here it was:

We usually think of the imaginary as unreal, false – in general as some way less than the physical, sensory world. Or we see it as leading to “novelty” or the “cutting edge” in some process – this means technology most often today. But Corbin and Jung and others contend that for them – and potentially for all of us – the “Imaginal” constitutes an entire world of its own, that is just as objective as the sensory world, with its own geography, history, laws, and, as Jung discovered, its own inhabitants.

Such delicious fruit to read before he wended his way to bed, and toward the prospect of yet more wonder-filled encounters in the imaginal realm.

24. The Highs and Lows

Louie was reluctant to talk, or even think too much, about the minor awakening and revelation that he'd had oh-so-many years back, just before he first encountered Idries Shah. He didn't want to inflate his ego, which was, as he'd read in Jung and in the later works of the Jungian scholar and adept, James Hillman, one of the dangers of the path he had recently turned onto. Nor did he want to scare the bejabbers out of himself.

But, at the same time, Louie did want to explore and amplify this experience once again, and record it as best he could, partly in the hope that it might prove useful in some way, if only to him, if not to others. Or at least serve as a warning.

Depth psychology was not everybody's cup of tea; indeed, to many it was pure hemlock. Even the imagination was strictly out of bounds and *verboden* to many. But in Louie's experience – what little he had of that – there was so much to be learnt by exploring within.

As Peter Kingsley had written in *Dark Places of Wisdom*:

Always we want to learn from outside, from absorbing other people's knowledge. It's safer that way. The trouble is that it's always other people's knowledge. We already have everything we need to know, in the darkness inside ourselves. The longing is what turns us inside out until we find the sun and the moon and stars inside.

This turning inside out was not something that Louie had as yet experienced, at least not knowingly. However, it was a topic that he'd encountered in his earlier reading, in the work of the writer Tom Cheetham, in *All the World an Icon: Henry Corbin and the Angelic Function of Beings*, to which he'd been introduced by the timely prompting of a dear friend – the most-appropriately named Angelica:

In the spiritual birth that this coming-to-consciousness engenders, the soul finds that it was a stranger in the world in which it had lived, and that now it has come home.

It is a matter of entering, passing into the interior and, in passing into the interior of finding oneself, paradoxically, outside.... The relationship involved is essentially that of the external, the visible, the exoteric ..., and the internal, the invisible, the esoteric, or the natural and the spiritual world. To depart from the where ... is to leave the external or natural appearances that enclose the hidden realities.... This step is made in order for the Stranger, the gnostic, to return home—or at least to lead to that return.

But an odd thing happens: once this transition is accomplished, it turns out that henceforth this reality, previously internal and hidden, is revealed to be enveloping, surrounding, containing what was first of all external and visible, since by means of interiorization one has departed from that external reality. Henceforth it is spiritual reality that ... contains the reality called material.



The Highs and Lows on the Road to Atonement: A Poem

It all began long, long ago, when I fatefully put my feet up.
Week after week I'd laboured, sprucing house from top to
tail.

I'd burnt the candle at both ends, but now I drank a cup,
yet while my body's work was done, my mind still blew a
gale.

Up, up I flew and farther still; to the dizzying heights I
reached.

Entranced by associative delight — until fright snatched hold

of me.

Symbol, sign and metaphor, the flood my defences breached;
burst and scattered far and wide, connected teardrops in a sea.

Down I tumbled through the Blessèd Tree, my Soul set all-
aflame,
and plumbed the darkest depths where dear Jung had dared to
dive.

Scared stiff at such hubris and gripped by mortal shame,
I clung to a shred of sanity, and fought to stay alive.

The Angels' timely intervention saved me from damnation.
They raised me up, brushed me down, and then they set me
free.

And a mystic offered help to rebuild my life's foundation.
But for their aid, I'm sure as sure, I'd still be under lock and
key.

Only now can I look back without utter wide-eyed dread,
and learn from – even cherish – that bitter-sweet first home
run.

With joy I close my eyes and dream, and in my vision see
ahead,

Cosmos and deep Psyche's twin lives truly are as One.

I know I've erred and fallen down so many times before,
And my well-worn coat's all patched up, and yet again
unravelled.

But every time I draw deep breath and head toward Destiny's
door,

And once again I set off, along this star-lit road less travelled.

25. Arcadia Revisited

As Tom Cheetham wrote in *Green Man, Earth Angel: The Prophetic Tradition and the Battle for the Soul of the World*:

It is the mythic experience, the mythic imagination that opens, reveals depth and mystery, which places the human in the context of the nonhuman, and so, forces retreat, humility, and awe, in the presence of spaces beyond our will.

“The Battle for the Soul of the World”, indeed. That’s how high the stakes truly are. But that’s another story for another day.

For now, Louie was intent on preserving the already-fraying remnants of a vivid mythic dream he’s just been fortunate enough to play a part in:



Arcadia Revisited: A Poem

Once upon a time, beyond place and time,
and everywhere you cared to ramble,
there stood a Garden no digger touched,
nor black tarmacked road, nor death-dark mill.

If you use reason, you will be deceived
into thinking it mere childish myth.
But open your heart and you will sense:
though long overgrown, it still endures.

I once met a fair maid along the lane,
who revealed to me her dreamtime name.
Eugenie guided me by the hand,
and ushered me through a secret door.

In a trice I left this sad world behind
and saw in awe and great surprise,
that what we believe as real and true
is a clockwork nightmare fantasy.

We think that we live and think that we love,
though really we subsist in slumber,
while the birds and bees and chestnut trees,
here, set my heart all a-flutter.

Arcadia's not a place to visit:
like water to fish, we all swim in it.
And though in essence it's hidden deep
It unveils to folk who truly seek it.

Though back now in this materialist world,
as I pass along a dirt alleyway
I catch the scent of a blossoming rose,
and it carries me back to Arcady.

Just there! On the breeze I hear lilting tune,
and in mind's eye see a sacred grove,
where all the joyful folk are gathered,
and I join the "Wassail!" and sing along.

There she stands waiting, dearest Eugenie,
smile on her lips and toss of red hair.
Full of heart, I hasten toward her
and, embracing, we're carried back there.

We sing and we dance and we lay on hands,
life's miseries and woes a-healing.
In the warmth and glow of the campfire:
here in Remembrance, we make our home.

26. The Cracks in the Concrete

By now, Louie realised that he was standing at a Y-shaped fork the road; a major intersection in his life. This was something that emerged from the background and came back to the fore in his mind as he read through Peter Kingsley's dark work, *Reality*.

