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## The Dream of Socrates

My relationship with Socrates started when I was twenty-two, and it continues to this day. At the time it began, I was a hopeless drunk and street punk on my way to becoming a drug addict. It was a time of deep depravity in my life. Not only did I not care about anything at the time, it was worse. I did not even care that I did not care. In fact, I really liked the lifestyle of being a complete reprobate and a burgeoning drug addict. I was twenty-two and could see no future. So what did I give a fuck. On top of that, it was the height of the Viet Nam War and as far as I was concerned I was going to Viet Nam and I was going to die there. It seemed like my fate. I had a lot of evidence to support this belief. Out of the myriad of "beefs," or streets fights, I got in, whether in the North End or at Boston Trade High School, I lost way more than I ever won. I took some pretty vicious beatings, two of which caused my Mom to not recognize me when I walked through the door. With that kind of record, my chances in Viet Nam seemed slim to none. So going to Viet Nam meant it was going to be *tutto finite*—all over—at a very young age.

The North End back in the 70s was nothing like it is today. It was rough and hard, but it was soft and tender too. There was a lot of violence and there was a lot of love. It was both the scariest and the safest place I ever lived. I felt so alive in those days! Growing up in the North End in the early seventies, like my friend Peter Catizone said, was like living in a Fellini movie. Everyone was a character on the stage of our streets, no two were the same, and there was always something going on: good, bad, funny, sad, violent, or tragic—and often all of these happening at the same time. But whatever happened, it happened with passion; and then it was talked about with even more passion. Someone's story became everyone's story. I loved being out on those streets with my Goombas. We were one big tribe, all of us, from elderly to infants, all so different from each other, but also much like one another because we were all so different from the world around us. And that world had a war raging.

By some miracle, I got into the National Guard and both my tour of duty in Viet Nam and death were postponed. The Army was a strange place, especially Basic Training. Yet, it was a lot like the North End. They were teaching you to be tough and to kill people if you had to. You learned to be part of a tribe that was separate from the social structure of the society. But there were differences. You had to conform to a dif-

ferent hierarchy. In the Army it was blind obedience to authority; in the North End it was blind disobedience to authority. In the Army, any revolt against authority was smashed. In the North End, every revolt was a celebration. As for the food, what can I say? When you come from the North End where your mother cooks the best Italian food in the world and go into an Army Mess Hall, you go from Heaven's *cuchina* to Hell's kitchen.

After Basic Training, on my first weekend of National Guard Duty, I was in a two-and-a-half-ton army truck going to our training camp on Cape Cod. There were two other Guardsmen in the truck with me, MIT professors. The truck was only allowed to go twenty-five miles per hour so it would take us five hours to get to our base camp. They were talking about some pretty heavy shit. I thought I was getting a college education. Of course, you have to remember who I was in the back of that truck with those two professors. In the sixth grade, I got polio. I went from an honor student in Saint Mary's elementary school to a silent, extremely withdrawn, academically falling student. I went from taking good care of the way I looked to not washing and not brushing my teeth and letting my school uniform fall apart. On top of that, I stuttered. The nuns classified me as "retarded" and passed me each year just to move me on. The High School I went to—Boston Trade School—was the dumping ground for students with learning and/or discipline problems. Only seven of the 48 students in the cabinet making class passed, two of whom could not even read. So, although I could hardly understand most of what these two MIT professors were saying, the conversation fascinated me. I listened in awe and silence for the whole five-hour trip.

We got to the base and set up camp. It was Saturday night and one of the professors was really drunk. He came over to talk to me. To my surprise, he was very direct and this was not an intellectual or abstract conversation. He told me that he envied me. Astonished, I asked why? He had a world class education, lived in a lovely house, and had a beautiful wife. I was a street-fighting goomba destined to get shot, go to prison, or die from a drug overdose. I lived in a small apartment with a bathroom in the hallway. I not only did not have a girlfriend at the time, but I was not even having sex—despite being in the midst of a sexual revolution. He had what I thought I wanted: the American Dream. So, what he said next really touched me. He said that he envied me because I had a huge capacity to love and he did not. He also told me that on the surface I was pretending to be happy but deep down I was depressed. He said that all I wanted to do was intellectual and creative things. He said I should take drugs because they would act like a catalyst for me to feel the pain I was keeping myself

numb to. Then, I would realize that all I wanted was to do was intellectual and creative things. I listened and went to my tent. I thought about it and came to the realization that he was right. He knew me. I do not know how he knew it but he did.

