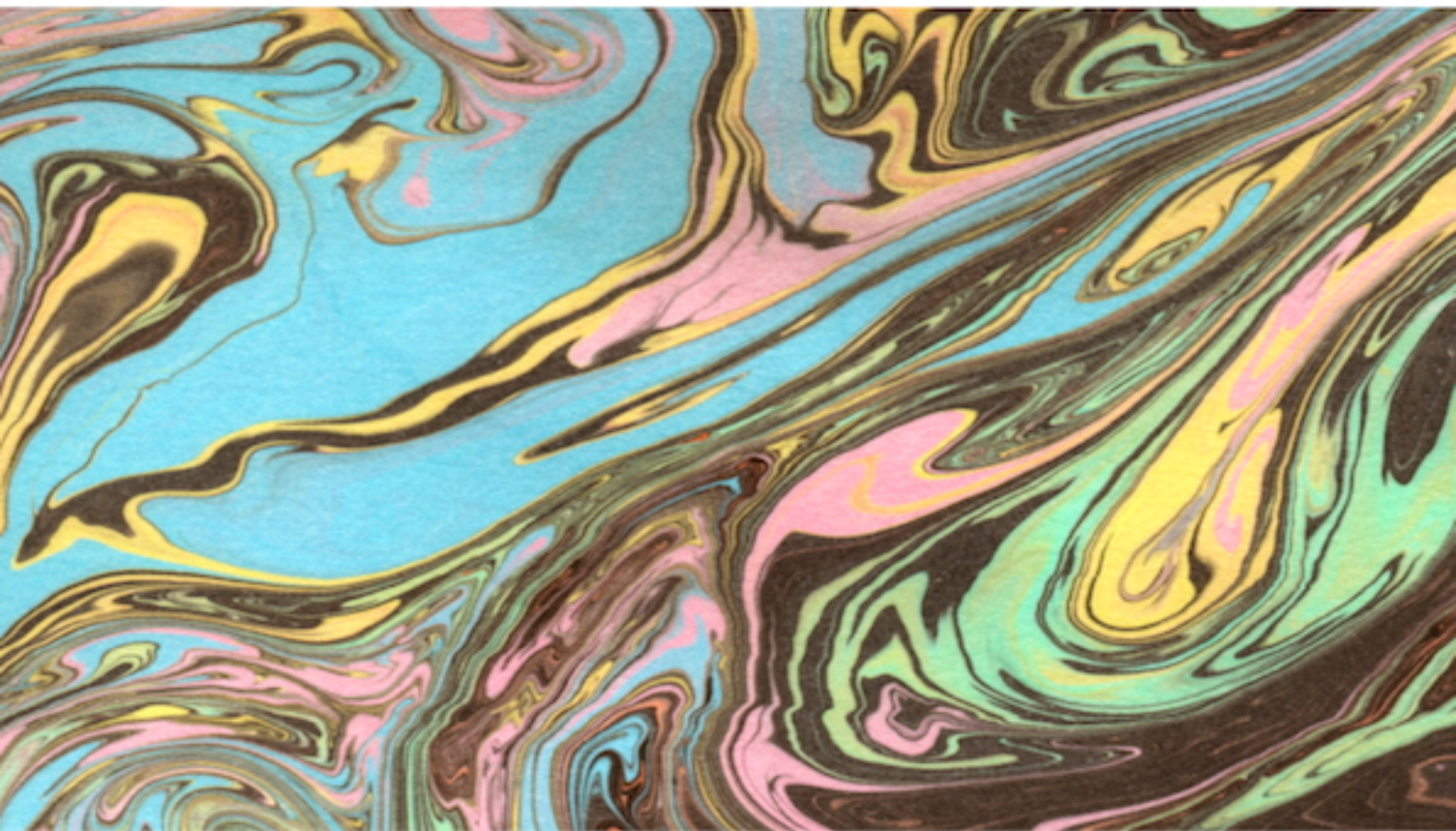


Ewen Munro

The Flow of All Things



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The Flow of All Things is dedicated to all those who have suffered and to all those who are currently suffering.

The Flow of All Things

The Newborn grew out of the universe much like everything else throughout time. Vulnerable and unaware of itself, the Newborn fitted in with the rest of life, resonating love to all beings everywhere whilst feeling its own presence. The Newborn, like all other life forms, was the beginning, the middle and the end, nothing and everything all at once.

Gradually, the Baby developed its senses: seeing lights, hearing sounds, touching surfaces, tasting flavors and smelling scents, experiencing life. Everything was something new, something different to play with. Everything was beautiful.

But then the Baby produced its first thought, *Mom*, and impulsively spoke the word that came to mind. The Baby's Mother and Father turned in amazement and asked their child to utter the word again. And the Baby did. The Mother and Father were elated, laughing and embracing each other whilst the Baby instinctively giggled and occasionally repeated the word, "Mom," to witness its parent's response and playfully prolong the celebration. But without realizing it, this was the dawn of the Baby's demise. This was the moment the Baby's innocence was corrupted.

I came out from behind the tree, ran down the dirt road and looked under the gigantic rock formation, but nothing was there. And so, I turned around and kept searching. But there was nothing.

Later, I was eating with Mum and Dad.

"How was the big game?" Mum asked me.

"Terrible," I replied.

"Oh? What happened?"

"I couldn't find them."

"It's a game. We don't always win games."

“Why not?”

“There are always winners and losers. That’s how games are played.”

“But why can’t we all be winners?”

“Because then no one would play the game.”

“I think we should all be winners.”

“You’ll get them next time.”

I stopped eating and looked away from Mum.

But then Mum leaned towards me, gave me a kiss on my forehead and started to tickle my belly.

I couldn’t help but laugh.

And eventually, Mum stopped, with a smile and started to eat her dinner again.

I smiled back and also started to eat again.

I was sitting in class, watching the rain outside form two puddles.

“Am I boring you?” my Teacher asked me.

I just kept watching the rain.

“...Have you solved the first problem?” my Teacher inquired.

“No,” I answered.

“Why not?”

I turned and read the problem.

“...A lady has five apples and then buys another two apples,” my Teacher said. “How many apples does the lady have now?”

Seven apples. I know that. But it doesn’t feel right. Is it seven apples?

“...I don’t know,” I answered.

“You don’t know?” my Teacher asked.

I looked towards the rain again.

“...I’ll make it easier for you,” my Teacher said. “What is five plus two?”

I kept watching the rain.

“...Five apples plus two apples?” my Teacher asked.

I just kept watching the rain fall, one raindrop at a time and slowly, my attention drifted towards the two puddles, only to notice that the two puddles had merged into one.

Wait.

“...Seven apples,” my Teacher said. “The lady now has seven apples.”

“No, she doesn’t,” I responded.

My Teacher kept looking back at me.

The other students in the class turned to face me.

“...The puddle,” I said.

“What about the puddle?” my Teacher asked.

“The puddle was two puddles before. But now the two puddles are one puddle.”

“What’s your point?”

“How come there aren’t more puddles? Doesn’t one plus one always equal two?”

“...You’re using the wrong measurement. When you measure liquids, you have to use volume. When you measure solids, you have to use units.”

“Why?”

“Excuse me?”

“Why is it like that?”

“Because it is.”

“But why?”

“Because volume is for liquids and units are for solids.”

“But why can’t I use units for liquids?”

“Because you can’t.”

“Why?”

“Because volume is for liquids and units are for solids.”

“But why?”

“Because volume is for liquids and units are for solids!”

Everyone fell silent, as my Teacher and I stopped, looking back at each other.

And then, gradually, a few of the students started to laugh at our Teacher.

“Quiet!” our Teacher shouted.

Our Teacher looked around the class, staring us all down, before turning to me.

“Do you want to see the Head Teacher?” my Teacher asked me.

“No,” I replied.

“Good. Now, do your work.”

My Teacher turned around and wrote down more problems for us to solve.

The rest of the class moaned.

But I smiled.

Not everything is what it seems.

I was with Mum and Dad when I told them about what happened in class.

“Are you mad at me?” I asked them.

“No,” Dad answered. “You were just curious. But you shouldn’t stand up to your Teacher like that, even if your Teacher is wrong.”

“Why is that?”

“People don’t like to feel embarrassed. You can understand why.”

“Did my Teacher feel embarrassed?”

“That’s not our place to say. Also, try to pay attention in class. We don’t want your lessons to go to waste.”

“Ok.”

“...Is there anything else I can help you with?”

“...Yes.”

“And what is that?”

“What does curious mean?”

“It’s when someone likes to...seek answers to questions.”

“I’m a seeker then?”

“That’s correct. A little seeker.”

“I am a little seeker.”

I found my Teacher looking over notes for our class and

approached my Teacher.

My Teacher looked up at me.

"...What is it?" my Teacher asked.

"...I'm sorry," I said.

"For what?"

"For yesterday."

"...We'll see."

"...I'm sorry, what do you mean?"

"I mean, we'll see if you live up to your apology."

I kept looking back at my Teacher until I eventually turned around and sat down.

I was walking home, when a student from my class ran up beside me.

"Where are you going?" the student asked me.

"Home," I answered.

"Why are you going home?"

I looked back at the student.

And the student kept looking back at me.

"What is it?" I asked.

"What is what?" the student replied.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Looking at you like what? I'm not doing anything wrong."

I continued to look back at the student.

But the student wouldn't look away.

And so, I started to walk faster.

But the student started to walk faster too, quickly walking up alongside me.

"...Why are you rushing?" the student asked me.

"I'm not," I answered.

"Yes, you are."

The student stepped in front of me.

And so, I stopped, looking back at the student.

And then, eventually, the student took a small step toward me.

I took a small step back.
“What are you doing?” I asked.
And then, suddenly, the student punched me in my stomach.
I curled up, wrapping my arms around my stomach.
“Why did you do that?” I asked.
The student pushed me to the ground and kicked my stomach.
I grasped for breath and tried to pick myself up.
The student just watched me.
“Why are you hurting me?” I asked.
“...If you tell anyone about this, I’ll hurt you more,” the student said.
And then the student ran off and left me in pain.

I walked down another path, with my right arm over my stomach, while still wincing at the pain.

Why did that Bully hurt me? Was it something I did? Something I said? It must have been. Why would that Bully have picked me?

I came to a stop and noticed that there were two paths before me.

“...You seem lost,” a voice echoed.

I jumped back and quickly turned around, only to find a homeless person, sitting on the ground, casually looking back at me.

“Are you lost?” the homeless person asked me.

I froze, staring back at the homeless person.

“I can help you,” the homeless person said.

“...I’m ok,” I answered.

I hesitantly turned around and looked back at the two paths before me.

“...Are you hurt?” the homeless person asked me.

“...Are you hurt?”

I turned back to the homeless person.

“Huh?” I responded.

“Are you hurt?” the homeless person asked again. “...If you’re hurt, I can help.”

I just kept looking back at the homeless person.

But then the homeless person stood up and started to walk towards me.

I instinctively turned around and just ran down the first path.

“Wait!” the homeless person shouted.

But I just kept running and running and running and after some distance, I looked over my shoulder to find no one behind me.

That homeless person must have given up.

I continued my way down the path, only to realize that the path was starting to stray away.

What do I do? Keep walking down the path that I’m on? Or walk towards home? I don’t know.

I began to cry. But the sadness quickly passed and I took a step towards home.

I’ve come this far and am not home yet, so why don’t I just walk towards home?

And so, I continued my way towards home, occasionally making my way around large logs and moving heavy rocks, but eventually, finding my way back home.

I entered and Mum and Dad ran towards me and clung onto me.

“What happened to you?” Mum asked frantically. “Are you ok? Are you hurt?”

“I’m fine,” I answered.

“What happened to you?” Dad asked.

What do I say? If I tell Mum and Dad about the Bully, then the Bully might find out and hurt me again.

But I can’t lie. Lying is wrong. So, what do I do...? I can’t lie.

So, I told Mum and Dad what happened.

I walked to class with Dad and pointed the Bully out to him.

Later, I was heading home, consistently looking over my shoulder, until I was alone and took a deep sigh.

I made it.

But then, suddenly, the Bully jumped out of nowhere and pulled me to the ground.

“You told on me!” the Bully screamed.

I quickly placed my hand on the back of my head and then looked back at my hand, only to realize the blood that was dripping down my fingers. I pressed my hand over the wound.

“You won’t even deny it,” the Bully said.

What do I say? What do I say? I don’t know.

The Bully took a step forward.

I jolted back, turned around and pushed off in the other direction.

But the Bully quickly grabbed me, held me to the ground and raised a fist in the air.

“You did this,” the Bully said.

“Violence always comes back onto those who commit violent acts,” a voice suddenly interjected.

The Bully and I turned to the voice.

It was the homeless person, standing a few steps away from us with a smile.

“...And therefore, violence never solves one’s problems,” the homeless person concluded.

“What do you know?” the Bully asked the homeless person.

“Nothing. Nothing at all.”

“Then you can leave.”

The Bully stood up and turned towards the homeless person.

“I very well can,” the homeless person said. “But I think I’ll stay.”

“No!” the Bully lashed out. “You have to leave.”

"I don't have to do anything. And you don't have to do anything also. You don't have to hurt anyone or anything."

"Go away!"

"Why?"

"Just go away!"

"Why should I?"

"Because I said so."

"Why should I do as you say?"

"Because I said so."

"And why should I do as you say?"

"Because..."

Tears started to stream down the Bully's face and so, the Bully looked away to hide the tears.

"You have nothing to be ashamed of," the homeless person said to the Bully. "Many of us experience fear when we look deep into the eyes of the unknown. The lesson is not to let fear drive you to hate, but to let fear be a reason to love."

Wow. Let fear be a reason to love. I really like that. I really, really like that.

I eventually faced the Bully.

And then the Bully turned around and faced me.

"It's okay," I said to the Bully. "...It's okay."

The Bully's eyes widened and eventually, the Bully looked back to the homeless person.

The homeless person just looked back at the Bully.

And then the Bully shed a few more tears, turned around and stormed off.

Then the homeless person faced me.

"...Are you hurt?" the homeless person asked me.

What do I say? I shouldn't talk to strangers.

But then this stranger helped me.

"Can I see your wound?" the homeless person asked me.

I carefully took my hand away from my sore.

The homeless person looked at my head.

"Does your head hurt?" the homeless person asked me.

I nodded.

“...I can help you if you want,” the homeless person said.

“...Where?” I asked.

The homeless person pointed in the same direction I was headed.

“A little down that way,” the homeless person answered.

“...I don’t think I should,” I said. “My Mum told me not to go anywhere with a stranger.”

“That’s wise of your mother to say.”

Then the homeless person giggled.

“What is it?” I asked.

“It’s going to be difficult for me to go anywhere with you.”

“Why?”

“Because I am a stranger to all.”

“What do you mean?”

“I have no name.”

“What do you mean, ‘you have no name?’”

“I was never given a name.”

“Your Mum and Dad never gave you a name?”

“My Mum and Dad weren’t around.”

“Why?”

“Lack of appreciation.”

“What does that mean?”

“It’s when someone doesn’t recognize the good things in life. In a way, it is the foundation for all of the problems we make for ourselves.”

Lack of appreciation is the foundation for all of the problems we make for ourselves. I don’t get it, but it feels right.

“...We should get you home,” the homeless person said.

And so, I stood up, tidied myself and began walking with the homeless person following me from a distance.

I would occasionally look over my shoulder and see the homeless person keeping the same distance.

I'm going to be ok. There have been so many chances for this stranger to hurt me and yet, this stranger hasn't done anything to hurt me. I'll be ok.

How can this stranger go around without a name? It must be difficult. This stranger has to have a name.

I turned around and waved my hand to the homeless person.

The homeless person walked up alongside me.

"Why don't you give yourself a name?" I asked the homeless person.

"But I don't want a name," the homeless person answered.

"Why don't you want a name?"

"Because if I have a name, then others will reduce me to an impression."

"What do you mean?"

"When you have a name, others think of you as your name. And I don't want that."

"Why?"

"Because we are not our names."

"Then what are we?"

"So much more. And those who have names are reduced to their name."

"So, it's not good to have a name?"

"I think so."

"Then I don't have a name."

"You don't have to give up your name because I don't have one. You should do what you want to do."

I should do what I want to do.

But what do I want to do? I don't know.

"...I don't know what I want to do," I said to the homeless person.

"None of us really do," the homeless person responded.

"None of us?"

“No one.”

“Why?”

“Because we can’t know what we really want. We can realize what we want to a degree. For example, right now, I realize that I want to walk and talk with you. But we can’t know what we really want. We can’t know what we absolutely desire.”

“Why can’t we?”

“Because we are not our names. When we pretend to be our names, we believe we know what we really want. But because we are not our names, we don’t know what we really want. And we never can.”

But how does not being our names mean that we don’t know what we really want? This is confusing.

“...Did I confuse you?” the homeless person asked me.

“Yes,” I answered.

“Try this exercise then. Go to someone you know and ask them, ‘what do you really want?’ They’ll either tell you that they don’t know what they really want or they’ll tell you what they believe they really want. And if they tell you what they believe they really want, ask them, ‘why do you really want that?’ If they then give you a reason, ask them again, ‘why do you want that?’ And if they give you a follow up reason, ask them again, ‘why do you want that?’ And if they give you another follow up reason, ask them again, ‘why do you want that?’ And don’t stop asking, ‘why do you want that?’, and eventually, you’ll begin to understand.”

“Understand what?”

“Understand that none of us can know what we really want.”

“Ok, I’ll try it.”

We continued down the path.

I’ll try the stranger’s exercise. But how will I begin to understand that none of us can know what we really want? I don’t know. I’ve just got to try the stranger’s exercise.

It’s still odd to say that we are not our names. And since

we are not our names, what should we call each other? What should I call this stranger? I don't know. I should ask.

"...Since we are not our names, what should I call you?"

I asked the homeless person.

"You don't have to call me anything," the homeless person chuckled.

"Why?"

"If you start calling me by something, then to you, I'll be what you call me, similar to if you gave me a name."

"And you want to be more?"

"No, not exactly. I am everything. And so are you. And so is everyone else. We are all everything, only we're pretending we're not."

We are all everything? What does that mean? I am so confused.

"...Think of it as a big game," the homeless person said.

"We're all playing this game, where we all pretend we are somebody, when we're not anybody. We're all only pretending."

A game. A game that we're all playing. I get that. But how do we win the game?

"How do we win the game?" I asked the homeless person.

"The outcome of the game doesn't matter," the homeless person answered. "Whether you win or lose is beside the point."

"Then why play the game?"

"Because we like to play the game. We like getting absorbed in the game and seeing who wins and who loses, even though it doesn't matter who wins and who loses."

We like playing the game.

"And it is important to realize that we like to play the game, just as it is important to realize that we are playing the game," the homeless person said.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because when we are not aware that we are playing a

game, we might do things that we don't mean to do, like that child who hurt you."

We might hurt each other.

And we shouldn't hurt each other. It's a game. And games should be fun. Playing is fun. I do like to win. And I do forget that I'm playing a game when I try to win. But it's the playing that's fun. And we should just play. Have fun. Stop trying to win. Yeah, I like that. I really like that.

But if it's fun to play the game, then why isn't the stranger playing the game?

"If we like playing the game, then why don't you play the game?" I asked the homeless person.

"What makes you think I'm not?" the homeless person asked me.

"Because...you don't have a name."

"Very good. I don't have a name, but some think of me as the Sage."

I continued walking with the Sage, until we eventually arrived at a house and the Sage faced me.

"Are you sure you don't want someone to fix your wound?" the Sage asked me.

Can I trust the Sage? The Sage is still a stranger.

But my head is hurting.

I think I can trust the Sage. Ok. Let's go.

And so, I nodded my head and went with the Sage towards the house.

We continued towards the house, when suddenly, a Healer came out of the house with a smile and open arms.

"Hey," the Healer said.

"Hey," the Sage replied.

"How are you these days?"

"Amazing. And you?"

"Great that you're here."

"I have someone that requires your services."

"Oh? What happened?"

"This one got a bump on the head."

"How did that happen?"

"An accident."

"Can I see?" the Healer asked me.

And so, I showed the Healer my wound.

"Ouch," the Healer said. "Does it hurt?"

"I'm ok," I answered.

"Your friend is tough," the Healer said to the Sage.

The Sage just smiled.

"...Alright," the Healer said to me. "Let's get you fixed up."

And so, we all went inside the house and the Healer treated my wound.

"Will I be ok?" I asked the Healer.

"Yes," the Healer answered. "The wound wasn't too deep, so all I had to do was cover it up so that the wound could heal itself without potentially anything else irritating it."

"Potentially?"

"...You have nothing to worry about."

"...Thank you."

I looked over to the Sage and saw the Sage looking back at me.

"...This is..." and the Sage clapped.

"...What do you mean by..." and I clapped.

"Most believe that things are separate. But all things come together as one. Think of a sword. A sword has a blade and a handle, two things. But the blade and the handle make the sword. If we took the blade away from the handle, we wouldn't have the sword. If we took the handle away from the blade, we also wouldn't have the sword. The blade and the handle come together as the sword. All things come together as one. This is what I mean by..." and the Sage clapped.

Wow. All things come together as one. I hadn't thought of that before.

But is the Sage right? Do all things come together as one?

“Is the blade one?” I asked the Sage.

“Of course,” the Sage answered. “There has to be a swordsmith and steel to make the blade.”

“And is the handle one?”

“Of course. There has to be a craftsperson and wood to make the handle.”

“Is the steel one...? And what about the wood? Is the wood one?”

“...Think of it like this, we can only exist in relation to the environment, just as the environment can only exist in relation to us. If the environment weren't here, we couldn't be here. And if we weren't here, the environment couldn't be here. The sun is only bright in relation to our eyes. The wind is only noisy in relation to our ears. Rocks are only hard in relation to our soft skin. Apples are only delicious in relation to our tongues. Roses are only aromatic in relation to our noses. We are one with the environment. All things come together as one.”

Yes. It's so obvious. All things come together as one.

But why do most believe that things are separate?

“Why do most believe things are separate?” I asked the Sage.

“Because most are used to it,” the Sage answered.

“But why?”

“When one believes in an idea for so long they often believe that the idea must be right.”

“And they're wrong?”

“Not quite. A belief is just a thought one continuously focuses on. A belief is neither right nor wrong, but is just a thought one continuously focuses on. It is important to realize this because when we get so used to an idea that we believe must be right, we can take the game too seriously and can cause harm to others and to ourselves. To believe one is right, when we can never be right or wrong, is the most

harmful thing one can do.”

Like the Bully. And my Teacher. They believed they were right and were harmful to me and they embarrassed themselves. I don't want to be like them. I don't want to hurt others. Or hurt myself.

“But...,” I said to the Sage, “...why is it...?” and I clapped.

“Because...,” the Sage clapped, “...shouldn't be given a name,” the Sage said. “Giving...,” the Sage clapped, “...a name would corrupt...,” the Sage clapped, “...as the name would be a false concept that'll forever act as a grimy veil to...,” the Sage clapped, “...and cause harm to all. So...,” the Sage clapped, “...should have no name.”

I like that. I like that a lot.

Later, the Sage and I left the Healer's house and headed home.

I arrived home with the Sage by my side.

“Thank you for taking care of me,” I said to the Sage.

“It's not a big deal,” the Sage said. “...I like how you ask a lot of questions.”

“Why?”

“Because when one asks their own questions they realize their own answers. And this grows one's wisdom.”

“What is wisdom?”

“A strong understanding of things.”

Wisdom. I like the sound of that. I'm going to grow my wisdom.

“...And the persistent application of growing wisdom is the key to one's enlightenment,” the Sage said.

“What is enlightenment?” I asked.

The Sage clapped.

“...More or less,” the Sage added. “Enlightenment cannot be communicated because words, numbers, symbols and images cannot grasp it. But the way to enlightenment can be communicated.”

“Ok,” I responded. “What does that mean?”

“That anyone can reach enlightenment.”

“Even me?”

“Even you. And all you have to do is persistently apply your growing wisdom.”

And I grow my wisdom by asking my own questions. I get it.

“...And it is important to realize that wisdom has little to no weight without positive action,” the Sage added. “That is why we should persistently apply our growing wisdom.”

“Why is that?” I asked.

“One who is wise and does not act is a prisoner, just as one who acts and is not wise is a prisoner. One requires both wisdom and positive action to be free, to live life on their terms.”

“What is a prisoner?”

“One who is trapped.”

No. I can't be trapped. That'd be terrible.

“...When one believes they are right, they can become a prisoner of their belief and cause harm to others and to themselves,” the Sage continued. “One should ask questions to grow their wisdom and then consistently act on their growing wisdom.”

Yes. I can't believe that I am right. And I can't be a prisoner. I've got to ask questions to grow my wisdom. And then act on my growing wisdom.

But how do I grow my wisdom? In class? Does that mean I have to stay in class?

“Does that mean I have to stay in class?” I asked the Sage.

“Do you need to go to class to learn?” the Sage asked me.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I learn in class.”

“Can you learn outside of class?”

Can I learn outside of class? I don't know.

"...Class is a great place to learn," the Sage said.
"However, it is not the only place where one can learn. One can learn from all books, nature and others. One can learn from all things."

"Then I'll stay in class and learn from all things," I said.
"I'll ask questions and learn from all things."

"Very good. I'm going to let you go now. You should see your parents."

"Ok. Goodbye."

"Goodbye."

The Sage wandered off.

And I entered my home.

I sat down with Mum and Dad and told them what happened.

"I'm so sorry," Dad said to me. "I told your Teacher about what that Bully had done to you and was promised that the Bully would be cared for so that it wouldn't happen again. I'm so sorry."

"It's ok," I said to Dad. "I don't think the Bully will hurt me anymore."

"Why is that?" Mum asked me.

"The Sage."

"The homeless person?"

"Yes."

"...It's good that this homeless person saved you," Dad said. "But we don't want you spending any more time with this homeless person."

"Why?"

"Because we don't know this person."

So? I know the Sage. Mum and Dad don't know the Sage. But I know the Sage.

And did I always know my friends? Did Mum and Dad always know their friends? Our friends were strangers once. All of our friends were.

"Did we always know our friends?" I asked Mum and

Dad.

“It’s not the same,” Mum explained.

“Why?”

“Because homeless people can be difficult to trust,” Dad answered.

“Why?”

“Because they can be selfish.”

“What is ‘selfish?’”

“It’s when one only cares about oneself,” Mum answered.

“Wasn’t I cared for?”

“It’s not the same,” Dad said.

“Why?”

“Please, don’t talk to any homeless people. We just don’t know if we can trust them.”

I can trust the Sage. But Mum and Dad wouldn’t. They believe they are right.

But I’m not right as well.

I closed my eyes, trying to fall asleep when Mum approached me.

“How are you feeling?” Mum asked me.

“Ok,” I answered.

“...Do you understand why we don’t want you around that homeless person?”

“No.”

“We want you to be safe. And we don’t think you’re safe around homeless people.”

“Is it because they’re homeless?”

“It’s because we don’t trust them.”

Mum and Dad couldn’t trust the Sage because they cared for me. I hadn’t thought of that.

It’s important to understand how others feel. That’s how we’ll all get along.

“Do you understand?” Mum asked me.

I nodded.

“...Thank you,” Mum said.
“...Can I ask you something?” I asked Mum.
“Sure. What do you want to ask me?”
“What do you really want?”
“...I want you to feel safe.”
“Why do you really want that?”
“...So that you won’t feel frightened.”
“Why do you want me to not feel frightened?”
“So that you feel good.”
“Why do you want me to feel good?”
“So that you can live a happy life.”
“Why do you want me to live a happy life?”
“Because that makes me happy.”
“Why do you want to be happy?”
“...Because it makes me feel good.”
“Why do you want to feel good?”
“...So that I don’t feel bad.”
“Why do you want to not feel bad?”
“Because it’s not as good as feeling good.”
“Why do you want to feel good?”
“Because it makes me happy.”
“Why do you want to be happy?”
And then Mum froze, looking back at me.

That must be it. We don’t know what we really want because we keep going around in circles. And we can keep going around in circles if I keep asking the same question, ‘why do you want that?’, over and over and over again. The Sage is correct. No one knows what they really want.

“...I’m not sure,” Mum said.
“It’s ok,” I replied.
“...Get some sleep. Ok?”
“Ok.”

And so, Mum gave me a hug and a kiss on the cheek.
“Goodnight,” Mum said.
“Goodnight,” I said.
Mum left.

And I quickly feel asleep.

I was skipping rocks by the lake with a Friend from class.

“Were you listening?” I asked my Friend.

“Huh?” my Friend responded.

“Were you listening?”

“Yes.”

“What was I talking about?”

“Some homeless person.”

“And?”

“And the homeless person was homeless.”

“You weren’t listening, were you?”

“Nah-uh, I was.”

And now my Friend is lying. That’s why it’s important to listen. I shared something that was important to me and my Friend didn’t care to listen. And then when I confronted my Friend about what I had said, my Friend lied. If we don’t listen to each other, then we’re more likely to lie to each other.

The Sage is correct. One can learn from all things.

But if we’re more likely to lie to each other when we don’t listen to each other, why don’t we listen to each other? It’s not hard. It’s just listening.

Eventually, I turned around and started walking home.

“Where are you going?” my Friend shouted.

“Home,” as I continued walking.

“It’s early.”

“I know.”

My Friend ran up beside me, grabbed my arm and spun me around.

“Don’t go,” my Friend said to me.

“Why?” I asked.

“Please.”

“What are we going to do?”

“I don’t know.”

After a moment, I turned around again and continued to

walk home.

But my Friend grabbed my shoulder and spun me around again.

“Please?” my Friend asked.

What do I say? I can't lie. But I don't want to be around someone who's going to lie and not listen to me. What do I do? And what does my Friend want?

“We could see who can skip their rock the furthest again,” my Friend said to me.

Skip rocks? Really? What's wrong with my Friend?

“... Why do you want me to stay?” I asked my Friend.

“... I just want to play,” my Friend answered.

“Why?”

“I like playing.”

“Why do you want to play with me?”

“I don't know. Stop asking so many questions.”

“Why?”

“Because it's annoying.”

“... Why do you want me to stay?”

“Because I do.”

“But why?”

“I don't know.”

“You don't know?”

“I don't know. Stop being so annoying.”

My Friend is annoyed at me and still, my Friend wants me to stay. I don't get it. But I don't know what else to do.

I continued to look back at my Friend.

But my Friend didn't say anything.

Is my Friend going to answer me? Or are we just going to stand here in silence? I don't know. But why does my Friend want me to stay? My Friend doesn't care about me.

Or does my Friend care about me? No. No, my Friend doesn't. But why does my Friend want me to stay?

Or could it be that my Friend just doesn't want to be alone? That could be it.

But why? Being alone is fun. When I'm alone I can think

to myself. I don't know. My Friend's strange.

But I stayed with my Friend and let my Friend skip rocks further than I skipped mine.

Later, I was walking back with my Friend.

My Friend annoyed me, but I did a good thing. And I feel good for it. And I learned a few things. I learned that it is important to listen to others and that my Friend doesn't like to be alone.

But why would my Friend not like to be alone? Why would anyone not like to be alone? And is there anyone else who doesn't like to be alone? I don't know. There might be others. Since my Friend doesn't like to be alone, then it is possible that there are others who don't like to be alone. But I don't know.

I don't really know much. I keep asking questions and keep learning how much I don't know. I must be stupid. Or learning how much I don't know could be part of it. I don't know.

But that could be it. We might not like to be alone because when we're alone, we're alone with our thoughts. Once we've learned to think, we struggle to stop. And if some of us don't like to think, then they're not going to like being alone. It makes sense.

So, how do we stop thinking? Can we stop thinking? I don't know.

I was sitting around a fire with Mum and Dad, while we ate and watched the night sky.

"How deep is the sky?" I asked Dad.

"I don't know," Dad answered. "That would be interesting to find out."

How deep is the sky? I don't know either. There must be some end, a border.

But what would that border look like? It must be huge. It must be a giant shell that surrounds everything.

But then what is beyond that shell? If we broke through

the shell what would we find? I don't know. It might be impossible to break through the shell.

But it has to be possible. There must be a way to break through the shell, otherwise, why would there be a shell? There must be something beyond the shell. But what? More sky? Or could it be something else? I don't know.

But whatever it is, we could get through the shell. We could get through any shell. So, there mustn't be an end.

"Dad," I said.

"Yes," Dad said. "What is it?"

"The sky can't have an end."

"Oh? Why is that?"

"If there is a border that surrounds everything, then there must be a way through that border. There must be a way through any border. So, how can the sky have an end?"

"Maybe. Maybe not."

"Why not?"

"...It's not that the sky couldn't have an end. It's just that I find it difficult to imagine that the universe is infinite."

"What do you mean by infinite?"

"Never ending."

Infinite. I like that word.

"...Why do you find it difficult to imagine the universe as infinite?" I asked Dad.

"If the universe is infinite, then we must be really, really, really, really, really small," Dad said with a chuckle.

We would be small. We would be really small.

But there either isn't a border or there is a border that we could go through. So, either way, the sky has no end. The universe is infinite. Yes. The universe is infinite.

I looked down and around, only to find myself staring into the fire.

Could a fire burn forever? I don't think so. But if a fire could burn forever, then it couldn't harm anyone.

Is that so? I don't know. It feels correct, but I can't explain it. I don't know. Forget it.

I then started to look at the wood in the fire.
What else could be burned by fire? Grass? Trees? Many things?
But is there anything a fire can't burn? I don't know. Fire can't burn water.
But is that so? I don't know. Maybe, fire can burn water. I'm not sure.
Is there anything fire can't burn? There has to be something, but what? I don't know. Fire? That's stupid.
Wait. Fire can't burn fire. Fire burns. Fire can't burn itself.

I headed towards class and saw the Bully standing alone, at a distance.

What would the Bully do if the Bully saw me? I don't think the Bully will hurt me. But I don't know.

Suddenly, the Bully turned, saw me and stared back at me.

I just looked back at the Bully.

Oh, no. Maybe, the Bully might hurt me. Maybe, I'm not safe. I have to get out of here.

But I didn't move, as my heart started to race and my hands and armpits began to sweat.

And then the Bully took a deep breath and walked towards me, staring back at me.

What can I do? I can make sure that the other students see me. If the Bully were to hurt me again, then the other students would come to help me.

I watched the Bully, while slowly moving around to make myself visible to the other students.

But the Bully followed me.

And eventually, when I was in sight of the other students, I stopped.

Then the Bully stopped.

And there we were, standing together, facing each other.

What else can I do? The Bully could still hurt me in front

of the other students. And would the other students help me? I don't know.

But then I don't know what's going to happen. The Bully might apologize to me. That could happen. But I don't know. I don't know what'll happen.

So, how can I get away from this? I could just turn around and run away. But the Bully would probably run after me. Or I could ask the Bully how the Bully is feeling. But that might make the Bully mad. I don't know what to do.

But then, suddenly, the Bully looked away from me and sighed.

The Bully is trying to tell me something. But what? What's the Bully trying to tell me? I don't know.

But it's clear that the Bully isn't trying to hurt me. I'm safe.

Maybe, the Bully is trying to apologize to me. And maybe, that's difficult for the Bully. I don't know. But that could be what is happening here. That could be it. I don't know.

But I have to do something. I know what I could do. I can make it easier for the Bully. I don't need to make the Bully apologize to me. I can make it easier for the Bully.

"...I forgive you," I said to the Bully.

The Bully looked up at me.

The Bully is sorry.

And then the Bully nodded, took a deep breath and walked to class.

That was good. I could have gotten angry at the Bully. I could have hurt the Bully back. But I didn't. I forgave the Bully. And I'm happy with my decision.

I was walking down a different path home and just happened to find the Sage sitting on a rock, watching a colony of ants working together.

"Hello," the Sage said to me.

"Hi," I replied.

“Are you happy on this day?”

“... Yes, I am happy.”

“Why are you happy?”

“... Why not?”

“Why not, indeed?”

I should go. Mum and Dad don't want me talking to the Sage. And I don't want to hide anything from Mum and Dad. And I don't want to tell the Sage that we can't talk to each other. That would hurt the Sage's feelings. I should go.

And so, I took a deep breath. But then my eyes drifted towards the ants.

“They're quite amazing, aren't they?” the Sage asked.

I should go. But I can't just turn around and walk away. That would be rude. And I don't want to be rude.

“... They are,” I replied.

“They don't question who's right or who's wrong, they just work together to support each other,” the Sage said. “We can learn a great deal from ants.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“What's on your mind?”

“... My Mum and Dad probably want me home.”

“Ok.”

I started to walk away, but then stopped myself.

Why isn't the Sage more upset? I would have been.

I turned back around.

“Are you not upset at me?” I asked the Sage.

“No,” the Sage answered. “Should I be?”

“I don't know.”

“One should determine their own happiness. If one's happiness is predicated on others, then one will never be happy. But if one determines their own happiness, then no misery shall come to them.”

“How does one determine their own happiness?”

“To determine one's happiness, one must surrender.”

Surrender?

“It is only by giving up control that one will be at peace

with one's life situation," the Sage said. "When one is swimming, one shouldn't swim against the current. This will cause resistance. And resistance leads to frustration. Instead, one should let go and allow the current to take them."

"What if one doesn't want to let go?" I asked.

"Then one will never be at peace."

That can't be true. There must be other ways for one to be happy.

The Sage sat back and watched the ants work together.

I eventually turned around and left.

I was building a fort with some Friends from class when a bird flew towards me, causing me to jump back and fall on the grass, without a gash to show for it.

My Friends turned to me and began to laugh.

And then I began to laugh.

I don't have anything to feel embarrassed about. I fell.

We all fall. And this moment shouldn't be any different.

I picked myself up and dusted myself off.

And my Friends quickly stopped laughing.

That was strange. One moment they were laughing at me and the next, they stopped.

Maybe, the only reason they stopped laughing was because I didn't feel embarrassed. And if I did feel embarrassed, then they would have kept on laughing.

We should learn to let go of our accidents so that we don't feel embarrassed by them.

Maybe, the Sage was correct.

We finished building the fort, stepped back and stared contently at our handiwork.

But then, suddenly, a gust of wind blew and one of the smaller pieces of wood slipped, causing the entire fort to fall apart.

We all just looked down at the fallen fort.

We could fix it. We've done it before, so we can do it again, from the beginning.

And so, I walked over to the fallen fort and began to kick and smash it.

And soon after, my Friends joined in.

We smashed and kicked the fort down until it had turned to rubble and we were left standing in the wreckage.

Even though our fort fell over, it was fun to smash it down. And now we can start all over again.

I was eating with Mum and Dad at a gathering, when I noticed a stranger with a hunchback that was so severe that the Hunchback could only face the ground when standing.

How terrible it must be to struggle to see another's face.

The Hunchback was continuing to get food, when suddenly, the Hunchback dropped a heap of food.

Everyone around the Hunchback turned to see the mess, as the Hunchback proceeded to clean the mess.

Why is no one helping this Hunchback? Are they just rude? I don't know. But that doesn't have to be me. I don't have to be rude.

And so, I got up and walked over to the Hunchback.

"Do you need any help?" I asked the Hunchback.

"Piss off!" the Hunchback shouted.

I froze up, looking back at the Hunchback, while everyone around us paused to watch.

Then the Hunchback turned around and continued to clean the mess.

What did I do? Did I embarrass the Hunchback? Did I insult the Hunchback? Was it something else? I don't know.

Dad walked up beside me and placed a hand on my shoulder.

"Let's continue to eat," Dad said to me.

I eventually nodded.

But then, all of a sudden, tears began to flow and Dad crouched down and wrapped his arms around me.

"It's ok," Dad said. "It's ok."

I just continued to cry.

What did I do wrong? I don't know. I don't know. I did nothing wrong. I don't know.

Eventually, I began to calm down.

And Dad let go and looked me in the eyes.

I wiped my tears and looked back at Dad.

"What did I do wrong?" I asked Dad.

"You did nothing wrong," Dad answered. "Now, c'mon. Let's continue eating."

I kept on weeping, as Dad stood up and walked me back to Mum.

Mum then gave me a big hug.

"Are you ok?" Mum asked me.

I just kept looking down.

Mum then kissed me on my head and held me tighter.

I sat down in the audience with Mum and Dad.

What did I do wrong? I didn't annoy the Hunchback. I didn't hurt the Hunchback.

Or did I? I just asked the Hunchback if the Hunchback wanted any help. That's all I did. Was there something wrong with that? I don't know. Maybe, I did it in a bad way. But I was only asking. And I only asked once. I was polite. I don't know.

I sat back and watched the stage.

Then the Narrator walked on stage and everyone in the audience fell quiet.

"Ladies and gentlemen...", the Narrator announced, "...thank you for coming this evening. Tonight's show – just so you make sure you're in the right place – is titled, 'The Great Face.' It's an original piece by yours truly and I hope you enjoy it. Thank you."

The audience applauded.

The Narrator ran to the back of the stage and sat down with a cither.

"Three, two, one," the Narrator counted down.

Then the Narrator started playing the overture.

The audience quietened, but eventually, I could hear the fidgeting, clearing of throats and the cracking of knuckles.

I must have done something wrong. I don't know what, but I must have. The Hunchback wouldn't have reacted in that way if I did the right thing.

I wish the Narrator was better. Or that the Narrator was playing a better tune. If the Narrator could do that, then I wouldn't be thinking of the Hunchback.

This is so annoying. Why won't it end?

I sighed, looked down and curled up.

"...Do you want to leave?" Mum quietly said to me.

No. I can't go. Mum and Dad have wanted to watch a show for so long. I can't do that to them. We have to stay.

I shook my head and looked up, towards the stage.

Mum then turned towards the stage.

And finally, the Narrator finished.

The audience applauded.

But the Narrator then raised an arm and gestured to four Performers, who walked on stage.

The audience quickly stopped applauding, sat back in their seats and continued to watch.

Two of the Performers moved to one side of the stage, held each other in their arms and slow danced on their spot, portraying a couple in love.

The other two Performers moved to the middle of the stage, as one of the Performers was portraying a younger character, while the other Performer was portraying an older character.

"I am waiting," the younger character said. "...I am waiting."

"Waiting for what?" the older character asked. "Huh?"

"For something better."

"I was waiting once. And now I'm here."

"Did life turn out well for you?"

"Nah."

"My life will get better. I know it."

The older character started laughing hysterically.
The audience laughed alongside the older character.
“What’s so funny?” the younger character asked.
“You have no idea,” the older character answered.
“You’re so infuriating... Where are we?”
“Where are we?”

“Yes. Where are we?”
“I don’t know. Where is anywhere?”
“Don’t be silly.”

The younger character walked to the front of the stage, looked out into the audience and then looked back at the older character.

“How did we get here?” the younger character asked the older character.

“How do we get anywhere?” the older character asked.
“Travel, dummy!”

“Please, be serious.”

“Yes.”

“Do you remember how we got here?”

“No.”

“I don’t remember either. I don’t remember travelling here. I...Is this a dream?”

The older character walked over to the younger character and smacked the younger character over the head.

The audience laughed.

“Ow!” the younger character exclaimed.

“Seems real to me,” the older character said.

The younger character cowered to the back of the stage, while the older character looked to the audience with a wide grin.

But then the younger character paused and faced the older character.

“Are we dead?” the younger character asked the older character.

“What?” the older character reacted.

“Could we be dead?”

“No, that’s not possible.”

“Then how did we get here?”

The older character looked away from the younger character, before eventually looking down.

“...I’m dead,” the older character said. “I’ve been hoping for a better life my whole life. And now I’m dead. It’s all a joke. And...death is the only one that loves us.”

No,” the younger character exclaimed. “This can’t be.”

The younger character looked out to the audience

“I’ve still got so much life to live,” the younger character said. “How-How can this be? How can this be?”

“Don’t you see?” the older character shouted at the younger character. “You weren’t supposed to wait! You weren’t supposed to wait for the future! You were supposed to live your life now! You were...”

The older character turned away from the audience and cried.

The younger character watched the older character.

After a long beat, the older character turned back around to face the younger character.

“...You were supposed to live life now,” the older character said to the younger character. “You were supposed to have fun now, be happy now, fall in love now.”

The older character gestured towards the couple.

The younger character turned to watch them.

“Not later,” the older character said. “We tricked ourselves the whole way through.”

Both the older and the younger character looked down.

Then the Narrator began to play a different tune.

And both the older and the younger character ran off stage.

The audience looked to the couple, as they continued to slow dance on their spot.

And eventually, the Narrator finished playing and the show went on.

They are just pretending. The show isn’t real. None of it

is real.

I was walking home with Mum and Dad.

“What did you think?” Dad asked Mum.

“I really, really liked it,” Mum answered.

Really? Why? They were just pretending.

“The characters felt honest,” Mum went on. “And I liked a lot of the interesting ideas that the show was exploring.

The characters felt honest? The interesting ideas that the show was exploring? I don’t get it. The show wasn’t real. It was all pretend.

Maybe, Mum and Dad are just easier to please. Or maybe, it’s because of the Hunchback. Or it might be a combination of different things. I don’t know.

But we don’t have the same opinion about the show. Why is that? I’m not sure. We saw the same show and don’t have the same opinion about it.

Or did we? Did we watch the same show? We must have. We were all there, together, watching this show.

But then we don’t have the same opinion about the show. It must mean that what Mum saw was not what I saw. That has to be it. What we see is different to what others see.

Later, I arrived home with Mum and Dad, washed up, lay down and closed my eyes.

But I kept on tossing and turning and eventually, opened my eyes, sat up and looked around, until my eyes fixed on an empty space and my heart began to slow down.

And then, suddenly, I heard a scream.

I got up, ran towards the noise and found Mum in tears, trying to wake up Dad.

I froze.

Mum couldn’t stop crying, as she shook Dad.

“Please wake up!” Mum cried. “Please!”

But Dad wouldn’t move.

Was this what the Performers were talking about in the

show? I don't know.

I finally took a step forward.

And then Mum turned to see me looking back at her.

We locked eyes.

Later, I was holding onto Dad's hand, while Mum went away.

Why won't you wake up? C'mon, Dad. Wake up. Please.

Mum eventually came back with a Doctor and the Doctor approached Dad to examine him.

I stood up and walked over to Mum.

Mum held me in her arms as we watched.

Some of our neighbors approached the commotion. There were a few gasps and whispers from our neighbors.

And then, eventually, the Doctor sighed, stood up and walked over to us.

"I'm sorry," the Doctor said.

Mum burst into tears and held me tighter.

Some of our neighbors gasped and began to cry.

What's going on? What's wrong with Dad?

"What's wrong with Dad?" I asked Mum. "What's wrong...?"

"...Dad...", Mum said, "...Dad is gone."

"What do you mean 'gone?' What do you mean?"

I began to cry.

Mum looked down.

"How is Dad gone?" I asked. "How is Dad...? He's right there. Dad's right there."

Tears started to stream down my face.

And so, Mum faced me and wrapped her arms around me.

And I embraced her.

We held each other and cried out.

I was sitting with Mum in silence.

I will never see Dad again. Dad is gone. Forever. And why? What did Dad do? Dad was so good. I don't know. It's

not fair. I hate it. I hate death.

What's the point if we're going to die in the end? We're here and then we're gone. That's it.

Just like Dad. Dad was with us and then Dad was gone.

No. I don't want any part of it. I don't want to die. I'm not going to die. And I'm going to get Dad back. Yeah, I'll just get Dad back.

But can I? Is there a way to get Dad back? I don't know. Mum told me that 'Dad is gone forever.' Maybe, I can't get Dad back. When we're dead, we're dead. That's it. We're here and then we're gone.

If there was a way, Mum wouldn't have cried. I wouldn't have cried.

So, what do we do? Can we stop death? Can we not die? I don't know.

But I can't go on like this. My head hurts, but I can't trouble others. They will think that I'm annoying them. And I can't do that. I don't want to burden them. No. I can't tell them what I'm thinking about. I can't tell others what I'm feeling. That would annoy them. I can't tell them anything. Nothing. I have to stay silent. I have to. For them.

I was with Mum at Dad's funeral service and watched over Dad's dry and rigid body.

It doesn't look anything like Dad. Dad was always so warm and lively. But here, Dad just looks cold and hardened.

And we care for that. We care for hardness and strength. Why? When we're dead, we harden. So, why do we care for hardness and strength?

And when we're born, we are weak. And we don't care for weakness. Why? That doesn't make sense. We don't care for weakness, but we care for hardness and strength. I don't get that.

All great things had to be born. How could those great things have been alive? All great things come from

weakness.

So, why do we care for that? Why do we care for hardness and strength? I don't know. It doesn't make sense.

The service went ahead and Mum and I cried again, as Dad's body left us.

I was wandering around, looking at the trees, the animals, the clouds, all things.

Why do we have these things? Everything comes to an end, so what's the point? It's a tragedy. Everything is a tragedy.

So, what should I do? What can we do? I don't know. Nothing. There's nothing we can do. How sad.

I was sitting in a circle with some friends from class.

Why are they so quiet? Was it something I did? Did I do something wrong? They're usually so much fun, but now they're not. Not since Dad died. Have they changed because of what happened to Dad?

Or have they changed because of me? Because I'm not talking? Why would they talk to me if I'm not going to talk back? Even being around my friends is annoying for them. I have to go.

I lay down and took a deep breath.

What do I do now? I can't be around anyone, otherwise, I'll just annoy them. So, what do I do? I don't know.

I feel sick. Tired. I'm fine, but I feel sick. It's all too much. I don't know. What do I care? It doesn't matter anyway. Nothing matters.

I was barely eating, while Mum was gorging her food.

"Are you not hungry?" Mum asked me.

I'm starving. But I can't eat. I can't eat anything.

And so, I just stared at my food.

"...Is there anything you want to do?" Mum asked me.

Is there anything I want to do? No. There's nothing I want to do. Nothing at all.

And then Mum stopped eating and faced me.

"I miss you," Mum said to me.

I miss you? I've been home. Why would she miss me?

Did Mum want something? But what? I don't know. I'm here.

"...I miss you," Mum repeated.

Mum's eyes began to swell.

"...I just don't want you to feel alone," Mum said to me.

"And...you don't have to talk to me. You don't have to tell me anything. But I am there. I am here for you, if you want."

Mum didn't want something from me. She was just worried about me.

But I still can't talk to her. I can't talk to anyone. I'll annoy them. Frustrate them. Burden them. And I can't do that. I can't. I can't do that.

And so, I just nodded to Mum.

Mum just smiled back.

I was wandering around by myself.

Maybe, I shouldn't keep silent. Maybe, I should be talking. I don't know.

I just can't burden anyone. I can't. What would they think of me? They'd hate me. That's what would happen. They'd hate me.

So, what can I do? I don't know. I should be talking. Communication is important.

But how? How can I talk to others when I feel this way? When I feel this emptiness inside me?

I can find a way to get better. I can get better before I try to talk to others. That seems like the best thing to do. I won't burden others that way.

Yeah. Yeah, that's what I'll do.

And so, I wandered around, until I found a bookshop, walked in and looked over all the books.

There are so many books in here. Where do I even begin? I don't know.

But maybe, I should just pick a book. Otherwise, I'll be in here forever. Yeah. Just pick one that looks like it'll help.

And so, I picked a book and glossed over it.

Pain is inevitable? No. That's not right. Pain can't be inevitable.

And why should we think more about death? Death is a terrible thing. Why should someone think about death more often? That's ridiculous. This book is ridiculous.

I shut the book, put it back, looked over the books again, picked another one and glossed over it.

But then, suddenly, there was the sound of someone walking into the bookshop.

"Hello," a familiar voice echoed.

"Hello," the Bookkeeper replied. "How are you today?"

"Good. Yourself?"

"The usual. But can't complain."

I leaned over for a closer look.

The Sage was with the Bookkeeper.

I quickly ducked out of view.

But I heard the sound of footsteps approaching.

"Hi, there," the Sage said to me. "It's been a long time."

I turned to the book I was holding.

What else could I do? I'm being rude, but I don't have a choice.

"Are you happy on this day?" the Sage asked me.

Are you happy on this day? Why does the Sage always ask me that question? Most of us ask, 'how are you?', but not the Sage. I don't know. It's just weird.

"...That's a good book," the Sage said.

I looked up at the Sage.

And then the Sage smiled.

"...See you around," the Sage said.

The Sage then turned around and walked away.

I then looked back to the book and started to read it.

Huh. How we feel determines how we live. That makes sense. Whenever I felt bad, my life was bad and when I felt good, my life was good. It's so simple. And obvious.

I'm an idiot. How we feel determines how we live. Of course. How come I didn't know this before? It's so obvious.

I continued to read the book.

And in order to change the world around us, we have to change how we feel. We don't have to change anything else.

That's it. That's all I have to do. I have to change how I feel. Of course. It's so simple.

I then bought the book and left.

I got back home, sat down and continued to read the book.

Ok. There are different ways to change how we feel. But they all involve "no-mind."

No-mind? Ok?

I read on.

No-mind means to not think.

Ok? I have to quieten my mind somehow.

But how? How do we not think? I don't know. But it must be hard. I've never not thought before, especially after Dad.

I looked back to the book.

To not think, to reach no-mind, we have to play around with some of these different ways, so that we can each realize what works best for of us.

That makes sense. We each live different lives, so we'd each have different ways that'd work for us.

I continued reading.

The first way is to take up a discipline.

I can do that. And it could be fun.

But what discipline should I take up? I don't know. I'm not really good at anything. Maybe, I should try another way.

I continued reading.

The second way is to train your body. Training one's

body is a discipline within itself.

No, I couldn't do that. It's too exhausting. No. That's not for me.

I continued reading.

The third way is the hardest to understand and one has to practice different approaches in order to realize what works best for them.

Ok?

The third way is to observe one's thoughts. One can do this by sitting with legs crossed and eyes closed.

Yeah, I can see why that's hard to understand. How do you watch your thoughts? All I can do is practice different approaches, as the book suggests.

And so, I sat up, crossed my legs and closed my eyes.

Ok. Now what?

Am I doing this right? How can I tell?

I've got to stop asking questions. I've got to stop thinking.

But in thinking about thinking, I'm thinking. So, what do I do? I don't know. It's hard not to think. It sounds so easy, but it's really hard. There's no way I'm doing this right.

And so, I opened my eyes, slouched forward and took a deep breath.

I've failed. And I failed badly. I have to find a discipline.

I walked in to find Mum cooking all alone.

What must be going through her mind? I don't know. I wouldn't have a clue. But it can't be easy for her. I have to get better first, before I can talk to her. But it still can't be easy.

And then Mum turned around and looked back at me.

"Hey," Mum said to me. "...Dinner is almost ready."

Mum then turned back around and continued cooking.

I'm sorry Mum. I'm sorry about what's happened to me.

I'm trying to solve it, but what can I do?

I turned around and started to walk off. But then I

paused.

I could hug her.

I turned back around and gave Mum a hug.

Mum stopped and submitted to my embrace.

And eventually, I let go.

Mum then turned around to face me.

“Thank you,” Mum said to me.

I smiled back at her.

I don't have to speak to Mum to care about her. I just have to care for her.

*And if I can be caring, then others can be caring too.
We can all be caring. So, what's stopping us?*

I arrived at the bookshop, only to find the Sage glossing through a book.

The Sage looked up and saw me.

I just looked back at the Sage.

But then the Sage grinned, quickly looked over some more books, picked one out and handed the book to me.

“I think you'll like this one,” the Sage said to me.

I paused, looking back at the Sage, but I eventually took the book and started to browse through more books.

The Sage went back to reading.

I looked over some more books, picked out a book, quickly read over it and then looked to the Sage.

The Sage just kept reading.

And so, I looked back to the book, read a bit more, stopped, closed the book and walked over to the Sage.

The Sage stopped and looked back at me.

“...Do you want to know what I think of the book?” the Sage asked me.

I nodded.

“You could read that one,” the Sage said. “But I prefer...”

The Sage walked over to some more books, quickly looked over them and picked out another book.

“...this one,” the Sage finished.
I looked over the book, smiled and then nodded.
The Sage kept on looking back at me, until the Sage gasped.
“...Can I make an observation?” the Sage asked me.
I nodded.
“You’re not talking to anyone, are you?” the Sage asked.
Oh, no. I can feel my emptiness again.
I looked away from the Sage.
“...Can I ask why?” the Sage asked me. “...Did something happen to you?”
Dad.
My eyes began to tear up.
“...I don’t have to know what happened, but I’m always happy to help,” the Sage said.
I looked back up at the Sage, wiped my tears and nodded.
The Sage nodded back and then looked over some more books and picked out some more books.
“These ones are on me,” the Sage said.
Thank you.
But how is the Sage going to purchase them?
But the Sage smiled.
“There’s no need to worry,” the Sage said to me.
The Sage walked over to the Bookkeeper.
I followed and tried to cut in front of the Sage.
“No,” the Sage said to me. “I’ve got it.”
The Sage walked ahead of me, approached the Bookkeeper and placed the books in front of the Bookkeeper.
“I’ll take these,” the Sage said to the Bookkeeper.
“Ok,” the Bookkeeper replied.
The Bookkeeper started to calculate the cost of the books.
I just watched.

How is the Sage going to afford these?

And so, I approached the Bookkeeper, pulled out some talents and began to count them.

But the Sage pulled out some gold and placed it in front of us.

“Would this do?” the Sage asked the Bookkeeper.

The Bookkeeper and I froze, looking back at all that gold.

“...Yes,” the Bookkeeper answered. “That’ll do.”

And so, the Sage traded the gold for the books, gave the books to me and then the Sage and I left together.

Looks can be deceiving and we shouldn’t judge by appearances.

I was carrying all the books home, as the Sage walked by my side.

“You don’t have to carry all of those books by yourself,” the Sage said. “I can help you carry them if you want. It’s not a problem.”

No, I have to look after these books. I can’t burden the Sage.

But I’m denying the Sage’s request. Is that rude? It is. But it’s also the best thing to do. I’m not burdening the Sage.

But then I’m pushing the Sage away again. And the Sage has only ever been nice to me. And the Sage did buy the books. I wouldn’t be losing anything if the Sage were to take them.

And so, I handed some of the books over to the Sage.

“...You’re probably wondering how I got that gold,” the Sage said to me.

Yeah, the Sage is correct. Where did the Sage get all that gold?

And so, I nodded.

“Many of us fall into the habit of closing ourselves off from what is in front of us,” the Sage said. “Talents. Gold. These riches are not as hard to get as it may seem. All riches

are within reach. We just might not be in possession of them...yet.”

Really? If it's so easy, then why doesn't the Sage have all of those riches? What's stopping the Sage? What's stopping me? Or anyone? That can't be correct.

But maybe, the Sage is correct. I don't know. I should ask more questions. I shouldn't stop my wisdom from growing. Since I've stopped talking, I've been asking fewer and fewer questions. And I can't do that. I can't stop my wisdom from growing. So, I have to ask more questions. I have to come to more realizations and continuously grow my wisdom, even with my problem, my emptiness.

I was still walking home with the Sage.

“Do you need to be home right away?” the Sage asked me.

I shook my head.

“Do you like to wander?” the Sage asked me.

I nodded my head.

“Then why don't we wander around?” the Sage asked me.

And so, we wandered around.

There's this freedom in wandering, drifting around, aimlessly, without any desires, much like a cloud. How peaceful it is.

It's like how that book describes no-mind. Maybe, that's what no-mind is. It's that peaceful feeling of not having to go anywhere, not having to do anything, just feeling. I don't know, but that could be it.

“Why aren't you talking?” the Sage asked me.

I faced the Sage, but then bowed my head and looked away.

“Sorry,” the Sage responded. “Forget I asked.”

The Sage knows that something is wrong with me.

It's good that the Sage isn't pushing me into saying what happened. The Sage just cares.

“...Do you remember what I told you about the ‘persistent application of growing wisdom?’” the Sage asked me.

I nodded.

“Books can really help with that,” the Sage said. “They can teach you things that you couldn’t learn anywhere else. They can make you imagine life through others’ perspectives. And with books, with the persistent application of growing wisdom, you can learn to handle any pain that you’re feeling. That’s why I traded my gold for those books. Books are more valuable than gold.”

And the Sage gave me those books. The Sage really is caring. And generous. Very generous. If there’s anyone I could talk to, it’s the Sage.

Thank you.

The Sage smiled.

I arrived home with the Sage and all of the books.

“...I’ll see you around then,” the Sage said to me.

And so, I took all the books and gave the Sage a wave.

And the Sage waved back and left.

I sat down, picked the first book from the pile and started to read.

No-mind again? And how to watch our thoughts?

There doesn’t seem to be anything about disciplines. Or training one’s body. Maybe, the book only explores watching one’s thoughts.

But there’s no harm in reading.

And so, I read on.

Reaching no-mind is easy.

Easy? Really? No. It can’t be easy. If it was easy, then I would have done it. I would have reached no-mind. But I haven’t. No. It can’t be easy.

I closed the book, put the book down and looked away.

Or is it easy? Maybe, I was doing something wrong. I probably was doing something wrong.

So then, I looked back to the book, picked the book up, opened it and continued reading.

The problem is that many believe that it is complicated and therefore, they try too hard.

Many try too hard. That's what I was doing wrong. I was trying too hard.

But isn't it good to try? Isn't it good to give it a go?

I read on.

And as we try too hard to watch our thoughts, we stimulate more thinking.

Yes. That's what happened to me. When I tried to watch my thoughts, I couldn't stop thinking. And then I'd try to watch those thoughts and that'd only make me think more.

So, what should we do? How do we watch our thoughts? How do we reach no-mind?

I read on.

So, to reach no-mind, we should let go. Surrender.

Surrender? The Sage was correct. I have to surrender.

And so, I put the book down, sat up, closed my eyes and just watched my thoughts.

My breathing is kind of loud. Is that a good thing? I don't know.

I'm thinking again. I've got to stop. Just surrender. It's easy.

My attention slowly drifted to the sounds of a tree blowing in the wind and then to the tune of a bird chirping.

But then, slowly, the sound quietened and all at once...

*...Wow. Wow. That was amazing.
But I had to wake up. I could only be in no-mind for so long. I couldn't feel peace forever.
Or can I? I don't know. I have to find out. I have to.
Or at least, I have to find out how to reach no-mind while I'm awake. Is it possible? I don't know.
The other book said that I could take up a discipline or train my body. I'm not interested in training my body. But I could take up a discipline.
But what discipline should I take up? I don't know. Nothing really interests me.
So, what can I do? Find a discipline that interests me. That's it, really.
But how? How do I find a discipline that interests me? I can't be told what discipline to take up. That's obvious. No one likes being told what to do. It always feels as if you're doing something for them. They don't care about you. They just expect you to do what they tell you to do.
So, I have to rely on myself to realize what discipline to take up.*

I had finished reading the books that the Sage bought for me, so I went back to the bookshop and glossed over each book, one by one.

There are so many good books. But I can't have all of them. And I won't be able to read all of them. There are too many. And I don't have the time.

I have to narrow down my choices. Keep it simple. I have to pick the books that I want to read, the books that are going to help me feel peace while I'm awake.

And so, I looked over the books, but I quickly stopped.

There doesn't seem to be any. All these books are on the variety of different disciplines and how to train one's body, but none of them can show me how to feel peace all the time.

How can there not be a book on this? How can there not be a book on how one can feel peace all the time?

I began to sweat and feel aches in my neck and shoulders.

Maybe, the reason why someone hasn't written the book is because no one has ever posed the question.

No. Throughout all of history, no one has thought about feeling peace. Someone must have.

If we could all feel peace, then we wouldn't hurt each other. We would just love. Imagine that. Imagine a universe where everyone just loved. And loved without expecting anything in return. Love without any attachment to a return. That would be a universe that I would like to live in.

But then where is the book? Someone must have written that book. Or at the very least, someone must have talked about it with someone else. Or maybe not. I don't know.

I closed my eyes, took a deep breath and walked away.

"You were with that homeless person the other day, weren't you?" a familiar voice asked.

I turned around and saw the Bookkeeper standing behind me. I nodded back.

"I've never seen so much gold in my life, let alone traded so much for some books," the Bookkeeper said.

I smiled.

"...If you want, you and your friend can come and read as many books as you two want," the Bookkeeper said.

My eyes lit up.

Really? As many books as I want? That's so generous.

"...But only for you and your friend," the Bookkeeper said. "And you have to bring the books back the way you took them."

I nodded.

"...Very few buy books anymore," the Bookkeeper said. "It's a shame."

Yeah, it is. There's so much that we can learn from books and yet, many don't. I don't know why that is. It seems so obvious and yet, many don't.

But it's nice that the Bookkeeper is being so kind,

especially when the bookshop isn't doing so well. I can only imagine what the Bookkeeper must be going through.

Why is that? Why do I feel for the Bookkeeper? Is it because I can imagine what the Bookkeeper is going through?

Or is it because I've suffered? And we can relate? I've never owned a bookshop before, so I don't know the difficulties of running one. But there is my emptiness. I can understand what the Bookkeeper is going through because of my emptiness. That's why I feel for the Bookkeeper.

It's funny though. I wouldn't feel for the Bookkeeper if I didn't have my emptiness. It's because I've suffered that I can understand how the Bookkeeper is suffering.

And maybe, I can also understand how others have suffered. How everyone has suffered.

Maybe, we can all understand how we've all suffered. We could all relate to each other's suffering.

And that means we can all help each other. We can all get along.

And I might not have realized this if I hadn't suffered, if I didn't have my emptiness. Sometimes our darkest moments can present us with great gifts.

I walked back into the heart of the bookshop, resumed searching through the books, picked out some books and waved, 'goodbye,' to the Bookkeeper.

"See you next time," the Bookkeeper replied.

I read many books, taking books from the bookshop home, reading them and returning them in the condition they were taken.

I was with Mum as we went to our Neighbor's place, where we were welcomed with open arms.

"Hello!" our Neighbor shouted exuberantly.

"Hello!" Mum responded in the same fashion.

They gave each other a huge hug, before our Neighbor

turned to me and smiled.

I smiled back.

“...Shall we go in,” our Neighbor said to Mum.

“Yes,” Mum replied.

And so, we followed our Neighbor.

And as we walked, Mum gave me a kiss on my head.

“Please, be polite,” Mum whispered to me.

What does Mum expect from me? I'm here. I'm here for you. I don't have to be here. But I'm here.

“Here,” our Neighbor said.

Mum and I sat down.

And our Neighbor walked off.

Ok?

I looked around.

I don't want to be here. But what choice do I have?

And then our Neighbor came back with some drinks.

Why did our Neighbor bring us drinks? What if I don't want a drink? Did our Neighbor think about that? I doubt it.

But Mum took a sip and looked to me.

“It's good,” Mum said to me. “Try it.”

Try it? No, I won't try it.

I just looked away.

Yeah, I'm being rude, but what about me? Our Neighbor didn't even ask if I wanted a drink or what drink I might have wanted and just assumed that I would drink whatever I was given. Our Neighbor put me in a difficult position and now I'm being judged for it. That's unfair.

Mum sipped her drink again and smiled to our Neighbor.

“It's great,” Mum said. “Thank you.”

“Thank you,” our Neighbor responded. “I've got something to show you.”

What now?

“Wonderful!” Mum replied.

Our Neighbor got up, left and eventually came back with some new clothes to show us.

“What do you think?” our Neighbor asked Mum.

Mum looked through all the different clothes.

“...They’re wonderful,” Mum answered.

Wonderful? Wonderful? Mum has never used that word before now.

And why is Mum behaving like our Neighbor? It’s strange.

But how should Mum behave? Do any of us really know how to behave? I doubt it. That could be why most of us just copy others without thinking about the way we’re behaving, like Mum, calling everything ‘wonderful.’

If everything is wonderful, then the word becomes meaningless. And we often do that. We often misuse words.

But how do we know which words to use? And when to use them? How can we be sure? Do we have to judge for ourselves? Or is there a system that tells us when to use a particular word? Each writer writes in a different style, so there can’t be a system that tells us when to use what word. Each writer is different, much like how each of us interprets the same one thing differently. And how we each interpret the same book differently.

But then, since we each interpret the same book differently, how can we ever know what the writer meant? We each have a unique interpretation of the same book. There’s no way we can interpret a book without some bias. There’s no way we can interpret anything without some bias. And since we bring our values to every book, we can never experience the book as the writer experiences the book. Each of us will experience the same book differently. And that goes for everything else we experience. We interpret the same one thing differently and get into conflict with each other, even though it’s the same one thing.

I looked up and saw Mum and our Neighbor continuing to look through clothes.

Why do they care so much about clothes? It’s not that I don’t care about clothes. But clothes are just what we wear.

That's it. Nothing more. And yet, so many of us make such a big deal out of clothes. I don't get it. Life is too beautiful to reduce it to things.

But clothes do have a way of reflecting who we are. Some wear their clothes to fit in, others wear their clothes to stand out, then there are those who wear their clothes to make a statement, as well as the many other reasons why one would wear the clothes that one wears. One can learn a lot about others through the clothes they wear.

And I would say that our Neighbor is one to show off and try to seek attention. And seeing as our Neighbor is so keen to show us these new clothes, to get Mum's reaction, that seems pretty accurate.

This is probably why they became friends in the first place. Mum wanted someone to communicate with and our Neighbor wanted someone to show off to. It's sad in a way.

But this is just speculation. How could I have known who our Neighbor is? We're so much more complex than the clothes that we wear.

Plus, first impressions can be wrong. And if my first impression is wrong, then the conclusion that I arrived at would also be wrong. One shouldn't be quick to judge others. One shouldn't be quick to judge others through the clothes that they wear.

But there must be some reason for why one makes the decision to purchase the clothes that they wear. And that probably means that any conclusion that one comes to about another can't be that far off. The conclusion that I came to about our Neighbor can't be that far off.

All I want to do is read.

I arrived back home with Mum when Mum stopped me.

"Are you ok?" Mum asked me.

Am I ok?

"...I thought you'd want to talk," Mum said to me.

Talk about what? What's wrong with you?

“...Forget about it,” Mum said. “Everything’s good.”

No, everything’s not good. If everything were good, you wouldn’t be trying to get me to talk.

But what can I do? I can’t burden Mum.

“...I just want you to talk,” Mum cried out. “That’s all I want. Just for you to talk.”

What can I do? Without sharing my emptiness? I can use hand gestures. But then hand gestures are so much harder to interpret than written words, so I can’t do that.

I can use a book. I can use a book.

And so, I quickly rushed to my books, picked out a book, rushed back to Mum, opened up the book and pointed to the word ‘I.’

“I,” Mum repeated out loud.

I looked through the book again until I found the next word, ‘love.’

“Love,” Mum repeated the word again. “You?”

I nodded.

Mum started to tear up.

And then I started to look through the book again.

C’mon.

But then I stopped and rushed back to my collection of books.

Mum followed me.

I picked out another book and looked through it until I found the word, ‘forever,’ and showed the word to Mum.

Mum shed a few tears.

I kept searching through the book and quickly found the words, ‘no,’ ‘matter’ and ‘what,’ and finished the sentence for Mum.

Mum smiled back at me and hugged me.

“I love you too,” Mum whispered to me.

We both withdrew.

No matter what struggles we face, no matter what problems we have to solve, we have each other.

I was reading the latest book.

We cause all of our problems in order to come up with a solution to our problems.

What? That can't be correct.

Or is it? Not everything is as it seems. So, it could be.

But if it is, then have I been causing my problems? No. I haven't been causing my problems. I didn't cause my emptiness. My emptiness happened to me.

But I read on.

So, where's the solution? If we cause all our problems in order to come up with solutions to them, then where is the solution to this problem? This is stupid. Why would a book raise a problem and then not provide a solution? There's no good in that.

Or am I missing something? I don't know. Who cares?

I put the book down, took a deep breath and looked around.

I should take a break from reading. Do something else.

But what? I don't know.

I took another deep breath and kept on looking around, until my attention landed on my latest collection of books.

I don't know. Maybe, I can get some sleep.

Or why don't I write something? Not a whole book, but something. It could be fun, especially since I enjoy reading so much.

Yeah, I'll give it a go.

But what do I write about? I don't know.

I should get some sleep.

And so, I went to sleep.

I was wandering around.

What a waste of time. But what can I do? I don't have anything worth writing about.

I continued walking along the grass fields, by the lake, the rock formation, among the trees and down many other different paths.

Something just needs to happen. Something just needs to come to me.

I can try going somewhere else. All these places are too familiar to me. Maybe, that's the problem. There's nothing new. Nothing exciting anymore. I have to do something different.

And so, I continued to wander around until I reached the ocean, sat down and just watched the waves.

How come I've never been here before? The beach isn't that far away. I don't know. It's probably because it's still kind of close. Things aren't special when they're within reach.

There's no magic here. There's no magic anywhere. Even with the soft sand, the waves and the shimmering reflection of the sun, there's nothing here.

How far do I have to go to find magic? It must be far. There's nothing here for me.

And how will I know when I find it? I guess one won't know what inspires them until it happens. And if that's the case, then one might be travelling for a very, very long time.

But surely there must be a way to immediately find inspiration. If there wasn't a way, then there wouldn't be so many books.

But then again, maybe there should be more books than there already are. I don't know.

I just need to find something to write about. That's all. But what? What do I have to find? It has to be special. But what is special?

Mum is special. But it would be weird to write about Mum.

I should write a list. A list of all the special things in my life.

But what else can I add to my list? What else is special in my life? I go to classes. I read books. And I know a lot, but that's it.

I have to travel. I have to get away from here and find

inspiration.

But how can I? I can't leave Mum.

I will never be a writer.

I began walking back home, only to notice a student from class playing with a dog.

It made me smile.

And then the dog quickly saw me, playfully barked at me, ran towards me and ran circles around me.

I then raised my hand.

And the dog stood up on its back legs, trying to reach my hand.

"She likes you," the student said.

I looked back at the student with a smile

"...Do you have a dog?" the student asked me.

I just shook my head.

"That's a shame," the student said. "Dogs are the best. The best. Dogs are man's best friend because all dogs do is play. And they can look after themselves. Dogs don't need any help with anything. You should get a dog. I mean it."

Yeah, there is all that with a dog. But one also has to make sure the dog is fed, washed, looked after. That's a lot of responsibility.

It is fun though. Maybe, I could write to Mum about getting a dog. I don't know.

"...Where are you going?" the student asked me.

How do I respond? Yeah, the student is a bit of a stranger to me, but I mustn't be rude.

But how do I respond? I could write. Yeah, I can do that.

And so, I wrote the word, 'home,' and showed the word to the student.

"How far?" the student asked me.

I then wrote down, 'close.'

"Do you want to walk together then?" the student asked me.

Why not?

And so, the student and I started walking together, with the dog following just behind us.

“...You really don’t talk at all, do you?” the student asked me.

I shook my head.

“Can I ask why?” the student asked me.

Uh, what do I write? I don’t want to get into it. And the student might find out about my emptiness. I can’t let that happen.

So, what do I write? I don’t know.

“...I don’t need to know,” the student interjected.

I took a deep breath and nodded.

We continued down the path we were on, watching the moving world around us.

I love this. I love this silence.

My other friends don’t like silence at all. They can’t stand it and will do anything to drown it out. I don’t get that.

It’s just so comforting to be here. It really is. The only moments I’ve felt this comfortable were around Mum, Dad and the Sage.

Dad.

I think I’m sick. I think my emptiness is rising.

I took a deep breath, raising my chest.

“What are you doing?” the student asked me.

I don’t know. But what other choice do I have? I can’t share my troubles. I can’t tell the student about my emptiness. I have to get away.

But how? I can’t just run off.

So, I stopped and closed my eyes.

Just watch what you’re thinking about and your emptiness will go away. It’ll just go away. And I’ll feel better. And I’ll get home. And everything will be ok. It’ll all be ok.

But I began to sweat.

C’mon, please. Please pass.

I opened my eyes.

What do I do? What do I do?

But then I looked to the student and the student began to copy me.

What is the student doing?

Then the student started to pull faces.

And I laughed and began to mimic the student.

And then we laughed together, as we exaggerated our performances and gradually, my breathing slowed down and I was sweating less and less.

I can breathe. Thank goodness.

The student really helped me back there. If the student didn't help me, then I don't know what would have happened. This is someone I can call my Friend.

I sat down and closed my eyes. But then my eyes opened.

What's wrong with me? Why can't I find it? Why can't I get there anymore? I didn't have a problem before. But now. Now, I don't know. One can't know what to do when they don't know the problem.

And I feel good. I feel good. It's not as if my emptiness is building up and overpowering me. I'm content. But I don't know.

What's stopping me? Mum is feeling better. Classes are the same.

But maybe, that's it. Everything is still more or less the same.

But then again, I made a new friend, someone I like to spend time with.

So, what's wrong with me?

I was heading for a walk, when I heard Mum humming a tune. So, I turned around and saw that Mum was looking through her clothes.

Mum must be going out.

Or she is just looking through her clothes. Some do that. They find interest in clothes.

I don't get it. Others might like it. But I don't get it. Clothes get lost, ripped, torn, even lose their sentimental value. And if one's happiness is dependent on their clothes, then what would happen to them when their clothes are taken away from them?

The same goes for all other possessions. When we put our happiness into our possessions, then we become a prisoner of our possessions.

Then Mum turned around and saw me.

"Hey," Mum reacted. "What-What are you doing?"

I shook my head.

And then Mum continued to look through her clothes, but without humming the tune.

Ok?

"Are you going out?" Mum asked me.

I nodded.

"Don't be late," Mum said to me.

Mum gave me a hug, turned around and continued to look through her clothes.

And I left.

Was Mum embarrassed? She was humming a tune, but why is that embarrassing?

Some get embarrassed over the smallest of things. They feel embarrassed over dropping things, tripping over, telling a bad joke, as well as many other little things. But why? Do those tiny moments matter? I don't get it. Those moments happen, and whether we feel embarrassed or not we still move on. We always move on. Might as well move on without feeling embarrassed.

But even if I explained this to most, they'd still feel embarrassed. Maybe, they just can't help it. Maybe, Mum can't help it. I don't know.

But there is something strange about the way Mum is acting.

I was wandering around.

She must have been embarrassed because of something else. Who feels embarrassed for getting caught looking through their own clothes? No one.

She was humming, but that's nothing to be embarrassed about. I wouldn't be embarrassed about that. She might be, but I wouldn't be. I don't know.

But if there is something else on Mum's mind, then what? What could it be?

And why hasn't she told me what it is? I might not be talking, but we are close again. She would have told me if something was bothering her.

Maybe, Mum still has her bad moments. Maybe, she is hiding her concerns to protect me. Mum would do that. She cares more about me than I could ever imagine. And she doesn't want to burden me with her troubles.

Like me and my emptiness. I can't burden Mum. The pain she'd have to endure would be unbearable. And I can't do that to her.

It's tough. It's really tough, on both ends. Since Mum won't share her concern with me, then there isn't much I can do. I can figure out what her concern is and try to solve it, but that's invasive. I can cause more problems that way. I can't do anything.

That's the toughest thing in life: to stand back when someone we love is in trouble. Why does life do this to us? Why does life come with so much pain, so much suffering? What good is there in it? Life should be painless. Life should be pleasant all the time. That's how life should be.

I kept wandering around, until my attention caught a bare tree.

The leaves. They're all gone. It wasn't that long ago when the tree had leaves, but now the leaves have blown away.

Or maybe, the leaves have left. The wind blows leaves away.

But to suggest that the leaves had blown away would suggest that the leaves left against their will. And what if leaves have will? What if leaves could decide to drift away? We make decisions. Who's to say that leaves can't make decisions?

What a dumb question. But it's still good to ask questions, even if they're dumb. When we ask dumb questions, we realize life's fallacies. And when we don't, we miss everything in front of us. We miss life. We should all ask more dumb questions.

This tree though. This tree is so beautiful. Somehow. It doesn't have leaves and yet it's beautiful. When the tree had leaves, it was like any other tree. But since the tree has shed itself of its leaves, then the tree is different.

Is that why the tree caught my attention? Or is it because of something else? The bare tree does look peculiar. To notice a tree that was once full of leaves and vibrant and then to see that tree without its leaves, to see that tree stripped naked could be the reason why I am so curious.

But then again, maybe that is it. Maybe, it's because the bare tree is dead.

Or is it? Is the tree dead because there are no leaves? The tree is still a tree, even without leaves. It is no different to a lobster leaving its shell. A lobster grows too big for one shell and has to get another one. The bare tree isn't going to get another shell.

But a bare tree is still a tree. Just because the tree is bare doesn't mean that the tree is dead. So why might we consider a bare tree to be a dead tree? Is it just because it doesn't have leaves?

No. That's not it. We consider a bare tree to be a dead tree, not because the bare tree is dead, but because the bare tree isn't full and vibrant. The bare tree is dead because of the leaves that it lacks, not because it is bare. We are judging the bare tree by what it isn't, not by what it is. The bare tree is still a tree. The bare tree isn't dead.

*Or is it? Does a tree need leaves to be alive?
I have to write this down.
I quickly turned around and raced back home.*

I felt my blood surging through my body, as I rushed home.
*A bare tree isn't a dead tree. A bare tree isn't a dead tree.
A bare tree isn't a dead tree.*

*I've got to get home. If I don't, I'll forget everything.
And if I do that, I'll be mad at myself. I'll get angry. I'm
finally inspired and if I let the inspiration slip, I don't know
what I'd do.*

*Stop. Stop distracting yourself. Focus. Focus on the
bare tree, how a bare tree isn't a dead tree. A bare tree isn't
a dead tree. A bare tree isn't a dead tree. A bare tree isn't a
dead tree.*

I eventually made it home, wrote down the thought and sat back.

*I can breathe. I've never had to concentrate so hard.
I've never panicked so much either.*

But it was worth it.

And kind of exhilarating.

*I should bring something to write with me though. Don't
want to forget a thought.*

*But maybe, I had to go through that. Maybe, those were
answers that I had to realize. Maybe, I had to race home and
not only learn how invigorating it was to be that focused, but
also learn that I should always have something to write with.*

*And all of that came from a tree. All of those realizations
came out of that bare tree. How is it that something so
simple, so bland and ordinary could also be so inspiring?
How did this tree ignite a fire within me? Was it just because
the tree was bare? Or was it because the tree was simple,
bland and ordinary? Could simplicity lead to inspiration?
Or was it because the tree was different? Or was it just
circumstance? I don't know. Again, I don't know.*

But that's also something to take away. I don't need a

new experience to find inspiration. I can find inspiration anywhere at any moment.

I have to write this down.

I then leaned forward and consolidated my thoughts.

I handed the passage that I had written to my new Friend and my Friend took the passage and examined it thoroughly.

"I like it," my Friend said to me.

That's it? I like it. No criticism? Nothing else? Just 'I like it?' Great feedback.

"...A tree of all things?" my Friend asked me.

I shrugged my shoulders.

"Ok," my Friend responded.

You really aren't going to give me any more feedback. At least some criticism I could use, but I can't use nothing.

Maybe, something's wrong with my Friend. My Friend is usually more animated. Maybe, my Friend didn't like what I had written and is just being quiet to be polite. To protect me.

It's getting annoying though. Mum thinks I need protection. My Friend thinks I need protection. But I don't. I can look after myself.

Or might I be wrong. Maybe, my Friend did like what I had written, but is just not showing it. I don't know.

Who else could I get feedback from? Mum, yes. But any criticism from her would hurt. At least with my Friend, I could take it. But not from Mum. She's too close to me. There's no way I can handle that.

But who else do I have?

Or I could just not get any feedback. There's nothing wrong in that. And who's to say what's better? We're all neither right nor wrong anyway. And since we're neither right nor wrong, then who's to say that one thing is better than another thing? No one, that's who. No one can say what's better or what's worse. We're all neither right nor wrong.

So why do we ask for feedback? I don't know. Maybe, we just want validation. We want someone to tell us what we want to hear. That's my guess.

"You need to run more," my Friend interjected. "If you were struggling to run home, as you described you did, then you need to run more."

My Friend stood up.

"C'mon," my Friend said. "You're going to run with me."

What? You've got to be joking. I don't need to run.

"...I'm not joking," my Friend said.

I shook my head.

"Yes, you are," my Friend said.

No, I'm not. I hate running. The act is deplorable and monotonous and too arduous for anyone to undertake.

But what other choice do I have? I can't say "No." I can't be rude. I have to run.

"You're going to thank me for this," my Friend said to me.

We'll see.

I began running with my Friend, feeling the sweat seeping from my body, my heavy breathing and pounding heart.

Has my Friend realized that I don't run? I have to start at a much slower pace. I'll burn out otherwise.

I could slow down, but maybe, I shouldn't. I don't know. This is too much.

And so, I endured the pain.

"...So, I was having this weird dream last night," my Friend was telling me. "And I mean a weird dream. Extremely weird. I was in a desert and I was dehydrated, looking for water, when suddenly, this snake came out of the sand. I don't know if snakes do that, but this one did. Anyway, I froze, looking back at it, not sure what to do. And then this snake started to move and I was panicking, getting really scared, so I tried to run away, but my feet got stuck. It

wasn't quick sand, I just couldn't move for some reason. And then the snake moved closer towards me and I thought the snake was going to bite me, but it didn't. The snake just drew a circle around me and then disappeared into the sand. And then I woke up. That's weird, isn't it?"

My Friend turned to me and I looked back at my Friend, while trying to wipe the sweat off my forehead.

Please, keep talking.

"Dreams are weird," my Friend said. "Dreams can be just weird. Or they can look so real you can't tell them apart. Those dreams can be worse. Wake up and still think you're dreaming. You figure out you're awake, but it makes you think, what's the difference? What's a dream and what's real? Sometimes they blur. But you still know. Somehow you still know. I don't know how. You do though. You somehow know the difference. It's all weird. It's all just weird."

We eventually made it to the top of the hill, where I was able to catch my breath.

Dreams are weird, but why does that matter? A dream's a dream. I might think they're weird. My Friend might think they're weird. But what of it? In the end, a dream's a dream. Nothing more. Nothing less.

What's interesting is how I was able to endure that run by distraction. Listening to my Friend's words, I was able to get out of my body and just get through it. Maybe, there's something in that. I don't know. But if there is something, then maybe, I can use it to my advantage. Maybe, I can learn to distract myself to get through the arduous moments in life, a way of tricking myself. I don't know. I can only try.

It does feel good at the top. It really does. And it might have been worth it. Maybe. We'll see.

"...How do you feel?" my Friend asked me.

I nodded.

No, it is good. There's so much I can take away from this. Distraction can be used to one's advantage. That's a

big one.

Maybe, my Friend talked the whole way through to distract me. If my Friend did ramble on to distract me, then my Friend is better than I had realized.

But then, maybe, my Friend just wanted to talk. My Friend does like to talk and talk and talk. So, I don't know.

But it did help. It helped me to finish the run. If my Friend hadn't been with me, then I wouldn't have finished. That I know. That I have realized. I have realized a lot. And I'm grateful for it.