If Jungian depth psychology was not everybody's cup of tea, then nor was Kingsley; perhaps doubly so in his case. But, if you set aside his repetitions and annoying idiosyncrasies (consider them "deflection techniques", to hark back to the Sufi materials), he had some very important, and brutally-direct things to say:

[T]raditionally, and especially to people in southern Italy, the underworld was known as the place where we come to the great fork in the road: to a *trihodos* or "three ways" where the fateful decision is waiting to be made between life and death, between lasting existence or utter [annihilation and] non-existence.

[G]radually, skillfully, [Parmenides] conjures up the image of us humans as stuck at this place where the road divides—unable to decide between the two paths, incapable even of seeing what the choice involves, just dithering in the space in between.

And what that means is something we need to understand very clearly. We humans are already in the underworld. We are already dead.

That pithy piece perhaps played some part in Louie's mentation at the time, and – directly or indirectly – led to another in a long string of lucid dreams that he had; though alas most of which were more or less forgotten by the time he awoke, located his pen, and snatched up his notebook:



The Cracks in the Concrete: A Poem

“I think I’m losing my mind,” I blurted out
to the only bright-eyed person I could find
in this fathomless sea of darkly-sunken, vacant faces.
A sentient soul in this disenchanted land of the blind.

The old man raised an eyebrow and broadly smiled:
“Come, sit a moment while you find calm,” he beckoned.
“Then we’ll take a walk and leave these cares behind.”
I drew a deep breath, and then drew a second.

He shuffled along the rosewood bench to make room,
introducing himself and asking my name:
“Glad to make your acquaintance,” Joe tipped his cap,
a beam on his face and his eyes all a-flame.

“I’ve sat here for years, watching the world go by,”
old Joe informed me, with a sigh and lament,
“Not one in a hundred in the here and now.
There or then, they are, not truly in the moment.”

“Oh! hither and thither and helter-skelter:
armies of ants in an ant-heap making money,”
cried old Joe, wiping a stray tear from his eye.
“Better to be like bees, in a hive, sharing honey.”

I took a deep gulp and bade the man continue.
“What you’re hearing and seeing now is grim reality,
squeezed through your unregenerate distorting lens,
and a dreadful reminder of our fallibility.”

“Beyond this superficial layer, lies a tough unsavoury husk,
and at the moment that’s all you seem to behold.
But please trust me when I tell you: deeper still –
beyond – lies a kernel, a beating heart of gold.”

“Do you think I’m going mad?” I asked old Joe.
He said nothing as we walked off down the road –
then paused – and nodded at a drive as we passed by,
and I turned my head, mind still on overload.

“That’s what’s happening to you,” old Joe explained.
He pointed down the driveway, waving his arm about,
and the deep cracks in the concrete said it all:
this was my state – my fate – it left no room for doubt.

“Just nature’s renaissance, and pushing up roots,”
smiled Joe, “but look there and you’ll see what I mean:”
and there, in a crack, I saw a flower a-bloom,
its petals vibrant orange, its slender stem jade-green.

“So, you don’t think I’m mad?” asked I, peering at him,
and yet I wondered if this was subtle subterfuge.
“Heaven forbid,” old Joe smiled and shook his head:
“We just need to get you to a safe refuge.”

“Not the psyche ward! Dear God, please no!” I screamed,
and Joe placed a calming hand on my shoulder:
“Don’t be so quick to judge,” he gently replied –
but deep inside I still sensed my dragon a-smoulder.

“I know a shelter a few hours’ walk from here:
a country school where they’ll take care of your needs,
teach you how to keep your secret tucked away,
and how to grow a garden from those precious seeds.”

“For how long?” I asked, thrilled at this new prospect.
“As long as it takes,” he shrugged, as we walked on.
“Until you’re ready to return and play your role.
Good job you found us before you were too far gone.”

“And on the way, there’s a quaint tavern I frequent,
where we might relax over a lunch and beer,

to celebrate the joy of your first awakening,
and give thanks that – at long last – you made it here.”

“There are so many folk around with partial solutions,
that it’s hard to tell the horse from the cart.
So easy to get lost in the world’s gyrations,
and lose touch with the quiet-wisdom of the heart.”

“I’m sorry you fell through the cracks,” Joe lamented,
“and you’ve had to struggle and suffer all alone.
But the only important thing, in the end
is that you made it to this major milestone.”

°... Before you ended up pushing up the daisies,° his inner voice added, at this point, and Louie felt a distinct shudder run through him and shake him in his boots.

°Yes, indeed,° he replied, with a slow, thoughtful nod of his head.

It had been a close call, and he would have to finally make his mind up about which fork in the road to take, while he was still able to make that choice at all.

27. Lost Soul in a Disenchanted World

Again Louis had a dream, perhaps due to his recent studies, admixed with vague memories of being such a misguided wastrel during his rebellious adolescence, and his fall into debauchery during early adulthood.

For a time Louie was lost in a terrible labyrinth of absent-minded, speculative and primitive thought. Then quite suddenly, and out of the blue, a familiar voice chirped-up:

°Meaning emerges from engagement with the world, not from abstract contemplation of it.°

That sounded like Iain McGilchrist.

°*The Divided Brain and the Search for Meaning*,° Louie was reliably informed, which confirmed his guess. Just how relevant the quote was, he couldn't be sure, but at least it had broken his deep reverie.

Back to work, then. And there really were tears as he wrote. So many, indeed, that he had to fetch a paper handkerchief to dry the blotches of ink on his page:



Lost Soul in a Disenchanted World: A Poem

I approached the regal Lady sitting before me,
and fell to my knees, clutching at her velvet dress.
Salty tears pressed hard behind my eyeballs and welled-up,
and I cried out in heart-felt sorrow and distress.

“So many abandoned me for the Sky Gods,” sighed She,
“I, who feed and nurture you and from whose womb you
spring.
Dear heart, I nurse you, protect and cherish you,

for I'm *anima mundi* and in me you cling."

"I hold open my door for those whose doors are shut,
and yet you doubt me, afraid of daemons and treason.
You bind yourself tight with chains, and you yoke yourself
like a beast of burden to the sharp plough of Reason."

"Why do you pretend I don't exist, and spurn me?
Is that what they taught you to believe and despise
in church and school and the fad of scientism?
It's clear I count for nothing in materialist eyes."