I ended up getting out of the National Guard for medical reasons a few months after this conversation. About six months later, I remember being on my bed in the North End and feeling like I was at the edge of a dark abyss. It was worse than being depressed. I felt like I had no feelings and no future. Then it hit me. I thought that I would try out what this mysterious professor from MIT said: I would take drugs. Being a reprobate, the idea of taking heavy drugs appealed to me. I had friends in the North End where the drug culture of the sixties was beginning to gain ground. In fact, there was a variety of sub species of North Enders in the genus family of "North Ender." You had a sub species that managed to do well in school and go to college, or who got blue collar jobs, and managed not to not get addicted to alcohol, drugs or criminality. Then, there was a sub species that was addicted to alcohol and did not do well in school. Next, there was a sub species that were addicted to heroin. Each of these groups had different "crews" (a crew was like a gang except they were not really a gang because the organized crime in the neighborhood—the Mafia—was the gang). Crews were like platoons in a company of men in the Army. There were some crews that mingled with drug addicts, alcoholics and non-alcoholics. There were few crews that did not drink at all or do drugs. Among these were crews that were intensely hostile to the kids who did drugs and used to beat them up and even shoot some of them. We had our own war going on in the North End.

There were two basic sides in this war. The kids who did drugs thought of themselves as "going Hip." This meant you were growing your hair long, making friends outside the North End, listening to rock 'n' roll—and taking drugs. On the other side were the "Wannabees," the kids who wanted to acquire a reputation for being violent and tough in order to gain access to the underworld life in the North End (the Mafia). If you wanted to gain access to the underworld in the North End you had to be tough, have huge balls, and acquire a reputation where you would follow the rules of the underworld of the North End. The family that was head of the Mafia at that time also wanted someone who was smart and was capable of being cool under the most stressful situation, as well as someone capable of violence. One particularly violent candidate was a man by the name of WF. His strength was his ruthless capacity for violence. With the advent of drugs at the time, the rulers of the Mafia were finding that drugs brought the police into the neighborhood. So, they did not approve of the youth culture of the

sixties and seventies, being Hip, because this was bad for business. And what was bad for business in that Family was bad with a capital B. What was bad for business was usually responded to with violence. WF and his crew, none of whom did drugs, took on the job as enforcers against drugs. They really took center stage. It was not just being beaten with fists; they went after kids with bats. If you were like me, you were afraid of WF and his gang. When you saw him on the same sidewalk as you, you walked to the other side of the street and hoped he kept walking on his side.

So, I kept a low profile and kept taking drugs—acid. After about three months of this it hit me that the MIT professor had been right: I was depressed and had been for a long time. So, I decided, “what the fuck, I might as well read some books. If he was right about the depression, then maybe he was right about the intellectual and creative part too. There was a problem with reading, however. In my house we rarely read, so there were only three or four books available. Three philosophy books. One was the Dialogues of Plato, and the other two, Marcus Aurelius’s *Mediations* and Saint Augustine’s *Confessions*. I chose the dialogues of Plato. I knew that this was the book that I had to read. The book pulled me towards it like a magnet.