I was walking back with my Friend.

"Do you need to go home now?" my Friend asked me.

I shook my head.

"Then do you want to clean up at my house?" my Friend asked me.

Yes.

I nodded.

And so, we went to my Friend's house where I was immediately hit by a cold, distant nostalgia.

What's happening here? It feels haunted.

"Are you thirsty?" my Friend asked me.

I nodded and stuck by my Friend, as my Friend went to fetch me some water.

My Friend poured water for both of us and gave a cup to me.

I sipped some water.

"What is it?" my Friend asked me.

I looked back at my Friend and shook my head.

"I know something's wrong," my Friend said. "What is it?"

This place. That's what's wrong.

But I can't tell my Friend that. That would be no different to telling my Friend, or anyone, about my emptiness. But my Friend isn't going to give in, so I'll have to try to stay calm and withstand any questions that my

Friend might throw at me.

I then took a sip of water.

"You feel it?" my Friend asked me. "Don't you?"

I looked back at my Friend.

"My house is gloomy," my Friend said to me. "Isn't it?"

It's not just me.

"I hate it," my Friend went on. "It's just depressing. Miserable. It sucks. And..."

And? And what?

"...Can I show you something?" my Friend asked me.

I don't know. We have just walked into an eerie house, albeit that it's my Friend's eerie house, and my Friend wants to show me something, something that my Friend isn't going to tell me about.

But I eventually nodded.

"Ok," my Friend said. "I'll show you."

My Friend started walking and I followed, until we arrived and I saw an old, frail woman lying in what seemed like a very uncomfortable position.

"Hello," the old woman said to me.

"...This is my mother," my Friend said to me.

Really? How did I not know this?

I approached my Friend's Mother.

"She's been sick for a while," my Friend continued. "They don't know what's wrong with her. And I'm...I am left to..."

"You're talking too much," my Friend's Mother interrupted. "Why don't you let your friend speak?"

"My friend doesn't talk."

Her eyes lit up.

"Why don't you talk?" my Friend's Mother asked me.

Uh.

But then, my Friend's Mother started to laugh.

"It was a joke," my Friend's Mother said.

Her and I began to laugh together.

"Would you give your friend something to write on?"

my Friend's Mother asked my Friend.

My Friend quickly left.

And then my Friend's Mother clasped my hand firmly.

"It's nice to meet you," my Friend's Mother said to me.

I smiled.

My Friend arrived with some material to write with and gave it to me.

"What do you like to do?" my Friend's Mother asked me. "What are your interests?"

I wrote down, 'I like to read and write,' and showed what I had written to my Friend's Mother.

"Brilliant," my Friend's Mother said. "What do you like to read and write about?"

"Trees," my Friend interrupted.

"Shh!"

My Friend just looked back at my Friend's Mother.

And then, eventually, my Friend's Mother faced me.

"Go on," my Friend's Mother said. "What do you like to read and write about?"

And so, I wrote down, 'life,' and showed the word to her.

"Ah, wonderful!" my Friend's Mother said. "You must be so inspired by life."

Yeah. Yeah, I guess she's right. I wouldn't say that I am easily inspired by life, but then again, her comment must contain some truth. To write about a bare tree, as if the tree were gold, I must be someone who is easily inspired.

But how was it that a bare tree could inspire me, but the ocean couldn't? Does inspiration strike one on a whim? Or is there a method to its madness? These are still questions with answers that I haven't yet realized.

But it'd be better to leave those questions for later.

"I was a farming girl myself," my Friend's Mother said. "I used to help my father for years. But then he passed on. And the land was left to me. And I had to look after the land. There were so many people who were relying on me. So, I

maintained it, as time went by. But it wasn't something that I wanted to do. I just had to do it. I had to look after the farm. But now, now, I've learned one important lesson in life. You should write this one down."

And so, I prepared myself.

"...I didn't have to farm my father's land," my Friend's Mother continued. "I didn't have to do it. I could have done anything else with my life. I could have gone places, seen the world and all its glory, gone on numerous adventures, faced countless dangers, met interesting individuals. I could have done all that. But I farmed. Don't mistake me. I am not upset. After all, I got to live. I got to raise my child. But if there's something, other than my child, that I could leave behind, it is that we should all live our dreams while we have time. That's something worth sharing. That's what I keep telling my child to do. Live your dreams. Have fun. Celebrate life. Listen to your heart and follow it. Your heart is always right. Always. Your heart can never be wrong. At times it might feel wrong, but your heart is never wrong. Your heart knows what's right."

I know what you mean. I don't know how, but somehow, I get it.

My Friend's Mother had gone through life, doing something that she really didn't want to do, without living her dreams. And it's painful to hear, even though it seems that she is content with her life.

But it makes me wonder, what is the best way to live? I don't know. Another answer that I haven't yet realized.

But I don't want to feel the same feeling that she is feeling. I don't want to feel regret because how does one come back from that? Time passes. We can't get it back. One who feels regret can only weep. I'm not going to feel regret. Never.

I cleaned up and waved, 'goodbye,' to my Friend's Mother.

"Nice to meet you," my Friend's Mother said to me.

I smiled.
Then my Friend walked me out and stopped me.
“Could you do me a favor?” my Friend asked me.
I nodded.
“Could you not mention my Mum to anyone?” my Friend asked me.
Yes, of course. I understand.
I nodded again.
“Thanks,” my Friend replied. “...See you tomorrow then.”
I waved, ‘goodbye,’ and then we parted.
I wandered around.
Really, really, we each deal with our own problems. And it’s awful. Why should life be so problematic? Life should be wonderful, beautiful, amazing. But how can life be any of these things if it’s riddled with problems? I don’t know. More questions with answers that require realizing, I guess.
But then I have been trying to come to these realizations and nothing. Nothing at all. Maybe, there are just some answers that can’t be realized.
Or maybe, I’m just not there yet. I don’t know. I’ve just got to keep exploring.
But if we are each dealing with our own problems, then wouldn’t it be best for us to come together and help each other out? That just seems to make sense. And yet, we don’t.
Why don’t we? Why don’t we open up to each other? Why don’t we communicate with each other? I don’t know. It might be because we feel different to each other. How we feel does determine how we live.
But then if we just took a leap of faith, we can feel our similarities. There must be some similarities between all of us. We can’t all be so totally different to each other. If anything, we’re all alive. We all think. We all feel. We all act. We behave. Those are similarities. Those are commonalities.
But we don’t take that leap. Why? I don’t know. There’s

no reason why we can't. I mean, why not? Why can't we all take that leap? Why can't we all open up to each other? Why can't we all try to communicate with each other? I don't know. The answer might be different for each of us. We are all different and yet similar at the same time. So, there could be different answers for each of us.

But maybe, it is time to open up. Maybe, it is time to start talking again. I can reach out to Mum and tell her how I feel and maybe, she won't feel burdened by me. Maybe, she might be happier. Who knows? I don't. I don't know. Maybe, it is time to take my leap.

But how can I? How can I take my leap? I can't. I don't know what will happen. I don't know what will happen.

That might be it: the not knowing. We don't know where anything leads. That's why we hesitate. We don't know. So how could I know? How could I know what talking again would do? How could I know what talking again will do to Mum? This is my dilemma. This is our dilemma: the not knowing.

But if we could take our leaps, imagine the world we'd live in. Imagine life at its most beautiful. That's what life should be like if only we could take our leaps.

I have to find a way to take my leap. I have to find the answer. I have to.

I got home, sat down and tried to write.

I'm too tired. I should lie down.

But if I do I'll forget everything.

But I'm just so tired. Maybe, if I just lay down for a moment, then I could get up and write everything down.

Or I might forget everything. I don't know. I'm just so exhausted. I should lie down.

No. No, I have to write everything down. I have to write my thoughts down before they drift off.

But how do I start? How does one start?

I'm wasting time. I just have to start. I have to start

writing.

And so, I started writing and the momentum gradually carried me, only for my words to quickly lead me to write about Dad and I came to a halt.

Do I want to go down this road? I might open up old wounds. I might bring out my emptiness.

But then again, what do I have to lose? They are just words.

And so, I started to write again and gradually, the words began to write themselves, the momentum growing so much that it was perpetuating itself, lifting me increasingly higher and higher, until I suddenly came to rest and was once again aware of myself. I looked back at my words.

There was so much more that I wanted to do, but I didn't really compute that until Dad had passed on.

That is the misery of life. Time is precious, fragile and doesn't rest and yet, we take time for granted. I didn't soak in each moment that I had with Dad and worst of all, I didn't realize that I should have taken in these valuable moments until Dad had passed on, before it was too late.

I hope no one else will make the same mistake that I did. I hope no one else will be as wasteful with their time as I was with mine, especially when one doesn't know when their time is going to come to an end.

If it were up to me, I would have made it so that Dad and Mum and I and everyone else would live on forever. But it isn't up to me. I can't control these things. I can't control life. No one can.

And there is never enough time. And there is nothing anyone can do about it. It is sad: knowing that we are all going to die. But that is just how life works. What choice do we have? We have none. We have no choice. It isn't up to us. As far as I know, we have no choice.

Maybe, there is an answer that I don't know. Maybe, there is an answer that I haven't realized yet. I am hopeful. I hope to realize that answer some day.

But in writing all this down and in thinking about Dad, I do get a lot off my mind. I have a clear head. I have a clearer head. And there's something comforting in that.

But I can't show this to anyone. I might have been able to unpack my worries, but what would others think of me if they read my words? What would others think of me and my feelings and my emptiness? I might have been able to clear my head, but I can't show my words to anyone. I have to hide my words. I have to hide my feelings and my emptiness.

I was sitting next to my Friend in class.

"And be sure to prepare for your upcoming test," our Instructor reminded us.

All the students moaned.

Another test? Why? We've just had one and now we have another one.

Why do we even have these tests? We study for tests, take them and forget what we studied afterwards because it doesn't matter to us anymore. And this cycle just continues. So, why have tests? To improve our ability to remember?

And this cycle isn't going to end anytime soon. If everything went according to plan, then we would pass each test until we graduated, be released into society where we would have to find some way of earning a living, which would be a test in itself, and then continue to have to pass those tests that our livelihood demands of us until we die.

And why? Why would we do that to ourselves? Is it just because we have to earn a living? Or is there some greater purpose that we are all working towards?

If there is a greater purpose, then I haven't realized it yet. That doesn't mean that there isn't a greater purpose. I don't know. I can't tell.

But if we are just going through this cycle of tests just to earn a living, then what a bore. What a drag. We all have to go through life studying to pass tests so that we can earn a living and fit in with the rest of society, but really, all these

tests do is just inch us towards death. And since we're all going to die, then why would we spend our time studying to pass tests that get us closer to death? Why would we do that to ourselves? The entire process just seems so pointless.

But what else would we do? If we didn't go through this process and pass these tests, then we would be ostracized. That's what happens to those who are different. The many don't like the few who are different because they can't relate to them. They believe that they can't get along. And because it's just easier to get rid of the few, the many discard the few who are different, even if being different might be beneficial in some way.

But then again, we confine ourselves to this cycle of tests that just pushes us towards death. No matter how one looks at it, we have to admit, we are our own demise.

Eventually, our Instructor showed us a symbol.

"Can anyone tell me what this means?" our Instructor asked us.

Some of the students raised their hands.

And our Instructor pointed to one of the students.

"What do you think it means?" our Instructor asked the student.

"Coming full circle," the student answered.

"Good answer. Does anyone have any other suggestions?"

"Wholeness!" another student shouted.

Some of the other students giggled.

"Good," our Instructor replied. "But not quite."

Our Instructor looked over all of us, as we looked back at our Instructor.

"...This symbol has many different meanings," our Instructor told us. "It could mean to come full circle or wholeness or many other things."

How can a symbol have multiple meanings?

There are some words, like 'bear', that have multiple meanings, but when applied in its appropriate context the

word makes sense.

Maybe, symbols are the same as words. I don't know. But how? How does that work?

"...This same symbol has different meanings in different cultures," our Instructor informed us. "To some cultures, this symbol means to come full circle, but in other cultures, this symbol means 'wholeness' or 'oneness.'"

I understand.

But how is it that different cultures could have different meanings for the same symbol? It's the same symbol. Shouldn't the same symbol have only one meaning?

But then again, some words have multiple meanings. And when applied to the appropriate context, these words make sense.

That could be it though. I don't know. But if a word only works in the appropriate context, then doesn't that say something about the word?

Or does that say something about the context? If we take the word 'bear' and called a fish a 'bear', that wouldn't make sense. The word 'bear' wouldn't work for that context.

But then why? What makes a fish a 'fish?' What makes a bear a 'bear?' Is it because they are their name?

No. No, we are not our names. A fish isn't a 'fish.' And a bear isn't a 'bear.'

But why? When I see a fish, I immediately identify it as a 'fish.' And when I see a bear, I immediately identify it as a 'bear.' When I see the sun, I immediately identify it as the 'sun.'

That's it though. That's the catch. It's me that's identifying these things. I am the one calling a fish, a 'fish.' I am the one calling a bear, a 'bear.' I am the one calling the sun, the 'sun.'

And the same could be said for numbers and symbols. I am the one calling 1, '1.' I am the one calling ∞ , ' ∞ .' It is me. It is us. We are the ones identifying these things. We give everything a name.

And because we give everything a name, that means that everything isn't its name. We are not our names.

And that is why different cultures have different meanings for the same symbol. One culture will identify the symbol and give this symbol a name and a meaning behind that name, while another culture will execute the same process but the outcome will be different, giving the same symbol a different name and a different meaning behind that name.

All of this might be something that even the Sage hasn't realized yet. But I won't put it past the Sage.

Our Instructor showed us the color red.

"What does 'red' mean?" our Instructor asked us.

Some of the students raised their hands.

Our Instructor picked out one of the students.

"Rage or anger," the student answered.

"Yes," our Instructor replied. "But it could also mean 'love.' The color red could mean one of two very different emotions."

Even colors can have different meanings. The color 'red' could mean either 'rage' or 'love' depending on the context. But it is about the context. When two individuals are having an argument and are both red, we wouldn't think of that as 'love', we would consider that context to be 'rage' or 'anger.' But if the same two individuals are dancing together, dressed in red, we would consider that context to be one of 'love.' It is all about the context.

Then again, don't we decide what the context means? When the two individuals are dancing together, dressed in red, don't we decide that context is one of 'love?' Why can't that context be 'rage' or 'anger?'

Don't we decide that when we see rage we identify that emotion as 'rage?' And won't that be the same for 'anger' and 'love?'

Everything is what it is because we have given everything a name and then associated each thing with its

name. Everything is what it is by association. And the only reason why we believe that each thing is its name is because we have become used to it.

One of the students raised an arm.

And our Instructor noticed the student.

“Yes,” our Instructor said. “What is it?”

“...What does ‘love’ mean?” the student hesitated.

Many of the other students gasped and giggled at the student.

“Okay,” our Instructor interrupted. “Okay, please calm down.”

Gradually, the other students calmed down.

And then our Instructor turned to the student who asked the question.

“Love can mean multiple things too,” our Instructor answered. “Love could mean a love for one’s family. Or love could mean a love for one’s profession. Or love could mean the passion between a couple. Love can be all these things.”

Love can have multiple meanings too.

I don’t know this from my own experience. I haven’t experienced love before.

I love Mum and Dad, but that’s normal.

I love writing, but writing is simple. All I have to do is sit down and write. It isn’t any more complicated than that.

But the passion between a couple, I haven’t experienced that. I’ve never been a couple.

What does it matter anyway? Love is love. That kind of love, the passion between a couple can’t be any different to any other kind of love. No way. I’m not missing out. If it happens, it happens. And if it doesn’t happen, then I’m not missing out.

I was walking with my Friend.

“I’m worried about this test,” my Friend said to me.

“I’ve been studying for it, but there’s so much to cover and you just can’t retain any of it. You can’t.”

Maybe, you should stop worrying. I don't. I never get stressed over tests. Probably because I don't care about them. Whatever result I get is the result I get, even if I fail. And others might criticize me for that, but I don't care. I'm not going to let them bother me. Life is too short for their negative judgement.

And besides, life is just so much easier when I don't care about what others think of me. I mean, it might be okay to care about what Mum thinks of me. But since I stopped talking, I've noticed how so many would let other's opinions get in their way. Many would get irritated or stressed over their family's opinion of them or their friend's opinion of them or even a stranger's opinion of them. And why? What benefit is there in caring about what others think? I can't see any. It's just so much easier to let it all go, to surrender.

Why do they do that to themselves? Is it because they want validation? Another person's approval? I guess it would be a case by case basis, but surely, there must be an answer for why so many care about what others think of them that I just haven't realized yet. And I bet the answer is staring me right in the face.

But I don't know. I can't tell.

But I can understand what it feels like to be stressed over something. I'm not immune to stress. I have experienced stress before. We all have, I believe. I can't imagine anyone who hasn't been stressed at least once in their life. If there is such a person, then they mustn't care about anything in their life. I mean, even if they care about only one thing, one small thing, then wouldn't they, at the very least, feel stressed on the odd occasion because of the potential to lose the one thing they care about?

Care must come with a degree of stress, otherwise, the caring wouldn't be genuine. And with that, how could a person not care about anything? If a person doesn't care about anything, then they mustn't be honest with themselves. We all must have things that we care about, even if it's not

obvious to us.

So, in that sense, stress can't be all that bad. If we didn't have stress, we wouldn't have care.

Sometimes stress can be bad, like when my Friend complains about a test that my Friend has struggled to study for.

But stress on its own isn't that bad.

My Friend has to relax.

"I think I'm just going to pick the topics that'll probably be on the test and just study those," my Friend mentioned.

"I-I can't cover it all. There's just too much. I'm going to pick the topics I think will be on the test, study those and hope they'll be on the test because that's-that's all I can do."

Then my Friend looked to me.

"What do you think?" my Friend asked me.

I just nodded.

"Ok," my Friend responded. "That's what I'll do."

That's it? This must be the first time that my Friend has stopped talking, ever.

My Friend is just making too big a deal of this test.

Or might it be something else? My Friend does usually continue to ramble on about these things, but that's not happening here. If I were to guess, it has to do with my Friend's Mother, but I can't be sure.

And so, I wrote down a question, 'are you ok?', and showed the question to my Friend.

"Yeah," my Friend replied. "It's just this test, that's all."

Is it though? How can I tell?

Maybe, I should ask my Friend if there's something wrong.

No. No, I can't. If I ask that after my previous question, then it might suggest that I believe that my Friend is lying to me and that could make my Friend even more upset. I can't ask my Friend if there's something wrong.

But could I try to make my Friend feel better? Yes, I guess.

How though? I can do something that my Friend loves to do. That'd be the best thing to do.

But my Friend isn't interested in much. My Friend likes to run, but that is it, really. My Friend doesn't have many interests, just like me. And there's nothing that's going to persuade me to run with my Friend again. Nothing.

The only thing I could do to help my Friend is to let it go. My Friend isn't going to give me anything and I'm not going to force the answer out of my Friend.

And besides, I can't force the answer out of my Friend. If I do, in any way, then my Friend will be even more upset. All I can do is let it go.

And if my Friend wants to tell me what is wrong, then my Friend is free to tell me. And my Friend knows that. But until then, I'm not going to do anything. I'm just going to let it go. That's all I can do. Just like any other stressor, I can only let it go.

I was still with my Friend, when we began to wander around.

My Friend must want to experience something different to stop pondering over whatever is on my Friend's mind.

And so, I just drifted with my Friend, as my Friend led the way.

I'm not going to question my Friend, nor stop my Friend, even though it is a little bit concerning. My Friend isn't the type to just wander around. My Friend is direct, assertive and doesn't like to waste time, unless the time that is being spent is on my Friend's terms. And I can relate to that, even if I am less anxious about things.

But I guessed my Friend is lost for answers and doesn't know what to do, except to hopefully stumble upon the answer my Friend is looking for. I hope that my Friend finds whatever it is my Friend is looking for, although, that has never happened to me.

I have never wandered around and as if by some miracle, the answer to a question I had just appeared before

me. That seems unheard of. That isn't to say that it can't happen. It is just that it seems unheard of.

We then strolled away from the path and happened to find the Sage walking with another Child.

Why is the Sage with a Child? Is this the Sage's Child? Or has the Sage been sharing thoughts with other children? And if so, why? And how many? I can't be sure.

"Let's go this way," my Friend said to me.

And so, we turned around and began to walk away.

But then the Sage turned towards us and spotted me.

"Hello!" the Sage shouted.

I stopped and looked back at the Sage with a smile, while my Friend stopped and saw my response to the Sage.

"Do you know your way home from here?" the Sage asked the Child.

"Yes," the Child replied.

"I'll leave you then."

"Goodbye."

"Goodbye."

The Child left, while the Sage looked to my Friend and me and walked towards us.

"Do you know this homeless person?" my Friend asked me.

I nodded.

"Hello again," the Sage said to me. "It's been a while."

I smiled again.

"Are you happy on this day?" the Sage asked me.

I nodded with a smile.

"Still not talking?" the Sage asked.

I shook my head.

And then the Sage faced my Friend.

"And who's this?" the Sage asked me.

"Who are you?" my Friend responded.

"I am not 'I' just as you are not 'you.' If I am 'I' because you are 'you' and if you are 'you' because I am 'I', then how can I be 'I' and how can you be 'you?'"

If I am 'I' because you are 'you' and if you are 'you' because I am 'I', then how can I be 'I' and you be 'you'?

I don't get it. It must have something to do with how we are not our names or it is some reference to the idea that we are not our names. I'm not sure.

"...I don't know," my Friend answered. "How?"

"Have a play with the question and when we meet next, tell me what you came up with," the Sage said.

"Ok."

My Friend seems to be really warming up to the Sage, even though there's something wrong with my Friend.

The Sage is being extremely friendly to my Friend. It's not unlike the Sage to be kind to strangers, but I don't know.

Why was the Sage talking to that Child? Why is the Sage being so friendly to my Friend? Is the Sage just that nice? Or does the Sage have some ulterior motive? I have no idea.

But the Sage has never given me a reason to believe that there is an ulterior motive. I'll give the Sage the benefit of the doubt.

"You look like you've got too much on your mind," the Sage said to my Friend. "What's troubling you?"

"Nothing's troubling me," my Friend answered.

"Nothing?"

My Friend must believe that the Sage can read others' thoughts. I have been struggling to read my Friend's thoughts of late, but I can tell what my Friend is thinking in this moment.

"...I'm just a little worried," my Friend responded.

"Worried?" the Sage asked. "Why? Worry is unnecessary."

"Unnecessary?"

"Yes. What are you worried about?"

"I have this test that I've been struggling to study for. There's just so much to cover and I can't get it all. I'm going to study the bits that are going to be on the test and hope they'll be on the test."

“If the bits you are going to study are going to be on the test, then what do you have to worry about?”

“No, sorry. The bits that are probably going to be on the test. I’m going to study those.”

“So then, what do you have to worry about?”

“Because I won’t be able to cover everything I need to for the test.”

“And why does that bother you?”

“Because I won’t be fully prepared for the test.”

“And why does that bother you?”

“I might fail the test.”

“And why does that bother you?”

“Because failing isn’t good.”

“Why?”

“Because it isn’t. I don’t know.”

“If we never fail, then how will we learn from our mistakes?”

“...We don’t just learn from our mistakes though. We can learn in many different ways. That means that we never have to make mistakes or fail.”

“Very good. But don’t we learn best from our mistakes? From failing?”

“Possibly.”

“Then what do you have to worry about?”

“...But what about the test?”

“What about the test?”

“I don’t want to fail.”

“Why does it bother you if you fail?”

“I don’t like failing.”

“Why don’t you like failing?”

“I’ll look bad.”

“And why does ‘looking bad’ bother you?”

“No one likes to look bad.”

“Why?”

“It doesn’t feel good.”

“And why does that bother you?”

“No one likes feeling bad.”
“Why?”
“Because it doesn’t feel good.”
“Why do you want to feel good?”
“Because it feels good.”
“Why do you want to feel good?”
“...I don’t know. I don’t want to fail my test.”
“Then study.”
“But I thought you didn’t want me to study.”
“If you want to study, then study. If you don’t want to study, then don’t study.”
“No, I don’t want to fail my test.”
“If you don’t want to fail, then don’t fail.”
“But I need to study to pass.”
“Then study to pass.”
“But there’s so much to cover.”
“Then cover all of it.”
“But I can’t.”
“Then don’t.”
“...This is stupid! I have to pass. I have no choice. I-I have to study and pass, so I don’t fail. I can’t fail. I just can’t. I have to – I have to pass. I...”

My Friend looked away from the Sage and I.

The Sage looked to me.

And I just looked back at the Sage.

And then the Sage smiled and looked back to my Friend.

“Those who speak do not know and those who know do not speak,” the Sage said.

Was that for me? It just seems strange to say that. The Sage had been talking just as much as my Friend had been and the Sage isn’t the type of person to make hypocritical statements.

But the remark might have been a lesson for my Friend, suggesting that my Friend should behave more like me, someone who doesn’t speak and learns, instead of someone who speaks and doesn’t learn.

I have no idea though. I might be overanalyzing the Sage's comment. Or I might be spot on. I have no idea. Just one of those moments where we make of it what we will.

But either way, my Friend's not happy. Just look at my Friend's face.

"...You don't know what you're talking about," my Friend finally lashed out.

"No one does," the Sage said.

My Friend looked back at both of us and then stormed off.

And there I was, looking between my Friend and the Sage.

"You should go after your Friend," the Sage said to me.

"...It's ok, I'll talk to you next time."

I paused, but eventually, I waved, 'goodbye,' and ran after my Friend.

I caught up to my Friend.

"That was stupid," my Friend began to ramble. "Tests-Tests are important and hard and need to be studied for. And I can't cover everything for this one test. I just can't. There's too much. And it's not that easy. It's so much more complicated. So much more complicated than that. It's..."

Why didn't my Friend resonate with the Sage? The Sage seems to resonate with me most of the time, but with my Friend it's different. Why? I guess that the most obvious answer is because my Friend and I are different. I mean, I don't talk and my Friend only talks. We couldn't be any more different than that. And because of these differences, we might not see eye to eye on certain things.

I've heard the idea that opposites attract, but I have never found that to be true. We don't attract to others because of their differences, we attract to others who share similarities with us because we can relate to them, even if there are a few differences. That's why it's called a relationship. And that's why one of the antonyms for

relationship is different. Those with similarities relate to one another.

And yet, we're all alive. We all think. We all feel. We all act. We all behave. We should all be able to relate to one another.

But we don't. I don't know why we don't, but we don't.

Why doesn't my Friend relate to the Sage? The only reason I can think of is because my Friend and the Sage can't see the similarities in each other.

But knowing the Sage, I'm sure that the Sage can see similarities in my Friend. It's the Sage. The Sage knows these things.

But maybe, it's because my Friend can't see similarities in the Sage. That makes sense, especially in that moment when my Friend was stressed about the upcoming test. The stress clouded my Friend's mind and my Friend couldn't look past the thoughts that were bouncing around in my Friend's head and realize that the Sage is someone my Friend could relate to.

It's quite distressing to think about because if that's what stress can do to us, then imagine how many of us might struggle to notice the similarities between each other and the conflict that could cause. If all it takes to eliminate pain and struggle and suffering is for all of us to notice our similarities, heck, just to even notice that we're all the same, then why haven't we done it already? Surely, all of us aren't that clouded with stress. We can't all be blind.

Maybe, some of us are just ignorant. Maybe, most of us are ignorant.

Or maybe, we have just decided not to focus on our similarities. For what benefit though, I have no idea. What benefit is there in focusing on our differences? It just seems that those who concentrate on our differences want conflict. It's as though they love conflict.

Or possibly, there's another reason that I haven't yet realized. Another reason others could relate to.

We eventually arrived at my Friend's house.
"See you tomorrow," my Friend said.
I waved, 'goodbye,' and then left.

I walked in, only to find Mum eating with a stranger.

Who is this? How does Mum know this stranger?

Mum seems so comfortable around this stranger. The way that they are sitting back, looking so relaxed and how they look at each other. There's something happening here.

Mum noticed me and quickly stood up.

"Hey," Mum said.

Have I done something? I don't know. I didn't do anything wrong. Nothing that I can recall at least. I'm not sure.

The stranger stood up, turned around, smiled at me and gave me a wave.

I just looked back at Mum and the stranger.

"...This is a friend of mine," Mum said.

Phew. I didn't do something wrong. I'm just meeting this stranger.

The stranger stood up, approached me and stuck a hand out.

"Nice to meet you," the stranger said.

I shook the stranger's hand, withdrew, looking back at the stranger and then looked over to Mum.

Mum sighed.

What does Mum have to be relieved about? I don't know. But there's something that they're hiding. I don't know what, but there's something they aren't telling me.

I just looked back at them.

And Mum and this stranger looked back at me, until they looked to each other.

What's going on here? What aren't they telling me?

"...Are you hungry?" Mum asked me.

I nodded.

"Have a seat," Mum said.

And so, we all sat down and I began to eat.
Mum and the stranger just watched me.
*What is going on here? Mum has a stranger in our home
and is acting weird. What's happening?*
I stopped and pointed to the food.
"I'm full," Mum said. "Thank you though."
"I'm full too," the stranger added.
*They're not going to tell me anything. So, whatever
they're hiding from me must be important. Otherwise, they
wouldn't be so hesitant.*
But what is it? I don't know.
But I can't take this anymore. I have to get a response.
I have to do something.
And so, I stopped and looked back at them.
Mum looked to the stranger as the stranger looked to
Mum.
What are they doing? Just tell me already.
Eventually, the stranger looked to me.
"Your mother has something she wants to tell you," the
stranger said to me.
What? What does Mum have to tell me?
Mum looked to the stranger, as the stranger looked back
at Mum, with shrugged shoulders.
"What?" the stranger responded. "You do, don't you?"
Mum continued to look back at the stranger.
And then the stranger slowly leaned towards Mum.
"It's ok," the stranger said to Mum.
What's ok? What is ok? Mum, just tell me.
Mum eventually took a big gasp and faced me.
"We...", Mum said, "...We are together."
Together? What do you mean together?
"...We're seeing each other," Mum said.
*What does Mum mean by that? I can tell they are seeing
each other. They've been looking at each other.*
Something's wrong. My emptiness is rising.
I took a deep breath.

"It's not a bad thing," Mum said. "It's-It's a good thing."

Mum looked to the stranger.

"Right?" Mum asked the stranger. "It's a good thing?"

"Yeah," the stranger answered. "Yeah, it's good. It's very good."

Please, not now. Not now. I can't deal with my emptiness right now. Just take a deep breath. Just take a slow deep breath.

And so, I took a slow deep breath.

But then Mum faced me, looking me in my eyes.

"Dad is not being replaced," Mum said.

What? Why would you do that? Why would you replace Dad? Why would you betray Dad like that?

No. No. I won't. I can't accept this. You're betraying Dad. You're eliminating Dad, getting rid of him by replacing him with this stranger, this phony. No, I won't. I won't accept this.

Oh, what's the use? Why does it even matter? None of it matters. She has hurt me. Betrayed Dad. Who cares? My emptiness has won. So, why should I care? Why should it matter? Why should anything matter? That's life. That's what life is. Life doesn't matter. Life is pointless. And I don't care. I don't care for life.

My body began to tense up and I ran off and hid away.

I was with myself.

How could she have done that? How could she have replaced Dad like that? Betrayed Dad like that? This is Dad. And he's being taken away from me. How could she? How could she have done that? She doesn't care about Dad. At least, not anymore.

The tears began to flow.

Why does she have to replace Dad? That's the question. Why does she have to replace Dad? She doesn't. She doesn't have to. And yet, she has. She mustn't care for Dad anymore.

She might never have cared for Dad.

And how can I care for someone like that? I can't. I can't care for her. I am all I have.

She doesn't care for Dad. She probably doesn't care for me. She probably hasn't considered how I'd feel. She has no reason to replace Dad like that. None. None, whatsoever.

All she does is cause pain. She caused my pain. She probably caused my emptiness. She was the cause of my emptiness. It was her. It was her fault. All of it. And I can't care for her. I don't care for her. I hate her. I hate her.

Mum found me and walked towards me.

"Can we talk?" Mum asked me.

I turned away from her.

"I'm sorry," Mum said. "I'm sorry. I didn't want to upset you. I-I didn't mean to hurt you."

You did hurt me. That's what you do. You hurt others.

She sat closer to me.

"I love Dad," Mum said to me. "And I miss him. And he's still Dad. No one is going to take Dad away. Okay?"

If you love Dad, then why are you replacing him? Why are you betraying Dad?

You don't love Dad. I know that. You know that. Everyone knows that.

Eventually, Mum stood up.

"I love you no matter what," Mum said to me.

And then she left.

Was I harsh on her?

No. She didn't have to do what she did. Dad is being replaced. And soon he will be forgotten.

That's all we are. We are just people who become forgotten. We wake up, eat, go through tests and rest. And slowly, as we march on, we get a little older, sicker, more and more exhausted, more debilitated, more decrepit. From the moment we are born, we descend into abhorrence, into affliction, malady. And by the end, everything that we endured, everything that we had clung onto slowly, slowly,

slowly, slowly, slips away.

And what for? What is it all for? We are only ever going to fall into that cold sleep. That's life: an arduous road towards emptiness. My emptiness. And there's nothing we can do. There's nothing we can do to stop it. We are doomed from the beginning. I was doomed from the beginning. How painful it is. So, how can I care for life? I don't care for it. I don't care for life anymore.

I woke up, looked around and eventually picked up the first book within reach.

What is the point in reading? What is the point in anything? We are all going to suffer and die and that is that. There isn't anything more to it. There isn't anything special or important. There is just life and it is miserable.

So, what do we do? Do we just live on in pain and suffering? Or is there a cure? There has to be. There has to be some answer to life, otherwise, how can so many people live life with such joy? How do they do it? If life is just pain, suffering and misery, then how can anyone be happy? Either there's a cure, some answer to life, or they're just plain ignorant.

That could be the key. Maybe, ignorance is the answer. When we are just children, we never think of how painful life is. We don't even consider it. We just play. But when we get a little older, we begin to notice the pain, the suffering, the misery.

Ignorance is the key. We have to ignore the pain, the suffering and the misery. We have to ignore life and just pretend that we don't know any better. That's it. Ignorance is the key. It isn't the application of growing wisdom. It's ignorance.

And so, I closed the book and tossed it aside.

I eventually got up and went to get something to eat, but found her eating alone.

*I won't forgive her. I won't.
But what do I do? I have to eat and she's in my way. I'm
so hungry.*

And so, I got some food, sat away from her and just
stuffed myself.

She just continued eating.

Why is she ignoring me? I'm mad at her.

*She can't be mad at me. She must have decided to keep
to herself. The moment is already awkward enough, she
doesn't need to react and make our situation even more
awkward. She's even more annoying when she's not doing
anything.*

*Or maybe, she is trying to get me to question myself,
trying to get me to overanalyze. I'm not going to fall for that.
No, I'm not going to fall for that.*

And so, I continued to eat, until I was finished.

And she just continued to eat.

Fine. Be that way. What do I care?

I stood up, turned around and began to walk away.

But then there was a noise.

And so, I stopped and listened in.

Is she crying?

*I can't walk back in. I would embarrass her. If I had
walked back in and she saw me looking back at her, she
would feel worse. I can't do anything. And I did this to her.
Life is already painful enough. I don't need to make life even
more difficult for her.*

*But what could I do? Just accept that Dad is being
replaced? Move on? I can't do that. I'm not like that. I can't
forget Dad. I can't forget him. I won't let every memory of
Dad go. I just can't. And if I did, if for some reason I did, I
won't forgive myself. I am the only one keeping Dad alive. I
can't let him go.*

And besides, she might not be crying.

I sat down and wrote.

What does it matter? Words are just words. They have no weight to them and yet, they confine us, reduce us to labels, separate us and cause conflict. Like everything else, they don't mean anything.

But writing is the only thing that I like to do, so why not just write?

And so, I kept on writing.

What do I do? How do I deal with Mum? How do I get her to stop trying to replace Dad? I don't know. I really don't know.

I've got to think of something else. This is killing me. But how? It's difficult to just think about other things. Thoughts don't just change when you want them to. Thoughts have their own objectives.

I don't want to be miserable though. No one wants to be miserable. If they do, then they want to be miserable for some alternate reason that they believe will make them happy. They might want to be miserable and complain because they want someone else's pity and potentially have them solve their problems for them so that they can be happy. Or some other reason like that. I don't know. Each situation is different. But ultimately, everyone wants to be happy. No one actually wants to be miserable. No one. And I certainly don't want to be miserable.

And so, I kept on writing and gradually my thoughts began to blend with my words, working in tandem.

Since we're all going to die, what's the point? What's the point in living? That's a question that I can't answer. Or at least, I haven't answered yet.

If we're all going to die anyway, why not speed up the process? Why not just end it? I don't know. If there's no point to life and life is so painful and miserable, then why not end it? Why not end our suffering and just kill ourselves?

But then what'd happen? Sure, we'd die, but then what? What happens on the other side? I don't know. No one can know. The only way to find out would be to die, but then, if

one is dead, then they can't tell the rest of us what's on the other side. We can only speculate. We can't know what happens to us after we die.

Is there another place that we all go to? If there is, then how would that place be any different to here, when we are alive? I can't imagine any difference.

Or does it all just end? Once our life has ended, has our life ended completely? Is there just nothingness? Total emptiness? I can't stand the thought: to be in total emptiness. Not only would I feel my emptiness at all times, but I would also be surrounded by my emptiness. And this is inevitable.

Since this is what is going to happen to me, then I can't kill myself. I can't speed up the process. There must be some answer to our impermanence. There must be some answer to death, to life. There must be. And I have to find it. I have to find it before I get lost in my total emptiness.

I was searching.

Where can I find it? And what does the answer look like? What shape does it take? What are its colors? What's its touch? Its scent? I don't know. I assume that I'd recognize it as the answer when I stumble upon it.

But how can I be sure? It isn't as if the answer is going to have a label that tells me it is 'the answer.' And if it does, then I might be skeptical, or at the very least, someone would be skeptical and that would mean that the thing with the label, 'the answer', isn't truly the answer and is some kind of con.

So then, how will I know? How can I be sure? I've no idea. But I will find it. Somehow. Some way.

But if I were to find the answer, then I can't be ignorant. I can't. I need to learn and realize my own answers in order to find the answer. So, I can't be ignorant.

Ignorance can't be the key then. We can't be ignorant and educate ourselves at the same time. That's a paradox.

And such paradoxes cause friction within ourselves.

But then, maybe, we can be selective. Maybe, we can be ignorant of some things and educate ourselves on others.

But if that's the case, then what things do we educate ourselves on and what things do we ignore? I'm not sure. If I were to guess, we can ignore the things that aren't important.

Class is important. It isn't important to me, but it is important.

Although, what is important except for the things that are important to me? What's important is important to me. And what is important to someone else is important to them. We are neither right nor wrong, it's just what is important to each of us.

There isn't some numen who decides what's important and what's unimportant for everyone. And if one were to think that there is such a numen, then that is what is important to one and not what this numen decides is important or unimportant for everyone.

And so, what is important and what is unimportant is relative. And that means that I have to ignore what is unimportant to me and educate myself on what is important to me.

And what is important to me is Dad and this answer that I have to find. I have to ignore everything else. So, that's what I'm going to do.

I arrived at the bookshop, borrowed as many books as I could carry, went home, locked myself away, sat down and just read. But then I stopped.

All of these books are just arguing against each other. Some books occasionally bring up ideas that they might agree on, but for the most part, it seems that each book is out to prove an idea that the writer deems to be right. And in doing this, these books will often argue with each other and conflict with each other. I used to think that there were some

books that were right and some that were wrong, but I had been forgetting that we are neither right nor wrong, as the Sage said.

Although, could the Sage have been wrong about that? Could there be some things that are right and other things that are wrong, definitively? I guess there could be.

But what's right and what's wrong? Is there someone who decides what is right and what is wrong for all of us? There might be.

No. No, there can't be. If that were the case, then how would the idea of judging what is right and what is wrong be any different to the idea of judging what is important or unimportant? What is important or unimportant is relative. And so, that would mean that what is right and what is wrong is also relative. There can't be some numen who decides what is right and what is wrong as if their word is absolute truth because what that individual claims to be right and wrong would be relative to that individual. It's all relative. Everything. Life is relative. And we are all neither right nor wrong, as the Sage said.

But then why do these books argue against each other? Each writer believes that they are right, even though they can't be right nor wrong.

Maybe, that is it. Maybe, it is just because they believe they are right. And when one individual believes in one thing and another individual believes in another thing, then they are prone to arguing with each other and causing conflict. It isn't that one is right and the other is wrong. They are just protecting their beliefs. That's it. And they are both neither right nor wrong, as we are all neither right nor wrong. And yet, one might strongly believe, with conviction, that they are right. It's insane. We might argue, bicker, get into conflicts with each other because we believe we are right.

Why? What benefit is there in arguing or getting into conflict when we could just as easily get along with each other? It's as if we would rather be right than help each

other out and get along with each other. It's as if we would rather be right than be happy. How insane.

But there must be a reason for why we behave in this way. There has to be. If there isn't, then we wouldn't argue or bicker or get into conflict with each other because we'd realize that there's no benefit in that. So, there must be a reason for why one might strongly believe that they are right. They must have arrived at their belief somehow.

Well, maybe, it has less to do with their belief and more to do with how they arrived at their belief. We all must have gone through our adventures to have come to the beliefs that we have. And since we each live different lives, then that means that we all had different adventures. And that means that the different adventures that we have all lived through would have shaped our different and, at times, conflicting beliefs. That's it. These adventures that we lived through might have led us to believe that we are right. It isn't that we are right, because we are all neither right nor wrong, but that our adventures might have shaped us to believe we are right.

If only we could all realize this. If we could, then we wouldn't get into conflict with one another and would respect each other. If only we could all realize this.

Well, we could. Why couldn't we? Why couldn't we help each other to realize that we are all neither right nor wrong? There's nothing stopping us. No obstacle. No barrier. Nothing.

But how can we help each other realize that we are all neither right nor wrong? Really, we can only explain this realization to everyone else. It would be arduous, but it would be beneficial. At least, I believe it would be beneficial.

But it might be difficult for some to accept that their beliefs are neither right nor wrong. They might feel embarrassed or even insulted by the realization. That's probably why some would prefer to be right than be happy. They don't want to feel embarrassed or insulted, even if it

means that they'd be happy. They would prefer to be ignorant and lie to themselves, rather than be honest with themselves. Ignorance really isn't the key. That's becoming clearer to me.

But what else could be done? I can only preach this realization and hope that others might come to the same realization. And as they come to this realization for themselves, ideally, they'll learn to listen to those they used to argue against and understand that they are people with values and challenges of their own.

Ideally, we'll get used to the idea that we are all neither right nor wrong. Ideally, we'll learn to be compassionate and empathetic and find similarities and resonate with those who share similar values, while respecting all life, even with those who have different or conflicting values.

But I can't do all that. I'm just me. I'm not special. I'm different, but I'm not special.

And anyway, I have to find this answer to life.

And since all of these writers only ever wrote about what they believe is right, even though we are all neither right nor wrong, then it's obvious that I'm not going to get the answer from any book. Nor am I going to get the answer from anyone. I have to find the answer myself.

I began to wander around, until it started to snow. And so, I looked around, found shelter, headed towards it, stood still and watched the snow fall.

Just like class.

Life was so much simpler when I was a child. I had less to worry about then. I didn't have anything to worry about really. I didn't have problems to face. I didn't know about the harsh realities of life. I wasn't aware of these things. Ignorance still wasn't the key, but simplicity did help.

How can I unlearn all of these harsh realities? I can't. No one can. As soon as one learns of any cruelty, then the lesson stays with them forever. One can't erase the lesson

from their life.

Or so it seems. Maybe, as I get a little older, certain memories might leave me. I can only hope. But then which memories will leave me? I don't want any of the good memories to leave. I only want the bad ones to go. And I doubt that I can select which memories to fade away. That isn't within my power. So, all I can do is live with these harsh realities, live with the pain and hope that time will cause the pain to ease off.

But is there something that I can do? Maybe. I guess there might be. I don't know.

No one else should have to live with the pain that I'm living with. No one else should live with their own emptiness. And in that, maybe, I can help others. I can possibly prevent them from having to endure the same pain that I'm living.

But how? How can I stop the pain, the torture, the emptiness before it grows? The only way I can think of is to share my story. But I can't talk. I don't want others to learn of my emptiness, even though I want to help them prevent theirs.

I can write my story though. And I can leave out some of the details. I don't have to write about everything. I don't have to write about my emptiness. I can then share my story with many different people, strangers even. I can write a book and share that book with everyone and help each and every one before it is too late. Maybe, this is the answer.

But if I write a book, then how will I be different from any of those other writers who believe they are right? I mean, I know we are all neither right nor wrong, but I don't want to come across as a writer who believes they are right. I don't want to come across as someone who thinks that they know better than everyone else.

No one knows any better than anyone else. We each come to our own realizations. I don't know more or less than others. I'm not smarter than others. I'm not better than others. I have had different realizations to others. We have

all had different realizations to others. That's it.

Although, maybe, the way around this dilemma would be to mention how we are all neither right nor wrong in the book. That makes sense. If I write how we are all neither right nor wrong in the book, then readers won't perceive me as an arrogant writer who believes that they are right, but would perceive me as a writer who believes that they are equal to everyone else.

But what would have come of all this? What's the point? What purpose is there in writing a book? Sure, I will share my story, but why does it matter? Maybe, it isn't the answer.

Although, I can't know unless I write my story.

I walked home, sat down and my story began to write itself, until it couldn't anymore and stopped.

What do I write about now? I don't know.

This is why writing is difficult. Writers always have their peaks and their troughs, like a wave.

But waves always flow. So, that's what I should do. Flow.

And so, my story started to write itself again and then it appeared before me.

I did it. I wrote my story. I don't know how, but I did it.

But it's only a first draft. I probably have to write more.

But why? Why do I have to write more? So long as the words are spelt correctly and are in the right order, then what benefit is there in writing more drafts?

I guess, it has to be perfect.

Although, how would I know if it is perfect or not? What is perfection? I have no idea.

I need another pair of eyes.

But now that the first draft is done, what of it? I do feel a sense of achievement, although, the whole ordeal was so strenuous, I'm not sure if I could go through that again. So many words. So much headache. It might not have been worth the effort. I don't know. I'm not sure.

*The accomplishment did feel amazing though.
But what of it? I feel good, relief after all that effort.
Is that it? Well, I'll now have to share my story with others.*

And then what? Then they will learn and won't go through the pain that I live in.

And then what? And then I'll be looked up to. I'll be praised.

Is that why writers write? Are writers looking for some sense of appreciation? I could see that. Imagine a flock of fans appreciating me for sharing my story. Just the idea of it feels enticing.

But is that it? Sure, after the strain of writing a book and sharing that book with friends, family and strangers, there might be some appreciation. But what for? Nothing matters still. The book is a collection of words that might have inspired some, but the book itself doesn't matter. There is no point to the book, just as there is no point to anything else.

Unless the book lives on. If the book lives through time, then the book might not be so pointless. That's it. That's why writers write. They write to be remembered. They write to live through time. They write for legacy.

That's how I can preserve Dad. Through my book, through my words, Dad will be remembered. This is the answer. I found it. I found the answer. Legacy. That's why we do everything. We do what we do to be remembered.

But that means that we all have to be careful of what we do so that we aren't remembered for doing something terrible. We have to be remembered for something good, for doing good. I have to be remembered for doing good. I have to be remembered for writing my story. That means that I have to write the right words. My story has to be perfect. I don't want to be remembered for an imperfect book. I have to make the book perfect.

I need another pair of eyes.

I went to my Friend's house and showed my Friend my story. My Friend took my story and started looking over it.

I can't stand this. What will my Friend think? What will my Friend think of me? It's so nerve racking.

But why is my Friend's opinion so demoralizing. It's not as if my Friend's opinion matters that much.

But then, if my Friend's opinion doesn't matter, why am I asking for it? I'm causing my own anxiety. I have to stop thinking.

My Friend finally turned to me.

"Ok," my Friend said to me

Ok? Ok? Nothing more? And my Friend hasn't even finished. My Friend has barely even started.

And what does "Ok" mean? There's no criticism, no affirmation, just "Ok." What could a writer do with "Ok?" There is nothing a writer can do. A writer might as well have not shown their work at all if the response was going to be "Ok." How painful it is. I would have preferred to have been criticized and given some suggestion as to how I could improve my story, instead of just "Ok." I'm stuck in stone. There's no moving forward with "Ok."

And then my Friend began to smile.

How dare my Friend take my story so lightly. This is my story. These are my words. It's important to me and my Friend's wearing this smile as if this entire situation is a joke.

"...There are some bits that I like and others that could use some work," my Friend said.

That I could work with. That I could move forward with.

"...I think, so far, there are a lot of unnecessary words," my Friend continued.

Unnecessary? A word is not unnecessary. No word is unnecessary. Each word of my story is meticulously placed, like every note ever played. There are no unnecessary words.

"...And I think that there isn't much happening," my Friend continued.

Does using the words "I think" before sharing an opinion make one more or less convincing? Less. At least, for me. When I used to say "I think" before I shared anything, I felt less confident. I don't know why.

Maybe, when we use "I think," there's no purpose or meaning behind the words. Although, there's no purpose or meaning to anything, so why those words make us come across as less confident, I'm not sure. But it does.

"...There isn't much of a plot," my Friend went on. "Your characters don't really do anything."

But that's the point. My characters don't do anything because we don't do anything. If a story is supposed to be a reflection of life, then why would I manipulate the story so that it didn't reflect life? That doesn't make any sense.

"...Now, I haven't read the whole thing," my Friend said. "I've just skimmed over it so far."

I know. I know you haven't read the whole thing. I've been watching you partially reading my story.

And now that you're admitting to not taking an interest in something that's clearly important to me, I'm even more infuriated. I mean, what good is that? My Friend is virtually telling me that I shouldn't take any of the advice given to me because my Friend has only skimmed over the part that my Friend covered and wasn't really taking in my story. This is a waste of time.

"...But if your story continues in this direction, I don't think it'll be as good as it could be," my Friend said.

I'm not getting anything of worth from my Friend. I'm getting a lot of criticism without any suggestions. What can I do with that?

Plus, it just seems as if my Friend doesn't want to read my story. It's as if my Friend is just willing to put in as little effort as possible because my Friend doesn't care for me or my story. How selfish.

And what makes it even more so incredibly annoying is that my Friend could have just explained why reading my

story wasn't worth the time. My Friend didn't have to waste our time. But no, my Friend did. My Friend decided that it was better to waste our time than to be honest.

If one can't commit to a task and embrace the task fully, then one shouldn't do the task at all.

I nodded back.

"...It's good," my Friend concluded. "It's not great, but it's good. It just needs some more work. That's all."

I don't want my story to be great. I want it to be perfect.

But then, what is perfect? My Friend thinks that I need more of a plot, but I don't. To my Friend, a plot seems important to the story, but to me, it doesn't. What might be perfect to my Friend might not be perfect to me.

We each experience life differently. And that's something that's easy to forget, even though it's important to remember. And because we each experience life differently, then each of us is going to have a different worldview, which isn't wrong. There's nothing bad in experiencing life differently. But that just means that we aren't right. We are neither right nor wrong.

Or is that wrong? Is it? I'm not sure. I mean, we are all neither right nor wrong. But then, from my perspective, to say that we are all neither right nor wrong seems right, even though I know it is wrong too.

Are we all neither right nor wrong? Or is it the other way around? Maybe, instead of us all being neither right nor wrong, we are all both right and wrong. I mean, from each of our perspectives, which is the only way we can perceive life, we are right. From my perspective, I am right. And from everyone else's perspective, they are right also. In that sense, we are all right. But then I know I am wrong too. We can all be refuted, so we must all be wrong too. It's like the books. Each writer believes that they are right, even though they can be refuted. From their perspective, they are right, but overall, they are wrong. It's as if we can't be completely one or the other. We can't be completely right nor

completely wrong. We are either right and wrong or neither right nor wrong.

But what does it matter? What's the point in realizing this? We are no better off. Whether we are right and wrong or neither right nor wrong, it doesn't make a difference. In both cases, we can't be completely right nor completely wrong. There has to be a mix.

And in that way, we can't be perfect. Perfection is when we are completely right. And we can't be completely right. We are either both right and wrong or neither right nor wrong. And because of that, we can't be perfect. There's no way. So, that means that no matter how hard I try, my story can't be perfect.

What do I do then? Do I stop? Don't try? What's the point? If my story is never going to be perfect, then what's the point? If nothing I do is going to be perfect, then what's the point?

Why am I asking myself these questions? I know the answer. There is no point.

So then, why am I making a big deal out of this? What if my story is never going to be perfect? Big deal. And besides, it's still my story. How many people can say that? And at least I understand that my story can't be perfect. I understand that I can't be perfect. And I'm not going to worry over trying to be perfect. I'm just going to write my story.

I got home, sat down and looked over my story.

I've just got to keep going until I'm happy. That's the most I can do. And at least, if no one else likes my story, then I will be happy.

Alright, that's what I'll do.

And so, I began to edit my story.

But then I quickly stopped.

This'll never end. I could edit my story forever, even though it can never be perfect. Heck, that's why I could edit

my story forever, because it can never be perfect.

So, what can I do? I could stop and don't edit my story.

But I like it. I like editing my story, so why am I complaining? I don't know.

Just keep going.

And so, I kept developing my story.

I'm not going to stop. I'm just going to keep writing and growing my story because I like it.

That's why we do anything, isn't it? We do things because we like doing them, not because we want them to be perfect.

I'm a seeker.

Oh, Dad. I miss you.

That's strange. Usually, when I am reminded of Dad, my emptiness overwhelms me. But it's not happening this time. I can't remember if this has ever happened before. I mean, I'm not complaining, but it would be interesting to realize why my emptiness isn't overpowering me.

Well, what's the difference between then and now? The major difference is that I'm writing. I'm writing my story. Every other incident, I was in the middle of something that I didn't want to do or I had gone through some situation that I didn't want to live through. And in each of those cases, I wasn't happy. As far as I can recall, I was miserable. But now, I'm happy. Maybe, that's the difference. In those previous incidences, I wasn't happy, regardless of what I was living through, but now, in writing my story, I am happy. Maybe, that's it. And if that's it, then that means that so long as I am happy, my emptiness can't hurt me.

How about that? If I just continue to be happy, then my emptiness won't hurt me. It makes so much sense. How we feel determines how we live. That idea can't be more accurate. And it is so simple. So long as I am happy, then my emptiness can't hurt me. It's just another reason to be happy. And I am happy when I'm writing my story, when ideas are coming to me and I am letting those ideas just pour out and

form my story.

And so, I continued to write.

I finished writing, got up and walked off.

That was fun. That was really fun.

But I have to stop. I can't write forever. If I do that, then I might start to hate writing. Too much of a good thing is never good because the act of doing it might eventually become stale and boring. There has to be a balance. I don't plan on hating writing.

I'm hungry. Maybe, I should cook something to eat. That'd help me to get my mind off of my story for a bit.

And so, I stood up and went to cook food.

But then I found her in the stranger's arms.

Great. Now, I have this to contend with.

She and the stranger noticed me and quickly let go of each other.

And then, eventually, I turned around and walked away.

They're not going to bother me. I won't let that happen. But that doesn't mean that I have to be around them.

However, as I was leaving, a voice called out to me.

Did the stranger ask me a question? I don't know. I don't care though. I have better things to do.

And so, I quickly reverted to my story.

I kept on writing and editing my story.

My story is the only thing that matters to me.

Class is boring. Plus, we aren't learning from the best. We only learn the standard. It's as if our instructors prefer for us to conform than to get us to think.

Mum is always with that stranger. And that means that Mum and I are virtually strangers to each other.

And I feel so uncertain with my Friend that when we do meet up, my focus is on my story. I am with my Friend, but I am not really there. I am never in the present unless I am writing my story because my story is the only thing that

matters to me. Everything else is meaningless.

And my story is in my control. Everything else is out of my hands. My story is the only thing that I can control. I can write what I want to write and how I want to write it. I can share the sides of myself that I want to share. I can be the best version of myself. And I'm going to be remembered for it. I'm going to be remembered as this leader, a hero who inspires all and lives on through time. Everyone will find meaning in my story and will continue to extend my legacy forever. That's how I'm going to live on. Everyone is going to be inspired by my story and the lessons that I have realized.

Or will they? I mean, why won't they be inspired by my story? There isn't any reason why everyone won't be inspired by my story.

But then again, why will they be inspired by my story? I doubt it. Everyone's different. I know that. So, my story can't be meaningful to everyone.

I'm getting in my head again. I have a bad habit of getting in my own way. It's as if I need to think about everything in order to protect myself.

But protect myself from what? The future? The future hasn't happened yet.

So, what is it that I'm protecting myself from? I guess, I am protecting myself from myself. Now, there is a dilemma. I need to write my story in order to be remembered, in order to have my legacy, to reach the answer, but I'm stopping myself because I'm afraid.

But afraid of what? The future still hasn't happened yet, so what am I afraid of? Any fear that I have in my head is only a fear that I have in my head. It isn't real. It's all in my head.

So, what am I afraid of? Well, maybe, the fear itself could happen. There's always that potential. I'm only ever afraid of the potential of something bad happening.

But that doesn't mean that my fear isn't in my head. The

fear that something bad could happen is only ever in my head. It still hasn't happened yet. And it still isn't real.

So, what am I afraid of? I don't know, but I still can't stop being afraid. I still can't stop the potential for something bad to happen. There's always the potential for something bad to happen. That isn't reassuring, but it makes me wonder, since there is always the potential for something bad to happen, then why is it that at times we feel afraid and at other times we don't? When I'm thinking about my story, I'm afraid that no one will like it. I am still afraid that no one will like it. But why? Everyone's going to like it. I know that.

Although, I don't know that. Everyone liking my story is something that could happen. There's always the potential for everyone to like my story, similar to how there's always the potential for something bad to happen.

It's just in my head. The belief that everyone would like my story is only ever in my head. It isn't real. It could be, but it hasn't happened yet.

I'm expecting everyone to like my story. My Friend didn't like my story, so how could I expect everyone to like my story? I couldn't. I mean, I could, but it wouldn't help in any way. I put these expectations on myself as if putting on another heavy layer of clothing that I'm constantly wearing, adding pressure to the already difficult challenge. There's no good in burdening myself. I can't expect everyone to like my story.

But then what should I do? If no one likes my story, then I won't have my legacy. And I can't know if everyone likes my story until I write it and show it to everyone.

So, what can I do? I don't know. But maybe, legacy is one of those things that can't be made. Maybe, it just happens for some.

No, that can't be true. There must be some reason for why some have a legacy and why others don't. There must be some answer.

Although, I'm not sure.

Maybe, if I learn how those who have a legacy managed to make there's, then maybe, I might realize the answer.

I was going through some of the books that I borrowed.

Are they well known? I don't know.

And so, I took some of the books to class to show them to students, but all of them just looked back at me with a blank face.

It might be because I approached them and put a book in front of them. But I imagined that there would be at least a few students whose eyes would light up upon recognizing some of the books. But no, that didn't happen.

Maybe, that's just a further indication as to the problems I have with classes. Classes are supposed to encourage us to learn, help us learn to learn, but it seems that none of the other students feel compelled to read outside of class. To me, it's an issue.

But there's a greater concern at hand. Not only am I wrong about these writer's legacies, but can a book make a writer's legacy? I mean, how can a writer know these things? What is it that makes a book resonate with its readers? It can't just be dumb luck. There must be something, some pattern that I haven't realized yet.

And so, I began to write little notes that asked students who their heroes were and handed these notes to all of the students.

And eventually, a large pool of students shared their many heroes with me.

This makes sense, considering that we are all different.

But this doesn't help. Not really anyway.

But then, maybe, there are some patterns amongst the list of heroes that I have obtained. And if I can figure out some of these patterns, then maybe, I will realize how I too can make my legacy.

I went to the bookshop, searched for biographies on the heroes on my list, but I only found two books.

Just two? And the two books are written on the same person.

What am I doing? If there are only two books, then, maybe, writing a book isn't a way of making a legacy. Maybe, legacy is founded on luck. Maybe, writing isn't the answer. Maybe, there is something else that I can do.

But what? What can make a soul live on through time, other than a book? I don't know. I have no idea.

Why is this bothering me? I don't know. But there's no use worrying about it. These things are what they are. That's it. There's nothing more. And there's no point in worrying about it. Worrying is unnecessary. Preposterous.

But that still doesn't mean that I know how to make a legacy.

Although, I don't have to be burdened by this.

I'm just going to write and see what comes of it. That's the most anyone can do. I'm going to write what is important to me and see what comes of it, in spite of the negative criticism, the doubts, the pains, the struggles, in spite of everything bad that might come my way. What other choice do I have?

I continued writing my story, while the rest of life moved at its own slow pace.

I was staring back at my story.

Now what? The protagonist knows what to do. I know what to do. But I can't walk that path.

It's ok. I've been writing so much, I should take a break.

And so, I got up, went out and wandered around.

Everything we have is here, with us. We don't need anything else. I mean, what else is there? I can't think of anything.

But then again, I don't know and I might not have heard of what else there might be, yet.

And slowly, I continued on my way.

But then...

*...Who is that? Who is this beautiful stranger?
What is this? What is this feeling? Transcendence? I
don't know. I don't know what to think of this feeling other
than that I like it.*

And so, I continued to watch the stranger play in the
grass field with some friends.

*Everything about this stranger seems so serene,
somehow, in some way.*

*I don't know what this is, but I am feeling peace without
having to watching my thoughts, without having to do
anything.*

*Is this the answer that I am looking for? Whatever it is?
This feeling? This moment? Is this the answer?*

But then the stranger noticed me.

I quickly dashed behind a nearby tree.

*Why am I behaving like this? What's wrong with me?
This isn't me. I don't care how others view me.*

But who am I? I don't know.

*There's no time to think about who or what I am. I have
to get out of here. This stranger can't see me watching. That
would be creepy. And I'm not a creep. I wouldn't do that to
someone. I'm just curious.*

And so, I slowly turned my head and looked back
around the tree.

The stranger was watching me.

"You don't have to hide," the stranger said to me.

The stranger's friends giggled.

*This stranger must think that I'm a creep, even though
I'm not. I'm not any of those things. I'm just curious. I just
lost my attention for a small moment. I'm not bad.*

*But it doesn't matter. This stranger has judged me as
bad person, a creep. And because that is how the stranger
views me, that is who I am to the stranger. I can't change
that. I can't be anyone else in this stranger's mind. I have
blown my first impression.*

And so, I ran off.

I hope to never see this stranger again.

I quickly got away.

I think I'm in the clear. They wouldn't have chased after me.

And so, I slowed down and began to walk home.

Who was that stranger? What was that feeling that I felt? And why did I feel that feeling? These are just questions without answers. And they're answers that I won't be able to realize.

I can't meet the stranger again. I would be judged poorly. I would be viewed as someone whom I am not, even though in the stranger's mind I am just that. So, I can't see the stranger to find out who the stranger is.

But that feeling? What was that? It must have been transcendence. That's it. I was transcended.

But what does that mean? And why? Is it because I was caught off guard by the stranger? By the stranger's presence? Or is it just because I experienced a pleasing image? There are too many questions to answer.

And so, I ran home.

I made it home, lay down, closed my eyes and tried to fall asleep.

Who is this stranger? Who is this stranger whom I had never realized before, who I had never even seen?

I continued to toss and turn, until I opened my eyes, took a deep breath and just stared into empty space.

I have to know. I have to. It's too much for me not to.

This stranger is beautiful. Really beautiful. The most beautiful person I have ever seen. This stranger is probably really smart too. And fun. And funny. And compassionate. Incredibly giving. Just kind. Just an incredibly amazing individual. This stranger is everything.

If anyone were reading my thoughts, they would think of me as a creep. They would judge me just as this stranger

judged me. It's a double-edged sword. On one side of the sword, it is amazing to allow my imagination to fill in the gaps, to fill in those details and realize every possibility that I can, but on the other side of the sword, I'm acting weird, silly, even stupid. I am behaving in such a way that I don't like.

But I know, at the very least, I have to find out who this stranger is. I have to. I have to answer these questions. What other choice do I have?

I went by the grass field later the next day, but the stranger wasn't there.

And so, I went by the following day, but still, the stranger wasn't there.

And then I went to the grass field again and again and again, but the stranger was never there.

I might have frightened the stranger. If the stranger thought that I was a creep, then the stranger would have been frightened by me and would have decided to never show up at the grass field again.

But I didn't mean to scare the stranger. That did happen. We could misinterpret each other. One might be led to believe that another is odd or bad, even though there is nothing wrong with the other person. Just dumb luck.

And there isn't anything anyone can do about it. It isn't as if we can control how others interpret a situation because then they won't like us for trying to control them. One has to be cool at all times. And if others don't like it, then too bad.

But I'm not being cool. I wasn't cool when I was awestruck by the stranger. And I haven't been cool since then. I've been another person. A person that I don't like. A person that I'm not happy with, even though that person is me. I'm not happy with myself. I'm not happy for the way I am behaving. I don't like the way I am acting. I have to stop. I have to let the idea of this stranger go, for my own sake.

I was wandering around.

I'm doing the right thing. It's fun to imagine the possibilities I might have had with that stranger, but I'm not being me. If I was myself, or if I was comfortable with how I was behaving, then maybe, I would do more. But I'm not. And I have to let it go. It's the best thing.

Although, it is difficult to let these thoughts go. I could watch them. But as soon as I try to, I imagine more possibilities. And as I continued to try, my imagination always draws me back to this stranger and the questions that are plaguing me. I can't let go of the idea of this stranger.

But maybe, just maybe, I could distract myself. Maybe, if I could think of something else, then my imagination will focus on that other thing and naturally, I'll let go of the stranger. We can't focus on two things at once, so if my attention is on something else, then my focus won't be on the idea of this stranger.

But what else is there to focus on? My story. My story is the only thing that's important to me. I have to keep writing.

I got home, sat down and tried to write, but no words were coming to me.

What does my protagonist do now? I don't know. I don't have a clue. I mean, nothing much is happening. My protagonist doesn't have any problems to solve. Maybe, I could give my protagonist a problem, but what problem? I don't know. I really don't know.

Usually, this doesn't bother me because I know that characters, just like people, don't know what they really want. I've read that characters should always have objectives, that they should always know what they really want, but no one can know what they really want. We can know what we want to a degree, but we can never know what we really want. And so, how can I expect my characters to know what they really want? I can't.

And that means that sometimes my characters will do

something that even I wouldn't expect, that might seem out of character to some readers. But that's how we are. Sometimes, we do things that are out of character.

Why do they act out of character? I have no idea, but I can't imagine there being just one answer for every scenario. There's probably a variety of reasons for each scenario. A case by case basis. We must act out of character because of the different conditions we are in. Action must be conditional. And that explains why we sometimes act out of character.

But even though I know that action must be conditional and that we don't know what we really want, I still don't know what to write. I can't find the words. I can't recall the feeling that I was writing with. I can't do it.

This stranger has changed me. And changed me for the worse. I can no longer do what I love. I wish I had never seen this stranger. I wish that I could continue to write. But I can't.

And so, I lay down.

This stranger really is beautiful.

I have to stop thinking about this stranger, otherwise, it's going to ruin me.

Or maybe, I could keep on thinking about this stranger. It isn't harming anyone. It's only my imagination after all. So, why shouldn't I? Why not let my imagination explore these possibilities?

And then I fell into a deep sleep.

I was wandering around.

How can I not know what to write about? I know everything about my protagonist: my protagonist's interests, frustrations, weaknesses, strengths, even my protagonist's secrets. I know everything about my protagonist, but I can't figure out where my protagonist is going.

Maybe, I could just make up a new direction for my protagonist to go in. I mean, aren't we all just making it up

as we go along? I don't know. But it sure feels that way. I mean, really, we can never know what's going to happen. We can't know the future. The future hasn't happened yet. All we do is march on and make adjustments, little changes to suit the changing conditions we are in. Of course, we are making it up as we go along. So, why shouldn't my protagonist just make something up?

Or should I just come up with another obstacle for my protagonist to overcome? My protagonist would have to react to the obstacle and that would propel my story into a new direction. I could do that. But then again, what would the obstacle be? I don't know. All I have is this stranger.

No. No, I can't. I'm not going to put this stranger in my story. That would be too much. It would be weird. And wrong. And I can't.

There's nothing wrong with putting this stranger in my story, but I can't do it. I just can't do it. I have to come up with a new obstacle. An obstacle that isn't this stranger. I have to. Even if the idea of this stranger being an obstacle for my protagonist is a good idea, I can't do it. I have to come up with a different obstacle. And even if writing about this stranger might help me to forget about the stranger, I still can't do it.

But then again, if writing about the stranger is going to help me to dump my thoughts and forget about the stranger, then won't it be beneficial to me to write about the stranger? I mean, I would forget about this stranger. I would put this stranger behind me in my story. And that would be it. And I would move on. It isn't such a bad idea after all.

But no. No, I can't. It still feels weird. It feels...

...The stranger appeared in the distance, alone.
I froze, looking back at the stranger.
And then the stranger noticed me.
My knees began to ache.
What do I do? What do I do? I can't run off. That would be weird. Embarrassing. So, what do I do? I don't know. What can I do? This is so awkward. I am so awkward.
But then I received a smile.
And I smiled back.
The stranger then walked towards me.
Ok. You can do this. I can do this. I can do this.
The stranger approached me.
"Hi," the stranger said.
Oh, no. The stranger doesn't know that I don't talk. How do I respond?
I put my hand up and waved back.
"What's that?" the stranger asked.
Idiot. You're such a stupid idiot.
I then quickly wrote down, 'I don't talk,' and showed the words to the stranger.
"Oh," the stranger responded.
I then quickly wrote down, 'sorry,' and showed the word to the stranger.
"What for?" the stranger asked.
I'm making a mess of things. I might as well leave.
But I can't just leave. So, what do I do? I have to come up with something. I can't just let us hang in this awkward silence.
And so, I wrote down, 'for embarrassing you,' and showed the words to the stranger.
I'm going to write down how I honestly feel. If the stranger takes it well, then I won't have anything to hide. And if the stranger takes it badly, then I will realize that we weren't meant to know each other. Either way, the outcome will be positive.
Why don't we always be honest with each other?

"I'm not embarrassed," the stranger said. "...You're sweet."

I couldn't help but blush as we couldn't stop looking at each other.

This doesn't feel wrong. This doesn't feel wrong at all. This feels natural.

Wow, this stranger is so beautiful. So, incredibly beautiful.

But then the stranger started to blush and looked away.

"I feel like I know you," the stranger mentioned.

I feel exactly the same way. I can't explain it, but then, maybe, I don't need to.

"...Do you want to walk with me?" the stranger asked me.

I smiled and nodded.

The stranger smiled back.

And then we started to wander together.

I don't have to speak. And I'm not going to speak either.

But it's different that the stranger doesn't seem to feel a need to speak either. We could just wander in silence. And it's comforting. It's peaceful. Just being in this stranger's presence is enough to allow me to resonate with the stranger. I don't need words. I have silence. And everything feels as it should be. Life has come into alignment for this one moment, for the stranger and me to come together. It's beautiful. Unexplainable. But beautiful.

I'm not going to overthink this moment. I'm just going to dive into it and float wherever the current takes me.

We eventually came to a stop.

I don't want this moment to end, but I guess it has to. No moment can last forever. Life is comprised of all these tiny moments, one after the other.

But that doesn't bother me. We will have more moments together. I know that. And that's something to look forward to.

We nervously looked back at each other, smiling.

The stranger doesn't want to speak. I don't speak, but it seems that the stranger doesn't want to speak. The stranger just wants to be here, with me. And I just want to be with the stranger. We just want to be in each other's presence, like leaves dancing in the wind.

"I have to go home," the stranger said. "But can we do this again?"

I smiled and nodded.

The stranger smiled back at me.

And then we parted ways.

I am so elated. Ecstatic. Euphoric. Words can't do this feeling justice. This must be the answer that I've been longing for, to experience the universe at its most beautiful. This is the answer. It isn't legacy. It is this feeling. Whatever it is. Transcendence. Jubilation. I have no idea.

Or maybe, just maybe, this is love. Not the love that one has for their friends or family, but the love between couples. Maybe, this is the love that I have never experienced before. This has to be it. This has to be love. I am in love. How else can I explain this oscillation between our souls, this mixture of desire, tenderness and passion that is binding us together? This is love. There's no other explanation. I am in love. I have fallen in love with this stranger, this used to be stranger who is my Soulmate.

I got home and started to write.

Love. Love is the answer. It's really that simple.

That's probably why Mum is with that stranger, Mum's Friend. Mum has been longing for love and Mum's Friend seems to love her back.

Maybe, I have been too harsh to her.

Although, I never fully understood it until now.

I stopped writing and walked around, searching, until I found Mum washing clothes and paused.

I know I have to respond to her, but I don't know what to do. I need a moment to think it through.

But then Mum saw me and just looked at me.

I just looked back.

And then, eventually, Mum looked away.

She didn't even smile. She just looked away with disdain. It's as if she expects the worst in me and goes on about her life with me in the background. That hurts. Mum and I love each other. We used to anyway. We would do anything for each other without expecting anything in return. That's how love between a mother and their child should be, not what we're doing, not this game we are playing. No. We have to get back to where we were. We have to love each other as a mother and a child should love each other.

But how? We have lost our trust for each other, manufacturing these walls to make us feel safe, comfortable, secure in our own little havens. What can we do? Well, there is only one thing to do: trust each other. How? Take down these walls. Push through them to get to Mum. And once I'm with her, love again.

And so, I walked towards Mum and gave her a hug.

She jolted a little, but quickly embraced me.

I began to hear her cry, which made me cry too.

"Thank you," Mum said to me.

We have gotten through the pain, the struggle, the walls and are now living in this beautiful, vulnerable moment, where everything has fixed itself.

We eventually let go and faced each other.

"Can we never do that again?" Mum asked me.

I nodded.

We both smiled together.

It's so simple. A hug. That's all that's required. We don't need anything else. Most times we just require a hug. A hug shows appreciation, empathy, compassion, care and love. And we can all hug each other. It's so simple, so obvious and yet, we rarely do it. Probably because if we hug too often, hugging would lose its impact and so, we should

only hug on special occasions.

Although, every occasion is a special occasion, really. We are alive. That's special.

But what makes a hug special? Well, when I hugged Mum, just then, it meant something. The hug meant something to me and to her. The hug meant something to both of us because we were giving our love to each other. So, for a hug to be special, we have to hug with the intention of giving love to those we are hugging. Intention is important. The intention can't be harmful or deceitful in any way, otherwise, the hug will cause some form of conflict. Intention is important. And for the hug to be meaningful, we have to hug with the intention of giving love to those we are hugging.

And we are all capable of giving meaningful hugs. I mean, what's stopping us? Excuses? We don't have to let those walls get in our way.

And since we can all give meaningful hugs, we can all love each other. Love really is the answer. Not just the love between a couple, but all forms of love. It's so simple, lucid, so obvious that it's so easy to miss, especially when we get in our own way. And we don't have to. We can just give each other meaningful hugs. We can just love each other.

Mum went back to washing clothes, while I hurried back to write.

I was with my Soulmate.

"Have you ever ridden a horse before?" my Soulmate asked me.

I shook my head.

"What?" my Soulmate asked me. "How come?"

I shrugged my shoulders.

"Let's go horse riding then," my Soulmate said. "Let's do it together."

And so, I followed my Soulmate and my Soulmate showed me this gigantic horse.

“What do you think?” my Soulmate asked me.

My Soulmate expects me to ride that? That thing is huge. I can't ride that.

But what other choice do I have? I'm already committed. And I don't want to come across as a coward. I can't have my Soulmate thinking that I'm a coward. I have to go with it.

“You have nothing to be afraid of,” my Soulmate said to me.

I just looked back at my Soulmate.

And then my Soulmate slowly approached the horse and started to caress it.

The horse rubbed its nose on my Soulmate's cheek.

And then my Soulmate gently leaned back on the horse.

And there's my Soulmate, with a horse, with nothing obstructing them. How beautiful is my Soulmate?

And there's nothing to stop me from feeling that same comfort. Really. There's nothing. So, why shouldn't I walk closer.

And so, I slowly approached the horse and was able to caress the horse.

“You just have to respect the horse,” my Soulmate said.

“They're like us in that way. You show respect and the horse will respect you. You don't, then the horse won't respect you.”

My Soulmate is correct. One who respects others, is respected by others. It's that simple.

My Soulmate then showed me how to get on the horse and a few basic maneuvers, while we occasionally laughed at my clumsy mistakes.

And then, eventually, we slowly rode out into the quiet fields.

“What do you like to do?” my Soulmate asked me. “I have my horses. What do you have?”

I used my hand to signal that I wrote.

“Writing?” my Soulmate asked me.

I nodded.

“Why do you like writing?” my Soulmate asked me.

How do I respond? I can't gesture the entire story of how I became interested in writing. The story is too long. I'd have to write it down in order to share it. But since I'm struggling to hold onto this horse, then I doubt I'd be able to write my story while riding this horse.

The only other option I have is to speak. And maybe, I could speak. This is my Soulmate after all. But I can't. Everyone would find out about my emptiness and no one needs to be burdened by me, especially my Soulmate. I have to remain silent.

“Did you get into writing because you like to read?” my Soulmate asked me.

I looked back at my Soulmate.

How could my Soulmate have guessed that?

Or maybe, my Soulmate is smarter than I had realized.

I nodded.

“That's how I'd imagine most writers get into writing,” my Soulmate said. “They were simply inspired by the books that they read and wanted to do the same.”

My Soulmate is an expert in deductive reasoning.

“The same sort of thing happened with me,” my Soulmate said. “But with horses. When I was younger, my Dad showed me how to take care of these horses. And I loved it. I loved caring for these horses. And as I grew up it was all I ever wanted to do. But I can't earn a living this way.”

But what if you could? I mean, why not? What's stopping you? The only barriers we have are our own thoughts. And thoughts are just words. And words are just words. No more. No less.

Many have this terrible habit of getting in their own way. Of course, I know this, so I'm able to deal with it. But most haven't realized this yet. Most listen to what they want to hear and feed into their excuses and stagnate. Why? Because it feels comfortable? They aren't right. They can't

be. It just feels comforting to believe that they are right, even though they can't be. It makes no sense to me. Why would one prefer to feel comfortable and make up excuses and stagnate when one could be happy?

Though, I guess, we always fall into something that makes us feel comfortable, no matter what it is that we are doing. But that just means that we should fall into happiness and feel comfortable there, instead of excuses and stagnation. It just doesn't make any sense to me. I mean, we all have a choice.

Or do we? Sometimes I feel that I don't have a choice, that I'm cornered in some way.

But then again, didn't I have a choice? In those moments, I could have done what I did or simply not done anything at all.

That's interesting. I could have not chosen. I could have decided not to choose. That's a contradiction if I ever heard one. How does one decide not to choose? We can't. We can't decide not to choose. That, in itself, is a decision. We are always deciding. We can only ever make decisions, even if we are unaware of it. We can't avoid it. We can't avoid making a decision. And so, we always have a choice. It's simply about which decisions we make. We are the decisions that we make. It's so simple.

But then again, I sometimes feel cornered. I feel that I don't have a choice. Although, it could just be the feeling of not having a choice. Just because I feel a certain way doesn't mean I don't have choices. It just means that I don't feel that I have choices. It's the feeling that's encouraging me to decide not to choose. It isn't that I don't have a choice, but that I feel that I don't have a choice. How we feel determines how we live.

It's this feeling that gets in my way, this feeling that I don't have a choice. And I do. We do. We always have a choice. We can decide to be happy. We can decide to become who we'd like to be. We can decide to live the life we'd like

to live.

I have to help my Soulmate realize a way to earn a living taking care of these horses. I have to.

Then my eyes lit up.

To earn a living, why doesn't my Soulmate train children? Of course. Yes, it's so obvious.

But how do I share this idea with my Soulmate? I can't. I have to be patient, write the idea down and then share it, even if the solution is bursting out of me.

We eventually came full circle and I was finally able to write down the idea and show it to my Soulmate.

My Soulmate's eyes lit up.

"I had never thought of that," my Soulmate said. "This is brilliant."

And then my Soulmate looked to me.

"Could you help me with this?" my Soulmate asked me.

Of course, I can. There's nothing getting in my way.

I nodded.

And then my Soulmate hugged me.

I jumped a little, but then I gradually embraced my Soulmate.

This is the happiest moment I have ever lived.

I helped my Soulmate write a plan for each lesson and come up with a variety of games for each level of experience.

But what now? Well, we have to figure out a way to get children to come to our lessons.

How though? We could go to the children in some of the other classes and inform them about our lessons.

And so, my Soulmate and I approached the other students, but they all just ignored us.

It's disheartening, I have to admit. But we aren't going to give up. I'm not going to give up on my Soulmate.

So, we started reevaluating.

How can we make these lessons more interesting? I don't get why we should have to. They're already interesting

as they are.

But that could be the problem. These lessons are interesting to us and we would be happy to take them, but these lessons aren't interesting to the children. We each experience life differently and what is interesting to us might not be interesting to others. It simply means that we have to make these lessons interesting to the children.

But how? Informing them about the lessons isn't enough. We have to adapt. Or we have to inspire them. Maybe, there's something there. Although, how does one inspire another? It isn't as if there's some formula lying around. And I haven't found any method for inspiring others in all of the books that I had read. So, how does one inspire another? I have no idea. We have no idea.

But that isn't going to stop us.

We explored ideas, refining the lesson structures, the plan, everything we could, but they still kept ignoring us.

They're either really stubborn or we're doing something wrong. I guess, we could be more patient with the children. They are children after all.

But it doesn't make sense. What's there not to like about horse riding? It seems so obvious, but clearly, we're missing something. But what? I don't know. I don't know.

Then there's my Soulmate. My Soulmate has put so much effort and care into my idea that I can feel my Soulmate's disappointment, even though my Soulmate has been so good about it. My Soulmate isn't going to give up. My Soulmate isn't going to give in. I can sense that. I know that. My Soulmate is stronger than anyone that I have ever known. And that encourages me. My Soulmate encourages me. My Soulmate inspires me. If only I knew how. And if only my Soulmate could inspire the children. We could direct that inspiration towards the children and that would inspire the children to take up the lessons. But we don't know how. So, we have to find another way.

We kept on exploring ideas and shared those ideas with

the students, but the students still ignored us.

Maybe, we should give up. Any sane individual would have given up by now.

But I can't give up. I can't disappoint my Soulmate. I have to keep going. And since I'm going to keep going, then my Soulmate will keep going. We are either stupid, insane or so ridiculously stubborn.

And then, my Soulmate's eyes lit up.

I stopped, leaned forward and looked back at my Soulmate.

And eventually, my Soulmate looked to me.

"Why are we trying to encourage the children to take our horse riding lessons?" my Soulmate asked me. "We should be approaching the parents."

My Soulmate is incredible. Of course, we should approach the parents. They're the ones who are going to pay for the lessons after all.

I'm such an idiot though. How did I not come to this realization earlier? It's so obvious. It's so obvious. And I missed it. I'm so stupid. I've wasted so much time.

But now we know what to do.

My Soulmate and I began to approach the parents. Many of the parents politely declined. But there were a few who signed their children up for a lesson.

And so, my Soulmate and I prepared for the first lesson.

"I'm so nervous," my Soulmate said to me.

I wrote down, 'I'll be there to help you,' and showed what I had written to my Soulmate.

My Soulmate smiled.

The parents and their children arrived.

And so, my Soulmate brought all the children together, began the lesson and eased into it. My Soulmate sounded nervous, but as the lesson went on, My Soulmate was looking more and more comfortable.

And by the end, the children were smiling, laughing and cheering each other on.

When the lesson finished, the parents took their children away, with smiles.

My Soulmate took a deep breath.

And gradually, with each subsequent lesson, more and more families showed up.

All that work has paid off. The word has gotten out. And my Soulmate has now found a sustainable way to earn a living doing what my Soulmate loves. I couldn't be happier for my Soulmate.

Later, my Soulmate approached me.

"This has really turned out great," my Soulmate said. "Hasn't it?"

I nodded and smiled.

"Thank you for all of this," my Soulmate said to me. "I should have thanked you a lot earlier, but I've been so busy."

You would have figured this all out whether I was with you or not.

"...Is there anything I could do for you?" my Soulmate asked me. "Anything?"

Anything? Anything at all?

I'd like to be with you. That's all I want.

But what if you don't think of me in the same way? It's possible. I can't read your thoughts. I can feel your feelings. I do resonate with you strongly, but I can't know what you're thinking. I'm not experiencing life as you. I'm experiencing life as me. I don't know.

Is it worth the risk? I don't want to lose you. So, no. It's not worth it. I care for you too much.

And so, I remained silent.

I got home and sat down alone.

What do I do? Either I remain silent and manage the anguish that comes with not knowing what will happen or I take the leap and find out how my Soulmate feels.

Let's say I take the leap, what's the worst that could happen? My Soulmate could laugh at me and I would feel

embarrassed, humiliated and wouldn't be able to live with myself. Or worse, my Soulmate could reject me and decide to never talk to me again. If I couldn't see my Soulmate ever again, I really won't be able to live with myself. I don't know what I would do without my Soulmate.

But would my Soulmate do that? Even if my Soulmate doesn't want to be with me, would my Soulmate just abandon me? I don't know. How can I know? We all react to different situations differently. Action must be conditional. So, I can't know what will happen. And I won't be able to live with myself if my Soulmate happened to reject me.

But then what if my Soulmate accepted me? I would be greater than I had ever been. I would be so overjoyed, so happy, so ecstatic. Just the idea of my Soulmate and me together, happy, in love is so beautifully uplifting.

But I'm not there. I'm not living that dream, that reality. I'm stuck. A prisoner. It's the worst feeling. And I have a choice. I know that I have a choice. I can decide to take the risk or decide not to take the risk. I know that I have a choice. We always have a choice. But I'm still stuck.

No. No, I'm not stuck. I'm just convincing myself that I'm stuck. It's because I have a choice, because we always have a choice, that I'm not stuck. I just feel cornered, trapped because I'm hesitating. Hesitation is our greatest disease, this infection that grows when one cannot decide on one of their choices. That's the only cure. So, I have to decide.

But how? I don't know what's going to happen. I can't know. No one can predict the future. That's what's building up my hesitation, my anguish: the not knowing. And my anguish is only ever going to build unless I know what will happen if I take the leap, if I told my Soulmate how I feel. If I remain silent, then my anguish will only grow, but if I take the risk, then maybe, my anguish will dissipate. That, I realize. So, I have to take the risk. I have to tell my Soulmate how I feel.