"I am a deep well of soulful intuition,
a sacred spring of imagination and inspiration.
A sea whose waters run deep: you swim and breathe in me,
I bring a bountiful harvest and integration."

"Plumb my depths and you'll find the pearl of great price
and riches beyond compare: I am the original mater-ial.
Follow my scent and you're sure to find your way;
follow until you arrive at the essential and real."

"I swear to you, on all that is truly holy:
you will not suffer a molecule of loss.
Not a loss of anything that has true value,
just glittering fool's gold, plastic tinsel, and dross."

"Look and you will see nothing; close your eyes and see;
seek and you will find me waiting so peaceable.
Drink deeply and I'll fill your cup with strange delight,
And you will cry out, 'But this is so unbelievable!'"

"Don't try to force things, and they will arise naturally,
Just as the waters flow and like flowers in May.
Remember the sun is always shining, dear heart:
it's our mood-laden clouds that get in our way."

“You’ll find me in the sewing of a patchwork quilt;
in the smile of a passer-by, or bitter confection;
the light in dark depths, not some distant mountain peak;
in love and wholeness, and street-wise imperfection.”

Thus She spoke to me, and then slowly faded from sight,
and I found myself back in my warm bed with my kin.
“Close your eyes and dream,” came Her warm, whispered
breath,
“and try to imagine this blessed cosmos within.”



Louie let out a deep sigh of relief as he laid down his pen and went to sit in his armchair beside the fire.

°Well, that didn’t turn out so badly, after all, did it?° the inner voice spoke up.

°True enough,° he replied, but he wasn’t in a mood to talk at that time: he was still savouring the warm and gentle afterglow of completing the work.

°Has the penny dropped yet?° his inner voice asked, after some time had passed, and Louie had begun to drift off into sleep in his armchair.

°Sorry?° he queried, not knowing quite why “X” should come out with such a question at that time, or indeed quite what he meant by the challenge.

He clambered up from the chair, stretched himself, and wandered across to his bookshelves, in search of a book of Shah’s which might contain a quote on such matters.

There it was, on page 214 in *Caravan of Dreams*. He’d guessed page 200, which wasn’t that far wide of the mark, and it was a long time since he’d last read that book, or for that matter any of those books, from cover to cover.

°Now, now, Louie. Don’t be a smart ass,° X firmly rebuked him.

Louie mentally slapped himself. Like the well-meaning but at times errant house elf, Dobby in J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter*

series, he would now have to go and iron his hands.

Many aspects of higher human development can only take the form of communicating knowledge and experience in a disguised manner: rather as we teach our children by involving them in activities which they consider to be amusement rather than lessons in (say) counting, co-ordination, or manners.

One method of accustoming people to a “higher pattern” is to involve them in activities and enterprises which are equivalences of higher things.

Another procedure of great worth is also comparable to one employed in teaching children. It is to surround the pupil with data which he absorbs piecemeal until the “penny drops”.

More food for thought, then. A lifetime’s worth, at least. Speaking of which, however, his stomach was rumbling and much in need of some lunch and a mug of coffee, so that need took precedence. As for the matter of the penny dropping, that would for now have to take the back seat.

28. Beyond the Point of No Return

Well, there Louie was again: standing at the fork in the road, and this time faced with a choice between going further up the road with the Sufis, or down the garden path with his new-found fellow adventurers. Perhaps at some later point the paths would once again converge?

However, a choice and a firm commitment now had to be made, whichever path he decided to choose, or whichever path was chosen for him. In a sense, the other choice that he was faced with was whether to surrender or die.

As Hughie Green used to say on *Opportunity Knocks*: “It’s make-your-mind-up time, folks.”

°No pressure, then,° X observed, though clearly tongue-in-cheek, and perhaps masking the very serious nature of the options and existential quandary set out before Louie.



Beyond the Point of No Return: A Poem

For what seemed an aeon, I searched in vain
for the fabled Ladder to the Stars.

With so much loss and yet so little gain,
close I came – but still, no cigars.

On I trod in the steps of Greater Men,
with nothing but the goal in mind.
And one mile turned to two, seven leagues to ten;
these greater men guiding the blind.

Then I stopped in my tracks one fateful day,
beyond the Point of No Return.

I asked strangers heading the other way:
“What do you know that I might learn?”

One lady amongst their ranks smiled at me,
and put her hand on beating heart.
“In there, you will find sweet freedom,” said she,
“and learn timeless alchemical art.”

“The ego likes to think that it’s the king,
but it’s a product of the brain.
The Deep Self is a secret, hidden thing,
and its destiny is to reign.”

“I’ve been to the Land of the Midnight Sun,
and I’ve seen the Emerald Tower.
And I know the product of One times One,
and I’ve felt Love’s grace and power.”

“And if you’d like to taste this wine, my friend,
then please feel free to walk our Way.
And we’ll show you such wonders without end,
and we will help you if you stray.”

“It’s not too late to change the drink you sup,”
she said – something that rang a bell.
“Listen: a ladder’s not just for climbing up,
it is for climbing down as well.”

“You won’t find the answer in a thousand years,
if you don’t search deep down inside.
The Treasure’s in the mine, you see, my dears.
Where else would Truth and Love abide?”

And with that I spun round upon my heel,
and walked with the lady some way.
She it was who taught me to see and feel;
much Wisdom did herself convey.

Later, I looked back at my merry band,
and the sight: it caused me much pain.
The lady smiled and lightly squeezed my hand:
“Don’t worry, we’ll all meet again.”

“I’ve been to the Land of the Midnight Sun,
and I’ve seen the Emerald Tower.
And I know the product of One times One,
and I’ve felt Love’s grace and power.”

°That’s it, then,° Louie told himself at length. °My mind is made up.°

°And may God have mercy on your soul,° came the instant response.

°Hmm,° he murmured, not quite sure how he should take that two-edged reply.

°It’ll all come out in the wash,° X added, which again was ambivalent.

°Sheesh!° Louie called out loudly, then hushed his breath. °This is seriously not a good time for *double entendres* and riddles.°

°Hey, buster!° X came back at him forcefully. °Remember: you’re the one in two minds, not me.°

Louie mulled over those words. “He was in two minds”. In two minds, indeed. X had scored a bullseye with that off-the-cuff remark

Then: °Do you think I’m in my right mind, X, or am I making another big mistake?°

X made no response.

°And what’s that mean, X? That “silence is also an answer to a fool”?°

Again there was no response.

Then, finally: °I think you know the answer to that, Louie. Deep down in your heart, that is.°

X was clearly determined to be non-committal, so there was little point in prolonging the argument. Perhaps he wished for

Louie to have the final say on the matter.