Keep in mind that at the time this was the second book that I had read in my twenty-two years. I only read one book in Boston Trade School High. It was *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*. Our English teacher had us read it in the class. Every time we went into that class he had us read for the entire class. No one did any homework. So there I was, reading my second book, the Dialogues of Plato, featuring Socrates. *Ba da bing!* I started in the late afternoon, and read it until I finished, around eleven pm. I was amazed at not only how fast I read this one book but also by how I had only read one other book in my life and there I was, finishing a book in a night. Here was a person who, when people were going to put him to death unjustly, said, “I honor and love you, but I would rather obey God than you.” At that time if you stepped on my toe I wanted to kill you, and I had almost killed a couple people for less. So, I was just amazed by this. How can a man say this? I went to Catholic school and they taught of a man called Jesus who taught unconditional love for everyone and forgiveness. He forgave those who put him to death and loved them who crucified him. I always felt that they the Priests and Nuns were trying to shove this down my throat. It was just a myth for me. On the other hand, Socrates was flesh and blood and I felt that was with him when I read the dialogues, holding his hand as he went through what he had to go through. I felt a kinship towards Socrates. In some unconscious way he became a surrogate father taking the place of my father who died just two years earlier. I think that

maybe he was hitting upon my collective unconsciousness in some way. The second thing that Socrates said, which really threw me around the world in twenty days, was that a man could have anything he wanted: health, wealth, and happiness if he merely told the truth. Now, at the time I lied, cheated, stole, and did anything to get what I wanted. I was only honest with my family, friends and the Tribe of the North End, who were the only people that I felt I had any sense of integrity and morality. Socrates was saying that we should love all people and be good to all people. Even those outside the tribe! Even people that wanted to hurt me.

As I finished the Dialogues, I was intensely galvanized. I just could not stand still. So, I went out for a walk. I did not walk in the North End but around the periphery. Time passed. I walked along Boston's Waterfront, which at the time was deserted and abandoned. We called it "Ghost Town." Then, to my surprise I started to walk out of the North End down the financial district. I realized that there had been an invisible barrier there for me which I did not know how it got there or who put it there. The streets of the Financial District at that time before gentrification were devoid of people. The only people I saw were homeless drunks. I continued through the empty Downtown to the old red-light district called "the Combat Zone" which I participated in in my teen age years. Then, I started to walk through the Public Gardens, something I never did just living a half-hour walk from them. It was like a Whole World opening up to me. I walked down those green streets lined with trees: Commonwealth Ave, where there was grass and trees and tall granite buildings where only one family lived, unlike the North End where multiple families of eight or ten people lived in three or four rooms, with no greenery on the streets. It was funny though. I was not jealous or even bitter that people could live in so much affluence and we did not. We had an affluence of a different kind. I remember talking to Jerry Ameno, Captain Carl's father. He said that the North End was a special place. I asked him why? He said that the love here was just amazing. Jerry was an architect who somehow managed to achieve this coming from a depressed area that was also stigmatized because it was Italian—being Italian was not seen as a good thing in those days. I heard it again from a young boy. I was down the North End Pool with JR and Mikey Fud and we were talking about how crazy the North End was and this young boy who could not be over eight said, "Hey, I know the North End is crazy, but I would rather live around a bunch of people who are crazy and love you than people that are not crazy and don't love you. Out of the mouth of babes.

I did not know how far I walked, when I started to head home. I did know that

it was the middle of the night. I just remember being at Government Center under the abstract statue of Thermopylae commemorating that battle between the three hundred Spartans and the mighty army of the Persians. As you probably know, the Spartans fought till their death. On their monument were the words:

*Go, tell the Spartans, stranger passing by  
That here, obedient to their laws, we lie.*

And so, I lay under that statue of Thermopylae. It looked like a brass dinosaur who was a Spartan warrior standing on three legs. I remember that there were no thoughts going through my head. There was only a certain kind of silence and calmness, which I had never experienced in my life as I looked towards the east where the sun was beginning to rise. I had never stood up all night to greet the dawn without sleeping, even on acid. Then, suddenly a thought occurred to me that seemed to come not from me, but from outside of me: "I am going to do an experiment. We will see if this man called Socrates was bull-shitting us or was being straight. I will start to live my life telling the truth and loving all those around me unconditionally." I knew that I wanted this more than anything. I embraced the commitment that I was going to live as well as I could and die as well as I could like this Athenian who somehow was a father to me. Not quite knowing what I was doing, I figured that if knowledge was virtue and virtue was essential to leading a good life, I should go to school. And so I began my odyssey. I worked hard and went to school nights. I had to take a train ride to Roxbury—the African American part of Boston—in the middle of the race riots. I went to therapy at twenty-five and went to college after two years of picking up what I did not learn in high school.