But how? I have no idea.

Writing my thoughts down could show me how I can tell my Soulmate how I feel.

And so, I started to write my thoughts down.

Maybe, I can do that. Maybe, I can write my feelings down and share my feelings with my Soulmate. I can write a heartfelt, honest, romantic letter. And at least that way, I can take the time to find the exact words to capture what I'm feeling.

But would handing over a letter be so honest? Since I had spent the time to perfectly articulate how I feel, the letter might come across as contrived and would get in the way of what really matters, which is how I feel. So, I couldn't write a letter. I have to do something else. I have to find another way.

I know what to do. I know what I have to do. But I can't do it. I can't speak.

It's the best way to tell my Soulmate how I feel. I haven't spoken for so long that any message that comes out of my mouth will reinforce how important my message is.

But I can't speak. What if I reveal my emptiness? What if I reveal my emptiness to my Soulmate? What if I burden my Soulmate with my emptiness? I wouldn't forgive myself. I wouldn't be able to live with myself.

But I'm not able to live with myself as it is. This torture, my anguish, this is my life and it's unbearable. This is what love can do. It's dangerous, intolerable and yet, beautiful. Love is everything, all at once.

I have to tell my Soulmate how I feel.

But then again, I feel uncomfortable. I can't do it. If only I could find another way. If I could, then I wouldn't have to speak and risk burdening my Soulmate with my emptiness. I have to find another way. I have to. I can't speak, even though it's the most obvious, the simplest thing to do. I can't. It's too difficult.

And so, I kept on writing.

No, it's the best thing to do. I have to tell my Soulmate how I feel, even though it will be difficult, even though I don't want to do it, even though I risk losing my Soulmate. Everything's telling me to speak, to speak from my heart.

But what about my emptiness? I can't burden and hurt my Soulmate. Who would I be? A monster. A behemoth. The worst of the worst.

But if there's anyone that would understand, if there's one soul, it would be my Soulmate. And maybe, maybe, despite the burden, the pain I might inflict, maybe, my Soulmate could help us through it. Maybe, it's time.

I saw my Soulmate in the middle of a lesson and just watched my Soulmate. Sweat began seeping out of my hands and armpits.

I have to do this. I have to tell my Soulmate how I feel.

So, I kept watching my Soulmate.

Maybe, I should leave. Maybe, I should regroup and try to tell my Soulmate how I feel some other time. I mean, I'm already sweating and that might distract my Soulmate from my feelings. And I can't allow that. Maybe, it would be best to try again at a later time. Yes. Yes, it would be.

But am I making an excuse? I'm not sure. Maybe. Maybe not. Maybe, regrouping might be the best move. Or maybe, I'm just prolonging the tension. I have no idea. I have no idea which choice is best and I can't know unless I decide. And if I pick the wrong choice, then it will be too late.

That's the hardest part: not knowing which is the best choice, while also knowing the consequences of picking the wrong choice. Understanding that is enough to deter anyone from deciding on anything. The anguish, the nausea is the crux of all of humanity's problems. If we didn't have this, this nausea, then we could just decide on the right choice every time. There wouldn't be any hesitation with anything. We would just decide. And we would be right each time. At least, I believe so. I'm not sure. It's too late for me. I have

the nausea.

I'm getting off track. I have to decide.

If I don't tell my Soulmate how I feel right now, then there will be plenty of other moments to talk to my Soulmate. And on one of those moments, I might have thought it through a little better, or something else might have happened to make me feel a little more uplifted and a little less stressed and that might be the difference between me getting my feelings across and my Soulmate being distracted by my nervousness.

But then if I don't tell my Soulmate how I feel right now, then I might build up my nervousness, the stress, the worry to such a height that I might not be able to tell my Soulmate how I feel. I can't know which choice is right until I decide and if I pick the wrong choice, then it will be too late and I will have to suffer the consequences.

On the other hand, if I tell my Soulmate how I feel, then at least, I will know. Even if my Soulmate doesn't want to be with me, then I won't have to carry the worry of not knowing.

But then my Soulmate and I won't be together and I might have to carry that worry instead. I would have replaced one burden with another.

But if I tell my Soulmate how I feel and ask my Soulmate if we could be together, then my Soulmate might accept me and I will be happier than I have ever been. I will be overjoyed, filled with so much love. It would be the best outcome I could have ever hoped for.

But again, I don't know. I can't know. And I know that. So, what should I do? Well, if I never tell my Soulmate how I feel, then I will regret it. And I don't want to regret anything, much like how my Friend's Mother regrets her life. I don't want to live through that.

So, I have to tell my Soulmate how I feel. I have to. As painful as the outcome might be, the regret would be worse. I can see that. I can see that now. The best thing for me to do would be to tell my Soulmate how I feel right now, in the

moment.

The lesson came to an end and my Soulmate went to get some water.

This was my chance.

I approached my Soulmate.

And then my Soulmate turned around with that beautiful smile.

“Hi,” my Soulmate said to me.

You’re doing it. You’re going for it.

Don’t mess it up.

Just got for it. Just get through the hesitation. Tell my Soulmate how I feel.

And so, I cleared my throat.

But then I looked away.

Just do it you coward. Just talk to your Soulmate. It’s not hard. So, just do it already.

“What is it?” my Soulmate asked me.

I could just write down how I feel and share my feelings that way.

But at the same time, that way wouldn’t be as impactful.

“Are you ok?” my Soulmate asked me. “You look a little nervous.”

It’s too late. Get out of there. Just get out of there.

But my legs froze up.

I have to do something. I have to say something. I might as well tell my Soulmate how I feel, even if it will be difficult, even if I feel uncomfortable, even if my Soulmate rejects me, I have to push through it. I have to push through the nerves, the anxiety, my anguish, all of it to tell my Soulmate how I feel.

And so, after everything that I had been through, my silence, my anguish, my hesitation, my emptiness, my capricious relationship with Mum, losing my friends, feeling alone, Dad’s death, I finally said, “I...”

My Soulmate’s eyes widened.

“...I...like spending time with you,” I said to my

Soulmate. "...I...think you're amazing. I think you're really amazing."

My Soulmate smiled.

I took a deep breath.

This isn't going so bad.

"...And...I want to spend more time with you, if that's alright with you," I finished.

Oh, no. You blew it. You're a fool. An idiot. How could you do this? How could you do this? Your Soulmate will never talk to you again. Never ever again. You're so stupid.

But then my Soulmate nodded.

"Sure," my Soulmate replied.

Is that it? After all that I went through?

I mean, I'm not complaining. I just expected more, but I guess, I'll take that. I'll definitely take that.

"Ok," I smiled.

"Ok," my Soulmate smiled. "How about after tomorrow's lessons?"

Yes, I can definitely do that.

"Yeah, I can do that," I replied.

"Great," my Soulmate said. "See you tomorrow night then."

"See you tomorrow."

I then turned around and walked home.

I'm in love with my Soulmate, my one and only, and my love is being reciprocated. There's no greater experience. This is love at its best, at its purest.

I went to see my Soulmate and we brought some food, went by the lake, started a fire, cooked the food and ate together.

"What's one thing that fire can't burn?" I asked my Soulmate.

"I don't know," my Soulmate answered. "Water?"

Can fire burn water? We can boil water. And if we continue to boil water at some point we might burn the water. We really can burn water.

“Fire can burn water,” I replied.

“Really?” my Soulmate responded. “You’re making this up.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Sure.”

My Soulmate is being more playful than usual. I guess, it’s because of the moment, being along, together.

Or maybe, my Soulmate is nervous.

I’m a little nervous, even though I’m not feeling the anguish that I had. No. This is a different sensation. There are the nerves, but there’s also a feeling of trust. That’s what I feel. And I believe that’s what my Soulmate feels.

“Do you want me to give you the answer?” I asked my Soulmate.

“No,” my Soulmate answered. “I can figure it out.”

“Ok, then.”

And so, my Soulmate looked away, only to eventually look back to me.

“Fire,” my Soulmate answered. “Fire can’t burn fire. I told you I’d get the answer.”

“I’m impressed,” I responded. “Most don’t usually get it.”

“How many people have you asked?”

“Only two.”

“Me?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“And who else?”

Dad.

I can’t bring up Dad, otherwise, we might start talking about my emptiness and why I stopped talking in the first place. And I don’t want to burden my Soulmate with all that.

But how do I respond? If I try to change the subject, then my Soulmate might infer that there are still things that I might not trust my Soulmate with and my Soulmate might take that the wrong way, even though I wouldn’t have changed the subject because I didn’t trust my Soulmate, but

because I was protecting my Soulmate.

But then again, I can't know how my Soulmate would interpret my attempt to change the subject. And I can't control how my Soulmate would react anyway. And if I did change the subject, then my Soulmate might understand that I'm doing it because I'm protecting my Soulmate and not because I don't trust my Soulmate. I mean, soulmates trust each other. That's what makes them soulmates: the trust between them.

"Could we talk about something else?" I asked my Soulmate. "If that's ok with you?"

"...Yeah," my Soulmate answered. "Sure."

It feels so good to have such an understanding and caring soulmate.

"...I'm glad you started talking again," my Soulmate said. "It feels better."

A smile came to me.

The question of whether or not I should be talking had plagued me for so long that it is good to get some confirmation that I had made the right decision.

"It does feel better," I admitted.

My Soulmate looked to me.

And then I looked back at my Soulmate.

We peered deep into each other's eyes.

I feel so at peace here, so euphoric.

There's this fire that I can't really describe. But somehow, in some way, it just feels right. I can't explain why this feeling is right, but I somehow know it feels right.

I leaned forward.

And my Soulmate leaned forward too.

What do I do now? I don't know. Just go with it, I guess.

My Soulmate giggled.

I laughed too.

I'm so nervous.

I'm ok. It's ok.

And then I continued to lean in and eventually, through

the pause, the hesitation, our eyes slowly closed and our lips gently touched.

I'd spend these moments with my Soulmate, growing together, alone, in our precious little world, sharing stories and details about each other and realizing each other's beautiful imperfections.

That's what I admire most about my Soulmate. Even though I'm flawed, my Soulmate is comfortable with me.

My Soulmate might be the only one that I can open up to about my emptiness. But I still feel some hesitation. There's no point in burdening anyone with my issues.

But then, later, when we were alone, my Soulmate faced me.

"Can I ask you something?" my Soulmate asked me.

"Sure," I answered.

"Do you talk to anyone else?"

No. I don't. I don't really have any real reason not to, other than that there's no one else that I can communicate with.

Sure, there's Mum. But she has that stranger. She doesn't need me.

"...No," I answered. "There's no one else worth talking to."

"Was that why you started talking to me?" my Soulmate asked. "Because I was worth it?"

"Yes."

"...Can I ask you another question?"

"Yes."

"Why did you stop talking?"

How do I answer? I don't want to lie. That's what makes our relationship unique. We never lie to each other. We're completely honest with each other. And it's refreshing. With everyone else, I can't be completely honest. Most are so judgmental that I don't know how to be honest with them. I have to reserve parts of myself in order to get along with

them. But with my Soulmate I can be open.

But I don't want to tell my Soulmate about my emptiness. There's still no reason to burden my Soulmate. None. And I might lose everything if I did.

But I have to come up with a response. I can't keep my Soulmate in waiting.

Although, what am I to say? The only idea I can come up with is to divert the conversation to another topic. Really, that's what I have to do.

"...Could we not talk about it?" I asked. "Please?"

That will raise suspicions and my Soulmate might assume that I don't completely trust my Soulmate, but I have to protect my Soulmate from myself. I don't have to lie about my emptiness, but there are some things that ought never be said.

"Ok," my Soulmate replied.

My Soulmate is so kind. My Soulmate doesn't pressure the answer out of me and I can tell that my Soulmate wants to allow me to share my answer only when I feel comfortable sharing it. Most would start an inquiry and won't give up until I'm either forced to lie or forced to give the answer or forced to run away. But not my Soulmate. My Soulmate is kind and sensitive.

I leaned in and kissed my Soulmate on the head.

"You resonate with me," I said to my Soulmate.

"We resonate with each other," my Soulmate responded.

My Soulmate gave me a kiss.

We grew closer.

I came home and found Mum eating alone.

She looks happy. That's good. I'm glad.

I approached Mum and sat beside her.

"Hey, there," Mum said. "How was your day?"

Maybe, I could talk to Mum.

However, I know that if I do start talking, Mum will ask

me more questions than my Soulmate did and won't stop until I give sufficient answers.

Or maybe, she might not. I mean, she has been patient with me for so long that maybe she would just listen. Who knows? No one. I understand that.

Although, if I am to be as honest and free to speak with Mum as I had been with my Soulmate then maybe things would be alright. I don't know. But I love Mum. And she loves me. And if there's anyone else that I could be honest and open with, other than my Soulmate, it would be Mum.

But I have to feel comfortable and not feel obliged to talk because I worked it up in my mind.

And so, I wrote down 'good' and continued to write, asking 'you?' and showed the words to Mum.

"Yeah, really good," Mum answered. "Everything is where it should be."

Everything is where it should be. I like that.

She's comfortable with me being here. She isn't going to pressure me into anything. And that means that I can feel comfortable too. I can be me. I can talk.

But at the same time, I can't. I'm not sure why. Maybe, it's just because of my anguish.

Or maybe, it's because I don't know how Mum will react. It has been so long since I've properly talked to her that maybe, now, I'm just postponing it because it's inconvenient. I have become comfortable not talking to Mum or anyone else for so long that in order to get used to talking again, I have to put myself into more uncomfortable positions.

That's the biggest obstacle there is. We get so comfortable acting a certain way that if we want to change ourselves, we have to put ourselves into uncomfortable positions first in order to get comfortable acting in the new way that we want to be and change ourselves for the better.

And there's always that friction between feeling uncomfortable and wanting to live the life we'd like to live.

*Maybe, I have to get comfortable feeling uncomfortable.
That seems like the antidote.*

*But again, there's that friction. And to get through that,
initially, it would either take deep, deep courage or stupidity.
And unfortunately, I'm not stupid. At least, I don't believe I
am. And that means that I have to be courageous.*

And so, I turned to Mum.

And Mum looked back at me.

"What is it?" Mum asked me.

I took a deep breath and looked Mum in her eyes.

*I can talk to her. It isn't hard. It's just talking. It's not
as if I had never had any experience in talking before. I just
haven't done it for a while.*

*So, I can talk. I just have to say a few words to start. I
just have to start. And then the momentum will carry me.*

"...I...want to talk to you again," I said to Mum.

Mum eyes widened.

"...Honest communication is important," I said. "It's
what brings us together. And...I'm sorry I haven't been
talking."

"...There's no need to be sorry," Mum responded.

Mum got up, walked over to me and gave me a hug.

And I hugged her back.

I continued to grow with my Soulmate and converse with
Mum.

Life is solved.

I was walking with my Soulmate.

"I started talking to my Mum again," I said to my
Soulmate.

"Yeah?" my Soulmate asked.

"Yeah. She was shocked at first, but we've been talking
ever since."

"That's great. I'm happy for you."

A smile came to me.

And my Soulmate smiled back.

“...Does your Mum know about me?” my Soulmate asked me.

“No,” I answered.

“Trying to keep me a secret, are we?”

“Something like that. I don’t know. Just one of those things that we haven’t talked about yet.”

“Fair enough. It’s good though, that you’re talking to your Mum again.”

“You’re happy that I talk to you?”

“Of course. You’re the only one worth talking to.”

“I feel the same way.”

Maybe, I could tell my Soulmate about Dad and my emptiness. My Soulmate doesn’t know anything about either and has never asked. But I guess, when one doesn’t know about something, then they won’t think to ask about it.

But then, since everyone has a father, my Soulmate should have asked about my Dad. But my Soulmate has never asked. Not once. Maybe, my Soulmate understands that there is a reason why I never bring up my Dad in our conversations and that my Soulmate respects my decision to keep that reason a secret. I’m not sure.

Maybe, this is a discussion that I should have with Mum instead.

But if there is anyone I would feel comfortable talking to about Dad and my emptiness it would be my Soulmate.

Although, if I told my Soulmate about my emptiness, then not only might my Soulmate start to think ill of me, but I might burden my Soulmate with my emptiness and I can’t forgive myself for that. I can’t tell my Soulmate about my emptiness. Some secrets have to be kept secret.

I was heading to see my Soulmate.

Life is exactly as it should be: fulfilling. Life should be fulfilling for everyone. There shouldn’t be any tensions, any conflicts, none of that. We should all feel fulfilled. And I wish

that for everyone.

“Hello,” a familiar voice echoed.

I stopped and looked around.

And then the Sage appeared, looking disheveled and sickly.

“...It’s been quite some time,” the Sage said.

“It sure has,” I replied instinctively.

“You’re talking again? What changed?”

I don’t want to say. I don’t know why. Maybe, it’s because I haven’t told Mum about my Soulmate yet and I want to hold off from telling anyone else about my Soulmate before I tell Mum.

Or maybe, I just feel a little embarrassed. Who knows?

But whatever the reason, I’m not going to tell the Sage.

“Wait,” the Sage said. “Let me guess.”

The Sage looked deep into my eyes.

What’s the Sage doing? The Sage is acting very out of character.

But what does it mean to act in character? We are the decisions we make, not who others think we are. So, in that sense, we can never be out of character. We are our character. And we can only ever be our character, our portrait. We are the portrait that we put up for the rest of life to experience, not the other way around.

Even when I feel uncomfortable around the Sage, I can still learn something.

But what is taking so long for the Sage to give me an answer? I just want to go now.

I shouldn’t be rude though. Not to the Sage. The Sage and I have a history and I can’t destroy that history by dishonoring the Sage’s request.

“...Love,” the Sage finally said.

How does the Sage know? I guess, I might have given it away when my eyes widened at the Sage’s guess. But still, how did the Sage guess on the first attempt that I’m in love? The Sage couldn’t have known. My Soulmate and I had kept

quiet about our relationship. There's no way the Sage could have known about us.

But then how could the Sage have guessed correctly? There's no way the Sage was just lucky. There's no such thing as luck. Every result comes from an action. And every action comes from another action, and another action, and another action, and so on and so forth. We can't not act. I mean, how can we not act? How can we not do? Not doing is an action. To not act is to act because one is deciding not to act. That decision is an action. Deciding not to act is an act. There can only be action. We can only act. We can't not act. We can't not do. Not doing is doing. And not doing is acting. Nothing can happen independently, which means that nothing can happen out of luck or by chance. So, the Sage didn't get lucky. The Sage must have figured it out somehow.

Or the Sage has been following me. No. Why would the Sage follow me? That's ridiculous. I must have just given it away when the Sage guessed. That's the only explanation. There can't be any other explanation.

Or could there be? I'm not sure.

"You're in love," the Sage said.

How am I supposed to respond to that? I don't want to confirm the Sage's guess. So maybe, I should keep silent.

"That's it," the Sage said. "You're in love."

The Sage isn't going to back off.

I could lie. The Sage might hesitate.

But I'm not a liar. I have to be honest.

"How does it feel to be in love?" the Sage asked me.

Wonderful. But if I answer with how I feel then I will give myself up.

"I was in love once," the Sage said.

Great. Now, I'm going to get a story I don't have time for. I have to get to my Soulmate's lesson.

But I can't just leave. I mean, I could, but I'm not rude. I'm not. Not like some. I'm considerate, even though I want

to leave.

But really, wanting something for myself and not going along with it is still considerate. If anything, it's more considerate because I'm going against what I want. Just because one wants something for themselves doesn't mean they aren't considerate of others, especially when they still go about helping others.

"It was many years ago, when I was really young," the Sage went on. "We fell for each other at first sight. I didn't believe in such a thing, but it happened. What could I say?"

There's something odd about the way the Sage is talking. It seems that the Sage feels a need to be heard.

Or to be appreciated? A lack of appreciation is the foundation for all the problems we make for ourselves. And if the Sage isn't feeling appreciated, then something must be wrong.

But what? Maybe, the Sage is desperate for food. The Sage is thinning after all.

"We were crazy in love," the Sage continued. "And we had so much fun. We had so much fun. But that was then and this is now. And I-I have to live life now. We all do."

Agreed.

"...Are you hungry?" I asked the Sage.

"...No," the Sage answered.

The Sage is lying. This is the first time the Sage has ever lied to me. Something is wrong.

"Is there anything that you need?" I asked the Sage.

"No," the Sage answered, "I'll manage."

The Sage needs help. But what can I do if the Sage won't allow me to help? It wouldn't be that bad or wrong to accept help. But then, maybe, the Sage is just that stubborn. I've never been in a situation in which the Sage needed help, so maybe, this is how the Sage reacts when anyone offers their help. Or maybe, the Sage is too embarrassed to accept others' help, even though there's nothing wrong with it. I'm not sure.

But if the Sage won't accept my help, then there's nothing I can do. I mean, what can I do? I can't force the Sage to eat. I can't do anything unless the Sage accepts my help. Two moves have to happen for others to be helped: (one), one has to offer help and (two), those who require the help have to accept the offer. There's no way around it. Both moves have to happen. And since the Sage isn't accepting my help, then I can't help the Sage.

And that means that I can leave.

"...I'm going to go," I said to the Sage.

And so, I turned around and started walking towards my Soulmate.

"Wait!" the Sage shouted.

I stopped, turned back around and looked to the Sage.

But the Sage just looked back at me.

The Sage is hesitating. I have never seen the Sage hesitate before. The Sage always talked with such conviction, but here, the Sage can't seem to decide. There's no clarity, no confidence, just uncertainty.

"...What is it?" I asked the Sage.

"...I want to teach you something," the Sage replied.

"What do you want to teach me?"

But the Sage just looked back at me.

The Sage is hesitating again.

Or maybe, the Sage is stalling. What for though? I have no idea. But it seems highly unlikely that the Sage is stalling for some alternate reason. Usually, when one stalls, it's because they are waiting for something to happen. Sometimes they are waiting for something bad to happen to someone else.

But the Sage wouldn't do that. Even this Sage wouldn't do that. The Sage cares about all things, so the Sage wouldn't do that. The Sage might be stalling, but the Sage wouldn't stall for something bad to happen to me. No.

The Sage wants to feel appreciated. Again, a lack of appreciation is the foundation for all of the problems we

make for ourselves. That's why the Sage wants me to stay.

And what am I to do? Run off? I can't do that.

I'm going to listen to the Sage just because it's a good thing to do. Maybe, under different circumstances, I might respond differently, but for this moment, I'm going to listen.

"...What are you learning in class?" the Sage asked me.

"The same stuff," I answered. "Words, numbers, symbols and images."

"And what have you learned from them?"

"That they are not what they seem."

"And they can never be."

"Why do you think that is?"

"Words, numbers, symbols and images are like our names. Remember what I said about our names?"

"Yes."

"When we give an individual a name, they become that name. When we give a thing a word, that thing becomes that word. When we give a thing a number, that thing becomes that number. When we give a thing a symbol, that thing becomes that symbol. When we give a thing an image, that thing becomes that image. All things don't inherit their names, words, numbers, symbols or images. All things don't inherit their identity. We give all things their names, words, numbers, symbols and images."

That would have been my answer. It's comforting to realize that I'm not alone in coming to that same realization.

But I have to leave. My Soulmate is waiting for me.

"Thanks for the realization," I said to the Sage.

I then turned around and began to walk away.

"Wait!" the Sage shouted at me again.

I stopped, turned back around and looked back at the Sage.

This is dragging on for too long. And it doesn't seem as if it's going to end unless I do something drastic or at the very least, rude.

But if I just leave, am I being rude? I've been listening

for so long and have given the Sage the attention that the Sage was so desperately craving, so it might not be too rude. Leaving might not be rude at all.

But I can't leave. I just can't.

"...There's more," the Sage said.

"...What more?" I asked.

"Think about this. The problem, the real problem with words and numbers and symbols and images is that they all attempt to reduce the infinite universe to concepts that are finite, when it is impossible to do so."

That is genuinely something interesting to think about. We use words and numbers and symbols and images to explore and communicate ideas, but by doing so, we reduce life to ideas that they aren't, and could never be. Since we give all things their names, their words, their numbers, their symbols and their images, then nothing inherited its name or word or number or symbol or image, nothing inherited its identity. But without realizing it, by playing into these ideologies, we have reduced life to ideas, concepts that they aren't, and could never be.

I have to contemplate this realization some more, but at another time.

I have to go and see my Soulmate.

"What do you think about that?" the Sage asked me.

"It's something to think about," I answered.

"...Very good. Very good."

This is getting really awkward. I should just go. I don't care what the Sage thinks. That might be rude, but I'm being rude to my Soulmate right now by not showing up. I've got to go. I'm going to go.

"...I've got to go," I said to the Sage.

"Yeah," the Sage said. "No, I understand."

What has reduced the Sage to this weaker, lesser version of someone I once admired? I have no idea. And unless the Sage gives me the details, I'm never going to find out.

But whether or not I eventually realize what's causing the Sage's distress, I have to go.

And so, I turned around, left the Sage behind me and made my way to my Soulmate.

Maybe, the Sage is sick. I mean, the Sage didn't look healthy.

Although, the Sage never really looked healthy. Probably because the Sage isn't one to care about health. The Sage just eats what the Sage can get, so of course, the Sage doesn't care that much about health.

But maybe, in that, there's something. Maybe, the Sage is starting to realize the consequences of not living a healthy life.

I should start exercising again. At least, do something. I don't like exercising. And everyone that has tried to get me to train has put me off it.

But if someone like the Sage is suffering from the consequences of not living a healthy life, assuming that is what's bothering the Sage, then I should start to look after my health. I won't train as intensely as my Friend does, but I should do something.

And be consistent with it. Of course. Don't just train as infrequently as I've been doing. Train with consistency. Even if I don't train much, if I train consistently, then I will live a healthier life. That's something that I have to do.

Where was I? Yes, the Sage. It would make sense if the Sage is sick and is worrying about it. But most never worry about being sick, unless their sickness is extreme or potentially fatal.

Wait. Could the Sage be dying? No. Not again. This isn't happening.

I'm getting in my own head. I'm getting in my own way. No. The Sage is fine and healthy and has plenty of life left to live. The Sage isn't sick. I'm just telling myself that.

I don't know. The Sage didn't tell me what was going on, so there are infinite possibilities as to what is bothering

the Sage.

It isn't that the Sage is dying. No. The Sage isn't dying. No. No, it isn't.

Let's calm down. Think this through. The Sage looked sickly and was a little frantic. So, the Sage could have been worried about being sick. That's a possibility. That I could honestly say is a possibility.

But the Sage doesn't care about living a healthy life. And since that's the case, why would the Sage have been acting so frantically? I mean, since the Sage doesn't care about living a healthy life, then the Sage must have been acting frantic about something else, right? And either the Sage is frantic because of some other worry that I haven't realized yet or because the Sage is extremely sick and is worried about dying.

But these are all just possibilities. I don't know. I can't know. The Sage wouldn't tell me.

I just hope it's not true. I can't go through that again. Dying. Death. It's so painful. Death is so painful.

If only there is an answer. If only I could get rid of death, then no one would have to worry about it. I wouldn't have to worry about death. The Sage wouldn't have to worry about death. Mum, my Soulmate, no one would have to worry about death. We could all just live. Be alive and enjoy life. But the only way to enjoy life is to find an answer to death. And there must be some answer. I mean, there is an answer to life. Love is the answer to life. So, there must be an answer to death.

But that could be it. Love. Maybe, love is the answer to death also. I'm not sure how or why, but it would make sense. Maybe, love is the answer to everything. And maybe, if we love enough, we could stop death entirely.

Or maybe, I am mad. I have no idea.

But then, maybe, at the very least, I have to talk to my Soulmate. I have to tell my Soulmate everything: Dad, my emptiness, everything.

Maybe.

I found my Soulmate finishing up the last lesson.

Where do I start? There's so much to say. Even though I'm talking again, there's still so much to say.

Maybe, I should have written down what I wanted to say first so that at the very least I would have some clarity.

Or am I just telling myself this to divert from what I have to do? That's what it feels like. And if I steer away from what I have to do, I will never do it. It's one of those things really. When we convince ourselves that we can put off what we need to do, we never end up doing it. It's kind of a curse. And I'm not going to put this off for the future. The future never comes.

I approached my Soulmate.

And my Soulmate smiled back.

"Hey," my Soulmate said to me.

My Soulmate gave me a hug and a kiss on the cheek.

I embraced my Soulmate and kissed my Soulmate back.

Ok. Here it goes. Take it easy. And everything will be ok.

"...How were your lessons?" I asked my Soulmate.

"Great," my Soulmate answered. "Everyone's enjoying themselves. That's what counts."

That's what's important. If no one enjoys themselves, then it's not worth the effort.

Time is precious. Our time, that is. Time itself marches on, with or without us. But our time is temporary. We have to make each moment count. We have to enjoy each moment. And our level of enjoyment is the measurement by which we could determine whether or not the moment we are in is worth the effort, is worth our time.

I'm diverting, ruminating on ideas. Interesting ideas, but ideas that I don't need to be thinking about at this moment. It isn't the time for that.

"...Is something wrong?" my Soulmate asked me.

I just smiled and hugged my Soulmate again.

Why did I do that? Why did I divert again? That was the perfect opportunity to share everything that I had to say, but I didn't. I cowered. And now, I have no idea when I'm going to get a better opportunity.

I let go and looked back at my Soulmate.

"...Are you sure nothing's wrong?" my Soulmate asked me.

Another opportunity. And a great opportunity at that. My Soulmate is still concerned and really wants to help.

But what am I going to say? I have an idea in my mind of what I'm going to say, but I haven't actually formulated it in any discernable order. Maybe, I should have written everything down first.

But I'm diverting again. I've got to focus on why I want to say what I want to say. I've got to focus on my intention. Tell my Soulmate everything. That's my intention. I have to tell my Soulmate everything. Dad. My emptiness. Everything.

"...I'll tell you later," I answered my Soulmate.

At least that's going to give me some time to get my words in order. The words are there, but I guess, not in any cohesive order.

"Ok," my Soulmate said.

"Ok," I responded.

We packed up all of my Soulmate's things, went to our normal hiding place, lay down in each other's arms and just gazed up at the stars.

It's so nice just to watch these stars. I wonder if there was a time where there weren't any stars. Maybe. Maybe, life was just darkness, a void. But I can't imagine it. I mean, if there was a time when life was just darkness, then how would we have known that the darkness was darkness without light? Light and dark must rely on each other for us to distinguish them. We can't have one without the other. So, it's hard to imagine a time when there was just darkness.

Although, maybe, we wouldn't have called it darkness, but would have called it something else. The void? I don't know.

But then nothing is its name. So, there couldn't have been a time when there was just darkness or the void or whatever anyone wants to call it. When there is darkness, there must be light.

And since we can't have one without the other, then both light and dark will forever be around. That's all there is really: light versus dark, forever in conflict with each other, with no eventual winner or loser.

Or maybe, they aren't in conflict with each other. Maybe, they are just dancing. Or playing a game. Maybe, life is just one big game. It sure feels like it sometimes. It's only when something bad happens that life doesn't feel like a game. It just feels cruel. Life feels cruel in those moments.

I have to tell my Soulmate everything.

I faced my Soulmate.

And my Soulmate faced me.

"...What is it?" my Soulmate asked me.

All the thoughts are there, but it's just hard to put them in the right order. At least, that's what I have convinced myself.

I just have to start. That's the only way I'm going to tell my Soulmate everything, everything that is bothering me.

But then again, I don't want to burden my Soulmate.

No. No, no, no. I'm getting in my own way again. And I don't have to. I know better.

But I might burden my Soulmate with everything: Dad, my emptiness, everything that burdens me. And then my Soulmate might leave me. My Soulmate might think ill of me and leave me. And if that happens, I don't know what I'll do. I love my Soulmate and to lose my Soulmate would be the worst thing to happen to me. I wouldn't be able to live with myself.

But then I don't know. I never know.

“...You can share with me,” my Soulmate said to me.

Another opportunity. My Soulmate is inviting me to share again and my Soulmate wouldn't do that unless my Soulmate wanted to help. My Soulmate cares. My Soulmate really cares for me. I have to share everything. I have to share everything with my Soulmate.

“This is going to be difficult for me,” I said.

“That's ok,” my Soulmate replied. “I'm listening.”

This is it. If I don't share everything with my Soulmate now, then I will never do it. I will cower at any future opportunity. I need to do this now. I have to share everything. I have to take my chance, no matter the consequences.

“...I struggle a lot,” I said. “I mean, I really struggle. Ever since my Dad died, I often feel...so...empty, that-that I have this emptiness inside me. And I can't get rid of it. As much as I try, I can't shake it off. And...um...That was why I stopped talking. I-I didn't want to burden anyone with my emptiness. So, I went silent and internalized it. But now-now, I can see that it has just been too much. Sometimes life is just too much. And...sometimes I don't know what I'm doing. Does any of this make sense?”

I looked away from my Soulmate.

But then I heard a few sobs.

Is my Soulmate alright?

I looked up.

My Soulmate was in tears.

And so, I wrapped my arms around my Soulmate.

And my Soulmate embraced me.

“I sometimes feel the same way,” my Soulmate admitted to me.

My Soulmate understands me. My Soulmate understands me. And I don't have to be burdened by my emptiness any longer, all because of my love for my Soulmate, because of our love for each other. Love is truly the answer to everything.

And then I leaned back and faced my Soulmate.
And my Soulmate looked up and faced me.
We kept looking into each other's eyes, until we both
began to laugh.
My emptiness has been defeated.

I went home and shared with Mum everything that I had
shared with my Soulmate and Mum burst into tears.

"...I'm sorry," I said.

"What for?" Mum asked me.

"For not talking to you. For distancing myself from you.
For being so much trouble. For..."

"You weren't trouble. Not at all. If anything, I-I..."

"No, I was the troublemaker. I should have talked to
you. Been open. But I didn't. And that made life hard. I'm
the one who made life hard. And I didn't need to. I shouldn't
have gone silent. I should have known better."

Mum nodded and smiled at me.

And a smile came to me.

I'm myself again.

I was writing.

*These conversations that I had with my Soulmate and
Mum could help others as well, either by preventing them
from falling into the trap of going silent and closing
themselves off from those they love or by encouraging them
to be more open and communicate with those that they love.*

*Communication is vital to any relationship, whether it
be with a family member or with a friend or with a soulmate
or a stranger and yet, we very rarely communicate with each
other.*

*Of course, most like to talk. Most talk and talk and talk
about anything. But that kind of talking is just senseless
noise that drowns out the potential for an awkward silence.
I prefer the awkward silence over the senseless rambles of
someone who doesn't speak with any purpose. At least an*

awkward silence is honest.

But why do most ramble on about pointless things that aren't going to matter to them later? I guess, it's because it's tough to be open. When one opens up like I did, they can't help but feel vulnerable. And I guess that most don't like to feel vulnerable, even if it's only for a moment.

Only if we could take that leap and be open and vulnerable and honest with each other, then everything will be lifted. All the pains, the struggles, all of the problems that we face will dissipate and we'll all be born again, wearing smiles. That's what I want: a reality without struggle. Is that much to ask for? No. I mean, why couldn't it happen? Why couldn't we all live without struggle? It seems possible to me. Maybe, difficult to implement, but possible. And it's an idea that's worth realizing.

So, how could we realize this reality? Well, we would have to encourage each other to be more open.

But then how would we do that? I guess, sharing stories like mine is one answer. Stories have a way of influencing us, inspiring us.

Wait. That's it. Inspiration. By inspiring each other we can learn to be more open with each other. That makes so much sense.

But then the question becomes: how do we inspire each other? I mean, if I share my story, would that be enough to inspire others? I don't know.

What inspires us? Really, it must be different for each and every one of us. None of us are the same. We are all different. Yeah, we are all human and we all have similar values, but we are all different also. We are all similar and yet different at the same time. And so, we can't all be inspired by the same one thing.

Or maybe, we could be. And if we could be inspired by the same one thing, then what is that one thing? What would inspire us? I have no idea. Stories? Kindness? Love? Those would be my answers. Love is the answer to everything, all

our problems, so it would make sense that love would be the answer to this problem. Love could inspire us to be more open and vulnerable and honest with each other. And by loving each other, all of our problems will dissipate. And so, that's what we have to do: love each other.

I was walking to class, while watching my surroundings.

Life feels so weightless. I feel so weightless. What a remarkable feeling. To be in the moment, without any worries or inhibitions and to feel everything come together. Life is as it should be: peaceful.

I arrived at class, sat down and looked around me.

But the space which my Friend usually occupied was empty.

Where is my Friend? My Friend doesn't always show up on time. My Friend is like that. I don't know why. But it does puzzle me. I mean, all my Friend has to do is show up on time. My Friend knows the time and location, but would still struggle to show up on time. How? It really isn't that hard. And basically, to do anything well, all one really has to do is show up. But my Friend struggles with that. Maybe, there's a good reason. I don't know. But if there isn't, then I have no idea why my Friend can't just show up on time.

Our Preceptor arrived.

"Alright," our Preceptor announced. "Let's begin."

Something is wrong. I have no idea what's wrong, but something is wrong.

I closed my eyes and took some deep breaths.

Something's wrong with my Friend. But what? I don't know.

I eventually opened my eyes.

Even though my Friend has a habit of showing up late, my Friend would always show up and something's telling me that my Friend isn't going to show up for this lesson. I have no idea what's telling me or who's telling me, but I somehow know. I have a feeling.

Eventually, the class came to an end.

“That’s it for today,” our Preceptor said. “Don’t forget to study for the test tomorrow.”

My Friend hadn’t shown. Maybe, my Friend had a good reason for not showing up. But I’m worried. Something is wrong. I still have no idea how I know that something is wrong, but that doesn’t matter. What matters is that I know that something is wrong and something has to be done to fix it. I have to fix it. Whatever it is, I have to fix it. But first, I have to find my Friend.

I went to my Friend’s place and looked around.

Where are you?

You’re not here. There’s definitely something wrong now. I’m certain of it.

I eventually turned around, wandered off and continued searching.

Where are you? Where can I find you? I don’t know. I honestly don’t know. You could be anywhere really.

Maybe, it might be wise to stop. I mean, there’s nothing wrong in stopping and trying again tomorrow. If there’s something wrong with that, then what is it? I’m still going to try. I’m just going to breathe before I try again.

And so, I walked back.

But then I saw my Friend, sitting all alone.

And so, I approached my Friend.

And then my Friend noticed me.

“Why are you here?” my Friend asked me.

Why the animosity? I’m here to help. I don’t want to start a fight. Calm down.

I’m not going to leave. I care. And I’m going to help.

And so, I sat down beside my Friend.

“I came looking for you,” I said to my Friend.

“You just spoke,” my Friend responded.

How could I have forgotten? I don’t know, but I guess it’s too late to do anything about it. I can’t take back what I

just said. I can't take back anything that I've done. The past has to be left behind us. That's the best practice. And so, I might as well continue to speak. Go along with it.

"Yeah," I said. "I do that sometimes."

It's quite funny. My Friend used to be the one who always spoke and I was the one who always listened. But now, I'm the one talking and my Friend's the one who is silent.

I smiled.

"Why are you smiling?" my Friend asked me.

"Huh?" I responded instinctively.

"Why are you smiling?"

I have to change topic. My Friend will lash out at me if I don't.

I've been there too and it's almost impossible to resist. I have to remain calm and try to brush off my mistake.

"Just a joke that I thought of," I said.

"What joke?" my Friend asked me.

"It was just a joke. It was a silly joke."

"And what was the joke?"

"It was just a joke."

"And what was it?"

I just looked back at my Friend.

What's wrong with you? I might have smiled when I probably shouldn't have, but it's just a smile. A harmless little smile. It isn't a huge mistake. Surely, it isn't that bad.

My Friend just turned away.

Maybe, from my Friend's perspective, my smile was worse than I thought it was. I don't know. Could that happen? Could someone judge a situation as better or worse than it is? I guess so. Otherwise, how would we get different opinions?

But then, surely my Friend would have understood that my smile, even in that moment, wasn't that bad. My Friend is a reasonable person. I know that.

However, my Friend is still clearly mad at me. What

could I have done to deserve this? Nothing. I'm not in the wrong here. This is my Friend.

Or this is my Friend's problem. My Friend's problem is driving my Friend to behave like this. This isn't my Friend. This isn't my Friend sitting beside me. This is someone else. Someone whom I have never met. And how could I talk to this individual? How could I communicate with this problem? I have no idea. A smile blew up into an issue. A small smile. Who knows what else could antagonize this individual? I can't say. I can't speak, or do anything. I have to wait for this individual to make a move.

And so, we sat in our quietude, until my Friend finally looked to me.

"...Can you just leave me alone?" my Friend asked me.

No, I can't. Being alone doesn't help. I know. My Friend needs someone to communicate with. And that's why I have to stay, even if my Friend doesn't want me here.

"I'm sorry," I said to my Friend. "I can't do that. It might feel better to be alone now, but trust me, it doesn't help in the long run."

"What do you know about me?" my Friend asked me.

"What do you mean?"

"What do you know about me?"

"...I know you like to train and look after yourself. I know you love your dog. I know you care about..."

"No. No, that's not me. Those are just facts. That isn't me. That's not who I am."

What's my Friend getting at? Those facts are what made my Friend who my Friend is.

Or are they? I guess, we are the decisions that we make, that make our character.

But I can't think about this now. I have to help my Friend. And the only way I can help my Friend is by going with my Friend's game. I shouldn't argue with my Friend. That will just make my Friend madder. I have to go with the current.

“Who are you then?” I asked my Friend.

“I don’t know,” my Friend answered.

And then, suddenly, my Friend began to cry.

“...It’s not fair,” my Friend cried. “It’s not fair. It’s not fair. It’s not fair.”

What do I do? My Friend has to stop, but I can’t interfere. I can only listen to my Friend’s hysterics, even though it probably isn’t good for my Friend.

What good is there in repeatedly telling one’s self that life isn’t fair? Or anything negative for that matter?

Although, maybe, in the moment, one might not be thinking about the benefits of their actions. Sometimes we just act irrationally or hysterically without thought. And while that’s no excuse to act irrationally or hysterically, if we don’t know any better, then that could explain why we behave irrationally and hysterically under certain circumstances.

And then my Friend came to a halt.

What now? Are you having an epiphany? I can’t tell.

My Friend’s problem isn’t my Friend. My Friend is the decisions my Friend makes. We are the decisions that we make. Our problems are not us. So, I can’t trust anything that this problem is telling me.

Although, since we are the decisions that we make, this must still be my Friend sitting beside me. Even though my Friend is troubled by a problem that I haven’t realized yet, my Friend is deciding to lash out and push everyone else away.

I decided to push everyone away from me by going silent. I decided to do that. And I decided to start talking to those I loved: Mum and my Soulmate. I decided to do everything that I have done. We decide to do everything that we do. We are the decisions that we make.

And that means that this is my Friend. It’s just a side of my Friend that I have never encountered before, a side that I’m not overly fond of.

Is everyone like this? Maybe. But it's hard to believe. I mean, my Soulmate would never behave in this way. That's for sure. And Mum, she would very, very rarely behave like my Friend is behaving. But that's no excuse. Just because others might lash out or push others away doesn't mean that we have to lash out and push others away. We don't have to behave like everyone else. We can be who we'd like to be. We can decide who we'd like to be. We don't have to conform. We don't have to follow the norm.

But maybe, most of us don't know that. Maybe, most of us haven't yet realized that we don't have to be like everyone else. Maybe, most of us haven't realized that we can be who we decide to be.

That's a message that needs to be shared. And I will proudly put my hand up to share this message.

My Friend hasn't said anything for so long. Maybe, my Friend has become comfortable with my being here.

Although, I can't be certain.

And because of the way my Friend has been behaving, I'm not sure if I want to be around my Friend anymore. I mean, since my Friend isn't allowing me to help, what can I do? It's the same situation that I was in with the Sage. Since the Sage wasn't accepting my help, then I couldn't help the Sage. And now, because my Friend isn't accepting my help, then I can't help my Friend. And since my Friend is behaving like this, then why would I want to be around my Friend? Why would I want to be around someone who doesn't value my help?

That's important. We have to surround ourselves with those whom we value. That's why I spend so much time with my Soulmate. Because my Soulmate and I value each other. We decide to be together. And when we don't surround ourselves with those whom we value, then we fall into conflict with those we don't care for.

And since my Friend isn't valuing me, then maybe, it might be wise to leave.

But I can't. I can't. Something is holding me back. Maybe, it's because I care. I might care too much.

Although, I doubt there's such a thing as caring too much. One either cares or doesn't care. To say that one cares too much is really to say that one cares a lot, which isn't a bad thing. At least, in my mind.

However, if the reason I can't get up and leave is because I care a lot, then what's really preventing me from leaving is my values. I mean, really, if I was my Friend, feeling plagued by a problem, no matter what the problem was, and the person who was sitting beside me just got up and left, then I wouldn't value them. Why would I? To be in so much pain, so much agony and watch the person that was beside me leave would only add to the pain that I was already feeling. It would be too much. It would be torture.

So, I can't leave my Friend. I have to commit to my values. Otherwise, how can I be the person that I'd like to be if I don't? I can't. To be whom we'd like to be, we have to commit to our values.

"...I want you to go away," my Friend finally said to me.

No, I'm not going to leave.

I just continued to sit there.

"...Just go away," my Friend said to me.

"I can't," I replied.

"Just go."

"I'm sorry, I can't do that."

"Yes, you can. Just go."

I just looked at my friend.

And my Friend looked back at me.

"...Go!" my Friend unleashed on me.

What had I done?

"...I don't want to see you again," my Friend went on.

"You're not my friend. You never were. You are just...an idiot. You're an idiot."

If that's how you feel, then maybe, I should go. I can't

help you like this.

“...I’m done with this,” my Friend muttered.

My Friend quickly stood up and began walking away.

I followed, standing up and chasing after my Friend.

“Leave me alone,” my Friend said.

I won’t. It might be good to leave you alone, but maybe, it might not be so good. I don’t know. But I’m going to be by your side because that’s what friends do.

And then, eventually, my Friend stopped and turned around to face me.

“Why won’t you leave me alone?” my Friend asked me.

“...Because you’re my friend,” I answered.

“No, we’re not. We’re not friends.”

“...Why aren’t we friends?”

“Because we’re not.”

“But why? Why aren’t we Friends?”

“Because we’re not.”

“...Haven’t I listened to you? And your problems? Haven’t I been there for you when you needed it most?”

“No. No, you haven’t.”

What’s my Friend saying? I had been there. I had helped my Friend when my Friend needed it most. Is my Friend just that ungrateful? If my Friend is, then I don’t want to be around this person. I am good. I care. I have done everything a friend should do and this is how I am being treated.

“...You aren’t,” my Friend continued. “You are always with your other friend.”

What other friend? Does my Friend mean my Soulmate? How does my Friend know about me and my Soulmate?

And suddenly, my Friend started to laugh.

What’s going on now? I don’t understand.

“...Don’t play dumb,” my Friend said. “Everyone knows.”

Everyone? That can’t be true. How’s that possible?

“...You aren’t my friend,” my Friend said. “Not really.”

If that's how my Friend feels, then that's how my Friend feels. I'm not going to try to change my Friend.

And besides, I don't want to breathe in this awkward tension any longer.

“...If that's how you feel, then that's how you feel,” I said.

My Friend fell silent.

And then, eventually, I turned around and left my Friend behind me.

I went to see my Soulmate and told my Soulmate what had happened between my Old Friend and me.

“...How does everyone know about us?” my Soulmate asked me.

That's the question you want to ask? Are you embarrassed to be seen with me or something?

No. My Soulmate wouldn't be embarrassed. I'm not special, but my Soulmate is so loving and caring that I couldn't imagine my Soulmate ever feeling embarrassed around anyone. My Soulmate must just be curious.

“...I have no idea,” I answered.

“...Oh, well,” my Soulmate said. “It's too late now.”

That's amazing. How could my Soulmate have just pushed a concern aside like it meant nothing? My Old Friend could have lied to me. That's a possibility. But still, to just dismiss it without any care of what others think about us amazes me.

Maybe, I care too much about what others think of me. I can see how that might hold me back. It would be so liberating to just not care about others' opinions.

But then again, isn't there some benefit in caring about what Mum and my Soulmate think of me? I think so. Even though I can't say what the benefit is, nor explain why I believe there is benefit in caring about what Mum and my Soulmate think of me, there must be. Since I care for and love Mum and my Soulmate, I must care about what they think of

me.

“You’re amazing,” I said to my Soulmate.

“You’re amazing too,” my Soulmate replied.

I was walking home.

Why would my Old Friend have acted like that? What could have driven my Old Friend to behave like that? I don’t know. And I might never know.

But that happens sometimes. There are some things that happen that we can’t explain, or at least explain in that moment. We might find out later, but then again, we might not. Just that idea can cause one’s nausea. When there’s no real closure, we can’t help but worry and try to explain it all.

But then what is real closure? Life always marches forward. Nothing finishes. Nothing ends. It’s all just continuing forward. Life is a continuum. At least, that’s what life feels like. I’m not sure.

But then, maybe, when we die, life just ends. That seems to make sense. When one dies, all of it, this totality, must also die with them. It has to be this way. Otherwise, how could we be aware of life if we’re dead? That can’t happen. When we’re dead, we’re dead. We can’t be aware of life when we’re dead. If we’re aware of life, then we must be alive. That’s just logic. When we’re aware of life, we’re alive. And when we aren’t aware of life, we’re dead.

Although, what if there’s life on the other end of death? What if, when we die, we wake up and live life again? But if we are to wake up on the other end of death and live life again, then that would mean that we are alive, that wouldn’t mean that we are dead. And if that is so, then death can’t be death. Death must be an illusion, a facade, a small nap between lives. Life really is a continuum.

But then again, how can we know any of this unless we’re dead? It seems impossible to determine, which means that we can continuously ponder until the day we die and by

then it will be too late. What irony. What a joke. It makes the whole ordeal pointless to think about.

And maybe, just maybe, I have to just brush it all away, just like my Soulmate did.

That still makes me smile.

I got back home, ate with Mum and wrote.

If I write everything down, I might be able to make sense of it all.

No. No, that's not going to work. I'm trying too hard to rationalize every detail and fill in all the blanks with possibilities. Maybe, that's something that's innate in all of us.

Although, what does it mean for something to be innate? Since nothing inherits its identity, then how can anything be innate?

How can something be anything? There's the rub. All things are really nothing. Everything is nothing. And nothing is everything. That's it.

And so, writing happened.

I went to see my Soulmate.

"Do you want to do something different today?" my Soulmate asked me.

"Sure," I answered. "Was there any specific thing you wanted to do?"

"No, just thought we'd make it up as we went along."

"We all do that anyway."

"Yeah, we do."

And so, we wandered off.

We can be seen together. That doesn't bother me. But maybe, my Soulmate might feel embarrassed if we are found together.

Or maybe, not. I wonder.

"Do you not care if someone sees us?" I asked my Soulmate.

“No,” my Soulmate answered. “Should I?”

“No. I don’t know.”

“Do you care if someone sees us?”

“No, not at all. It’s just that we spend so much time together and I like that. I like it when it’s just us, alone, and everyone else is far, far away and happy doing their thing.”

“I like that too. And we don’t have to lose that. We’re just spending time doing other things as well.”

“Ok.”

I guess, we’re letting others know about our relationship now.

Mum still doesn’t know about my Soulmate. And since we’re being open, it might be wise to tell Mum about us before Mum finds out from someone else. Finding out about my Soulmate and me from someone else might upset her. It wouldn’t be that I lied to her, but more that she might feel left out.

“...Do you want to meet my Mum?” I asked my Soulmate.

“Yeah,” my Soulmate answered. “Sure.”

And so, we headed home.

Maybe, this is not such a good idea. What might they talk about? Do they have anything in common? I can’t say. There are so many questions.

But why is this such a predicament? They are both good and honest people. What could go wrong?

I still can’t stop sweating. Maybe, it’s just the idea that their first impressions might go horribly wrong, even though the likelihood of that happening is extremely, extremely slim.

I’m just putting this pressure on myself. I can feel that. And realizing how low the potential is for something bad to happen is really helpful. It puts everything into perspective.

However, a part of me can’t help but worry. Maybe, I like the stress, the anxiety, the anguish, the nausea. Maybe, we all like our own self-imposed anguish. I have no idea why, but maybe we do. I don’t know. It seems silly to like

something that causes so much grief.

But then again, since we put the grief on ourselves, then maybe we do like it. I have no idea.

We eventually arrived home and looked around.

Maybe, she isn't home. Although, I doubt it. Nowadays, she only ever leaves to get food. She has everything she needs at home. Even when she's with that stranger, they only ever spend their time together at home. They never go out together. I'm not sure why, but I guess they just like being alone, like how my Soulmate and I like being alone.

"...Mum!" I shouted

"Yes?" Mum shouted back.

"Can you come here?"

"Why?"

"Please?"

There was a quiet groan and then the sound of footsteps approaching.

Please. Oh, please get along.

Eventually, Mum appeared and stopped, looking at my Soulmate and me.

"...Mum," I said. "I'd like you to meet someone."

"Hi," my Soulmate said. "How are you?"

My Soulmate put out a hand.

Mum kept looking back at us until, eventually, she shook my Soulmate's hand.

"Wonderful," Mum answered. "How about yourself?"

"Wonderful as well," my Soulmate answered.

Phew. I knew they would approve of each other.

But I still can't help but stress about the possibilities of it all going wrong. It's terrible really. We always contemplate the worst that could happen. Why not contemplate the best that could happen? Sure, it seems harder, but wouldn't it be worth the effort?

However, this is a question that I have to put off until later. For now, I have to make sure that this first interaction goes smoothly.

“...Do you want something to eat?” Mum asked my Soulmate.

“Sure,” my Soulmate answered. “That sounds great.”

“Have a seat and I’ll bring everything over.”

My Soulmate and I sat down, while Mum went to get some food.

And then my Soulmate sat closer to me and nestled in my arms.

And so, I wrapped my arms around my Soulmate.

And eventually, Mum came back with food, put the food in front of us and sat opposite my Soulmate and me.

“...Go on then,” Mum urged us.

My Soulmate reached for some food and had a bite.

“Wow,” my Soulmate said. “This is amazing.”

“Thank you,” Mum replied. “It’s a really old recipe, but it still holds well.”

“Can I ask, ‘what’s the recipe?’”

“Of course, I’ll show you if you like.”

“Yeah, that sounds amazing. Thank you.”

“...So, how did you two meet?”

How do we answer that question? There really isn’t a great tale behind the inception of our relationship. Really, we just saw each other, started talking and decided to spend time together. That was it.

Although, maybe, that might be enough of an answer. I’m not sure.

I looked to my Soulmate.

And my Soulmate looked back at me, only to eventually face Mum.

“Basically, we found each other,” my Soulmate answered. “And I’m happy that we have.”

Thank goodness for my Soulmate.

And Mum. She really likes my Soulmate. It’s in her eyes.

“It’s an amazing feeling, isn’t it?” Mum asked.

“It sure is,” my Soulmate answered.

“...How long have you been together then?”

I don't know. I haven't been counting.
I looked to my Soulmate.
And then my Soulmate looked to me.
"I don't know," my Soulmate said to me. "How long have we been together?"
"I haven't been counting," I answered.
And so, we began to laugh.
"What's so funny?" Mum inquired.
"Sorry," my Soulmate responded. "I don't remember."
"We don't remember," I added.
"But it feels like we've known each other forever."
How amazing is my Soulmate?
And I'm so glad that Mum gets to see my Soulmate in the same light.
"That's wonderful," Mum acknowledged.
My Soulmate and I smiled.
Mum then stood up.
"Why don't I show you some of my recipes then?" Mum asked.
"Yeah?" my Soulmate asked. "Right now?"
"Is there any better time?"
Mum began to walk off.
My Soulmate looked to me.
"She has the same charm as you do," my Soulmate said to me.
"Is that a complement?" I asked.
"Of course."
Then my Soulmate stood up and followed Mum.
Mum walked my Soulmate through the many recipes that she had, until they were cooking together.
What a relief. Their introduction was a success and I can finally breathe.
Later, we were eating, laughing and sharing stories, when Mum started to yawn.
"I'm getting tired," Mum said.
"So am I," my Soulmate said.

“...Do you want to stay over?”

“Yeah. My parents should be okay with it.”

I have to meet my Soulmate's Parents next. Hopefully, I can make as good of an impression on my Soulmate's Parents as my Soulmate has done with Mum.

Although, I'm sure, if I'm half as good as my Soulmate is, then it would be enough.

“Is it alright with you?” my Soulmate asked Mum.

“Of course,” Mum answered. “I love your company.”

“Then I have to stay.”

And so, we cleaned up.

Then Mum stopped my Soulmate and me.

“I'll leave you two then,” Mum said to us.

“Ok,” I said.

“Goodnight.”

“Goodnight,” my Soulmate replied.

“Night,” I added.

Mum left.

And my Soulmate and I sat together, alone, and wrapped our arms around each other.

“I really like your Mum,” my Soulmate said to me.

“Yeah,” I said. “She's more than I deserve.”

“Don't say that. You deserve everything. You're wonderful. And amazing...”

“No, I'm not. I'm just me.”

“No, I refuse to believe that. You-You are meant for great things. You are meant for so much more.”

“You really think so?”

“I know so.”

What do I say to that?

I smiled and looked away.

Why does my Soulmate think so highly of me? I'm not remarkable. I'm flawed, clumsy, foolish, imperfect. And yet, I'm lucky.

But I can't be lucky. There's no such thing as luck. Every action comes from another action and that means that

everything happens for a reason, even if one doesn't know what that reason is. So, I must deserve my Soulmate.

Although, I can't take pride in that. I might deserve my Soulmate, but that's no reason to boast about it. I have to be reticent, to be honorable.

"...You're amazing," I said to my Soulmate.

My Soulmate smiled, nestled back into my arms and just sat with me.

But then, suddenly, my Soulmate looked to me.

"Can I read your story?" my Soulmate asked me.

Maybe. You're the only one who'd understand my story.

But you're also so close to me that I'd be hurt by your criticism.

And what about the parts where I used you for inspiration? Would you appreciate being in my story? Or would you take offense? I don't know.

I'm getting in my own way. Again, I'm contemplating all of the possibilities, especially the possibilities where something disastrous could happen. It's not benefiting me, but yet, I can't help myself.

Or could I? I mean, there's that possibility. There's the possibility that I don't have to berate myself over what might or might not happen. I could just decide without running through every possible scenario. I could just decide on instinct.

But how? How does one just decide? I don't know, but I guess one doesn't think about it. For those who just decide, who decide on instinct, they simply make their move with little to no thought.

But then, what if there are situations where thought is required? Aren't there situations where we have to plan the steps we need to take in order to move forward? There are. So, what about those situations? Well, since that's the case, then we should all play each situation on its own merit. In some situations, we should decide on instinct, while in other situations, we should decide based on a plan.

But then how does one know when to use instinct or when to make a plan? I don't know. I guess that is up to one to decide.

We really are the decisions that we make.

"...Sure," I muttered.

My Soulmate smiled.

Is this the best decision? I don't know.

But then I won't know until my Soulmate has read my story, or at least, has read what I have written so far. And I know that. I'm just getting in my own way again.

It's really becoming a bad habit. Hopefully, that's all it is: a bad habit. If my dilemmas are just bad habits, then that would mean that there are ways to get rid of my dilemmas. However, if my dilemmas aren't just bad habits, then I might be stuck, unsure of myself and racked with my anguish, my nausea for the rest of my life. What a sad thought.

But that's why I have to realize if my dilemmas are just bad habits or not. At least in that way, I will know and might be able to be content with the answer.

My Soulmate stood up and tried to pull me up.

"C'mon," my Soulmate said. "Let's go."

I rolled my eyes, stood up, walked over to my story and showed my story to my Soulmate.

My Soulmate's eyes glistened.

"Is this it?" my Soulmate asked me.

I just nodded and smiled back.

My Soulmate then took my story and went away.

And what do I do now? Sit and wait and wait and wait, until my Soulmate finishes? How agonizing it is. There's just space to ruminate on what my Soulmate might say.

But again, I won't know what my Soulmate will say until my Soulmate finishes reading what I have written thus far. I have to do something to occupy my mind so I don't get in my own way again, like I'm accustomed to.

And so, I picked a book from my pile, found a quite spot and explored the book's contents.

Time is an illusion because our idea of the past and the future could only exist in the present. That's correct. I mean, what is the past? The past is simply a recollection of possibly distorted memories. Nothing more. Nothing less.

Of course, one could argue that the past has been recorded, written down in scripture and that the past is valid and more than just an illusion. But all books and all scriptures that recount human history exist now and the ideas that come from all of those books and all of those scriptures exist only in the now. The book that I am holding in my hands doesn't exist in the past. It exists now. Every book exists now. Everything exists in the now. Nothing exists outside of now because now is where everything is.

And what of the future? What is the future? Just our projection of what might be? The future is only in our heads. It hasn't happened yet. And it never will happen. It's the future. How can the future ever happen?

So, I agree with the author. There's only now; forever now.

But what does this all come to? What purpose is there in realizing that time is an illusion? I don't know. And the author doesn't know. It's probably because the author only wants to brag, writing a book on an idea that many haven't realized in order to seem or feel superior.

Although, I shouldn't be so quick to judge. I'm only speculating after all.

However, if there is a genuine purpose in writing this book, then how come the author doesn't clearly state what that purpose is in the book? It does make me wonder.

But then again, I can only speculate. I can't know unless I know the author's intentions with the book.

I can still learn from this lesson though. I can take this realization and use it for myself with my story. We can all learn from mistakes, but that doesn't mean that the mistakes have to be ours.

However, what benefit is there in realizing that time is

an illusion? I have no idea.

Why not try and realize the answer for myself? I mean, there's no reason as to why I can't realize the answer for myself. Any reason that I come up with would be an excuse. I know that.

So, since time is an illusion, what does that mean? Well, since time and space are associated with each other, and since time is an illusion, then wouldn't that mean that space is also an illusion? That makes sense. I mean, how can we have time without space, or space without time? They need each other. Space and time can't exist without each other. They're inextricably linked, forever. So, space must be an illusion also.

But still, what benefit is there in realizing that time and space are illusions? We do learn that, in a way, time is no-time and space is no-space, that space and time are what they are not, much like no-mind.

And maybe, all things are what they are not. I mean, since all things aren't their names, then that must mean that all things are something else. And what is that something else that all things are? The difficulty in recognizing, or naming what all things are is that I am still giving all things a name. I would contradict myself if I went through the whole process of taking away the names of all things, only to then give them new names.

So, what do I do? Should I just eliminate the names of all things? Really, that's the only thing I can do.

But what's left when we eliminate the names of all things? What's left when we eliminate all things? Some kind of infinity? Maybe. That might be it. I mean, with time, there's only now. Everything is happening now; forever now. And that forever now is a kind of infinity. And because time and space are inextricably linked, forever, then maybe, no-space is that same infinity. That could be it. That could be the realization. Space and time are just illusions that mask the infinite.

That realization could make one feel really small. There I am, sitting down, reading a book and there are all the other things in our infinite existence. And what is one to do about that? What could I do about that? I don't know. I guess, I could realize what to do. Or not. I don't have to. I have a choice.

And then, suddenly, my Soulmate appeared in tears.

And so, I sat up and looked back at my Soulmate.

"Are you alright?" I asked my Soulmate.

"It's so beautiful," my Soulmate replied.

I quickly stood up, walked over to my Soulmate and gave my Soulmate a gentle hug.

And then, slowly, my Soulmate embraced me, giving me a hug and a kiss on my left cheek.

Here we are, holding each other, resting our heads on each other's shoulders, entwined in the moment, in the infinite, the now; forever now. This is beautiful.

But this is it. The feeling has passed. It's over. Everything has elapsed. And nothing more has happened. Done. Gone. There's nothing special, nor extraordinary anymore. We are just here. We are just being here. This moment, like every other moment, is temporary.

How can there be a temporal moment in the infinite?

I was standing at a distance, watching my Soulmate teach.

Something feels off. Different.

Although, I can't say what it is. Or what caused it. It must be a phase. And it's going to pass. All phases do.

But it isn't comforting. It doesn't make me feel good. I want to be silly and feel that bliss with my Soulmate. Is that too much to ask? I don't think so.

But we were there before. There's no reason why we couldn't get back to where we once were. Any reason that claimed to explain why we couldn't would be an excuse. We could get back there.

However, where is there? It seems as if we had just

fallen into this situation.

Maybe, that's why it's described as 'falling in love.' We fall into love. We don't climb into love. There's no plan. We don't plan into love. We fall. We surrender. So maybe, I have to fall again.

But then what if we fall out of love again? What do we do then? Do we have to fall back into love? That seems arduous. We fall in love, then fall out of love, then fall back into love, then fall back out of love, then fall in love again, then fall out of love again and on and on and on, forever and ever.

Why can't we just stay in love? Any reason that claimed to explain why we couldn't would be an excuse. So, why can't we just stay in love? Why can't we just be in love?

But then, maybe, the question is: how could we fall out of love? Since we could stay in love, how could we fall out of love? Maybe, it's that temporal moment idea, that idea that needs to be looked into so that we may overcome it. And maybe, for now, we don't have any other choice but to go through this cycle of falling in love and falling out of love again and again and again, forever and ever.

Well, we could decide not to fall in love, but who would want that? Being in love is the greatest feeling.

So, what am I missing? I'm not sure. But maybe, I'm not missing anything. I never really considered that possibility. Maybe, we believe we might be missing something when we aren't. Everything we want is with us and all we have to do is reach for it. I can see how we might fall for that mistake. And since that's the case, then I'm not really missing anything. I'm just getting in my own way.

The mind can be a tricky castle to conquer. As one attempts to rule oneself, a thought might slip through and strike when least expected. One must be on guard at all times to make sure that war doesn't break out.

My Soulmate finished the lesson and walked over to me.

"Hey," my Soulmate said to me.

“Hey,” I replied back.

My Soulmate gave me a hug and a kiss.

“So,” my Soulmate said. “Do you want to go to my place today?”

I can't say “No.” If anything, I'm probably going to meet my Soulmate's Parents.

I'm getting nervous.

“Yes,” I answered.

My Soulmate smiled.

And then I smiled.

And so, we packed up and began to head towards my Soulmate's place.

But then, suddenly, I heard the sound of leaves and dust being kicked up.

“Hey!” a voice shouted. “Hey!”

My Soulmate and I stopped and turned around.

And a stranger appeared before us.

“Hey, there,” the stranger said.

My Soulmate and I just looked back at the stranger.

“Do you remember me?” the stranger asked me.

“No,” I replied. “Sorry.”

Who is this stranger? Have we met before? And if so, when? I don't recall.

“Remember when you were bullied and the Sage brought you to me to fix you up?” the stranger asked me.

The Healer! How could I have forgotten?

Though memories come and go like clouds, I suppose. It makes one really question what one remembers.

“Yeah,” I said. “I remember now.”

“The Sage has been looking for you,” the Healer said to me.

“Why is that?”

“...The Sage has been sick for a while and wants to see you in case things take a turn for the worse.”

Oh, no. Here it goes again. My emptiness. I can feel it. I thought I had gotten over it. I thought that being in love, or

at least, falling in love had cured me. But no. My emptiness is back. And my life is going to get worse from here. I have no idea how I know this, but I just do. I just know it.

"Is the Sage dying?" I asked.

"Maybe," the Healer answered. "I-I'm not sure what the disease is."

It's like losing Dad all over again.

Although, when Dad died, it was so sudden. And I didn't understand death and didn't have the opportunity to say, "Goodbye," like I have here with the Sage. I have to see the Sage, even if it ends up being our last moment together. I have to.

"Where is the Sage?" I asked the Healer.

"At my place," the Healer answered. "I'll walk you there."

The Healer turned back around and began heading towards the Sage.

I started to follow the Healer.

But then my Soulmate placed a hand on my shoulder.

"Wait," my Soulmate said to me. "Who is this person?"

"...An old friend," I answered. "C'mon, I'll introduce you to the Sage."

My Soulmate and I continued to follow the Healer until we arrived at the Healer's place, were invited in and were shown the Sage, lying down, looking extremely pale and brittle.

What do I say?

Eventually, the Sage noticed us.

"Hello," the Sage said.

I waved, 'hello.'

And then the Sage looked to my Soulmate.

"Who is this?" the Sage asked me. "Is this the one you fell for?"

"...We fell for each other," my Soulmate said.

My Soulmate and I smiled to each other.

But the Sage just looked away.

Have we upset the Sage?

I then turned to my Soulmate.

"Can we...?" I asked my Soulmate.

"Yeah," my Soulmate said. "I'll just be outside."

My Soulmate left the Sage and me alone.

"Your friend seems nice," the Sage said. "...Are you happy?"

"Yeah," I answered. "I am."

"...Does your friend make you happy?"

Does my Soulmate make me happy? Yes.

But it still feels as if we're at the end of a phase. And I don't know what'll happen to us. How could I know?

"Yes," I answered the Sage.

"How does your friend make you happy?" the Sage asked me.

I don't know, really. My Soulmate just makes me happy. And I make my Soulmate happy. That's what matters. How we make each other happy doesn't need to be thought over. At least, that's what I believe.

But why is the Sage asking me so many questions about my Soulmate? It feels so invasive.

"What's with all the questions?" I asked the Sage.

"...Love makes us live on forever," the Sage answered.

"And?"

"And that's how we beat death."

The Sage has confirmed it. Love is the cure to death.

"...Then we must find someone for you," I said.

The Sage laughed, only to accidentally fall into a fit of coughing.

I moved closer, grabbed some nearby water and helped the Sage to drink the water.

"Thank you," the Sage said.

And I put the water aside.

"I don't need someone," the Sage said to me.

What? What does the Sage mean? If the Sage doesn't need someone, then how could the Sage fall in love? And

beat death? That doesn't make any sense.

"What do you mean?" I asked the Sage.

"...Love comes in different shapes and forms," the Sage answered. "Love isn't quantifiable. Love isn't scalable. Love is abstract. Like every other feeling."

"So, why don't you need someone?"

"Because I love everyone. I always have. And always will. I don't need to find someone. I love. I just love. And that's it."

I don't understand. How can anyone just love? In order to fall in love, one has to fall, so how can anyone just love?

"How does one just love?" I asked the Sage.

"Give," the Sage answered. "Give your heart. Like you give to your friend."

The Sage is talking about a different fall, a surrender. To love everyone, I have to surrender and give away everything.

But mightn't that lead to problems? If I just give myself away, then mightn't others take advantage of me and my sincerity? Not everyone is my Soulmate, so how can I just give myself away like that and expect to get the same response? I can't. Some might warm up to me, but then again, there will be others who might take advantage of me. The idea of loving everyone is flawed and is something that I just can't do.

"I'll be back," I said to the Sage.

And so, I stood up, left and then approached my Soulmate.

"I'm going to be staying," I said to my Soulmate.

"Yeah," my Soulmate replied. "I understand."

"I'm sorry about this."

"No, don't be."

My Soulmate smiled and gave me a hug and a kiss.

"See you tomorrow," my Soulmate said.

"See you tomorrow," I responded.

And so, my Soulmate and I let go.

And then my Soulmate turned around and left.

I went back and just sat by the Sage.

Is this going to be it again? Another death? I couldn't know until it happened, but it sure feels like the Sage is nearing the end.

And what could I do about it? Nothing. I can't stop death. All I can do is be there to ease the transition. How helpless I am. How helpless we all are.

What can we do with life, when there is no stopping death? There has to be an answer. The Sage's answer is love, but the Sage is still going to die.

Maybe.

No. Maybe, love isn't the answer. Maybe, love isn't what I thought it was.

No. That's not true. How can I say that? My Soulmate is everything. And I love that. I love that I love my Soulmate. And my Soulmate and I matter because we love each other. Yes. Love is still the answer.

But then death is still imminent. What can I do? What can anyone do? No matter what we do, we are all going to die. That's the curse of life: it has to come to an end. Why go through it at all? Why live if we're going to die anyway? Who knows? No one. No one knows. At least, I don't think anyone knows. I mean, how could anyone know what the point of life is if we are just going to die anyway? No one can know the answer.

Maybe, there is more. Maybe, there are things that I'm missing, things that I have to realize.

But why? Why is life so hard? Why is life so painful? I didn't ask for this. I didn't ask for any of it. I didn't ask for my anguish, nor my nausea, nor my pains, nor my struggles, nor my emptiness.

I didn't ask for Dad or the Sage to die. I didn't ask for death. I didn't ask for me, or Mum, or my Soulmate to die.

My Soulmate is going to die too, just like Dad. And I can't do anything about it. I can't even save my Soulmate. I

am helpless. Hopeless. Useless. We all are. We are all victims in this prison called life. And there's nothing we can do. There's nothing I can do.

I don't want this. I don't want this at all. I didn't even ask for life. I didn't get the choice of whether I wanted to be alive or not. If I had known how painful, how insufferable life would be, then I wouldn't have chosen life. I would have chosen the alternative, whatever that is.

But that wasn't my choice to make. We don't get to choose whether we want to be born or not. It's only after we are born that we get choice, and the nausea that comes with it.

Life's a drag. Life's a long drag towards an end that we can't prevent. So, why bother? Who knows? I certainly don't.

But if I'm going to continue to live, I'm going to find the point of it all. I'm going to realize the point of life. I'm going to realize the answer to life.

I woke up and saw the Sage just lying there with closed eyes.

I gently nudged the Sage.

But the Sage didn't move.

So, I gently caressed the Sage's hand.

It's so cold.

"Hey!" I yelled.

The Healer ran in, saw the situation and examined the Sage, until the Healer stopped and started to cry.

"Is the Sage...?" I asked.

"...Yes," the Healer answered.

Tears began to swell in my eyes.

Don't cry. Don't cry.

But the tears just flowed.

Death has struck once again.

I can feel it again. My emptiness. I've lost. I thought I had beaten my emptiness once and for all, but no, I've lost. And what can I do about it? I've no idea.

I thought that love was the answer. And maybe, love could help ease the pain, the torture, but I'm not sure anymore. How could I be? How could anyone be with death looming over us at every moment? How could anyone live? How could I live? How could I live with my emptiness?

Will it ever go away? If I can't find the answer to my emptiness, will my emptiness ever go away? I don't know. I don't know. Does anyone know? If they say they do, how can they? I don't know.

That's the worst part: the not knowing. At least, if I know whether or not my emptiness will be with me for the rest of my life, I might be able to contend with it. Maybe. I don't know. Will it end? Will my emptiness end? Will I beat my emptiness? I don't know.

My emptiness has won. And there's nothing I can do to stop it.

I eventually stood up, looked over the Sage and then turned around and left the Sage behind me.

My emptiness has taken over me and is controlling me. I'm not in control anymore. I'm a victim, a prisoner. I'm my worst fear: a prisoner. Stuck. Trapped by my emptiness. And what can I do? What can I do? I don't know.

I wandered around until I found a tavern, entered, purchased drinks and just drank and drank and drank, until my stomach began to ache and I ran off and vomited.

Why do we drink to such a state? Sure, it drowns our sorrows for an instant, but it's only for an instant. And instants don't last. So, once the instant is over, we fall into greater despair and are faced with the choice of either trying to alleviate our pains again with these vices, which would only leave us spinning in a whirlwind of misery, or not use such vices and look for something else to make us happy. There's really no point in drinking to such states.

But why do we do it? Why do we drink to such states? I don't know. Maybe, we don't know.

Or maybe, we do it because we don't know. How many of us come to our own realizations? I doubt many do. So, if we don't come to our own realizations, then we're just going to copy those around us. And if those around us drink to such states, then we're going to drink to such states.

This is yet another reason why we should come to our own realizations, so we don't just idly copy what others do and fall victim to others' behavior.

I continued to stumble about, somehow made it home and found Mum staring back at me.

Oh, no.

"Hey," Mum said. "Where were you?"

I tried to walk past her with my head down.

But Mum approached me.

"What's going on?" Mum asked me.

Go away. Go away, Mum. I don't want to hurt you. I don't want to burden you with my emptiness.

So, I turned around and began to walk away.

But Mum quickly walked up to me and put a hand on my shoulder.

"What's the matter?" Mum asked me.

I shrugged her off.

But then she grabbed my shoulder again and stopped me.

"What happened?" Mum asked me.

Mum's not going to let me go without an answer. I don't have a choice. I have to take the leap.

So, I turned back around, hugged her and cried out.

"...It's ok," Mum said to me. "It's ok."

I eventually let go.

And Mum let go of me.

"...Are you hungry?" Mum asked me.

I took a breath and wiped my tears before nodding.

"Let's get you some food then," Mum said.

Mum sat me down, made some food and then sat beside

me.

I can't eat. I just can't. I mean, I'm hungry, but I just can't. My emptiness is filling me. I'm both hungry and full and my emptiness is preventing me from anything.

So, what can I do? Again, I don't know. I guess, eating would be the wise option. I can't trust my emptiness. Nor should I.

But I can't eat. I just can't eat.

"...Hey," Mum said. "Are you still hungry?"

What did you ask me? I don't know.

Nothing feels right. It just all seems so blank. It's all emptiness. My emptiness is all around me. And it's suffocating. I'm suffocating.

I clenched my heart.

Mum grabbed hold of me.

"Are you alright?" Mum asked me. "...What's wrong?"

I don't feel so good.

I suddenly spewed out, away from Mum.

"Oh, no," Mum exclaimed.

Mum helped me up, walked with me and laid me down on my side.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Nothing to worry about," Mum responded.

I moaned.

But Mum just walked back and cleaned up the mess.

I'm so pathetic. And woeful.

But it's not my fault. My emptiness caused my sickness. It's my emptiness that did this to me. It wasn't me. I mean, what else could I have done? Nothing. It just happened. I couldn't control it. I couldn't even prevent it. My emptiness caused all of this to happen. And it has to be stopped.

But how? I've tried everything. Legacy. Love. Everything else. How can I stop my emptiness, this pain, this torment inside me? I don't know. I don't know anything. How could I? It's all so hopeless. It's all so hopeless, useless, so worthless.

I hate myself. How can anyone like me? Really, how? I'm the worst. I'm my emptiness. That's all I am. I'm my emptiness. And no one likes me.

I fell asleep.

I remained dormant.

Why would they want to see me? I have nothing to offer them. I have no value. I have nothing to give. No happiness. No love. Nothing.

But I have to do something. I can't just live like this. Imagine me, my emptiness, living in this tortured state for the rest of my life. Imagine how those around me would react if I stayed this way for the rest of my life. It's unbearable to imagine. It's unbearable to live life like this. I have to do something.

But what? What can I do? It always comes back to this question: what can I do? As much as I try to find an answer, I keep failing. I fail and fail and fail and I'm tired of it.

So, what can I do? I don't know. How can I keep going on like this? How can I keep failing to find the answer? That's insane. No one in their right mind would keep going. Sometimes there comes a point where one just has to stop, where they have to quit.

But then again, what do I do? I can't live like this. I can't live the way I'm living.

But I can't keep failing, keep losing either. What do I do? Keep failing until I find the answer? What choice do I have? I have to keep failing. Fail forward. Fail forward until I finally realize the answer. I have to fail forward.

So, I read through the all the books that I had.

How come no book could provide me with the answer? It's so ridiculous. Surely, I'm not the only one who's suffering from their emptiness. I mean, my Soulmate even confessed to having felt an emptiness. So, there must be others who feel the same way. And why isn't there a book on the topic? I don't know.

Or maybe, I just haven't found the book yet. There has to be a book. There has to.

I snuck passed Mum and went to the bookshop.

There's got to be a book. There's got to be a book. There's got to be a book. There's got to be a book. There's got to be a book. There's got to be a book. There's got to be a book. There's got to be a book. There's got to be a book. There's got to be a book. There's got to be a book. There's got to be a book.

I made it to the bookshop and proceeded to search through all the books.

There's got to be a book. There's got to be a book. There's got to be a book. There's got to be a book. There's got to be a book. There's got to be a book. There's got to be a book. There's got to be a book. There's got to be a book. There's got to be a book. There's got to be a book. There's got to be a book.

Eventually, I scanned through all the books in the bookshop.

How could I not find the answer?

I fell to the floor and started to sob.

How can this be? There must be a book on this topic. There must be a book on my emptiness.

But where? If it isn't in the bookshop, where could I find this book? At another bookshop. I have to find another bookshop.

And so, I picked myself up and left.

Where could there be another bookshop? In another town? Another village? Maybe. There must be other towns that have bookshops. I mean, what would they read if they don't have any?

But how could I know if they have different books? I couldn't. Or at least, I couldn't unless I went to every bookshop in every town. That's what I have to do. I don't

have a choice. It's either I succumb to my emptiness or finally find the book with the answer.

I have to keep searching. I have to fail forward.

And so, I continued searching through different bookshops and went through all the books that they owned.

I still can't find the answer. How is this possible? Surely, the answer must be somewhere. Surely, someone knows of it.

But who? Where are they?

I looked up and saw strangers looking back at me.

Is there something about me that is interesting to look at? Or are these strangers looking at me because they have never seen me before? I don't know. Either way, it's uncomfortable.

I'm tired. Maybe, it would be better to get some rest before I continue my search.

And so, I made my way home.

Should I have continued my search for the answer? Of course, I want to find the answer, but I've gone through this before. I tried to search for the answer in books and couldn't find the answer.

So, why do I believe I'm going to find the answer this time around? I have no idea.

But maybe, the answer isn't in books. Maybe, the answer is in something else entirely.

But what? I could find everything else in a book. Why can't I find the answer in a book? That seems ridiculous. The answer must be in a book.

But then, if the answer is in a book, how come I haven't found it? The answer must not be in a book. The answer must be in something else.

Although, what could contain the answer?

I made it home and found Mum with her arms crossed, in tears, looking back at me.

I just looked back at Mum.

And then Mum rushed up to me and hugged me.

"Are you alright?" Mum asked me.

I hugged Mum back and nodded.

Was Mum thinking of me? Was she genuinely concerned or upset that I had run off? If she wasn't genuinely concerned then she wouldn't have asked if I was alright, but would have told me off.

I must have caused her to worry, like I worried. That's selfish. And inconsiderate. I'm selfish and inconsiderate. I have to make it up to Mum.

We both eventually let go of each other.

"Don't worry about me," I said to Mum. "I'll be alright."

"...I don't think I'll ever stop worrying about you," Mum said.

I know that somehow. I have no idea how I know that, but I know that somehow. And I love her for it. Even if I might say or do something that suggests otherwise. Deep down, I love my Mum.

A smile came to me.

Mum smiled back and gave me another tight hug.

And we both eventually let go of each other again.

"I'm going to get some sleep," I said to Mum.

"Ok," Mum replied. "Take it easy."

And so, I walked off and lay down.

Where could I find the answer? Who knows?

Although, maybe, that's it. Maybe, I just have to find someone who knows the answer or at the very least, knows where I could find the answer.

But is there such an individual? I'm not sure.

I can't be sure unless I ask. And that means I have to ask.

But I can't. I mean, how would I bring the conversation up? Hey, do you have the answer? I can't do that. No way.

What other choice do I have though? I guess, I could succumb to the idea that I can't find the answer and let my emptiness swallow me whole, but that's not going to happen. No. I won't allow it. I'm going to fight back. I'm going to

find the answer. I'm going to find the answer. I'm going to find the answer. I'm going to find the answer. I'm going to find the answer.

All I have to do is ask around. As strange as it might be to others, I have to ask around. I have to find the answer.

No, I'm going to find the answer.

I woke up and found my Soulmate sitting beside me.

"Hey, sleepy," my Soulmate said.

"Hey, yourself," I replied.

"How are you feeling?"

How do I answer? I'm not well. And I have to talk to someone to find the answer.

But how can I raise the issue with my Soulmate? I love my Soulmate and wouldn't want to put any burden on my Soulmate's shoulders.

I'm going through this dance all over again. Should I? Or shouldn't I? And all while knowing that I can't know which choice would be the better one until I actually make the decision.

I just have to decide and if I fail, I fail. I'll fail forward.

"...I'm," I said. "...I'm not good."

"...Does it have to do with the Sage?" my Soulmate asked me.

"...The Sage passed on."

"I'm sorry."

"It-It..."

Why can't I say anymore? Something's stopping me. But what? What's stopping me? My emptiness? It must be. My emptiness is preventing me from talking, from being open and honest.

"What is it?" my Soulmate asked.

"...It...I...", I tried.

My emptiness is preventing me from being open with my Soulmate. And if I can't be open with my Soulmate then I can't be open with anyone, not even Mum.

And since I can't be open with anyone, then how can I find the answer? I need to talk and be open with the one who knows the answer or the one who can guide me to the answer. But if I can't talk about it, if I can't be open with anyone, then how can I talk to the one who has the answer? How can I talk to the one who can guide me to the answer? I can't. I can't. There's no way. I'm stuck. I'm a prisoner. My emptiness has won yet again.

I eventually turned away, with my back to my Soulmate.

But then I began to hear a few sobs.

What's wrong with me? Everything. Everything is wrong with me. Every part of me is wrong. Every facet of my being is wrong. Everything. Everything is wrong. I'm so useless, so pathetic and worthless. I'm truly worthless.

And then I heard my Soulmate stand up.

"You don't have to talk to me," my Soulmate said. "But please, talk to someone. It'll help."

My Soulmate gave me a kiss on the cheek and then left.

I'm truly worthless.

But what can I do? I can't find the answer. I can't stop my emptiness. So, what can I do? Nothing. That's all I could do.

No. No. I have a choice. We always have a choice.

But what can I do? I don't know. I guess, realize another way. There must be another way to find the answer.

But how? I don't know. But I guess that just means that I have to find this other way.

I was lying down.

What can I do? Since my emptiness is preventing me from being open, I can't talk to anyone about my emptiness. And I can't find any books on the subject, so there's no luck there.

So, what can I do? I could think it over and over until the realization comes to me.

Then again, is that a good idea? I can't tell whether or

not it's a good idea until I do it.

But how can I tell that I have arrived at the answer? Does the answer just click in some way? And besides, it's by asking questions and realizing my own answers that I'll be able to find the answer, not by thinking it over and over and over again until it clicked. We can only do what we have realized, which simply means that I need to realize more in order to do more. And to beat my emptiness, to find the answer, I have to realize what to do to beat my emptiness.

But then where do I start? I can't rely on books. I can't be open with others about my emptiness. Where do I start? The way I see it, nothing that's happening for me is working right now. I'm not happy, I'm not fulfilled with my life and really, the only thing I can do is change that.