°The things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them,° X spoke after a long, pregnant pause. °That's Aristotle, from the *Nichomachean Ethics*. And the same applies to the choice you have to make. Your choice, that you yourself have to make.°

Then: °Or as Buckminster Fuller once said: "I'm not trying to counsel any of you to do anything really special except dare to think. And to dare to go with the truth. And to dare to really love completely."°

Yes, standing at the threshold, Louie could sense his own hesitancy; could feel the underlying fear of taking a step in any of the three directions that would take him, perhaps irrevocably, past the point of no return.

What was it that William Blake had once written? He found the quote in Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*:

Each Man is in his Spectre's power
Until the arrival of that hour
When his Humanity awake

And it felt to Louie as if this was just such an hour of personal need.

29. The Early-Morning Briefing

As it happened, these recent events did not go unnoticed in Louie's psyche, and it was inevitable that he should have yet another vivid dream.

He was pretty sure that he'd made a firm choice, and he was 65% confident that it had been the right decision. But it was in this momentous dream that his resolve was intensified and the decision thoroughly cemented:

~~~~oOo~~~~

### **The Early-Morning Briefing: A Poem**

Eugenie breezed back into my life this morn,  
and stirred me from the most sublime slumber.  
There I was floating aloft a twilit cloud,  
when – “Presto!” – my soul was jerked back down to earth.

“This is your early-morning wake-up call.  
Rise and shine and show a leg there, shipmate!  
Jump out of bed and fling the curtains wide,  
rub your sleepy eyes, and turn on the telly.”

I really could not see the point, but complied,  
and I idly flipped through the many channels.  
So, another crisis had gripped the nation;  
yet more panic buying and civil unrest.

So many lies from the political class  
in this uncaring, post-honour, post-truth era.  
Saying black is white, wrong is right, down is up,  
to advance their left brain, neo-fascist bull.

Polarisation, head-banging division,  
dissonance, energetic entanglement,  
conflict and fear-mongering, twenty-four/seven ...  
There's only so much sentient souls can bear.

Okay, so that's too much "Shock! Horror!" today.  
I hit the off button and fast turn away.  
Eugenie stands there, and she nods sagely.  
"Indeed," she smiles, and claps her hand on my back.

"Behold, the folly of the world laid bare.  
Surely now you can see right through this tyranny?  
If you've forgotten, you'll remember soon enough,  
when you've opened the sealed orders in your Heart."

Eugenie isn't one to sweeten her words,  
let alone filter them through a meat grinder.  
She's a good friend, but she has real work to do,  
waking this reprobate from a deep sleep.

"But don't think this is going to be easy,  
the censors' raised eyebrows are the least of it.  
Someone's bound to hit the Big Red Button  
and the guards will call for reinforcements."

What she means is instead of a single "I",  
a squadron of simpletons live in my mind –  
each with their own myopic agenda,  
and no unified command and control.

"Think not that a civil war is raging within;  
make a declaration of independence.  
Keep a calm head and hold off the attacks –  
at least until help arrives from afar.

"You'll need a noble heart to weather this storm

and a strong and sturdy constitution.  
But don't forget you are only one of many  
entrusted with this most important task.

“This is the Moment of Truth – right here and now –  
and there is no room for ‘ifs’ and ‘buts’ and ‘maybes’.  
Unless you are with us, we cannot help you,  
so get on board while we still have a chance.

“Take your preconceived notions and toss them aside.  
Better to lose your mind and come to your senses.  
There's no room for intellectualism:  
you're here to walk the walk, not talk the talk.

“Trying to force the issue is foolish:  
that's a sure way of preventing change and growth.  
Let inner-tuition come of its own accord;  
allow things to unfold as nature intends.

“Don't set yourself impossibly high standards,  
because you will always seem a failure.  
Just set yourself reasonable goals and excel,  
and overall you will feel and fare much better.

“We've waited an age for this moment to arrive,  
and it quietly crept up on us, unawares.  
Make yourself ready to receive the Gift  
when Destiny comes knocking at your door.

“Realize this: the honeyed flow of inspiration  
doesn't come *from* you, but *to* you and *through* you.  
Make of your own self a noble vessel  
to store these psycho-cosmic energies.

“We represent a long chain of grail keepers:  
something attained when we become worthy within.  
But beware of unholy ego-inflation:

what's needed is humility and dedication.

“Here's a love-cup of nectar to slake your thirst  
and fill you with fresh courage and resolve.  
Drink this blessed sustenance, but pass it round:  
thrift is theft where ambrosia is concerned.

“This is the Secret of the Hidden Economy:  
that the more you give, the more you receive.  
That's the true nature of this bottomless purse:  
to simply give, give, give and keep on giving.

“Don't look for peer recognition or laurels,  
breathe deep and witness your transformation.  
This is all your hopes and wildest dreams come true:  
this is it – the one true initiation.

“And now, your real work in this world may begin,  
in service to Mother Earth and humankind.  
And if anything is needed for the Work,  
it'll arrive before you've even thought of it.

“Trust that the rule of Newtonian clockwork  
and scientism is coming to an end.  
Trust that the whole cosmos will support you  
in this battle for the Soul of the World.

“And look forward to the time – not far away –  
when the world enters a new Renaissance,  
casting off the threadbare Cartesian robes,  
and the good and simple joys of life hold court.”

## 30. Re-enchantment in a Material World

Louie was calmly relaxed that day, having already written a long essay outlining his thoughts, and now sitting in his favourite armchair and re-reading the words. Of course, he could do no more than use many broad brushstrokes, and pick out a few salient points from the cosmic saga, and pass hints, with some minor detail. Only then could he rest easy, at least for a time.

So here it was, his minor opus – for better or worse:



### Re-enchantment in a Material World

*O stars,  
isn't it from you that the lover's desire for the face  
of his beloved arises? Doesn't his secret insight  
into her pure features come from the pure constellations?*

~ Rainer Maria Rilke, "The Third Duino Elegy".  
From *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*,  
(transl. Stephen Mitchell).

### Boiling frogs

It's said in fable that if you take a frog and plunge it into boiling water, it will experience shock and immediately jump out. But if you place a frog in tepid water and slowly heat it, the frog will not sense the change, will not see the danger, and will be slowly and inexorably boiled to death. More than a fable, this is a metaphor for where we are right now, as individuals, as group members, as a culture, and as a planetary collective – some materialists, illusionists and sceptics might say a slime mould on

Earth's surface, a cancerous growth, or a plague. The mystic and philosopher Gurdjieff would say that we are asleep; his student P. D. Ouspensky, that we are automatons.