But it was not easy. Most people in the North End did not see education as something that pulled you out of poverty. As for a way to cultivate yourself—forget about it! That thought was anathema. I remember a guy we called "Doctor Mike" saw me reading a book called *Problems in Philosophy*. Mike said that the problem of the problem with Philosophy was Philosophy itself. I did not know if he was saying that because he felt that learning philosophy would make a person too conceptual or that learning anything other than to make money was a mistake. But I knew it was not a statement of approval. And it was not only Mike. When people would ask why I going to college I would say that I loved it; the response was invariably something like "get the fuck out of here" or "why are you doing something like that, wasting your time," just "what the

fuck is wrong with you?"

On top of that, I still struggled to make a living. I was working marginal carpenter jobs that were really miserable. I was going from one armpit of construction to another. And the drugs were bringing crime to the North End. I remember one night I parked my car in front of the Pizzeria Regina. Out of all the parking spaces I parked in I remember parking that night in that space in mid-November. When I woke up the next day to go to work, I found that my car was broken into and the tools stolen.

I was devastated. I fell into an abyss of hopelessness and despair. Before I went to bed I thought of death. Thinking maybe I will get lucky and not get up to do this tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow, again and again and again, the same thing all over again and again. Sleep came hard, but I did succeed in succumbing to death's counterfeit, falling deep into unconsciousness. There I had a dream. It was the beginning of dawn and I was walking down a wheat field in full bloom. A golden wheat field of hope all around me. As I walked down this path in this sea of golden sunlight and golden wheat I could see a figure of a man walking toward me. As he came closer, I recognized and knew that he was Socrates. He was wearing a *himation*, which was a simple two-piece garment around the body. I was stunned. I did not know what to say as he approached me. He came right up to me and much to my astonishment he spoke in a heavy North End accent.

"Hey, kid. How you doin'?"

That he spoke in a way I was used to made me feel completely at ease. It felt like I was talking to one of my brothers from the North End. I replied:

"I don't know, Socrates. I am trying so hard to do as well as I can and live an honest and noble life like you lived, but it seems so hopeless. It seems that for me, the streets are just too long." I looked down and then up into his smiling face.

Still speaking like a North Ender, he said, "Don't worry about a thing, kid. You are going in the right direction."

And he pointed down an earthen path surrounded by golden wheat and the sun was beginning to rise at the end of the path. He did not say anything else with words, but I knew his thoughts. They added up to this: "A man who is good for anything ought to calculate that death is not an evil because no evil can happen to a virtuous man, whether in life or after death." So, I knew that all was well and all will be well.

After that dream, I was in a state of euphoria for about six months. I stopped taking acid. How I viewed the world shifted from a mean-spirited place where I could not cultivate a life, to a place where life had the possibility of being rich and fertile, and

more importantly, I experienced being fertile. Because of this I was more responsive and optimistic to my life and life in general. Socrates did that for me. He pointed the way.

And now, as I enter my seventh decade, I find that I still work on being Socrates. I am a lifetime student. I still go to therapy to know myself. I have been going to a poetry class for over twenty-five years. I have been doing transformational seminars and courses. I still read and work on my ethical and spiritual self. Socrates is a constant presence. I am seventy and can see death approaching, and I find that I want over only one thing. That I can say before I lie in my grave:

*Stranger, thou who passes by, go and tell that here I lie,  
obedient to the promise: to be as Socrates was, so long ago.*

"If you saw me after dark, it wasn't me.

It was Dmitri, my doppelgänger."

— Yuri Corrigan

"*Abandon every hope, who enter here.*" These words—their aspect was obscure—I read inscribed above a gateway, and I said: 'Master, their meaning is difficult for me.' And he to me, as one who comprehends: 'Here one must leave behind all hesitation...'"

— *Inferno*, Canto III



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