I mean, I could decide to not change that. I could succumb to my emptiness, but I'm not going to do that. I'm better than that. I might not feel that way, but I'm better than that. I'm better than my emptiness. I just have to do something different.

Break the pattern. Yes. That makes sense. We all do that. We all fall into normalcy. We all fall into a routine. It's just about whether or not we're fulfilled with the routine that we have fallen into. And those who realize that and decide to make the necessary changes are able to find that fulfillment again. I have to break the pattern. I have to break my pattern.

But how? What do I do? I guess I'd have to do something different. But what? I don't know. But at this point, I'll do anything. There's no reason to be particular with what I can do differently.

Or is there? If I'm particular, then I could narrow down my search to things that I might be interested in.

But then what if I can't find anything that I'm interested in? And wouldn't I only realize whether or not I'm interested in something until I try it? Well, yeah. I won't be able to realize whether or not I'm interested in something until I try it, so that means that I have to try many different things. And

besides, just trying new things will break the pattern anyway.

So, what do I do? Or better yet, what can I do? I guess, I can wander around and look for things that might interest me or at least, give me ideas as to what I could do. That makes sense. I can't do something new unless I realize the new thing that I want to pursue. So, I have to look for something new. And that way, I can break my pattern and at the very least, be fulfilled.

I wandered around, until I arrived at two paths that went in opposite directions.

Which path do I take? If I took the path to my right, I would find my way to the lake, which I've been to many times before. I'm not going to find something new there. I have to take the other path.

But where does the other path take me? I have no idea. There could be something that might interest me at the end of that path. Although, there could be something that might frighten me. I don't know. And I'm never going to know unless I walk down that path. I know that.

Maybe, this is what stops many from taking these leaps of faith and breaking their patterns: the not knowing. It always seems to come back to how we don't know what'll happen until we make a decision and the friction our hesitation causes us. And I can see why that prevents us from taking leaps of faith, from taking risks. We become paralyzed by choice.

But surely, there must be a way around it. There has to be. Otherwise, how is it that some can take risks and others can't? And yeah, each situation is different, but there must be some lesson to learn from those who take risks. Heck, there must be some lesson to learn from those who can't take risks.

Everyone is a teacher. And everything can be learned from.

But what are these lessons? Well, let's see. Those who

can't take risks must be unsure of what might happen. But even then, those who can take risks must be unsure as well. They can't know what will happen. No one can. So, those who can take risks must be just as unsure of what will happen as those who can't take risks.

So, what's the difference? Why is it that some can take risks and others can't? I'm not sure, but I must be on the right track. At any given moment, we're always unsure of what might happen next. There's no escaping that.

But then how can some follow through on their risks and others can't? If I am to guess, those who take risks must be either insane, or stupid, or they just don't care about the consequences of their actions.

If they are insane, then their insanity might push them to take risks. However, what a sane person might consider to be risky, an insane person might consider to be normal. So, what is risky and what is normal? Really, what is risky and what is normal must be relative. What one might consider to be risky, another might consider to be normal, regardless of whether those individuals are sane or insane.

And by association, it makes one question what is sane and what is insane. Same thing. What one might consider to be sanity, another might consider to be insanity. We each experience life differently.

One's perspective is different to another's perspective. And so, what is risky or normal, what is sane or insane, what is good or bad, right or wrong, all of it is relative. It has to be. We can't experience life objectively. That's impossible. We can only experience life through our individual lens. And so, it must all be relative.

But I'm not insane. Nor do I want to be insane. Those who are insane can't be in control of their choices. Their insanity must dictate their choices and the decisions that they make. And since we are the decisions that we make, then their insanity must dictate their lives. And who would want that?

And as far as stupidity is concerned, if those who take risks are stupid, then their stupidity would push them to take risks. Maybe, that's why many believe that ignorance is bliss.

But then couldn't one still live a blissful life and be knowledgeable at the same time? I'd imagine so. And since that's the case, then what's the benefit in being stupid?

And the last guess, that those who take risks might be able to take risks because they don't care about the consequences of their actions, is probably the guess that makes the most sense. I mean, when one doesn't care about what they do then of course, they'd be willing to take risks. And so maybe, that's what one should do: don't care about the consequences of one's actions.

Although, that would mean that all is permitted. And if all is permitted, then what is there to stop one from committing heinous acts? There would be no impediments, no boundaries. We would just go around, without restrictions, doing whatever pleases us. It would be chaos.

No, that wouldn't be right. We should care about our actions and our consequences. So, not caring isn't the answer either.

Although, maybe, it isn't that they don't care about the consequences of their actions, but it's about not caring about what others think of them. I can see that. Those who don't care about what others think of them would be free of judgement, not that they can't be judged, but that they won't be affected by anyone else's judgement. How liberating it must be to live that life.

But isn't there some benefit in caring about what others think of us? I mean, if Mum or my Soulmate told me about a bad habit that I have, I would appreciate them for bringing it up so that I could replace the bad habit with a good habit.

That's how one gets rid of a bad habit: by replacing the bad habit with a good habit.

Where was I? Yes, caring about others' opinions could

provide some benefit.

Maybe, one just has to realize whose opinions they should care about and whose opinions they shouldn't care about in order to separate who they should listen to from who they shouldn't listen to.

But if one is having to do that, then they would still be prevented from taking risks by those they are closest to. It doesn't change anything. For one to benefit from not caring about what others think of them, one has to not care about everyone's opinions of them, not just those they don't care about. That's the only way it could work.

And I'm not willing to not care about what my Soulmate and Mum think of me. I value their opinions. And I'm not going to let that go. No way.

So, what is it that encourages some to take risks and others to cower? I don't know. There must be something. Really, there has to be a reason. There's always a reason for everything. We just might not realize that reason yet.

So, what is it? Well, let's think it through again. What is a risk? And what is normal? They're both relative. What one might consider to be risky, another might consider to be normal. So, in that sense, maybe, those who are able to take risks perceive a so-called risky act as normal and those who are not able to take risks perceive that same act as risky. And maybe, those who take so-called risks, just become used to taking those risks. They become comfortable being uncomfortable. Yes. That's it. That's it. They become comfortable being uncomfortable. To take risks we have to become comfortable being uncomfortable. And that's what I have to do. I have to become comfortable being uncomfortable.

And so, I took my first step down the other path and began walking.

This isn't so bad. This isn't bad at all. I was crazy to believe that something terrible was going to happen. But that's it really. I believed the worst would happen and that

almost prevented me from starting. And yet, all I had to do was start. That's it. I just had to start. And since I've started, the momentum has been carrying me forward. It's just about starting. That's the only hurdle there is.

And nothing terrible is going to happen. I believe that. And even if something bad does end up happening, I could always turn back around. I have options.

But that's what prevents many from taking risks. Most would often imagine the worst possible outcome and get in their own way. When they're faced with two paths, where one path led to a place they're used to and the other path led to an unknown place, they would hesitate to walk the unknown path because they assume the worst is going to happen and either go down the known path or turn back to where they came from.

And what's the likelihood of our worst nightmare coming to fruition? Extremely unlikely? No. Not even that. It's virtually impossible. Our imagination plays for us either the most uplifting dream or the most horrific nightmare. Our imagination never tells us the full story. We only ever imagine one side. We never imagine the whole. So, it must be virtually impossible for our worst nightmare to come to fruition.

If only we could realize that we are the cause of our friction. I mean, if we could, then we'd feel more comfortable taking risks. And with that, we'd be able to live the life that we'd like to live and grow our fulfillment. What stops us from living the life that we'd like to live is the hesitation, the friction that comes from not knowing the outcome. But if we simply start, then we'd realize that our situation isn't so bad and that the likelihood of our worst nightmare becoming a reality is virtually impossible.

But even in realizing this, I could still see many of us still struggling to start. I know I still do. So maybe, there is a way to get over this hurdle.

Or maybe, there's a way to at least ease the anxiety to

be able to feel safe enough to start. Well, what did I do? I realized that if something bad did happen, I could turn back around. I had a solution to my worst-case scenario.

Maybe, that's it. If we are imagining our worst nightmare, we could ask ourselves what is the likelihood of our imagination becoming a reality and then ask ourselves what we could do to solve that nightmare if it so happens that what we imagined becomes a reality. That's it. That's all it takes. By realizing how unlikely our worst nightmare could become a reality and by realizing a solution in case our worst nightmare does happen to become a reality, we can ease our anxiety of starting and simply start.

And by starting, we get over the hesitation, build momentum, live the life that we'd like to live and grow our fulfillment.

It's so obvious. How come I'd never realized how simple it is? I don't know. But I'm grateful for realizing it now.

I stopped at the end of the path and looked around.

I've been here before. I remember the trees and that rock formation.

But there's nothing new, nor anything to get excited about.

I turned around and walked back.

What can I take away from all this though? What did I learn? These are good questions because they are going to reinforce what I have just realized.

What did I learn? I learned that the likelihood of my worst nightmare becoming a reality is impossible. And I learned that by having a solution to my worst nightmare, I could calm my anxiety down and decide to walk the unknown path. That's all it takes.

And what's the benefit of learning this? By being able to calm my anxiety, I will be able to get over my hesitation and take calculated risks, which will help me make the decisions that, previously, I might have struggled to make and help me to live the life that I'd like to live and grow my

fulfillment.

Hold on. Grow my fulfillment? Is fulfillment something that we can grow? That seems plausible. As we grow, as we improve ourselves, won't we become more fulfilled? Won't our fulfillment grow with us? That makes so much sense. As we grow, we naturally grow our fulfillment.

And what of our fulfillment? What could our fulfillment do for us? Well, if we are more fulfilled, then wouldn't we want even more fulfillment? Wouldn't we want to continue to grow our fulfillment? I mean, because of how amazing fulfillment feels, wouldn't we want to feel even more fulfilled? Yeah, of course we would. Of course, we would want more fulfillment. That's just natural. So, it's about growing our fulfillment in our lives.

Growth and fulfillment really complement each other. And they both value the long haul. Growth and fulfillment both have long lasting effects, which makes for a great life to live. A great life must come with growing fulfillment.

I found a quiet place to sit and write.

So, what can I do? Well, firstly, since growth complements fulfillment, the question should be: how can I grow?

There is writing. I could continue to write my story. I've taken a step back recently because of all the distractions that I've had, but I could start writing my story again. And grow my fulfillment that way.

I can also read more. And by reading more, I'd learn more and be able to apply more. I could transform myself into the master of many disciplines. That'd be fun.

Is there anything else I could do? Maybe. But for now, I'm just going to stick to writing and reading. I don't need other ways to grow. And besides, if I'm juggling too many interests at once, I might not grow as fast as I might like to in any one interest. When we try to do everything at once, we either stagnate or barely inch forward. However, when we

*focus on one thing, we progress forward with giant strides.
I'm going to write and read again.*

I was writing my story, until I stopped.

What now? There's nothing new. Nothing to write about. I've written everything that I want to write. But now, I'm lost for words. So, what do I do? How do I find the words?

When we face a problem, we tend to ask questions like: 'what do I do?' which only make us feel overwhelmed and helpless and by doing so, we struggle to come up with solutions.

But when we ask ourselves questions like: 'how do I find the words?' our minds will go to work in order to realize a solution. We contemplate the possibilities to realize ways to solve the problem. Possibility thinking.

So, how do I find the words? I guess, I need to be inspired. But how does one become inspired? Doesn't there have to be a surprise in order to become inspired? I imagine so.

But then how does one intentionally surprise oneself? That's a contradiction if I ever heard one.

Or do I need to be surprised in order to be inspired? Well, on the occasions that I was inspired, the inspiration that I felt came to me in the form of a surprise. But I had to be open to being surprised. I have to be open to be inspired. If I'm closed to the inspiration, to the surprise, then I have no chance of being inspired. So, I just have to be open. I have to keep my mind open. That's all I can do.

And because one can only keep an open mind, we can assume that inspiration must be all around us. Inspiration must be everywhere. And if one can't find their inspiration, then they have simply closed themselves off to the inspiration around them, that they put up walls and blind themselves to the inspiration that is right under their noses.

Many close themselves off and act arrogantly in order

to mask their own ignorance. Their egos are so big that they can't admit that they are the cause of their problems. In a way, egoism is the biggest cause of all our problems. If everyone with their egos would just let go of themselves and stop being so self-centered, then all of the problems that we are facing will dissipate. It's really that simple. And all we have to do is become a little wiser and realize that we aren't our names, that we aren't our egos and that our egos are not helping us, or solving any of our problems.

Why am I thinking about egos?

Oh, yes. Inspiration. What else could I do to be inspired? Well, I don't have to stay here with my open mind and wait to be inspired. I could go out and wander around until inspiration is clear to me. There's always that option.

And what's stopping me? Nothing. Nothing's stopping me. Any other answer is an excuse. I know that.

And so, I got up and wandered around.

How will I know when I have found inspiration? I have no idea. But that's where the surprise comes in? And besides, it's fun not knowing how I'm going to be inspired.

I kept wandering around.

What am I doing wrong? My mind is open. I'm keen. But still, nothing.

It isn't that I'm doing something wrong, but that inspiration hasn't happened yet. And when will I find inspiration? I don't know. I can't know. How can one know when inspiration will strike? It's one of those things we just can't know. When it happens, it happens. Inspiration has no set time. There's no date. Inspiration is all around us, but we have to be open and patient for inspiration to reveal itself.

And so, I stopped, crouched down, took a deep breath and found a set of smaller rocks surrounding a larger rock.

Is this what I have been waiting for? Is this inspiration? I don't know. But does it matter? No. It doesn't matter at all. I just have to do. I have to go with it, go with whatever it is.

I stood up, walked over to the rocks, picked up a smaller

rock and carved images, that formed a story into the larger rock.

How inspiring.

I leaned back and saw the story that I had formed.

Where did this come from? This story? These characters? These images? They simply appeared to me. Had these images been with me all along? I don't know. But how incredible it is.

I could sit and look over this story all day. And each day I'd see something new. That's the difference between images and words. With images, one can learn something new every time their eyes wander over the images because one is reborn every single day. No one is the same the next day. Each day, we learn new ideas, new philosophies and bring those ideas and philosophies to the images we see. And to a degree, we undergo the same process with words, but words feel fixed by their concepts, even though nothing is its word. A set of images and a set of words could have told the same story, but we would have responded differently because of how the story is told to us: images or words.

But imagine that. Imagine looking over this one story for a lifetime. How little we would know.

Although, we know little as it is. That's the case really. The more we learn, the more we'd realize how little we know.

But imagine someone looking over the same story for an entire lifetime and knowing only that story. What would their imagination consist of? Would they just repeat the same story in their heads? Or might their imagination wander off and realize other possibilities? I don't know. But I guess their imagination could produce other possibilities. Questioning any situation that we're in allows us to open our minds to new possibilities.

Although, how could one have known to question their lives unless they are encouraged to? They can't. That's one of the problems with class. We aren't encouraged to question

our lives and of course, we aren't able to imagine new possibilities.

Thankfully, though, I had the Sage to help me see the benefits of questioning everything.

How could they know to question their lives unless they are encouraged to? Well, what happened with me? I questioned my life and am now able to see life as it is, keep an open mind and imagine other possibilities. So again, what happened with me?

I somehow knew that something was off. I can't explain how I knew that something was off, or what it was, but I just knew. Somehow, I just sensed it. I felt it. And I just went with that feeling. That's it. I just went with my feelings.

How could they know to question their lives unless they are encouraged to? They just have to go with their feelings. We all have to go with our feelings.

I headed home and put all of the realizations that I had just come to into my story.

I'd let my imagination wander and realize new possibilities to write into my story.

I was writing.

I miss my Soulmate.

What might my Soulmate have thought of me for not being around though? I don't know. And I can't know unless I go and see my Soulmate.

But I have to ask myself, what's the worst that could happen? My Soulmate would be ecstatic to see me. I know that. There's nothing to worry about.

But what should I say? I couldn't just appear unexpectedly and say, "Hello," as if nothing happened. We have drifted apart for a short spell and I have to acknowledge that and let my Soulmate know that I'm ready for us to be back together again. That's the right move.

But what should I say? I don't know. But I do know that

I can't get caught up in trying to find the perfect set of words, as if I'm rehearsing for some speech. That would make my feelings seem stale and formulaic, when they aren't. My love for my Soulmate is pure and I don't want to overshadow that love with a prepared speech that could never capture how I feel. I have to spontaneously express how I feel with the words that come to me in the moment and allow whatever comes of it, even if it hurts me.

Again, what's the worst that could happen? And what's the likelihood of the worst happening? The worst that could happen is my Soulmate becoming happy upon seeing me. And the likelihood of my Soulmate becoming happy is high. There's nothing to worry about.

I have to go and see my Soulmate.

And so, I stopped, stood up and went to see my Soulmate.

At what point does belief become arrogance? I don't know. Could I know? I don't think so. Wouldn't the point where belief becomes arrogance be relative? What arrogance is to one might be belief to another, and vice versa. So, what is belief and what is arrogance must be relative.

Or is it? I mean, couldn't we agree on what belief is and what arrogance is? Arrogance has ego and pride mixed in with a self-belief. Whereas a belief is just a thought that one continuously focuses on. Nothing more. Nothing less.

So, there must be a clear distinction between belief and arrogance.

Or maybe not. What is egotistic and what is prideful must be relative. And that would mean that what is arrogant would be relative and what is belief would also be relative.

Or maybe, it's all just belief and there's no such thing as arrogance. Maybe, everything comes from belief and what we might consider to be arrogance is really just our belief of arrogance. I can see that. I can see how it's all belief. It all comes from belief.

My palms began to sweat and my shoulders started to tense up.

Am I nervous? Why am I nervous? This is my Soulmate. There's no need to be nervous. So, why am I nervous? I don't know. I just have to go with it.

I kept going, but my palms continued to perspire, my shoulders continued to tense up and my heart started to race.

Why is this happening? I have nothing to be nervous about.

Or do I? Maybe. No. No. I have nothing to be nervous about. What's the worst that could happen? My Soulmate would be happy to see me. That's the worst that could happen.

But then why am I nervous? If the worst that could happen is my Soulmate being happy to see me, then why am I nervous?

I know why. Because I'm not being honest with myself. The worst that could happen is my Soulmate getting upset because I hadn't shown up sooner.

Showing up is important. It might be the most important thing. Think about it. If one simply showed up, then one is more likely to follow through. I mean, if one doesn't show up at all, then one can't follow through. So, it makes sense that the only way one could follow through is if one showed up. And I didn't show up. I became complacent. Comfortable. And I did it so that I didn't have to face my potentially upset Soulmate. I'm afraid.

But this is good. This is really good. I have to go through this. I have to go through this harsh realization. It's the only way I'll learn. It's the only way anyone will learn.

And now that I know what to do, that I know how to fear less, I can put myself in a position to face my potentially upset Soulmate. I can put myself in a position to confront any difficult situation.

I can do this. I can do this. I can do this.

I finally reached my Soulmate's place and looked

around.

But then, suddenly, I found my Soulmate laughing with a stranger.

Who is this stranger? How come I have never seen this stranger before?

I approached them.

My Soulmate turned, saw me and stopped laughing.

"Hey," I said to my Soulmate.

"...Hey," my Soulmate replied. "Hey."

I stepped forward and leaned in.

But my Soulmate just looked back at me.

And so, I stopped and stood back.

What's going on here?

"...How have you been?" my Soulmate asked me.

"Good," I answered.

My Soulmate just looked back at me.

And I just looked back at my Soulmate.

"...Is this the one?" the stranger quietly interjected.

My Soulmate turned to the stranger.

"Yeah," my Soulmate answered. "This is the one alright."

What are they talking about? Have they been talking about me? Who is this stranger?

The stranger put a hand out.

"Nice to meet you," the stranger said to me.

I have to shake this stranger's hand, don't I? If I don't, then I'd look bad in front of my Soulmate. And after what's happened between us, I can't afford to make things worse.

And so, I shook the stranger's hand.

"Nice to meet you too," I said to the stranger. "So, how do you know each other?"

"We don't," the stranger answered. "I'm just a Traveler."

A Traveler? Why is this Traveler here? And how come this Traveler knows my Soulmate?

"What brings you here then?" I asked the Traveler.

“Don’t know,” the Traveler answered. “I just go where the wind takes me.”

“How poetic.”

I can’t stand the hubris that is oozing out of this Traveler.

My Soulmate faced me.

“So,” my Soulmate said. “Why are you here?”

“...I came to see you,” I answered.

“I know. But did you want something? Or...?”

“I wanted to see you.”

“Right.”

My Soulmate then gave a quick glance at the Traveler.

And so, I looked to the Traveler, only to see a wry smile back at me.

Why is this Traveler smiling at me? This Traveler must be out to get my Soulmate. That must be why the Traveler is smiling. But not if I have anything to do with it. No. I’m not going to let this Traveler get with my Soulmate.

I turned to my Soulmate.

“Can we talk?” I asked my Soulmate.

“Yeah,” my Soulmate answered.

“...I mean alone.”

“Oh. Okay.”

My Soulmate and I walked off and found a quiet space.

“What’s going on?” I asked my Soulmate.

“Sorry?” my Soulmate responded.

“Who is that?”

“Just a friend.”

“How did you two meet?”

“I was out and we just met.”

“Just like that?”

“Why are you asking so many questions? I don’t like being interrogated like this.”

“I’m not interrogating you. I’m just trying to understand what’s going on.”

“What’s going on? Nothing’s going on.”

Really? Nothing? This Traveler wants you. It's so obvious and you're telling me that nothing is going on. That's just hard to believe.

"...Are you jealous?" my Soulmate asked me.

"What?" I reacted.

"You're jealous, aren't you?"

"No, I'm not."

"Yes, you are."

How do I respond? If I said anything, then our argument would have only escalated. That's how these things happen. Just a few words that compound into huge unnecessary conflicts. I have to remain silent.

And eventually, my Soulmate took a deep breath.

"...I miss you," my Soulmate said.

"I miss you too," I responded.

My Soulmate leaned forward and kissed me.

And then we withdrew and our eyes met.

"What do you want to do today?" my Soulmate asked me.

"I don't know," I answered. "Anything you want to do."

"Are you hungry?"

"I wouldn't mind eating."

"Then let me cook something for you."

My Soulmate grabbed my hand and walked with me back to my Soulmate's place.

But when we arrived, the Traveler was still there.

"I'm going to make something to eat," my Soulmate said.

"What are you making?" the Traveler asked.

Wait. My Soulmate isn't inviting this Traveler to eat, right?

"Don't know yet," my Soulmate answered.

"Do you mind if I stick around?" the Traveler asked my Soulmate.

Is my Soulmate seriously considering that this Traveler should stay with us?

“Sure,” my Soulmate said. “We don’t mind.”

Why won’t this Traveler just leave us alone?

I’m being rude. I can’t be rude. I can’t just tell the Traveler to leave. Well, I could, but I would look bad in front of my Soulmate and I don’t want that. So, what can I do? I can only go along with it. I have to allow this Traveler to stick around with us, even though this Traveler is interfering with our time.

And so, we all entered my Soulmate’s place.

“Do you want anything a drink?” my Soulmate asked me.

“Yeah,” the Traveler interjected. “Water thanks.”

Wow, that was rude.

“...No, I’m okay,” I answered my Soulmate. “Thank you.”

My Soulmate walked off.

The Traveler sat down.

And then I sat down, at a distance from the Traveler, looking away.

But as my eyes wandered, I noticed the Traveler’s eyes darting all over me.

Is this Traveler trying to gauge me? Is this Traveler trying to figure me out?

“...I’m not trying to take anything from you,” the Traveler said.

What is this Traveler saying?

“You think that I’m trying to steal your love,” the Traveler said. “That’s why you’re looking at me funny.”

What’s this Traveler talking about? I’m not doing anything of the kind.

“Oh, you can’t hide it,” the Traveler said. “Especially with me. I know exactly the right places to look. I can read anyone. Anyone. No one can hide how they feel from me.”

Wow, this Traveler is extremely conceited.

“That’s what happens when you travel and see the world,” the Traveler said. “You learn more about people,

understand them, how they behave.”

Please, stop. Just stop talking.

“But don’t worry,” the Traveler said. “I’m not out to steal your love. I’m just being...me.”

“...Aren’t we all?” I asked.

The Traveler just smiled.

And then my Soulmate came back with water and gave the water to the Traveler.

“Thank you,” the Traveler said.

My Soulmate smiled, turned around and left us alone again.

What could we say to each other? I don’t know.

But even though the awkwardness of the moment is suffocating, listening to this Traveler speak is worse. I’d prefer to sit in silence than listen to the next words that came out of this Traveler’s mouth.

“...You’re a writer?” the Traveler asked me.

My Soulmate has been talking to this Traveler about me. But why? And what else did my Soulmate say?

“...Yes,” I answered.

“What do you write about?” the Traveler asked me.

“I have my own story.”

“Your own story, huh? What happens in your story?”

How do I answer this question? Sure, I’m writing my story, but there’s so much in it. There’s no way I could give a short and simple summary. No way.

Is that a problem? I don’t think so. But I can’t just explain my whole story. I could share one of the many facets of my story, but no one facet would encapsulate what my story is about.

“...There’s too much to cover,” I replied.

“Okay,” the Traveler responded.

It would be good to come up with a short and simple summary. But how? I don’t know. Why is it so hard? I’ve spent so much time on my story, it should be easy. But no. No, it isn’t easy. Funnily enough, it’s harder than writing my

story.

“...I write poetry myself,” the Traveler said. “I prefer the shorter format that comes with poetry. Stories are too long and boring for me. I just don’t have any time for them.”

Why is this Traveler telling me this? Is this Traveler trying to undermine me? That’s my guess. But why would the Traveler do that? To feel superior? To make me feel inferior? I don’t know. There are many possibilities.

But if this Traveler is trying to make me feel inferior in any way, this Traveler isn’t going to succeed. I’m not going to be fooled.

“...In poetry, you can capture so much with a line or two,” the Traveler continued. “And, well, that’s just better.”

In your opinion. But in my opinion stories are better. Much better.

But really, neither of us are right. We can’t be. We’re all neither right nor wrong. And nothing is of better value. Nothing is of worse value either. Nothing is of better or worse value because all is relative.

“...We’re quite similar,” the Traveler said. “You know?”

Where is this Traveler getting this idea from?

“We both see life in our own way,” the Traveler said. “See, most see life in their way because others tell them to see life in that way. But you and I, we don’t. We see life in our own way.”

The Traveler might be correct. We both might see life in our own way.

But we still aren’t alike. At least, I wouldn’t have gone that far. I mean, really, we are all similar and different. We are all similar in the sense that we are all alive, but we are all different because we are all living different experiences. So, with that in mind, one could always say that they are similar to another, or they could always say that they are different to another. But neither will capture the full story.

And besides, we all experience life in our own way.

There's no escaping that. To say that some experience life in the same way is a lie.

And I get that the Traveler is explaining how most conform to the world around them by just doing as they're told, but that doesn't mean that we all don't experience life differently. The Traveler is wrong.

My Soulmate finally came back with food.

"Here we go," my Soulmate said to me.

My Soulmate then put the food in front of us.

But then the Traveler quickly grabbed a handful of food and proceeded to eat.

Isn't this food for my Soulmate and me? And why isn't my Soulmate doing anything about this? This Traveler shouldn't be eating our food.

My Soulmate looked back at me.

"Aren't you hungry?" my Soulmate asked me.

I just looked back at my Soulmate.

Isn't my Soulmate going to do anything? At least, say anything?

No, I guess not. We're just going to allow this Traveler to eat our food. That's okay.

Eventually, I looked to the food and reached for something food to eat.

My Soulmate smiled, got some food and started to eat.

"...So," my Soulmate said. "What are we talking about?"

"Oh," the Traveler said. "I was just saying how we're both alike."

"Yeah, I can see a lot of similarities between you two. You're both writers..."

"No, I'm a poet. There's a big difference."

"How? It's still writing."

"Oh, no. No, it's not."

"How's that?"

"Poetry is an art. Stories are just fiction, and nothing more."

“What?” I reacted.

“Because of poetry’s shorter format, you really have to craft a poem to elicit multiple meanings and make it good. But with stories you can just make them up.”

“What do you mean ‘you can just make them up?’”

“I mean you can just make a story up. How hard is that to understand?”

How hard is that to explain then? If it’s so easy to understand, why can’t you explain it to me? Huh?

“...Stories are just made up,” the Traveler went on. “They’re...fake.”

“Stories aren’t fake,” I stated.

“What? Of course, they are.”

“And poetry is real?”

“Yes.”

“How can you say that?”

“Because it’s true. Good poetry evokes meaning...”

“And stories don’t?”

“Yes, stories don’t.”

This Traveler is wrong. Stories have meaning and clearly this Traveler is too stupid to realize that.

“...Okay then,” I said. “Explain to me how poetry has meaning.”

“Please don’t,” my Soulmate quietly interrupted.

“What is there to explain?” the Traveler asked. “In poetry, you have to finesse the words in the poem so that the poem evokes meaning. That’s art. That’s real art. And because poetry is a real art, unlike stories, poetry is meaningful.”

“So, your saying that because of the craft of poetry, poetry is meaningful?” I asked.

“Yes, that’s what I’m saying.”

“But don’t stories have their own craft?”

“...No.”

“How don’t they?”

“Because you can just make up the story.”

“But if stories are just made up, then couldn’t we say that poetry is also made up?”

“...No.”

“Then what’s the difference?”

“There’s a world of difference.”

“But what’s the difference...? They’re both forms of writing. And by your understanding, if one is made up, then the other has to be made up.”

“No.”

“Then what’s the difference?”

“...How hard is it for you to understand? Poetry takes craft. It takes real craft. Stories don’t.”

“But they’re both forms of writing, aren’t they?”

“...Yes, they are.”

“Then if one of those forms is made up, then mustn’t the other form of writing also be made up?”

The Traveler paused, looking back at me.

What a moron.

“...Okay,” the Traveler finally said. “Stories and poetry have different crafts. But poetry takes more discipline.”

“Says who?” I asked.

“I do.”

“And you’re right?”

“Yes, I’m right.”

“You’re always right?”

“No, I didn’t say that I’m always right.”

“But you think that poetry takes more discipline?”

“Yes, I do.”

“And that makes you right?”

“No, I am right because poetry does take more discipline.”

“No, you’re not. From my perspective, writing stories takes more discipline, but from your perspective poetry takes more discipline, which doesn’t make either of us right or wrong. It’s just what we believe. You’re not right.”

“You’re not right either then.”

“Yes, but I’m not claiming to be right.”

The Traveler paused again, looking back at me.

You must feel like a real moron now, huh? Huh, Traveler? You imbecile. You fool. I hope you feel your shame.

But then, suddenly, the Traveler began to chuckle.

What’s going on here? How’s this Traveler not embarrassed?

Or maybe, this Traveler is embarrassed, but is masking it by laughing.

“...If you say so,” the Traveler said. “I’m going to go. It’s, uh, it’s been fun.”

Then the Traveler stood up, looked to my Soulmate and smiled.

“Thanks for the food,” the Traveler said to my Soulmate.

“You’re welcome,” my Soulmate replied.

Then the Traveler looked to me.

“Nice to meet you,” the Traveler said to me.

The Traveler put out a hand.

Yeah, this Traveler feels embarrassed alright.

I shook the Traveler’s hand and smiled.

“You too,” I said.

The Traveler turned around and left.

But then, suddenly, I felt a slap on my arm.

“Ow!” I exclaimed.

I immediately turned around and saw my Soulmate staring back at me.

“What was that all about?” my Soulmate asked me.

“What was that all about?” I asked. “What do you mean ‘what was that all about?’”

But my Soulmate looked away from me and then began to clean up the leftover food.

I walked around, into my Soulmate’s line of sight.

“I didn’t do anything wrong,” I said.

“You did,” my Soulmate responded.

“What? What did I do wrong?”
My Soulmate stopped and looked back at me.
“You didn’t have to continue arguing,” my Soulmate said. “You could have stopped at any point, but you didn’t. You had to prove yourself.”
I had to prove myself? Where is this coming from?
My Soulmate went back to cleaning up the food.
“...Did you see how your friend was behaving?” I asked.
“Yes, I did,” my Soulmate said. “I saw the whole thing.”
“Then how can you blame me...? How can you blame me?”
My Soulmate stopped and looked at me again.
“I don’t blame you,” my Soulmate said. “I just expect more from you.”
We were caught staring at each other.
My Soulmate is right. I got carried away and behaved in a way that I’m not proud of.
My Soulmate went back to cleaning up the food.
And so, I took a deep breath and helped my Soulmate.
I then looked over to my Soulmate.
And my Soulmate looked back at me.
Once we were done, we faced each other.
“...Come here,” my Soulmate said to me.
I moved closer, as my Soulmate gave me a kiss and a hug.
“I’m sorry,” I said.
“It’s okay,” my Soulmate said. “It’s forgotten.”
We both smiled and were finally together.

I went to see my Soulmate and found my Soulmate finishing a lesson.

My Soulmate noticed me, finished the lesson and approached me.

“Hey,” my Soulmate said nonchalantly.
Have I done something wrong? I thought we had made

up, but then why the lack of energy? Maybe, I haven't given it enough time. Or maybe, my Soulmate is just tired from the long day. Yeah, that's probably it.

I smiled and gave my Soulmate a hug and a kiss.

"How was your day?" I asked.

"Good," my Soulmate answered.

But then, my Soulmate just turned around and started to pack up.

And so, I helped my Soulmate pack up.

Something's wrong.

Is it me? Was it something I did? No. No. We have worked things out. So, something must be going on with my Soulmate.

But what is it? I don't know. If I am to find out, I'll have to tread lightly. A wrong word or a wrong gesture could be trouble.

"Do you need to go home now?" I asked my Soulmate.

But my Soulmate just looked away, finished packing, walked off into the open field and sat down.

I followed and sat beside my Soulmate.

"...Are you happy?" I asked my Soulmate.

"Yeah," my Soulmate answered. "...I'm happy."

Are you really happy though? Or are those words just noise? I can't tell. And that makes my heart sink.

Eventually, my Soulmate sighed, stretching both arms to the sky and lay down.

Again, I followed, lying down and nestling next to my Soulmate.

Is my Soulmate going to share something important? I don't know. All I can do is be with my Soulmate and wait until my Soulmate is comfortable to share whatever is on my Soulmate's mind.

"...What do you want to do with your life?" my Soulmate asked me.

What do I want to do with my life? That's a question I'd never been asked before. Most usually ask, 'what do you

want?’ or something along those lines. But ‘what do you want to do with your life?’, that’s another question altogether.

The question suggests that our lives are something that we own and that the most important part of our lives is what we do with them. I like it. I like how the question acknowledges that life is about what we spend our time doing and not about arriving at some destination.

And besides, none of us know what we really want anyway. So, we might as well make life about what we enjoy doing and not about what we want.

Also, most put so much emphasis on what they want that they don’t consider what they have.

But what do I want to do with my life? I don’t know. I’ve never been asked the question, so I have never thought it through.

“...I don’t know really,” I answered.

“You don’t know?” my Soulmate asked.

“I’ve never thought about it.”

“You haven’t thought about it?”

“Yeah, I’ve never thought about it.”

“How have you never thought about it?”

“It’s never occurred to me.”

“... You don’t know what you want?”

“No, I’ve never really wanted anything.”

“Nothing?”

“Yeah, nothing.”

“...I don’t understand that.”

“...What do you mean, ‘you don’t understand that?’”

“...How can’t you know what you want to do with your life?”

“Because I’ve never really wanted anything.”

“You’ve never really wanted anything?”

What have I done wrong? I’m being honest, but my Soulmate’s upset. What have I done wrong?

“...I’ve never really wanted anything because I can’t

know what I really want,” I said.

“What?” my Soulmate asked. “You can’t know what you really want?”

“Yes, no one can know what they really want.”

“That makes no sense.”

“Look, if I ask you what you really want, your deepest desire, you’ll give me an answer like riding horses. But if I ask you, ‘why do you want to ride horses?’, you might give me a response like, ‘because it’s fun.’ Fair enough. But if I then ask you, ‘why do you want that?’, you might give me a reason. And if you give me a reason, then I’ll ask again, ‘why do you want that?’ And if you give me another reason, then I’ll ask again, ‘why do you want that?’ And I’ll keep asking, ‘why do you want to do that?’, until you realize that you’re running around in circles.”

My Soulmate just looked back at me.

“...No one can actually know what they really want because we can never land on what it is we really want,” I concluded.

“...So, are you saying you don’t really want to be with me?” my Soulmate asked me.

How do I reply to that? I love my Soulmate, but none of us can know what we really want.

Maybe, I don’t really want to be with my Soulmate. Is that possible?

No. No, that’s not true. I do really want to be with my Soulmate.

But that would mean that the Sage was wrong. We can know what we really want.

But how? How could we know? Wouldn’t we still be running around in circles attempting to realize what it is that we really want? I suppose so. We can never pin down what we really want, our inner most desire. We can only chase what we believe we really want.

And that would mean that I don’t really want to be with my Soulmate. I do care about my Soulmate. I do love my

Soulmate. But being with my Soulmate isn't what I really want, my innermost desire. Nothing is. And nothing can be.

Eventually, my Soulmate stood up and began to walk away.

"Wait!" I shouted.

I got up and chased after my Soulmate.

"Wait a moment," I said.

But my Soulmate just kept on walking.

And so, I ran after my Soulmate.

"I care about you!" I shouted.

My Soulmate kept on walking.

But I caught up to my Soulmate and stood before my Soulmate.

"I care about you," I repeated. "I care about you so, so much. And that's what matters. It's about us. It's about you and me. How you resonate with me and how I resonate with you. That's-That's what love is. That's..."

A tear ran down my cheek.

What do I say? What can I say to make my Soulmate understand? I don't know. I don't know.

I love you. I love you.

"...I love you," I said to my Soulmate.

"...Do you?" my Soulmate asked me.

I froze, looking back at my Soulmate.

And then my Soulmate just turned around and walked away.

My universe is fading away.

I wandered home.

What should I have said? Or what should I have done? I don't know. I can't know now. It's too late.

But do I really not want to be with my Soulmate?

I can't keep going over this. We can't know what we really want. There's no way.

But what does that mean for us? Do we just endlessly go around in our circles? Is that it for us? No solution? No

answer? No. That isn't true. There must be an answer. There has to be.

What's the answer though? I mean, since I don't really want my Soulmate, then love might not be the answer. Maybe. Maybe not. I don't know.

Or maybe, legacy is the answer. I have to continue to write my story.

Although, maybe, legacy isn't the answer either. I don't know.

My heart began to race and my body started to perspire.

No. No. No. No. No. I had won. I had beaten my emptiness.

I began to run home, while clutching my heart.

I'm almost there. I'm almost there. I'm almost there. I'm almost there. I'm almost there. I'm almost there. I'm almost there.

I eventually made it home, lay down and got my breath back.

How did this happen? I had won.

Or so I thought.

How could this happen? How come my emptiness keeps coming back? I don't know.

Tears started to run down my face.

I don't know. I don't know. I don't know.

And so, I just lay there, crying.

I don't know anymore. I don't know what to do. I don't know. I don't know.

And then Mum came in, saw me and ran towards me.

"Hey, hey, hey, hey," Mum said.

Mum helped me up and wrapped her arms around me.

"It's okay," Mum said. "It's okay."

I wiped a few of the tears and looked back at Mum.

"I'm sorry," I said to Mum.

"Don't be," Mum said.

"I'm such a mess."

Mum just looked back at me.

And so, I just looked back at Mum.
But then, suddenly, Mum smiled at me.
What is Mum smiling at? Is something wrong with her?
Or was it something I did?
But Mum kept smiling.
And eventually, I couldn't help but laugh.
And then Mum started to laugh with me.
I need this.
We both slowly settled down.
"...Thanks, Mum," I said.
"...Do you want to talk about it?" Mum asked me.
No. No, I don't know if I can handle it right now. Maybe,
later.
Mum eventually hugged me and gave me a kiss on the cheek.
"You don't have to tell me," Mum said.
I want to. I want to open up, but I can't. Not right now.
Mum then stood up, turned around and slowly walked away.
Maybe, I should have said something.

I was attempting to write, but then I moaned, throwing my arms in the air and looked away.
What should I have done? I don't know. I'll never know.
All I can do is go forward, go forward into oblivion.
What a terrible premise. We're born, we live and we die and there's no stopping it.
Or at least, I haven't found a way to stop death. There has to be a way. There has to be some answer. I just haven't found it yet.
And what about my Soulmate? I can't fix what had happened. I can only look forward. We can only look forward.
So, how can I fix the mess I've made? How can I rekindle my relationship, my love for my Soulmate? I don't know. I guess, really, the only thing I can do is apologize.

It's the most obvious thing to do. And it's probably the best thing to do. I have to apologize.

But how? I have to be precise with my words. Otherwise, I might fall into another conflict with my Soulmate.

But at the same time, I can't be unprepared. I might say something I shouldn't have and make the wrong impression. I need a balance between prepared and spontaneous.

Although, how does one be both prepared and spontaneous? It seems that we either fall into one or the other in any given moment. There's no middle.

Or is there? Maybe, if I prepare myself to be spontaneous, then I could balance the two. I don't know. Maybe, I'm overthinking everything again.

But that's where it gets tough. How do I know when I'm overthinking? And how do I know when I haven't put enough thought in? How do I tell the difference? I don't know. Both overthinking and not thinking enough make us feel overwhelmed and cause us to remain stagnant.

But then, maybe, it isn't so much about whether I'm overthinking or not thinking enough, but about how I'm stagnating. I mean, whether I'm overthinking or not thinking enough, I'm feeling overwhelmed and that can't be good for me. That's what I have to change.

So, I have to get going again. I have to get moving again. That's what matters.

I have to apologize to my Soulmate, regardless of how much thought was put in.

I headed towards my Soulmate's place.

I'm sorry that I said, "I didn't really want to be with you." I didn't mean it. I do care about you. I do love you. And I do really want to be with you. I know that now. I can't live another day without you. I can't. I need you. I love you. I love you. And I really want to be with you. I really want to be with you.

I eventually reached my Soulmate's place and took a deep breath.

This is it. Now is the time.

I slowly approached my Soulmate's place.

I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry.

But then, suddenly, I noticed my Soulmate in the arms of the Traveler.

I froze.

What's going on? What's happening?

And then my Soulmate gave the Traveler a kiss.

No!

My heart soared off and sweat began to pour, as I just stood there, watching.

And then, my Soulmate stood back and gave the Traveler a hug and as they embraced, my Soulmate looked towards me and saw me.

I just looked back at my Soulmate.

My Soulmate then let go, quickly pushing the Traveler away and rushed towards me.

Tears started to flow, as I turned around and ran away with my head down.

Why? Why? Why? Why? Why?

"Wait!" my Soulmate shouted.

I stopped, turned around and saw my Soulmate running after me, only for my Soulmate to quickly catch up and stand before me.

I kept looking back at my Soulmate and eventually wiped my tears.

"...I'm sorry you saw that," my Soulmate said to me.

"Why?" I asked. "Was I not meant to see that?"

"You know what I mean."

"...Why?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know? How can you not know?"

"I don't know. I really don't know."

"...How come I don't believe you?"

My Soulmate just kept looking back at me.

"...How long have you two...?" I asked.

"We don't need to get into that," my Soulmate said.

"Fine, I don't care anyway."

I wiped another tear.

"...Do you love me?" I asked my Soulmate.

"Yes," my Soulmate said. "Of course, I love you."

"Then how could you hurt me?"

My Soulmate looked away from me, before looking back at me and taking a few quiet steps towards me.

"...I'm sorry," my Soulmate said. "I'm really sorry. I didn't mean for it to happen. I just...I felt alone. And I needed someone."

"But what about me?" I asked. "What about me?"

"...I know."

"...I love you. I love you. Does that mean anything to you?"

"Yes. Of course, it does. It means everything."

"Then why am I a victim here?"

"...Because I'm stupid."

My Soulmate began to cry.

What do I do? Console my Soulmate? Do I care for my Soulmate? I don't know.

It hurts so much. Everything hurts so much.

But then my Soulmate wiped a few tears and looked up at me.

"I'm stupid," my Soulmate said. "And I don't deserve you."

No. No. You're not stupid. I know. I know that. You're amazing. Beautiful. You're everything.

But everything is flawed. Imperfect. And painful.

You're painful. And I can't live with you. I can't live with the pain.

I then turned around, walked off and left my Soulmate behind me.

I ran towards home.

Was that the right thing to do? I don't know. I don't know anymore. I could have consoled my Soulmate.

But my Soulmate hurt me. My Soulmate betrayed me. How could I accept that? How could I accept such pain? How could anyone accept such pain? I don't know. Pain shouldn't be allowed. So, yes. I did the right thing.

But then again, pain still comes for us. Maybe, pain is inevitable. Yes, pain is inevitable. And since that's the case, then maybe, I should have consoled my Soulmate. Since we all suffer, since we all experience pain, then maybe, that's a reason to help each other. Maybe. Maybe, I didn't do the right thing.

Although, if pain is an incentive to help each other, then how come no one is helping me? How come no one cares for me? No one cares. No one. I'm alone. We're all alone. I did the right thing. I did the right thing in leaving my Soulmate.

But the pain. It's still so painful. I cared for my Soulmate. I loved my Soulmate so, so much. And this is how it ends. This is what comes of love. How can we live with love if we know that love will end? And end with such torment, such agony, misery? How can we endure such torture? How? How? How? How? I don't know. I don't know.

I ran to a stop.

But what does it matter? Why does any of it matter? Why not let my emptiness take over? Why not just succumb to my emptiness?

My heart began to race and sweat began to perspire.

I can't let Mum see me like this. I can't burden Mum with my emptiness. I won't allow it. I have to get away. I have to go far away.

And so, I wandered off.

I kept wandering.

What am I to do with my life? I have no idea. I have

nothing to live for. I don't have my Soulmate. I don't have Mum anymore. I have nothing. Nothing. That's life.

I passed through fields, trees and rivers.

But then, suddenly, from nowhere, a stranger appeared and pushed me to the ground.

"Where are your talents?" the stranger yelled at me.

My heart raced faster.

"Where are your talents?" the stranger shouted again.

"I don't have any," I answered.

"Liar!"

The stranger began to search me, going through everything that I had, only to eventually stop and look back at me.

"Where are your talents?" the stranger asked me.

I just looked back at the stranger.

And then the stranger started to search me again, only to find my story and pull it out.

"What's this?" the stranger asked me.

I just looked back at my story in the stranger's hands.

"What's this?" the stranger shouted at me.

"My book," I answered.

"A book?"

"Yes."

The stranger paused, looking back at me.

I paused, looking back at the stranger.

But then, suddenly, the stranger just threw my story far away, only for my story to land in a dirt puddle.

No. No, no, no, no, no, no, no.

The stranger quickly ran away.

And so, I crawled towards my story, picked it up and dusted the dirt off.

But my words were all smudged.

I slumped down, dropped what remained of my story on the ground and just lay there, looking up at the sky and closed my eyes.

I'm done. I'm done with life.

I woke up, gradually slouched up with a moan and looked around me.

Why go on? What's the point? We're all going to die anyway, so why go on? There's no point in living. All things end. Legacy. Love. All things fade into nothing. Nothing lasts. So, why go on? Why live? Especially when it's not worth it. Might as well turn over my wrists.

I slowly got up and began to wander, looking over my surroundings.

How could I do it?

I continued to wander until I found a small sharp stone.

That'll do.

I fell to my knees, picked up the stone and placed the sharp end of the stone over my wrist.

It'll all be over soon.

My heart began to race, my body constricted, sweat started to pour and the air escaped me as I pushed the sharp end of the stone into my wrist, drawing a spec of blood.

This is it.

But then, eventually, I gasped, threw the stone far away and slouched back, allowing the air to fill me.

Why can't I do it? It's not hard. It's not hard at all. But I can't do it. I just can't. I don't know. I don't know.

I began to cry, sitting there, huddled up, alone.

What can I do? What can I do? I can't go on living like this. I just can't. If I am to go on living, I have to find the answer. I have to. I have to find the answer to all this.

I wiped the tears that covered my face, slowly stood up and made my way forward.

I have to find this answer. I have to find this answer. I have to find this answer. I have to find this answer. I have to find this answer. I have to find this answer. I have to find this answer.

But then I stopped.

Where do I find this answer? If I knew, I would have

found the answer already.

I started to walk forward again, at a slower pace.

If I knew where I could find the answer, I would have found the answer already.

I don't know. I've tried reading books, talking to others, but nothing. No answer. No clue as to which direction to walk in. Maybe, this is something that no one knows. Maybe, no one knows the answer.

No. No. Surely, there's someone out there. There has to be. But if there was anyone, at least anyone that I knew, it would have been the Sage. The Sage would have known the answer. The Sage knew everything. But it's too late now.

So, what can I do? Find another Sage? I doubt it. I haven't met anyone else like the Sage. Although, there might be someone else out there. I mean, if the Sage could come to those realizations, then someone else might have come to those same realizations, or similar realizations.

I don't know. We each experience life differently. So, how could someone else have come to the same realizations as the Sage? They couldn't. We each come to our own realizations. We each come to our own answers. We each realize our own answers.

So maybe, maybe, there is no answer to death. Maybe, there is no answer to life. I mean, how could there be? We are all neither right nor wrong. There's no right answer. And there's no wrong answer. There's just what we do. That's it. So, there can't be an answer.

How could I have missed this? It's been right in front of me. It was there all along. There is no answer. There is no great answer to life.

But that's terrible. If there isn't an answer to life, then why go on living? Why live? I don't know. Maybe, there's no reason, or at least, there isn't a good one.

But why is that bad? Is it really so terrible that there's no reason to live? We say that, 'there must be a reason for why we're here,' 'there must be a purpose to life,' but we

never think to ask, 'why is it so terrible that life shouldn't have a purpose?'

And I don't know why it's terrible. I couldn't provide an answer, a good one that is. I guess we just assume that not having a great purpose to life is terrible, without being able to explain why it's so terrible in the first place.

I mean, if anything, it's kind of a relief in a way. We don't have to go on searching for some great answer that isn't there. We can just enjoy and appreciate life. We can just be. We don't have to do anything extraordinary. We don't have to go beyond and above ourselves. We can just be. We can just love.

And sure, life has its troughs, but life has its peaks too. Life comes with both. We can't have a peak without a trough, just like how we can't have ups without downs, on without off, light without darkness. A thing requires its opposite in order for us to distinguish the thing from its opposite.

And it's not like we need a purpose to go on living. We've lived without a great purpose all our lives. So, why do we need a purpose? We don't. We don't need some great answer to go on living. We've done just fine without some great answer.

Well, I haven't of late, but I had before. Before, when I wasn't so anxious to find the answer, the answer that isn't there.

That's what we do. We lead ourselves to believe that there's an answer to the struggle that we're going through. But there isn't. There isn't an answer.

And there isn't a struggle. There is, but since the answer doesn't exist, then mustn't the question that suggests the answer not exist also? It can't exist. The answer and the question are made up. It's all made up, like words. Words, numbers, symbols and images, they're all made up. It's all made up.

But what's left? What's left once we lift the veil?

I came to a halt and clapped my hands...

...*Life is*...

...*We are*...

...There is no great answer to life. There is no great aim. There's just...

...And it all makes sense. Everything grows out of nothing. And it all comes together. What happens to us and what we do is all one process. And in a way, all we are, are the vehicles for life to be experienced. We are life being experienced subjectively.

I started to walk forward again.

And that must have been why the Sage wanted me to ask questions. The Sage wanted me to eventually realize that there is no great answer to life. There is no great aim. Life isn't going anywhere. Life doesn't have some destination to arrive at. Life just plays, like a dance, like music.

And when we dance, when we play, or listen to music, we surrender. We surrender to the now. And we feel infinite. When we think, life feels finite. But when we only feel, life feels infinite.

And nothing needs to be done.

That's why we should keep asking questions. Questions teach us that there is no great answer. There's just the realizations that each of us comes to. That's it. Nothing more.

And really, really, I did this to myself. I caused all my problems. Since it's all made up, then I made up all my problems. I am responsible for all my problems. I am responsible. When I'm behaving irresponsibly, I have to be responsible for my irresponsibility. Even when I'm not taking responsibility, when I believe I'm not responsible, I have to be responsible for believing that I'm not responsible. I can't not be responsible. I can only be responsible. I take a step, and I am responsible. I raise my hand, and I am responsible. I utter a word, and I am responsible. I'm sad, and I am responsible. I'm frustrated, and I am responsible. I'm angry, and I am responsible. I'm afraid, and I am responsible. I'm anxious, and I am responsible. I suffer, and I am responsible. I am always responsible. I just hadn't realized it yet. Or maybe, I had forgotten. Either way, I am always responsible. I am responsible for myself and for

everyone else. I am responsible.

And I am free. I am free. I'm not bound by any problem because all problems are just thoughts. They're not real. I mean, if we didn't think, we wouldn't have problems. We wouldn't have solutions either. We wouldn't have anything. All problems, all solutions, all things are just thoughts. And all thoughts are just words. And all words are made up. Problems aren't real. They're made up. And therefore, I am free.

And I am complete. I am whole. I am whole because I am the experience, this happening, this totality, life. That doesn't mean that I, as in my name, my character is life. It suggests that consciousness, awareness, which I am embodying, is life. Awareness is life. And I am aware. I am life.

I am worthy.

I am...

The smiling sun beamed down like it had never before. The sounds were soft. And the smell was sweet.

I continued my way forward with aching muscles, dry lips and a growling stomach.

Have others arrived at the realization that I had come to? I don't know. But if others had, I doubt there'd be many. I mean, if many had, then someone would have at least helped me to come to this great realization sooner. But that didn't happen. Most likely, most of us haven't come to this realization. Or maybe, no one else has come to this realization. Maybe, I'm the only one.

But what if others had arrived at this realization? What would have happened? Well, if everyone realized what I had realized, then no one would attempt to find some answer that isn't there. Everyone would just enjoy life. We'd just appreciate and experience life. We'd just live. We'd just love.

We wouldn't get in our own way. We wouldn't get

caught up in our own anxieties. We wouldn't miss out on the experience because we believe that there's some answer out there for us. And we wouldn't get into arguments with ourselves because we believe we have found the answer. We wouldn't fight with ourselves over what we believe is the answer. We wouldn't hurt ourselves. All conflicts would end. And we'd just live in peace.

How come we haven't realized this? How come we haven't helped each other to realize this? I mean, we could end all wars and learn to respect and care for and love each other. Just imagine that. Imagine a universe where we all respect each other, where we all care for and love each other. Imagine that universe.

So, how come we haven't helped each other realize that there is no answer? We all must not have realized this yet. We all haven't realized that there is no answer.

That just means that I have to help everyone else come to this realization. I have to help everyone else realize that there is no answer. I have to help everyone else realize that it's a relief that there is no answer too. I have to do this. That's my purpose.

Is that right though? Could I make up my purpose? I guess so. I mean, since everything is made up, then that would mean that any purpose, any meaning that we have in our lives is made up.

And what's wrong with that? What's wrong with making up my purpose? I don't know. So long as the purpose that's made up doesn't harm others in any way, there's nothing wrong with that.

And what made our made-up purpose unique is that it's ours. Our purpose is our own. It's personal to us. Our purpose won't have come from someone else who imposed their beliefs and values on us. It would be our own. Our purpose in life would be our own.

And wouldn't we be more willing to get behind our own purpose? Wouldn't we be more willing to defend our own

purpose? Wouldn't we be more willing to help others, care for others, respect others, empathize with others, love others through our own purpose?

That's it. That's it. It isn't that there is some ultimate purpose. We create. We just create. We create through what we do. And through doing, through creating, we inadvertently create meaning.

There was water.

And so, I ran towards the water, scooped some of the water up with my hands and drank it.

But then, suddenly, I caught my reflection in the water. My reflection made me smile.

I then continued to drink the water, sat back and immersed myself in life.

As I continued forward, my attention was caught by a plant.

What's so special about this plant? Is it just me? Or is the plant beautiful without me? How can I tell?

But why does it matter? The plant is beautiful. It's beautiful as it is.

I slowly approached the plant, crouched down and gently caressed it with my hand.

Does a plant need to explain to itself why it exists? Does a plant need a reason to live? No. A plant just grows. There's beauty in that. And why should we be any different?

I eventually stood up and walked off, watching everything around me.

And how do we just grow? How do we grow when our thoughts can get in our way? We question everything to realize that everything is made up and give ourselves the space to just feel. And from that place, grow, like a plant.

The issue is that we attempt to solve life as if life is some giant problem, by rationalizing everything, by using thoughts. And thoughts are nothing more than words. And words are made up. It's a losing battle. Like trying to burn

fire, we can never get at it.

Life isn't a problem that needs to be solved, but is an experience that should be embraced.

My stomach kept on growling, as I inched my way forward, while looking for food and shelter.

But then I stopped, took a deep breath, looked around and saw some berries. And so, I walked over to the berries, analyzed them, picked them out and started to eat. The berries made me smile. I then continued forward, while eating those berries.

Eventually, I found a burrow, slowly approached it and looked inside.

The burrow was empty.

I then pushed against the walls. The walls remained intact. And so, I sat there, nestled in and finished eating my berries.

This isn't so bad. It could be much worse. I could have not found these berries and continued to starve, but I didn't.

I'm going to be okay. Everything will be okay. I don't know how, but that doesn't matter. Everything will be okay.

What do I have to worry about? What do I have to worry about when everything will be okay? Worrying really is unnecessary.

Everything will be okay.

My eyes opened to the moon's light, as it seeped in through the entrance of the burrow.

I rolled over, looked away from the light and closed my eyes again. But my neck had tightened. And so, I began to toss and turn, until I stopped, took a deep breath, slowly crawled out of the burrow and just sat outside, looking up at the moon.

This universe really is something special. We sometimes just pretend that it's not. All we have to do is feel it. And not play into the illusions, these walls that we have constructed.

And if we can do that, we'll be able to live in peace. We'll be able to live in a universe where we could at the very least respect each other despite our different challenges, our different values, our different beliefs and different appearances.

And sure, there'll still be challenges. Just because we could all respect each other doesn't mean we won't have to face disease or a raging environment. There will always be challenges. But if we could respect each other, we would make it so much easier on ourselves by working together to create solutions to these challenges and not get in each other's way.

Imagine that universe. Imagine a universe where we live in peace. And the great thing is, it's well within our potential. All we have to do is feel. Just feel.

The moon passed and the sun appeared, as I continued to sit there, observing life.

But then I heard the heavy breathing and odd sounds of something approaching.

I quickly stood up and turned around.

And then, suddenly, a stranger appeared with a wounded leg, slowly shuffling in my direction. The Cripple looked up and saw me.

"Hi, there," the Cripple said.

"Hi," I replied.

"Do you have a spare talent I could borrow?"

"No, I don't."

The Cripple moaned and continued to shuffled on past me.

"Do you know where the nearest village is?" I asked the Cripple.

The Cripple stopped, looked back at me and then pointed back from where the Cripple had come.

"There's a village a little down that way," the Cripple said. "Just follow the path."

“Thanks,” I replied.
“But there’s nothing there. There’s nothing anywhere.”
“Oh. Why do you say that?”
“Because all the work is taken.”
“All the work? There must be some work available.”
“No, all the work is taken.”
“Then how have you been able to eat?”
“I’ve had to grovel.”
“I’m sorry to hear that.”
“...I just want it all to end.”
“Why? There’s so much to life.”
“What is there?”
“...Everything.”
“Everything? How can you say that in your position?”
I looked away.
“...Exactly,” the Cripple said. “I’m right. I’m always right.”
The Cripple began to shuffle off again.
But then I looked back up at the Cripple.
“Because all I see is possibilities,” I said to the Cripple.
The Cripple stopped and looked back at me again.
“What possibilities?” the Cripple asked me.
“The infinite possibilities we all have,” I answered.
“Infinite? Does it look like I have infinite possibilities?”
“Yes.”
“...You’re insane.”
“What makes you say that?”
“Because anyone can see that I’m impaired.”
“Yes, I won’t take that away from you. But...who are you?”
“Who am I? I’m a useless cripple. That’s who I am.”
“Why do you say that?”
“Because that’s who I am. That’s who I’ve been and that’s who I’ll always be.”
“But when you judge others, how do you judge them?”
“What?”

“When you judge others, what do you judge them by?”
“I don’t know. Why does it matter?”
“Don’t we judge others by what they do?”
“I don’t know. I haven’t thought about it much.”
“We can’t judge others by how they feel, would you agree?”
“I guess.”
“We can’t feel what others feel. We can only feel what we feel, correct?”
“And?”
“And doesn’t that mean that we can only judge others by what they do?”
“Okay. What’s your point?”
“...Because we can only judge others by what they do, then wouldn’t that mean that we are what we do?”
“Okay.”
“And wouldn’t that mean that to become who we’d like to be, we just have to do the things that are required of us to become who we’d like to be?”
The Cripple just looked back at me.
“...And wouldn’t that mean that it’s not about what we’re born with that defines our character, but about what we do that defines our character?” I asked the Cripple.
“No,” the Cripple answered. “What about my leg? I can’t run because of my leg.”
“Couldn’t you move faster if you tried?”
“No.”
“And why not?”
“Because of my leg.”
“Have you tried?”
“I don’t need to.”
“You haven’t tried?”
“No, I don’t need to try with my leg.”
I just stared back at the Cripple.
And the Cripple just stared back at me.
I then turned away and began to look around.

How can I help this Cripple see? What to do? What to do?

Eventually, my attention landed on two big rocks that had some distance between them.

That'll do.

And so, I turned back to the Cripple.

"Why don't we try an exercise?" I asked.

"No," the Cripple answered.

"Why not?"

"Because I don't have to do anything you tell me to."

"You don't. But if you're right, what are you afraid of?"

"...Okay. Fine."

"Could you walk between these two rocks as fast as you can?"

I pointed to the two big rocks.

And so, the Cripple shuffled over to the closest rock and looked at me.

"Ready?" the Cripple asked me.

"Yes," I answered.

The Cripple then turned around, shuffled as fast as possible to the other rock and looked to me.

"There," the Crippled said to me. "Happy?"

"Now, can you walk back at a faster pace?" I asked the Cripple.

The Cripple sighed.

"C'mon," I said.

And so, the Cripple faced the opposite rock, quickly shuffled towards it and turned back to me.

"How was that?" the Cripple asked me.

I just smiled back at the Cripple.

"What are you smiling at?" the Cripple asked me.

"I asked you to walk as fast as possible the first time, correct?" I asked the Cripple.

"Yes."

"And the second time you walked faster."

The Cripple just looked back at me.

“...How can you be limited when you can go beyond your limitations?” I asked the Cripple.

“But I still can’t run,” the Cripple stated.

“Not yet. But with some effort, why couldn’t you?”

“...No. No, it’s impossible.”

“Is it?”

“Yes. And don’t think you can trick me into believing that it is when it’s not. I’ve tried everything and it’s impossible. It’s impossible. So, don’t try to trick me. You can’t.”

This Cripple is just not open to potential, to possibilities. This Cripple is so convinced of the story being told in the mind that I don’t think I can do anything to help.

And so, the Cripple eventually turned around and shuffled off.

I watched the Cripple leave and then walked to the village.

It’s a shame that the Cripple is so closed off to possibilities.

But what could I have done? The Cripple is asleep. Maybe, it takes some time to wake some of us up. Or maybe, some of us can’t be woken up. How sad. How sad it is that some are so convinced by the sad story they tell themselves.

But then again, I don’t have to wake others up. Whether I wake others up or not, life is beautiful. And it always will be. Life doesn’t need me to change it. I don’t need to do anything. I can just embrace life. I can just celebrate life. I can just love. I can just love.

Moving forward, I continued lugging my aching feet and sore legs, but all while wearing a smile.

And eventually I made it to the village, wandered into it and looked around.

However, as I made my way, there were many villagers staring back at me.

Why are they so curious? I wonder.

I began to smile to each of the villagers and got a few smiles back.

This village seems very friendly.

I eventually found myself in the middle of the village and came to a stop.

“...Are you okay?” a voice suddenly asked me.

I turned to the voice and saw a stranger with dirty hands, standing at a bit of a distance from me.

I smiled to the stranger.

“I’m happy,” I answered the stranger. “How are you?”

“I’m good,” the stranger answered. “Are you lost?”

“No, I’m where I should be.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know. I just feel that this is a good place.”

“...Do you have a place to stay?”

“No, I don’t.”

“I have a spare room if you’d like to stay the night.”

“...Thank you.”

“Come with me then.”

The stranger walked me into a shop that showcased a variety of ceramics.

“Did you make these?” I asked the stranger.

The stranger stopped and saw me looking over all the ceramics.

“Yes,” the stranger answered.

This stranger is a Shopkeeper.

“These are beautiful,” I said.

“Beautiful?” the Shopkeeper asked.

“Yes.”

“I wouldn’t call them beautiful.”

“Why’s that?”

“...I don’t know why.”

“Well, I think they’re beautiful.”

“...Are you hungry too? I could make you something if you’d like.”

“That would be amazing.”

“Let me show you where you’ll be sleeping and then I’ll bring you something to eat.”

And so, the Shopkeeper showed me where I was to sleep.

“This is it,” the Shopkeeper said. “I know it’s not much.”

“No,” I said. “This is amazing.”

“Is everything beautiful and amazing to you?”

“...Yes.”

“...I’ll see what I have for you to eat.”

The Shopkeeper turned around and left.

I then sat down, crossed my legs and closed my eyes.

Why was it that the Cripple couldn’t find food when this Shopkeeper is kind enough to give me food? Is it because the Cripple was unlucky to not have found this kind Shopkeeper, or another kind shopkeeper in this village? Or is it because I’m fortunate enough to be taken in by this Shopkeeper? I could speculate forever on these questions.

But what is luck? There’s no such thing. So, there must be some reason for why the Cripple struggled to find food in this village.

What could have been the reason? We almost look the same. The Cripple is impaired, but other than that, we look similar. And I doubt that these villagers wouldn’t give the Cripple food because of the Cripple’s impairment.

So, what could it be? Since I’m guessing, it might have to do with the Cripple’s attitude. The Cripple liked to complain. And I don’t blame the Cripple. I understand that. I like to complain too. It’s so much easier to complain, even though it gets us nowhere.

But that could be it. That could have been the reason why the villagers weren’t accepting of the Cripple.

And what could have added to the Cripple’s attitude is the story that the Cripple is being told. The Cripple is so convinced that there is no work in this village that the Cripple couldn’t get any work. The Cripple is closed off to

any opportunity that's staring right back at the Cripple.

And most of us are like this really. Most of us are so convinced of the story we tell ourselves that we're closed off to opportunities that are right in front of us. We believe in our story and because of that, to us at least, it is so. Believe it and it is so.

And what could we do about it? Are we supposed to not believe? We couldn't do that. To not believe means to not think. For what is a belief? A belief comes from thought. A belief comes from a thought, a thought that one continuously focuses on. Really, that's all a belief is. A belief is just a thought that one continuously focuses on. Nothing more.

And so, what would happen if we don't believe? If we don't believe, we'll have to live without thought. And we can't do that. As much suffering as thought can cause us, we can't live without thought.

Or can we? Can we live without thought? Can we live just feeling?

Suddenly, I heard a clanging sound and so, I opened my eyes and turned to find the Shopkeeper carrying some food towards me.

"I'm sorry," the Shopkeeper said.

"It's okay," I replied.

"...Here's your food."

"Thank you."

I smiled, stood up and looked closer at the food.

The Shopkeeper handed the food to me.

And then I took the food, sat down again and began to eat, only to eventually stop and look to the Shopkeeper.

"This is amazing," I said.

"I'm glad," the Shopkeeper said.

I kept on eating.

"...Where are you heading?" the Shopkeeper asked me.

I stopped eating again and looked to the Shopkeeper.

"I don't know," I answered. "I'm just wandering around."

“Do you have any plans on settling?” the Shopkeeper asked me.

“I don’t know.”

“You’re just going with the flow?”

“Yes, very much so.”

We both smiled at each other.

And then I finished eating.

“I can take that,” the Shopkeeper said.

“Thank you, again,” I said.

The Shopkeeper took the empty plate.

“How about you clean up?” the Shopkeeper asked. “I’ll fetch you some new clothes.”

“That would be amazing,” I said.

“There’s that word again.”

We both smiled.

And then the Shopkeeper began to walk off.

“...Come on now,” the Shopkeeper said to me.

I quickly followed the Shopkeeper, only for the Shopkeeper to show me the space where I could wash up.

“I’ll get you those clothes,” the Shopkeeper said to me.

The Shopkeeper left.

And so, I ran the water, washed the dirt off my soft skin, closed my eyes, breathed in the steam and smiled.

This is amazing.

Eventually, I heard a knock, so I opened my eyes, turned around and noticed some clean clothes.

Those must be for me.

I dried myself off, put on the clothes, headed back in the direction from which we came and found the Shopkeeper sitting alone.

The Shopkeeper turned and saw me.

“How are the clothes?” the Shopkeeper asked me.

“They’re great,” I answered. “Thank you for all of this.”

“It’s nothing. It’s always good to help others.”

I smiled.

Should I ask something? I don’t know. I hate talking

about idle things. It always seems like a waste of time.

Plus, when others talk about trivial matters, they fall into complaining. Their complaint might be small or insignificant, but it's still a complaint. And there's no good that comes from complaining.

But I should say something. It would be terrible to be invited into this Shopkeeper's home and not be able to hold a conversation with this Shopkeeper.

Although, what could I say? What should I say? I know.

"...Did you by any chance happen to see a Cripple come through this village?" I asked the Shopkeeper.

"Yes, I did," the Shopkeeper answered. "Why do you ask?"

"On my way here, I bumped into this Cripple who said that there wasn't any work here."

"There's plenty of work here, but that Cripple wouldn't stop complaining and no one was willing to give that Cripple any work."

I am correct. It isn't just a myth. Our thoughts shape our reality. The Cripple believed that there is no work and that shaped the Cripple's workless reality, even though there is plenty of work, as the Shopkeeper stated. Our thoughts shape our reality. Our thoughts shape our reality.

And since that's the case, then why don't we use our thoughts to serve us? Why don't we use our thoughts to shape the reality we'd like to live? What's stopping us? The honest answer is nothing. There's nothing stopping us. If one is to believe that there is something stopping them, then wouldn't that be due to one believing that there is something stopping them and not due to something actually stopping them?

Our thoughts shape our reality. So, one should be aware of what one is thinking about. Or at the very least, realize and remember that thoughts are just words. They're not real. They don't mean anything.

"...Are you looking for work?" the Shopkeeper asked

me.

“...Yes, I am,” I answered. “Do you know anyone I could help?”

“What can you do?”

“...Give everything.”

“...Well, if you’re willing to give it everything, then I could use a hand around the shop.”

“What do you want help with?”

“Just another pair of hands around the shop would be nice. Are you up to it?”

“Sure.”

“Great. We can start tomorrow.”

“...If that’s the case, then I think it’d be best if I get some sleep.”

“That sounds like a good idea.”

The Shopkeeper stood up.

“Good night,” the Shopkeeper said to me.

“Good night,” I replied to the Shopkeeper.

The Shopkeeper walked off and left me alone.

We really are good. It seems that many of us believe that we are bad, selfish, wicked, but really, that’s mostly because of the story that they are telling themselves. We are good. We just have to see the good that we do in order to realize how good we really are.

I went back to where I was and fell asleep.

There was a loud thud that woke me up.

“Are you awake?” a voice asked.

I groaned, opened my eyes and looked over to where the voice was coming from. As my vision cleared, I saw the Shopkeeper standing over me.

“Are you awake?” the Shopkeeper repeated.

“Yes,” I answered.

“Let’s get going then.”

The Shopkeeper walked off.

I sluggishly stood up, put on the clothes that were beside

me, closed my eyes, took a deep breath, opened my eyes again and caught a glimpse of the sun, which caused me to smile.

Today will be a good day. I don't know what will happen. I can't know what will happen. But I can accept life. And with that, I can enjoy life. Today will be a good day.

I turned around and followed the Shopkeeper, only to find the Shopkeeper preparing the shop.

"What can I do?" I asked the Shopkeeper.

"Well, you can either spend the day with customers or spend the day making pots, plates, whatever the customers want," the Shopkeeper answered. "Which would you prefer?"

"I've never made any pots before. So, I better stick to my strengths and talk to customers."

"Then that's what we'll do today."

And so, I helped the Shopkeeper finish preparing the shop.

Once we were finished, the Shopkeeper faced me.

"I'll be checking in on you in case you need help," the Shopkeeper said to me.

"Alright," I replied.

The Shopkeeper slowly walked off and left me alone.

This is odd. How could this Shopkeeper trust me already? We only just met and this Shopkeeper is trusting me with the customers. Is this Shopkeeper senile?

Or maybe, this Shopkeeper is testing me. Maybe, this Shopkeeper is seeing if I can be trusted.

If that is so, then this Shopkeeper is taking a real risk in trusting me with the customers. One bad interaction with a customer and the Shopkeeper's reputation could be damaged. I have to be good. No. I will be good. I will be good.

And so, I continued to stand there, guarding the shop, only to feel the time passing by.

Could I do something to encourage potential customers

to come into the shop? Or am I turning this situation into a problem? It's hard to tell the difference.

All problems really are just in our heads. I mean, we are the ones who stir up negative thoughts in an attempt to go searching for solutions and convince ourselves that once we find our solutions we'll finally be complete, even though we are already complete.

All problems are thoughts. And all thoughts are just words. And all words are just made up.

So, even though I could feel the weight of time passing by, it's not a problem. I can accept that.

I took a deep breath through my nose, exhaled through my mouth and took a long glance around the shop, while listening to the sounds, feeling life playing all at once. Another smile came to me.

But then, suddenly, a Customer entered.

"Oh," the Customer said. "Hello."

"Hello," I replied.

"You're new."

"Just started today."

"How exciting."

"What can I do for you?"

"I've accidentally broken one of my plates and was wondering if I could get a new one."

"Sure. Are you looking for anything in particular?"

"I guess the one that catches my attention."

"Well, feel free to browse around. And if you need anything, feel free to ask."

The Customer nodded and then continued to browse around the shop.

I kept on watching the Customer.

And eventually the Customer stopped.

"Ah!" the Customer reacted.

The Customer then picked out a plate and walked over to me.

"I'll have this one, thanks," the Customer said.

Throughout the morning, more customers came in, in search of plates, knives, forks, spoons and small pots. Some even came in to marvel at some of the latest sculptures that the Shopkeeper had made.

But when the sun was right over us, a stranger came in with food.

“Hello?” the stranger asked.

“Hello,” I said. “How are you today?”

“I’m good.”

Suddenly, the Shopkeeper came in and saw the stranger.

“Hey,” the Shopkeeper said.

The stranger’s eyes lit up.

And then the Shopkeeper walked over to the stranger and gave the stranger a hug.

“How are you?” the stranger asked.

“Great,” the Shopkeeper answered. “Yourself?”

“Yeah,” the stranger answered. “Same.”

The Shopkeeper and the stranger let go, facing each other.

“You’ve made a new friend,” the stranger observed.

“That’s good to see.”

The Shopkeeper looked to me.

“Come over here,” the Shopkeeper said to me.

And so, I approached them.

“You have to try this,” the Shopkeeper said to me.

The stranger handed the food to me and so, I took a bite and instantly, my shoulders loosened.

“This is amazing,” I said.

The stranger smiled.

“We should sit at the table,” the Shopkeeper suggested.

“Yes,” the stranger replied.

We moved to a table, sat down and shared the food amongst ourselves.

“So, how did you come to find our village?” the stranger asked me. “What’s your story?”

“...I don’t have a story,” I answered.

“You don’t have a story?”

“No.”

“Is your story not all that interesting? Or is it something else?”

“It’s okay,” the Shopkeeper interjected. “You don’t have to badger the poor soul.”

“I’m not badgering anyone,” the stranger said to the Shopkeeper. “I’m only curious.”

Then the stranger looked to me.

“Am I badgering you?” the stranger asked me.

“No,” I answered. “Not at all.”

The stranger looked back to the Shopkeeper.

“Okay then,” the Shopkeeper said. “Continue.”

And then the stranger looked back to me.

“You don’t have to share your story if you don’t want to,” the stranger said to me.

“No, it’s not that,” I said. “I really don’t have a story. I live in the moment. And in the moment, there is no story. There’s only the now.”

“...Interesting. You’re very mysterious.”

“That’s where the fun lies.”

We all finished eating, cleaned up and returned to the shop.

I then stood back, while the Shopkeeper walked the stranger to the front entrance. They whispered a few words to each other and then the stranger left.

“How do you two know each other?” I asked the Shopkeeper.

“Old friends,” the Shopkeeper answered.

“Is that all you two are?”

The Shopkeeper paused, looking away from me, before looking back up at me.

“That’s all we are,” the Shopkeeper answered.

Then Shopkeeper eventually returned to making more ceramics, while I stood there, guarding the shop.

There must be something between the Shopkeeper and

the Shopkeeper's Old Friend. But it also seems that circumstances have gotten in their way.

Or again, maybe, it's their own thoughts that have gotten in their way.

Maybe, I can help the Shopkeeper to be with this Old Friend. Maybe, I can do the Shopkeeper a favor, like the Shopkeeper did for me. I'm not obliged to help the Shopkeeper, but it would be nice to give back.

Although, what would happen once the Shopkeeper is with this Old Friend? Would they live happily ever after? No. No, they wouldn't. Since nothing lasts forever, then how can any two individuals live happily ever after? It's impossible.

But that doesn't mean that we shouldn't enjoy life. That doesn't mean we shouldn't fall in love. That doesn't mean we shouldn't love others. It means that we shouldn't expect love to last. We shouldn't hold any expectations.

I should help the Shopkeeper.

Later, the Shopkeeper walked in with a new sculpture.

"What do you think?" the Shopkeeper asked me.

"Wow!" I responded.

The Shopkeeper handed me the sculpture.

And I inspected it.

"This is incredible," I said.

"Thanks," the Shopkeeper replied.

"How did you get into sculpting?"

"Family tradition. My father taught me and my grandfather taught my father and on and on and on."

I eventually handed the sculpture back to the Shopkeeper.

And then the Shopkeeper put the sculpture up on display.

"...Do you have any interests?" the Shopkeeper asked me.

"I used to write," I answered.

"Yeah? What happened?"

“My story got ruined.”

“I thought you said you didn’t have a story.”

“...I began writing this story that reflected my life. And I planned on writing it throughout my whole life. It had never been done before, so I thought it’d be something interesting. But then someone attacked me and in the tussle, it fell into a puddle of dirt and was ruined.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. When did this happen?”

“Not that long ago.”

“It’s frustrating when you work on something for so long and then it gets taken away.”

“Yes, it is. But that wasn’t why I wrote.”

“Oh?”

“I wrote because I loved doing it. I loved writing. It didn’t matter what I was writing, why I was writing, or for whom I was writing. None of that mattered. I just liked being in the moment. I like it when I can only feel. And writing was a way that I could do that. I realize that now.”

“...Then why don’t you start writing again?”

My eyes widened.

And then the Shopkeeper turned around and left me alone.

There’s no reason why I couldn’t start writing again. There’s no reason at all. And this time around, I wouldn’t get caught up in trying to do something that’s beyond me. I wouldn’t try to build a legacy. I would just enjoy writing. I would just write for the joy of it, to be fulfilled.

I eventually turned around, caught up to the Shopkeeper, cooked and ate with the Shopkeeper.

“Do you have anything I could use to write with?” I asked the Shopkeeper.

“Yes,” the Shopkeeper said. “Of course.”

The Shopkeeper then left and brought back some tools to write with.

“Thanks,” I said.

The Shopkeeper smiled and gave me the tools.

And so, I cleaned up, moved to a quiet space and sat down.

What to write about? What to write about?

It's been so long. It isn't that I've forgotten how to write. I remember. But it has been a long time. And I do feel a little lost.

I'm getting in my own way. All problems are in the head. I just have to surrender and see what comes of it. Don't expect the words to be perfect. Just write. Just enjoy writing.

And so, I took a deep breath and just wrote down a word.

It's one word, but at least I've started.

I then wrote down more words, constructing a sentence.

Now, we're moving.

And then, suddenly, all of my senses blended into one and all these words flowed out of me.

I eventually snapped out of it and looked back over the words that were in front of me.

Did I really write that?

I sat back and read over the words again.

I guess I did. I didn't know I could write something like this, but I guess I could.

I put my words down, stood up, walked to where I was going to be sleeping for the night and laid back down, looking up at the stars.

It's not so difficult. All I have to do is let go. It's never about trying. It's never about going beyond myself. It's always about letting go. It's always about surrendering. And when one surrenders, one is able to accept it for what it is and not for what one wants it to be. It's always about surrendering.

The sun was rising.

And so, I woke up, sat up, rubbed my eyes, took a deep breath, stood up, put on my clothes and approached the Shopkeeper.

"Can you show me how to make a sculpture?" I asked

the Shopkeeper.

“Yes,” the Shopkeeper answered. “We can do that.”

And so, we set everything up and then the Shopkeeper sat down and showed me what to do.

There’s a lot to keep track of.

This is too much. I can’t make sculptures. What am I thinking? This is ridiculous.

No, no, I’m getting in my own way again.

It seems that I can’t help but get in my own way. But then everyone’s like this. The lesson is to realize when I’m getting in my own way, stop myself from getting in my own way and allow myself to fail.

Allow myself to fail. It really is alright to fail so long as I’m failing forward. It’s alright to fail so long as we’re failing forward.

And we have to. We have to fail forward. It’s the only way we can grow. We can’t grow unless we run the risk of failure. We can’t grow unless we challenge ourselves.

Otherwise, we remain stagnant. And by remaining stagnant, we fail, but in another sense of the word. We fail without moving forward.

So, we have no choice but to risk failure in order to grow. We have to get comfortable being uncomfortable. I have to be comfortable being uncomfortable. And it’s a challenge.

But I can do it. I can do it.

“There,” the Shopkeeper said. “So, why don’t you try?”

And so, I sat down and took a long, deep breath.

“Go at your own pace,” the Shopkeeper said.

I nodded, took another long, deep breath and then started.

But then I quickly fumbled and my piece fell apart.

“That’s okay,” the Shopkeeper said. “Happened to me on my first attempt.”

I looked back and took another deep breath.

This is good. This is good.

“Hello,” I said. “How are you two doing today?”

“We’re good. And yourself?”

“I’m good, thanks for asking. What can I do for you?”

“I accidentally broke one of our bowls and we’re hoping you’d be able to put it back together for us.”

“...I don’t know if we can put bowls back together. Let me check.”

I turned around, walked away and found the Shopkeeper in the middle of making a sculpture.

“Hey,” I said.

“What is it?” the Shopkeeper asked.

“There’s a parent asking if we can put their bowl back together.”

“Oh, yeah. We’ve never done that before. Usually when customers break their pots or plates, they get a new one.”

“What should I say?”

“Ask them if they’d be willing to get a new one.”

“Okay.”

And so, I turned back around and approached the Parent.

“We don’t fix bowls unfortunately,” I explained.

“Would you be interested in a new bowl instead?”

“No,” the Child interrupted.

“...It’s not my decision,” the Parent said.

“I see,” I said.

I then looked at the Child and crouched down.

“Can I see your bowl?” I asked the Child.

The Child took out the broken pieces and showed them to me.

“Can you fix it?” the Child asked me.

“...I’ll see what I can do,” I said.

The Child gave me the broken pieces.

“Thank you,” the Parent said.

The Parent turned around and walked the Child out of the shop.

I stood back up, looked at the broken pieces, gently laid down the broken pieces in front of me and stared back at

them.

Even if I can put the pieces back together, the bowl won't be the same.

But a promise is a promise.

I went to the back of the shop and looked around.

There's nothing here.

What can I do? What can I do?

I continued my search, but eventually I stopped, leaned my head back, took a deep breath and closed my eyes.

There's something here.

A smile came to me.

I opened my eyes and looked around, until my attention was caught. And so, I walked in the direction my attention was leading me, crouched down and noticed this thick untouched fluid.

I looked around me, noticed two leaves, grabbed the leaves, took one of them, dipped the leaf into the fluid and gently placed the leaf with the fluid onto the other leaf.

The two leaves stuck together.

I stood up, looked around, found a small brush, returned to the fluid, analyzed the broken pieces and then gradually put the bowl back together and looked back at the bowl.

There's still something not quite right.

I stood up, looked around again and noticed this gold powder.

My eyes lit up.

This would be perfect.

I took the gold powder, applied it along the cracks of the bowl and then looked back at the bowl.

Now, this is magnificent.

Later, the Parent and the Child arrived.

"Did you fix it?" the Child asked me.

"I did," I answered.

The Child smiled, looking back at me.

I then showed the bowl to the Child.

But the Child's smile went sour.

"Don't you like it?" I asked.

"It's not like it was," the Child said.

"I told you it wouldn't be the same," the Parent said to the Child.

"I know."

I then looked to the Child, crouched down and looked the Child in the eyes.

"Your bowl might not be the same," I said. "But it is beautiful."

"How?" the Child asked me.

"Real beauty is not perfect, but is imperfect. And these gold cracks show us how beautiful imperfection really is."

"I don't understand."

"Do you think rainbows are beautiful?"

"Yes."

"And have you ever seen a perfectly shaped rainbow?"

"...No."

"Why is that?"

"I don't know."

"Because a rainbow does not need a perfect shape. A rainbow is beautiful as it is."

The Child kept looking back at me.

"...And this is the same," I went on. "This piece does not need a perfect shape. This piece is beautiful as it is."

I handed the bowl back to the Child.

And then the Child smiled and took the bowl.

"I get it," the Child said.

"Now, since all things are imperfect, what does that say about all things?" I asked the Child.

"...That all things are beautiful."

"You're very sharp."

The Child laughed.

"...Thank you," the Parent said.

I smiled back at the Parent and stood up.

"I'm glad I could help," I said to the Parent.

The Parent smiled back at me and then turned around

and walked the Child out of the shop.

All things are beautiful.

Customers came in with their broken bowls, plates, cups, pots, vases, sculptures and other broken ceramics, asking if they could be fixed.

And so, I put every broken piece back together and was rewarded with warm smiles, blessings, interesting stories and generous donations.

But why are the villagers so drawn to me? Is it just because I was listening to them and giving them guidance? Or is there something more?

I then went around, approached some of the villagers and asked them if they liked talking to me.

They all said that they did in some way.

And so, I'd then ask them why they liked talking to me.

But none of them knew why.

It just feels that there's something there. I don't know what it is, but I have a feeling.

And besides, it's a fun game to play.

So, what could it be? Well, when I'd talk with these villagers, we would always talk about them.

No. I wouldn't even say that. I mean, really, they would talk about themselves. I don't do much talking. I just listen.