## **Squadron of Simpletons**

As psychologist Robert Ornstein pointed out, we are not one single, unified “I” but are largely governed by a “squadron of simpletons” or idiots, between which we frequently shape-shift, each running his or her own sub-program, with an outlook that is often myopic and blinkered, and with little effective central command or coordination. Many of these psychic simpletons were acquired in more primitive times when we were daily faced with dangers that demanded a swift reaction – “fight, flight, or freeze” – and which are simply not geared-up to noticing or thoughtfully responding to the sort of slow-moving creep of trends such as nuclear proliferation; global warming – which has at long last been recognized by some as a climate crisis, though of course disparaged by denialists, contrarians and conspiracy theorists who dub themselves “climate realists” – biodiversity loss; and sham-materialism – Shammat, which is documented in Doris Lessing's *Canopus in Argos* series of sci-fi novels.

## **Post-Truth**

More recently, we've reached the lowest common denominator, and populism, politics and media have dispensed with old-fashioned values such as truth, honour and chivalry, to the point of arguing, in an Orwellian way, that “up is down”, “wrong is right”, and “truth is fake news”. Proponents, acolytes and followers don't “do” rational argument, and don't sense hypocrisy, irony, and other subtle arts, as intelligent or sentient people might foolishly think; they thumb their noses at the “fact-checking libtard expert elite”; evangelists who blindly or even wilfully worship morally-bankrupt neo-liberalism, wealth and other gilt-edged idols. They turn their backs on the very traditional Christian or spiritual values and virtues that they might

reasonably be expected to uphold at all costs, such as the tragic plight of refugees (from wars and disasters that the West has helped create), the poor, the disenfranchised, and the homeless – as the most financially-wealthy 1% look on and rub their hands with ever-increasing lust and glee. Wingnuts who are determined to bring about the prophesy of the End Times, through some horrendously-beautiful Armageddon, to Resurrection, ultimate supposed Rapture, and Blessed and Eternal Life.

## **Warners and Arks**

Of course there are warning voices: Author Margaret Atwood has brought us *The Handmaid's Tale*; and Philip Pullman has much to say about the politico-religious and paramilitary body which he calls the Magisterium, in his *The Dark Materials* and in his *The Book of Dust*, which he has affectionately referred to as “His Darker Materials”. There are, of course, many warners (though as Doris Lessing once lamented “the wind blows away our words”) – but what we desperately need right now are more arks: physical, metaphorical or otherwise.

How much more utterly bizarre and crazy do things have to get before we are finally shocked out of our sleep and apathy, and realize that our dreams of fame and fortune, burying our heads in the sand, and thinking sweet and happy-happy thoughts, aren't going to get us out of the fine mess we're in; and realize that we are up the proverbial and stinky creek without a paddle? As Roger Waters of Pink Floyd asks in the song “Comfortably Numb” which I grew-up listening to in the 1970s: “Hello? (Hello, hello, hello) / Is there anybody in there? / Just nod if you can hear me / Is there anyone home?”

## **Sufi Mystics**

This isn't a new problem, of course, though things are becoming more and more exacerbated in this post-modern era. The writer, thinker and teacher in the Sufi mystical tradition (which preceded and flowered in the classical Islamic era), Idries



Shah wrote at length about the commanding self – that “mixture of primitive and conditioned responses, common to everyone, which inhibits and distorts human progress and understanding”. He writes: “The Commanding Self ... can be seen as a sort of parasite, which first complements the personality, then takes over certain parts of it, and masquerades as the personality itself.” Shah states that there is “no intention of destroying or undermining the Commanding Self”. Instead, would-be students are encouraged to “divert vanity from the spiritual arena ... to channel the Commanding Self’s activities to any worldly ambition: while continuing to study the Sufi Way in a modest and non-self-promoting manner,” according to Wikipedia.

Shah’s approach is only partly direct or didactic, however: the Sufi materials are interleaved or interwoven with what are specially-designed teaching stories (and poetry) which approach issues indirectly, so as to smuggle themselves past our defences and inner censors, and hence not provoke our opposition and defeat the object of what is a more intuitive exercise (ultimately provoking inner-tuition, as it were). One such story illustrates aspects of this approach, and features in Idries Shah’s *Tales of the Dervishes: Teaching Stories of the Sufi Masters Over the Past Thousand Years*:

## **The Indian Bird**

A merchant kept a bird in a cage. He was going to India, the land from which the bird came, and asked it whether he could bring anything back for it. The bird asked for its freedom, but was refused. So he asked the merchant to visit a jungle in India and announce his captivity to the free birds who were there.

The merchant did so, and no sooner had he spoken when a wild bird, just like his own, fell senseless out of a tree onto the ground.

The merchant thought that this must be a relative of his own bird, and felt sad that he should have caused this death.

When he got home, the bird asked him whether he had brought good news from India. “No,” said the merchant, “I fear

that my news is bad. One of your relations collapsed and fell at my feet when I mentioned your captivity.” As soon as these words were spoken the merchant’s bird collapsed and fell to the bottom of the cage.

“The news of his kinsman’s death has killed him, too,” thought the merchant. Sorrowfully he picked up the bird and put it on the windowsill. At once the bird revived and flew to a nearby tree.

“Now you know,” the bird said, “that what you thought was disaster was in fact good news for me. And how the message, the suggestion of how to behave in order to free myself, was transmitted to me through you, my captor.” And he flew away, free at last.

In addition to this, the Sufis use a technique termed “scatter”, rather than presenting the materials in a logical and systematic A-Z fashion as one might in a modern Western school, and this is in part so that the picture presented to the student – composed of a constellation of minor impacts – is not brought into premature but incomplete focus, which might lead to him or her settling for the comfort of a stunted psychic development (the result of premature “paradigm fixation”. Once you’ve seen one coherent image or gestalt, this can make it more difficult to unsee that and see further alternatives or additional dimensions).

## **Henry Corbin and Tom Cheetham**

Our western philosophy has been the theater of what we may call the “battle for the Soul of the World.”

~ Henry Corbin.

The philosopher and *ishrāqī* mystic, Henry Corbin also sees our current predicament as symptomatic of a much earlier onset of dis-ease. Corbin’s work is densely packed and not an easy read, but fortunately the author Tom Cheetham has written several books that are useful in interpreting Corbin’s thoughts.

Much of what Corbin wrote concerned what he termed the

*mundus imaginalis* or “Imaginal World”, an intermediate world between that of our own mundane world and that of spirit, and Corbin is at pains to inform us that it (and its angelic inhabitants) is as real, if not more real, than what we call our everyday, supposedly-real world of concrete, glass, consumerism, sex and politics; and it is most certainly not “merely imaginary” or a fantasy. There are three ways into this world: through dream; active imagination (of the type Carl Jung and J. R. R. Tolkien engaged in); and, ultimately, death. Being an ishrāqī mystic, too – that is, of the School of Illumination – the nature, gradation and role of Light features much in Corbin’s work.

In the first chapter of *Green Man, Earth Angel*, titled “The Mundus Imaginalis and the Catastrophe of Materialism”, Cheetham writes:

“In language that I’ve learned since, this is the history of what the French call *mentalité*, and this shift in the relation between the subject and the object involves a “withdrawal of participation.” Many people have discussed this phenomenon from a variety of viewpoints. For instance, you can analyze the Neolithic transition in terms of a kind of disjunction between humans and nature: outside the walls of the city lies the Wilderness, within them, the Tame. It has been argued that by a similar process, the immanent, female deities of Earth were severed from the remote and transcendent masculine gods of the Heavens. Another disjunction, another loss of participation, accompanies the transition from oral to literate society. For European history the crucial transition occurs in Greece roughly between Homer and Plato. The techniques of alphabetic writing and reading forever changed the relation of humans to language and to the nonhuman world. Socrates was very concerned about this new technology, and was afraid that it signaled the death of real thinking, and that education would suffer irreparably. In fact the great sweep of Western history as a whole has been read as a story of withdrawal and the progressive “death of nature,” and the birth of a mechanistic cosmology based on abstract materialism.”

And Cheetham goes on to say: “[In Henry Corbin’s view] all the dualisms of the modern world stem from the loss of the

*mundus imaginalis*: matter is cut off from spirit, sensation from intellection, subject from object, inner from outer, myth from history, the individual from the divine.” Those of you who have read Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* or *The Book of Dust* may find a resonance with this aspect of Corbin’s work.

Then, on a related note, there is also the question of whether Eve was framed, and of whether it was wrong to “steal fire from the gods”.

## **The Real Corbin and the Inner Church**

Since Corbin is such a central figure in this, and many would dismiss his contribution as merely intellectual and philosophical (“you can talk the talk, but can you walk the walk?” as the refrain goes), if you’ll forgive the digression, it’s worthwhile clarifying his status in this arena:

According to Wikipedia, Henry Corbin (14 April 1903 – 7 October 1978) was a philosopher, theologian, Iranologist and professor of Islamic Studies at the *École pratique des hautes études* in Paris, France.

According to his widow, Stella Corbin, as reported by Peter Kingsley in his book *Catafalque: Carl Jung and the End of Humanity* (p364), however, Henry Corbin’s “real identity and purpose” was “not as a scholar with some minor mystical leanings but as a mystic, inwardly directed to play the role of academic.” She described to Kingsley how in Iran, “the great spiritual teachers or sheikhs often offered to initiate him as a Sufi on condition that he converted to Islam; and how he always politely refused. ‘Thank you for your invitation but there is no need, because I already have my own inner sheikh inside me.’” (pp364–365)

Corbin (who knew and understood Jung and his work so well; they were colleagues at the conference venue Eranos) spoke of an “inner church”, echoing Jung fifty years previously when Jung explained how “if we belong to the secret church, then we belong, and we need not worry about it, but can go our own way. If we do not belong, no amount of teaching or organization can bring us

there.” (p366).

Corbin writes of his years of retreat in Iran with his wife, “I learned the inestimable virtues of silence, of what initiates call ‘the principle of the arcane’ (*ketmân* in Persian). One of the virtues of this silence is that I found myself placed, I alone together with him alone, in the company of my invisible sheikh, Shihâb al-Dîn Yahyâ Suhrawardi,” (p367) and he goes on to say that “when these years of retreat finally came to an end I had become an Ishrâqi.” (p368) *Ishrâq* means the point of dawn in the East – not, to Corbin, the (horizontal) geographical East, but the mystical Orient and Celestial Pole; (p368) and the Ishrâqi is a “tradition of those who appear with the dawn; who belong to the moment of dawning; who tirelessly and timelessly work at fetching the gifts of the sacred into the light of day.” (p368) The Ishrâqi are the “eternal heaven” (p369). According to Kingsley, Corbin was an Uwaisî (p372), one of those Sufis who happen to be without a physical teacher, and who are guided and sustained by those like the mysterious invisible guide, Khidr (p372).

## **The Invisible College**

There are several other authors whose work, topics of interest, and enthusiasms overlap with that of Corbin, indeed in a sense you might call this an “invisible college”:

As a starting point, Tom Cheetham has written several useful books interpreting Corbin’s dense and voluminous work: *The World Turned Inside Out: Henry Corbin and Islamic Mysticism*; *All the World an Icon: Henry Corbin and the Angelic Function of Beings*; *Green Man, Earth Angel: The Prophetic Tradition and the Battle for the Soul of the World*; and *Imaginal Love: The Meanings of Imagination in Henry Corbin and James Hillman*.

## **James Hillman**

James Hillman has written a number of books such as *Re-Visioning Psychology*, and *The Soul’s Code*, about which the publisher’s blurb reads: “Plato and the Greeks called it ‘daimon’,

the Romans ‘genius’, the Christians ‘Guardian Angel’ – and today we use terms such as ‘heart’, ‘spirit’ and ‘soul’. For James Hillman it is the central and guiding force of his utterly unique and compelling ‘acorn theory’ which proposes that each life is formed by a particular image, an image that is the essence of that life and calls it to a destiny, just as the mighty oak’s destiny is written in the tiny acorn.”

And then there are several authors and poets (the latter such as William Blake, Kathleen Raine and Rainer Maria Rilke) who survey or convey important events and movements in the past, such as the “good times” of the pre-Socratic philosophers, neo-Platonism, the Renaissance, and Romanticism, and the terrible decline from the time of the so-called Enlightenment – which some have more-wisely termed “The Endarkenment” – the Industrial Revolution, and the rise of Scientism and other fundamentalisms and extremisms, and seek to rediscover and bring about a new renaissance rooted in largely-lost native Western tradition, rather than Eastern imports and modern kitsch. Regarding the Industrial Revolution, see the last two chapters of J. R. R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*, beginning with “The Scouring of the Shire”, that were lamentably omitted from the otherwise-excellent film adaptation.