And how many would do that? How many would just listen?

It's similar to when I stopped talking and my Old Friend would always talk to me. Maybe, that's why we became friends in the first place. I was someone who was willing to listen and my Old Friend appreciated that.

Or maybe, that's it. Maybe, many like to talk about themselves because they don't feel appreciated in their lives.

That's something that the Sage taught me. A lack of appreciation is the foundation for all of the problems we make for ourselves.

And by listening to them, by giving others my attention,

they felt appreciated. Yes. Yes. That's it. By giving others my attention, they felt appreciated. It's about giving. That's why they felt appreciated.

Giving. Giving is beautiful. And giving is something we can all do, regardless of how little we believe we have.

The villagers kept coming to me and I didn't ask for anything in return.

Later, when I was wandering through the village, I noticed a villager give their attention to another. And then I noticed another villager give their attention to another. And then I noticed another villager give their attention to another. And then I realized that all of the villagers were giving their attention to each other.

It made me smile.

It's really simple to inspire others. All one has to do is give and gradually, that inspires everyone.

And then one of the villagers approached me with the idea of holding a gathering to provide guidance to the entire village.

My eyes lit up.

I then went around and asked all the villagers if they'd be interested in the idea.

They all were.

And so, the entire village would gather outside the shop to ask me questions and listen to my guidance. Inspiration would spread, stories would be shared and we would all enjoy our presence together in the now.

This village really made me feel loved.

A gathering had just ended and so, most of the villagers had left. But the Shopkeeper's Old Friend was still with us and approached me.

"That was really beautiful," the Shopkeeper's Old Friend said to me. "Everything you said really touched me."

"Thank you," I replied. "How have you been?"

“Good. A lot of the same really.”
“Sounds comforting.”
“It’s quite boring actually.”
“What are you looking for?”
“You know, I actually don’t know. I’ve been looking for something more, but I don’t know what it is.”
“That’s the trap, you see?”
“How so?”
“Most of us are always looking for something more, only to miss everything that is right in front of us. This moment, now, is everything because everything is happening in this moment, the now.”
“...How did you come to learn all this?”
“...One doesn’t learn this. One feels. And through only feeling, one comes to these realizations.”
“So, we just need to feel?”
“Yes.”
The Shopkeeper’s Old Friend smiled at me.
And so, I smiled back.
But the Shopkeeper’s Old Friend just kept staring back at me.
What’s happening here?
And then, suddenly, the Shopkeeper’s Old Friend leaned forward and tried to kiss me.
But I quickly stepped back.
“What are you doing?” I asked.
“Sorry,” the Shopkeeper’s Old Friend replied. “It felt right, didn’t it?”
“...I’m sorry, I don’t feel the same way.”
“No, I’m sorry. I’m an idiot.”
“No, you’re not. You’re beautiful.”
“I don’t really feel beautiful.”
“You are. But that doesn’t mean we should be together.”
“Then what does it mean?”
“...There’s someone else who likes you more than I do.”

“Really? Who?”

“I can’t say.”

“That’s not fair.”

“It might not feel fair to you now, but if I tell, then it’ll ruin the mystery.”

The Shopkeeper’s Old Friend just looked back at me.

“Just investigate,” I said. “Play the game.”

“Fine,” the Shopkeeper’s Old Friend replied. “I’ll play.”

A smile came to me.

And then the Shopkeeper’s Old Friend turned around and walked off.

Later, I was making pots, stopped, stood up and walked towards the shop, only to notice the Shopkeeper and the Shopkeeper’s Old Friend quietly talking to each other. They laughed and smiled.

But then their eyes met for a moment and the Shopkeeper leaned in and gave the Shopkeeper’s Old Friend a kiss. They embraced. And eventually the Shopkeeper withdrew and looked the Shopkeeper’s Old Friend in the eyes again.

The Shopkeeper’s Old Friend smiled, turned around and left.

A smile came to the Shopkeeper.

Slowly, strangers from outside the village came to the gatherings to also ask me questions.

But during one gathering, a stranger stood up and looked me down.

“What makes you so special?” the stranger asked me.

“Who says I’m special?” I replied.

“You’re walking and talking like you think you’re bigger than everyone else.”

“I am not special. That’s what I believe. I’m no more or less than you or everyone else for we are all nothing and everything, all at once, like music. That’s what I believe.”

“Then what are we doing here?”

"I don't know. But it feels good to come together, to listen to each other and help each other."

The stranger just looked back at me.

"...I really don't have anything to teach you," I said. "I am not a teacher in the conventional sense. I don't give you knowledge that you can add to. I do the opposite. I tear away everything you believe you know so that you can just feel. And from that place, inspire you to look to your own nature, come to your own realizations, grow, grow your fulfillment and live in peace. And so, in that way, it's not about what I say, nor what I do, but about what you realize because that's what's going to allow you to grow. It's really the only way to grow."

The stranger just stared back at me.

"...Why are you here?" I asked the stranger.

"I wanted to see if you were like every other fraud," the stranger answered.

"Like every other fraud?"

"Yes."

"And what are these frauds like?"

"They proclaim that they know the answer to my troubles. But when I did what they told me to do, it didn't work."

A smile came to me.

"What?" the stranger asked me.

"What are you seeking?" I asked.

"...A happier life."

"And what's stopping you?"

"I don't know. I don't know how to live a happier life."

"What do you want to do with your life?"

"I want to live a happier life."

"That's not what I mean. What do you want to do with your life?"

"I don't know."

"Yes, you do."

"I said, 'I don't know.'"

"But you do know. You're just afraid to share it with others. You're afraid of what others might think of you. How they will judge you. And that's understandable. It's scary to be vulnerable."

"...It is."

"...What do you want to do with your life?"

"...I like to sing."

"Wow. I love singing. What do you like to sing?"

"Anything. I just like the act of singing."

"Can you sing for us?"

"...I can. But..."

"...When I began to write, I used to be afraid of what others, especially those closest to me, thought of my writing. So, I hid what I had written for a long time. But now, I realize how wonderful giving is, even if I expose myself."

"Are you saying I should just share my interests?"

"Yes."

"But how? What if others don't accept me?"

"Well, what's the worst that can happen?"

"They laugh at me and I feel humiliated."

"And if you were to be laughed at and feel humiliated, what could you do to come back from that?"

"I don't know."

"Couldn't you learn from the experience?"

"Yes, I guess."

"And couldn't you grow from that experience?"

"Yes, but sometimes I get so afraid. It's like I have all these knots inside me, that tear me up inside and it just builds and builds and builds and I just can't..."

The stranger began to cry.

And so, I walked a little closer to the stranger.

"From my experience, the best remedy for fear is positive action," I said. "It's taking a forward step in the direction towards your dream. And as you move forward, you'll build momentum and the fear will dissipate."

The stranger's eyes widened.

“That makes so much sense,” the stranger said. “I can’t believe I didn’t see that before.”

“The best things are right in front of us,” I commented.

“...Thank you.”

I nodded my head.

And then, suddenly, everyone around us began to applaud.

“Would you be willing to sing for us now?” I asked the stranger.

The stranger looked around, before looking back to me and nodding.

I joined the applause.

The stranger took a few deep breaths.

Everyone else slowly quietened.

And then the stranger raised one arm, before slowly lowering the arm and singing this soft melody.

Everyone else just listened, until some began to weep.

And eventually, the stranger stopped and looked over all of us.

“What did you think?” the stranger asked.

I wiped a tear and began to applaud.

Everyone around the stranger and me started applauding too.

The stranger looked over all our faces again, as tears started to flow.

“Thank you,” the stranger said. “Thank you.”

Eventually, everyone around the stranger and me approached the stranger to share words of appreciation, warm hugs, smiles and laughs.

And I just stood there, with a smile and watched it all happen.

As I was wandering through the village, I noticed a Child trying to lean two sticks against each other and so, I approached the Child.

“What are you doing there?” I asked the Child.

"I'm leaning these two sticks against each other," the Child answered.

"Why are you doing that?"

"I don't know. I'm just doing it."

The Child went back to attempting to lean these two sticks against each other, but the sticks fell.

"Can I help?" I asked the Child.

"...Okay," the Child answered.

And so, I sat down next to the Child and gently leaned one stick on the other, allowing for both sticks to support each other.

The Child and I watched the sticks.

"It's very appropriate, isn't it?" I asked the Child.

"What is?" the Child replied.

"One stick needs another stick in order to stand up. It's like us. One needs others to stand up. Without others..."

I pulled one of the sticks and the other stick fell.

"...There's no support," I finished.

I then leaned the one stick that I pulled against the other stick.

"Doesn't life look beautiful when we support each other?" I asked the Child.

"Yes," the Child answered.

A smile came to the Child.

And then a smile came to me.

There was another gathering.

"What is growth?" I asked. "...Isn't growth relative? What growth is to one individual is different to every other individual."

"What is growth to you?" someone asked.

"To me, growth is fulfillment. And fulfillment is growth. Growth and fulfillment are this great couple that blend into one. When we grow, we grow our fulfillment. And when we grow our fulfillment, we grow."

"And how do we grow?" someone else asked.

“Well, what could we do? Couldn’t we always help and support others? And when we help and support others, don’t we grow? Couldn’t we always give without expecting anything in return? And when we give, don’t we grow? Couldn’t we develop a particular discipline? Couldn’t we train our bodies? And couldn’t we just feel? When we only feel, don’t we grow?”

“But what if we can’t do any of these things?” someone else asked.

“Why can’t we help or support others, or give to others, or develop a discipline, or train our bodies, or only feel?”

“I don’t know. Maybe, we’re just not able to.”

“...Would you agree that one always has options?”

“I don’t think so,” someone else answered.

“Sometimes we don’t have a choice,” someone else responded.

“...Would you agree that we can only ever act?” I asked.

“What do you mean?” someone else asked.

“Can we not do something...? No, we can’t. To not do something is impossible. We can only ever act. Even if we decide not to act, aren’t we committing the act of deciding not to act?”

Many turned, looking amongst themselves, while the rest just looked back at me.

“When we decide not to act, aren’t we deciding?” I asked.

“Yes,” someone answered.

“And since we can only ever decide, then doesn’t that mean we always have a choice? Don’t we always face the choice between deciding to do and deciding not to do?”

“Yes,” someone else answered.

“So, don’t we always have a choice?”

Everyone around me looked back at me, with some nodding in agreement.

“In this moment, in the now, we always have a choice,” I said.

Walking into a store, there was a Storeowner, sweating and peeking outside.

I approached the Storeowner.

"Are you happy?" I asked the Storeowner. "...Are you happy?"

The Storeowner finally turned to me.

"Sorry," the Storeowner responded.

"...Are you happy?" I asked again.

"Am I happy?"

"Yes, are you happy?"

"...Yes."

The Storeowner peeked outside again.

"What are you looking for?" I asked the Storeowner.

The Storeowner quickly turned to me.

"Sorry," the Storeowner responded.

"What are you looking for?" I asked again.

The Storeowner just looked back at me.

"...Are you waiting on someone?" I asked.

"No," the Storeowner answered. "I mean, I don't know."

"...What's getting you so worked up?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"...Nothing big."

"Do you need help?"

"I..."

"...Do you need help?"

The Storeowner just kept looking back at me.

And so, I turned around and started to walk off.

"Wait," the Storeowner said.

I turned back around.

Eventually, the Storeowner took a step towards me.

"...I know you're a good person," the Storeowner said.

"I sometimes go to your gatherings. But, I'm in this very delicate situation and I...need to know that I can trust you

before I ask for help.”

“Have I given you a reason to not trust me?” I asked the Storeowner.

“Good point. Okay, I’ll tell you...I stole something from someone. And it’s eating me up inside. And I don’t know what to do.”

“What did you steal?”

“Their idea.”

“Does this person know that you stole their idea?”

“I believe so. What should I do?”

“...Why do you feel as though your insides are eating you up?”

“Because I did something I shouldn’t have.”

“You feel guilty?”

“Yes.”

“And what is guilt?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Couldn’t we say that guilt is the friction that is caused by going against one’s values?”

“That sounds right.”

“Then doesn’t that mean that one should become clear on their values so that they make sure they don’t go against them?”

“Yes, I need to become clear on my values.”

A smile came to me.

“...But what should I do now?” the Storeowner asked me.

“Couldn’t one’s values indicate to them what one should do?” I asked the Storeowner.

“That makes sense.”

“And when one is clear on their values, wouldn’t it be easier for one to make a decision?”

“Yes, because their values would indicate what they should do.”

“So, what should you do?”

“Become clear on my values. But how do I become clear

on my values?"

"What have I been doing?"

"...Asking questions."

"What's important to you? What do you care about? What do you love? What matters to you? What inspires you? What are you grateful for? What drives you? What interests you? What can you give to others? What can you do for others? Ask questions like these and your answers will resonate with you. And the answers that you resonate with are your values."

"...I understand."

A couple was shouting at each other and so, I approached them.

"What's wrong here?" I asked them.

"Apparently, I don't do enough for us," one of them answered.

"I just said that I do more," the other responded.

"You don't do more!"

"Stop being so ungrateful."

"I'm ungrateful?"

"Can we just...?" I pleaded.

The three of us stopped and took long, deep breaths, looking back at each other.

And then I looked to one of them.

"How much do you do for the two of you?" I asked.

"I do almost everything," the first one answered.

"Almost everything?" interrupted the other.

"Can we...?" I asked.

"Alright. Continue."

And so, I looked towards the one I originally questioned.

"A lot," the first one answered.

"Can you give me a percentage?" I asked the first one.

"Huh?"

"Can you give me a percentage of how much you

believe you contribute to your relationship?”

“I don’t know. 60%.”

I then faced the other.

“And how much do you believe you contribute to your relationship?” I asked the other.

“A lot,” the other answered.

“What percentage?”

“60%, I guess.”

A smile came to me.

“...What are you smiling at?” one of them asked me.

“Both of you believe that you are contributing to 60% of the relationship when that’s impossible because that would mean that your total contributions would add up to 120%,” I said. “How can your total contributions add up to 120%?”

“So, what are you saying?” the other asked.

“Do you two consider the times you contribute to your relationship while the other might be unawares?”

The couple fell silent.

“...Might it be possible that your partner is caring for you and loving you when you don’t even realize?” I asked. “There’s a gap there.”

“...I didn’t even think about that,” one of them muttered.

“It’s an important realization, isn’t it? Each of us experiences life differently. And because of that, with every relationship, we should consider others’ perspectives.”

The couple faced each other.

“I’m sorry,” one of them said.

“I’m sorry too,” the other replied.

The couple embraced each other.

“I love you,” one of them whispered.

“I love you too,” the other whispered.

Writing happened.

The shop was quiet until this stranger wandered in.

“Are you the one?” the stranger asked me.

“The one?” I asked.

“The one who hosts these gatherings around these parts?”

“Yes, that’s me.”

“...How do I know you’re the one though?”

“Well, how does one realize anything?”

“...Through experience.”

“Are there any other ways of realizing?”

“...No.”

“Then what should you do?”

“Go to a gathering.”

“Very good.”

“When’s your next gathering?”

“Tonight.”

Later, some familiar faces and even more strangers gathered together.

“What is reason?” I asked. “What is logic?”

“Something that makes sense,” someone answered.

“And what is sense...? Would you agree that words are made up?”

“No,” someone else answered.

“And why would you say that?”

“Because words are words.”

“The sun has many different names for it, correct?”

“Yes,” someone else answered.

“There are some places that have a different name for the sun,” someone else mentioned. “Soleil, for instance.”

“And if words came before us, how come we have many different names for the sun?” I asked. “How come we have many different names for this one thing?”

“If words came before us...,” someone muttered.

“...Then there’d only be one word for the sun,” someone else finished. “We wouldn’t have many different names for the sun.”

“Words must be made up,” someone else commented.

“... Words, numbers, symbols and images developed out of us,” I said. “Awareness enables the development of words, numbers, symbols and images. Awareness enables the development of everything. But why is this important...? Since we made up words, numbers, symbols and images, then mustn’t we have made up concepts? How can we have concepts without words, numbers, symbols and images?”

“We can’t,” someone answered.

“Yeah, we can’t,” someone else said.

“... We wouldn’t even be able to understand what a concept is without the word ‘concept’,” I commented. “And so, again, what is reason?”

“... Reason is not real,” someone answered. “It can’t be.”

“Reason is not real. Logic is not real. How can reason and logic be real when the way by which reason and logic are expressed, words, is made up?”

Many pairs of eyes widened.

“... And really, really, all words, all numbers, all symbols and all images are just expressions of how we feel,” I concluded.

Later, all the villagers left and the stranger approached me.

“That was impressive,” the stranger commented.

“Thank you,” I replied.

“I believe that you are the one that I’m looking for.”

A smile came to me.

But then the stranger pulled out a note and handed it to me.

“Now that we’ve gotten that out of the way, I am to escort you to the palace,” the stranger said to me.

“What palace?” I asked.

“The palace. The palace that rules over the land you are standing on.”

“Why am I to be escorted to the palace?”

“I don’t know. I’m just your Guard.”

“What if I refuse?”

“I’d have to kidnap you.”

“You’re serious?”

“I’m under orders.”

“Then I guess I’ll have to go, won’t I?”

“Great. We’ll leave first thing tomorrow.”

The Guard walked off.

And so, I approached the Shopkeeper and the Shopkeeper’s Old Friend to inform them of the conversation that I had with the Guard.

“How exciting,” the Shopkeeper’s Old Friend said.

“I’ve never been to the palace before.”

“But what if I don’t want to go?” I asked them.

“Don’t you want to go?” the Shopkeeper asked me.

“I don’t know.”

“It could be fun. A new chapter in your life.”

“Yeah, it could be.”

“We’ll take care of the village while you’re gone. Don’t you worry.”

“Then I guess, I’m going to go to the palace.”

We all smiled before going inside, eating together, sharing more laughs and stories and going to our private spaces to sleep.

As the sun was rising, the Shopkeeper and I stepped outside and saw the Guard standing there.

“Morning,” the Guard said.

“Morning,” I replied.

I turned to face the Shopkeeper.

“Don’t take too long,” the Shopkeeper said.

“I’ll be back soon,” I replied.

“...Okay, c’mon.”

The Shopkeeper widened both arms.

And so, I gave the Shopkeeper a hug.

“Be safe,” the Shopkeeper said to me.

“I will,” I replied.
We both withdrew, looking back at each other.
And then I turned around, took a step in the opposite direction and walked off with the Guard.
“Did you grow up in that village?” the Guard asked me.
“No,” I answered.
“How long have you been there then?”
“A while now.”
“What brought you to there?”
“I just found myself there.”
“Just like that? No story?”
“No, I don’t have a story.”
“Okay then.”
“...How long have you been a Guard?”
“All my life. When I was a child, I was put into training and that’s all I know. How did you come to know so much?”
“What makes you believe that I know much?”
“By what you talk about. It seems that you know more than most.”
“But that’s it though. We make the mistake of believing it’s about knowing more, when it is not. It is not about knowing. It is about not-knowing. That’s where we really learn.”
“Not-knowing, huh? How does one not-know?”
I remained silent.

The Guard and I continued forward until we encountered a tiger.

“We should move,” the Guard said.
“Wait a moment,” I responded.
The tiger kept staring back at me.
And I just stared back at the tiger.
And eventually the tiger moved on.
“That was close,” the Guard said.
“Was it?” I replied.

The stars were flickering, so we stopped.

“Are you hungry?” the Guard asked me.

“I’ll manage,” I said.

“You haven’t eaten all day.”

“I’ll be okay.”

“Fine then.”

We sat down and watched the stars.

“...Do you believe in any of the old legends?” the Guard asked me.

“Old legends?” I replied.

“Have you not heard any of them?”

“No, I haven’t.”

“Then I must tell you one.”

The Guard looked up at the stars.

“...I’ve got one,” the Guard said. “Do you want to hear it?”

“Sure,” I answered.

“Okay, here it goes. There was a daemon that walked amongst us. But the daemon couldn’t communicate with us, so the daemon was all alone. Then the daemon got an idea. The daemon got the idea of going to the moon. Surely, there must have been someone on the moon who the daemon would be able to communicate with. So, the daemon started to build this bridge to the moon. But the daemon struggled. The task was difficult. And there was no one to help the daemon. But the daemon persisted and after all that effort, made a bridge to the moon where the daemon found another daemon to communicate with. And they lived happily ever after.”

“...And that’s it?”

“Yes. What more do you want?”

“What happens after?”

“After what?”

“After the two daemons meet on the moon?”

“They live happily ever after.”

“But how?”

“I don’t know. They just do.”

“Life doesn’t just stop. Life always lives on. So, what happens after that?”

“I don’t know. They live happily ever after. End of story.”

“But how can there be an end when life always lives on?”

“Don’t you like a rounded story though?”

“I love open ended stories.”

“Why?”

“Because they reflect life. They’re honest. Rounded stories aren’t.”

“But don’t you like to feel a sense of closure? A sense of comfort? Hope?”

“I like to learn and grow. But that is my opinion. And we should each have our own opinion so long as we respect each other’s opinions.”

“Agreed.”

I then looked up at the stars.

“...What do you think of daemons?” the Guard asked me.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Do you think they exist?”

“Do you?”

“I believe there’s more to what we see.”

“And why do you believe that?”

“Some things just can’t be explained.”

“And so, you believe daemons explain the things that can’t be explained?”

“Yes. It makes sense.”

“Could it be that you don’t have all the information in an unexplained situation to be able to explain the situation?”

“...It’s possible.”

“And could it be that we use concepts such as daemons, spirits and ghosts to explain these unexplained situations that we don’t have all the information to?”

“But why would we do that?”

“Doesn’t it feel comforting to believe that there is an explanation for everything, even if that explanation were daemons, spirits and ghosts?”

The Guard looked away from me.

“...And what about the issue with words?” I asked the Guard. “Since words and concepts aren’t real, then how can daemons be real?”

“If words and concepts aren’t real, then nothing is real,” the Guard responded.

“Yes.”

“You can’t say that nothing is real.”

“Why not?”

“Because there are things that are real.”

“Like what?”

“Like you. Me. We’re real.”

“...What is real though? How can real be real, when words are made up?”

“So, then everything is not real?”

“Not quite. Everything is neither real nor unreal.”

“Neither real nor unreal? If everything is neither real nor unreal, how do you explain all this then?”

“...Why do you feel that all this needs explaining?”

“Because it does. There has to be a reason for all this.”

“I agree that there are reasons for everything. But why do you feel that all things need to be explained?”

“Because we should explain all things.”

“But why?”

“Because we...”

The Guard paused, then looked away, before looking back to me.

“...Honestly, I don’t know,” the Guard answered.

A smile came to me.

The sun rose, shining on us.

And so, we woke up, packed up and continued towards

the palace.

But then, suddenly, we found a Preacher standing before a crowd.

“The Sovereign is losing it!” the Preacher announced. “Save yourselves!”

“Let’s keep moving,” the Guard said to me.

But I stopped and watched the Preacher.

“What Sovereign?” I asked the Preacher.

“The Sovereign,” the Preacher answered. “The Sovereign of this land.”

“Can you not spur on this Preacher?” the Guard asked me.

“And how is the Sovereign losing it?” I asked the Preacher.

“The Dictator is declaring war on our land and the Sovereign doesn’t know what to do about it,” the Preacher answered.

“The Dictator?”

“Yes. Don’t you know anything?”

“No, I don’t.”

“...The Dictator wants everything and is declaring war on all the regions.”

“Why does the Dictator want everything?”

“Power. But it gets worse.”

“How?”

“The Dictator already has informers in the palace.”

“Who told you that?” the Guard interjected.

“I hear rumors.”

The Guard grabbed the Preacher, shoved the Preacher to the ground and kneeled over the Preacher.

“Who told you that?” the Guard shouted at the Preacher.

“Please,” I said. “There’s no need for violence.”

“Yes,” the Preacher said. “There’s no need for violence.”

The Guard let go of the Preacher and stood up.

Then the Preacher stood up.

"Can you tell us how you found out about these informers?" I asked the Preacher.

"...I hear rumors," the Preacher answered.

"You better tell us," the Guard interrupted again.

"Please," I said again.

The Preacher looked back at the Guard and me.

"...Well," the Guard said. "Can you tell us who told you about these informers?"

"...No," the Preacher answered.

"And why not?"

The Preacher just looked back at the Guard.

"...Tell me," the Guard said. "Who told you about these informers?"

"...No one," the Preacher answered. "No one told me."

"No one?"

"I...just made it up."

"You made it up? You made it up?"

"Please," I interjected.

"Quiet!" the Guard shouted at me.

The Guard looked to me.

And I just looked back at the Guard.

And then, eventually, the Guard faced the Preacher.

"Do you understand how your fake rumors could harm the people?" the Guard asked the Preacher. "Spreading lies like that?"

"It just makes sense that there would be informers in the palace," the Preacher said.

"It just makes sense? It makes sense?"

"Wait," I interjected. "How does it make sense?"

"Wouldn't you have informers in the place you want to take over?" the Preacher asked me.

"...But still, how can you just lie to the people like that?" the Guard asked the Preacher.

"Because it gets us to think about what's going on."

"No, it doesn't. It only spreads fear. And no one needs fear."

The Preacher fell silent.

“You’re pathetic,” the Guard said to the Preacher.

And then the Guard turned around and walked off.

And so, I followed the Guard.

Later, the Guard faced me.

“...Sorry about the way I acted back there,” the Guard said to me.

“It happens,” I said. “...Was that Preacher telling the truth about the Dictator declaring war?”

“I don’t know. The Sovereign won’t tell anyone if the rumors are true because the Sovereign doesn’t want anyone to feel fear. But the rumors are spreading fear throughout the land anyway. I believe the Sovereign doesn’t know what to do.”

“That’s why the Sovereign called for me?”

“I believe so.”

“...You were right back there though.”

“Right about what?”

“No one needs fear.”

We reached the palace, entered and then the Guard escorted me to a private sector.

“You have to wait here,” the Guard said to me. “...I don’t know how long until the Sovereign will see you. It’ll depend on when the Sovereign is available.”

“I’m sure the Sovereign is very busy,” I said. “But I’m happy to wait.”

“...If you need anything, ask for me and I’ll see what I can do to help.”

“Thank you.”

The Guard then smiled, turned around and left.

I sat down and waited.

Later, the Guard came back.

“The Sovereign wants to see you now,” the Guard said.

And so, I stood up and followed the Guard and eventually, we arrived at another private sector, where a

stranger was standing there, looking back at us.

“This is the one you were seeking,” the Guard said.

“Thank you,” the stranger said.

Then the Guard left us.

“I’ve heard some interesting things about you,” the stranger said to me.

“What have you been told?” I asked.

“I’ve been told that you don’t believe in anything.”

“Who told you that?”

“It’s one of the rumors that’s spreading.”

“Do you believe in those rumors?”

“I’m just sharing what I’ve been told about you.”

I just looked back at the stranger.

“...Is it true?” the stranger asked. “Do you not believe in anything?”

“Well, what is a belief?” I asked.

“A belief is when one, usually without proof, accepts something to be true.”

“And what is truth?”

“Truth is what is known without negation.”

“And what do we know without negation?”

“A great many things.”

“Like what?”

“Like how we are the result of a series of events.”

“And how do we know that?”

“Because learned people have recounted these events.”

“And how does that mean we know that we are the result of a series of events?”

“Because it makes sense. We must have come from somewhere.”

“Why must we have come from somewhere?”

“Because we’re here. We must have come from somewhere in order to be here.”

“And what is here?”

“What is here? Here is here.”

“Here is now?”

“Yes, exactly.”

“But would you agree that the past wouldn’t be able to exist without the now?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t thought about it before.”

“If we weren’t here in the now, would we have a past?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

“When we’re dead, our memory lives on.”

“But don’t memories live on through those who are here in the now?”

“Yes.”

“So again, how can the past exist without the now?”

“It can’t.”

“And what about the future? Can the future exist without the now?”

“I guess not.”

“And why can’t the past and the future exist without the now?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Ok, what is the past?”

“The past is all the events that have happened up until now.”

“And how do we recall the past?”

“We have books that recount these events.”

“But aren’t we experiencing these books in the now?”

“Yes. In a way.”

“We can’t read these books in the past. The past has already passed. So, how can we read these books in the past?”

“You’re right there.”

“And so, how do we recall the past?”

“I guess, we remember past events.”

“We remember?”

“Yes.”

“And couldn’t we say that the past is just our memory?”

“Yes, we could.”

“And what about the future? How do we look into the future?”

“I guess, we imagine the future.”

“And since we can only remember the past and imagine the future, wouldn’t that mean we can only experience the now?”

“Yes, that seems fair to say.”

“And so, how do we know that we are the result of a series of events when the past is just memories?”

“But I experienced these past events. And these experiences have led me to where I am.”

“That’s one way to look at it. But since the past is only memories, since there’s only the now, couldn’t we say that all we’ve gone through is just one experience? Couldn’t we say that the now is the experience that we are living, all at once, through time and space, memories and imaginations, being and non-being?”

“Maybe, but how can I avoid my past?”

“What makes you believe that I am asking you to avoid your past?”

“You’re refuting the past, so you must want me to avoid it.”

“That’s not my intention. Why is it wrong to remember the past?”

“I don’t know. But by explaining how the past is just memories, you’re degrading the past.”

“How is the past only being memories degrading?”

“Because you make it feel as if the past didn’t happen. Describing the past as just mere memories makes the past feel obsolete.”

“But how is the past obsolete when it is happening all at once...? Now is it. Now is where it is, where it’s headed and where it comes from.”

“...I get it.”

“The great gate is wide open and nobody is obstructing it.”

“But what is it?”

I looked away, before I looked back to the stranger, smiled and gave a loud clap.

The stranger jolted back.

“...It is neither I nor you,” I went on. “It is neither free nor determined, cause nor effect, action nor inaction, voluntary nor involuntary, strong nor weak, right nor wrong, good nor evil, truth nor lie, valuable nor invaluable, significant nor insignificant, relevant nor irrelevant, equal nor unequal, animate nor inanimate, personal nor impersonal, rational nor irrational, balanced nor imbalanced, permanent nor impermanent, infinite nor finite, here nor there, beyond nor underneath, real nor unreal, material nor spiritual, form nor matter, absolute nor conditional, dependent nor independent, perfect nor imperfect, being nor non-being, dream nor reality, nothing nor everything. It is no concept, no thought, no word. Nothing can be added to it nor taken from it. It can’t be held onto nor let go of. It is happening. And to give it a name would corrupt it.”

“So, we shouldn’t give it a name?” the stranger asked me.

“We shouldn’t.”

“But how will we understand it when it doesn’t have a name?”

“We feel it. Just like you’re feeling it in this moment.”

“And how do we feel it?”

“When you’re thinking, it is still. And when you’re not thinking, it moves.”

“...So, you do believe in something.”

“Yes and no.”

“You’re a very interesting individual.”

A smile came to me.

“...Have you heard some of the rumors about me?” the Sovereign asked me.

“Yes,” I answered. “I’ve heard that the Dictator has declared war on all the regions and that you’re hiding the

details from your people because you're afraid that the news would spread fear amongst them."

"That's one of the rumors going around."

"Is the rumor accurate? Has the Dictator declared war on all the regions?"

"That's not quite the story."

"What is the story?"

"...The Dictator has only declared war on our region."

"Why is that?"

"Because the Dictator knows that we're the easiest to defeat."

"Are we?"

"We have the smallest army and the least number of resources compared to the other regions. And if we're defeated, the Dictator will be in a strong position to go to war with both our neighboring regions."

"So, why don't you raise this issue with your neighboring regions? If you could convince your neighboring regions to band together, then wouldn't the Dictator be outmatched and be compelled to not go to war?"

"Yes, but our neighboring regions have been arguing with us for so long that we couldn't possibly resolve our differences."

"Arguing over what?"

"That's the worst part, I don't even know anymore. We just argue and we resent each other because of it. I have no idea what started the feud."

"Do you believe that because of the potential threat that they might face they might be willing to listen?"

"I've tried, but I've had no luck."

"So, what are you going to do?"

"I'm not entirely sure. But that's why I've asked for you. I've heard the rumors about you and now that I see that they're true, I'm hoping that you'd be able to help me find a way to win this war."

"Win this war?"

“Yes.”
“You plan on going to war with the Dictator?”
“Yes.”
“Despite having the smallest army and the least number of resources compared to the remaining regions?”
“Yes.”
“Why do you plan on going to war?”
“I don’t see any other option.”
“We always have a choice.”
“I agree with that, but going to war seems to be the best choice we have.”
“And why do you say that?”
“Because our neighboring regions won’t help us.”
“Is it that our neighboring regions won’t help us or that you’re too afraid to ask them for help?”
“... What are you insinuating?”
“Could it be that you’re afraid to ask your neighboring regions for help? Could it be that you’re afraid of looking weak in front of them?”
“I’m not afraid of them.”
“Really?”
“Yes.”
“Have you asked for their help?”
“Yes.”
“In person?”
The Sovereign paused, looking back at me.
“How did you ask for help?” I asked the Sovereign.
“I sent them a message,” the Sovereign answered.
“And did they respond?”
“No.”
“Then why don’t you see them in person?”
“I don’t know.”
“You don’t know?”
“Alright, I’m hesitant. I’m not afraid. I’m just unsure.”
“And what do you believe is the best way to combat this hesitation that you’re feeling?”

"I don't know."

"...If you continue with what you are doing, what do you think will happen?"

"More of the same."

"So, wouldn't it be wise to change course?"

"Yes, it would. But how?"

"...Have you ever been swimming?"

"Yes. Why do you ask?"

"Usually, at least for me, when I first get into the water, the water feels so cold and I'm shivering and to some extent, I don't want to be in the water. But as I start to swim around, my body warms up and gets used to the water."

"What are you saying?"

"That first step is going to be the most difficult obstacle to face. But once one starts, the momentum will carry them forward."

"You want me to go to our neighboring regions to ask for help in person?"

"In my opinion, that's the best option."

"I'm going to look weak in their eyes. And others will think badly of me."

"That's usually what stops most of us from doing anything. But do you know what will happen?"

"No, I don't know."

"So, your neighboring regions could respect you for asking for help?"

"They could. But that's highly unlikely."

"But they could?"

"Yes, they could."

"And your people could love you for saving them?"

"They could. But still..."

"But still?"

"It's still difficult."

"I'm not denying that."

"So, what should I do? What would you do if you were in my position? What would you do to take this first step?"

“What’s the easiest step you could take?”

“I’m not sure.”

“...Could you write down what you would want to say to your neighboring regions?”

“Yes, I could do that.”

“Then that’s the first step.”

And so, we sat down, wrote out what the Sovereign wanted to say, revised it over and over again and eventually, we both retreated to our private sectors.

The Sovereign and I worked together to help the Sovereign memorize the message the Sovereign wanted to say to our neighboring regions.

Later, the Sovereign stopped and faced me.

“Would you come with me?” the Sovereign asked me.

“Yes,” I answered.

“I warn you, it might be dangerous.”

“To live is an act of courage.”

We both smiled.

The Sovereign and I rode out with several guards and headed towards our closest neighbor region.

On our way, one of the Guards moved up alongside me.

“Who are you supposed to be?” the Guard asked me.

“That’s a good question,” I answered.

“What are you on about?”

“My name was given to me. And your name was given to you. And all our names were given to us. Correct?”

“I suppose.”

“And what does that mean?”

“I don’t know. You tell me.”

“We are who we are because of others.”

“What’s your point?”

“Never take others for granted. They shape who we are.”

We continued towards our closest neighbor region until we arrived at a small settlement and noticed a stranger parading around, pulling faces and making loud noises to make a group of children laugh.

I smiled, came to a stop and approached the scene.

"We need to get moving," one of the Guards said to me.

But I kept walking towards the scene, until I stopped and watched.

The Guard followed me.

And then, suddenly, the Fool faced the Guard and me.

"And what do we have here?" the Fool asked us.

"None of your business," the Guard said.

"None of your business."

"Watch yourself."

"Watch yourself."

The children giggled.

The Guard then turned around and started to walk away.

"This imbecile isn't worth it," the Guard muttered.

"What makes me an imbecile?" the Fool asked the Guard. "Do I need a certificate to become an imbecile?"

The Guard stopped and turned back around.

"No," the Guard answered "You just are one."

"But how am I an imbecile?" the Fool asked.

"Because you have the qualities of an imbecile."

"And what qualities might they be?"

"You act funny."

"I act funny? Doesn't that make me a funny person?"

"You know what I mean."

"No, I don't. What do you mean?"

"You act funny. You're odd."

"But isn't an imbecile a stupid person? And aren't you an imbecile for not being able to identify the qualities of an imbecile?"

"I am not an imbecile!"

"Oh, I've made the imbecile mad."

The children continued to laugh.

"I am not an imbecile, you idiot," the Guard said.

"So, I am an idiot now?" the Fool asked the Guard.

"Could you make up your mind as to what I am?"

"That's it."

The Guard steamed towards the Fool, with red in both eyes.

And so, I quickly jumped in between the Guard and the Fool.

"Move!" the Guard shouted. "This has nothing to do with you."

"Yes, it does," I said. "I am responsible for everyone, just as you are responsible for everyone also. We are all responsible for everyone."

"Then why don't you say that to that idiot?"

"Why is this important to you?"

"It's not."

"Then why do you keep persisting...? I understand that you're upset. But there's no benefit in arguing. It'll only cause more conflict."

"That Fool started it."

"That maybe so, but that still doesn't change how arguing causes more conflict."

The Guard stared back at the Fool, only to eventually moan, turn around and walk off.

"You're not the same," the Fool said to me.

I turned around and faced the Fool.

"What makes you believe that?" I asked the Fool.

"Because you don't need anything," the Fool answered.

"That is, you don't need anything to make you fulfilled."

"Why do you believe I don't need anything to make me fulfilled?"

"Because those who believe that they need things to be fulfilled are victims to themselves. And you're not a victim."

"How do you know that?"

"I know one when I see one. Understanding that nothing is needed to be fulfilled is the greatest freedom there is."

“Why do you say that?”

“Because one doesn’t have to go beyond one’s self. One can just be. And play. And enjoy life. Plus, one realizes that everything is in reach.”

“And why would one feel a need for anything to be fulfilled when one realizes that everything is in reach?”

“Exactly. One wouldn’t feel any need.”

“Nor would they feel a sense of lack.”

“Yes, exactly.”

“Good talking with you.”

“Likewise.”

The Sovereign, the guards and I kept moving forward until we came to a large canyon.

The Sovereign looked to the left and to the right.

“Does anyone see a way across?” the Sovereign asked.

“No,” many of the guards answered.

Then one of the Guards faced the Sovereign.

“What should we do?” the Guard asked the Sovereign.

The Sovereign then turned to me.

“What do you think we should do?” the Sovereign asked me.

“Do you believe there is a way across?” I replied.

“I don’t see any way across.”

“Then there isn’t a way across.”

The Sovereign looked across the canyon, before facing me again.

“What if I were to believe that there is a way across?” the Sovereign asked me.

“Then there is a way across,” I answered. “Believe it and it is so.”

The Sovereign looked across the canyon.

And eventually, some of the guards faced the Sovereign.

“We should turn back,” the Guard said. “Go home.”

“There’s no way across,” another Guard said. “We’re better off going back.”

“There’s no shame in turning around,” another Guard said.

“Turning back is the best option,” yet another Guard said.

“No,” the Sovereign said. “We’ll do whatever it takes to get across. We’ll even go around if we have to.”

The Sovereign looked over all the guards, before riding off.

The Guards and I followed.

“There’s no way we’re going to find a way across,” a Guard whispered.

“This is ridiculous,” another Guard whispered.

But we persisted through the rough terrain and eventually, we came to the end of the canyon and went around it.

We were eating when I noticed one of the Guards approaching the Sovereign.

“Can we talk?” the Guard asked the Sovereign.

“Sure,” the Sovereign answered. “What is it?”

“Some of us are getting a little restless.”

“And why is that?”

“We don’t believe this plan will – this plan, it just feels desperate.”

“I understand your concerns. But this is better than going to war with the Dictator, don’t you agree?”

“Yes. Yes, it is.”

“The best we can do is to help each other. Helping those by your side will help you through the tough times.”

“...Ok. Thank you.”

“Thank you for talking to me.”

We moved forward.

Eventually, we arrived at a large tower.

But then, suddenly, some soldiers came out of the tower

and surrounded us.

“Why are you here?” one of the Soldiers asked.

“I wish to speak with the General,” the Sovereign answered.

“What business do you have with the General?”

“That’s a private matter.”

“Then we can’t let you into the tower.”

“Why is that?”

“You need permission from the General to be allowed into the tower.”

“The General would be interested in what I have to say.”

“We still can’t allow you into the tower without the General’s permission.”

“Then how do we get the General’s permission?”

“You can’t.”

Many of our Guards moaned.

“...Have you heard rumors about the Dictator and what the Dictator is up to?” the Sovereign asked the Soldier.

“Yes,” the Soldier answered.

“Good. Then you’ll know that if the Dictator were to take over our region there’d be nothing to stop the Dictator from taking over your region.”

“Yes, I do know that.”

“Then why don’t you go to your General and explain how the Sovereign is waiting outside your tower and wants to make a truce?”

“We can’t. We need the General’s permission to let you in.”

“Then we’ll wait here until we get the General’s permission.”

And so, we set up camp.

And the soldiers just stayed put.

Later, the Sovereign approached me and sat next to me.

“How are you?” the Sovereign asked me.

“Amazing,” I answered. “And you?”

“Good, I think. It would have been nice to have talked

to the General by now, but that's how it is I guess."

"Is it though?"

"...Do you believe I made the right decision?"

"What's the right decision?"

"I don't know."

"Neither do I."

"That's not very reassuring."

"It's honest though."

"...Do you believe the General will let us into the tower?"

"Yes. Do you?"

"I think the General will."

"Why do you only think the General will?"

"It makes sense. The General has as much to lose as we do. And the General is smart enough to see that."

"But you don't believe the General will?"

"It's hard to believe when you cannot see."

"Is it? Or is that just another belief?"

"...That's just another belief."

"Then why don't you believe that it is easy to believe when you cannot see?"

"I could. I really could."

"Keep in mind, we see what we want to see."

"So, if I believe in what I want to see then I'll see it?"

"Yes. Believe it and it is so."

"...Is that true of all beliefs? Positive and negative?"

"Yes. Those who say they can and those who say they cannot are both correct."

"So, why not just say that we can?"

"Precisely."

"...I can."

"Keep repeating that to yourself until it happens and opportunities will open if you do."

"I will."

Later, a Soldier came out of the tower, approached the group of soldiers that were keeping guard and whispered a

few words to them.

The Sovereign, our guards and I watched on.

And eventually, the soldiers stopped and walked over to us.

“You have your permission,” one of the Soldiers said.

And we were lead into the tower.

A Soldier walked us to a large empty section of the tower and then faced the Sovereign.

“You are to come with me,” the Soldier said to the Sovereign.

“Alone?” the Sovereign asked.

“Yes.”

“No,” one of our Guards interjected.

“We won’t leave you alone,” another Guard said.

“Can I have at least one come with me?” the Sovereign asked the Soldier.

“I’m afraid not,” the Soldier said. “This meeting is to be between you and the General. That’s it.”

The Sovereign looked over all of us, only to end up staring at me.

I just looked back.

And then the Sovereign faced the Soldier.

“Would the General allow me to have at least one if the General could also have someone else?”

“I don’t know.”

“Could you find out?”

The Soldier just looked back at the Sovereign before eventually turning around and leaving.

“I have a bad feeling about this,” one of the Guards whispered.

“I knew we should have stayed home,” another Guard whispered.

“Stop bringing the rest of us down,” another Guard interjected.

The Sovereign and I turned around and watched the

guards talking amongst themselves.

“We’re in this,” the Guard said. “There’s no good in discussing what we should or shouldn’t have done.”

“You’re right,” one of the other Guards said.

“Sorry,” another Guard said.

A smile came to the Sovereign.

And then a smile came to me.

Eventually, the Soldier came back and approached the Sovereign.

“The General has agreed to allow you to bring one other,” the Soldier said. “But only one.”

Then the Sovereign quickly turned to me.

“Come,” the Sovereign said to me.

But I paused, looking back at the Sovereign.

“Is that wise?” one of the Guards asked the Sovereign.

“It’s the wisest move I’ve made yet,” the Sovereign answered the Guard.

The Sovereign looked to me again.

“C’mon,” the Sovereign said. “Let’s go.”

I eventually took a deep breath, made one step forward and slowly walked towards the Sovereign.

“This way,” the Soldier said.

And so, the Sovereign and I followed the Soldier, walking through different sectors of the tower, only to eventually reach the top and be led into a private sector that was empty.

“They are here,” the Soldier announced.

“Thank you,” a voice echoed. “Leave us.”

The Soldier left.

The Sovereign and I slowly walked into the private sector and eventually found another Soldier standing before us and a curtain with a shadow of a person.

“Please sit,” the shadow said.

And so, the Sovereign and I sat down.

“...How do you like the tower?” the shadow asked us.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?”

"It sure is," the Sovereign answered.

"I planned it myself. All of it. And it has stood firm ever since."

"So, I've heard."

"...I believe we have a common enemy. That's why you're here."

"Yes, that's correct."

"And how would bringing us together help solve this problem? The Dictator."

"By coming together, the Dictator wouldn't dare go to war with either of us."

"That's not what I've heard. The Dictator is too driven for power and too hungry for war."

"...That might be true, but wouldn't we have a better chance if we worked together to stop the Dictator than if we both tried to stop the Dictator alone?"

"I agree with that. And that's exactly why you're here."

"So, we have a deal?"

"Not quite. Because the Dictator is more likely to go to war with you and finish you off first, there are certain...additions to our deal that I'm going to make."

"And what are those additions?"

"I want full access to all of your resources upon request. One can never know when they might need the resources of a friend."

"Understandable, but what do you mean by full access?"

"Everything. Your water and food supplies, your guards, your talents. All of it."

"But then what is preventing you from just taking everything our region owns?"

"This is a friendship we're trying to establish here, isn't it? We have to trust each other in order for our friendship to stand strong."

The Sovereign just looked back at the shadow.

"...You're not talking," the shadow commented.

"...It's just hard to talk about trust with someone who

won't reveal themselves," the Sovereign said. "How do I even know that you are the General?"

"Are you challenging the General?" the Soldier asked. "How dare you challenge the General!"

"Now, now," the shadow said. "There's no need for that here. We can be civil... We both have the same objective: stop the Dictator. And all you have to do is accept my offer. That's it."

"...Can I think it over?" the Sovereign asked.

"Yes, but make it quick. The sooner you leave your decision, the more time the Dictator will have to prepare for war."

And so, the Sovereign and I stood up and started to walk off.

But then I stopped and turned around.

"Why don't you reveal yourself?" I asked the shadow.

"Who is asking?" the shadow asked.

"Does that matter?"

"No, I suppose not."

"So, why don't you reveal yourself? What do you have to hide?"

"I have nothing to hide. I have a mystery to build."

"Do you?"

"Do I what?"

"Are you really building a mystery? Or is that just your answer?"

"Are you calling the General a liar?" the Soldier asked.

"What if I were?"

"You wouldn't want to know."

"But isn't that why I asked?"

"Don't get smart with me."

But then, suddenly, the shadow laughed hysterically.

"You're funny," the shadow commented. "And clever too. I'll admit that."

"... You still haven't answered my question," I said.

"Which one?"

“Are you building a mystery? Or are you just saying you’re building a mystery to hide what’s really going on?”

“I really am building a mystery. But I guess my answer won’t satisfy you, will it?”

I gently shook my head.

“Too bad,” the shadow said. “Now, leave. Think over my offer and make your decision quick.”

Eventually, the Sovereign and I turned around, walked back to the private sector with all the guards and shared the conversation we had with the shadow.

Writing was happening, when the Sovereign approached me.

“What are you writing?” the Sovereign asked me.

“Nothing,” I answered. “But that’s not the point.”

“And what is the point?”

“There is no point. But the real joy of anything lies in the act of doing the thing.”

“...Can I ask you a few questions?”

“Sure. What is it?”

“If we were to make this deal, what would stop the Dictator from going to war with us anyway? And if the Dictator were to go to war with us, then what’s the benefit in making this deal?”

“Those are good questions. Firstly, would the Dictator be at a disadvantage if you were to make this deal?”

“Sort of. The Dictator would be outnumbered, but the Dictator would still have better resources. And from what I’ve heard, the Dictator is a supreme strategist, so outnumbering the Dictator might not be much of a benefit.”

“But the chances of the Dictator declaring war on you diminishes if you make this deal, correct?”

“Yes. Yes, it does.”

“Then wouldn’t the benefit in making this deal be how you and the General will diminish the chances of going to war with the Dictator?”

“Yes, that would be the benefit. But do you believe this

deal will stop the Dictator from declaring war on us? Even though the Dictator would still have better resources and is still the supreme strategist that the Dictator is?”

“...I don't know. I can't predict the future. No one can.”

“True.”

“But from my experience, when one has a will, one will find a way.”

“So, you don't believe this deal will stop the Dictator from going to war with us?”

“...Can I ask you a question instead?”

“Sure.”

“What are you afraid of?”

“What am I afraid of?”

“Yes.”

“Going to war with the Dictator.”

“But if you're afraid of going to war with the Dictator, then why are you unsure about this deal? This deal has benefit. And you realize that. So, why are you hesitant?”

“Because the deal has its disadvantages too. What's to stop the General from just taking all our resources?”

“What has stopped the General from taking all your resources previously? What has stopped the General from going to war with you and taking over the palace?”

“...You're right. Nothing has stopped the General before now. But in making this deal, the General gets access to all our resources without having to go to war with us. And...I don't really trust the General. Really, I don't have any reason to trust the General.”

“Other than how you both have the same objective?”

“I guess that's a reason. But it isn't much of one. I mean, what'll happen if we stop the Dictator? Will the General and I remain friends? Or will the General just take our remaining resources?”

“I don't know. Again, no one can know what'll happen. But let's say you were able to stop the Dictator in some way, let's say you made this deal and the Dictator decided not to

go to war with you and the General, what could you do to prevent the General from just taking all your resources?"

"Are you suggesting that if we stop the Dictator and the General decides to take all our resources we should go to war with the General?"

"No, not at all. "But there are other ways in which you could prevent the General from taking all your resources."

"Like what exactly?"

"...Couldn't you build upon your relationship with the General? If you were to become close friends with the General, where you both helped each other out, then why would the General take all your resources...? For the General, there'd be more benefit in remaining friends."

"I never thought about that. Why is it that the regions don't see that there's more benefit in helping each other than in going to war?"

"I don't know. It could be because the regions are simply ignorant. Or it could be because the regions are arrogant and overly selfish. I don't know. There are many possible reasons. One would have to go to each region to realize the different reasons for why each region decides to remain divided."

"That wasn't what I was getting at. Clearly, there's more benefit in helping each other."

"Agreed."

"So, why don't the regions come together to help each other, seeing as there's more benefit in helping each other?"

"...Why are you afraid to make this deal again?"

"...Because I don't trust the General."

"And if there's no trust between the regions, how can the regions come together to help each other?"

"Good point. So, how do the regions learn to trust each other?"

"How have you learned to trust others?"

"I don't know. It's not something that I've thought about."

“...To be able to trust others, we have to allow ourselves to be vulnerable with others and see what others do with our vulnerability.”

“I can see that. But what happens if others take advantage of our vulnerability?”

“That’s the risk we take. But when you take a step, how do you know the ground won’t fall from under you?”

“I don’t know. I can’t know.”

“No one can know. And yet, you take that next step anyway, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“We just do it, like we breathe. And so, in that sense, what is a risk?”

“A risk isn’t a risk at all.”

A smile came to me.

“...You want me to make this deal,” the Sovereign said. “Don’t you?”

“I would prefer it,” I answered.

“Why? Why would you prefer I make this deal? What benefit do you get out of it? What benefit do you get out of all this?”

“...I believe in a universe where we all live in peace, where we all respect, care for and love each other despite the different illusions we play into. And I’m going to make that dream a reality. That’s what I’ve decided and committed to do.”

“And you believe that bringing us all together will turn that dream into a reality?”

“I believe it will. I believe it’s the best way to turn this dream into a reality.”

“...You’re quite remarkable...I too believe in that same universe. I believe we can all live together in peace. But I haven’t met anyone who also believes in what I believe.”

“I haven’t either. But I also believe there are many of us who do believe in this universe, but they’re just like us in that they haven’t been able to find others who share this

belief.”

“I can definitely see that...I’d like to help you turn your dream into a reality.”

“Thank you. But this is our dream.”

“Yes, it’s our dream.”

“...So, you’re going to make the deal?”

“...What is a risk?”

The Sovereign brought all the guards and me together and informed us of the Sovereign’s decision.

All the guards accepted the Sovereign’s decision.

And so, the Sovereign took a deep breath, turned around and took a step forward.

But then, suddenly, a Soldier appeared before us.

“The General would like to see you,” the Soldier said to me.

“Me?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

But the Soldier just looked back at me.

“...Does the General want to see me now?” I asked the Soldier.

“Yes,” the Soldier answered.

I turned to face the Sovereign.

And the Sovereign just looked back at me.

And so, I turned around and followed the Soldier up the tower, only to find the curtain with a shadow of a person.

“You can leave us,” the shadow said to the Soldier.

The Soldier paused before turning around and leaving.

“...Where’s your other Soldier?” I asked the shadow.

“I don’t feel that my Soldier is necessary,” the shadow answered.

“Why do you believe that?”

“Because you’re not one to harm others.”

“But what makes you believe that I won’t just pull that curtain to see you?”

“Because you’re not one to disrespect others either.”
“Okay then. Why have you asked for me?”
“Because you intrigue me.”
“How do I intrigue you?”
“I don’t know exactly. Just a hunch.”
“So, what do you want to do then?”
“Just talk.”
“What do you want to talk about?”
“I’m not sure. What are you interested in talking about?”
“... Well...”
“... Go on.”
“... I’ve been thinking about what you said about how you don’t reveal yourself to others because you want to build mystery.”
“You’re still not convinced, are you?”
“No, I’m not. But that’s not what’s been on my mind. Not exactly anyway.”
“Okay. Go on then.”
“What has been on my mind is why you have decided to build mystery.”
“And why do you believe I have decided to build mystery?”
“I don’t know. You could have decided to build mystery because you have something to hide. That’s the obvious reason. But you keep telling us that that’s not the reason why you build mystery. So, either you keep lying to us or there’s another reason that I haven’t realized yet.”
“The unobvious reason?”
“Yes.”
“And what do you believe the unobvious reason is?”
I just looked back at the shadow.
“... C’mon,” the shadow said. “I know you have ideas.”
“... I believe you build mystery to try to control others,” I replied. “Mystery can build a sense of excitement for the unknown. But mystery can also build fear. The greatest fear

is that which one cannot see. And in building that fear, you get obedient soldiers who follow through with every command.”

“Fascinating idea. Very fascinating idea.”

“But not a good one.”

“Oh. And why do you say that?”

“Because what’ll happen when those who are being controlled realize they are being controlled?”

The shadow faced me.

“...Rebellion,” I said. “They’ll rebel in some form or other. That could mean a revolt. Or they could just leave. But either way, they won’t be around. They won’t be loyal. And they won’t trust you ever again.”

“I was right,” the shadow said. “You are clever. But mysteries also keep everything in order. They keep everything in balance.”

“In balanced for whom? In order for whom?”

The shadow just kept looking back at me.

“...These concepts, balance and order, are relative, just like everything else,” I said.

“Then what would you recommend?” the shadow asked. “What would you recommend?”

“Respect. Care. Love. That’s what I recommend. Because through respect, care and love we can live in peace.”

“There won’t be any order though. There won’t be any control.”

“But what is control...? What is control? What is control when the one who is doing the controlling relies on those they are controlling in order to be the controller...? It’s a contradiction. Everything exists in relation to everything else. There cannot be a controller without a contolee. And because a controller depends on a contolee in order to be recognized, in order for the controller to exist, there cannot be a controller. The real question here is, ‘why does one feel the need to control others?’ What are they trying to cling

onto?”

“Trying to cling onto? What do you mean by that?”

“One cannot cling onto anything forever. Nothing lasts. One can only try to cling onto something.”

“That’s terrible.”

“And why is that terrible?”

“Because we have to survive. We have to go on living.”

“And why do we have to go on living?”

“Because we have to. If we don’t, we’ll die.”

“But we’ll all die anyway.”

“That’s awful.”

“And why is that awful?”

“Because we’ll be dead.”

“And why is that awful?”

“Because we’re dead. Death is an awful thing.”

“Why is death an awful thing?”

“Because it is.”

“But why...? What is death?”

“Death is when a person has passed on. It’s when a person is not alive anymore.”

“Is that what death is though?”

“Yes.”

“And how do you know that? How do you know that is what death is?”

“Because that’s what death is. Everyone knows that.”

“Do they?”

“Yes.”

“How? How can we know what death is when we’re not dead?”

“Then what is death? What is death? Huh?”

“...How can one experience an existence of nothing?”

“I don’t know. They just can.”

“But if one is experiencing an existence, aren’t they alive? Isn’t that what it means to be alive? Experiencing existence? Life...? So, how can one experience an existence of nothing? How can nothing be an experience...? It can’t

be. Nothing cannot be an experience. It's very much like with silence, the absence of sound, no-sound. One can't hear silence. One can't experience silence. One can only hear sound. So, one can't experience nothing. One can't experience non-being. And that means that when you die, everything fades out."

"That's still awful."

"Why is that?"

"Because one's life has gone. It's gone forever."

"But isn't there also an amazing realization in that?"

"What amazing realization is that?"

"When you die, life dies with you. And the only way that can happen is if you, all of you, are life. We are life being experienced subjectively. We are all instruments for which life can be experienced."

"So, what happens to you when you die?"

"What do you mean by 'you?' What is 'you', when you are life...? Most of us don't realize that we play into these roles that we have built for ourselves. It's like the actor who gets so absorbed in their own performance that they don't realize or forget that they're an actor playing a character. These characters aren't what we are. It's our own show. An illusion. We are nothing other than the characters we play."

"And what does that say about death?"

"...Death is just the other face of birth, much like how the end is the other face of the beginning. But ultimately, birth and death are mere illusions. They're not real."

"They're not real?"

"No. Nothing is real. Not even life. Life is neither real nor unreal. Life is."

"...And since death is an illusion, no one has anything to fear, right?"

"Really, yes. But that doesn't mean you won't jump when you hear a bang."

"So, we'll still fear?"

"Yes, but you don't have to be afraid of fear. You don't

have to allow fear to prevent you from living your dream.”

The shadow nodded.

And a smile came to me.

But then, suddenly, the shadow stepped out and stood before me as the General.

“...I am going to change my offer,” the General said. “Instead, all we’ll be doing is working together. The Sovereign’s resources won’t be a part of the deal.”

The General appeared before the Sovereign, explained that I had changed the General’s mind and they shook hands on the new deal.

Later, we all celebrated, eating, drinking, dancing, laughing and sharing stories at a large banquet.

And then, later, the Sovereign, the guards and I said, “Goodbye,” to the General, left and headed towards the next region.

We stopped, cooked food and ate together.

I quickly finished eating, stood up, wandered up a nearby hill and stopped to watch the clouds.

And then, suddenly, there was the sound of someone approaching me and so, I turned around and saw a Guard walking towards me.

“Hi,” the Guard said.

“Hi,” I replied.

“What are you doing up here?”

“Thought I’d get a better view.”

“Yeah, it’s pretty magnificent.”

“It sure is.”

“...How did you do it? How did you get the General to change the deal?”

“...How does one breathe?”

“I don’t know. We just breathe.”

A smile came to me.

“...Can I ask you something else?” the Guard asked me.

“Sure,” I answered. “What is it?”

“It’s a little embarrassing.”

“That’s okay. There’s nothing wrong with feeling embarrassed.”

“...I – um...I struggle with finding love. And I was hoping that you might be able to help me.”

“What makes you believe that love has to be found?”

“It has to be found, doesn’t it? Otherwise, how do we find love?”

“...Love does not need to be found because you already have it. All you have to do is love and love will come back to you.”

“I don’t understand. How does love come back to me?”

“...Life reflects what we believe. If you go out looking for love, with the belief that you don’t have love, then you’ll reflect the belief that you don’t have love and have to go on finding it. But if you love, then you’ll reflect love.”

“That’s all well and good, but how can I love when I don’t have love?”

“What makes you believe that you need love in order to love?”

“How do I love then?”

“How does one breathe?”

Continuing along our way, several of the Guards walked up beside me.

“Can we ask you some questions?” one of the Guards asked me.

“Sure,” I answered.

“...How can I get more talents?”

“Why do you need more talents?”

“Because everyone needs talents.”

“And why does everyone need talents?”

“If we don’t have talents, no one would be able to eat or have shelter or heat.”

“But there’s food in the trees, shelter underneath the

rocks and heat from a made fire. So, why does anyone need talents?"

"That's true," another Guard said. "But the quality isn't the same. With talents, one could buy better quality food, shelter and heat."

"But what is quality?"

"Quality is a thing's standard."

"Is it?"

"I think so."

"Then what makes the food, shelter and heat bought with talents of better quality than the food in the trees, shelter underneath the rocks and heat from a made fire?"

"Because the food tastes better, the shelter protects us more and the heat is nicer."

"To whom?"

"To everyone."

"Is that so?"

"Yes."

"Then what makes you believe that the food, shelter and heat bought with talents is of better quality for everyone when you can only experience life as you?"

"...I'd imagine everyone would believe that the food, shelter and heat that was bought with talents is of better quality," another Guard answered.

"But you're imagining what everyone would believe, aren't you?"

"Yes, I guess so."

"So, with that, how can one know what quality is when quality is relative?"

"But can't you judge what is of quality based on your own standards?" another Guard asked.

"Yes, and why not do so?"

"Then why the lecture on quality? What's that about?"

"My conversations are not about where I want them to go. They're about where you decide to take them. Because in that way, don't you get the most out of what we discuss?"

"True, I can understand that."

"...But what about earning more talents?" another Guard asked. "How can we get more talents?"

"Again, why do you need more talents?" I asked.

"Because by my standards, having more talents will lead to a better life."

"And why do you believe that?"

"Because those who have more talents are happier than those who have less talents."

"And what makes you believe that those with more talents are happier?"

"Because they are. I see how happy they are and how unhappy those with less talents are."

"But how can you feel what they feel?"

"I can't."

"And why is that?"

"Because no one can feel what others feel."

"So, what makes you believe that those with more talents are happier than those with less talents?"

"Are you saying that those with less talents are happier than those with more talents?"

"What makes you believe that I am saying that?"

"Your line of inquiry is heading in that direction."

"Is it?"

"...Aren't those with more talents happier because they can buy more? And because they can buy things of better quality, according to their standards?"

"But doesn't that also mean that those with more talents would also have more to lose?"

"...Yes. Yes, they do."

"And couldn't that make them more fearful and more anxious of what they could potentially lose?"

"I see," one of the Guards said.

"I get it," another Guard said.

"That's true," yet another Guard said.

"So, with all that in mind, what makes you believe that

having more talents equates to more happiness?" I asked the guards.

"It doesn't," one of the Guards answered.

"Yeah," another Guard said. "It doesn't."

"...So, how can we be happier then?" yet another Guard asked me.

"Why can't you just be?" I asked the guards.

"What do you mean?"

"When you just are, when you accept this moment as it is, don't you feel joy?"

"I don't know."

"Then why don't you accept this moment as it is?"

And so, we kept on walking in silence and gradually, one by one, a smile came to each guard.

"...And guess what happens when you continue to accept this moment as it is?" I asked the guards.

"What happens?" one of the Guards asked me.

"You continue to attract that feeling. We attract what we feel."

"And that means we should pay attention to what we're feeling, so that we don't attract the feelings that we wouldn't like to feel and attract the feelings that we would like to feel."

"Very good. Very, very good."

We eventually found ourselves at a small settlement where we stopped, made a fire and ate with the settlers.

But as we were eating, one of the Settlers dropped a heap of food.

And so, I quickly put my food down, rushed up to the Settler and helped the Settler pick up the food.

"You don't have to help me," the Settler said.

"But I want to help," I replied.

"Why would you want to help me?"

"I just do."

"Then you're the kindest person I've ever met."

I just continued to pick up the food.

“You oaf!” a voice suddenly shouted.

The Settler and I turned to see another Settler that towered over us.

“How do you still continue to make mess after mess after mess?” the Tall Settler asked.

“I didn’t mean to,” the Settler said.

“Yeah, yeah. It was an accident. It’s always an accident.”

“Could we please...?” I asked the Tall Settler.

“Why do you care? You don’t know this oaf.”

“But do we have to hurt others’ feelings?”

“I don’t care. This is the last straw.”

“But please,” the Settler said. “Please. I didn’t mean it. Please.”

“No. You’re done.”

The Tall Settler just turned around and walked off.

The Settler fell to the ground and began to cry.

“I’m a failure,” the Settler cried out. “I’m a complete and utter failure.”

“How are you a failure?” I asked the Settler.

“I’m done for. I’m really, really done for.”

“What do you mean?”

“I need help. I need help.”

The Settler looked up and towards me.

“Will you help me?” the Settler asked me.

“What do you want help with?” I replied.

“Everything. I’m an oaf. I’m a terrible oaf that needs help with life.”

“What makes you believe that you need anything, when you are capable of anything?”

“But I’m not. I’m terrible at life. And I need help. I need help.”

Then the Settler crawled towards me and bowed down.

“Please,” the Settler begged. “Please, help me!”

“...What makes you believe that I can help you?” I asked the Settler.

“Because you’re not as bad as I am.”
“But we’ve never met.”
“But you’re not me. And no one is worse than me.”
“...What makes you believe that I can help you when you won’t help yourself?”
“No, no, no. I will help myself. I will help myself.”
“Will you?”
“Yes. I will help myself.”
“How will you help yourself?”
“I don’t know. Will you tell me?”
“But how could I know how you could help yourself?”
“Because you know more than I do.”
“What makes you believe that?”
“Because everyone knows more than I do.”
“But what is knowing?”
“What is knowing?”
“Yes, what is knowing?”
“I don’t know. I don’t know anything.”
“And what makes you believe that you have to know anything?”
“Because I have to. I have to.”
“Why do you have to?”
“I don’t know. I just have to.”
“But why do you have to?”
“I don’t know. I don’t know.”
“...Most of us convince ourselves of the ideas we want to be convinced of. We select what we want to hear and ignore the rest, not because we’re right, but because it’s comforting to believe we are right.”
“What are you saying?”
“How can I help you when you believe you are a failure?”
“I don’t know.”
“I can’t. So long as you believe you are a failure, no one can help you.”
“But I need help. I need help.”

“Do you?”

“Yes.”

“Do you really?”

“Yes, I do.”

“...Have you had help all your life?”

“No. Not always.”

“And yet, you’re here, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I am.”

“So, why do you need help?”

The Settler just looked back at me.

And eventually, I turned around, sat back down and continued eating.

The sun had risen.

And so, the Sovereign, the guards and I woke up, packed up and left the settlement.

But then, suddenly, there was a noise and so, we all stopped, turned around, scanned the space from where the noise came and saw a moving branch.

“Hey!” a Guard shouted. “We can see you! Show yourself!”

And slowly, the Settler appeared.

“I don’t want to cause trouble,” the Settler said.

“Yeah?” the Guard asked. “Then why are you following us?”

“I-I...”

“Speak up!”

“It’s okay,” I interjected. “The Settler is with me.”

The Settler looked back at me.

“...Come with me,” I said to the Settler.

The Settler rushed up beside me.

And eventually, we all continued forward.

The Settler remained by my side as we made our way forward.

“May I ask you something?” the Settler asked me.

“Yes,” I answered. “What is it?”
“...Do you know how...I can...manipulate people?”
“Manipulate people? Why do you want to manipulate people?”
“...Never mind.”
“I’m not criticizing you. I’m asking a question.”
“I just...”
“...It’s okay.”
“...I just want to be able to.”
“For what purpose?”
“...Everyone else is able to manipulate others.”
“So, why shouldn’t you?”
“Yes. Yes, exactly.”
“But what makes you believe that others are able to manipulate?”
“Because they are. I see it.”
“You see it?”
“Yes, I see it.”
“Can you give me an example?”
“Um...”
“...It’s okay.”
“...Others are always manipulating me.”
“And you want to be able to manipulate others so that they don’t manipulate you?”
“Yes.”
“...What would happen if you just stopped allowing others to manipulate you?”
“If I just stopped?”
“Yes.”
“How do I do that?”
“Why can’t you just do it?”
“I don’t know how to.”
“Do you need to know how to beat your heart for your heart to beat?”
“No.”
“Your heart just beats. It doesn’t need instructions or

someone to lord over it and tell it what to do. Your heart is spontaneous. So, why can't you just stop allowing others to manipulate you?"

"...I guess, I could."

"And what would happen if you just stopped allowing others to manipulate you?"

"I don't know."

"If you stopped allowing others to manipulate you, then others won't be able to manipulate you, correct?"

"Yes."

"And you won't have to manipulate others too, will you?"

"Yes. But I'm still not sure how I can just stop allowing others to manipulate me. I don't think I can just do it."

"Then why don't you make the decisions that resonate with you and stop reacting to what others tell you to do?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"We can all feel what is good for us, would you agree?"

"I'm not sure."

"...When we are still, when we accept this moment as it is, we are able to just feel. And from there, when we are just feeling, what we are seeking comes to us, like magic."

"Really?"

"Yes"

"But how?"

"How does the heart beat?"

"It's spontaneous."

A smile came to me.

"Wow," the Settler said. "You're amazing."

"No," I replied. "I'm not."

"Yes, you are."

"No, I'm not. We are who we are because of others."

"What does that mean?"

"If you believe that I am amazing, it is because you are amazing too."

"Really?"

“Yes. However, that is not the real picture.”

“What do you mean?”

“In a way, there is only ‘you.’ When you interact with others, what is really happening is you are interacting with ‘you.’ You are always interacting with ‘you.’ Or to express it in another way, I am always interacting with ‘I.’ But ultimately, there is no ‘I’ nor ‘you.’ There is just it. And it is happening.”

“...Can I ask you something else?”

“What is it?”

“Since I am always interacting with ‘I’, I shouldn’t manipulate others, right? Because if I’m manipulating others, then really, I’m manipulating myself.”

A smile came to me.

We stopped at a stream, washed up and sat together.

“...I’m just going to go to the trees over there,” the Settler mentioned to me.

“Okay,” I said.

“I won’t be long.”

And so, the Settler got up and walked towards the trees.

And then one of the Guards approached me.

“How are you doing?” the Guard asked me.

“Amazing,” I answered. “How about you?”

“Good as can be. Can I sit?”

“Sure.”

And so, the Guard sat down beside me.

“...Some of the Guards are worried about this Settler,” the Guard told me.

“Why is that?” I asked.

“We can see how incompetent this Settler is and we don’t want anything that’ll slow us down.”

“Is the Settler slowing us down?”

“Well, yes. And on top of that, I don’t think the Sovereign is very pleased about the Settler being with us.”

“What would you have me do?”

“Ditch the Settler.”

“And if the Settler were you, would you give the same answer?”

“I know it seems harsh, but we have to think about what we’re doing.”

“And what are we doing?”

“We’re going to the castle to see the Grand Inquisitor and make a deal that’ll discourage the Dictator from declaring war on us.”

“Is that what we’re doing?”

“Yes. What do you believe we’re doing?”

“I believe we’re attempting to live in peace. And even though we’re talking about just one Settler here, this one Settler is important. We are all elements of this totality that we call life, existence, the experience, now, or whatever we decide to call it. And if even one of us were to somehow be taken away from life – not due to death, but were to be taken without condition – then life would be incomplete. All things make up life. And so, all things are important. Everyone is important. And we should all take responsibility for everyone. We should all take responsibility for all things.”

“...You’re right. I’m sorry for putting you in that position.”

“It’s okay. I understand your concern.”

The Guard nodded, stood up and returned to sit with all the other guards.

Later, while moving forward, I saw some of the guards talking with the Settler, sharing interests, stories and laughs.

A smile came to me.

And gradually, the Settler became a Guard.

The moon loomed over us, as we all sat around a fire, looking up at the sky.

Eventually, I stopped watching and writing happened.

We finally made it to the castle, entered and observed the

interior, until a Host approached the Sovereign.

“Hi, there,” the Host said.

“Hello,” the Sovereign replied.

“How are you all?”

“Good, thank you for asking. And you? How are you?”

“Great as always. The Grand Inquisitor has been expecting you, but is currently in the middle of another matter at this moment. Would you be willing to wait in our garden until the Grand Inquisitor is ready for you?”

“Yes, we can do that.”

“Excellent. Right this way.”

And so, the Host walked us all to the garden, where our eyes widened, experiencing the magic.

“I’ll be back to let you know when the Grand Inquisitor is ready,” the Host mentioned.

“Thank you,” the Sovereign responded.

And so, the Host left.

And we wandered through the garden, exploring, breathing in its energy.

And then, eventually, I found a quiet space, sat down, crossed my legs, closed my eyes and watched my thoughts.

A hand gently touched my shoulder and so, I opened my eyes, looked up and saw the Sovereign standing over me.

“The Grand Inquisitor is ready,” the Sovereign said to me.

I nodded, stood up, followed the Sovereign and saw the Host standing before us.

“Right this way,” the Host said.

And so, we followed the Host through the castle until we found ourselves in a huge hall, where the Grand Inquisitor was sitting on the other end of a round table, surrounded by many subordinates.

“Please have a seat,” the Host said.

The Sovereign sat down at the round table, opposite the Grand Inquisitor and the many subordinates.

“...Allow me to start,” one of the Subordinates said.
“We understand the dilemma that you’re in. The Dictator is a child, a scoundrel and seeks to obtain everything, even if it means war. And that puts you in an extremely vulnerable position, seeing as you’re the easiest target for the Dictator.”

“Yes,” the Sovereign replied. “We are.”

“We have also heard about the recent bond you have struck up with the General, which we are incredibly impressed with. As you are probably aware, we have tried to work with the General for a considerable amount of time and haven’t had any luck.”

“...Thank you. But I can’t take the credit.”

“We know.”

The Subordinate’s eyes drifted towards me.

“Are you the one who struck the bond with the General?” the Subordinate asked me.

“No,” I answered. “It was all of us.”

The Subordinate smiled.

I just looked back at the Subordinate.

“...Very well,” the Subordinate said.

The Subordinate then turned back to the Sovereign.

“So, now you’re here,” the Subordinate continued.
“And we assume that you’re here to side with us.”

“That’s correct,” the Sovereign said.

“Excellent. Because we want to side with you too. We want to stop the Dictator before the situation gets out of control.”

“Of course.”

“And what we want to do now is arrange an agreement. Is that okay with you?”

“Yes. What are your terms?”

“The first item on our list is for you to extend to us your relationship with the General. If we could all work together, it would be better for all of us.”

“Agreed.”

“Wonderful. Next, we wish to trade certain goods with

you. We know that your region produces better crops, has larger pools of fresh water, just to name a few. And we'd like to purchase some of those goods. Is that something we can agree on?"

"Yes. We can work out the finer details in private at a later time. That way we can get a better grasp as to how to go about this trade deal."

"Fair enough. Okay, now, there is one last item we'd like to discuss as a part of our agreement."

"And what is that?"

"...We pride ourselves in being the best. That doesn't always mean that we are the best at everything, but we always strive for the best. And when we see potential, we want that potential to join us."

"What are you asking?"

"We want your friend to stay with us at the castle."

The Subordinate then looked to me.

Then the Sovereign swiftly turned around and looked back at me.

I just looked back at the Sovereign.

"...Of course, your friend would have to agree to staying here at the castle," the Subordinate said. "But in all of our interests, it would be a wise decision."

The Sovereign turned around and faced the Subordinate again.

"Are you comfortable with that?" the Subordinate asked.

"...It's not my decision," the Sovereign answered.

And so, the Subordinate looked back to me again.

"Would you like to remain here at the castle?" the Subordinate asked me.

I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, listened and then, eventually, opened my eyes and looked back at the Subordinate.

"...Can I come back to you on my decision?" I asked the Subordinate.

“Certainly,” the Subordinate answered. “Take as much time as you need.”

My eyes where shut, as I sat alone.

And then, suddenly, there was a noise and so, I opened my eyes and looked over to where the noise was coming from, only to find the Sovereign approaching me.

“Hi,” the Sovereign said to me.

“Hi,” I replied.

“Am I disrupting you?”

“No, it’s okay.”

“...I just want to say something to you.”

“Sure.”

“...I just want to say: you have every right to decide to stay here. It’s your life. It’s your decision.”

“I really appreciate it.”

“Of course, I’d like it if you were around. You’ve...been a good friend.”

“You have too.”

“...That’s all I really want to say.”

“Thank you.”

And then Sovereign turned around and left me by myself.

My eyes were shut as I attempted to fall asleep, but I couldn’t help but toss and turn and so, I stopped, opened my eyes and just laid there.

The sun eventually came up and so, I sat up, closed my eyes, took a long deep breath, opened my eyes, stood up, put on my clothes and headed towards the huge hall.

But then the Host appeared and approached me.

“How are you this morning?” the Host asked me.

“Amazing,” I answered. “And you?”

“Wonderful as always. What can I do for you?”

“I was hoping to speak with the Grand Inquisitor.”

“The Grand Inquisitor is busy at the moment, but I’m

sure we can have someone see you. What is it that you want to speak to the Grand Inquisitor about?"

"...What exactly is the Grand Inquisitor busy with?"

"I'm sorry. I'm not allowed to discuss that."

"...I understand. Thank you, anyway."

"Anytime."

And so, I turned around, walked off and wandered the castle.

But then, suddenly, there was the Grand Inquisitor, staring at a statue, alone.

I stood there and just watched.

The Grand Inquisitor eventually looked away, then looked back up at the statue, walked a few steps around the statue, sighed, kicked the dust and looked away again.

And so, I then stepped forward and approached the Grand Inquisitor.

The Grand Inquisitor turned towards me.

"Hello," the Grand Inquisitor said.

"Hello," I replied.

"What are you doing here?"

"I was just wandering around."

"Yeah, I like to wander around myself. It's strangely intoxicating."

A smile came to me.

"...I'm sorry I didn't introduce myself properly when we met," the Grand Inquisitor said to me. "The subordinates are always the ones who dictate proceedings."

"Even though you are the Grand Inquisitor?" I asked.

"Even though I am the Grand Inquisitor, yes."

"How is that? How is it that you aren't making the decisions?"

"The subordinates know better."

"How so?"

"They just do."

We both looked away and eventually, our attention was caught by some birds flying above us.

“Beautiful, aren’t they?” the Grand Inquisitor asked me.

“They sure are,” I answered.

“What do you think of them?”

“What do you mean?”

“What comes to your mind when you see these birds?”

“...The birds are...dancing.”

“I like that. Birds don’t fly. They dance, like the rest of us. All we’re doing is dancing. We’re dancing without reason, without a destination to arrive at. It’s just the great dance. It’s just happening. And it’s beautiful. And yet, we’re all pretending to be these personas that we’re not. Most of us don’t even realize that we’re putting on an act.”

“Why do you believe we put on our personas?”

“I believe that many of us like to believe that there’s more to life, that there’s more to the dance. And we wish to go beyond life. But it’s silly.”

“Why is it silly?”

“Because whatever ‘more’ we believe there is beyond life can only be pretend. What can be beyond life? If we were to somehow go beyond life, then wouldn’t the place that we went to be a part of life?”

“Wouldn’t that place have to exist? And wouldn’t the place that exists be a part of existence?”

“Exactly. There can’t be anything beyond life. But there doesn’t need to be. Life is life. And it is beautiful as it is.”

“...Why do you believe we wish to go beyond life?”

“I think many of us don’t feel complete. We feel lonely. Separate. Incomplete. But again, that’s just us pretending. And our pretending is something that we have become accustomed to.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“That we just get used to pretending to be these personas that we’re not. We spend so much time being our personas that we just get used to it and gradually believe that we are our personas. Why don’t we take an example to explain this...? If you were to fall into a deep sleep, wake up

forgetting who you believed you were and were told that you used to be a farmer, wouldn't you gradually believe that you are a farmer?"

"I guess I would."

"You wouldn't believe you were who you believed you were before you fell into the deep sleep because you don't have any memory of who you believed you were. We get used to pretending to be the persona that we're not. But after having said all that, there's nothing wrong with pretending. There's nothing wrong with pretending to be the persona that we put on."

"And why do you believe that?"

"Because if we didn't pretend, how could we distinguish between what is pretend and what is not pretend?"

"And what is not pretend?"

The Grand Inquisitor looked to the dancing birds and pointed to them.

A smile came to me.

And then the Grand Inquisitor looked back to me.

"What is important for all of us to realize is that these personas that we pretend to be aren't real," the Grand Inquisitor said. "And by doing so, we won't believe that we are separate, attempt to do 'more' and harm ourselves."

"How do we harm ourselves by pretending to be these personas that we're not?" I asked the Grand Inquisitor.

"When one of us tries to do 'more' to feel complete and another with an opposing set of values also tries to do 'more' to feel complete, then they'll get into conflict and harm themselves. Once we all realize that we aren't our personas and that we are already complete as we are, then there'll be no conflict."

"...Do you believe that these personas that we pretend to be are a mistake?"

"Oddly enough, no. For if we didn't have these personas that we pretend to be, then we wouldn't be able to realize what is not pretend. Our personas aren't a mistake. There are

no mistakes. It's just all one great dance."

A smile came to me.

"...Before I received my crown, I wanted to be this great leader," the Grand Inquisitor said. "That was all I cared about. It was all I thought about. I imagined myself being this loved and honored leader that would be remembered throughout time. But then, once I was crowned and began to serve the people, I exhausted myself attempting to save everyone. Even through my exhaustion, I tried to save everyone. I tried to go beyond myself. I tried to go beyond life. And then, one day, it became too much for me. I collapsed. And so, I asked my subordinates to help me serve the people as I recovered. But my subordinates wouldn't allow me to serve, so they ended up serving the people. And while I recovered, I fell into this deep peace. I felt that I didn't need to do anything, that I could just enjoy life. I didn't feel as if I needed to save anyone. I felt...complete. Tranquil. At peace. And I've felt the same ever since...The one thing that I haven't been able to realize yet has been why I felt the need to save everyone in the first place, or why anyone feels the need to save others. That one I haven't been able to figure out yet. I don't have to figure it out though. I just haven't figured it out yet."

"...By pretending to save others, we pretend that we're saving ourselves," I said.

"...Go on."

"Well, you've said it really. Because there are so many who feel incomplete, they feel that they need to do 'more', they feel that they have to go beyond life, even though they can't. And one of the ways in which one can feel that they're doing 'more' is by pretending to save others. So, by pretending to save others, one pretends to save one's self."

A smile came to the Grand Inquisitor.

"...Or it could be because we are aware that nothing lasts and that we're going to die," I added. "So, we pretend to save others in order to be remembered throughout time."

And by forming a legacy, in a way, we save ourselves.”

“That could be it too,” the Grand Inquisitor said. “But whatever the reason, there’s nothing wrong with serving others.”

“No, there isn’t. Just as there’s nothing wrong with forming a legacy.”

“So long as we realize that these personas that we pretend to be aren’t real.”

“So long as we realize that these personas that we pretend to be aren’t real.”

We both smiled.

“...Can I ask you something?” I asked the Grand Inquisitor.

“Sure,” the Grand Inquisitor answered. “What’s your question?”

“...Is it necessary that I remain here at the castle as a part of this deal?”

“Nothing is necessary.”

“Then why is my remaining here a part of the deal?”

“I don’t know. That’s something that you should discuss with my subordinates.”

“Even though you’re the Grand Inquisitor?”

“...What do you want to do?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never known the answer to that question.”

“Then why does it bother you whether you remain here or not?”

“I don’t know.”

“This is your decision. And only you should make your decisions.”

“Then can you answer me one more question?”

“Sure.”

“If I say ‘no’, how would your subordinates react?”

“They might scrap the original deal and write a new one. Or they might not. Each situation is different.”

I looked away from the Grand Inquisitor. But then,

suddenly, I began to chuckle.

“Why are you laughing?” the Grand Inquisitor asked me.

“No matter how much information we gather, our decisions will always be based on what we feel,” I said. “We can have all the information at our disposal, but we can never know what’ll happen. And so, we always make our decisions based on what we feel will give us the best outcome.”

“That’s a good one. That’s a really good one.”

“So, I might as well just listen and decide.”

“You might as well. It’ll save time.”

“Then...I’ve made up my mind.”

The Sovereign, the Grand Inquisitor, the guards, the subordinates and I all gathered in the huge hall, where the Sovereign sat down at the round table, in front of the subordinates and the Grand Inquisitor.

“As part of our agreement thus far, we have all agreed that you’ll extend to us your relationship with the General in order to bring us all closer together,” the Subordinate began.

“Yes,” the Sovereign replied.

“As well, you have also agreed to a trade deal which we have already discussed and agreed to in private.”

“Yes.”

“Now, the last part of our agreement. We’d still like your friend to remain here with us at the castle.”

“...That’s still not my decision.”

The Sovereign, the Grand Inquisitor, all the guards and all the subordinates turned to face me.

I looked back at all of them.

“...Have you come to a decision?” the Subordinate asked me.

“Yes,” I answered. “I have.”

“And what is your decision?”

“...I would like to ask some questions first.”

“Okay. What are your questions?”

“Why do you want me at the castle?”
“Because we believe you’d make a great addition to our castle.”
“For what purpose?”
“To work with us to become the best.”
“And what is the best?”
“The best? The best is about being better than everyone else.”
“And what is better?”
“Better means to be superior.”
“Superior is just a synonym of better. What is better?”
“Better is...”
“...Okay then, why don’t we try another question?”
“Okay.”
“Better to whom?”
“Better to whom?”
“Yes. Better is relative, isn’t it?”
“No. Better is objective.”
“Then how is better objective?”
“Because you can scale what is of better quality to another.”
“Only because we made up the scale.”
“Made up the scale? We didn’t make up the scale.”
“Of course, we did. Just as we made up everything else.”
“That’s ludicrous. We didn’t make everything up.”
“Why not?”
“Because we couldn’t have.”
“But why couldn’t we have.”
“Because we couldn’t have.”
“And how does saying that we couldn’t have prove that we didn’t?”
“Because it...”
“...How could thought have existed before we were around to think?”
“What?”
“How could thought have existed before we were

around to think?”

“...I don’t know.”

“It couldn’t have. All our thoughts formed all our words, all our symbols, all our images, everything. Everything is thought. Everything grows into existence through us. And doesn’t that mean that we made up the scale that encourages us to judge what is of better quality to another?”

“But the scale is still objective.”

“How is the scale still objective? How can anything be objective when life can only be experienced subjectively?”

“...Then from what you are saying that would mean that there can’t be any objective truth.”

“Well, what is objective truth?”

“The truth. Objective truth is the truth.”

“Is it?”

“Yes. Yes, it is.”

“Then what is the truth besides that which we identify as the truth?”

“What?”

“...How can we recognize the truth without going through the process of identifying the truth?”

“I...don’t know.”

“We can’t. We can’t recognize the truth without undergoing the process of identifying the truth. And therefore, what we identify as truth is only what we identify as truth and not an objective truth. It means that truth can only ever be relative. What truth is to one might not be truth to another.”

“But what about objectivity?”

“What about objectivity?”

“It must exist.”

“Why must objectivity exist?”

“Because it has to. There have to be facts.”

“But what is a fact?”

“What is a fact?”

“Yes, what is a fact?”

“A fact is the absolute truth.”

“No. Truth is just a synonym for fact. What is a fact?”

“A fact is the absolute truth. It’s something that’s proven.”

“No. Again, proof is just a synonym for fact. What is a fact.”

“...I don’t know.”

“...Fact is just a word. A word that we made up. If we didn’t have the word ‘fact’, then would there be facts?”

“...I don’t know.”

“There wouldn’t be any facts because how could we conceive of facts if we didn’t have the word ‘fact?’”

“...We couldn’t.”

“And the same is said of ‘proof’, ‘objectivity’, ‘absolute’ and ‘truth.’ If we didn’t have these words, how would we be able to conceive of the meaning behind these words?”

“...I don’t know. But knowing that facts are just made up can’t be good.”

“Why can’t it be good?”

“Because then how can we validate anything if there are no facts?”

“One can’t validate anything. Not really. And since one can’t really validate anything, what can they really validate...? Nothing.”

“And that’s terrible.”

“Is it?”

“Yes.”

“But couldn’t one’s need for validation be harmful...? Couldn’t believing that we need some form of validation to grow discourage us from growing? And couldn’t our discouragement cause us to slow down our growth, or stagnate, or even prevent us from starting to grow towards our dreams in the first place? We allow the facts to get in our way. The real question should be: why does one feel the need for validation? Because it’s through this question that one

can understand their affliction and grow.”

“...So, what are these words then if they’re just made up?”

“What is anything then? What is anything when everything is made up?”

“You tell me.”

I clapped.

“...So, what is better?”

The Subordinate just looked back at me.

“...We should renegotiate the deal,” the Grand Inquisitor interjected.

The Sovereign, the guards, the subordinates and I all faced the Grand Inquisitor.

“Clearly, there is no point in keeping our friend here,” the Grand Inquisitor said. “We’ll come back to you with a new deal and go from there.”

The Sovereign, the guards and I were all eating in the garden together when the Host approached us.

“We would like to talk with you if that’s alright,” the Host said to the Sovereign.

“Yes,” the Sovereign replied. “Let’s talk.”

And so, the Sovereign stopped eating, stood up and approached the Host.

“Do you only want me?” the Sovereign asked the Host.

“Yes,” the Host answered. “Only you this time.”

“Why is that?”

“I don’t know. It’s not for me to know.”

The Sovereign looked back to me.

I just looked back at the Sovereign.

“...Okay,” the Sovereign said.

The Sovereign turned around, facing the Host.

“Great,” the Host said. “Right this way.”

And so, the Host walked off and the Sovereign followed.

“...What do you think the Grand Inquisitor wants with

the Sovereign?” one of the Guards asked me.

“I don’t know,” I answered.

“I think they want to speak with the Sovereign so that they don’t have to deal with you,” one of the other Guards said.

“And what makes you believe that?”

“You insulted them. You highlighted the fallacy in what they believed and crushed their egos. No one likes being proven wrong.”

“No one likes to believe that they’re wrong. But if they were insulted, then that would just further highlight how insecure they are about their beliefs. All beliefs are neither right nor wrong. A belief is just a belief. And those who realize that won’t be insulted by any argument against their beliefs. They’d just accept that each of us experiences life differently, through our own perspectives and that we’re all neither right nor wrong.”

“I don’t disagree with you. I’m just saying that no one likes to believe they’re wrong.”

“And yet, sometimes, it’s once we realize that we’re not right that we may decide to look past our current set of beliefs, decide to make a positive change and then grow.”

“Sometimes?”

“Sometimes. Other times we believe with such conviction that we are our egos and when our egos are threatened, in any way, we do everything we can to protect our egos. And unfortunately, one can’t force others to realize that they’re not their ego. Doing so only antagonizes the ego. All one can do is inspire others and those others who are open to new realizations will decide to make a positive change.”

“And for those others who aren’t open?”

“Sadly, they’ll suffer. At least, until they allow themselves to be open.”

The Sovereign eventually came back with the Host.

“Thank you,” the Sovereign quietly said to the Host.

“My pleasure,” the Host replied.

The Host turned around and left us.

“...What happened?” one of the Guards asked the Sovereign.

The Sovereign looked over all of us.

“The Grand Inquisitor and I had a long discussion,” the Sovereign said. “And we’ve agreed that no one will be remaining at the castle.”

The guards sighed in relief.

And a smile came to me.

“And all the other terms have been agreed upon,” the Sovereign mentioned.

“So, our region is safe then?” one of the other Guards asked.

“Yes, we’re safe.”

And then, suddenly, one of the Guards shouted with joy and quickly, all the other guards and the Sovereign began to cheer with jubilation.

I just stood back and watched.

Later, there was a big feast, where the subordinates and the guards mingled amongst themselves, while the Sovereign and I sat beside the Grand Inquisitor. We ate, drank, conversed and laughed.

“Are you happy?” the Sovereign asked me.

A smile came to me.

“...What’s so funny?” the Sovereign asked me.

“I knew someone who asked me that same question,” I answered.

“And what happened to this person?”

“This is not the place nor the time for that story.”

“What is the place or the time for anything? That’s what you’d be asking.”

A smile came to me.

“...What’s on your mind?” the Sovereign asked me.

“Nothing,” I answered.

“Nothing? How can there be nothing on your mind?”

“I’m not thinking.”

“How are you not thinking? Every time I try not to think, I start thinking, even if I’m thinking about my own thoughts.”

“Well, that’s it, isn’t it? You can’t try not to think. That’ll only cause you to think.”

“Then what do you do?”

“Surrender. Surrender to the now.”

“...It still feels as if there’s something on your mind.”

“What makes you feel that way?”

“I don’t know. But I can’t know, can I?”

“No, you can’t.”

“...Is there something on your mind?”

“There was. But it was just a thought passing through my mind.”

“I’m still curious though, what was the thought?”

“...Are you safe?”

“Yes, I believe we are.”

“And what is safety?”

“It’s the feeling that you’re protected from danger of any kind.”

“Ah, you said it there.”

“Said what there?”

“Safety is a feeling. It’s only a feeling.”

“...What are you implying?”

“...You’re not actually safe.”

“We’re not?”

“Not really. Why couldn’t a storm hit this castle? Or an earthquake? Or why couldn’t someone attack the Grand Inquisitor in this moment? Or anyone else...? There’s no reason for why anything can’t happen. Everything is possible. And all is permitted. Safety is only a feeling. Nothing more.”

“I see what you mean.”

“For many, that can be a crushing realization.”

“But an honest one. A realization that I appreciate.”

“...And I am happy. I didn’t answer your first question.”

“That’s good to hear. But how can you be happy when you’re not actually safe?”

“One doesn’t need to be safe to be happy.”

The Sovereign, the guards and I lined up beside the Grand Inquisitor and the subordinates.

“This is it,” the Sovereign said to the Grand Inquisitor. “For now, at least.”

“Until we meet again,” the Grand Inquisitor replied.

And then the Sovereign and the Grand Inquisitor shook hands.

“Thank you,” the Sovereign said.

“Thank you,” the Grand Inquisitor replied.

They withdrew.

And then the Grand Inquisitor looked to me.

“You too,” the Grand Inquisitor said to me.

“Thank you,” I replied.

And then a smile came to me.

And a smile came to the Grand Inquisitor.

And so, the Sovereign, the guards and I turned around and headed back.

Walking back, the Sovereign walked up alongside me.

“...There seems to be much more on your mind,” the Sovereign said.

“What makes you believe that?” I asked.

“It’s just what it seems. Is there more on your mind?”

“I was curious about one thing.”

“And what was that?”

“What did you and the Grand Inquisitor talk about?”

“You.”

“What about me?”

“How you inspired the Grand Inquisitor.”

“And how did I inspire the Grand Inquisitor?”

“I don’t know. The Grand Inquisitor couldn’t explain what it was.”

“That’s okay. Nothing needs to be explained.”

“Nothing?”

“Yes, nothing. Do you need to know how your lungs work in order to breathe?”

“No.”

“Do you need to know how your heart beats in order to pump blood through your body?”

“No.”

“Do you need to know how your brain works in order to be aware?”

“No.”

“Do you need to know anything in order to live?”

“No, I guess not.”

“So, why does anything need to be explained?”

“It doesn’t.”

“We can just live. We don’t need an explanation.”

It began to snow and so, we searched for shelter, found a cave, built a fire and huddled together.

“Is everyone warm?” the Sovereign asked.

The guards and I all nodded our heads.

“We should do something to distract ourselves,” one of the Guards said.

“Yeah,” another Guard responded.

“Great idea,” yet another Guard said.

“But why should we distract ourselves?” I asked the guards.

“So, that we don’t feel the cold,” one of the Guards answered.

“But if you stay with the feeling, accept it as it is, won’t you warm up?”

“I don’t know.”

“Then why don’t you have a go at it? Accept this moment as it is?”

And so, the Sovereign, the guards and I sat back and then, gradually, we all began to breathe slower.

"...As difficult as it may be for us, when we stay with the feeling, accepting the feeling as it is, the feeling dissipates and we realize how insignificant pain is," I said.

One of the Guards stood up, approached me and sat beside me.

"...Can I ask you something?" the Guard asked me.

"Yes," I answered. "What is it?"

"...How did this all begin? In your opinion?"

"How did life begin?"

"Yes, how did life begin?"

"What makes you believe that life has a beginning?"

"Because we must have come from somewhere."

"And yet, isn't time an illusion?"

"Is it?" another Guard interjected.

"Can we live in the past?"

"I'm not sure."

"Can't we only remember the past?"

"Yes," another Guard interjected. "The past is remembered. The past can't be lived."

"And what about the future? Can we live in the future?"

"No," another Guard answered. "We can't."

"And why is that?"

"Because the future is always ahead of us," another Guard answered. "Right?"

"Very good. Because the future is always ahead of us, can't we only imagine the future?"

"Yes."

"And what about the present? Because we can only remember the past and imagine the future, doesn't that mean that we can only remember the past and imagine the future in the present?"

"Yes," another Guard answered.

"We can only live in the present," another Guard

commented.

“So, how can there be a beginning to life when life can only be experienced in the now...?” I asked the guards. “Those who believe that life has a beginning have fallen for the illusion of time. Life is now. And now is all there is.”

“But mightn’t there have been a Maker?” one of the Guards asked me. “Someone who made all this?”

“Well, firstly, if there was a Maker, how does a Maker change the illusion of time? Whether there is a Maker or not, time is still an illusion. So, how could there have been a Maker that made life in the beginning when time is an illusion and all there is is the now? And secondly, who is the Maker? To realize who we are, don’t we depend on time?”

“I’m not sure.”

“How is it that we depend on time to realize who we are?” another Guard asked me.

“Well, how can you realize who you are without a past?” I asked the Guard. “Don’t we each depend on a past in order to fabricate the stories we tell ourselves? And who would we be without our stories?”

“...No one,” another Guard answered.

“Exactly. The stories we fabricate for ourselves shape who we are, our identities. And since the past, since time is an illusion, what does that say about our identities?”

“That our identities must be illusions too.”

“Our identities are just illusions. All identities are illusions. And in realizing that our identities are illusions, who is the Maker...? There can’t be a Maker.”

“...Then how did this all happen?” another Guard asked me.

“Is it that this all happened or is it that this is happening...? We are not the result of a series of events. This moment, the now, is the event. This moment is happening. And it is always happening. It is eternal. It has no purpose. It isn’t going anywhere. It is just happening, like how our hearts beat. It is...” and I clapped.

“...So, is it wrong to believe in a Maker?” yet another Guard asked me.

“...Even after all that, it is neither right nor wrong to believe in a Maker, as nothing is neither right nor wrong. But the reason why we share the idea of the Maker, the reason why we share these stories about a Maker, these myths, is not so we can have something to believe in, but so we can learn from its lesson. And by believing that the Maker is real, we suck the mystery out of the myth, turning temples into expensive artifacts, and its lessons get lost in history.”

“...So, it isn’t good to believe that the Maker is real?” another Guard asked me. “It’s not that isn’t not wrong, but it’s just that it’s not good to believe that the Maker is real?”

“Believing that the Maker is real corrupts the idea of the Maker as that idea can then be used to control or manipulate others.”

“...And who is the Maker really?” another Guard asked me. “Or what is the Maker?”

“...The way I see it, the Maker is a clue for it, much like now ‘nothingness’, ‘the void’, ‘enlightenment’, ‘the truth’, ‘life’, ‘the universe’, ‘being’ and ‘it’ are clues for it. And the reason why they’re only clues is because words can’t capture it. Since words are made up, words can never capture it. The most words can do is give us a sense of what it is and help guide us to realize what it is. But really, the Maker is just another clue for it, for...,” and I clapped.

The Sovereign and most of the guards were asleep.

And so, I stood up, walked to the entrance of the cave, lay down and rested my head against a rock.

“What are you doing?” a voice suddenly asked me.

I looked up and turned around, only to see one of the Guards looking back at me.

“It’s too cold to sleep here,” the Guard said to me.

“It’s okay,” I said. “I want to sleep in the cold.”

“Why?”

“...To remind myself that I can live through the worst of conditions.”

“And why would you want that?”

“It helps me to realize that what I’m living through isn’t as harsh as it may seem. And that helps me to be grateful.”

“...Are you sure about this?”

I smiled and nodded.

“Okay,” the Guard said. “It’s your life.”

The Guard then turned around and walked back into the cave.

And so, I rolled over, rested my head back against a rock and closed my eyes.

We all woke up and saw that it had stopped snowing, so we got up, packed our belongings and continued forward.

And along our way, one of the Guards walked up alongside me.

“I have this question that’s been puzzling me,” the Guard said.

“Oh,” I replied. “And what is your question?”

“We say that ‘it is snowing.’ But what is ‘it’ that is snowing?”

“That’s a very good question. It is snow that is snowing. But we don’t say, ‘snow is snowing’, because we believe that would be an odd thing to say. So, instead we say, ‘it is snowing.’ And this misplacement of words highlights that our language is imperfect. And since our language is imperfect, what does that say about our thinking?”

“That our thinking is also imperfect.”

“Very good. Our thinking is also imperfect.”

We continued forward until we arrived at small town where the townspeople were gathered together around a pyre.

“We are here today to sentence to death the convict who admitted to murdering one of our own,” the Judge announced. “Bring out the Murderer!”

Then two townspeople brought out the naked, crying Murderer, walked the Murderer to the pyre and tied the Murderer down.

“Do you have any last words?” the Judge asked the Murderer.

“...I’m sorry,” the Murderer said. “I didn’t mean to do what I did. Please believe me.”

“...Alright, let’s get this over with.”

Two other townspeople approached the pyre with flaming sticks.

And the Murderer began to sob.

But then I stepped forward.

“Wait!” I exclaimed.

The two townspeople stopped, turned around and faced me, as did everyone else around us.

The Murderer stopped sobbing.

“Why are you killing this poor soul?” I asked.

“Because this Murderer killed one of our own and should be punished accordingly,” the Judge answered.

“But don’t you see that this poor soul feels guilty for the crime that was committed?”

“And rightly so. This Murderer deserves what is coming.”

“You don’t look to understand others then? To imagine life through another’s lens? To practice empathy?”

“We practice law and order.”

“...Can I at least console this poor soul?”

“...Make it quick.”

“Thank you.”

And so, I approached the pyre.

The Murderer just watched me.

And I kept looking back at the Murderer.

“...Life...can be cruel sometimes,” I said to the Murderer. “We may find ourselves in dark moments when life might seem as if it’s not worth living. But without these moments we wouldn’t be able to recognize the good

moments. Without anger we couldn't recognize kindness. Without hate we couldn't recognize love. These dark moments help us to recognize the good moments. I remember when my father passed away. It was a dark moment for me. I was very young and I couldn't understand it. I couldn't understand life. I couldn't understand why something so terrible had happened to him. I went around looking for an answer. I searched for so long and couldn't find any answer. I thought that life was cruel. But I also remember the good times. I remember the times when my father cared for me, loved me, loved us. I remember the dark moments and the good moments. And living both is what makes life beautiful."

"...Who are you?" the Murderer asked me.

"No one."

"...What will happen to me after I die?"

"I don't know. No one can know. But the way I see it, either you won't be born again, in which case you have nothing to worry about, or you'll be born again and live the same experience, or a similar experience to the one you're living now."

"Might I be able to make up for what I did?"

"Why do you want to make up for what you did?"

"Because what I did was wrong."

"I agree that murder is a terrible act to commit, but what I'm really asking is: why do you want to be saved?"

"...Because I'm afraid. I'm afraid of dying."

"And yet, death is just the other face of birth. Life is eternal."

"You believe that?"

"How can there be impermanence without permanence?"

"But what is permanent?"

I clapped.

"...But in another sense..." I clapped, "...is neither permanent nor impermanent," I said to the Murderer. "It is

just...,” and I clapped.

“So, I’m going to be born again?” the Murderer asked me. “After I die?”

“You don’t need to be saved is what I’m saying.”

The Murderer exhaled deeply.

“...Can I ask why did you do what you did?” I asked the Murderer.

“I was angry,” the Murderer answered.

“With what?”

“With life. Everything was the same. Dull. Boring. It was awful. It was so miserable. And I was angry. I was so angry. And I lashed out. And I shouldn’t have. I know I shouldn’t have. But I did. And...I’m sorry. I’m sorry for what I did. For every terrible thing that I’ve done, I’m so sorry.”

“...To feel anger, misery, hatred, depressed, any negative feelings, even towards others, is...honest. It’s not wrong to feel anger. It’s not wrong to feel misery. It’s not wrong to feel hatred. It’s not wrong to feel depressed. It’s not wrong to feel any negative feelings. It’s a feeling. Feelings are neither right nor wrong. It’s just a feeling. But just because we feel negative feelings doesn’t mean we should harm others, nor get into conflict with others, nor disrespect others, nor cause any form of resistance with others. And if anything, this means we should always appreciate and accept what we feel, so that we don’t cause friction inside ourselves and impulsively commit acts that are harmful or disrespectful to anyone in any way.”

“...I’m sorry.”

“...I understand. I understand why you did what you did. I don’t condone it. I don’t condone your actions, but I understand. I understand you.”

“...Thank you.”

I just stood there, looking back at the Murderer.

And then, eventually, the Murderer nodded.

“...Okay, I’m ready,” the Murderer said.

“You heard the Murderer,” the Judge said.

I stood back.

Then the two townspeople approached the pyre with their flaming sticks and lit the pyre on fire.

The Murderer cried out.

Everyone around the pyre just stood there, watching, listening to the cries.

And eventually, the Murderer screamed no more.

The flame continued to burn.

Later, the Sovereign, the guards and I were sitting together.

And then, suddenly, the Judge approached me.

“Who do you think you are?” the Judge asked me.

A few of the guards stood up and blocked the incoming Judge.

“Get out of my way,” the Judge demanded.

“Please take a breath before speaking to my friend,” one of the Guards said. “Anger doesn’t solve anything.”

“It’s okay,” I said.

The guards eventually took a step back and allowed the Judge to walk up to me.

“...You shouldn’t have done what you did,” the Judge said to me.

“And why is that?” I asked the Judge.

“Because you can’t defy the law.”

“And why can’t I?”

“Because it’s the law.”

“So?”

“There’s a reason why we have laws in place. And that reason is so that we can convict and prosecute anyone who breaks those laws.”

“You have laws in place so that anyone who breaks those laws is convicted and prosecuted? Why don’t you just not have any laws in place? It’d be so much easier.”

“We can’t not have laws.”

“Why not?”

“Because then we’d do as we please. Everything would be permitted.”

“How though?”

“How though? Because everything would be permitted. You’ll have evil. Immorality. Mischief. Vice.”

“But doesn’t morality come out of responsibility?”

“No.”

“How doesn’t it? If we couldn’t be responsible, how could we be moral?”

“...I-I don’t know.”

“Morality must come out of responsibility. And we can only ever be responsible. We can’t not be responsible because then we’d be responsible for pretending that we’re not responsible. And that’s simply a contradiction. A paradox. We can only ever be responsible. And so, as we each come to realize this for ourselves, we’ll gradually treat each other with more respect, care, empathy, compassion and love, even without laws.”

The Judge just kept looking back at me.

“...Also, how have your laws prevented that poor soul from committing murder?” I asked the Judge.

“...Sorry?” the Judge replied.

“How have your laws prevented that poor soul from committing murder?”

“...Uh...laws don’t prevent us from committing crimes. They punish those who are unlawful.”

“So, we can still do whatever we’d like. It’s just that we might be punished for committing some acts.”

The Judge just kept looking back at me.

“...And what about you?” I asked the Judge.

“What about me?” the Judge asked.

“You just murdered that poor soul. So, shouldn’t you be convicted and prosecuted?”

“But I acted lawfully.”

“So, murder is appropriate when it is done lawfully?”

“Yes.”

“Do you see the hypocrisy in that?”

“...Then what should we do? Should we just allow anyone who commits a murder or who commits any unlawful act to roam free?”

“...I believe you should adapt your laws to the time that we’re in so that everyone can live in peace.”

“And you don’t think our current laws do that?”

“What I believe is different to what you believe. And that’s why law will forever be flawed.”

“...Our current laws acknowledge these times. That’s all I can say.”

“But do your laws really acknowledge these times?”

“Why do you doubt me?”

“Because I feel that your intention is to serve yourself and not to serve others.”

The wind was howling.

And so, I sat in a quiet space and wrote.

But the Sovereign and the guards began to drink, laugh, share stories and sing.

I then stopped, looked back at them and watched the fun, only to eventually stand up and join them in their ecstasy.

One of the Guards approached me.

“May I sit beside you?” the Guard asked me.

“Yes,” I answered.

And so, the Guard sat beside me.

“...I’ve been thinking about what you did for that Murderer and what’s been happening with the Dictator and this war and I’ve been thinking and asking myself many questions,” the Guard said to me. “I believe that’s a good thing.”

“I believe that’s a good thing too,” I replied. “What questions have you been asking yourself?”

“Well, there have been many. But there’s one that I keep

returning to.”

“And what question is that?”

“Why is there so much evil in the world?”

“Is there?”

“Sorry? Is there what?”

“Is there evil in the world?”

“Yes. Of course, there is.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because there is. Don’t you believe there’s evil in the world?”

“No, I don’t.”

“How can you say that?”

“Because evil doesn’t actually exist.”

“Evil doesn’t actually exist?”

“Yes.”

“What? How does evil not exist? Explain that one.”

“Evil is just a concept, a thought in the mind. If we did not think, there would be no evil because we wouldn’t be able to conceive of evil. And therefore, evil does not actually exist. Evil is just a thought in the mind.”

“But can’t you say the same thing for all concepts?”

“Yes, we can. All concepts: good, evil, right, wrong, balanced, imbalanced, free, determined, equality, inequality, important, unimportant, relevant, irrelevant, order, chaos, mind, body, peace, conflict, love, hate, suffering, birth, death, being, non-being, life, all thoughts are just in the mind and don’t actually exist.”

“...But if we did not think there would be nothing.”

“Well, there wouldn’t be nothing because we wouldn’t be able to conceive of nothing.”

“But it’ll be a sort of nothing.”

“As an expression, yes, there would be nothing.”

“...Is it wrong to think then?”

“No. Thinking is neither right nor wrong. Right and wrong don’t actually exist. They’re just thoughts in the mind.”

“And we can’t not think either, can we?”

“Why can’t we not think?”

“...I guess we can. But we can’t not think completely. The only way we can recognize when we’re not thinking is by distinguishing when we’re not thinking from when we’re thinking.”

“Very good.”

“We have to think.”

“Thinking is something we do. It happens.”

“And since we think, isn’t it still good to think about good things? Isn’t it still good to do good things? Even if good and evil don’t actually exist?”

“It is. I agree with that.”

“So, what can we do to do more good?”

“We can always love more.”

“How?”

“By sharing more love. By giving more love away. By always acting with love. By saying, ‘I love you’, to others.”

“We can’t say, ‘I love you’, to everyone.”

“Why not?”

“Because others might take it the wrong way, even when we have good intentions.”

“Then instead of saying, ‘I love you’, to everyone, think, ‘I love you’, to everyone. Think, ‘I love you’, to everyone you interact with, so you can spread love to everyone.”

“...Are there any other ways?”

“We can also love the thoughts that pass through our minds, even if they’re negative thoughts.”

“How does that help?”

“Because it reduces the weight of our thoughts and allows us to just be. And play. And love. We can just love.”

We all woke up, struggled to pack our belongings and looked amongst ourselves.

“Is everyone ready to go?” the Sovereign asked us.

The guards and I all nodded.

“Alright,” the Sovereign said. “Let’s go.”

And so, we were on our way.

But then, suddenly, one of the Townspeople approached us.

“You’re the Sovereign, aren’t you?” the Townsperson asked the Sovereign.

“Yes, this is the Sovereign,” one of our Guards answered. “What’s it to you?”

“The town believes you should know that the Dictator has just made friends with the Chancellor.”

The Sovereign’s eyes widened.

“Where did you hear this?” the Guard asked.

“I have birds that travel,” the Townsperson answered. “What does that mean for the regions?”

“We don’t know. Thank you for informing us.”

The Townsperson nodded, turned around and ran off.

“...What should we do?” another Guard asked the Sovereign.

“...We have to go home and prepare for battle,” the Sovereign answered.

We were heading back when one of the Guards walked up beside me.

“Do you believe the Sovereign is making the right decision?” the Guard asked me.

“What is the right decision?” I replied.

“The decision that leads to the best outcome, I guess.”

“And how can we realize what the best outcome is when we can only realize the one outcome from our decision?”

“We can’t?”

“We can only decide and realize the one outcome from our decision.”

“But can’t we realize the outcome from a decision, learn from the outcome and make a following decision that’d lead to a better outcome?”

“Sure, we can. But the following decision happened in

a different moment, didn't it?"

"Yes, it did."

"In the moment, we can only realize one outcome from a decision."

"...Do you agree with the Sovereign's decision then?"

"I'm not sure. Who is the Chancellor?"

"This intellectual who owns a small region."

"And why would the Dictator side with the Chancellor?"

"There are rumors that the Chancellor is a designer at heart. And my guess is that the Dictator sided with the Chancellor so that the Dictator could manipulate the Chancellor into designing better and more resources for battle. The Sovereign, no one believed that the Chancellor would side with the Dictator. The Chancellor is a loner who doesn't have strong relations with any of the other regions. And it would have been a waste of our time to attempt to side with the Chancellor when there were other potentially stronger allies to form relationships with. At least, that was what we believed. What should we do? I don't want to go to war."

"I don't know. Allow me to watch my thoughts and listen to my heart and I'll inform you on how I feel about it."

Later, we stopped by a lake.

And so, I wandered off, found a quiet space, sat down, crossed my legs, closed my eyes and listened.

There was a thick fog ahead of us and so, we stopped.

"What should we do?" one of the Guards asked.

"Go through the fog," the Sovereign answered.

And so, we steadily entered the fog and slowly wandered through, while ceaselessly scanning our surroundings.

But we quickly found the open air and walked towards it.

"I'm glad we made it," one of the Guards said.

“...We go through so many fears and yet, most of them are never realized,” I stated.

The moon was beaming down on us when we stopped, made a fire, cooked some leftovers, ate, shared stories and laughed.

“...How do you know so much?” one of the Guards asked me.

“What makes you believe that I know anything?” I replied.

“You don’t know anything? You seem like you know so much.”

“Well, what is knowing?”

“...I don’t know.”

We laughed.

Eventually, we all calmed down.

“...None of us know anything,” I said. “And that’s not because we’re impotent. It’s because we can’t know anything. What can we know when the way in which we know – through words, numbers, symbols and images – is made up? When everything grows out of nothing? The reason we believe we know what we believe we know is because we fill words, numbers, symbols, images, all things with meaning. Words, numbers, symbols, images, all things are like empty dishes that we fill with meaning when we’re experiencing them. And when we’re not experiencing words, numbers, symbols, images, all things, they’re empty. They don’t have meaning. And how can they have meaning? How can a thing that is not being experienced have meaning? A thing in itself has no meaning. All things are without meaning. All things are without self. It’s the experience, the relationship we have with the thing that gives the thing meaning. And in realizing this, we can’t know anything. Not really anyway. But even then, since we can’t really know anything, then what can we know?”

“Nothing,” another Guard answered.

“And because we can’t know anything, why don’t we fill all things with positive meaning? Why not fill all things with magic?”

“Why not?” another Guard replied. “There’s no excuse.”

“There isn’t. We get to decide what meaning gets poured into all things. And if one were to doubt this, then their doubt would be the meaning they’re pouring in.”

“...We get to decide what meaning gets poured into all things.”

“...And even though I can’t know anything, even though we can’t know anything, I still encourage others to learn.”

“Why is that?” another Guard asked.

“Because learning helps us to grow. And growth collaborates well with fulfillment.”

“I see.”

“I am a student. I’ll forever be learning.”

We kept going forward until one of the Guards stopped and observed something in the distance.

The Sovereign, the other guards and I all stopped and turned around.

“What is it?” another Guard asked.

But the captivated Guard just kept observing.

And so, the Sovereign, the other guards and I looked in the direction that the captivated Guard was observing, only to notice some horses playing in a shallow river.

We all just stood there and watched.

We were moving forward when one of the Guards walked alongside me.

“How are you?” the Guard asked me.

“Amazing,” I answered. “And are you happy?”

“Yes. Yes, I am happy.”

The Guard smiled.

And so, did I.

“How are you feeling amazing?” the Guard asked me.

“I don’t know,” I answered. “But I don’t need to know. I just feel. And it feels amazing.”

“I want to ask you something.”

“What is it?”

“You have said to us that there is no point to anything. So, the question that I’d like to ask is: why do anything?”

“Ultimately, there is no good reason to do anything. Why develop a discipline? Why earn a living? Why fall in love? Why do anything? There are no good reasons to do anything.”

“So, why do anything?”

“Well, why would one develop a discipline? Let’s take dancing for instance. Why dance? Why does one dance? There is no good reason. We just dance. We’re not trying to get anywhere with dancing. There’s no destination to arrive at. We’re just dancing. And that’s all there is to it.”

“But mightn’t we enjoy dancing? And mightn’t that be the reason why we dance?”

“As I said, ultimately, there is no good reason to do anything. On the surface, there might seem like a good reason to do something. We might do something because we enjoy it or because of some other reason. But ultimately, there is no good reason. There’s just...,” and I clapped, “...And I’d like to add that there’s nothing wrong with creating meaning in one’s life either. There’s nothing right nor wrong. Not ultimately at least. And creating meaning can help one to grow and grow their fulfillment.”

“Depending on the meaning one makes.”

“Depending on the meaning one makes.”

Suddenly, there was a scream.

And so, I woke up, sat up, looked around and saw one of the Guards sweating and breathing heavily.

The guards who were on patrol rushed up to and

huddled around the shocked Guard.

The Sovereign and many of the other guards slowly woke up with a few moans and faced the shocked Guard.

“What’s the matter?” one of the other Guards asked.

But the shocked Guard just kept looking forward until the Guard began to cry.

And so, I approached the crying Guard.

“I’m just going to sit beside you,” I said to the crying Guard.

And so, I sat next to the crying Guard.

The Guard just kept crying until there were no more tears.

“...I’m sorry,” the Guard said.

“It’s okay,” I replied. “Being vulnerable is what makes us human.”

We just sat there together.

We were packing up when the Sovereign approached me.

“Do you have a moment to talk?” the Sovereign asked me.

“Yes,” I answered.

“...A lot of the guards are becoming more and more restless about going to war. And I don’t blame them. I am too. But do you believe there is anything else we can do?”

“Well, what else can we do?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Couldn’t we ask our new allies for help? Isn’t that why we went to them in the first place?”

“Yeah, we can. I just thought that being allies with our neighboring regions would intimidate the Dictator and stop the Dictator from going to war, but the Dictator is so insanely determined to own everything that it seems as if it doesn’t matter what we do.”

“That’s why we shouldn’t hold expectations. Expectations will only disappoint us.”

“...This is becoming too much for me. I wish the

Dictator would just disappear. Go away. Is that wrong to think like that?"

"Everything is neither right nor wrong. But how does wishing a problem to disappear help you to grow?"

"It can't."

"We can't grow without problems."

"But aren't some problems just too difficult?"

"Are these problems really too difficult? Or do these problems just feel too difficult?"

"Problems only feel too difficult, I guess."

"And that's part of the problem. That's part of the challenge."

"It can feel overwhelming."

"It can. But isn't that just an incentive to change how we feel? Isn't that just an incentive to form effective solutions to our challenges?"

"Yes. Yes, it is."

"...So, are you going to ask your allies for help?"

"Yes. I'd have to send someone."

"Who are you going to send?"

"Probably one of the Guards."

But then, suddenly, the Sovereign's eyes widened.

"...Or could I send you?" the Sovereign asked me.

"Me?" I asked. "Why do you want to send me?"

"Because you're inspiring."

"But aren't you just asking for help? Why do your allies need inspiring?"

"I don't know. Something just tells me that I have to send you."

I looked up at the blue sky and felt the wind against my face, only to look back to the Sovereign.

"Okay, I'll go," I said.

And so, I finished backing my belongings and headed back.

The air was warm, the sun was seeping through the clouds

and the wind was pushing against my back, as I wandered across the grass field with a smile.

There was a small village up ahead and so, I walked towards the village, wandered around until found some strangers who were writing.

One of the strangers turned and saw me.

“Hello,” the stranger said to me.

“Hello,” I replied.

“You’re new.”

“Yeah, just making my way through.”

“Where are you headed?”

“I’m going to the tower.”

“Why are you going there?”

“To see the General.”

“Really? I thought the General doesn’t talk to anyone.”

“The General has changed of late.”

“That’s neat. Why are you going to see the General?”

“I’m sending a message to the General.”

“That’s it?”

“Yes.”

“Couldn’t you just deliver the message? Why walk all that way to the tower? It seems like a waste of time.”

“That’s one way to look at it.”

“And what’s another way to look at it?”

“That nothing is wasted because nothing needs to happen. It’s all happening.”

“That’s an interesting way to look at it. I disagree though. If you’re spending your time doing something that you don’t love to do, then you’re wasting your time.”

“But then what is time?”

“Good point, but do you see where I am coming from?”

“Yes. Yes, I do.”

“See for me, I wouldn’t want to do anything other than what I do.”

“And what do you do?”

"I'm a Scientist. We all are."

"A Scientist. Okay."

"...I can tell you're not as keen."

"It's just not a field I'm interested in."

"I understand. Not everyone cares about numbers and equations like I do, like we do. And that's fine. Everyone should have their own passions. But I do wish that we could all love numbers and equations as much as we do."

"And why is that?"

"Because it's fun."

"Fun?"

"Yes. To me, this is so much fun."

"How?"

"It just is. I couldn't really tell you how."

I just kept looking back at the Scientist.

"...You're still baffled?" the Scientist asked.

"Yeah, I am," I answered.

"What makes it so hard to believe that numbers and equations can be interesting?"

"It's not that I don't believe that one could find numbers and equations interesting. I can believe that. It's just that I personally don't see the attraction."

"What do you see when you think of numbers and equations?"

"...I see how every number and every equation can be refuted. And how all numbers and all equations are ultimately meaningless."

"And?"

"Wait. That doesn't bother you?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because it's still fun. Numbers and equations don't have to be meaningful in order for me to have fun playing with them."

"But aren't you bothered by how numbers and equations won't ultimately solve anything?"

“No, because I still have fun playing with them. I don’t see numbers and equations as a means to solve anything. Nothing needs to be solved. Not really anyway. I just love the researching, the experimenting and the findings. That’s what fascinates me. Numbers and equations are just play.”

“Life isn’t a problem that needs to be solved, but is an experience that should be embraced.”

“That’s very profound. And we enjoy playing with numbers and equations. What do you do?”

“What do you mean exactly?”

“What do you like to do for fun?”

“I like to write.”

“And how is writing really any different to exploring numbers and equations? They’re both forms of play. It’s just that one form is using words and the other form is using numbers and equations. But really, they’re both play.”

“It’s all play.”

“Yes, it is. Yes, it is.”

“And in a way, all numbers, all equations, all words, all symbols and all images are all...forms of art that we play with.”

“Yes. That’s a great way of seeing it. All things are forms of art.”

“I see it now. I see numbers and equations as you do.”

A smile came to the Scientist.

Wandering through the village, there were some builders building a house and so, I drifted towards them until I stopped, standing at a distance, and watched.

“What are you doing?” one of the Builders shouted.

“I’m building the house,” another Builder answered.

“But that’s not what I told you to do. I told you to stack it up, like I showed you, not lay it down.”

“But then the house won’t stand.”

“Won’t it?”

“No, it won’t.”

“Did you plan the house?”

“No.”

“And do you know who planned the house?”

“...Yes.”

“And who planned the house?”

“You did.”

“That’s right. I planned the house because I know what I’m doing. And what you’re doing is not what I told you to do.”

“It won’t work.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure.”

“Are you really sure?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Then get out of here. I don’t want you ruining this house.”

The Builder just kept looking back at the Boss.

“...What?” the Boss reacted. “Get out!”

Eventually, the Builder walked off.

But then, suddenly, the Boss’s eyes spotted me.

“What are you looking at?” the Boss asked me.

“Me?” I replied.

“Yes, you. What are you looking at?”

“Nothing.”

“You not comfortable with how I handle things?”

“Are you not comfortable with how you handle things?”

“Excuse me?”

The other builders stopped, turned towards us and watched.

“...Are you not comfortable with how you handle things?” I repeated.

“Of course, I’m comfortable,” the Boss answered.

“Then why is it of any concern to you what I think of how you handle things?”

“It’s not.”

“Then why did you ask?”

“...Get lost.”

“Why?”

“Because I said so, that’s why.”

“And I have to do everything you say?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because I said so.”

“But why? Saying that I have to do what you say because you say so isn’t a good reason to do what you say. Anyone else could say that you have to do what they say because they say so and that would be just as valid.”

“Stop being smart.”

“Why?”

“Because I...”

Eventually, the Boss groaned.

“...Just get lost,” the Boss said to me. “You’re a distraction.”

“How?” I asked the Boss.

“With all your questions. Stop asking questions.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s annoying.”

“Why are my questions annoying you?”

“Because they are.”

“But why are my questions annoying you? Again, saying that my questions are annoying isn’t a good reason for why they’re annoying. Anyone else could say that you’re annoying because you are and that, again, would be just as valid.”

“Would you just get lost already? I don’t need you here.”

“Why do you believe that?”

“Because you’re annoying! You’re a pest! And I don’t need you here! So, would you just get lost?”

“No.”

“No?”

“Why should I?”

“Because you have to.”

“Why do I have to?”

“Because you have to.”

“But why do I have to? I don’t have to do anything.”

“Yes, you do. You have to leave.”

“But why?”

“Because you’re annoying me, that’s why.”

“Am I?”

“What?”

“Am I annoying you?”

“Yes. Yes, you are. You’re annoying me.”

“Really?”

“Yes!”

“Because if I’m annoying you, why don’t you just walk away? You could have walked away at any point during this interaction and yet you didn’t. So, I couldn’t have been that annoying to you.”

“...Just get lost!”

And then the Boss stormed off.

The other builders kept looking back at me.

As the moon peered through the soft clouds, one of the Builders approached me.

“How are you?” the Builder asked me.

“Amazing,” I answered. “Are you fulfilled?”

“Sort of. I’m doing well, but I’m not...amazing.”

“Why is that?”

“This house. It’s a bit of trouble. Nothing I can’t handle though. And I shouldn’t complain.”

“That’s good. Complaining is for those who have too much.”

“You mean for those who are ungrateful?”

“Yes, for they wouldn’t complain if they were grateful for what they have. And besides, complaining doesn’t do anything for anyone.”

“...What you said to our Boss, that was something

though. I've never seen anyone stand up to our Boss like that. You made our Boss look like a real idiot."

"That was not my intention though. I don't intend to make anyone look like an idiot, or a fool, or anything along those lines."

"Even someone who deserves it?"

"Even someone who deserves it. Everyone is important. And at the very least, I respect everyone, even if I don't agree with them."

"That's noble."

"The reason why your Boss looked like an idiot was because your Boss felt like an idiot. I could have posed those exact same questions to someone else and they might not have felt like an idiot. They might have laughed at themselves. Or they might have learned a lesson that they hadn't realized before. But your Boss didn't. Your Boss took my questions personally, which is just a reflection of how your Boss feels. And it's how we feel that matters. How we feel determines how we live."

"I like that."

"I like that too."

"...Do you have any other words of wisdom? Anything that I could use to deal with my Boss?"

"There's a lot that I can give."

"Great. I'm listening."

"One shouldn't attempt to control or manipulate others. That'll only produce resistance. And it seems that your Boss is a good example of this. It seems that your Boss tries to control and manipulate how you and your colleagues build this house, having to follow the plan that your Boss has set out."

"Yeah, that's our Boss. When anyone proposes a good idea, our Boss tells them that their idea is bad every time without any explanation for why their idea is a bad idea and goes on to explain how our Boss is the superior and should always be listened to."

“And that produces resistance within your environment?”

“Yeah, that’s why this house is a problem.”

“And so, you understand why you shouldn’t behave like your Boss, don’t you?”

“I understand why. But it’s unfair. Why should our Boss be in a higher position than the rest of us when we know what we’re doing and our Boss doesn’t?”

“But that’s the next lesson to realize.”

“And what’s that?”

“Is your Boss fulfilled?”

“...I don’t know. I had never even thought about it.”

“If your Boss is producing that level of resistance, then one would imagine that your Boss isn’t fulfilled.”

“I guess so.”

“And so, how is your Boss better off than you, even with a higher position, when your Boss isn’t fulfilled?”

“Yeah, I can’t believe I had never considered that.”

“...And that leads to another realization.”

“What’s that?”

“How is your Boss around others outside of your environment?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never spent time with my Boss outside of building this house.”

“Then you should spend time with your Boss outside of building this house.”

“That’s going to be difficult.”

“Why is that?”

“Because I’m afraid of my Boss. I’m scared of my Boss.”

“That’s just another reason for why you should spend time with your Boss outside of building this house then.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“Why is that?”

“Because those who we find intimidating are usually

only intimidating because of the particular context that we associate them with. And when we spend time with them in other contexts, around others that we don't experience them with, we can experience different sides of them and ideally, realize that they're not as intimidating as we were initially led to believe."

"Is that so?"

"We are who we are because of others. And when we experience those who we find intimidating with others that they are happy with and don't intimidate, we realize that they are only intimidating because of the particular context that we associated them with. It's context."

"Okay, but it's still going to be difficult."

"Then what is the worst that could happen if you asked your Boss to spend time together outside of building this house?"

"My Boss forces me to leave."

"And what could you do to bounce back from that setback?"

"I could find another way to make a living. That's one option."

"Or couldn't you find another way to make a living now? Before asking your Boss? That way, you'll mitigate the risk."

"I could do that. Yeah, I could do that. But how does that help me to deal with my Boss? Even after all that you've said, my Boss will still be the same. My Boss will still tell us what to do and that we have to follow the rules. And if we don't follow the rules, our Boss will force us to leave. My Boss won't change, even if I do what you've said I should do."

"One can't control the effect, but one can control the cause."

"What do you mean by that?"

"...Why do you feel as if you have to change your Boss?"

“My Boss will continue to cause trouble if I don’t.”

“That’s not what I’m asking. I’m asking about how you feel. Why do you feel as if you have to change your Boss?”

“I’m not really sure. I guess, because if I change my Boss, then my Boss won’t trouble anyone.”

“Because you believe you’d be fulfilled if you changed your Boss? Correct?”

“Yes, I guess so.”

“So, why don’t you just change how you feel instead of trying to change your Boss? It’s much easier.”

“And how do I do that?”

“You grow.”

“How do I grow?”

“There are many different ways to grow because growth is relative. One should realize what growth is to them, whether that be evolving a particular discipline, or becoming healthier, or developing one’s character, or becoming wiser, or giving more, or loving more, or even a combination of different ways, whatever it is. But what is important, I believe, is that one feels their growth. Because with growth one grows their fulfillment. Many seem to believe that they have to change their circumstances in order to be fulfilled. So, they go about attempting to control or manipulate others to conform to their values, which only produces resistance with others around them and can even lead to conflict. They don’t realize that by growing they could grow their fulfillment.”

“That makes a lot of sense.”

“And the irony is that when one grows, others around them begin to change. When one grows, others around them become inspired by their growth. And then they decide to grow. And when they grow, they inspire those around them to grow. And on and on and on, the inspiration spreads.”

“So, I have to grow to inspire those around me to change?”

“Inspiration is the only natural way to make a positive

and sustainable impact.”

“I see. But even if I were to grow, what would guarantee that my Boss would feel inspired?”

“Well, firstly, what is guaranteed?”

“Nothing. Yeah, nothing is guaranteed.”

“And secondly, why is it of any concern to you whether or not your Boss is inspired by you when you are fulfilled?”

“True. But is there anything I could do to make sure that my Boss is inspired?”

“Unfortunately, no. And to do anything to try to inspire your Boss would just be some form of control or manipulation in disguise. Inspiration comes from feel, resonance, not controlling or manipulating the circumstances around us.”

“So, there’s nothing I could do to make sure my Boss is inspired?”

“Some are just so closed off that they won’t allow themselves to be inspired. But again, why do you feel as if you have to inspire your Boss to change?”

“Because I believe I’d be fulfilled if I inspire my Boss to change.”

“So again, why don’t you just change how you feel instead of trying to change your Boss?”

“Right, I see.”

The sun was coming over the mountain, as I sat there, watching it rise, until I eventually took a deep breath, stood up, packed my belongings and started to make my way forward again.

“Hey!” a voice shouted.

I turned around to find the Builder chasing after me, only to quickly catch up and catch breath.

“Are you leaving?” the Builder asked me.

“I am,” I answered.

“Why so soon?”

“To fulfil a promise.”

“Oh, I see.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I just forgot to say, ‘thank you’, for all your advice.”

“My pleasure, I’m always happy to help.”

“Right. Well, thank you. I’d like to give you some food for your journey, if that’s alright.”

“No, you don’t have to.”

“No, please. It’s the least I could do.”

And so, the Builder ran back, only to eventually come back with food.

“Here you go,” the Builder said to me.

The Builder gave me the food.

“Thank you,” I said. “You’re very kind.”

“It’s nothing,” the Builder replied.

“No, it’s not. A small act of kindness can inspire many.”

“...Imagine what many small acts of kindness can do then.”

“Exactly. Imagine what we could all do with many small acts of kindness.”

We both smiled.

“...Safe travels then,” the Builder said.

“All the best,” I replied.

And so, I turned around and continued forward, while I ate.

The rain was pelting down as I ran, searching for cover, only to gradually slow down and come to a stop, smile and take a deep breath.

But then, suddenly, the leaves rustled.

I swiftly turned around and scanned the space behind me.

The leaves rustled again.

I took a step forward.

And then, suddenly, an arrow zipped past me.

I jumped back and raised my hands.

“I mean no harm!” I exclaimed.
Then an Archer appeared, aiming an arrow at me.
“Why are you here?” the Archer asked.
“I was just walking through,” I answered. “I didn’t mean to cause any trouble.”
“I never said you did. You’re coming with me, unless you want to get yourself hurt.”
And so, with an arrow pointed at me, we turned around and walked off, until we arrived at a small home and walked inside.
The Archer gestured towards a spot on the floor.
“Sit down over there,” the Archer said to me.
And so, I sat down where the Archer referred to.
Then the Archer put the bow over the right shoulder and while holding the arrow in the left hand, walked over to a line of rope that was coiled up, picked up the rope, approached me and proceeded to tie me down.
“Sorry to do this to you,” the Archer said to me. “But one can never be too careful.”
The Archer had me tied down.
“There,” the Archer said. “Not too tight?”
I just watched the Archer.
The Archer then stepped back and faced me.
“You’re awfully quiet for someone who’s tied down,” the Archer commented.
“I’m just accepting this moment as it is,” I replied.
“...Where are you going?”
“I was going to see the General.”
“Yeah, right. The General doesn’t speak to anyone.”
“The General speaks to me.”
“Don’t lie. It’s not good for the soul.”
“I agree. And I’m not lying.”
The Archer smirked.
“Believe me or don’t believe me, it’s up to you,” I said to the Archer. “But I was going to see the General.”
“Why would the General speak with you then?” the

Archer asked me.

“Because we’re friends.”

“Friends? Don’t be ridiculous.”

“What makes you believe I’m lying?”

“Because why would the General be friends with you?”

“Why not?”

“Because you’re a nobody and the General is the General.”

“And?”

“And it’d be hard to believe that the General is friends with you.”

“The General’s position is just a position. Past all our positions we’re all the same.”

“I don’t deny that, but it’s still hard for me to believe you.”

“...What’s it going to take for you to believe me?”

“...Why don’t you tell me how you and the General became friends then?”

“Okay. Have you heard of the Dictator?”

“...Yes.”

“And have you heard about the Dictator’s plans?”

“No.”

“No?”

“No, I haven’t.”

“You haven’t heard any of the rumors?”

“I live here all by myself. There are no rumors to be heard.”

“Then how did you hear about the Dictator?”

“It’s a long story.”

I kept looking back at the Archer.

“...Anyway,” the Archer said. “You were saying.”

“There are rumors about the Dictator declaring war on the other regions,” I continued.

“Yeah? Are those rumors real? Or are they just rumors?”

“They’re real.”

“Right.”

“And in the midst of these rumors, the Sovereign also happened to hear rumors about me?”

“The Sovereign?”

“Have you not heard of the Sovereign either?”

“No.”

“The Sovereign is the leader of one of the smaller regions.”

“Right. And why would the Sovereign have heard about you?”

“I used to hold gatherings in a village within the Sovereign’s region.”

“Gatherings? What sort of gatherings?”

“I’d bring villagers together and talk, give them advice, inspire them to grow their fulfillment.”

“Right.”

“And the Sovereign heard of me and my gatherings and wanted to speak with me. So, I was brought to the Sovereign where the Sovereign informed me of the Dictator and the Dictator’s intentions. The Dictator was going to attack the Sovereign first because the Sovereign was, and still is, the easiest region for the Dictator to conquer. The Sovereign has the smallest army and the least number of resources compared to the other regions the Dictator wants to rule over. And so, the Sovereign and I decided to travel to the other regions and ask for help. We went to see the General. It took some inspiring to get the General to agree to help the Sovereign, but the Sovereign did it. And that’s how I met the General and how we became friends.

“Right.”

“And then we went to see the Grand Inquisitor.”

“The Grand Inquisitor?”

“Have you not heard of the Grand Inquisitor either?”

“No.”

“The Grand Inquisitor is the leader of the largest region.”

“Right. Why didn’t you go to the Grand Inquisitor first? Especially when the Grand Inquisitor has the largest region?”

“The Sovereign was aware that the Grand Inquisitor had been trying to build a strong relationship with the General for a while and because the Dictator was likely to attack the General next, if the Dictator defeated the Sovereign, then the Sovereign believed that was enough of an incentive to join forces with the General.”

“And by building a relationship with the General, the Grand Inquisitor would have been more inclined to join forces with the Sovereign and help the Sovereign?”

“Exactly. And that’s what the Sovereign did.”

“Right. But why are you going to see the General now?”

“The Dictator joined forces with the Chancellor.”

“The Chancellor?”

“The Chancellor is a leader of another region. It’s a small region, but there are rumors that the Chancellor loves design. And the Sovereign believes that the Dictator has joined forces with the Chancellor so that the Dictator could manipulate the Chancellor into designing resources for the Dictator’s war.”

“How did you not see this move by the Dictator though?”

“I don’t know. One of those outcomes that very few saw coming.”

“Right. It still doesn’t tell me why you’re going to see the General.”

“The Sovereign asked me to go to see the General in person and ask for help.”

“Why do you have to go see the General in person? Aren’t you all friends? Couldn’t you just send a message to the General?”

“That’s what I said to the Sovereign. But the Sovereign felt that I’d be needed. And so, I accepted the Sovereign’s decision and just went with it.”

“Right. And now you’re on your way to the General?”

“Yes.”

“...You have a compelling story, but how can I trust you?”

“Trust is earned. But if you want to begin to trust me, you have to start with a calculated risk.”

“A calculated risk?”

“Yes.”

“Why should I start with a calculated risk?”

“Because one has to allow themselves to trust others. And one can’t do that if they don’t take a calculated risk.”

“Right.”

“But even having said that, one could obtain all of life’s information and they’d still make a decision based on how they feel.”

“And why do you say that?”

“Because we can’t know what’s going to happen. We can’t know what’s going to happen a while from now, or even in a short moment from now, so we’re always making decisions based on how we feel. How we feel determines how we live.”

“Right. So, what are you saying?”

“You should listen to what you’re feeling to determine whether you can trust me or not. And your feelings will inspire you to decide which direction to take.”

“Right. And that’s what you’re going to leave me with? You’re not going to try to convince me to trust you?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because, ultimately, you’ve already made your decision. Since life is interdependent, all decisions have already been made. Life is predetermined.”

“That sounds terrible.”

“Why does that sound terrible?”

“Because then we don’t really have choice.”

“And yet, aren’t we still free? And isn’t freedom what

we want from choice?”

“Yeah, I would agree with that. But how are we still free?”

“Either we have freewill or we don’t. If we have freewill, we’re free. That one explains itself. But if we don’t have freewill, then life is predetermined, which means that life is interdependent and nothing is absolute. And therefore, we’re free.”

“Right. Because nothing is fixed and everything is in flux, we’re free.”

“Yes, exactly.”

“You can’t say you’re free though.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because you’re tied up.”

“Good point.”

A smile came to the Archer.

And then a smile came to me.

Then the Archer slowly approached me, untied me, stood back and held up the bow and arrow.

“...I’m still holding onto this though,” the Archer gestured to the bow and arrow.

“It’s your decision,” I replied.

It was drizzling, even with the angry clouds raging in the distance.

“It usually rains a lot around here,” the Archer commented.

“Yeah?” I asked. “Do you like it here?”

“It’s home.”

“Even with the rain?”

“Home is home.”

“Yeah, home is home.”

“Where are you from?”

“I’m from the Sovereign’s region.”

“Right. And what’s your home like?”

“...My home is...great.”

“What’s great about your home?”
“I don’t know. Nostalgia. That’s probably why.”
“Can you tell me more? I’d love to hear about your home.”
“Why are you so curious about my home?”
“Don’t change the subject. I see what you’re doing.”
“Do you really?”
“Yes, I see you.”
A smile came to me.
And then a smile came to the Archer.
We kept staring into each other’s eyes.
But then my smile faded.
“...I really can’t say much about my home,” I said.
“And why is that?” the Archer asked me.
“It’s not that I wouldn’t if I could. I just haven’t been home in a while.”
“Is that because of your adventures?”
“Partly.”
“And the other part?”
I looked out towards the rain, listened to the rain drops fall and hit the ground before turning back to face the Archer.
“I...ran away, a while ago,” I answered.
“Why?” the Archer asked me.
“Selfishness. Jealousy. Anger. Just an amalgamation of different painful emotions.”
“What happened though?”
“My heart got broken. And I reacted poorly.”
“I’m sorry to hear that.”
“No, don’t be. Because of what I’ve lived through, I have an appreciation for life. I love it. I love life. And I love sharing my love of life with others. And I wouldn’t have this love if I hadn’t gone through all that I had gone through, including the heartbreak and all my other struggles. I wouldn’t have realized all that I have realized. And I wouldn’t be here now.”
The Archer kept smiling, looking back at me.

“...And what about you?” I asked the Archer. “How did you end up here?”

“I don’t want to get into it,” the Archer answered.

“Why not?”

“It’s a long story.”

“You can’t do that.”

“I can’t do what?”

“You can’t just encourage me to share and not share yourself.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s not fair.”

“You’re going to use that excuse? It’s not fair?”

“What are you talking about? That’s a great excuse.”

“No, it’s not.”

“Yes, it is.”

“Nah, ah. It’s a terrible excuse.”

“A terrible excuse?”

“Yeah, a terrible excuse.”

We both chuckled together.

“...How can I trust you?” I asked the Archer.

“You’re going to tell me about trust now, are you?” the Archer replied.

“Yeah, I am because how can I trust you when I’m willing to open up and you aren’t? Trust is a relationship. It goes both ways, otherwise, there is no trust.”

A smile came to the Archer.

And that made me smile.

“...Fine,” the Archer said to me. “Since you’re so insistent.”

I kept smiling.

But then the Archer’s smile faded.

And so, my smile slowly faded.

“...A while ago, I lived in a small town with my Mum and Dad,” the Archer said to me. “And life was amazing. It was really simple and pleasant. The town, however, was in the Dictator’s region. It’s close to the border of the General’s

region, but it's in the Dictator's region. And when the Dictator came into power, new rules were applied and we had to pay the Dictator for the Dictator's services. And that hurt many of us in our town because we were only earning enough talents to live. We didn't want any more. So, the situation made many flee early on – which was the wise decision. But many of us remained, including my family. 'Home is home', we thought. But we would struggle to earn the talents. We would have to work days and nights just to earn the extra talents to pay the Dictator. Life became a chore. But then it got worse. Gradually, as time wore on, the Dictator demanded more and more. And our family slowly burned ourselves out. It first started with my Dad getting sick. My Dad got this fever and couldn't move and had to lie in bed all day. And that led to my Mum developing back pains from having to compensate for my Dad's sickness. And this sort of thing happened with many of us in the town. We all suffered in different ways. And because of that, our town couldn't work to earn the extra talents, so the Dictator's warriors came to our town and questioned why we couldn't pay them. We told them that we were suffering from the demand put on us, but the Dictator's warriors didn't take this well. They believed that since we couldn't pay the extra talents, we shouldn't live in the Dictator's region. So, the warriors raided our precious town and burned everything to the ground. We were left stranded and had to make our way to the General's region. But as we made our way, one by one, many of us fell. We couldn't take it. Many of us just passed on from the pain that we had endured. And when we made it to the General's region, my family was all that was left, but we were barely alive. My Dad was struggling to breathe and my Mum couldn't walk. So, I decided to look for someone to help us. I ran around trying to find someone, but I couldn't find anyone nearby. My guess was that no one wanted to live close to the Dictator's border. But when I came back to my Mum and Dad, I found my Mum crying,

pleading for help and my Dad in her arms. That was a long night. The next day, I woke up and came up with the idea to build a new home for my Mum and I. This home. And we got to work that day. We made the home together to deal with our pains. It was our therapy. And we eventually made it. We made our home. And we made the most of it. We hunted. We enjoyed our company. My Mum's back got better. We even travelled for a bit and found a village really far away, where I decided to send a message to the General to tell the General about our story, but I never got a reply. And then one day, when we were home, my Mum's stomach began to cramp and she started to get sick. I then had to look after her, until she passed on. That's how I arrived here."

"I'm sorry to hear that you had to endure all that," I said to the Archer.

The Archer looked away and shed a tear.

"...What were your Mum and Dad like?" I asked the Archer.

"They were amazing," the Archer answered. "They were both really kind, loving parents. And they gave me everything, so..."

The Archer faced me.

I just kept looking back at the Archer.

"...Sorry," the Archer said. "I don't mean to be depressing."

"No, don't be sorry," I said.

"...What about your parents? Where are they?"

"...My father has passed on. It was a while ago. We got home from a show when my Dad just collapsed and passed away. We never found out why my father passed away."

"I'm sorry."

"It's ok. It was a while ago."

"...What about your Mum?"

"...My Mum is still with us. She's back home."

"And what is she like?"

"She's...incredibly giving, loving. She means so much

to me.”

“That’s sweet. When was the last time you saw her? With all your adventures, I’d assume you haven’t had much time with her.”

“It’s been a while.”

“Do you know when you’re going to see her next?”

“No, I don’t know.”

“You should see her. No one knows when any of us will pass on nor what will happen. It’s what makes life precious.”

I just nodded.

The Archer was sharpening some arrows, while I sat at a distance and watched.

But then, suddenly, the Archer glanced over at me and kept looking back at me.

I just kept watching.

A storm was brewing, as the Archer and I huddled close together, near the fire.

“Are you warm?” I asked the Archer.

“Yes,” the Archer answered. “Are you?”

“Yes.”

“...Show me your hands.”

And so, I raised my hands.

And the Archer held my hands.

“Your hands are freezing,” the Archer said.

“It’s okay,” I replied.

“It’s not okay.”

“No, really. It’s okay.”

But then the Archer started to rub our hands together.

“Is that better?” the Archer asked me.

“Yes,” I answered. “Thank you.”

The Archer continued to rub our hands together, only to eventually stop and just hold my hands.

“...Is that...?” the Archer asked me.

“Yeah,” I said. “It’s okay.”

A smile then came to me.

And that made the Archer smile.

“...What is it?” the Archer asked me.

“...When I was small, my Mum, my Dad and I used to sit by a fire and talk about anything really,” I said. “It wasn’t so much about what we talked about, but that we were just sitting by a fire, talking. And I remember once, when we were sitting by a fire, this question ran through my head, ‘Is there anything fire can’t burn?’ And so, I thought of answers to that question. What seemed to be the most obvious answer was water, that fire couldn’t burn water. But I wasn’t sure if that was correct. And later, I realized that it wasn’t. Fire could burn water.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I was surprised when I realized that too. Anyway, I was sitting there, by the fire, thinking of answers to this question. And the one answer that I came to was that fire couldn’t burn fire. Fire couldn’t itself. Fire burns. And it’s the same with water. Water can’t irrigate itself. Water irrigates. And it’s the same with everything else. Everything is just doing. It’s spontaneous. It’s all just happening. There’s no ultimate objective. There’s just this...,” and I clapped. “And it is beautiful. And it’s such a relief because nothing is needed. I mean, what does one need? What does one need when one is life? One evokes life. There’s even a clue to this in sleep. When one is asleep, life is not being experienced. One can’t experience being asleep because being asleep, having no awareness, non-being is not an experience. And the only way that could happen is if one is life. It’s the only way. One is life. And so, we don’t need to do anything. We can allow ourselves to just enjoy, celebrate this totality that we call life. So many cause their own suffering because they try to control or manipulate others to conform to their values. They believe that they’re right, when they can never be right nor wrong, and are willing to give up their fulfillment just so that they can delude

themselves into believing they're right. It's so absurd. Why would one want to be right when they can be fulfilled? It's just so absurd that so many of us would do this to ourselves. Why would one want to be right and cause their own misery? What does one achieve in being right? A sense of pride? Feeling better than others? What joy is there in that? And what is 'better?' What is 'better' when it's all relative? No one can really be better because what is better comes from a perspective. Many might believe that they are better than others, but it's just a belief. A delusion. No one is better than another. And no one can be. Not really. Not absolutely anyway. And with that, what's the point in trying to be 'better' when 'better' can never be absolute...? I'm sorry, I'm rambling on."

"No, I loved listening to your spiel. You have a lot of love to give. And you shouldn't be sorry for that."

"...Thank you."

A smile came to the Archer.

And then a smile came to me.

Then the Archer leaned on me.

And I put my arm around the Archer.

And we just sat there together.

The storm was still raging.

And so, we cooked some of the remaining food and ate while watching the storm.

"When will this storm end?" the Archer asked.

"Why do you want it to end?" I replied.

"I don't like storms. Don't you want the storm to end?"

"It is what it is. And it is beautiful."

"A storm? With all its loud thunder and lightning?"

"Yes."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"Why is a storm beautiful to you?"

"I don't really have a reason. It's just beautiful."

“You must have an idea of why it’s beautiful though.”

“Maybe, I guess it’s because...a storm isn’t trying to achieving anything. A storm doesn’t try to go beyond itself. It just does.”

“Right, I can accept that. But you don’t get frightened by the thunder?”

“Maybe, a little. But a storm is still beautiful. And my reaction to the storm is just part of its beauty.”

“...I don’t think I can ever see a storm as beautiful.”

“Why not?”

“Because storms are loud and...angry.”

“But isn’t a storm’s loudness and anger what makes the storm beautiful?”

“No. I’m sorry, I just can’t see a storm the way you do.”

“All things are magical, so long as we’re open to the magic behind all things.”

“Are you saying that the reason why the storm isn’t beautiful is because I’m closed off? So, it’s my fault?”

“Well, yes. Yes, it is.”

We both started to laugh.

“...Thanks,” the Archer said. “Really appreciate it.”

We kept on laughing.

The Archer was cleaning and so, I helped the Archer.

“You don’t have to help me,” the Archer said to me.

“I don’t have to,” I replied. “But I’m going to.”

“...Thank you then.”

Eventually, a smile came to me.

“What is it?” the Archer asked me.

“I was just thinking that you should thank me after we’re done,” I answered. “I might do a terrible job.”

A smile came to the Archer.

“...Then I’ll clean up your mess,” the Archer responded. “But you won’t. I believe in you.”

“Do you?” I replied.

“Yes. You can do it.”

I chuckled.
Then the Archer began to laugh.
And we were laughing together.

We were lying down next to each other, watching the sky.
“What does someone like you dream of?” the Archer asked me.
“Someone like me?” I replied.
“Yes, someone like you.”
“Is there something that makes me special?”
“No.”
“No?”
“There’s nothing special about you.”
“Nothing?”
“Nothing at all.”
“Ouch.”
The Archer started to laugh.
And that made me laugh.
“...That one hurt,” I said.
“You’re tough though,” the Archer replied. “You can handle it.”
“I don’t know.”
“You can handle it.”
We continued laughing.
And then, slowly, we both calmed down.
“...So, what does someone like you dream of?” the Archer asked me again.
“Really?” I replied.
“Yes, what do you dream of?”
“My vision of life.”
“Your vision?”
“Yes.”
“What’s your vision of life?”
“...I see a place where we all respect each other, care for each other, even love each other, despite our different appearances, our different values, our different beliefs and

our different challenges. I envision a place where we're all growing in our own ways and are able to inspire those around us to continue to grow and inspire those around them."

"...That's beautiful."

"You really think so?"

"Yes, why wouldn't I?"

"No reason. I just assume that when I share my vision of life, many would believe that I'm naïve or something along those lines."

"Why do you care about what others think of you?"

"Good question. I suppose we don't have to care about what others think of us. What others think of us is a reflection of them and how we react to their judgement is a reflection of us. That's the difference there. But we should still respect them because we're all neither right nor wrong."

"That works. We don't have to care about what others think of us, so long as we respect them and their values."

"Right. And what about you? What do you dream of?"

"I have pretty boring dreams, I think. Mainly, I dream about moments in my past. Memories. But then, sometimes, I dream of stories that I've never lived through."

"Really? Can you share one of your stories?"

"Well, for instance, I have this one recurring dream where I am wandering to different villages, only to find out that each village is empty. There aren't even any traces of life. There are no footprints, there's no water, no food, nothing. And as I continue wandering around, I grow thirsty and hungry. I'm not sure what to do, so I just persist. I keep going. But then it becomes too much for me. I eventually fall to my knees and start to crawl to the next village. I crawl and crawl and crawl, losing my breath, and then, out of nowhere, this small white light appears just above me. I try to grasp at it, but I can't quite get it. It's just out of my reach. And then I fall and pass on. Does that mean anything?"

"What is meaning?"

“I don’t know.”

“Then what is meaning except for what is meaningful to us?”

“There can’t be meaning unless it is meaningful to someone or something.”

“Exactly. Meaning is relative?”

“Right.”

“Meaning can’t be objective?”

“Right.”

“And doesn’t that suggest that anything we deem as meaningful is only meaningful because we decide it to be meaningful?”

“Yes. Yes, it does.”

“So, your dream is only meaningful if you decide it to be meaningful.”

“Right. Why do we dream then? If the only meaning that is in dreams is the meaning that we give to them, why do we dream?”

“Why do we do anything? There is a reason behind everything that we do, but what purpose are we really trying to achieve? There can’t be anything that we’re really trying to achieve. There is no great purpose. Life doesn’t have an ultimate objective. Life is just living. That’s it. All life does is live. But that isn’t to say that creating meaning is wrong. It’s not. There’s nothing wrong with creating meaning and making a positive and sustainable impact. It’s something that we do. And since we’re going to be alive anyway, why not make a positive and sustainable impact and share our gift with others? We might as well.”

“Right. Couldn’t we say though that we dream in order to recognize what is real? And aren’t we real because we dream?”

“But what is ‘real’ and what is ‘dream?’ And how do we know that what we agree to be ‘real’ isn’t a dream and what we agree to be a ‘dream’ isn’t real?”

“I don’t know. But I guess, ‘real’ is real and ‘dream’ is

dream because we decided that ‘real’ is real and ‘dream’ is dream.”

“Very good. Very, very good.”

A smile came to the Archer.

And that made me smile.

And then the Archer rolled over and faced me.

“Do you want to dance?” the Archer asked me.

“Dance?” I replied. “What, now?”

“Yeah, why not?”

“There’s no reason why we couldn’t. It’s just a bit of a strange request.”

“How’s that?”

“We were talking about dreams and now, all of a sudden, you want to dance.”

“And?”

“There’s a big leap there. How did you get from one to the other?”

“I don’t know. I just feel like dancing right now.”

And so, the Archer stood up and faced me with both arms reaching out to me.

“C’mon,” the Archer said. “Let’s dance.”

“Oh, no,” I replied. “You’re not getting me to dance.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t dance.”

“Everyone dances.”

“Not me.”

“Oh, c’mon. Please, dance with me.”

I just shook my head.

But then the Archer grabbed my arms.

“C’mon,” the Archer said. “It’ll be fun.”

The Archer attempted to pull me up.

“You don’t know that,” I replied.

“I don’t,” the Archer said. “But it’ll be fun.”

I chuckled, as the Archer continued to pull me up.

“C’mon,” the Archer said. “Just one dance.”

“...Alright,” I said.

A smile came to the Archer.

And then the Archer let go of my arms.

I then stood up, walked closer to the Archer, put my hands on the Archer's hips and then we danced, holding onto each other in the moment, until we eventually withdrew from each other and found ourselves standing at a distance, looking back at each other.

"So?" the Archer asked. "It wasn't so bad, was it?"

"Not at all," I answered.

Then the Archer took a step towards me.

I just stood there, watching the Archer.

And then the Archer took another step towards me, and then another, and another, and another, until the Archer stood just before me, wrapped both arms around me and held me tight.

I then wrapped my arms around the Archer and held the Archer just as tight.

And there we were, together, in each other's arms.

The sun was shining in the clear blue sky and so, the Archer and I walked out to the front of the Archer's place, stopped and faced each other.

Eventually, a smile came to me.

And then the Archer smiled back.

"...It's been great to share time with you," the Archer said to me.

"It has," I replied.

"...This is sad."

"What's sad?"

"The end."

"But the end is what makes the beginning and the middle just that much more precious."

"I agree. But it's still sad."

"Then what do we do?"

"I don't know. Prolong the middle, I guess."

"Do you want me to stay then?"

"I do. Yes, I do."

"I'd like to stay too."

"Then why don't you?"

"If I do then others might be hurt."

"Right."

"But after it's all done, I will come by and see you again."

"You don't know that."

"I don't. But I can do that."

"Or you can just not leave. You can stay."

I just kept looking back at the Archer.

"...I'm sorry," the Archer said to me. "I'm being selfish."

"No," I replied. "No, you're not. You just care. And I care. I care about you. And that's what matters here. What matters is that we care for each other. We don't have to be together to care for each other. We can just care for each other. We can just...love each other. We love each other without expectations."

A smile came to the Archer.

And that made me smile.

"...I will love you," the Archer said to me.

"And I will love you too," I replied.

I then took a step back.

"...Bye," I whispered.

"Bye," the Archer whispered back.

And so, I turned around and walked off.

There was a large bolder that I was sitting on, with my legs crossed, my feet on opposite thighs, and my eyes closed.

There was some rustling and so, I stopped and looked around, only to notice a group of strangers approaching me from every direction.

"Who are you?" one of the strangers asked me. "And what are you doing here?"

“I’m just passing through,” I answered.
“Where to?”
“To see the General.”
“The General? And who is the General?”
“The leader of this region.”
“Leader? There is no leader around here. There’s just the Shaman.”
“Who’s the Shaman?”
“The one we follow.”
“But if you’re following someone, mustn’t that someone be a leader?”
“Not always. And not in this instance.”
“What is the difference then?”
“The Shaman doesn’t tell us how to live. We have decided to follow the Shaman.”
“Why is that?”
“Because the Shaman knows all.”
“Really?”
“Yes.”
“How does the Shaman know all?”
“Because the Shaman does.”
“Alright, then, how can the Shaman know all?”
“Because the Shaman can.”
“But no one can know anything. So, how can the Shaman know all?”
“If you’re so skeptical, then why don’t you come with us and see for yourself?”
“Alright, then. I will.”
And so, I went with the Shaman’s followers, only to find a small tribe that eyed me and quickly began to surround me. I just looked back at all of them.
And eventually, they halted, forming a circle around me. I continued to look back over all of them.
Then one of the Followers walked into the middle of the circle, placed a cushion before me and stared back at me. I just looked back at the Follower.

But then another two followers appeared with a blind person and walked the blind person towards the middle of the circle.

The followers who had surrounded me bowed and made way for the blind person.

And eventually, the two followers walked the blind person to the cushion and helped the blind person to sit down before me.

The blind person faced me.

I just looked back at the blind person.

“We have encountered another who is ignorant to the truth,” one of the Followers announced to the blind person.

The blind person just nodded.

“What shall we do?” the Follower asked the blind person.

The blind person faced the Follower.

And then the Follower looked to me.

“The Shaman wants to know why you’re closed off to the truth,” the Follower said to me.

“What makes you believe that I am closed off?” I asked the blind person. “I’m sitting before you, aren’t I?”

“But you said to us that ‘no one can know anything.’”

The blind person faced me again.

“That’s because no one can know anything,” I said. “No one can know anything. Not absolutely anyway. And since one can’t know anything absolutely, one doesn’t know anything. And that’s because all answers can be questioned. There is no answer that is not subject to being questioned. All answers can be questioned. All things can be questioned. Everything can be questioned. And since everything can be questioned, everything can be refuted. Nothing cannot be refuted. And so, no one can know anything.”

“But we know some things.”

“Like what?”

“We know that the sun rises in the morning and sets at night.”

“But what is the ‘sun?’”

“The sun is the source of light in the sky.”

“And who gave you that definition?”

“I don’t know.”

“Someone must have given you that definition, otherwise, you wouldn’t have a definition of the ‘sun’, correct?”

“I guess.”

“And since that definition of the ‘sun’ was given to you, then wouldn’t that suggest that the definition of the ‘sun’ that was given to you isn’t absolute? How can any definition be absolute since the definition is dependent on us to recognize it? How could anything be absolute since everything depends on an opposite in order to be recognized?”

“It can’t.”

“And since all definitions can be refuted, what can be known? What can be known absolutely...? It shouldn’t even be about knowing anyway. It shouldn’t be about knowing more or knowing better because what good would that do for anyone? What good is there in believing that one knows more or knows better than another? That’ll only produce resistance between one and another, and that won’t serve either of them. So, what good is there in believing that one knows more or knows better than another? And that’s not what should matter anyway. It’s not about knowing. It’s about feeling. It’s about just feeling. What does one feel when they experience this moment? What is one feeling in the now? That’s what should matter. Whenever we make a decision, we always decide based on how we feel. We can gather all the information in the universe, but we can never realize whether a decision is a good decision or a bad decision until we make the decision. We can predict the outcome of a decision, but we can never realize the outcome of a decision until the decision has been made. And because of that, we must always make a decision based on how we feel. That’s why how we feel determines how we live. That’s

why how we feel should matter, not what we believe we know.”

Suddenly, a tear ran down the blind person’s face.

I just kept looking back at the blind person.

And all the followers just watched with wide eyes.

And then the blind person smiled, wiped the tear and nodded.

A smile came to me.

And the followers smiled with us.

Then the blind person reached out in front of me.

“The Shaman wants to have a closer look at you,” the Follower informed me.

I looked to the Follower, before facing the blind person.

The blind person then leaned forward and stared into my eyes.

And I just stared back.

Then tears began to flow from both of us.

And that made us smile.

As the stars glazed above us, we gathered together around a smoky fire, shared bites of food amongst ourselves and chanted hymns together.

And then later, we all sat together and watched the fire roar.

Then one of the Followers approached me and sat down beside me.

“You’re quite different,” the Follower said to me. “That’s what the Shaman thinks anyway.”

“Why does the Shaman think that?” I replied.

“The Shaman tells us, ‘you’re one who is not ruled by rules.’ And we like that. The rest of humanity is so constricted by the rules that they put on themselves that they don’t know how to live. It’s as if a plant were to strangle itself with its stem.”

“Isn’t it a bit ironic though?”

“What is?”

“Everyone here ran away from the rest of humanity to escape conformity, only to make your own little civilization that conforms to a set of rules that you’ve made up.”

“But this is different.”

“How?”

“Because we encourage each other to come to our own realizations.”

A smile came to me.

“...What is it?” the Follower asked me.

“I’ve just never heard of a community who encourages their own to come to their own realizations,” I replied. “Most communities force their own to conform to someone’s set of values and that can be troublesome because conformity stunts growth and demolishes trust and that can lead to major conflicts and lots of unnecessary suffering. But what you have established, what you’ve built together, by allowing each member of the community to come to their own realizations, is really the only way in which a community can grow and build trust. Each member is allowed to come to their own realizations, which helps them to grow and further support the other members of the community and allows the community to work together and build trust and to thrive. It’s really beautiful. It’s...inspiring.”

“...You can stay here as long as you want.”

“I’d love to, but I’ll only be staying here for the night.”

“Where are you going?”

“To see the General.”

“And who is the General again?”

“The General is the leader of this region. The regions are currently on the brink of war and I’m going to see the General and the Grand Inquisitor to ask them if they could help prevent the war from happening.”

“You’re a messenger then?”

“I’m no one.”

“Hmm. Why don’t you just not ask for help? Why don’t you just enjoy your life?”

“There’s no reason why I couldn’t. But I’ve decided to go to the General and the Grand Inquisitor and ask them for help. And that’s what I’m going to do. And...I love life. I love life. And I love sharing my love of life. And if preventing this war is the way in which I can share my love of life and continue to share my love of life, then I’m going to do it. I’m going to prevent this war.”

“Fair enough. Again, you’re welcome to stay with us as long as you want to.”

“Thank you.”

The Follower then stood up and left me by myself.

And then I faced the crackling fire and just watched it.

There were a few drops falling from the amiable clouds.

And so, I woke up, packed my belongings, went to each follower to say, “Goodbye,” approached the Shaman, shook the Shaman’s hand and smiled.

The Shaman smiled back at me.

We both withdrew.

And then I turned around and started to walk away.

But then, from nowhere, an army of warriors appeared and towered over us.

“What are you all doing here?” one of the Warriors asked us.

One of the Followers stood up and approached the Warrior.

“We’re just living here,” the Follower answered.

“Doing what?” the Warrior asked.

“Nothing. We’re just living.”

The Warrior stared back at the Follower.

And the Follower looked away.

“...Are you the leader here?” the Warrior asked.

“No,” the Follower answered.

“Show me the leader then.”

“We don’t have a leader.”

“What?”

“We don’t have a leader. We’re just living here.”

“Then who is in charge?”

“No one.”

“You don’t have a leader and you don’t have anyone who is in charge?”

“Yes, that’s correct.”

“...To live in our region, you have to pay talents.”

“But we don’t mean any harm. We’re just living here on our own accord.”

“I don’t care. You still have to pay talents.”

“And if we refuse?”

“We’ll take everything you have and band you.”

“We don’t have many talents though. We just live with what we’ve got.”

“Then we’re going to have to take everything you’ve got.”

“Wait!” I interjected.

The warriors, the followers and the Shaman faced me.

“No one has to lose anything,” I stated. “Surely, we can work out a deal.”

“No, we can’t,” the Warrior said. “The rules are the rules. Everyone has to pay talents to live in this region.”

“But surely there is a way in which we can give you what you’re looking for without anyone losing their belongings.”

“...What do you have in mind?”

“Well, you work for the Dictator, correct?”

“How do you know that?”

“You just gave it away. Anyway, the Dictator wants to control all of the regions, correct?”

The Warrior just continued to stare back at me.

“...And maybe, instead of taking what they have, I can come with you to help the Dictator with what the Dictator is looking for,” I said to the Warrior.

“What can you do to help the Dictator?” the Warrior asked me. “Are you trained? Have you studied strategy? Can

you design weapons? Have you been in a war?"

"No, I haven't done any of those things."

"Then you can't help the Dictator."

"But I can."

"How then?"

"The Dictator doesn't really want to go to war. What the Dictator really wants is to control the regions. Winning a war by defeating the other regions is just a way in which the Dictator can get control. But what if there was another way? What if I can help the Dictator to get control without having to go to war?"

"And how will you do that?"

"Why does the 'how' really matter?"

"Because it does. When we go into battle, we need to know how to defeat the enemy, we need a plan, otherwise, we're going in unprepared."

"But don't plans change? Does every journey go according to how one predicted it would go?"

"No, not always."

"Almost never?"

"It never does."

"And in those challenging moments that weren't a part of the plan, doesn't one have to improvise and realize an alternative solution to the challenge?"

"Yes, we do."

"So, why does the 'how' really matter?"

"It still helps to have a plan."

"It does. I won't deny that. It helps to be measured. But doesn't the strong purpose behind what one is doing and the clear vision that one is growing towards matter more? If there was no strong purpose behind what was being done then as soon as one encountered a challenging situation, they'd give up. There'd be no reason to keep going, especially when the challenge felt difficult. So, why would one persist? Plus, when one is clear on the strong purpose behind what they're doing, doesn't it become easier for one

to decide what works for them? And by being able to make those decisions, doesn't the 'how' reveal itself along the way? So, isn't it more important to realize 'why' one is doing what they're doing?"

"...Yes."

"And if one doesn't have a clear vision that they're growing towards, then how can they be clear on what they're achieving?"

"They can't be clear."

"And how can they realize if they're heading in the appropriate direction?"

"They can't know."

"No, they can't. So, what matters isn't 'how' one does something, but 'why' one is doing what they're doing and the clear vision they're growing towards, correct?"

"Correct."

"So, why does the 'how' really matter?"

"It doesn't."

"No, it doesn't."

"...Fine then. You're coming with us."

I then pointed to the followers.

"And will you leave them alone?" I asked the Warrior.

"We'll see how you do first," the Warrior answered.

"And then we'll decide."

"Is that fair?"

"No. But I don't care. We can either take everything now or you can come with us and wait and see what we do to everyone here."

"Okay then, I'll go with you."

And so, the warriors bound my wrists together, hid my face and took me across capricious terrain.

I kept my eyes shut and listened.

The blur was lifted and I found myself inside a prison.

"What is this?" I asked.

But the Warrior behind me locked me in, turned around

and walked off.

I scurried as far as I could towards the Warrior.

“When will I see the Dictator?” I shouted.

But the Warrior kept walking and turned around a bend.

I then slouched back, only to eventually turn around, take a deep breath, sit down, cross-legged and close my eyes.

There I was, sitting.

And then, suddenly, some scraps of food were squeezed into my prison cell.

“Wait!” I shouted.

I scurried over and looked through the hole.

But the Warrior was walking away.

“When will I see the Dictator?” I asked.

The Warrior turned around the bend.

The sun was blazing, as I laid there, drenched in sweat.

And then again, suddenly, more scraps of food were squeezed into my prison cell.

I picked up all the scraps, looked over them, ate the bits that weren’t hardened, crawled towards the cool shadow and sat there.

There was a skull.

And so, I slowly crawled towards it, picked it up, faced it and watched its eyes peer into mine.

There was a loud bang.

And so, I jolted up and out of my stupor.

“Wake up I said,” the Warrior repeated.

I rubbed my eyes and slowly stood up.

But then the Warrior yanked me.

“C’mon already,” the Warrior said.

Then the Warrior dragged me, taking me through the fickle fort, only to eventually arrive at a towering entrance.

The Warrior knocked twice.

“Come in!” a voice shouted.

And so, the Warrior opened the entrance and threw me down on the floor before a stranger who dwarfed me.

“Are you hungry?” the stranger asked. “Or thirsty? Or both? Or neither?”

I lifted my head to face the stranger, feeling a strain in my neck.

“...I always like to ask that to the ones who have just gone through what you’ve gone through,” the stranger said to me. “It gives me a bit of a gauge as to who they are, what they’re like.”

I just looked back at the stranger.

“...No answer,” the stranger said. “Then I guess you won’t want either, will you?”

I kept looking back at the stranger.

“...Oh, c’mon,” the stranger said. “Speak. Talk to me. This is no fun if I’m the only one talking.”

I just kept looking back at the stranger.

“...Fine,” the stranger said. “You won’t get either. If you don’t play the game, you won’t get the chance to win the prize.”

“Your game,” I said.

“Oh, good. The dog speaks.”

“Dog?”

“Yeah, a dog. That was what I said.”

“Why am I a dog?”

“Because you’re obedient.”

“How am I obedient?”

“Don’t make me spell it out for you.”

“What do you mean?”

The stranger just stared back at me.

And I stared back at the stranger.

“...You’re a messenger who is on your way to see the General and ask the General to send soldiers to the Sovereign so that the Sovereign can win the war against...well, me,” the stranger said.

“You’re the Dictator?” I asked.

“Correct. And you’re in a really, really tight spot.”

I just kept looking back at the Dictator.

“...The way I see it, you have two options,” the Dictator said. “Either you can continue to starve and dehydrate or you can tell me what you know.”

Then the Dictator picked up a meal and placed the food before me.

“What will it be?” the Dictator asked me.

I just stared back at the Dictator.

But eventually the Dictator took the food away.

“...How disappointing,” the Dictator said. “You’re going to die now. And you didn’t have to. You could have just told me what you know.”

“And how could I have realized whether or not you would have let me go?” I asked the Dictator.

“You couldn’t have known. But I keep my word.”