### **Richard Tarnas and the Soulless Vacuum**

Richard Tarnas, quoted in Jeremy D. Johnson’s *Seeing Through the World: Jean Gebser and Integral Consciousness*, has this to say: “By the late modern period, the cosmos has metamorphosed into a mindless, soulless vacuum, within which the human being is incongruently self-aware. The *Anima Mundi* has dissolved and disappeared, and all psychological and spiritual qualities are now located exclusively in the human mind and psyche.

“The forging of the self and the disenchantment of the world, the differentiation of the human and the appropriation of meaning, are all aspects of the same development. In effect, to sum up a very complex process, the achievement of human

autonomy has been paid for by the experience of human alienation.”

## **Gary Lachman and Jean Gebser**

Gary Lachman has written two important books, *The Secret Teachers of the Western World* and *Lost Knowledge of the Imagination*.

In *The Secret Teachers of the Western World*, Gary Lachman writes: “The central argument of [philosopher, linguist and poet, Jean Gebser’s] *The Ever-Present Origin* is that human consciousness is not static. Throughout its history, it has gone through several changes—what Gebser calls “mutations”—before arriving at our own form of consciousness. These mutations transform consciousness from one “structure” to another. There have been four such structures so far, what Gebser calls “the archaic,” “the magical,” “the mythic,” and the “the mental-rational,” ranging from our prehistoric ancestors to modern times. Gebser also posits a fifth “structure of consciousness,” what he calls “the integral” [influencing many, such as Ken Wilber], which is an integration of the previous four structures, and he believed that we, in the late modern world, were beginning to experience the effects of the shift from the mental-rational to the integral structure.” Each structure is latent within, like a seed, until actualized.

According to Gebser, we are in the late stages of “the deficient mode of the mental-rational structure”, and the rise of left-brain dominance – up the proverbial creek without a paddle, you might say. Hopefully, we will make it more fully into the “integral”, but such an outcome is far from guaranteed.

## **Iain McGilchrist, the Master and His Emissary**

Psychiatrist and author Iain McGilchrist has much to add to the topic of the hemispheric working of the brain and its influence on the history of Western civilization. The RSA lecture on the Divided Brain provides a useful introduction (there’s a fun RSA

animation, too), and *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* is an epic read with more studious footnotes than you can shake a stick at.

McGilchrist echoes words that may or may not have been those of Albert Einstein, that: “The intuitive mind is a sacred gift. The rational mind is a faithful servant. We have created a society that honors the servant but has forgotten the gift”, and Philip Pullman has expressed similar sentiments about reason and rationality. In a similar vein, Gary Lachman writes in *Lost Knowledge of the Imagination*, there are two main modes of working: “Pascal was admirably equipped to follow mathematical reasoning, but he knew of other reasoning too; as he famously wrote, ‘the heart has its reasons that reason does not know’. It knows them through the spirit of finesse, the intuitive approach, one of the two directions, as Barzun says, that the ‘one human mind can take’, [the other, rigorous approach being the ‘spirit of geometry’].”

As Khalilullah Khalili once wrote (quoted in Idries Shah’s *Learning How to Learn*):

In every state, the Heart is my support:  
In this kingdom of existence it is my sovereign.  
When I tire of the treachery of Reason -  
God knows I am grateful to my heart.

In *The Master and His Emissary*, McGilchrist goes on to write: “Our talent for division, for seeing the parts, is of staggering importance – second only to our capacity to transcend it, in order to see the whole. These gifts of the left hemisphere have helped us achieve nothing less than civilisation itself, with all that that means. Even if we could abandon them, which of course we can’t, we would be fools to do so, and would come off infinitely the poorer. There are siren voices that call us to do exactly that, certainly to abandon clarity and precision (which, in any case, importantly depend on both hemispheres), and I want to emphasise that I am passionately opposed to them. We need the ability to make fine discriminations, and to use reason



appropriately. But these contributions need to be made in the service of something else, that only the right hemisphere can bring. Alone they are destructive. And right now they may be bringing us close to forfeiting the civilisation they helped to create.”

## **Patrick Harpur and the Soul of the World**

Another author who writes along the same lines as Gary Lachman is Patrick Harpur, such as *The Philosopher's Secret Fire: A History of the Imagination*, and *A Complete Guide to the Soul* (UK) or *The Secret Tradition of the Soul* (US).

In *A Complete Guide to the Soul*, Harpur writes: “What you knew in your childhood is true; the Otherworld of magic and enchantment is real, sometimes terribly real – and certainly more real than the factual reality which our culture has built up, brick by brick, to shut out colour and light and prevent us from flying.”

In *The Philosopher's Secret Fire*, he lays it all down: “According to the Neoplatonic tradition, psyche or soul is the underlying principle – the very stuff – of reality. It is, as we have just seen, ambiguous. It is imagined both as a macrocosm, ‘great world’, and as a microcosm, ‘little world’. It is both a collective world-soul, containing all daimons, images, souls, including the human soul; and an individual soul containing a profound collective level, in which we are connected to each other and, indeed, to all living things. Depending on our perspective, then, we can see ourselves as either embracing the Soul of the World [*anima mundi*] or as being embraced by it, although both are the case. Or we might say that soul manifests itself both impersonally, as world-soul, and personally as individual souls. At any rate, we can begin to see that the ancient laws of sympathy and correspondence which modern science has discredited are not primitive scientific laws at all, but profound psychic principles which express the way each microcosm – each of us – potentially reflects and participates in the entire cosmos.

“In Plato’s *Timaeus*, where the Soul of the World is first described, it is infused throughout the cosmos by the Demiurge,

Plato's creator-god, who thus makes a living ensouled universe. (The Soul of the World remains the root metaphor for all conceptions of the world as organism, including modern ecological ideas.) In other words, as well as being transcendent, one level above our world, the Soul of the World is also immanent, just as traditional cultures imagine it. Not that they always have a concept for the world-soul – they do not abstract from the world but rather see it in the first instance as animate, instinct with soul. 'All things', according to the ancients, from Thales to Plutarch, 'are full of gods.'

"The very people who have emptied Nature of soul and reduced it to dead matter obeying mechanical laws, pejoratively call the traditional world-view animism – a term which effectively writes off what it claims to describe. To 'animistic' cultures there is no such thing as animism. There is only Nature presenting itself in all its immediacy as daimon-ridden. Every sacred object or place had its genius or jinn, numen or naiad, yes, even its boggart and hob, as the case may be.