“Is that why you’re declaring war on the other regions? To keep a promise?”

“No, I’m going to war for another reason, something entirely different.”

“And what is that reason?”

“...Alright, I’ll play along. When I was really young, there was this Bully who would always pick on me. I don’t know why. And I never found out why, but this Bully did. This Bully liked to taunt me. Nothing more. This Bully just liked to provoke me. But this Bully would provoke me consistently, time after time after time. And I couldn’t tell anyone about it because to anyone who was older, they saw it as being playful, even though I knew what the Bully was really doing. And after enduring this Bully for so long and having no one to turn to, I just snapped, I lashed out. But that finally gave the Bully the permission to hurt me physically, to really hurt me because it was in quote-unquote self-defense. I got all of these wounds. And worst of all, I was the one who was punished because I was seen as the one who

initiated the conflict. I was asked to stay at home and was locked away. I couldn't see anyone for days. But in that time, I realized something. I realized that I couldn't take the Bully head on. The Bully was too big and too strong for me. But if I was going to get back at this Bully, I'd have to surprise this Bully. I'd have to get at this Bully when the Bully was least expecting me. I then came up with a plan. Since no one was expecting me to be there, that was the best opportunity to get back at this Bully. I could hit this Bully when no one, especially the Bully, expected me and flee the scene and the Bully couldn't say a thing. The only trouble was attacking the Bully when the Bully was alone. I couldn't have witnesses that could corroborate the Bully's story because I would have gotten into much more trouble. But I knew that the Bully liked to take short breaks during classes. The Bully would leave class and walk off to this quiet area. And that was it. That was the plan. And when I was ready, I snuck away with a hammer, hid where the Bully couldn't see me and when the Bully took one of those breaks, I came from behind and hit the Bully and quickly ran off. No one found out. And that was when I learned that this was the way life is. If there was something that I wanted, I'd have to take it by any means necessary."

I just kept staring back at the Dictator.

"...So, what do you think of my story?" the Dictator asked me.

I just looked away.

"...C'mon," the Dictator said. "You must have an opinion."

Eventually, I nodded, looked up and faced the Dictator.

"I was bullied once," I said to the Dictator.

"Yeah?" the Dictator asked. "And did your Bully get what they deserved?"

"We all get what we deserve. But I didn't harm my Bully. I never did."

"Why didn't you?"

"Because it's not how life is."

"No, you're just a coward."

"And yet, I am here before you. Isn't that brave?"

"You're still a coward."

"What makes you believe that?"

"Only cowards don't take what's theirs."

"And does that mean that you're brave? Are you brave because you're taking what you believe is yours?"

"Yes, I am the bravest you'll ever meet."

"But doesn't bravery come from vulnerability?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because vulnerability is weakness."

"But when we're born, we're weak. We're vulnerable. And when we die, we're hard and strong. Birth's qualities are weakness and vulnerability, while death's qualities are hardness and strength."

"That's ridiculous."

"One can't be brave without going through a moment of vulnerability. One wouldn't even be alive without being vulnerable in birth. Vulnerability is bravery, not strength."

"No, you're wrong. You're so wrong."

"How? How am I wrong?"

"Because you are. You're wrong."

"Didn't I just explain why bravery is vulnerability?"

"And you're wrong."

"But how am I wrong?"

"You are. You're wrong."

"How though?"

"You're wrong."

"How?"

"You're wrong. We're done here."

The Dictator stormed past me, towards the entrance.

"You'll never get what you want," I interrupted.

The Dictator stopped and turned around.

"You'll never get what you want," I repeated.

The Dictator just kept staring back at me.
And I kept staring back at the Dictator.
But then, suddenly, the Dictator began to laugh.
“...I won’t get what I want,” the Dictator said. “I always get what I want.”
“Do you?” I asked the Dictator.
“Yes, I’m the best at getting what’s mine.”
“Have you ever gotten what you really wanted though?”
“Yes, all the time.”
“Really?”
“Yes, I even told you of the time when I got back at that Bully.”
“But was that what you really wanted?”
“Yes, of course it was.”
“Why did you really want to get back at the Bully?”
“Because the Bully deserved it?”
“But why did you really want to get back at the Bully?”
“The Bully deserved it, alright? The Bully deserved it.”
“But do you really care whether the Bully deserved it or not? Because I don’t believe that was why you did what you did.”
“Oh, really? You believe you know me?”
“No, I don’t know anything.”
“That’s true.”
“But I believe there’s another reason for why you did what you did. I believe you did what you did because it feels good. And that’s why you continue to do what you do. Because it feels good.”
“You’re right about some things.”
“But it’s not going to last.”
“Is that so?”
“Yes. Eventually, it will come back on you.”
“No, it won’t.”
“Yes, it will. What one gives away always comes back to them. One decides the consequences they receive.”
“You’re just trying to scare me. But it won’t work. I

don't care what you think. You're wrong. And I'm right."

"Why do you feel the need to prove yourself?"

"I don't. You're wrong. You're all wrong. And I don't care what you all think."

"Why don't you care?"

"Because you don't matter. You don't matter at all. I'm the only one that matters."

"Is that really the reason?"

"Yes."

"Is it?"

"Yes. Yes, it is."

"I don't think it is."

"Then you're wrong."

"I believe you don't care about others because they don't care about you."

"You're wrong. There are many people who care about me."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

"My humble supporters."

"Do they really care about you?"

"Yes."

"Or do they just care about the position you're currently holding?"

"No, they care about me."

"Do they really?"

"Yes."

"So, once you've been replaced, will your supporters continue to support you?"

"Yes, they will. They'll always support me."

"Always?"

"Yes. And I will never be replaced."

"Never?"

"Yes."

"Even when you die, you'll continue to hold the

position?”

“No, that’s not what I said. Stop twisting my words.”

“How am I twisting your words?”

“You are.”

“But how?”

“You just are.”

“Can you give me an example?”

“I can give you plenty of examples.”

“What’s one example then?”

“You just twisted my words back then.”

“How? What did I say?”

“I don’t remember.”

“Do you not remember or are you just accusing me of twisting your words?”

“You’re doing it again.”

“How?”

“You just did it.”

“What did I do?”

“You just twisted my words.”

“Are you just accusing me of twisting your words or are you trying to avoid discussing how no one really cares about you?”

“No, there are people who will always support me.”

“Your supporters?”

“Yes.”

“Why will they always support you?”

“Because they love me. And why wouldn’t they?”

“But why would they?”

“Because I am the greatest.”

“At what?”

“Everything.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Of course, I am.”

“How are you the greatest?”

“Because I am.”

“Because you say so?”

“No, there you go again, twisting my words.”
“Then how are you the greatest?”
“Because I am. I already told you that.”
“But how? What scale do you use to judge who is the greatest?”
“Stop trying to provoke me. I am right...”
“What scale do you use to judge who is the greatest?”
“...And you are wrong.”
“There is no scale, is there?”
“I am the greatest.”
“You just call yourself ‘the greatest’, don’t you?”
“No.”
“Then how do you judge who is the greatest?”
“There you go again, trying to twist my words.”
“You’re living in denial.”
“No, you are living in denial.”
“You call yourself ‘the greatest’, without anything to base that on...”
“You’re in denial.”
“...So that you delude yourself...”
“Wrong!”
“...Into believing that others care about you.”
“You’re wrong.”
“Am I?”
“Yes!”
“How then? How am I wrong?”
“Because you are. You are wrong and I am right. You are...”
I just kept looking at the Dictator.
And the Dictator just looked back at me.
“...Why should I even care about other people?” the Dictator asked me.
“Isn’t that just a reason for you to care for others?” I replied. “If others don’t care, then isn’t that just a reason for you to care?”
“But I shouldn’t have to bother.”

“Why is that?”

“I’m the Dictator. They should have to care about me.”

“But why should they have to care about you? Take away the position you’re currently holding, why should they have to care about you...? The real question you should be asking yourself is: why do you feel the need to seek others’ care?”

“Why is that the question?”

“Because how we feel determines how we live. Every decision we make is based on how we feel. One could gather all the information that they possibly could, but they will never know what will happen. And the only way one can make a decision is by going with what they feel is the decision that would give them what they believe is the best outcome.”

The Dictator just kept looking back at me.

“...It’s the real question most of us should be asking ourselves: why do we feel the need to do what we believe we have to do?” I continued. “Why does one feel the need to seek others approval? Why does one feel the need to prove themselves? Why does one feel the need to find ‘the truth?’ Why does one feel the need to find ‘the answer?’ Why does one feel the need to attach themselves to thoughts? Why does one feel the need to do...anything...? To suggest that one feels a need to do something would suggest that they feel incomplete. And we aren’t incomplete.”

“Aren’t we?” the Dictator replied.

“No, we aren’t. Everything happens for a reason. And that’s because nothing can exist independently. How could light be seen if there were no eyes to see it? How could sounds be heard if there were no ears to hear them? How could surfaces be touched if there were no skin to touch them? How could flavors be tasted if there were no tongues to taste them? How could scents be smelled if there were no noses to smell them? How could life be if we weren’t here to experience it? Everything exists in relation to everything

else. Life is relationship. And nothing exists independently. Nothing exists absolutely. We are complete because we are life. It's just that most of us don't feel complete. We don't feel worthy. And for those who don't feel worthy, they should alter how they feel and not try to control or manipulate others to conform to their values. The two biggest mistakes we make are to either believe that there is some 'answer' out there for us, or to believe that we have found 'the answer.' And once we realize this, we can let go, surrender, and really live."

"...That was very convincing, but you're still wrong."

"And how's that?"

"Because what about me?"

"What about you?"

"What about what I want?"

"And what do you want?"

"To reign over the regions."

"Why do you want to reign over the regions?"

"To control everything."

"And why do you want to control everything?"

"So that I can do what I want when I want to."

"And why do you want to do what you want when you want to?"

"To be free."

"And why do you want to be free?"

"Because it'll be amazing."

"And why do you want that feeling of amazement?"

"Because it'll feel good."

"And why do you want to feel good?"

"Because...it's better than feeling bad."

"Why do you want to not feel bad?"

"To be happy."

"And why do you want to be happy?"

"Because...it'll feel good."

"And why do you want to feel good?"

"I..."

“...This is what desire does. Desire makes us go around and around and around without ever landing on anything, and makes us suffer in the process. And this is why, if we can eliminate desire, we eliminate suffering.”

“And how do you eliminate desire?”

“By letting go. Surrender.”

“But I can’t do that?”

“Why not?”

“I have too much already.”

“What do you have?”

“What do I have?”

“Yes, what do you own?”

“I own this entire region. I own everything within this region.”

“Do you really?”

“Yes.”

“What is to stop anyone from taking what you own?”

“I’ll go to war with them if they even try to take my region.”

“The threat of war prevents them from invading your region?”

“Yes.”

“But if the Sovereign or the General or the Grand Inquisitor were to look past that threat, what would stop them from taking your region?”

“Then I would stop them.”

“You’d go to war?”

“Yes.”

“But then if they defeat you, what would stop them from taking your region?”

“...I don’t know.”

“Nothing would. So, how do you really own this region when it can be taken from you at any moment? How does one really own anything when anything can be taken from them at any moment? We are all naked, even with our clothes on.”

“But it’s still mine. I am in charge of this region.”

“But isn’t there a difference? Being in charge of something isn’t the same as owning something. Being in charge is being responsible. Owning something just suggests that you have easy access to the thing you believe you own.”

“No, you’re wrong. This region is still mine.”

“How?”

“Because I own it. I own this region.”

“Then...who are you?”

“Who am I?”

“Yes, who are you?”

“I am the Dictator, ruler of this entire region.”

“But aren’t you the Dictator because of those that you interact with?”

“No.”

“How aren’t you?”

“Because I’m not.”

“How could you be the Dictator if you didn’t have those who take out your commands?”

“I could still be the Dictator.”

“How?”

“Because...”

“...We are who we are because of others. And in that way, we aren’t who we are. Life is relationship. So, how can we be who we believe we are?”

The Dictator just kept looking back at me.

“...So then, what do you have?” I asked the Dictator.

“...I don’t know,” the Dictator answered.

“...All our attachments are in the mind. And that is because it is all in the mind. When a tree is being blown by the wind, what is it that is moving?”

“The tree.”

“Is it? Or is it the wind?”

“...I don’t know.”

“It’s neither. It is the mind that is moving. All our attachments are to thoughts in the mind. And once we can let

go of all thoughts, we'll feel peace."

"But I can't do that."

"Why not?"

"I just can't."

"But why?"

"...What will happen when I let go?"

"Everything."

"But that doesn't make sense. How will everything happen once I let go of everything?"

"Because you'll allow it all to happen."

"But I..."

"...What's on your mind?"

"...It's not easy to just let go."

"Why isn't it easy?"

"...I don't know. It's just not."

"Does it not feel easy?"

"Yes."

"And what did I recommend we should do when we don't feel good?"

"We change how we feel. But that's not easy."

"Why isn't it easy?"

"It just isn't."

"But why isn't it easy?"

"It's just not."

"Is it not easy or are you just telling yourself that it 'isn't easy' so you can postpone having to do anything about how you feel?"

"I don't know. How do I tell the difference?"

"What do you feel is the answer to this question?"

"I don't know."

"Don't you know or are you just saying that you 'don't know' so that you don't have to confront the feeling you've been neglecting?"

The Dictator kept looking back at me.

"...Really, everything is easy," I said. "It is just as easy to do as it is easy to not do. And in this moment, in the now,

one always has the choice between what is easy to do and what is easy to not do. So, to do what is easy just do what is easy to do. It's that simple."

"...If it's so easy, what do I do exactly?" the Dictator asked me.

"You just let go. And from that place, grow."

"Grow?"

"Yes. What areas in your life can you grow in?"

"I don't know."

"Really?"

"I have no idea."

"...How could you be a better leader to your people?"

"I don't know. I'm a great leader."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"Why do you believe you're a great leader?"

"The people think that I am."

"Do they?"

"Yes. Why is it hard to believe that my people think highly of me?"

"How others behave around one is usually a reflection of who one is. And how I have been treated suggests to me that you're the opposite of a good leader."

"Are you telling me that I'm a bad leader?"

I just kept looking back at the Dictator.

"...No," the Dictator responded. "I'm a good leader. And my people believe that."

"Do they?" I asked the Dictator. "Or are they just saying that because they're afraid of what you'd do to them if you were to realize how they felt?"

The Dictator kept looking back at me.

"...So, how could you be a better leader to your people?" I asked the Dictator.

"I don't know," the Dictator answered.

"Then isn't that a reason to realize how you could be a better leader to your people?"

“I guess so, but what do I do?”

“Why don’t you ask your people what you could do to help them?”

“Ask my people?”

“Yes. Help them. Serve them. And inspire them.”

“That’s not going to make me feel better. If I’m going around helping my people, then I’ll be ignored.”

“What makes you believe that?”

“People just take and take and take. And if I go around helping everyone, then they’ll all take advantage of me and I’ll be left with nothing.”

“Is that how we really are or is that just how you believe we are?”

“No, that’s how people really are.”

“In your experience?”

“Yes.”

“Then that’s just been your experience with others, hasn’t it...? That doesn’t mean that’s how we really are. Each of us behaves differently because we’ve each lived through different experiences, correct?”

“I guess.”

“And because each of us behaves differently, then isn’t there the potential that there are those who don’t just take? Isn’t there the potential that there are those who give? Or those who at the very least believe that fair is fair?”

“But what about those who just take? How do I handle those people?”

“If you were to encounter another who took from you, why would you not just learn from that experience?”

“But I don’t want to lose anything.”

“But what are you attached to...? Once you let go of all thoughts, you’ll have nothing to lose and thus, allow everything to happen.”

The Dictator just kept looking back at me.

“... Why does this bother you?” I asked the Dictator.

“Because it does,” the Dictator answered.

“But why?”

The Dictator looked away. A tear dropped. And then the Dictator wiped the tear and confronted me.

“...It’s all that I have,” the Dictator said to me.

“And you’ll allow everything to happen once you let it all go,” I replied.

“But it’s not easy. Have you had to let anything go?”

“Yes.”

“What did you have to let go?”

“Everything. And that’s why it is all happening in this moment, in the now.”

“But how did you do it? How did you just let go?”

“...I didn’t try. When one tries to do anything, they force it and it doesn’t happen. It resists. One should just surrender. And it’ll happen. That’s what it means to have faith. To let go, to blow out one’s fire and allow it to happen.”

The Dictator just kept looking back at me.

“...How does one breathe...?” I asked the Dictator.

“Letting go is no different to breathing. We don’t try to breathe, otherwise, we’d force our breath, become increasingly stressed and anxious and quickly suffocate. We just allow our breath to happen. And it happens. It happens in and of itself.”

“...Just like breathing?” the Dictator asked me.

“Yes.”

“And once I let go, it’ll all happen?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

“Does it matter whether or not you know how it’ll all happen?”

“I don’t know. Shouldn’t it?”

“How does one breathe? One doesn’t need to know how to breathe to be able to breathe. The breathing happens.”

“I just let go and it’ll all happen.”

“Yes, and from that place, grow.”

“By helping others?”

“Helping others is one way to grow. But also, as one grows, no matter the way in which one grows, one will inspire others. And one’s inspiration will naturally help others.”

“But how will I know that letting go will work?”

“How does one know what will happen?”

“I don’t know.”

“By doing it. And experiencing the outcome.”

“It’s still hard to see how that’ll help me to feel good though.”

“Why is it hard to see?”

“I still see everyone taking advantage of me if I help them.”

“But remember, what one gives away always comes back to them. So, what’ll happen if you respect others?”

“They’ll respect me.”

“And what’ll happen if you care for others?”

“They’ll care for me.”

“And what’ll happen if you love others?”

“They’ll love me.”

“It’s that simple.”

The Dictator just stared back at me.

And I just stared back at the Dictator.

And then the Dictator took a deep breath, turned around, took a few steps away from me. But then the Dictator came to a halt.

I just continued to watch the Dictator.

And then, suddenly, the Dictator just walked off.

I took a deep breath, slumping forward, only to eventually lift my head and watch.

And then, suddenly, the Dictator returned with a buffet of food and assorted drinks and placed it all before me.

And so, we ate and drank together.

The Dictator and I were still there, as the sun fell and the

moon rose, peering through depressed clouds.

"I do feel a bit better, I have to admit," the Dictator said to me.

"Happy to help," I replied.

We both smiled together.

But then, from nowhere, there was a clanking sound that was increasing in volume.

And so, the Dictator and I stood up, wandered towards the direction of the noise and looked out, only to see three armies coming towards us, marching to the clanking of their weapons, while holding torches that illuminated the darkness.

"What is this?" the Dictator muttered.

I just kept watching the scene.

Then the armies came to a halt.

The Dictator turned around and stormed off.

And I followed the Dictator.

And then a Warrior approached us and walked up alongside the Dictator.

"What's going on?" the Dictator asked the Warrior.

"We don't know," the Warrior answered.

"Then find out."

"I will."

"And bring the superiors together."

"I will."

The Warrior walked off.

The Dictator continued forward, only to arrive at a large space.

I followed the Dictator into the space.

The Dictator sat down, before the empty space.

And I just stood in the back.

Then slowly, one by one, warriors entered the space and sat before the Dictator.

"What's going on?" one of the Warriors asked the Dictator.

"We're figuring that out now," the Dictator answered.

One of the Warriors looked towards me.
“Wait,” the Warrior said. “Who is that?”
The Dictator turned around and looked at me.
“What are you doing here?” the Dictator asked me.
“Helping,” I answered.
“...Fine,” the Dictator said. “Then sit here.”
The Dictator pointed to an empty space next to some of the warriors.
And so, I sat beside those warriors.
The entire space continued to fill up until the space was full.
And then, eventually, another Warrior came to us, approached the Dictator and whispered a few words to the Dictator.
“Just say it,” the Dictator interrupted.
The Warrior leaned back and nodded.
“Okay,” the Warrior said.
The Dictator just looked away.
The Warrior looked over the rest of us.
“The Grand Inquisitor, the General, the Sovereign and their armies have come before us,” the informing Warrior clarified.
“What do they want?” another Warrior asked.
“They...want one of our prisoners.”
“A prisoner?” another Warrior asked.
“Yes, that’s it. There aren’t any more demands.”
“Which prisoner?” another Warrior asked.
“A messenger we took from a tribe.”
Another Warrior quickly pointed to me.
“Do you mean that messenger?” the Warrior asked.
The Dictator and all of the other warriors faced me.
“What is the prisoner doing here?” another Warrior asked.
“Why isn’t the prisoner locked away?” yet another Warrior asked.
“The prisoner is with me,” the Dictator answered. “No

one needs to know why.”

“I don’t like that,” one of the Warriors exclaimed.

“If you don’t like that, then you can leave!”

The warriors fell silent.

The Dictator quickly glanced at me.

And I just looked back at the Dictator.

“...Sorry,” the Dictator said. “I shouldn’t have lashed out like that.”

Many of the warriors’ eyes squinted back at the Dictator.

“...Why would the Grand Inquisitor, the General and the Sovereign want this prisoner?” one of the Warriors asked.

“Yeah,” another Warrior said.

“Why would they want a messenger?” yet another Warrior asked.

“I don’t know,” the informing Warrior answered.

“...Why don’t we just give them the prisoner?” one of the Warriors asked.

“Or we could take them all on now,” another Warrior said.

“Don’t be brash,” yet another Warrior responded. “We’re outnumbered and unprepared. We wouldn’t stand a chance.”

“But they’re all here.”

“It’s suicide.”

“This prisoner must be valuable,” another Warrior interjected. “To have the Grand Inquisitor, the General and the Sovereign risk going to war with us, this prisoner has to be valuable.”

“Yeah,” another Warrior exclaimed. “Extremely valuable.”

“We should demand something in return,” another Warrior said.

“Don’t be stupid,” another Warrior responded. “They’ll slaughter us if we don’t give them the prisoner.”

“No, they won’t.”

“We’re outnumbered and unprepared,” a Warrior repeated. “Our only option is to give them the prisoner.”

“We’re all cowards then!” another Warrior shouted.

“Don’t you dare call me a coward!” another Warrior responded.

“We have to fight them now!”

“Quiet!” the Dictator shouted.

All the warriors quickly fell silent, looking back at the Dictator.

“...It’s hard to get anything done with all of you talking at once,” the Dictator stated.

The warriors and I just looked back at the Dictator.

Then the Dictator looked to me.

I kept looking back at the Dictator.

“...Apologies again,” the Dictator said. “I shouldn’t criticize.”

“...Are you alright?” one of the Warriors asked the Dictator.

“Never better. We should hand the prisoner over.”

Some of the warriors looked to each other.

“...And I know what you’re thinking,” the Dictator said.

“It’s going to make us look weak. But when we’re born, we’re weak. Birth’s qualities are weakness and vulnerability. And sometimes, not all times, we should practice being weak.”

The warriors just looked back at the Dictator.

And a smile came to me.

“...I had to learn that recently,” the Dictator added.

“...But weakness is cowardice,” one of the Warriors said.

“Cowardice is cowardice.”

Then one of the Warriors stood up.

“What’s happened to you?” the Warrior asked the Dictator. “You’re acting all strange.”

“I’m not acting strange,” the Dictator responded.

“Yes, you are. This talk about weakness and vulnerability makes you look like a coward. And we don’t like it.”

“Too bad. You don’t speak for us.”

“But I will speak for us. You expect to lose this war and are acting strange in order to better accept our defeat when it happens.”

“How ludicrous.”

“But it’s not. It’s the only explanation for how you’re acting.”

The Dictator took a deep breath and faced the warriors.

“...You’re right,” the Dictator said. “I believe we’re going to lose. There was a part of me that was so desperate to win that I deceived myself into believing that we would, but really, we are going to lose. Nothing is in our favor. We are outnumbered and even though our plan is sound, we don’t have the resources to defeat all of the other regions.”

“Even with the Chancellor?” another Warrior asked.

“The Chancellor has been a great ally, but the Chancellor can only do so much.”

The warriors just looked back at the Dictator.

“...The dream was desirable,” the Dictator said. “But we were never going to get there.”

Another Warrior stood up.

“How can you say that?” the Warrior asked. “The dream is still alive. So long as we live, the dream will live on.”

Then another Warrior stood up.

“Yes,” the Warrior said. “Long live the dream!”

Then one by one, the warriors slowly stood up.

“Long live the dream!” the warriors chanted. “Long live the dream! Long live the dream! Long live the dream! Long live the dream!”

The warriors gradually calmed down.

The Dictator kept looking over all of the warriors.

“But is that dream worth dying for?” the Dictator asked.

“Of course, it is,” one of the Warriors answered.

“The dream is the dream,” another Warrior said.
“Long live the dream!” another Warrior began to chant.
“Long live the dream!”
“But is it?” the Dictator interrupted. “I don’t think it is.”
“What has gotten into you?” another Warrior asked.
“This is our dream. It’s what we’ve been fighting for.”
“And I don’t think it’s worth it anymore.”
“...Our Dictator has become a coward,” another Warrior announced.
“No, I haven’t.”
“Our Dictator is a coward.”
“No, I’m not! I’m not a coward!”
“Then prove it to us. Attack those armies before us right now.”
“No, I won’t do that.”
“Then you’re a coward.”
The Dictator kept staring back at the Warrior.
And the Warrior kept staring back at the Dictator.
“No, I won’t attack,” the Dictator said.
“Then you’re a coward,” the Warrior replied.
“Then I’m a coward.”
“...You’ll be convicted then.”
“No, I won’t.”
“You can’t escape our laws just because you’re the Dictator.”
“I can’t. But if you were to attack those armies right now, you’ll need me. I’m the only one here who has the mind to win against those armies. And you’re not going to convict me and hang me at the risk of losing a war. So, you’re all going to do as I command. And we’re going to let the prisoner go.”
“...And then what?” another Warrior asked. “What about the war?”
“Then we’ll negotiate a deal with the three regions. And that’ll be it.”
“Negotiate a deal?”

“Yes. There will be no war.”

The warm light hit my face as I came out and wandered towards the three armies.

The armies stopped and watched me approach them.

And eventually, I reached the armies, wandered through the camps, searching amongst the many faces until I found the Sovereign.

“You’re here,” the Sovereign said.

A smile came to me.

Then the Sovereign gave me a warm hug.

And I hugged the Sovereign back.

“Did they hurt you?” the Sovereign asked me.

I remained quiet.

And so, the Sovereign let go, stood back and faced me.

And I looked up and faced the Sovereign.

“...What did the Dictator do to you?” the Sovereign asked me.

“It doesn’t matter,” I answered.

“Yes, it does.”

“No, it doesn’t. What’s done is done and all we can do is learn from it.”

“...I’m so relieved. It’s good to have you back.”

A smile came to me.

And that made the Sovereign smile.

And then, suddenly, the Grand Inquisitor and the General approached me.

“They released you,” the Grand Inquisitor said.

“Are you okay?” the General asked me.

“I’m good,” I answered.

“Are you really?” the Grand Inquisitor asked me.

“Yes, I’m good.”

Then I looked back to where I came from.

And there was the Dictator standing in the distance.

I then faced the Sovereign, the General and the Grand Inquisitor.

“You should all come with me,” I said.
I looked back to the Dictator.
And then the Sovereign, the General and the Grand Inquisitor looked with me.
“Is that the Dictator?” the Sovereign asked me.
“Yes,” I answered.
I then eventually began to walk towards the Dictator.
And the Dictator started to walk towards us.
And then the Sovereign, the General and the Grand Inquisitor followed me.
We all came together.
The Dictator put out both hands.
“I’ve come unarmed,” the Dictator said.
“What’s happening here?” the Sovereign asked.
“I’ve had a change of heart. And I don’t want to fight with you anymore.”
“Why have you changed?” the Grand Inquisitor asked.
“Because of your friend. Your friend can be quite inspiring.”
The Sovereign, the General and the Grand Inquisitor looked to me.
Then the General faced the Dictator.
“How do we know you’ll stay true to your word?” the General asked the Dictator.
The Sovereign and the Grand Inquisitor looked to the Dictator.
And the Dictator just looked back at all of us.
“... We have to trust each other,” I interjected.
“And how can we do that?” the General asked me.
“I have had a change of heart,” the Dictator interrupted.
“I really have.”
“We’re glad that you’ve changed your mind,” the Sovereign said. “But it is hard for us to trust you when not long ago you were willing to go to war with us.”
“... I understand.”
“... This is going to take time,” I said. “Building trust

takes time. But it's worth it."

"...How should we go about this then?" the Grand Inquisitor asked.

The Sovereign, the General, the Grand Inquisitor and the Dictator turned to me.

"...To begin building trust, one has to start with a leap of faith," I said. "One has to give themselves over and allow others to trust them."

I then looked to the Dictator.

"I believe you should take the first leap," I said to the Dictator.

"And how do I do that?" the Dictator asked me.

"How can one grow?"

And then the Dictator faced the Sovereign, the General and the Grand Inquisitor.

"What can I do to help you?" the Dictator asked them.

The Sovereign, the General and the Grand Inquisitor kept looking back at the Dictator.

"...I don't know," the Grand Inquisitor answered. "What can you do to help us?"

"I don't know," the Dictator answered.

"...How good are your warriors at building homes?" the Sovereign asked the Dictator.

"They're amazing," the Dictator answered. "The best."

"Some of my people need new homes. Could you send some of your warriors to build homes for us?"

"I can do that."

"Great."

"...This is a good start," I said. "Could we all realize more ways in which we can help each other and come together later to discuss those ways?"

"Yes," the Dictator answered.

"Yes, we can," the Grand Inquisitor answered.

"Then that's what we'll do," I said.

The Sovereign, the General, the Grand Inquisitor and the Dictator nodded together.

“And let’s ask the Chancellor to join us,” the General mentioned. “We should all be together.”

“Yes,” I said. “We should all help each other.”

And then the Grand Inquisitor put a hand out towards the Dictator.

The Dictator looked back to the Grand Inquisitor, only to eventually shake the Grand Inquisitor’s hand.

Smiles came to all of us.

And then the Dictator shook the Sovereign’s and the General’s hands.

As the Sovereign, the General and the Grand Inquisitor returned to their respective camps, the Dictator and I remained there.

“How do you feel?” I asked the Dictator.

“I feel that progress is being made,” the Dictator answered.

Smiles came to both of us

But then the Dictator’s smile faded away.

“What is it?” I asked the Dictator.

“I’m worried about my warriors,” the Dictator answered. “I’m worried that they’ll hate me.”

“Because you’ve sided with the Sovereign, the General and the Grand Inquisitor?”

“Because I’ve sided with the enemy. That’s how they’ll see it.”

“...Do you feel you’ve made a good decision?”

“Yes, this feels...good.”

“And could your warriors feel the same way?”

“I doubt it.”

“...How do you believe they’d react?”

“I don’t know. They might disobey my orders.”

“But you don’t want to order them around, do you?”

“Of course, I do. How else will they do what I want them to do?”

“But don’t you want to allow them to help you?”

“No, I want them to do as I order them to.”

I then looked towards the Sovereign before facing the Dictator.

“...We don’t order a tree to grow, do we?” I asked the Dictator.

“No,” the Dictator answered.

“We just plant the seed, water it and allow it to grow into a tree.”

“But that’s how you grow a tree. That’s different to how you lead.”

“How is it different?”

“It just is.”

“But how is it different? Why can’t one just plant the seed?”

“How do you plant the seed then?”

“Inspiration. Inspire others and they’ll do the tasks assigned to them.”

“But I can’t inspire people. I’m not like that.”

“Not inspiring?”

“Yes, I’m not inspiring.”

“What makes you believe that?”

“Because I’m not.”

“Because you haven’t inspired others yet?”

“Yes.”

“But why does that mean you can’t do it? Don’t we all have the potential to inspire others?”

The Dictator looked away from me.

“...What are you afraid of?” I asked the Dictator.

“I’m not afraid,” the Dictator answered.

“Really?”

“Yes.”

I just looked back at the Dictator.

“...I’m not afraid,” the Dictator repeated.

“Then why don’t you inspire your warriors?” I asked the Dictator.

“I don’t know how to.”

“Why don’t you help them?”
“Help them?”
“Yes.”
“But I’m their leader.”
“And?”
“They should be helping me. They should be doing what I tell them to do.”
“Should they?”
“Yes.”
“But then how will you inspire them? Just because you’re their leader doesn’t mean they’re supposed to help you. You should help them because you’re their leader.”
“That’s not what a leader is though.”
“What is a leader then?”
“A leader is someone who tells those below them what to do so that they’ll do it and have everything run according to the system that is in place.”
“And why is that a leader?”
“Because it is.”
“But why...? And if there was a way to get a better result, wouldn’t it be wiser to go with the way that led to a better result instead of sticking with the convention?”
“Yes.”
“So, why don’t you inspire your warriors? What are you afraid of?”
Eventually, the Dictator faced me.
“...I’m afraid of what they’ll think of me,” the Dictator answered.
“Why does that scare you?” I asked the Dictator.
“Because I don’t like it when others don’t like me.”
“You don’t like how it feels?”
“I hate it. What do you think I should do?”
“Plunge into the fear.”
“Plunge into my fear? Are you serious?”
“Yes.”
“Why?”

“Because it’s inspiring.”

The Dictator kept staring back at me before turning around and looking to where the warriors were.

I continued to watch the Dictator.

And then, eventually, the Dictator faced me.

“...I still don’t think I can do that,” the Dictator said to me.

“Why not?” I asked the Dictator.

“Because it’s still scary.”

“The fears we imagine are the worst possibilities. But they usually never happen.”

“Usually.”

“Potential is infinite. But the likelihood of one’s greatest fear becoming a reality is highly unlikely.”

The Dictator just kept looking back at me.

“...We fear so much and yet, most of our fears never happen,” I said. “So, why listen to our fears?”

“For that one instance when our greatest fear comes true,” the Dictator answered.

“But there’s also another side to this too.”

“And what is that?”

“Because everything exists in relationship with everything else then there must be a relationship between our character and our focus. And so, in that way, we are what we continuously focus on. Firstly, we can only focus on one thing at a time. We can do many things at once, but our focus can only be held on one thing in the moment. Secondly, to focus on a thing once will have little impact on us because we’d quickly forget the thing we focused on once, since we only focused on the thing once. But to focus on a thing continuously must have a huge impact on us, our character. And with all this, if we continuously focus on fear, then that’s what we’ll be, fearful. But likewise, if we continuously focus on courage, then that’s what we’ll be, courageous. The same goes with all feelings. Happiness. Sadness. Fulfillment. Depression. Anxiety. Calmness. Despair. Love.

All feelings. What we continuously focus on is what we'll be. And in realizing all this, the way to reduce fear is not to focus on trying to solve, or trying to reduce, or even trying to eliminate fear, but to continuously focus on courage, to grow courage and inadvertently reduce fear."

"But shouldn't we focus on the problem in order to solve it?"

"That's a good question. But what does identifying a problem help us to do?"

"I don't know."

"Doesn't identifying a problem help us to realize what we wouldn't like to happen?"

"I guess."

"And in realizing what we wouldn't like to happen, couldn't we realize what we would like to happen? I mean, isn't what we would like to happen just the opposite of what we wouldn't like to happen?"

"Pretty much."

"And so, in this way, we should continuously focus on what we would like to happen and grow, instead of continuously focus on what we wouldn't like to happen, which only aggravates the problem. What we continuously focus on is what will happen. So, instead of continuously focusing on the thoughts that tell us how life ought to be lived, why don't we continuously focus on the thoughts that'll serve us? Why don't we continuously focus on the thoughts that'll inspire us to grow? Why don't we continuously focus on the thoughts that'll inspire us to grow our fulfillment? Why don't we continuously focus on the questions that'll open up our potential? Why don't we continuously focus on the dream we'd like to live? Why don't we continuously focus on who we'd like to be? Why don't we continuously focus on loving others? Giving to others? Inspiring others?"

"Why don't we indeed?"

"And whatever challenge one might come up with to

these questions, are they absolutely sure that their challenge is not just an excuse?"

"Can they be sure that their challenge is not an excuse?"

"Well, we're all neither right nor wrong. So, their challenge can't be right."

"But their challenge can't be wrong either."

"It's all relative. So then, why not give ourselves the attitude that'll help us to grow our fulfillment? Why not continuously focus on what we'd like to happen?"

"...I have to continuously focus on courage. What could I do to be more courageous?"

"That's a great question. Why don't you ask your warriors to come out here and meet the Sovereign, the General, the Grand Inquisitor and their armies?"

"No. No, I can't do that."

"Why not?"

"They'll object."

"Will they?"

"There's no way they'll become friends with the enemy."

"How did they make friends before?"

"I don't know. They just did."

"So, why can't they make friends now?"

"Because they're the enemy."

"But isn't the only reason why they're the enemy is because your warriors perceive them as the enemy?"

"I don't know."

"How else could they be the enemy if they're not perceived as the enemy?"

"Fine, that's why they're the enemy. What's your point?"

"Why can't your warriors' perspectives change?"

"I don't know."

"There's no reason why their perspectives can't change. And once their perspectives change, then they'll no longer be the enemy. And your warriors won't look down on you

because your warriors will perceive them as you perceive them.”

“But how do I change my warrior’s perspectives? They’re incredibly stubborn.”

“Your warriors are just going to have to learn more about them.”

“They won’t become friends with the enemy.”

“They don’t have to become friends straight away. I’m just suggesting that they get to learn more about them so that they can realize some commonalities that they share.”

“Commonalities?”

“Yes.”

“You’re asking my warriors to look for commonalities?”

“Yes.”

“What if they don’t have any commonalities?”

“Everyone has commonalities with everyone else.”

“That’s not true.”

“Why not?”

“Because we’re all different.”

“And yet, we’re all the same. We’re all human. We all feel in the same way. We’re all the same and different, all at once.”

“Then why do we hurt each other if we’re all the same? Even if we’re also all different?”

“...Conflict happens due to ignorance. And we’re all ignorant of different things. But being ignorant isn’t an issue. There’s so much information in life that we’d become so incredibly overwhelmed in trying to comprehend it all. And it can even be good to be ignorant of particular ideas, like the ideas that are unimportant to us. There’s no benefit in listening to those. And so, we should apply some ignorance – or simplicity, which is a better word. Simplicity is the quickest path to get to where we’d like to be. Simplicity helps us to focus on the one thing that we should be doing to get us to where we’d like to be. But where our troubles lie is

in not being aware of the ideas that have a positive impact on us. Our troubles lie in being ignorant of our commonalities because...we're ignorant of them. And to me, this is just a reason for why we should come together and realize the commonalities that we share, because in that way, at the very least, we can respect each other and eliminate all conflict between each other."

"...What you're suggesting that I should do is scarier than just facing my warriors."

"How?"

"You're suggesting that I should ask my warriors to do something that they'll find difficult to do. That's not going to be easy."

"It'll only be difficult if you believe it'll be difficult."

"So, I should just believe it'll be easy? That sounds too easy."

"That's because it is."

The Dictator kept looking back at me, only to eventually look to the direction where the warriors were.

"No," the Dictator said. "I won't do it. I won't."

I then looked in the same direction the Dictator was facing, then looked away, then took a deep breath and faced the Dictator.

"...Would you do it for me?" I asked the Dictator.

The Dictator looked back to me.

And I just looked back at the Dictator.

And then, eventually, the Dictator looked back to where the warriors were and sighed.

"...Okay," the Dictator answered. "Okay then, I'll do it."

"Thank you," I replied.

And so, the Dictator took a deep breath and headed towards the warriors.

I then went to the Sovereign, the General and the Grand Inquisitor to share with them the conversation that I just had with the Dictator.

Later, the Dictator and all the warriors appeared before us, approached us and came to a halt, only for one of the Warriors to eventually step forward with one hand reaching out towards a Guard.

The Guard looked back at the Warrior.

Everyone else watched the Guard.

But then the Guard took a step forward, looking the Warrior in the eyes and shook the Warrior's hand.

And gradually, one by one, the warriors began to socialize with the guards, the soldiers and the Grand Inquisitor's army, asking questions, unfolding personal interests, sharing stories, telling jokes and realizing commonalities in the process.

A smile came to me.

But then, slowly, my eyes started to water and a gentle tear rolled down my face.

My smile widened.

The Chancellor appeared with a horde of troopers and so the Sovereign, the General, the Grand Inquisitor, the Dictator and the Chancellor went off together, while the guards, the soldiers, the Grand Inquisitor's army, the warriors, the troopers and I continued to eat, drink, laugh, share stories and play games together.

Writing was happening.

The Sovereign, the General, the Grand Inquisitor, the Dictator and the Chancellor returned.

And so, the guards, the soldiers, the Grand Inquisitor's army, the warriors, the troopers and I stopped what we were doing and faced them.

"We have an announcement to make!" the Grand Inquisitor declared. "We have all agreed on the new trade agreement! This'll mean that resources will be bought and sold across all the regions and will provide all of us with a

greater opportunity to earn more and help us to live together as one!”

There was an applause.

“...This agreement will form a friendship between the regions that has never been done before!” the Grand Inquisitor announced.

A cheer interrupted the Grand Inquisitor.

“...Thank you,” the Grand Inquisitor said. “I’m also happy to say that because of this agreement and our newfound friendship, we have all agreed to no more conflicts between the regions! This means that there will be no war!”

An applause erupted.

“...There will never be another war!” the Grand Inquisitor shouted. “We are now together! And together, we are strong! Thank you!”

The applause grew.

Smiles and hugs were shared.

Then the warriors started to chant “Together, we are strong!” over and over again.

And gradually, the rest of us chanted with the warriors, “Together, we are strong! Together, we are strong! Together, we are strong! Together, we are strong! Together, we are strong!”

The Sovereign approached me and sat down beside me.

“How are you feeling?” the Sovereign asked me.

“Amazing,” I answered. “This is really amazing.”

“It sure is. You’ve done what has never been done before.”

“What do you mean ‘I’ve done?’ I didn’t do anything.”

“Oh, c’mon.”

“No, I haven’t done anything.”

“You did this...”

The Sovereign reached out with both arms, pointing to everyone around us.

“...You did all of this,” the Sovereign said to me.

“I didn’t do this,” I replied.

“Don’t say that.”

“No, I didn’t. All of us did. We all decided to come together and help each other. We all decided to live in peace.”

“But you brought us together. You helped us to feel, to look deep within ourselves, imagine life through others’ perspectives and that inspired us to come together. You did that. And that’s no easy feat.”

“But I didn’t do this. It wasn’t me. We decided to come together. I just did what I did. That was it. I didn’t have an aim. I didn’t have any objective. It just happened. All of this just happened.”

“... You need to learn to take a complement.”

We both began to laugh together.

And then, gradually, we both calmed down together.

“... What will you do now?” the Sovereign asked me.

I looked up and watched everyone getting along, realizing each other’s commonalities, telling jokes, playing games, sharing stories, forming the foundations for long-lasting friendships, before I eventually turned and faced the Sovereign.

“... I will go home,” I answered.

“That sounds like a good idea,” the Sovereign replied.

“Would you like to come back with us?”

“I would like that.”

And so, the Sovereign, the guards and I all said, “Goodbye,” to all the others, turned around and headed home.

The Sovereign, the guards and I continued forward, when one of the Guards walked alongside me.

“Are you happy?” the Guard asked me.

“Yes, I am,” I answered. “And are you happy?”

“Yes, indeed. Could I ask you something?”

“Sure. What is it?”

“What do we do now that there is no war? We’ve been on the brink of war for so long and now that it’s over, we don’t know what to do.”

“If you could do anything, what would you do? If you could dream any dream, what would you dream?”

“I don’t know. I really have no idea.”

“Then why don’t you just watch it happen?”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Just observe it. Just observe all that is happening.”

“Really? That’s it? Nothing else?”

“Why do you need to do anything else?”

“I don’t know. I just didn’t expect this answer.”

“Why do you hold expectations?”

“I don’t know. I guess it’s reassuring to correctly predict what happens.”

“But when you incorrectly predict what happens, isn’t it not reassuring?”

“True.”

“So why hold any expectations?”

“True, true. So, I should just observe it all?”

“Yes. Including your thoughts.”

“My thoughts?”

“Yes. Just observe the thoughts that pass through.”

“But how do you do that? Do I have to meditate?”

“No. Observing one’s thoughts is not meditation. One is meditating constantly.”

“Really? I thought meditation was when one sits down and closes their eyes.”

“No. That’s not meditation. Meditation is breathing.”

“But don’t you sometimes sit down and close your eyes. I’ve seen you do it.”

“But that’s not meditation. That’s sitting down and closing my eyes.”

“Why do you do that then? Why do you sit down and close your eyes?”

“Because I like it. And to relax and rejuvenate.”

“...So, should I do that too? Should I sit down and close my eyes?”

“You can. But for now, just observe. Just watch your thoughts.”

“...Okay, I'll do this.”

Later, the Guard approached me.

“I started observing, but I got bored watching,” the Guard said to me.

“Did the idea of boredom come to you as a thought?” I asked the Guard.

“Yes, I guess it had to.”

“Then why don't you just watch that thought?”

“Watch the thought of boredom?”

“Yes. Just watch. Don't attempt to change. Don't judge. Just watch.”

“But why should I watch the thought of boredom?”

“Why should you do anything?”

“I don't know.”

“Neither do I. It is just happening.”

“...Okay, I'll do this.”

Later, the Guard approached me again.

“I watched that thought, the thought of boredom, and after a while, strangely enough, I became interested in the thought,” the Guard said to me. “I became fascinated by the thought of boredom. And now, everything feels so incredibly interesting.”

A smile came to me.

Words were written down.

As we made our way forward, walking along the sea, we decided to stop.

And as the Sovereign and the guards sat there, I wandered forward, only to find a Fisherman, fishing with a giant net. I just watched.

And eventually, the Fisherman turned around and saw

me.

“Hello there,” the Fisherman said to me.

“Hello there,” I replied.

“How are you doing today?”

“Amazing. Are you fulfilled?”

“I sure am. There’s nothing like fishing on a pleasant day.”

A smile came to me.

“...Have a great rest of the day then,” the Fisherman said to me.

“Have a great rest of the day too,” I replied.

And then the Fisherman turned back around and continued fishing.

I just continued to watch.

And as the Fisherman pulled the giant net out of the water, my eyes narrowed in on the drops that were dripping from the net.

And then, suddenly, the Fisherman turned around and saw me.

“You’re still here,” the Fisherman observed.

“I was just enamored with your fishing,” I replied.

“It’s a great discipline to learn. What about my fishing has enamored you?”

“When you pulled the net out of the water, there were the drops of water dripping from the threads of the net.”

“Why did that catch your attention?”

“Because the net is a great representation of words, numbers, symbols and images. All words, all numbers, all symbols and all images are like the net, attempting to catch the water. But the net can never catch all of the water. The net can only catch a few drops. Words, numbers, symbols and images are the same, trying to catch the essence of life, of it, but only ever getting ideas of it and about it.”

“That’s an interesting thought: trying to catch water with a net.”

A smile came to me.

“...Thank you for this realization,” I said to the Fisherman.

“You’re welcome,” the Fisherman replied.

My smile kept brimming.

And eventually, I turned around and wandered back to the Sovereign and the guards.

There I was, eyes closed, sitting with myself.

We kept going through the fickle landscape, pushing through angry winds, mean rain and vicious storms, until we eventually made it back to the palace and arrived to an applause. And so, we dived into the celebration, eating, drinking, laughing, singing and dancing together, well into the heart of the night.

Then as the beaming sun rose, I sat back, looked out into the distance and a smile came to me.

Later, the Sovereign, the guards and I all came together. I said, “Goodbye,” to each Guard before turning to the Sovereign.

“You’re welcome here any time,” the Sovereign said to me.

“I really appreciate that,” I replied.

Then the Sovereign leaned forward and gave me a strong hug.

“Thank you for everything that you’ve done,” the Sovereign said to me.

I hugged the Sovereign back.

“Thank you for believing in me,” I replied.

We both eventually let go and saw each other.

“Take care,” the Sovereign said to me.

“You too,” I replied.

And so, I turned around and headed home.

There was a Gardener tending a garden and so, I slowed down to a stop and watched the Gardener perform.

Eventually, the Gardener looked up and noticed me.
“Hello,” the Gardener said.
“Hello,” I replied.
“Nice day.”
“It always is.”
A smile came to the Gardener.
And then a smile came to me.
Then the Gardener went back to gardening.
I just kept watching.

Moving forward, I felt it, absorbing it all.

There was a small gathering that was applauding and so, I approached the gathering and found a Magician repeatedly bowing to the audience.

“Thank you,” the Magician said. “Thank you. Thank you”

The audience eventually calmed down.

“...Now, it’s time for my latest trick,” the Magician announced.

The Magician pulled out a pile of leaves.

“...But I warn you,” the Magician said. “This trick can be quite shocking.”

The audience leaned in.

And then the Magician placed a hand just above the pile of leaves, only for the leaves to catch on fire.

The audience jolted back, but still had their eyes fixed on the pile of burning leaves.

The pile of leaves quickly burned away.

And so, the audience faced the Magician.

“How did you do that?” one of the Audience Members asked.

“Yeah,” another Audience Member responded.

“...I can’t reveal my secrets,” the Magician answered.

“Why not?” another Audience Member asked the Magician.

“Because my intention is to make you wonder. Magic makes us wonder.”

With grace, I found myself back at the village, where I wandered through, seeing many familiar faces, only to be stopped by each one to share my adventures.

But then, as I looked up, the Shopkeeper appeared looking back at me with warm eyes and a gentle smile.

“It’s good to see you again,” the Shopkeeper said to me.

“It’s good to see you too,” I replied.

“...Come here.”

And the Shopkeeper took a step forward and gave me a big hug.

I just hugged the Shopkeeper back.

Then we both let go and saw each other again.

“How have you been?” the Shopkeeper asked me.

“Amazing,” I answered. “And you? How have you been?”

“Incredible. Life has been really good to us.”

“To us? Do you mean you and your Friend?”

“...Come with me. There’s so much to talk about.”

And so, I followed the Shopkeeper into the shop and saw all the new details.

“Would you like anything?” the Shopkeeper asked me. “Food? Water?”

“I’m good,” I answered. “Thank you.”

But then the Shopkeeper turned around, went away and came back with two glasses of water.

“Here,” the Shopkeeper said.

The Shopkeeper handed me one of the glasses.

I took the glass and smiled.

And the Shopkeeper smiled back.

“...We’ve been hearing about your adventures,” the Shopkeeper said to me. “Occasionally, we’d hear word about you from travelers passing through.”

“What have others been saying about me?” I asked the

Shopkeeper.

“That you’re a hero.”

“A hero?”

“Yes.”

“I’m no hero. I’m no one.”

“You might believe that you’re no one, but others believe that you’re a hero. And that’s...inspiring.”

A smile came to me.

“...Thank you,” I said to the Shopkeeper.

And the Shopkeeper smiled back.

And then a small chuckle happened to me.

“...What is it?” the Shopkeeper asked me.

“I don’t even believe that I am no one,” I answered. “I believe in nothing.”

Then the Shopkeeper had a small chuckle.

And then we both gradually calmed down.

“...What are your plans now?” the Shopkeeper asked me.

“I don’t know,” I answered. “I’ve never had a plan.”

“You could stay here. You can stay for as long as you want.”

“Thank you. I’d like...”

But then, suddenly, my attention was caught by a child’s head poking out from around a bend.

I just looked back at the child.

And then the Shopkeeper turned and saw the child.

“Hey, there,” the Shopkeeper said to the child. “Would you like to meet a friend of mine?”

The child ran up to the Shopkeeper, with a warm smile and clung to the Shopkeeper’s leg.

The Shopkeeper turned around to see me and placed a hand on the child’s head.

“This is my friend,” the Shopkeeper said to the child. “The one that everyone always talks about.”

“Hi,” the child said to me.

“Hi,” I replied.

The child just kept watching me.
“...Sorry,” the Shopkeeper said to me. “This one can get pretty shy.”
“Is this your child?” I asked the Shopkeeper.
“Yes. One of two.”
“Two?”
“Yes. The other one is out with my better half at the moment.”
“Wow, I’m-I’m really happy for you.”
“Thank you. It’s been really great.”
We both smiled.
But then my smile faded.

There I was, breathing in the atmosphere.
But then there was a noise and so, I quickly turned around, only to find the Shopkeeper’s Child come to a halt.
“Sorry,” the Shopkeeper’s Child said to me.
“It’s okay,” I replied. “What are you doing out here?”
“I wanted to listen to you talk. I’ve heard that you used to talk to people out here.”
“I did.”
“Will you be talking again?”
“I don’t think so. Not now anyway. Are you happy?”
“Yes. Yes, I am.”
“Why are you happy?”
“I don’t know. I am.”
“I like that.”
The Shopkeeper’s Child smiled.
I then slowly walked over and sat down next to the Shopkeeper’s Child.
“Why don’t you and I just talk?” I asked.
“Okay,” the Shopkeeper’s Child answered. “What do you want to talk about?”
“I don’t know. What do you like to do?”
“I like to build things.”
“Really?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s amazing. What do you like to build?”

“I don’t know. I just like to build things.”

“Yeah, I like to build things too.”

“Really?”

“Yep.”

“What do you like to build?”

“I like to bring people together and inspire them to grow their fulfillment.”

“That’s not building.”

“Isn’t it?”

“No, that’s not building at all.”

“No?”

“No, don’t be silly.”

“How’s that not building?”

“Because it’s not.”

“But when I’m bringing people together, I’m building a community.”

“That’s not building.”

“No?”

“No.”

“Fine. If you say so.”

We both smiled.

“...What is building to you then?” I asked the Shopkeeper’s Child.

“Building is like making things,” the Shopkeeper’s Child answered. “It’s like making small things.”

“Small things?”

“Yeah.”

“You make small things?”

“Yes.”

“How big are they? Are they this big?”

I stretched my arms as far as I could.

Then the Shopkeeper’s Child giggled.

“Or are they this big?” I asked.

And I put my hands really close together.

“No,” the Shopkeeper’s Child answered. “They’re this big.”

And the Shopkeeper’s Child stretched out both arms as far as the Shopkeeper’s Child could.

“That big?” I asked.

“Yes,” the Shopkeeper’s Child answered.

“That’s really big.”

“Yes, it is.”

“And how long have you been building small things for?”

“I don’t know. A while.”

“Did the Shopkeeper show you how to build small things?”

“Yes.”

“And do you just do it for fun? Making whatever you feel like making?”

“Kind of.”

“Kind of?”

“Yeah.”

“What do you mean by ‘kind of?’”

“I just make things and it’s fun.”

“You’re a real artist then.”

“A real artist?”

“A real artist is one who makes art without any objective. They’re not trying to get anywhere with their art. They’re not trying to do anything with their art. They just make it. It’s a bit like how a flower grows. A flower doesn’t try to grow. It doesn’t force itself to grow. The flower just grows. And really, all things are like that. It’s all just happening. But most of us pretend that it’s not.”

“Why do we do that?”

“Because most don’t realize or have forgotten that they are pretending. See, we’re all playing this game, but most of us get so absorbed in the game that we don’t realize or forget that it’s only a game.”

“I get it.”

A smile came to me.

“...I’m tired,” the Shopkeeper’s Child said to me. “I’m going to go to sleep now.”

“Okay,” I replied.

And so, the Shopkeeper’s Child stood up, turned around and started to walk away, only to stop, turn around and look back at me.

“Bye,” the Shopkeeper’s Child said to me.

“Bye,” I replied.

Then the Shopkeeper’s Child turned back around and walked off.

And so, I was left sitting with myself.

There I was, with the Shopkeeper, the Shopkeeper’s Old Friend and the Shopkeeper’s children, watching them eat and drink.

The villagers would gather together out the front of the shop, ask me questions and listen to my answers. Inspiration was spreading. But I could only hold an expressionless face.

As the moon started to fall and the sun began to rise, I woke up, sat up, put on clean clothes, gathered my belongings and began to head off, only to quickly come to a halt, turn around and look back.

And then, eventually, I walked back, sat down before the shop and watched.

Then suddenly, there was the sound of someone walking out of the shop.

“Hey,” a voice said to me.

I looked up and saw the Shopkeeper looking down on me.

“Hey,” I replied.

The Shopkeeper sat beside me.

“What are you doing out here?” the Shopkeeper asked me. “With your things?”

"I'm waiting," I answered.
"Waiting? Waiting for what?"
"For you. To say goodbye."
"You're leaving?"
"Yes."
"But why?"

I looked away, took a deep breath, shrugged my shoulders and faced the Shopkeeper.

"...It's something that I feel I should do," I answered.

"And why do you feel that way?" the Shopkeeper asked me.

I just looked away.

"...Sorry," the Shopkeeper said. "It's none of my business."

I then faced the Shopkeeper.

"...I'm not going to force you to stay," the Shopkeeper said to me. "As much as I'd like for you to stay, I can't force you to. And even if I could, I wouldn't."

"...Thank you," I replied.

And so, I nodded, stood up and faced the Shopkeeper.

"Will you be back?" the Shopkeeper asked me.

"I'd like to come back," I answered.

"Do you have any idea when?"

"I don't know. I can't know."

"...Then I guess this is goodbye again."

"I guess it is."

Then the Shopkeeper stood up, walked towards me and gave me a warm hug.

I hugged the Shopkeeper back.

"Be safe," the Shopkeeper said to me.

"I will," I replied.

We both withdrew and found ourselves facing each other.

I then turned around and wandered off.

As I continued forward, I arrived at the burrow that I had

slept in and so, I stopped, faced the burrow, walked closer to it and looked inside.

And then, suddenly, tears started to well, making me smile. I then wiped the tears, stood back, covered the entrance to the burrow, turned around and left the memory behind.

The words weren't being written, so I sat back, took a deep breath, closed my eyes and watched.

But then I suddenly opened my eyes, breathed out, slumping my shoulders and looked around.

I then rested my hand on my head, took a deep breath, scratched my head, got up and walked away.

Moving forward, I wandered through the moping forests, along erratic rivers and over the proud rock formations, until I found myself standing in front of my cold home. I kept looking back at my home, while taking many deep breaths.

But then, eventually, I took a step forward and gradually, the momentum carried me towards the entrance, only to come to a halt again.

And suddenly, a tear dropped from my eye. I wiped the tear, taking a step back and then held my hand against my cheek as I looked back at the entrance, before I took another deep breath, stood tall and knocked on the entrance.

There was a long silence.

But then, eventually, a stranger answered.

"Hello?" the stranger asked. "How can I help you?"

"Hello," I replied. "...I...um...I'm looking for the woman who lives here. Is she...?"

"...Sorry, who are you?"

"I'm a...I'm...her child."

The stranger's eyes widened.

"...Is she...Is she still here?" I asked.

"Yes," the stranger answered. "She's here."

"Oh. Great."

“Would you like to see her?”

“Yes, please.”

“Follow me then.”

And so, I followed the stranger into my house, feeling the nostalgia that was seeping from the details.

But then, suddenly, the stranger turned around and stopped me.

“I should warn you though, your mother might not look the same as she once did,” the stranger said to me. “I just want to let you know so that you can prepare yourself for it.”

“What do you mean ‘doesn’t look the same as she once did?’” I asked the stranger.

“...She’s been...sick.”

“Sick?”

“Yes.”

“For how long?”

“For a while now.”

“...What is it? What’s her disease?”

“We don’t know. We’ve done many tests, but we still can’t figure out what she’s got.”

I took a step back, looking away from the stranger and put my hand against my face.

Another tear dropped.

“No,” I uttered.

More tears began to pour and so I wiped them.

“No,” I said again. “This-This can’t be happening. No. Nah, uh. No. No.”

But the stranger just looked back at me.

And eventually, I just breathed out.

“...Sorry,” I said.

“No,” the stranger replied. “Don’t be.”

“...What’s she been like? How has she...?”

“She’s been amazing. She’s been so loving. And grateful.”

A smile came to me.

“She’s a wonderful person,” the stranger said.

"She is," I replied.

And then I took a deep breath and slowly wandered in, only to find Mum lying on a base, looking thin.

I then took another deep breath, wandered towards her and sat by her side.

Mum turned and faced me.

"...Is that...?" Mum asked.

"...Hey, Mum," I replied.

And then a smile lit up Mum's face.

"...You're here," Mum said to me. "I knew you'd come back."

A smile came to me.

"...How have you been?" Mum asked me. "Are you happy? Are you taking care of yourself? What's been happening?"

"So much has happened," I answered.

"Then please, share."

"I will. But later."

"Why not now?"

"...How are you, Mum?"

"Other than this, I'm happy. I'm happy even with my condition."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"Why are you happy?"

"Why not?"

"Fair enough."

We both smiled.

But then our smiles faded.

"...I used to take everything very, very seriously," Mum said to me. "But as I grew older, I learned to not take everything so seriously and just enjoy life. And that's it. That's all I did. And I feel amazing, even with my condition."

"That's great to hear," I replied. "I'm happy that you realized that."

“...Are you happy?”
“No.”
“And why is that?”
“Because...I feel that I’ve let you down.”
Tears began to flow again.
“No, no, no, no...,” Mum said to me. “You didn’t let me down.”
“Yes, I did,” I replied.
“No, you didn’t.”
“I ran away...”
“You didn’t let me down.”
“...Because I felt afraid. Alone. And I couldn’t face that.”
“No.”
“I couldn’t do it anymore.”
“I let you down. I let you down.”
“No, you didn’t.”
“Yes, I did.”
“I was the one that ran away.”
“Because I wasn’t a good parent to you.”
“What? No.”
“Yes, I wasn’t good to you.”
“You were an amazing mother. I was the one who was selfish. And angry. And miserable. And didn’t know what to do. So, I ran. I just ran away. And I left you behind. I left you alone, worrying, and I am a terrible person for doing that.”
But then Mum burst into tears.
I just kept looking back at her.
And then, gradually, Mum calmed down and wiped the tears.
“...No,” Mum said to me. “I wasn’t a good mother.”
“Yes, you were,” I replied.
“No, I wasn’t. I wasn’t. I never tried to understand you. That was my problem. I used to get so caught up with what I was going through that I’d ignore what you were going through, how you were feeling. And that was why we had so

many arguments, so many little feuds that no one needs to live through. And we did all that because of me, because I couldn't own up to that, how I treated you. I couldn't take responsibility. And I wish I could take that back. I wish I could have that time back. Start over. It was my fault."

Mum burst into tears again.

More tears flowed from my eyes.

But eventually, I leaned forward, put my hand on her hand and faced Mum.

"Hey," I said to Mum.

And then Mum wiped her tears and looked back at me.

"...I love you," I said to Mum. "I love you. And you love me. That's what matters here. Everything else is a hoax."

A smile came to Mum.

And then a smile came to me.

And then Mum leaned forward and gave me a warm hug.

And I hugged Mum back.

"I love you," Mum whispered to me.

"I love you too," I whispered back.

Mum fell asleep and so, I got up and wandered around my home, feeling the nostalgia that lay under the surface.

"Hey," a voice whispered.

I turned around, only to find the stranger standing at a distance behind me.

"Sorry," the stranger said. "I didn't mean to startle you."

"I'm okay," I replied. "I'm just..."

The stranger just watched me, looking deep into my eyes.

And I looked deep into the stranger's eyes.

"...I haven't been here in a while," I said. "And I just can't help but wander through my memories."

"Any good ones?" the stranger asked me. "Memories, I mean."

“Many good ones. And many not so good ones. But they’re all fulfilling.”

“What’s a good one? A good memory that is?”

“I...uh...I don’t have any one particular memory. I just remember these little moments where we were all happy together. And there wasn’t anything else. It was just Mum, Dad and me together, happy in each other’s presence.”

“That’s sweet.”

“...How long have you been taking care of Mum?”

“For a while now. We kept coming across each other in different places and we just bonded. She was incredibly nice to me. She listened to me, always asked how I was, what was happening in my life. And we grew really, really close. Then she started to get sick and I thought, she was so great to me that I’m going to look after her. And I’ve been looking after her since.”

A smile came to me.

And then a smile came to the Guardian.

But then my smile slowly faded, as I looked away.

“...What is it?” the Guardian asked me.

“Nothing important,” I answered.

“...Do you want anything to eat?”

“No, thank you though.”

“...I’m going to get some sleep then.”

“Okay. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

We both smiled together.

And then the Guardian turned around and wandered off.

Mum, the Guardian and I would spend time together to share stories, listen to each other, tell each other jokes, laugh with each other, play games and share the lessons we’ve learned from life.

Something nudged me and so, I opened my eyes and through the blur, in the darkness, I noticed a figure looking back at

me. I blinked a few times and rubbed my eyes, but I could only see the blur.

“Hey,” the figure said.

“Hey,” I replied.

“...I love you, no matter what.”

“...I love you too.”

And then the figure leaned forward and gave me a warm hug.

I just hugged the figure back. But I could feel a tear against my cheek.

The figure sniffled, leaned back a little, wiped the tears and smiled.

I just watched this blurry figure.

And then the figure leaned forward, gave me a kiss on the forehead, leaned back slightly, caressed my head and smiled.

A smile came to me.

And then the figure leaned back, turned around and walked off, blurring into the darkness.

Later, I woke up, rubbed my eyes, stood up and wandered towards Mum, only to find Mum lying still. My eyes squinted, as I walked closer towards her.

“Mum?” I asked.

I nudged her, but she didn’t respond.

“Mum?” I asked again.

Eventually, I gently placed two of my fingers against her neck.

There wasn’t any pulse.

I flopped down into the nearby chair, while looking back at Mum’s body and tears began to flow.

The funeral service went ahead and the Guardian and I cried, as Mum’s body left us.

There I was, sitting alone, when the Guardian approached me and placed a hand on my shoulder.

“Hey,” the Guardian said to me.
I placed my hand on top of the Guardian’s hand, while turning around to face the Guardian.
“Hey,” I replied.
The Guardian held my hand.
“Are you okay?” the Guardian asked me.
“No,” I answered. “...But I’ll be okay.”
“Okay.”
“Are you okay?”
“No, but I’ll manage. Is there anything I can do for you?
Are you hungry?”
“No, I’m okay. Thank you.”
“Okay.”
A smile came to the Guardian.
And then a smile came to me.
“...I’m going to get some sleep then,” the Guardian said to me.
“Okay,” I replied.
“If you want anything, feel free to ask.”
“Thank you.”
The Guardian let go of my hand, turned around and began to walk off.
“Um...,” I uttered.
The Guardian quickly turned around and looked back at me.
“Yes?” the Guardian asked me.
“Could you...,” I started, “...Could you stay with me?”
“Of course.”
And then the Guardian walked towards me and sat down beside me.

The Guardian and I were cleaning the home together, when the Guardian stopped and faced me.
“What will you do now?” the Guardian asked me.
“I’ve been wondering the same thing about you,” I replied.

“You wonder about me?”

“Yes, of course.”

“That’s sweet. But what will you do now?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know how one can even have a plan. Nothing goes according to plan, so I don’t bother with one.”

“Even when you were going around, inspiring the leaders? You didn’t have a plan?”

“No. And I couldn’t. If I had a plan, then my inspiration, my intentions would have been formulated, instead of spontaneous.”

“But didn’t you have some idea of what you were going to say to each leader before you spoke to them?”

“I might have had an idea of what I might say, but that wasn’t important.”

“Oh. And what was important?”

“That I had faith.”

“Faith in what?”

“In nothing. To have faith that it all happens as it should.”

“As it should?”

“Yes.”

“How do you accept that?”

“By letting go.”

“But would you so easily accept that it all happens as it should if the Dictator had killed you?”

“Well, I wouldn’t be around to accept anything.”

“Good point.”

A smile came to the Guardian.

And then a smile came to me.

“...What do you believe happens to us after we die?”
the Guardian asked me.

“...Um...,” I replied.

“Sorry, that was a silly question to ask.”

“No, we’re just talking.”

“We don’t have to...”

“No, no, it’s-it’s okay.”

The Guardian just kept looking back at me.

And eventually, I looked away.

“...When one dies, either one of two possibilities could happen,” I said to the Guardian. “One will either fade back into nothingness and won’t be aware of life, which means they have nothing to worry about; or after one dies, one will wake up and go through the process all over again, or go through the same sort of process all over again, maybe, just as a different character.”

“Do you believe that?” the Guardian asked me. “...Is it possible that when one dies they might live on in some place for eternity?”

“No, because how can we recognize death without birth...? Birth and death require each other in order to distinguish themselves. And so, how can we live in some place for eternity when we must die in order to be born...? Nothing is eternal. Nothing lasts. But why I feel that many worry about what happens to them when they die is because they don’t know what’ll happen to them. And yet we don’t worry about what happened to us before we were born. So, why worry about what’ll happen to us when we die?”

“Probably because we’re heading towards death and we can’t change that. Whereas what happened to us before birth has already happened. And we aren’t heading towards what has already happened because it has happened. What has happened is behind us. It’s the uncertainty of what’ll happen to us when we die mixed with the lack of control that worries us.”

“Then shouldn’t that be the reason for us to live the dream that we dream...? And let’s say that we didn’t die, that we were to live on forever, what would happen...? We would live on and on and on and eventually we’d reach a moment where we’d realize that this was not the way in which we wanted to live because life would cease to be interesting. And then we’d all be bored and depressed

forever. It'll be another form of death. A death of the soul. And why would we want that...? It is because all things come to an end that life is precious, special, beautiful, even magical. It is because all things come to an end that life is worth living. And accepting that all things come to an end is the greatest form of letting go, because it will help one live the dream they dream."

"...I like that. Thank you for sharing."

A smile came to me.

And then a smile came to the Guardian.

"...How did that conversation start again?" the Guardian asked me.

"You were asking me what my plans were," I answered.

"Oh, yeah. And then you mentioned how you've never had a plan."

"Yes."

"That's right."

"...What are you going to do?"

"Um...I don't know. I wouldn't mind travelling, but it's not something that I must do. I'm happy as I am here."

"That's good."

"It is. But I also don't know what to do here, so I figure I could travel, explore different places, learn new ideas and see where I land. If I land back here, then I land back here. And if I land somewhere else, then I land somewhere else."

"And accept what happens?"

"Yes. Exactly."

I smiled slightly.

Then the Guardian smiled back.

"...I would miss you if you left," I said to the Guardian.

"I would miss you too," the Guardian replied.

I smiled slightly again.

But the Guardian's smile faded.

And so, I looked away again before I eventually looked back up at the Guardian.

"Why don't we travel together?" I asked the Guardian.

“I have been to a few places I could show you.”

“Yes, you have.”

“So, what do you say?”

“...If you were to come with me on my travels, then what would be the difference between travelling with you and staying with you here?”

“Other than the travelling?”

“Yes, other than the travelling.”

“...There’d be a context for us to be with each other, other than because you were friends with Mum. That’d be the difference.”

“Yes, there would be that. But would you want to travel with me?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Even after all that you’ve been through?”

“Yes, if I were with you, it’d be worth it.”

A warm smile came to the Guardian.

And so, a warm smile came to me.

“But will you only travel just to be with me?” the Guardian asked me.

“Yes,” I answered.

“And if I didn’t travel, you’d still want to be with me?”

“Yes.”

“Then there’s really no reason for me to travel.”

The Guardian and I grew together, surrendering to each other.

As the Guardian and I were wandering around, some warriors arrived, saw me and approached me.

“Hello,” one of the Warriors said to me.

“Hello,” I replied. “Are you all happy?”

All of the warriors nodded their heads slightly.

“That’s good,” I said. “What are you all doing here?”

“We’re building homes as part of our agreement with the Sovereign,” one of the Warriors answered.

“That’s great. Just have a wander around and see how many homes we require. I’m sure there are plenty to be built here. And if you want an extra hand, I’m happy to help.”

“It’d be an honor to have you work alongside us.”

“Then I shall work alongside you all.”

All of the warriors bowed their heads slightly in gratitude.

“Great,” I said. “Then I’ll see you around.”

All of the warriors just looked back at me before the warriors walked around the Guardian and I and left.

“Who were they?” the Guardian asked me.

“They’re warriors,” I answered.

“You mean the ones who imprisoned you?”

“Yes.”

“They’re quite scary.”

“Only if you allow them to be.”

“Do they not scare you?”

“They did.”

“What happened?”

“I spent time with them and got to learn more about them, their interests and realized some commonalities that we shared.”

“I don’t think I can do that.”

“Why not?”

“They’re scary.”

“And that’s the dilemma that fear creates for us. To overcome fear, we should become acquainted with the thing that makes us fearful, with the intention of growing our courage. And as we do this, slowly, we’ll realize that there is nothing to fear. Fear comes out of ignorance. And to eliminate ignorance, we should educate ourselves on what we fear.”

“Very wise words.”

“Of course, they are. They’re from me.”

“Wow, that was pretty arrogant.”

“But what is arrogance?”

A smile came to the Guardian, as the Guardian playfully pushed me.

“Shut up,” the Guardian said.

A laugh happened to me.

And then a laugh happened to the Guardian.

The Guardian was sleeping and so, I walked off into a silent space, sat down and words were written down.

As I was wandering past the bare tree, there were warriors building a home and so, I approached them and watched.

And then one of the Warriors stopped, turned around and happened to face me.

“Hello,” the Warrior said to me.

“Hello,” I replied. “Would you like some help?”

“We’ll manage.”

A smile came to me.

And then the Warrior turned back around and went on with the building of the home.

And so, I just stood there, watching the warriors perform.

But then, suddenly, my eyes widened and so, I walked up to the Warrior.

“Can I ask you something?” I asked the Warrior.

“Yes,” the Warrior answered.

“Would you build a home for me?”

“Yes, that’s why we’re here.”

“But it can’t be just any home.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean a home. But...”

I looked away.

The Warrior just kept looking back at me.

But then, suddenly, my eyes widened again.

“What I’m really asking for you to build is a temple,” I said to the Warrior.

“A temple?” the Warrior asked.

“Yes.”

“You want a temple?”

“I don’t want it. It’ll be a gift.”

“A gift to whom?”

“To all.”

“What will the temple be for?”

“It’ll be a place where we can all come together and grow.”

The Warrior looked away from me.

I kept on looking back at the Warrior.

And then, eventually, the Warrior faced me.

“I don’t know if we can make it,” the Warrior said to me.

“Why not?” I asked.

“Because a temple wasn’t part of the agreement.”

“But why does the temple have to be a part of the agreement?”

“Because if it’s not and the Dictator finds out that we have spent time building a temple, then the Dictator might punish us?”

“Even if I asked the Dictator for the temple?”

“Maybe. I don’t know.”

“Can you send a message to the Dictator for me then? Can you tell the Dictator that a temple should be built to bring us all together?”

“I can do that.”

“Great, thank you.”

But the sun and the moon came and went many times over and there was still no reply from the Dictator.

And so, I approached the Warrior whom I asked to send the message.

“Hello,” I said to the Warrior.

“Hi,” the Warrior replied.

“Have you heard back from the Dictator yet?”

“No, I haven’t.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know. Your guess is as good as mine.”

“But should it take this long?”

“I don’t know how long it should take.”

“Neither do I. But this feels that it’s taking longer than it should.”

“Maybe you’re just being impatient.”

“Maybe I am. But this still feels that it’s taking longer than it should.”

“...I don’t know what to say.”

“Can you continue to keep a look out for the Dictator’s reply?”

“Yes, I can do that.”

“Thank you.”

But then, again, as the sun and the moon passed many more times, dragging along in their rotations, there was still no reply from the Dictator.

And so, I approached the band of warriors.

“Hello,” I said to the warriors.

Then one of the Warriors turned around and approached me.

“Hello,” the Warrior replied.

“Have you heard back from the Dictator by any chance?”

“Heard back from the Dictator? Why would we be hearing back from the Dictator?”

“To hear the Dictator’s reply to my message.”

“What message?”

“My message. My message about the idea of building a temple.”

“Building a temple?”

“Yes.”

“Why do you want a temple?”

“I don’t want a temple. The temple will be for us all.”

“How?”

“It’ll be a place where we can all come together and grow.”

“What an interesting idea.”

“Thank you. So, have you heard back from the Dictator?”

“No, we haven’t sent any message to the Dictator about an idea for building a temple.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“Why not?”

“Because we didn’t know about the message. None of us have even heard about the idea until now.”

“But I spoke to one of you about sending a message to the Dictator regarding the idea.”

“Which one of us did you speak to?”

And so, I looked over all the warriors who were working on the home until I found the Warrior whom I asked to send the message and pointed to the Warrior.

“That one,” I answered.

Then the Warrior who was with me turned around, looking in the direction I was pointing in and pointed at the Warrior whom I asked to send the message.

“That one?” the Warrior who was with me asked.

“Yes,” I answered.

“Okay,” the Warrior who was with me responded. “Let’s see what’s going on.”

And so, the Warrior who was with me approached the Warrior whom I asked to send the message.

I followed.

Then as we continued forward, the Warrior who was with me waved a hand to the Warrior whom I asked to send the message.

“Hello,” the Warrior who was with me said.

The Warrior whom I asked to send the message stopped and faced the Warrior who was with me.

I caught up to them.

The other warriors stopped to watch us.

“Hi,” the Warrior whom I asked to send the message

replied. "What is it?"

"Where you asked to send a message to the Dictator?" the Warrior who was with me asked.

The Warrior whom I asked to send the message spotted me and just looked back at me.

"...Did the Sovereign's friend ask you to send a message to the Dictator?" the Warrior who was with me asked.

The Warrior whom I asked to send the message looked away.

"Answer the question," the Warrior who was with me demanded.

"Yes," the Warrior whom I asked to send the message answered.

"And did you send that message?"

"Yes."

"Why was the message sent privately?"

"I didn't think much about it. I just sent the message and didn't think to let you know."

"Why didn't you think I should know?"

"It just never crossed my mind."

"Why not? It's part of our procedure."

"I don't know, but I just didn't think to let you know."

Both warriors just stared back at each other, locked in each other's gaze.

"...Okay then," the Warrior who was with me said. "And when did you send the message?"

"When the Sovereign's friend asked me to," the Warrior whom I asked to send the message answered.

"Then how come we haven't heard back from the Dictator?"

"I don't know. Maybe, the reply got lost along its journey."

"That's possible. But even if that were the case, enough time has passed for the Dictator to not hear back from us again and another message would have been sent."

“And maybe, that reply got lost along its journey too.”

“It’s highly unlikely that two replies would have gotten lost.”

“But it is possible.”

“...Okay. We’re going to have to conduct a full investigation.”

“An investigation?”

“Yes.”

“But why do we have to have an investigation?”

“To figure out why we haven’t heard back from the Dictator and to make sure our line of communication is secure.”

“But we don’t need an investigation for that.”

“Yes, we do. We have to conduct an investigation to address all concerns.”

“But this isn’t a concern.”

“Yes, it is.”

“But it’s not.”

“It is a concern. And we’re going to have to conduct an investigation into this concern.”

“But couldn’t we just send another message to the Dictator?”

“We could. But why are you suggesting that we send another message?”

“Because this is not a concern.”

“...Did you not send the Sovereign’s friend’s message?”

“No.”

“No, you didn’t or no you did?”

“No, I did. I sent the message.”

“...Okay. We’ll just send another message.”

“Good.”

“But in this message, we’ll explain how we sent a previous message to the Dictator a while ago and never got a reply back.”

“No, we don’t have to do that.”

“Why not?”

“Because we just...don’t have to.”

“Yes, we do.”

“But we don’t. We...don’t.”

“...You didn’t send the message, did you?”

The Warrior whom I asked to send the initial message just stared back at us.

“...Did you?” the Warrior who was with me asked again.

The Warrior whom I asked to send the initial message just kept staring back at us.

“...Answer the question!” the Warrior who was with me shouted.

“No,” the Warrior whom I asked to send the initial message reacted. “I didn’t.”

“Why didn’t you send the message?”

“Because the Dictator would have said, ‘Yes’, to the idea.”

“And?”

“And I don’t want to build a temple. I have a family that I want to see again. And I know I won’t be able to see them if we have to build a temple.”

“But we have a duty.”

“I know.”

“We can’t change things according to what you want.”

“I know.”

“We have to follow the Dictator’s commands.”

“I know. I know.”

Both warriors kept looking back at each other.

I just looked away.

All the other warriors watched.

“...You have brought shame on all of us,” the Warrior who was with me said. “And for that, you can’t be one of us.”

I looked up and watched.

All the other warriors kept looking back.

"I know," the Warrior whom I asked to send the initial message replied.

And then, suddenly, the Warrior whom I asked to send the initial message slowly turned around and began to walk off.

"...Why is this Warrior walking away?" I asked.

"Because bringing shame to us is the worst thing we can do," the Warrior who was with me answered. "To us, it is better to die than to bring shame."

"But this Warrior shouldn't have to leave."

And so, I stepped forward, in the middle of the band of warriors.

"Wait!" I shouted.

And the Warrior whom I asked to send the initial message stopped.

"You don't have to leave," I said.

The Warrior whom I asked to send the initial message turned around and faced all the other warriors and me.

But all of the other warriors looked at me.

"...What are you talking about?" one of the other Warriors asked me. "This disgrace has shamed on us."

"But why does that mean that this Warrior should leave?" I asked. "If anything, shouldn't this Warrior stay, so that this Warrior can learn from those who are honorable and respectful and not make the same mistake again? Why does this Warrior need to be further punished for this mistake?"

"To make sure that this disgrace doesn't make this mistake again."

"But this Warrior has just made this mistake. Using punishments as an incentive doesn't prevent us from making mistakes. If it does anything, it makes us worry about potentially making a mistake. When a child is learning to walk, the mother doesn't punish the child every time the child falls over. The mother helps the child as the child falls, and the child learns from each fall and gets better at walking. Plus, the consequences that this Warrior has felt from this

mistake are enough to learn from. This Warrior doesn't need further punishment for this mistake."

"Yes, this disgrace does," another Warrior stated.

"This disgrace needs to be punished," yet another Warrior stated.

"But this Warrior won't learn from any punishment," I said. "We don't learn from punishment. Punishment just makes us resist. Punishment doesn't teach us anything. Punishment doesn't help us to learn from our mistakes. Our mistakes help us to learn from our mistakes, so long as we are open to learning from our mistakes."

"No," another Warrior interrupted. "That's wrong. Punishment makes sure that we don't make the mistake again."

"No, punishment just deters us. It belittles us. Makes us resentful. And makes us resist. And we don't need that. It doesn't serve anyone. It's the mistake that we learn from. And if anything, we should be making more mistakes to learn from and grow."

"Make more mistakes?" another Warrior inquired.

"Yes."

"That's stupid," another Warrior stated.

"We shouldn't be making more mistakes," yet another Warrior stated.

"But how else would we grow if we didn't make mistakes?" I asked. "If we were to never make a mistake, we'd have to live hidden away from all others. And why would one want to live that life...? We should be making mistakes to learn from and grow."

"But if we're always making mistakes, nothing would get done," another Warrior said.

"Only if we aren't learning from our mistakes. But if we are learning from our mistakes, then we'll grow from our mistakes and will stop making those same mistakes."

"But isn't the punishment the consequence of a mistake?" another Warrior asked me.

“It doesn’t always have to be. When one harms another in any way, then yes, there might be a punishment. But in this case, since this Warrior hasn’t harmed anyone, feeling the mistake is enough.”

“No,” another Warrior responded. “Feeling the mistake is not enough. This disgrace needs to be punishment.”

“Why does this Warrior need to be punished though?”

“Because this disgrace might not learn from feeling the mistake,” another Warrior answered.

“But this Warrior won’t learn from being punished. We don’t learn from being punished, so wouldn’t it be better to allow ourselves to learn from feeling the mistake than not learn from being punished...? We might as well allow this Warrior to learn from this mistake.”

“No,” another Warrior responded. “This disgrace still needs to be punished.”

“Why though?”

“To get rid of the shame.”

“But when we learn from our mistakes, don’t we get rid of the shame?”

“No, we don’t,” another Warrior responded.

“How don’t we...? When we learn from our mistakes, we can get rid of any shame we feel.”

“But it’s not enough,” another Warrior said.

“How is it not enough?”

“It isn’t,” another Warrior answered.

“But how?”

“It’s just not. This disgrace needs to be punished.”

“The Sovereign’s friend is correct,” a voice suddenly uttered.

And so, the warriors and I turned in the direction of the voice and saw a Noble Warrior carrying a long and a short sword.

“Punishment is not the way,” the Noble Warrior stated.

I just continued to look back at this Noble Warrior.

“...But punishment gets rid of the shame,” one of the

other Warriors said.

“Punishment is not the way,” the Noble Warrior repeated.

And then, gradually, all the other warriors started to look amongst themselves until they all eventually faced the Warrior whom I asked to send the initial message.

“Come back then,” the Warrior who I was with said.

And so, the Warrior whom I asked to send the initial message slowly walked towards us.

“Thank you,” the Warrior whom I asked to send the initial message said to all of us.

A message was sent to the Dictator and eventually, there was a reply, asking the warriors to build the temple. And so, the warriors agreed to build the temple, wrote another message with a promise that they’ll build the temple and sent the message to the Dictator.

A frog leapt into the sound of a gentle current.

The Guardian and I were lying down, in each other’s arms, watching the soft-spoken stars.

And then, quietly, the Guardian rolled over and looked deep into my eyes.

I faced the Guardian and looked deep into the Guardian’s eyes.

And then, suddenly, the Guardian closed both eyes, leaned forward and gave me a kiss.

And so, I closed my eyes and kissed the Guardian.

We fell into one.

As the Guardian and I wandered on, I plucked a flower and gave it to the Guardian.

“Aww,” the Guardian said.

A smile came to the Guardian.

And then a smile came to me.

“...I saw you writing last night,” the Guardian said to me.

“Yeah,” I replied.

“What were you writing about this time?”

“Just whatever came out. I can never remember what I had written.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“How does that happen?”

“I don’t know. I really have no idea. And that doesn’t bother me.”

“So, it just happens? As you would say?”

“Yes, it just happens.”

“And then don’t you read over what you’ve written?”

“Sometimes I do. And sometimes I don’t. It just depends on what’s happening.”

“Hmm, I see.”

I just kept looking back at the Guardian.

“...Can I read what you’ve written?” the Guardian asked me.

“I don’t see why not,” I answered.

Later, I was sitting alone, reading a book, near a small flickering flame.

And then, suddenly, the Guardian appeared and steadily approached me.

I stopped and faced the Guardian.

“Hey,” I said.

“Hey,” the Guardian replied. “I finished reading your words.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“And how do you feel about it?”

“There’s...so much.”

“Is that a good thing?”

“For me it is. For others, maybe not. But that’s them. And they’re allowed to hold their opinions.”

“Just as you are allowed to hold your opinion?”

“Yes, just the same.”

“And what is your opinion? Other than how much there is?”

“One of the other things that caught my attention was how dream like your writing is.”

“Dream like?”

“Yes, dream like.”

“And how is my writing dream like?”