"The Romantics imagined Nature in this way. Imagination was coextensive with Creation, just like the Soul of the World. They were identical. Every natural object was both spiritual and physical, as if dryad and tree were the inside and outside of the same thing. Thus every rock and tree was ambivalent: a daimon, a soul, an image. 'To the eyes of a man of Imagination', wrote William Blake, 'Nature is Imagination itself.'"

## 31. The Return

Not only had the poetry returned to Louie's life, so had the music and the art, which warmed the cockles of his heart and brought back the rosy colour to his cheeks and the spring in his step, at long last. He'd finally got his mojo back, and with it his zest for life; especially natural life. He had found inner peace and could rightly afford himself a moderate amount of quiet self-satisfaction and a sense of fulfilment, though of course he *did* know that he still had far to go on his inner journey. Indeed, it was more than likely that there would be more wrong turns and blind alleys along the way. At the very least, however, he had made a start.

What's more, having found some voluntary work at a local charity, he was able to give something back to the community, and help at least some of the most needy and vulnerable, just as he had been helped in his own life – indeed, was still being helped, each and every joyful or painful step along the way.

At long last, then, he too “had his shit together” and, what's more, he no longer had anything to prove, not to his dear father and mother, nor to others, nor to himself.

Of course, that didn't mean that he was perfect, nor that he knew it all – far from it; just that he was now content to simply be himself in his own inimitable way.

He wasn't the first, nor would he be the last, but Louie knew that he was in good company.

Louie never did get to meet Granny Hewitt or Clement Woodward again in this world, though no doubt they were still around and with us, even after all these years, and he met a great many wonderful friends just like them, both in this world and in the imaginal realm, and in that hypnagogic state between what we commonly think of as wakefulness and sleep.

This was a comforting thought. Jack today might be Jill tomorrow and Cecil the day after that in this cosmic game of hide and seek, tig (or tag), and musical chairs – and it was all part of “God's little joke”.

We all get a chance to play tig, and each have a chance to be “it”. When you’re tiggled, you’re “it” and it’s then your turn to go chasing after others to tig them. On it goes; and where it stops, nobody knows.

Life’s really rather simple in essence; child’s play at heart, if you like. It’s just that on the surface (like the waves and froth on a deep ocean) it has a near-infinite, and ever-growing number of permutations, which bring with them apparent and bewildering complexity.

And if we might pass on Eugenie’s final piece of advice to you, dear reader – yes, *you!*:

°Forget the cold, hard “facts”, and what people might think. Just taste the rainbow.°

## 32. Follow the Breadcrumbs

...

Well, we've set up the stall and laid out some perhaps unusual borrowed wares, and invited you to enjoy a sample of what alternatives are on offer to us, to get an intuitive "feel" for them. We've tried to paint a picture with some broad brush strokes, if you like. We leave it to you to pick and choose what appeals to you, and to follow the tempting breadcrumbs that others have left, in their turn, for our benefit – who knows where they may lead? – in the hope of bringing a little blessed – if at times heretical – re-enchantment into these wondrous and wuthering Shadowlands in which we currently find ourselves exiled, marooned; forgetful, and largely out-of-touch with the Source.

Thankfully, we are not alone. Bahaudin Naqshband reminds us:

You may have forgotten the Way:  
But those who came before  
Did not forget you.

And in his work *Tyranny Against Human Consciousness: A Revolution in Human Becoming*, Kaleb Seth Perl has these reassuring words to say:

[C]onscious awareness is not some type of elite club. It is for everyone. It is just that the minimal cost of admission is reaching it. Once you get there – you're in! ... [E]ach person must become their own price of admission. If you cannot reach at least to the front door, then how can you expect the door to open? The door does not come to where you are. Each person must accomplish the minimum of travel to arrive at the threshold. There is then a crossing available at the threshold.

We'll leave the second-to-last word to Iain McGilchrist, as expressed in his *The Divided Brain and the Search for Meaning*, and as a cautionary note to ourselves: "Meaning emerges from engagement with the world, not from abstract contemplation of it." Or, as someone once cogently remarked to Louie: "Don't just stand there and nod. The mind observes and cogitates, the heart engages, and I would encourage you to engage with the process."

May you find your Shangri-La. May we all find our Sangrael!

## 33. Bibliography, reading and viewing delights

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- Mohammed Rustom, “Suhrawardi on Sacred Symbolism and Self-Knowledge”.
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- Mary Watkins, *Waking Dreams*.
- Mary Watkins, *Invisible Guests: The Development of Imaginal Dialogues*.

... to name but a few.

## **The ishraqi institute**

You can find us across at Facebook and Twitter. The *Mystical Faction* blogspot site has useful links to social media, etc.

Again: please follow the breadcrumbs. Who knows what treasure you might find?

***Other soft sci-fi books by the same author***

1. *The Dissidents: A novella.*
2. *Game of Aeons: A short novel.*

***Mystical adventure books by Etienne de L'Amour***

1. *Escape From the Shadowlands.*
2. *In Search of Destiny.*

Mystical Faction blog:  
<https://mystical-faction.blogspot.com/>

Sher Point Publications, UK:  
<https://sherpoint.uk/>

# *Secret Friends*

*The Ramblings of a Madman  
in Search of a Soul*

By H. M. Forester

The writer and thinker Idries Shah laid out his contemporary, Western projection of the Sufi Way in a great many books over the years, and *Secret Friends* draws, in part, on the inner experiences of Robert Llewelyn George in his faltering attempts to follow that mystical path.

The intrepid psychonaut, Carl Gustav Jung also documents his own inner travels in his *Red Book*, and later in his published journals, the *Black Books*.

This, then, you might call Louie's *Little Green Book*.

I wouldn't know where to start in writing a blurb, my dear reader, to give you a better idea of what this book is about, except to say that all the books (including the mystical adventures written as Etienne de L'Amour) have this one surprising thing in common: the largely unsuspected presence of the Hidden World and of the "Secret Friends" who are here to help us in our hour of need.

But, dear reader, should you eventually arrive at the conclusion that this work is little more than the incoherent ramblings of a madman in search of sanity, then that's fine by us; and were this book not given to you free of charge, then you would be fully entitled to demand your money back. But if the work touches your heart in some way, then please feel free to pass it on.

Genre: Psi-Fi.