“I don’t know. But when I read your words, life feels like...a dream. And I like that. I like that about your words.”

A smile came to me.

And then a smile came to the Guardian.

“...Do you feel that life is a dream?” the Guardian asked me.

“...Life is neither a dream nor reality,” I answered.

“Life is...,” I clapped.

The Guardian kept looking back at me.

“...Do you have any criticisms?” I asked the Guardian.

“No,” the Guardian answered. “I don’t have any criticisms. But I do have questions.”

“Okay, what questions would you like to ask?”

“You write about how hope can be harmful. But don’t you believe that it’s good to have hope?”

“It depends on how one lives in the now. If one is fulfilled in the now, then hope will aid them to grow towards their dream. But if one is unfulfilled in the now, then hope will just deter them.”

“But couldn’t hope help one to change how they feel? Couldn’t hope help one to feel fulfilled in the now?”

“It could. But not always. Hope is just a dream, unless action is taken towards that dream. Thoughts are useless without positive action. Ideas are useless without positive action. Inspiration is useless without positive action.”

“Alright. So, it all comes down to what we do?”

“Not quite. How we feel is also important. How we feel

determines how we live. And so, there should be fulfillment with positive action, otherwise, the positive action is unfulfilling and the dream will never be reached, regardless of how much effort is exerted.”

“...So, it’s fulfilled positive action that gets us growing towards our dreams?”

“Yes.”

“And hope is a tool that can be used to help us to grow towards our dreams?”

“Yes. Very well said.”

A smile came to the Guardian.

And then a smile came to me.

“...But what’s more valuable is faith,” I added.

“Faith in what?” the Guardian asked me.

“In nothing. One doesn’t have faith in something.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Faith is about letting go and trusting that it’ll all be as it should be.”

“But don’t you have to have faith in something in order to trust that it’ll all be as it should be?”

“No, that’s what belief is. Belief is a thought that one continuously focuses on. A belief is neither right nor wrong, it’s just a thought that one continuously focuses on. And to believe, we have to believe in something. One can’t continuously focus on a thought unless there is a thought to focus on. But to have faith is the opposite of belief. Belief is a thought that one continuously focuses on, while faith is letting go of thought. Belief and faith are opposing beasts.”

“...I understand what you mean.”

“Do you?”

“Yes.”

“Really?”

“Yes, I feel it.”

And so, a smile came to me.

“...Is it better to believe in something or to have faith?” the Guardian asked me.

“...We all believe in something and have faith,” I answered. “We all hold different beliefs, while having faith in the same way.”

“I can see how we all believe in different things. We each experience life differently, so it would make sense that we’d each have different thoughts that we’d continuously focus on. But how do we all have faith?”

“How do you know that the ground won’t fall from underneath you?”

“I don’t know.”

“How do you know that the sun won’t burn out?”

“I don’t know.”

“How do you know that your lungs won’t just give way?”

“I don’t know.”

“How do you know that your heart won’t just stop beating?”

“I don’t.”

“You don’t know if any of these things will happen. And you can never know. But you trust that they won’t. This is faith. You trust that the ground won’t fall from underneath you, that the sun won’t burn out, that your lungs won’t give way, that your heart won’t stop beating and you’re doing all this without even realizing it.”

A smile came to the Guardian.

And so, a smile came to me.

“What is it?” I asked the Guardian.

“That must be why you can’t recall what you wrote,” the Guardian said to me. “Because you let go of your thoughts and trust that the words will speak for themselves.”

“I like that. I let go of my thoughts and trust that the words will speak for themselves.”

The warriors were building the temple when I approached them and watched.

And then, suddenly, from nowhere, the Noble Warrior

appeared beside me.

"All great things have a strong foundation," the Noble Warrior said to me.

"I couldn't agree more," I replied.

"And what is your strong foundation?"

"My strong foundation?"

"Where did you come from?"

"Where do any of us come from...? Nowhere."

"This is the way."

And so, I looked to the Noble Warrior and saw the Noble Warrior's long and short swords.

"Why do you have both a long and a short sword?" I asked the Noble Warrior.

"To master both the long and the short sword, one must practice diligently," the Noble Warrior answered.

"Is that so?"

"Yes, this is the way."

"How often do you practice?"

"How often I practice is irrelevant. What matters is consistent diligent practice. And with each practice, one grows in their discipline. This is the way."

"You believe in growth too?"

"Yes."

"And do you have to master the long and the short sword to grow?"

"No, growth can take many forms and can come from any discipline. But it does not matter the form that growth takes, nor the discipline growth comes from. What matters is that one is growing. This is the way."

"And why is that? Why does it matter that one is growing?"

"Ultimately, it doesn't matter, as nothing matters ultimately. But growth allows one to be fulfilled."

"To grow their fulfillment?"

"Yes, this is the way."

"And why did you decide to master the long and the

short sword?”

“I did not decide to master the long and the short sword. The long and short sword decided that I should master them.”

“How did this happen?”

“How does anything happen?”

“It just does.”

“This is the way.”

“And if you were advising one to master either the long or the short sword, which would you advise?”

“Which one grabs one’s attention?”

“Both swords.”

“Then one should master both swords. This is the way.”

“But isn’t it better to focus on just one sword?”

“It is always better to focus on one thing. So, it could be said that it is better to focus on one sword. But what would one like to be? The master of the short sword? The master of the long sword? Or the master of the sword?”

“The master of the sword.”

“Then one must master the long and the short sword. Mastering both the long and the short sword means to master the sword. And mastering the sword is the one thing that one must focus on. This is one’s focus. This is the way.”

“Is it dangerous?”

“Danger comes where danger is sought. If one seeks danger, then one will find danger. But if one does not seek danger, and seeks peace, then one will not find danger, and will find peace. This is the way.”

“And can anyone master the long and the short sword?”

“If they allow themselves to.”

“Would you teach me then?”

“And why do you want to master the long and the short sword?”

“Why does anyone do anything? There is no ultimate reason. There is nothing to be achieved. It’s just what we do. And I’m just deciding to master the long and the short

sword.”

“This is the way.”

As the wind chilled the air, the Noble Warrior and I met at the bottom of a towering hill.

“What shall we do?” I asked the Noble Warrior.

“Run to the top,” the Noble Warrior answered.

I looked up at the hill leaning over me, but then a smile came to me.

“Okay,” I said. “Let’s go.”

The Noble Warrior ran up the hill.

And so, I followed, but I quickly slowed down, panting heavily, lagging behind, only to come to a stop, putting my hands on both knees. I then looked up and saw the steep path ahead of me. And so, I raised my chest, took a deep breath and continued forward. Sweat covered my skin, my heart was beating rapidly and my legs were weighing down on me, but I kept going and eventually saw the Noble Warrior standing there, looking back at me. I pushed forward, urging on, until I reached the Noble Warrior, came to a stop and took several deep breaths.

“Where are your long and short swords?” the Noble Warrior asked me.

“Sorry?” I replied.

“Where are your long and short swords?”

“I don’t have any long and short swords.”

“Then how are you going to practice?”

“Don’t you have any long and short swords for me to practice with?”

“No, I don’t. You must supply your own long and short swords. This is the way.”

“Where can I get a long and a short sword then?”

“I don’t know. This is a question for you to answer.”

“Okay, what should happen if I can’t find a long and a short sword?”

“Then you will not be able to practice.”

“Then I shall go find a long and a short sword.”

And so, I turned around, walked back down the hill, stopped and then wandered towards the warriors who were building the temple.

The winds were gusting as I approached the warriors who were building the temple.

One of the Warriors stopped upon noticing me.

“Hello,” the Warrior said to me.

“Hello,” I replied.

“Have you come to watch our progress again?”

“No, I have come here with a question.”

“Oh. And what is your question?”

“Where can I get a long and a short sword?”

“The Noble Warrior has taught you your first lesson.”

“Yes, I must supply my own long and short swords.”

“That is the lesson. But it’s also about being prepared for any possibility.”

“But how can we be prepared for any possibility? Anything is possible. Potential is infinite, which means that anything is possible. So, how can we be prepared for any possibility when anything is possible?”

“By withholding expectations and accepting what happens.”

“Ok. So then, being prepared isn’t about having every resource at our disposal?”

“No, it is not.”

“It’s just about acceptance.”

“Yes, it is. As the Noble Warrior would say, ‘this is the way.’”

“Yes, the Noble Warrior says that a lot, I’ve noticed.”

“It’s only to make sure you stay on the gentle path.”

“The gentle path?”

“The path of least resistance. Resistance leads to conflict. And conflict is harmful to all of us.”

“I agree. Conflict doesn’t serve anyone.”

“Conflict is not the way.”

“Yes, conflict is not the way.”

“...You can have my long and short sword.”

“No, I couldn’t take your long and short sword.”

“Please take them.”

“No, I couldn’t.”

“Please. It’ll mean a lot to me.”

“Why would it mean a lot to you?”

“Because I’ll be giving it away.”

“And?”

“And all things should be given away. A thing shouldn’t remain in one place because it’ll cease to be a gift and lose its significance. A thing should be received and given away. All things should be received and given away. And we should keep the cycle of receiving and giving. That is something that I believe.”

“I like that. I like that a lot.”

“...Let me get you my long and short sword.”

And so, the Warrior turned around and walked off, eventually to come back with a long and a short sword.

“Here,” the Warrior said. “This is my gift to you.”

“Thank you,” I replied.

And so, I took the long and the short sword and examined them.

“Wow,” I said. “These are beautiful.”

“Thank you,” the Warrior replied.

“...How is it that some of the warriors are vastly different to the others? You and the Noble Warrior seem so different to many of the other warriors.”

“We each have different masters. I call them masters. Other warriors call them trainers. Or teachers. And each master brings their own values to their practices. So, that’s how we get different types of warriors with different mentalities.”

“Is it frustrating to have different mentalities under the Dictator?”

“No, because that’s what makes us interesting. If we were all the same, then life would be boring. We should each be our own selves so that life may be interesting.”

“I agree. Thank you again for your long and short swords. I really appreciate it.”

“Thank you for receiving my gift.”

The Noble Warrior showed me a single movement with the short sword and I diligently repeated the movement over and over and over and over again, over many practices.

“Why am I only learning one movement,” I asked the Noble Warrior.

“It is better to perform one movement well than to perform many movements badly,” the Noble Warrior answered. “This is the way.”

And so, I continued to diligently repeat the movement over and over again, until I could perform the movement without thought.

And then the Noble Warrior showed me the next movement.

There I was, sitting, crossed-legged, with closed eyes, a rumbling stomach and a warm smile.

Words were written.

Wandering around, I found myself staring back at the bookshop for a moment, until eventually, I entered the bookshop and saw the Bookkeeper just standing there, looking back at me.

“Hello,” the Bookkeeper said to me.

“Hello,” I replied.

“How are you today?”

“Amazing. How are you?”

“As good as can be.”

“Why only ‘as good as can be?’”

“Oh, it’s just that this place is not doing so well. Not a lot of people want to buy books at the moment.”

“Why do you think that is?”

“I think that reading is just not that appealing to many people. Everybody wants spectacle and drama. Nobody wants to learn.”

“And why do you think that is?”

“Drama is fun. It’s fun to get involved in the drama of it all, even if the drama is harmful. Whereas with books, there’s no drama. It’s just you and this book. And you just take in what the book shares.”

“How poetic.”

“Yeah, but that’s all it is.”

“What can you do to inspire others to buy books?”

“I don’t know. If I knew, I wouldn’t be in my dilemma.”

“Then don’t you think you should do some research to realize what you should do? If one doesn’t know what to do, then isn’t that just an indicator for them to do some research to realize what they should do?”

“I guess, but it feels like I’ve tried everything. I’ve even gone through many of these books and none of them have told me what I have to do.”

“Then why don’t you go someplace new? Expose yourself to new ideas, ask yourself new questions and realize new answers.”

“But I can’t leave the bookshop.”

“Why not?”

“Because someone has to look after it.”

“Someone has to look after the bookshop that no one buys books from?”

The Bookkeeper just kept looking back at me.

“...If you don’t want to travel, then why don’t you begin a new discipline?” I asked the Bookkeeper. “Why don’t you practice a discipline from one of these books? You could even practice the discipline here.”

“I could do that,” the Bookkeeper replied. “But what’s

the use? Even if I do try a new discipline, and do everything else that you said, nobody will buy a book. Nobody will change. People don't like change."

"And why do you believe that is?"

"I don't know. They just don't."

"Do you believe that it's because they don't like change or it's because they would prefer for their lives to remain as they believe they want them to be?"

"One implies the other."

"And why would they prefer for their lives to remain as they believe they want them to be?"

"I don't know. Maybe, they just prefer for their lives to remain the same."

"Or could it be that they would prefer to cling onto their thoughts as life continuously changes?"

"It could be that."

"And if that's the case, once they realize that life isn't stagnant, wouldn't they more than likely turn to someone to help them with their challenges?"

"Yes, they would."

"And couldn't that someone be you and your bookshop?"

"It could."

"...It just seems that your bookshop is going through a momentary lapse. But life is continuously changing, it's continuously influx, and there will be a moment again when others will purchase books from your bookshop."

"But when will that moment come?"

"Why are you worried about when that moment will come?"

"Because I need to eat. I need to survive."

"But does worrying help you in your endeavor to survive?"

"No."

"So, why worry?"

"I don't know. It's just troubling, that's all. I don't mean

to worry, and I don't want to, but it's just...troubling."

"Do you want me to help you find others to buy books from your bookshop then?"

"Yes, that would be incredible. Thank you."

"It's no hassle at all. And besides, I believe we should all be reading more anyway. It's one way in which we can stamp out ignorance. And ignorance results in a lack of empathy and compassion. One doesn't know what others are going through as others don't know what one is going through. One is not living others' life as others are not living one's life. The most one can do is imagine what others are living through. And the most others can do is imagine what one is living through. But because the most we can do is imagine what others are living through, this should be an incentive for us to imagine what others are living through. Just because something is difficult doesn't mean we shouldn't do it, especially when the benefits are greater for all of us. We should imagine what others are living through in order to be empathetic, compassionate and at the very least, respectful of each other."

"How very true. And poetic."

"Thank you. May I purchase a book then?"

"Certainly. Do you have a book in mind?"

"Do you have a book on practicing with the long and the short sword?"

Words were read on the long and the short sword.

The Guardian was close to me, as we ate together.

"How's the food?" the Guardian asked me.

"Amazing, as always," I answered.

"Do you want anything else? I don't mind."

"No, but thanks for asking."

"...How's the training going?"

"I'm making progress."

"That's good. Have you learned another movement?"

“No, still on the same movement. But I enjoy it. There’s just this amazing feeling that I get when I’m in it, when I’m in the now.”

“Yeah, I can see that.”

The Guardian stopped eating and faced me.

“...Do you mind if I ask you something?” the Guardian asked me.

And so, I stopped eating and turned to the Guardian.

“What would you like to ask me?” I replied.

“Well, I’ve been thinking about this idea that I’ve had for a while now,” the Guardian said to me. “You have your thing with your training. And I don’t have my thing. I mean, I am looking after others, but I’m not getting that same feeling that you’re getting from your training. At least, I don’t believe that I get that feeling.”

“Is that to do with those you are caring for?”

“I think so. They’re not that receptive or comfortable to be with. But I shouldn’t expect that of anyone. And maybe, over time, they’ll warm up to me.”

“I like that.”

“...Anyway, what was I saying?”

“You were telling me how you weren’t getting that feeling that I get from training.”

“Yes, that was it. Um...So, what I wanted to ask you is – sorry, this is difficult.”

“There’s no need to be sorry. I’m here for you.”

“...What I wanted to ask you is: would you like to have a baby with me?”

“Yes. Yes, of course I would. That’s an amazing idea.”

“...I’m so relieved. I was worried that you’d say ‘no’ and that we’d get into this argument and we’d start to resent each other and then we’d fall apart and be miserable.”

“I couldn’t resent you. I love you too much.”

“...And I love you too much too.”

A smile came to the Guardian.

And then a smile came to me.

“...So, we’re going to have a baby,” the Guardian said to me.

“Yes, we are,” I replied. “We’re going to have a baby.”
We both smiled together.

The Guardian and I had a conversation with a Nurse over our plans to have a baby.

The Noble Warrior and I ran up the hill, reaching the top at the same moment.

“You’re growing,” the Noble Warrior said to me.

“Steadily,” I replied.

“This is the way.”

The sun was piercing through the clean clouds, forming a rainbow behind me, while I repeated another movement over and over again.

“Stop,” the Noble Warrior said to me.

And so, I stopped and faced the Noble Warrior.

“How do you feel about your practice?” the Noble Warrior asked me.

“I’m growing,” I answered.

“Is that all?”

“Isn’t that all that matters? That I feel growth?”

“This is the way. Do you feel tired though?”

“Yes.”

“And why do you persist?”

“I don’t know. But then again, I can’t know. Not really anyway. I just do. It just happens.”

“This is the way. Now, you shall practice with the long sword.”

And so, I put down my short sword, went over to my long sword and picked it up.

“Do you feel the weight of your long sword?” the Noble Warrior asked me.

“Yes,” I answered.

“And what difference do you notice in the weight of your long sword and the weight of your short sword?”

“The balance is different.”

“Can you swing the sword?”

And so, I raised my long sword up and swung, only for my long sword to quickly fall to the ground.

“Do you feel the difference?” the Noble Warrior asked me.

“Yes,” I answered.

“The long sword has a different feel to the short sword. This is why the long sword requires a different practice.”

“How do I master the long sword then?”

“Just watch.”

And so, I watched as the Noble Warrior grabbed a long sword, entered the empty space, raised the long sword up and swung the long sword, dancing through many moves in one continuous movement, only to gradually swing the long sword down to a halt and face me.

“...The long sword is too heavy for many repeated movements,” the Noble Warrior said to me. “It must flow in one movement. This is the way.”

And so, I lifted my long sword and looked back at it.

“Just let the long sword flow,” the Noble Warrior said to me.

And so, I inhaled, closed my eyes, exhaled, opened my eyes, raised my long sword and swung, allowing the long sword to flow, only to quickly slow down to a halt.

“...Did you feel it?” the Noble Warrior asked me.

“Yes,” I answered. “I felt it.”

“This is the way. Practice diligently, feel it, and master the long sword.”

Butterflies were dancing.

The Guardian and I felt our Baby’s kick. We looked to each other and smiled together.

There were many more practices with the long and the short sword, growing in the art of the long and the short sword with each practice.

Wandering past the warriors who were building the temple, a stranger appeared and approached the warriors.

And so, I stopped to watch.

“Hi,” the stranger said.

One of the Warriors stopped and turned around to face the stranger.

“Hi,” the Warrior replied.

But the stranger just looked back at the Warrior.

“...What is it?” the Warrior asked the stranger.

“...Right, sorry,” the stranger said. “...I heard about a temple here. And I, uh, I heard there is a great master who is going to teach at this temple once the temple is built. Have I come to the right place?”

“We are building a temple here. But who is this great master that you’ve heard of?”

“I don’t know anything about the details of this great master. I don’t know what this great master looks like. I don’t know of any characteristics that this great master has. I’ve just heard stories of this great master.”

“And what stories have you heard?”

“How this great master drew back the regions from the brink of war using nothing but speech and wisdom. How this great master was imprisoned by the Dictator, was starved and mistreated, and still inspired the Dictator to change and live in peace with the other regions. Is this temple for the great master that I am speaking of?”

“Yes, this temple is for the one you are speaking of.”

“Great. Is the great master staying around here then?”

“Yes.”

“And where can I find this great master?”

“Around here. The one you’re speaking of is always

wandering around.”

“But won’t you point out the great master for me? How will I know who the great master is?”

“Trust me, you’ll know.”

“...Alright, then. May I stay here in case the great master wanders past?”

“Yes, but instead of just standing here, why don’t you help us?”

“Um, okay.”

“Come with me then.”

The Warrior turned back around and went back to building the temple with the other warriors.

The stranger followed.

And I wandered off.

The wind was still.

There I was, practicing a movement with the short sword, when, suddenly, the Noble Warrior jumped in front of me with a raised short sword, causing me to freeze.

“Why did you stop?” the Noble Warrior asked me.

“I didn’t want to hit you,” I answered.

“But it’s my short sword that was in your way.”

“I didn’t want to hit your short sword then.”

“And why didn’t you want to hit my short sword?”

“Because this is not my practice.”

“But if you were in battle, wouldn’t your objective be to strike your opponent?”

“I wouldn’t be in battle.”

“And why not?”

“I wouldn’t fight. Fighting forms resistance that doesn’t serve anyone.”

“Then what would you do if another were to attack you?”

“I would gracefully defend myself until the attacker’s onslaught dissipated.”

“And what would you do if there was an opponent in your way?”

“I would inspire this other to feel peace. And if this other weren’t to allow themselves to feel peace, then I’d find a way around.”

“You wouldn’t go through?”

“No.”

“Then why are you practicing?”

“I don’t know. But I love growing. I love to feel growth. And through practicing the long and the short sword, I can grow.”

“But one can grow through any discipline.”

“Yes, but the long and the short sword grabbed my attention. And I decided that the long and the short sword was the discipline that I wanted to grow in.”

“This is the way. You have now entered the final stage of mastering the long and the short sword.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“...What do we do now?”

“Now, you must unlearn everything that you’ve been learning about the long and the short sword.”

“Unlearn everything?”

“Yes.”

“Why do I have to unlearn everything? Shouldn’t I be learning all that there is to learn about the long and the short sword?”

“No, you should learn everything there is to learn about the long and the short sword and then let go of all that you’ve learned.”

“But if I was only ever going to let go of all that I’ve learned, then why should I have bothered to learn all that I’ve learned in the first place?”

“Because it is only by learning that we can unlearn. By realizing what we know, we can realize what we don’t know.”

“By realizing everything, we can realize...,” and I clapped.

“This is the way. And once we let go of all that we’ve learned we can allow it to happen, and do it gracefully.”

“Then I shall unlearn everything.”

“This is the way.”

Wandering around, I found the stranger crouched down, quietly staring at the dust and so, I stopped to watch.

But then, suddenly, the stranger looked up and saw me looking back.

“Hi,” the stranger said to me.

“Hi,” I replied.

“Was I puzzling you? Staring at the dirt?”

“No, not at all.”

“Oh, I thought I might have looked odd, staring at the dirt like I was.”

I just kept looking back at the stranger.

“...Sorry,” the stranger said to me. “I talk about myself too much. I’m sorry.”

“There’s no need to be sorry,” I replied.

“No, there is. I do need to stop talking about myself.”

“Why do you need to stop talking about yourself?”

“Because I talk about myself too much.”

“And what is too much?”

“I don’t know. I’m sorry.”

“There’s no need to be sorry. Who says you talk about yourself too much?”

“People.”

“Which people?”

“I don’t know. Everyone.”

“Everyone? Everyone says that you talk about yourself too much?”

“...Yes.”

“But I don’t say that you talk about yourself too much. I don’t even know you. How can I say that you talk about

yourself too much when I don't even know you? And how can everyone say that you talk about yourself too much when not everyone knows who you are?"

"I don't know. Not everyone says that I talk about myself too much, but a lot of people do."

"Who does?"

"I don't know. I'm sorry."

"There's no need to be sorry. You have nothing to be sorry for."

"I have plenty to be sorry for."

"Like what? What do you have to be sorry for?"

"...Nothing. You're right. I have nothing to be sorry for. I'm going to go."

"Okay. Nice to meet you."

The stranger stormed off.

Walking back down the hill with the Noble Warrior, a flower caught my attention and so, I approached the flower, plucked it and looked back at it.

"What is it?" the Noble Warrior asked me.

"Nothing," I answered.

We continued back down the hill.

But just as we reached the bottom of the hill, the stranger was there, walking in our direction and so, we stopped.

The stranger then looked up, saw me and came to a halt.

"...Hi," the Noble Warrior said to the stranger.

"...Hi," the stranger replied.

The stranger looked to me.

"...I was just walking up the hill," the stranger said to me. "I wasn't following you."

"I didn't believe that you were following me," I replied.

"Sorry, I thought that you might have thought that I was following you."

"We're both in the same space. It is possible for us to run into each other."

"Yes, you're right."

“...Where are you going?”

“I was just walking to the top of the hill.”

“Why?” the Noble Warrior asked.

“I...heard of this great master who is going to teach at the temple that is being built. And I heard that this great master sometimes goes to the top of this hill.”

“A great master?”

“Yes. Isn’t there a great master at the top of this hill?”

“...Who is this great master that you speak of?” I asked the stranger.

“I don’t know much of this great master. I’ve just heard stories of this great master.”

“What stories have you heard?”

“The stories of how this great master brought the regions back from the brink of war. How this great master inspired the Sovereign, the General, the Grand Inquisitor, the Dictator and the Chancellor to come together so that the regions could live in peace. Do you know of the great master that I speak of?”

“We know who you speak of,” the Noble Warrior answered.

“Great. Can you point me to this great master?”

The Noble Warrior looked to me.

Then the stranger’s eyes widened.

“...Wait,” the stranger said. “Are you the great master?”

“No,” I said. “I am no one.”

“But are you the one that I speak of? Are you the one that I am seeking?”

I just kept looking back at the stranger.

“...You are the one that I am seeking,” the stranger said.

“You are the great master.”

Tears welled in the stranger’s eyes.

“...I’m so glad to have found you,” the stranger said.

The stranger wiped both eyes.

“Why is that?” I asked the stranger.

“...I just am,” the stranger answered.

“...What do you wish to do now that you’ve found me?”

“I don’t know. Finding you has been so difficult that I don’t know what to do now. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. You have nothing to be sorry for.”

“Maybe.”

“...Why don’t you take a moment to realize why you wanted to find me? And once you do realize that, come to me and share it?”

“Okay, I can do that.”

The stranger nodded, turned around and began to walk off.

“...Oh!” I said.

The stranger stopped and turned back around.

“One last thing,” I said to the stranger.

I approached the stranger, pulled out the flower and gave the flower to the stranger.

“A gift,” I said.

The stranger took the flower and looked back at me as tears began to well in the stranger’s eyes again.

“...Thank you,” the stranger said. “You are so kind.”

A smile came to me.

And then a smile came to the stranger before the stranger wiped the tears away, turned around and walked off.

Our Baby was arriving, so the Guardian and I rushed to our Nurse, where our Nurse helped bring our crying Baby out of the womb and into our warm arms. Our Baby gradually quietened down, laying there, curled up, while the Guardian and I watched.

The Guardian and I brought our Baby home and rested our Baby down.

“I’m just going to lie down,” the Guardian said to me.

“Okay,” I replied.

“If you want anything, just wake me up, okay?”

“Okay.”

The Guardian walked off.
And I just looked back to my silent Baby, staring deep into my Baby's eyes.

My Baby stared back at me.

"...Look at you," I whispered to my Baby. "You are here, with us, experiencing life. How incredible is that? How incredible it is to be here? To be in the now? To live life...? But of course, you are life. You are life being experienced in what we call 'the here and now.' And that's amazing. That's...phenomenal. You're phenomenal. You're going to live through many experiences. You're going to have a lot of magnificent, wonderful experiences. And yes, there are going to be those harsh and dreadful experiences. But they're all experiences. They're all the experience. And it's beautiful. And you get an opportunity to experience it. And enjoy it. Happy to be with you here."

There was more unlearning of the long and the short sword over many practices.

Walking by the warriors who were building the temple, I stopped to watch.

Eventually, one of the Warriors turned around, saw me, stopped and approached me.

"Hi," the Warrior said to me.

"Hi," I replied.

"We're almost finished. Just got to build the roof now."

"...Thank you."

"What for?"

"For building this temple."

"We were under orders."

"You might have been, but you didn't have to follow through on them. So, thank you. And if there's anything I could help you with, feel free to ask."

"We'll keep that in mind."

The Warrior nodded, turned back around and continued

building the temple with the other warriors.

As I wandered by the lake, the stranger appeared and approached me.

“Hey,” the stranger said to me.

“Hey,” I replied.

“...I’ve been thinking about why I wanted to find you.”

“Have you arrived at a realization?”

“Yes. Sort of.”

“What realization did you sort of arrive at?”

“...If I told you, what would happen?”

“Depends on what you tell me.”

“...What happens when others come to you for advice?”

“It still depends on what they say to me.”

“But what would usually happen?”

“Usually, I’ll ask questions.”

“What sort of questions?”

“Again, it depends on what we’re talking about. But the questions that I ask would be used to inspire others to come to their own realizations.”

“Can you give me an example?”

“Sure. For instance, there was one conversation that I had with another who was afraid they were going insane. And so, I asked them, ‘what is sanity?’, and they gave me their definition of what sanity was. I then asked them, ‘what is insanity?’, and they gave me their definition of what insanity was. But then I asked, ‘but aren’t those definitions that you’ve given me subjective?’ to which they answered, ‘no.’ So, I asked them, ‘why not?’, and they answered ‘because they are defined, and what is defined is not subjective.’ But we can only experience life subjectively, so how could anything be objective? Nothing is objective. And that means that all our definitions are subjective. So, what they defined as ‘sane’ and ‘insane’ was not objective. Those definitions are not absolute. They are subjective. They are relative. And because they couldn’t give me an actual

definition of 'sanity' and 'insanity', they realized that they weren't actually going insane."

"...But then what happened?"

"...They weren't satisfied. So, I asked them, why they believed they were going insane? And they told me that they 'felt so stressed.' But then I asked them, 'but who is telling you that you are going insane?', and they answered that 'others were worried that they were going insane.' And that was their next realization: we are who we are because of others. They believed they were going insane because others believed that they were going insane. They weren't actually going insane because there is no actual definition of insanity. There's just a definition that we all agree on, as all definitions are just agreed upon and are not actual."

"...And did they feel better?"

"Yes, they felt relieved and decided to leave those who were causing them strife."

"And that was that? Nothing else happened?"

"Well, they left and I didn't hear what came of it."

"So, all you do is ask questions?"

"Essentially, yes."

"It seems too simple."

"But then again, don't we at times make life complicated?"

"Because life is complicated."

"Is it?"

"Yes."

"And what makes you believe that life is complicated?"

"Because it is."

"That isn't much of an answer, is it...? We can't come to any new realizations with 'because it is.' So, what makes you believe that life is complicated?"

"I've just been through many, many complicated situations."

"And that's what makes you believe that life is complicated, when really, life is..." and I clapped. "It is

neither simple nor complicated. Life is...," and I clapped.

"And in that way, life is what we make of it."

"But life can be complicated."

"Is that so? Or do you just believe that to be so?"

"...I guess, I'd have to believe it in order for it to be so."

"And that's it, isn't it? Believe it, and one will believe that it is so. It's not that it's actually so. It's just that we believe it to be so. And if you want to grow your fulfillment in your life, why don't you just believe in the thoughts that'll inspire you to grow your fulfillment in your life?"

"I can't just do that."

"Why not? What makes you believe that you can't?"

"...I don't know. I guess, there's no reason why I can't do that."

"And why is that?"

"Because...if I believe that I can just believe in the thoughts that'll inspire me to grow my fulfillment, then I will believe that I can just believe in the thoughts that'll inspire me to grow my fulfillment. I can believe that I can grow my fulfillment. I can grow my fulfillment."

"Very good. Anything else?"

"...No."

"No?"

"...No, there's nothing else."

"...Okay. But if a thought comes to mind, then you can ask me."

"Thank you. And thank you for your time."

Our Baby was crying, as I entered and found the Guardian holding our Baby.

"I've tried everything," the Guardian said to me. "Could you please help me?"

The Guardian placed our Baby in my arms and I gently held our Baby close in.

"Shh...", I said. "...Shh...It's okay...It's okay..."

But our Baby kept on crying.

“...Shh...,” I said. “...Hmm...”
Our Baby quietened a little.
“...Mm...,” I hummed.
Our Baby quietened a little more.
“...Om...,” I hummed.
And then, gradually, our Baby fell silent.

Unlearning of the short sword was happening, until I awakened and realized where I was.

“You’re growing,” the Noble Warrior said to me.

“This is the way,” I replied.

A smile came to the Noble Warrior.

And then I dropped my short sword, picked up my long sword, found my grip, took a long, deep breath and swung.

Unlearning of the long sword was happening, until I awakened and realized where I was.

“...You’ve come a long way,” the Noble Warrior said to me.

“Thank you,” I replied.

“...It seems that I don’t have to be here anymore.”

“Don’t have to be here anymore? Are you suggesting something?”

“I’m saying that it’s time for me to go. The temple is nearly finished. And there’s nothing more for me to teach you. There’s just your continuous practice. And you don’t need me for that.”

I nodded back to the Noble Warrior.

“...There is just one principle that you should live by,” the Noble Warrior said to me. “And if you can live by this one principle, you’ll do well.”

“What is the one principle?” I asked the Noble Warrior.

“Whatever you do, do it gracefully. This is the way.”

One of the Warriors approached me.

“I bring some good news,” the Warrior said to me.

“Yeah?” I asked. “What’s your good news?”

“The temple is finished. Come, I’ll show you.”

The Warrior then turned around and walked back in the direction from which the warrior came.

And so, I followed the Warrior.

And eventually, we arrived at the temple and stood there, staring at it.

“...Come have a look inside,” the Warrior said to me.

We wandered inside the temple and looked at it.

“...What do you think?” the Warrior asked me.

“It’s beautiful,” I answered. “...It’s really beautiful. I love it.”

“Thank you. Is there anything you’d like to change?”

I looked around, until my eyes stopped and fixed on the front gate.

“...What is it?” the Warrior asked me.

“The gate should be taken down,” I answered.

“Why should the gate be taken down?”

“To make the temple feel open to all. And openness allows trust.”

“But what if someone comes in and harms you?”

“Then someone will come in and harm me.”

“Really? You aren’t going to defend yourself?”

“No, it’s not that I won’t defend myself. I’m just accepting what happens.”

“I see.”

“For there to be trust, one must begin by being open and vulnerable. So, I should begin by being open and vulnerable.”

“We’ll take the gate down then.”

“Thank you.”

And so, the warriors took down the front gate.

All of the warriors were gathered together, when I approached them.

“Hi,” one of the Warriors said to me.

“Hi,” I replied.

“Are you here to say goodbye?”

“Yes. And to thank you again for all that you’ve done for us.”

“It was nothing really.”

“It might seem like nothing to you, but we all really appreciate it.”

“That’s good to hear. But that wasn’t why it was an issue for us. We wanted to build the temple and the houses for you.”

“Why? I’m no one.”

“That might be so. But you’re inspiring. And we really appreciate it.”

“...Thank you.”

“...Okay, I guess this is goodbye. Hope to see you soon.”

“Hope to see you soon.”

The warriors turned around and slowly walked off.

And then, as I turned, the Noble Warrior appeared before me.

“It was an honor to teach you,” the Noble Warrior said to me.

“It was an honor to learn and unlearn from you,” I replied.

“This is the way.”

A smile came to me.

Then a smile came to the Noble Warrior.

And then the Noble Warrior turned around and caught up to the other warriors.

The Guardian walked into the temple with our sleeping Baby, looking around at it.

“Wow, this is incredible,” the Guardian said to me. “...I’m so happy for you.”

“Why is that?” I asked.

“All that you’ve dreamed of has come to reality.”

“...Your dreams can come to reality too.”

“Oh, I’m aware of that.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“My dreams have already come to reality.”

“Then I’m happy for you too.”

There I was, sitting in the temple, legs crossed and eyes shut.

Many came to the temple to ask me questions and feel the inspiration spread.

There was the sound of footsteps and so, I turned around and saw the stranger approaching me.

The stranger stopped.

“Sorry,” the stranger said to me. “I didn’t mean to disturb you.”

“It’s okay,” I replied. “It happens.”

“...If you’re busy, I can come back.”

“No. Please, stay.”

“Okay.”

And so, the stranger stepped closer towards me and looked at the temple.

“This is something else, huh?” the stranger asked.

“It sure is,” I answered.

“...I went to one of your gatherings.”

“I remember seeing you.”

“...I have realized why I wanted to find you. I mean, I’ve really realized why I wanted to find you.”

“Oh, yeah? And why did you want to find me?”

“To help you. I want to help you.”

“And why do you want to help me?”

“I don’t know. But I see what you’re doing.”

“Really? And what am I doing?”

“You’re showing me how I can’t know what I really want. And showing me how I suffer.”

“And how do you suffer?”

“Because we can’t know what we really want, we go

around in loops, trying to achieve what we believe we really want and we either get what we believe we really want and it doesn't fulfill us or we don't get what we believe we really want and are miserable. Either way, we suffer. But there's nothing really wrong in wanting. There's nothing really wrong with desire. We're human. We desire. It's what we do. But it helps to realize that we can't know what we really want so that we don't fall into desire's trap."

"...Very good. And what helps with taming desire is not by knowing what we believe we really desire, but by being clear on our values. It's about deciding what we value and committing to those values because that helps us to grow. Clarity helps us to grow."

"Yes, I see that."

"...So, why do you want to help me?"

"I don't really know. And I can't really know. But I feel like I should."

"Fair enough. How can you help me?"

"...I can cook for you, clean up, help maintain the temple and do chores that you don't have to worry about, so you can spend more time serving others."

"...Okay, we can see how it goes."

"Great. Thank you."

"...One more question though."

"Okay."

"What do you get out of helping me?"

"...It's as you've said, there is nothing to be gained. Not really anyways. And if we can't really gain anything, then there is nothing being gained. But if I were to play along with your question, I can't lead, I can't inspire people, but I can serve. We can all serve. And if I can give back to you and help you to inspire more people, then that's something I can be proud of."

"...Okay."

Unlearning of the long and the short sword was happening.

The stars were still as I woke up and realized the empty space beside me. And so, I sat up and looked around, until I eventually stood up and wandered around, only to eventually find the Guardian sitting across from and looking back at our sleeping Baby. I approached the Guardian.

“Hi,” I whispered to the Guardian.

“...Hi,” the Guardian whispered back.

“...May I sit next to you?”

“Be my guest.”

I sat beside the Guardian.

“...What are you thinking about?” I asked the Guardian.

“Nothing important,” the Guardian answered.

“Is that so?”

“Yes.”

“...Okay, then I’m just going to sit here, beside you.”

“...Okay.”

The Guardian continued to stare back at our sleeping Baby, until tears began to flow.

“...This is not what I expected,” the Guardian said to me. “...I thought...I thought that having a baby would change my life. I thought that it’d make life exciting again. But it hasn’t. I’m just living through the same routine, but instead of being with Mum, I’m with our Child. Don’t get me wrong. I love our Child. I love our Child so much. But I can’t live the same way over and over again.”

“Then why don’t we do things differently?” I asked the Guardian.

“How though? We can’t just do as we please. We have our Child to take care of.”

“And why can’t we take care of our Child and do something different simultaneously?”

“...I guess we can.”

“...There is always something that we can do to grow our fulfillment. And to do that, all that is required of us is to realize what we should do to grow our fulfillment and do

that. Decide to do what we believe will grow our fulfillment and commit to that decision. It's that simple. It's not complicated. And it doesn't need to be complicated. It's simple. Life is simple. We just have to allow it to be."

"...Yeah, I'm sorry for this."

"No, don't be. These moments are what make us human. It's why I love you."

"I love you too."

"...Why don't you take some time to realize what you can do to grow your fulfillment? I'll do more to look after our Baby and give you more space."

"No, you don't have to."

"But I want to."

"No."

"Please, I want to help."

"...Thank you. You're too good for me."

"That's only because you're too good for me."

The stranger was still cleaning the temple as others left the gathering and so, I approached the stranger.

"You don't have to finish cleaning," I said to the stranger. "It'll most likely get dirty again tomorrow and then you'll have to clean everything all over again."

"But appearances are important," the stranger replied.

"Are they?"

"Yes."

"And why is that?"

"I don't know."

"If you were to guess."

"If I were to guess, it's because our appearances show others how we feel."

"Go on."

"How we feel determines how we live, as you've defended. And that would suggest that how we feel would determine how we appear to others as well. And so, how we appear to others would give others an insight into how we

feel.”

“Even if those appearances are deceiving?”

“Well, we can’t tell if an appearance is deceptive or not until we realize we’ve been deceived. And it’s only till then that we can do something about it.”

“Unfortunately.”

“Yes, unfortunately. But deceptive appearances still show us how others feel.”

“And why is that?”

“Because they wouldn’t be deceiving others if they felt fulfilled. If they felt fulfilled then there wouldn’t be an incentive to deceive others. They already feel fulfilled, so why would they deceive others...? Many might deceive others to get a moment of satisfaction, but the most they can get is a moment of satisfaction because deceiving others is not enduring. Deceiving others will never lead to feeling fulfilled. So, if one was deceiving others then that would suggest that they felt unfulfilled, even if they were reaching brief moments of satisfaction. That’s why they’re deceiving others.”

“Very good.”

“...Is that why you’re so good at reading others?”

“What makes you believe that I am good at reading others?”

“Just an observation. It’s the way you behave really. But also, when you’re helping others, there is this glint in your eyes.”

“Really? I didn’t realize there was a glint in my eyes.”

“Well, you can’t. Unless one can see their reflection, one can’t see their eyes.”

“And why is that?”

“Because we depend on other things in order to have something to see.”

“...How are you finding it here?”

“Good.”

“Any concerns?”

“Uh, no. I’m really liking it here.”

“That’s good. If there’s something that I can help you with, feel free to ask, okay?”

“Yes, I will.”

Words were written.

There was a cold mist over the lake as I skipped rocks and watched the rocks disappear into it.

The stranger was sitting there, all alone, and so, I wandered towards the stranger.

“May I sit?” I asked the stranger.

“Sure,” the stranger answered.

I sat beside the stranger.

“How are you feeling today?” the stranger asked me.

“Amazing,” I answered.

“Why do you feel amazing?”

“Because I am here. I’m here with you. Or another way to put it, I’m there. We’re all there.”

“Do you have days where you don’t feel amazing?”

“Sure, I have my sad days. But those sad days make me appreciate the amazing days. And having both the sad days and the amazing days makes life beautiful. Feeling makes life beautiful.”

“Yeah, I suppose you’re right.”

“...But?”

“But what?”

“I don’t know. It just seemed that you were going to say more.”

“Oh, no. I have nothing more to say.”

“Really? Nothing at all?”

“Nothing at all.”

“Okay. And how are you feeling today?”

“Yeah, I’m okay.”

“Just okay?”

“Yeah.”

“Why don’t you feel amazing?”

“I’m just...I don’t know. It’s nothing. I’m fine.”

“Are you really?”

“Yeah, yeah. I’m fine.”

“...I was...never always this way.”

“Really?”

“Really. When I was younger, I used to get depressed quite easily. And it was just little things that triggered it. I never had any real reason to be depressed. Something would happen, usually something quite insignificant, and then I’d be depressed.”

“And how did you overcome your depression?”

“...I didn’t. Not really anyway. But what happened was that I realized that being depressed allowed me to grow my fulfillment. And that was a relief in a way. I was able to just be. I didn’t need anything. There was no great objective to strive towards. I could just live. And by just living, I could just enjoy life. From just living, I could grow my fulfillment. And that was it. And I still get depressed occasionally. But it’s all happening. And it’s beautiful.”

“But don’t you still sometimes wish that you didn’t get depressed?”

“I do, but at the same time, I don’t. And that is human.”

“What is human?”

“Having both. Feeling is human.”

“...What do you believe we should do when we feel depressed then?”

“What I feel one should do when they are depressed is to go with it. When one is swimming, one can either go with the current or go against the current. And when one decides to go against the current, they build resistance and that makes it difficult for them to swim. But when one decides to go with the current, they can allow it to happen. And for many of us, when we’re depressed, we try to do everything to overcome it, or resist it, but that only antagonizes it and

that just makes one feel even more depressed. But by going with the depression, and allowing the depression to happen, it just fades away, like everything else. By being graceful, we can allow it to happen. And to be graceful is to be honest. And in that way, in that honest way, when we are depressed, we can just allow the depression to dissipate.”

“...Yeah. Yeah, I can see that.”

“...And is that how you feel now?”

“Is what how I feel now?”

“Depressed?”

“What makes you believe that I’m depressed? I’m not depressed.”

“Aren’t you?”

“...No.”

“Really? Isn’t that why you’re here?”

“Sorry?”

“Isn’t that why you’re here? So, you can overcome your depression?”

“No, I’m not depressed. I’m fine.”

“...I only ask because usually when one comes to me, they come to me for a reason. They have some concern, an issue, something that they’re trying to overcome. So, it’s easy to assume that you’re here for a similar reason.”

“As I said before, I’m here because I want to help you. And that’s it. That’s why I’m here.”

“...Okay. May I share a thought?”

“Sure.”

“It can be difficult for some to ask for help because when we ask for help, we’re taking a risk. We become vulnerable, opening ourselves up to being taken advantage of. But also, by not asking for help, by not being vulnerable, we starve ourselves of the opportunity to come together, build trust, care for each other, empathize with each other, love each other. And that is a terrible loss.”

“...But how do you know when or who to ask for help? How do you know that you won’t be taken advantage of?”

"You don't know. And you can never know. We can't ever realize the outcome of a decision until the decision has been made. And by then, it's too late. The decision has been made."

"So, what do we do?"

"We go with it. We go with the feeling."

"And what if the worst were to happen? What if we were to be taken advantage of?"

"Well, what could we do if we were taken advantage of...? As difficult as it might be in the moment, couldn't we learn and grow from the experience?"

"Yes, I guess we can."

"Then that is what we could do. We could learn and grow. We can always learn and grow."

"...You really believe that I'm depressed, don't you?"

"I'm just going with it."

"...Okay, then. I'll tell you how I really feel. But this is not going to be easy for me."

"That's okay. I'm here for you."

"...You're right, I am depressed. And I'll tell you why...I was hurt. I was...abused. I was abused in the worst, most unimaginable ways, over and over and over again. And I was alone. I didn't have anyone. I was all alone. And all this happened as I was growing up. And I've been carrying this pain. I've been carrying this pain all my life. It is my life. And I'm sick of it. I'm tired of it. I want it to stop. But I don't know what to do. And then I heard of you. I heard of your stories. And that's...why I'm here."

"...I'm sorry that you had to live through that. I cannot fathom what you have lived through. And I don't believe that it is fair for me to even try to. But what I could do, that I believe is fair, is share what I have realized. And through my own suffering, I've realized that if there is at least one thing that I could do it is to help others. And that is what I have decided and committed to do. And what all this has taught me is that through suffering we can reach enlightenment."

Sometimes it falls that way. Sometimes it falls a different way. Sometimes we fall straight into enlightenment. But through suffering we can reach enlightenment. And if there is something that you could do it is to help others, to love others. And with that, because of the suffering that you have endured, you have a greater capacity to love others. It is because of the suffering that you have endured that you can really help and love others who have suffered as well.”

“You really think so?”

“That’s what I feel. And if you decide and commit to helping others, but only if you decide and commit to helping others, I will help you to help others.”

“Really?”

“I will. And I won’t have you copy what I do. You will do what you do. You will share the realizations that you’ve had to inspire others to grow. But this will only happen if you decide and commit to it.”

“Yes, I will. I will decide and commit to helping others in my way. I will be your Protégé.”

The Guardian was playing with our Child and so, I just stood there and watched.

And then, eventually, the Guardian looked up and saw me.

“Hey,” the Guardian said to me.

“Hey,” I replied. “How are you feeling?”

“Good. And you? Are you feeling amazing?”

“Of course.”

“...I’m sorry for the way I’ve been behaving recently.”

“Sorry? What for?”

“For the stress that I’ve caused. I’ve just been really stressed recently and I’m sorry for that.”

“That’s okay. Why have you been stressed?”

“It’s just been tough looking after our Child. And sometimes I just get so overwhelmed and it really gets to me. I don’t hate our Child. I don’t wish that we didn’t have our

Child. Not at all. I love our Child. I love our Child so much. I don't have a clue what I'd do without our Child. It can just be...overwhelming at times."

"Yeah, it can be overwhelming for me too."

"...I'm so happy to have you both in my life."

"I'm happy to have you both in my life too."

My Protégé and I were at the temple when some supporters from our latest gathering came by with food.

"Hi," a Supporter said to us.

"Hi," I replied. "Are you happy?"

"Yes, extremely."

"Extremely happy? Why is that?"

"Because you've inspired us. And we want to give you a gift in return."

The supporters handed the food to us.

"Thank you," I said.

"There's no need to thank us," the Supporter replied.

"You've given us so much that a little bit of food is nothing in comparison."

"It's still very kind of you. You didn't have to give me anything and you would have received the same value from our gatherings. But you have decided to give us food in spite of that. And that's very kind."

"Well then, thank you for acknowledging our kindness."

"It's only fair."

Many more gatherings happened.

Our Child was crawling around, as the Guardian, my Protégé and I watched on.

But then, suddenly, our Child uttered, "Ma."

"Did our Child just say something?" the Guardian asked me.

"I believe so," I answered.

"Can you say that again?" the Guardian asked our Child.

“...Ma,” our Child repeated.
“Oh, wow, our Child’s first word. Can you say ‘ma’ again?”
“...Ma.”
“Can you say ‘da?’”
“...Da.”
“A second word. Our Child is learning fast.”
A smile came to me.
But then my smile faded.
“...What is it?” my Protégé asked me.
“...A child’s first word is the beginning of everything,” I answered. “It is when a child starts to get absorbed in its own game and plays into the separateness of things.”
“That might be so, but with your help, your Child can realize that it is just a game.”
“Yes, I suppose I can help my Child come to that realization.”

Our Child stumbled occasionally, in attempting to stand up, only to eventually learn to stand up and walk.

My Protégé and I were walking along the lake.
“May I ask you a question?” my Protégé asked me.
“Sure,” I answered. “What is it?”
“How can one deal with loneliness?”
“Why does one feel that they need to deal with loneliness?”
“I guess because they feel that they need to be connected with others.”
“And why does one feel that they need to be connected with others?”
“So, they don’t feel lonely.”
“And why does one feel that they shouldn’t feel lonely?”
“I guess because they feel that they should be connected with others.”

"And why should they be connected with others?"

"Because loneliness is a terrible experience."

"And why is loneliness a terrible experience?"

"Because it's lonely. It's terrible."

"Why is loneliness a terrible experience?"

"...I don't really know."

"Can you really know?"

"No, I can't. No one can."

"So, how is loneliness a terrible experience?"

"It's not. It's just what others have told me."

"And is that true? What others have told you?"

"No, what others have told me isn't true."

"Just because others say that something is true doesn't make it true. And just because one believes that something is true doesn't mean that what they believe is true. One is just believing that the thing is true when nothing can be true. Nothing is true."

"...Then what should one do when they feel lonely?"

"What could one do when they feel lonely?"

"They could look for a companion."

"They could. And what might happen once they find a companion?"

"I don't know. They might feel fulfilled."

"They might. Or they might feel satisfied for a while, only to sink back into misery once they begin to live negative experiences with their companion."

"That could happen. But wouldn't it be worth finding a companion so that one could be fulfilled?"

"But why does one need a companion to be fulfilled? Why can't one be fulfilled now?"

"Because they're alone."

"But why can't one be fulfilled now?"

"They could, I guess."

"And why isn't one fulfilled now?"

"Because...they don't allow themselves to be. But does that mean that one shouldn't have companions?"

“Is it right or wrong to have companions?”

“It is neither right nor wrong.”

“So, why does it matter whether one has companions or not?”

“It doesn’t. But can’t it be good to have companions?”

“Is having companions better or worse than not having companions?”

“It’s better.”

“Is that true?”

“...No.”

“You just believe that having companions is better than not having companions?”

“Yes.”

“So, is having companions better or worse than not having companions?”

“Neither better nor worse. But what should one do when they don’t like being alone?”

“Then don’t be alone. Find a companion. But what am I doing here? What am I helping you to realize?”

“That having a companion is neither better nor worse than not having a companion?”

“And?”

“And that...and that we don’t need companions.”

“And why is that an important realization?”

“Because...our need for a companion is what makes us feel lonely?”

“Needs cause suffering. Desire causes suffering.”

“And it’s about changing how we feel because that’ll help us to deal with the loneliness we feel. Finding a companion might help us for a while, but really, it’s once we change how we feel that we’ll overcome the loneliness that we feel.”

“...And what might happen once we change how we feel?”

“I don’t know. We’ll probably become more appealing to others and ironically, that’ll help us to find a companion.”

“The sun is all alone, but it still shines. And once we let go of our needs, our desires, we can shine.”

“But there is another question that I have with all this.”

“And what question is that?”

“Isn’t it good to have desires?”

“Why is it good to have desires?”

“Because our desires give us something to achieve.”

“And why do we feel the need to achieve our desires?”

“I get that our needs cause our suffering. But I’m asking if it is good to have desires when one is already fulfilled.”

“Are you asking whether or not it is good to have dreams to grow towards, even though one is already fulfilled in the now?”

“Wait, what’s the difference between desire and a dream?”

“In my opinion?”

“In your opinion.”

“...Desire is a desperate want, a want that we believe we need in order to be fulfilled. Whereas, a dream is just appealing and not something that we believe we need to be fulfilled.”

“I see. Then yes, isn’t it good to have dreams to grow towards despite being fulfilled in the now?”

“Well, how would we grow without dreams?”

“We couldn’t. Because if we didn’t have dreams, we’d have nothing to grow towards.”

“So, just because one is fulfilled in the now doesn’t mean that one shouldn’t have dreams to grow towards.”

“Yes, one should have dreams to grow towards.”

“But could one grow towards their dreams if they are unfulfilled in the now?”

“I’d imagine it’d be extremely difficult. And if it wasn’t difficult, then it would be impossible.”

“It would be impossible to grow towards our dreams if we were unfulfilled in the now. So, isn’t it important to be fulfilled in the now so that we can grow towards our

dreams?”

“Yes, it’s about being fulfilled in the now. That’s what matters. And just because one is fulfilled in the now doesn’t mean that they shouldn’t have dreams to grow towards. Dreams help us to grow. But how we feel in the now is what matters above all else.”

“Very good.”

My Protégé and I were eating at the temple, when a stranger approached us.

“Hi,” the stranger said to us.

“Hi,” my Protégé replied.

“I’m looking for the keeper of this temple. Do you know who that is?”

“Why are you looking for the keeper of this temple?”

“Because I want to learn from the keeper. I want to learn from the best.”

“Why do you want to learn from the best?”

“Because that is how I’ll get better. It just makes sense. If you want to learn, you should learn from the best.”

“But what is the best?”

“The best is the one who is better than all the rest.”

“Best to whom though?”

“Best to everyone.”

“But don’t we each experience life differently? Don’t we each live different lives?”

“Yes. Yes, we do.”

“So, wouldn’t we each have a different perspective as to who and what is the best?”

“...I guess, we would.”

“So, best to whom exactly?”

“I guess, the best to me.”

“And why is this keeper the best to you?”

“...Because others have told me that the keeper of this temple is the best.”

“And does that make the keeper of this temple the best?”

“...No, I guess not.”

“So, why do you want to learn from the keeper of this temple?”

“Because I want to become better. I want to live a better life.”

“And what is better?”

“Better means greater.”

“No, better and greater are synonymous. They’re just different words that have the same meaning. So, what is better?”

“Better means to be superior, more satisfying, more effective.”

“But again, these words are just synonyms of ‘better.’ What is better?”

“...I don’t know. I have no idea.”

“Better is just a word. And by being just a word, nothing is actually better than anything else.”

“But wouldn’t you say that there are some things that are better than others?”

“No.”

“No? But why not?”

“Because every instant that we reach that we considered to be better we realize that it is not better and that there is just as much good as there is bad because we can’t have one without the other. Every development brings about an even number of positives and negatives, whether or not we are aware of this and whether or not we believe this to be the case because for every positive there has to be a negative in order to distinguish one from the other. So, positive implies negative, good implies bad, light implies darkness, and so on. And we can’t have one without the other. And with that, how can there be anything that is actually better than anything else?”

“...There can’t be.”

“So, why do you want to live a better life?”

“...I don’t know. It’s just appealing to me.”

“...What is wrong with your life right now?”
“Nothing is wrong. Sure, I have my ups and downs, but really, there’s nothing substantially wrong with my life.”
“So, why do you want to live a better life?”
“I guess, it’s just because it’s appealing to me.”
“How is it appealing to you?”
“I don’t know. I just feel it. And I believe that if we’re not doing what feels good to us, then we’re not really living life.”
“If one is not doing what warms their soul, then one might as well not live life at all.”
“Yes, exactly.”
“Alright then. You may be a pupil and learn from the keeper of this temple.”
“Wait, aren’t you the keeper of this temple?”
“No, I am no one.”
“But don’t you look after this temple?”
“I care for this temple. But I am not its keeper.”
“Then who is?”
“No one.”
“I don’t understand.”
“What do you actually own?”
“I own many things. For instance, I own my bag, the items in my bag and the clothes that I am wearing.”
“But weren’t these things given to you?”
“No, my belongings were purchased with talents.”
“But isn’t the process of purchasing goods a form of giving and receiving?”
“Yes, I guess you could say that.”
“Well, what is the process of purchasing goods if it isn’t a form of giving and receiving?”
“Yes, you’re right. Purchasing goods is a form of giving and receiving.”
“And since these things that you believe are yours were given to you, even in exchange for talents, how are these things actually yours?”

“They’re not.”

“And they can’t be. We possess nothing. Or another way to put it, no one possesses anything. Everything is exchanged, influx, given away and received. Nothing is owned.”

“...Then who is the keeper of this temple? Who is the one who I am seeking to learn from?”

“The one who you are seeking to learn from is right here.”

“Where? Is it you?”

“No.”

“Is it you?” the stranger asked me. “Are you the one whom I am seeking to learn from?”

“No,” I answered.

“Then who is the one that I am seeking to learn from?” the stranger asked my Protégé. “Who is it?”

“It’s you,” my Protégé answered.

Many more strangers became pupils.

My Child and I were playing when my Child fell and a cut opened up on my Child’s elbow. And so, I ran up to my Child and inspected the wound.

“Are you okay?” I asked my Child. “Is it really sore?”

“No,” my Child answered. “I’m okay.”

“Really?”

“I’m okay.”

“...You had me worried.”

“Why?”

“Because I love you.”

“I love you too.”

“...C’mon, let’s get you home.”

And so, we walked back home together.

There was a gathering at the temple.

“What is a belief?” I asked. “What is a belief...? A

belief is just a thought that we continuously focus on. It is neither right nor wrong. It is just a thought that we continuously focus on. But it seems that so many of us play into our beliefs as if they are true, when they're not, they're just thoughts that we continuously focus on. And it helps to realize this so that we don't get carried away, attaching to thoughts and getting so absorbed by our beliefs that we suffer because of them. We could defend the idea that all suffering comes from attachment to thought. I mean, if we let go of all thought, would we suffer...? No. Of course, we wouldn't. So, to eliminate suffering, we could let go of thought. And to let go of thought is to have faith. See, faith isn't about having faith in something. That's belief. When we believe, we believe in something. We believe in a thought. But when we have faith, we let go, surrender. Belief and faith are opposites. And so, if one were to believe in something, if one were to attach themselves to an ideology, then they can't have faith."

"...So, is it wrong to believe?" one of my Pupils asked me.

"Nothing is neither right nor wrong because what we believe to be right and wrong is only ever what we believe to be right and wrong. So, it is not wrong to believe, just as it is not wrong to have faith. To believe is just something that we do. To have faith is just something that we do. But realizing this can help us to realize how we can grow our fulfillment, inspire others and eliminate suffering."

"And how can realizing this do that?"

"Let's begin with belief. By realizing that a belief is just a thought that we continuously focus on, we can realize that all we should do to live the dream that we dream is to continuously focus on the thoughts that'll inspire us to grow towards that dream. We use our thoughts to serve us instead of just relying on our thoughts to inform us on how life ought to be lived. And as we do this, as we grow, we inspire others to do the same. And as the inspiration spreads we eliminate

suffering.”

“But how do we use our thoughts to serve us?” another Pupil asked me.

“We could continuously tell ourselves what to believe. We could repeat thoughts in our minds and gradually come to believing those thoughts. Or we could use strong questions to guide us. When we’re asked a question, we’re encouraged to realize an answer in response to that question. And so, when we ask strong questions, we can get strong answers.”

“What is a strong question though?”

“A strong question is a question that evokes an answer which’ll serve the one receiving the question. For example: why should I grow towards my dream? When asking this question, the one receiving the question is being asked to think of the purpose that they’re creating to help them grow towards their dream. Another question that could be asked: why can’t I grow towards my dream? This question usually evokes one of two answers. Either one answers that they can grow towards their dream, in which case, we should just allow them to grow towards their dream, or one might try to justify why they can’t grow towards their dream, giving us an excuse, and in this case, we could ask them: do you believe that your answer is honest or do you believe that your answer is just an excuse? This then begins a discussion that can help one to realize that there is no reason why they can’t grow towards their dream. And so, these strong questions and similar strong questions can be used to guide our thoughts in such a way that’ll help us to grow towards our dream. And the way to master asking questions is to practice diligently, like any other discipline that we decide to master.”

“...And what about faith?” another Pupil asked me. “How could we use faith to grow towards our dream?”

“Well, when we have faith, we let go. And once we let go, we can allow life to happen for us. We don’t get in our

own way by trying to control or manipulate life to conform to our values. That just forms resistance that doesn't serve anyone. But once we let go, once we surrender, we allow life to happen. And when we allow life to happen, when we trust, we are trusted because what we give we receive."

"And how do we have faith? How do we just let go?"

"Well, how do you let go? How does one let go...? If we tried to let go, then we'd just form resistance because we'd be trying. One doesn't try to breathe. The breathing happens. And so, in the same way, we shouldn't try to let go and form resistance. We should let go like how we breathe. We should just allow it to happen. But still, how do we do that? How do we just let go...? It helps to realize that all things are just thoughts. And all thoughts are just words. And all words are made up. And through this realization, we can then realize that nothing is real."

"And by realizing that nothing is real it becomes easier to let go and trust life to happen?"

"Yes, because you realize that you're not really holding onto anything. When everything is an illusion, and nothing is real, what do we have to hold onto?"

"...Nothing. There's nothing to hold onto."

"Very good."

While wandering around, one of my Pupils approached me and walked alongside me.

"Hi," the Pupil said to me.

"Hi," I replied.

"Are you happy?"

"Yes. And how about you? Are you happy?"

"Yes, I am."

"Why are you happy?"

"Why not be happy?"

"Very good."

"...I've been meaning to ask you a question."

"Oh. And what is your question?"

"I've been trying to find a way to grow. But I can't find any way that interests me."

"Do you feel that you're trying too hard to find your way?"

"Yes, I do. But at the same time, what else could I do...? If I don't try, then I won't find the way that'll interest me. And if I do try, I get in my own way."

"But that is it though."

"What is it?"

"You're already on the way. This is the way. All of it. It's just that right now you believe that you are not on the way."

"I see. And my belief, which can't be absolute, is preventing me from aligning with the way?"

"Yes, very good."

"...But what is something that I could be doing to grow? See, that's what I'm unsure of. What discipline should I undergo to grow in?"

"I don't know. And it shouldn't be up to me to decide for you. Your life is your life. It should be up to you to decide how to live your life."

"I agree with that. But could you give me any words of advice as to how I could realize what discipline to grow in?"

"Well, why don't you decide on a discipline and commit to it by practicing?"

"What? Just any discipline?"

"Yes."

"Really?"

"Why not?"

"Because shouldn't I be picking the discipline that I'm passionate about? Shouldn't I be finding the discipline I'm passionate about and pick that one?"

"But we can all be passionate about everything, so long as we allow ourselves to be passionate about everything."

"How is that? How can we be passionate about everything?"

“Because passion comes out of the flow that we experience when we practice, regardless of the discipline we are practicing in.”

“So, it doesn’t matter what discipline we practice, so long as we’re flowing?”

“Yes”

“And the flowing is what brings about our passion for the discipline?”

“Yes, very good.”

“But what if I don’t become passionate about the discipline that I decide on?”

“Well, what could you do if you don’t become passionate about the discipline that you decide on?”

“I could persist with the discipline until I become passionate about it, if I ever become passionate about it. It might not happen. And I can’t ever know if I will become passionate about the discipline that I decide on because I can’t know what’ll happen. No one can. So, I might end up persisting with this discipline, trying to become passionate about it, until I die. I don’t want that. I don’t want that to happen to me.”

“So, what else could you do?”

“...I could decide on another discipline. But if it comes to that, when will I know when to make the change? When will I know when to change disciplines?”

“When will you know when to do anything?”

“I won’t. And I can’t know.”

“So, what could you do?”

“If it comes to that, I could just decide and experience what happens.”

“Very good.”

“...But still, I have no idea where to start, what discipline to start with. What should I do?”

“Why not serve others?”

“Serve others?”

“Yes. Help them with their needs. Inspire them to grow

their fulfillment. And see what happens.”

“But how can I help them? How can I help them grow their fulfillment?”

“Well, how can you help them grow their fulfillment? What can you contribute?”

“I don’t know. I’ll have to think about it.”

“Then do that.”

And so, the Pupil eventually turned around and walked off.

Later, the Pupil approached me.

“I’ve realized my passion,” the Pupil shared with me.

“How wonderful,” I replied. “What discipline have you decided on?”

“I decided to make others laugh.”

“A comedian?”

“Yes.”

“What a great discipline. We can never have enough laughter in life.”

The Guardian and I were walking with our Child.

“Are you excited?” the Guardian asked our Child.

“Yes,” our Child answered.

“That’s great to hear.”

Eventually, we arrived and stopped to face each other.

“Listen,” the Guardian said to our Child. “I want you to have a great day in class and enjoy yourself.”

“I will,” our Child replied.

The Guardian gave our Child a warm hug.

And our Child hugged the Guardian back.

“Love you,” the Guardian whispered.

“Love you too,” our Child whispered back.

They eventually let go and faced each other.

And then our Child turned and faced me.

“Classes can be fun if you play,” I said to our Child. “So, what should you do?”

“Play,” our Child answered.

I gave our Child a warm hug.
And our Child hugged me back.
“Love you,” I whispered.
“Love you too,” our Child whispered back.
We eventually let go and faced each other.
“Have fun,” I said to our Child.
“We’ll see,” our Child replied.
A smile came to me.
And so, the Guardian and I let our Child go.
“Do you think our Child will be okay?” the Guardian asked me.
“I don’t know,” I answered. “Why are you worried?”
“Because I am.”
“Worrying won’t do anything for our Child. Worrying doesn’t do anything for anyone. Worrying is absurd.”
“I agree, but I do feel as if I can’t help but worry.”
“Do you believe that? Or is it just happening?”
“I might be putting it on myself. I can’t tell.”
“Then why don’t you just allow it to happen?”
“Okay, I’ll do that.”
Later, the Guardian and I were standing there, watching as all the students came out and eventually, our Child came out with a wide smile, spotted us and ran over to us.
“How was your first day?” the Guardian asked our Child.
“So much fun,” our Child answered.
“Really? Why don’t you tell us all about it?”
And so, we all turned around and walked home while the Guardian and I listened to our Child.

There I was, sitting and eating, when a Pupil approached me.
“May I eat with you?” the Pupil asked me.
“Yes,” I answered.
“Are you happy today?”
“I am. Are you happy today?”
“Yes, very much so.”

“That’s great to hear.”

“...I’d like to ask you a question on opportunities.”

“Oh. What question would you like to ask me on opportunities?”

“How does one tell when they’re facing an opportunity?”

“There are opportunities everywhere. However, most of us are blind to most of our opportunities. And so, great opportunities are not seen with the eyes, but are seen with the heart.”

“So, opportunities should be felt?”

“Opportunities resonate with us.”

While I was cleaning the temple, a Pupil came to me.

“Would you like some help?” the Pupil asked me.

“You can help if you like,” I answered the Pupil.

And so, the Pupil began to help me.

“...How have you been able to do this for so long?” the Pupil asked me.

“Doing what?” I asked the Pupil. “Cleaning the temple?”

“No, I mean sharing your wisdom.”

“I just do it. There’s no ultimate purpose to why I do what I do. It just happens. But as well, how could I not do what I do?”

“What are you asking?”

“How could I not help others? How could I not help others when I am able to?”

“And if you weren’t able to? Would you still be helping others?”

“Well, if I wasn’t able to, I wouldn’t be helping others. But we’re always able to help others, no matter what our situation is.”

“Always?”

“Yes, because potential is infinite.”

“Right. But if you weren’t you, if you were someone

else, would you always be able to help others?"

"Yes. I don't need to be me to always help others. We're all able to help others, whether we believe it or not."

"...I'm not sure about that."

"Even though potential is infinite?"

"Yes, even though potential is infinite. There are just some things that I can't do."

"Is it that you can't do those things? Or do you just believe that you can't do those things?"

"I guess, I believe that I can't do those things. But is it wrong to believe that I can't do some things?"

"No, it isn't wrong. And it isn't right either. Nothing is neither right nor wrong. But does believing that you can't do some things help you to grow your fulfillment?"

"No, probably not."

"Then why believe that you can't do some things?"

"...Good question. I guess, I don't really have a good reason. But mightn't it be good to not do some things in order to make room for the things that you would like to do?"

"Of course, it can. Simplicity enables focus."

"And through focus we can flow?"

"Yes, very good."

"...What could I do to help others?"

"Why does it matter what I believe you could do to help others?"

"I don't know. I was just curious to hear your opinion."

"Okay, what could you do to help others?"

"I don't know. I don't have any talents."

"What could you do without talents?"

"What could I do without talents?"

"Yes. What could you do without talents...? What could you do without help? Without support? When you're feeling lonely...? What could you do with a broken heart? What could you do when you're feeling down? Depressed? Disappointed? What could you do...to make a positive and sustainable impact in others' lives? What could you do to

inspire others? What could you do?"

"...I could learn. And I could learn fast and still retain it all."

"Then you learn what you could do to help others."

"Yes, I see."

"And the other side of what you could do is to realize who you are becoming. Who would you like to be...? Imagine that character. And be that character until the image becomes real. Use your imagination. Use your mind. That's what'll make you valuable."

"Yes, I understand that."

"So, who would you like to be?"

"...I like learning. I love learning. And maybe, I could help others to learn. And learn faster. And retain all the information. Yes, I could do that. I could help others to learn. And as they learn, they'll learn more and be able to use the information that they've learned to grow their fulfillment. I can't believe I hadn't thought of this sooner."

"It happens."

"...Thank you for helping me come to this realization."

"Happy to help."

My Protégé and I were cleaning the temple, when there was the sound of footsteps.

"Hi," a voice uttered. "We're looking for the keeper of this temple."

"Over there," one of my Pupils uttered.

The sounds of footsteps grew louder until they came to a stop.

"Hi, there," the voice said.

And so, my Protégé and I turned to see the Archer and a stranger looking back at us.

My eyes widened.

"Remember me?" the Archer asked me.

"Of course, I do," I answered.

I stood up, gave the Archer a hug and then let go.

“Are you happy?” I asked the Archer.

“Yes, I am,” the Archer answered. “And how about yourself?”

“Yeah, I’m happy also.”

“...Oh, and this is my Friend.”

“Hi,” the Archer’s Friend said to me.

“Hi,” I replied. “Are you happy?”

“Yes, thanks for asking.”

“...This place is pretty incredible,” the Archer said.

“Yeah?” I replied. “Do you like it?”

“Yeah, I love it. You’ve done so well. I’m so happy for you.”

“Thank you. And you look like you’re doing well too.”

“I am, thanks.”

“...So, what are you doing here? Did you just come to see me?”

“Yes, we came just to see you. I heard some stories about what you had gone through after we met and I wanted to find out if they were true.”

“What stories did you hear?”

“I heard how you were imprisoned by the Dictator, but then how you inspired the Dictator to let you go and stop the war.”

“Yeah, that happened.”

“Really? That must have been really traumatic.”

“It was what it was.”

“But still, how did you get through it...? Sorry if this is too much for you.”

“No. No, it’s not.”

“Sorry.”

“No, it’s okay. I just got through it. I don’t know how, but I just did.”

“Right.”

“...I apologize for the weak answer. It’s just that I really have no idea how I got through it.”

“No, it’s okay. I could only imagine.”

The Archer turned to the Archer's Friend.

"...Do you mind if we catch up?" the Archer asked the Archer's Friend.

"No," the Archer's Friend answered. "Go ahead. I'll be here."

"Thank you."

Then the Archer gave the Archer's Friend a kiss and a hug and let go.

"See you soon," the Archer's Friend said.

"See you soon," the Archer replied.

And so, the Archer and I wandered off.

"So, how long have you been with your Friend?" I asked the Archer.

"For a while now," the Archer answered.

"How did it happen?"

"We met at a village. I was staying there and we would pass each other occasionally, without ever really talking to each other. I thought that my Friend was good looking, but I also believed that my Friend wouldn't want to be with me, so I didn't even try to make anything happen. And then, suddenly, my Friend gave me a flower. I was so surprised, I asked, 'why are you giving me this flower?' And my Friend answered, 'because I think you're beautiful.' And then we started to spend time together, got to be familiar with each other and fell...in love."

"I'm happy for you."

"Thanks. And how about you? Are you with someone?"

"Yes, I am."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. We even have a Child."

"Wow, you're a parent...? That's...I'm happy for you."

"Thank you."

"How long have you been a family?"

"A while now. Our Child has begun classes."

"That's great. How did you meet your partner?"

"...Through my Mum. My partner was taking care of

my Mum.”

“Was?”

“Yes, my Mum passed away.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry to hear that. I keep reminding you of depressing memories.”

“No, there’s no need to be sorry. You didn’t know what had happened.”

“But still, I feel awful.”

“I’m okay, so there’s no need to feel awful.”

“I can’t help it though. What’s your Child like?”

“Incredible. It amazes me how loving a child can be. And just being with our Child is inspiring.”

“That’s wonderful.”

“...Would you like to meet my Child and my partner? We could all have dinner together.”

“I’d like that, but we won’t be staying here. We’re just passing through.”

“Where are you going?”

“Home.”

“And when are you going?”

“After this.”

“After seeing me?”

“Yes.”

“You’re not even going to stay for a night?”

“No, we really should be getting back.”

“...How has that been? Travelling?”

“I love it. I really love it. I love searching for new things and indulging in those mysteries.”

“Mysteries? Do you like solving mysteries now?”

“No, I don’t like to solve them. I just like indulging in them.”

“And why is that?”

“Because if I solve the mystery then the mystery will lose its magic.”

“How very poetic.”

“...Do you...mind if I ask you something?”

"Sure. What is it?"

"Okay...this might sound strange of me to ask, but...do you ever think about what might have been? Do you ever...think about what might have happened if you'd stayed...? I don't mean to start any controversy. I'm happy with my Friend, but I'm just curious about if you have these thoughts."

"...Yeah, I do."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Do you? Do you occasionally think about what might have happened?"

"Yeah, I can't help it really."

"But that's okay. Thinking about what might have been is just something that we do. We're always indulging in mysteries."

"And why do you think that is?"

"Because when we dream, we only dream of all the wonderful ideas that we are pulled towards. When we have nightmares, we envision all the dreadful ideas that we reject. But when we dream, we only envision the ideas that we are curious about."

"And sometimes I am curious about the idea of what might have been if you'd stayed?"

"Yes, just as I am curious about the same idea."

"So, what do we do about it? What can we do about it?"

"Well, why do we need to do anything...? Why not indulge in the dream? Why not indulge in the mystery? Because if we were to realize what might have been if I stayed, then what would we do...? We'd become less interested in each other. And we'd lose the magic."

"Right. Yeah, I agree."

"Having these mysteries, these dreams, it's part of being human."

"Yeah, they are."

"...Can I share something with you?"

"Yes. What is it?"

"It's a realization I came to, after I met you."

"Oh, yeah? And what realization is that?"

"...I...used to believe that to love another, I had to be with another, that love was about being with another. But that's not the case. To love another isn't about being with another. Whether or not one is with another is secondary. To love another means to surrender to another, whether one is with them or not. Love is an act of surrender. It's trusting that one will be held up by another. And I wouldn't have come to this realization if I hadn't met you."

"...Yeah?"

"Yeah. We don't have to be together. We never have to be together. We can just love each other, despite being with others, because love is what matters. Everything else is secondary."

"Right. Then...let's continue to love."

"Yes, let's continue to love."

The Guardian, our Child and I were eating together.

"Are you happy?" I asked my Child.

"Yes," my Child answered.

"Very good."

"...Can I ask you something?"

"Sure. What is it?"

"What do you do?"

"What do I do?"

"Yes."

"I inspire others."

"How do you inspire others?"

"I inspire others to come to their own realizations and grow."

"And how does that help them?"

"Because as we grow our fulfillment grows. Why are you interested in what I do?"

"I don't know. I just am."

"Would you like to come to one of my gatherings to

experience what I do?"

"Sure."

And so, later, at a gathering, the Guardian was sitting with our Child, while I wandered into the middle.

"Is everyone happy?" I asked.

"Yes," the audience replied.

"Very good. Now, who has a question they'd like to ask to start off the night?"

A Pupil raised their hand.

"Yes," I said to the Pupil. "What's your question?"

"All these illusions that we play into, are they a mistake?" the Pupil asked me.

"A very good question. And a very important question. But no, these illusions, everything that we play into aren't a mistake because how could we realize..." I clapped, "...without all the illusions we play into...? Just because everything is an illusion that we play into doesn't mean that all of these illusions are not there. Everything is there. All of these illusions are there. And there's nothing wrong with these illusions being there. There's nothing wrong with that at all. We should just not play into our illusions as if they are absolute, especially when nothing is absolute. And when we can all do that, we can eliminate suffering."

"Thank you."

"My pleasure. Any other questions?"

Another Pupil raised their hand.

"Yes," I said to the Pupil. "And what's your question?"

"Do you believe that one should have a plan?" the Pupil asked me.

"Well, one could have a plan. And a plan might help one. But it isn't necessary because how often does a plan live up to itself?"

"Not often, if ever."

"If ever. So, the chances are that one will have to adjust their plan. And it helps to realize this because as one grows there'll be moments where they are required to adapt. A

plant doesn't have a plan that it sticks to as it grows. A plant grows and adapts with its environment. And in this regard, we should be no different to a plant."

"But aren't we different because we think? And because of that difference, shouldn't we use our thoughts to construct plans that'll help us to grow?"

"We can, but why would one use their thoughts to construct a plan when one could use their thoughts to grow towards their dream...? When one believes that they have it, then they have it. Once one believes that they have their dream, then they have their dream because they're able to let their dream go, have faith and allow it to happen. See, it is only through belief that we can have faith. It is only through believing that we can let go of our beliefs and have faith and allow it to happen. And in this way, we can grow towards our dreams."

"Thank you."

"Thank you for your wonderful questions. Are there any other questions?"

"Yes," a voice answered.

I looked over to where the voice came from and saw a stranger looking back at me.

"... Yes," I said to the stranger. "What is your question?"

"You often say that there is no answer to life," the stranger said.

"Yes, I often do."

"So, if there's no answer to life, why should I listen to you? Why are we here listening to you?"

"Well, why should you listen to anyone when there is no answer to life?"

"I don't know."

"Neither do I. But neither does anyone else. And the one who realizes this will never be controlled or manipulated by others, but will live by their values."

"That was inspiring, but that still doesn't answer my question."

“Then instead of asking me why I am being listened to, why don’t you ask others why they listen to me?”

“Okay, I will.”

And so, the stranger looked to the audience.

“Why does everyone here listen to this exhibitionist?” the stranger asked.

“...Because we are allowed to grow here,” a Pupil answered.

“We are allowed to ask our own questions here,” another Pupil added.

“We are even encouraged and inspired to ask our own questions here,” another Pupil added.

“Other teachers just tell one how they believe we should all live when they don’t know any better,” another Pupil added.

“When they can’t know any better,” another Pupil added.

“And when one is living life as told by others, one doesn’t grow,” another Pupil added.

“And they don’t grow their fulfillment,” another Pupil added.

“They play into the separateness of things,” another Pupil added.

“And they continue to suffer because of it,” another Pupil added.

“And that doesn’t happen here,” another Pupil added.

“We are allowed to grow here,” another Pupil added.

“...But what if this exhibitionist is wrong?” the stranger asked. “What if this exhibitionist is lying to you and making fools of all of you?”

“But it is all an illusion,” I answered. “Everything is an illusion. And there’s nothing wrong with that.”

“It’s not all an illusion.”

“Why is it not all an illusion?”

“Because everything can’t be an illusion?”

“Why not?”

“Because it can’t. There are many things that are real.”

“Such as what?”

“Such as you and me standing here.”

“But who are you and who am I...? If I am I because you are you and if you are you because I am I, then how can I be I and how can you be you?”

“What? That doesn’t make any sense.”

“How doesn’t my question make any sense?”

“Because it doesn’t.”

“But that’s not much of an answer. I could just say that my question does make sense because it does make sense and that would be just as valid. So, how doesn’t my question make any sense?”

“Because...you are not you because I am I. You are you. And I am I.”

“And yet, don’t we receive our names from others?”

“Yes.”

“And because we receive our names from others, wouldn’t that mean that we are who we are because of others?”

“But just because our names were given to us doesn’t mean that’s who we are.”

“Then who are we? Who are we if we are not our names?”

“We are who we are. You are who you are. And I am who I am.”

“But how can I be I without you? And how can you be you without I...? All things depend on their opposites in order to be distinguished. But because of that, really, all things are interdependent and nothing is absolute. So, again, how can I be I without you? And how can you be you without I?”

“...You don’t know what you’re talking about. You don’t have a clue.”

“I agree. I don’t know what I’m talking about. I don’t know anything. And neither do you. See, no one knows

anything. Not really anyway. And if we can't really know anything, then what do we really know...? Nothing. So, none of us knows anything. And this is because every answer we arrive at comes in response to a question that we made up. Every solution that we arrive at comes in response to a problem that we made up. And since every question and every problem is made up, then that would mean that every answer and every solution is also made up."

"You're just talking a lot of nonsense."

"It's all nonsense. It's all an illusion after all."

"No, it's not. It's not all an illusion."

"Then what is real? When every answer you provide is made up, what is real?"

"...I'm done with this."

"Why are you here? Are you here just to attempt to prove me wrong? Or are you here for another reason?"

"Why does it matter to you?"

"It doesn't matter to me. Nothing matters. Not really anyway. There's just what matters to each of us, whether that be love, family, friendship, whatever it might be. And there's nothing wrong with that. There's nothing wrong with anything mattering to each of us. There's nothing wrong with caring, with loving. It's something that we do."

"Then why did you ask if there was another reason for me being here?"

"Because I care. I don't have to care. It doesn't matter whether I care or not. But I've decided to care. I've decided to care for and love others. And that's what I'm going to do. That's what I'm doing. So, is there another reason for you being here?"

"...No, I don't have another reason to be here."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Then why are you still here? What's preventing you from leaving?"

"...I'm hoping to still prove you wrong."

“And how is that working out for you?”

“How is what working out for me?”

“Hope?”

“Are you going to explain to me how hope is a bad thing?”

“Well, how is hope a good thing?”

“Because it’s good to hope. It’s good to hope that there’s a brighter future ahead.”

“But instead of hoping for that brighter future, why don’t you just grow towards that brighter future?”

“Because some of us can’t do that.”

“Why can’t they do that?”

“Because they can’t.”

“Again, I could just say that they can because they can and that would be just as valid. So, why can’t they grow towards that brighter future? Why can’t we all grow towards our dreams?”

“... We’re talking too generally here.”

“Then why don’t we be specific? Why don’t you give me an example that you believe will defend your claim?”

“...I can’t think of any.”

“That’s okay. Take your time.”

“...No, I can’t think of an example.”

“...Is there another reason for you being here?”

“...No.”

“Okay, then.”

Later, when the gathering finished and the audience dispersed, the Guardian and our Child came to me.

“Hey,” the Guardian said to me.

“Hey,” I replied.

“How was that for you?”

“Inspiring. How was that for both of you?”

“Inspiring.”

“Yeah,” our Child answered.

“Did you like it?” I asked our Child.

“Yes, it was fun.”

“...Sorry about that stranger,” the Guardian said to me.

“Don’t be,” I replied.

“I don’t know how you put up with all these saboteurs.”

“What’s a saboteur?” our Child interjected.

“A saboteur is someone who deliberately tries to destroy things,” I answered.

“Why would someone try to destroy things?”

“There isn’t just one reason. There are many reasons.”

“And why is that?”

“Because we each experience life differently. And because of this, we each live through different experiences that are caused by many different reasons.”

“But aren’t we all the same?”

“How are we the same?”

“...Aren’t we all human?”

“Yes, we are. And why is it important to realize that we’re all human?”

“...Because if we are all the same, then...we can all get along?”

“Yes, very good.”

“...Why don’t we start walking home?” the Guardian interjected.

“Okay.”

And so, we headed home.

“...That stranger, why couldn’t that stranger get along with others?” our Child asked me.

“I don’t know,” I answered. “Maybe, the stranger feels unappreciated by others and feels a need to make others feel the same way. Maybe, it’s because the stranger is ignorant to how we’re all the same. I don’t know. But there’s never just one cause. There are usually a number of different causes that add up to make one feel unworthy, just as there are a number of different causes that add up to make one feel worthy.”

“...What does ignorant mean?”

“Ignorant? It’s when one is unaware of something.”

“...How could that stranger be unaware that we’re all human?”

“I don’t know, but sometimes we don’t allow ourselves to grow our fulfillment.”

“Why?”

“Again, there are usually a number of different causes. There isn’t usually just one cause for why we do what we do. But I like to start with how we feel because how we feel determines how we live. And so, for one to live their dream, to grow their fulfillment, they should change how they feel, so that they can allow themselves to grow their fulfillment.”

“...How do they do that?”

“They have to decide to grow and commit to their growth. And it is only until then that they can allow themselves to grow and grow their fulfillment.”

“...Does that happen often?”

“Does what happen often? Are you asking how many of us don’t allow ourselves to change?”

“No, how often does a stranger try to destroy what you do?”

“It happens on occasion. It’s been happening more frequently of late. But without those who try to destroy what I do, I wouldn’t be able to do what I do. See, it is because one has another, that one has its opposite, that one can be one. One could not be one without another. Light could not be light without darkness. On could not be on without off. I could not be I without you. And in that way, life is relationship. And I can’t do what I do without the occasional stranger trying to destroy what I do, even though the feeling is unpleasant.”

“But how can pleasant feelings be pleasant feelings without unpleasant feelings?”

“Very good. You are a lot like me when I was your age.”

“Yeah? How?”

“When I was younger, I was really curious and I used to ask a lot of questions.”

“What does curious mean?”

“It’s when someone likes to...seek answers to questions.”

“I’m a seeker then?”

“Yes. Yes, you are.”

While I was writing, my Child arrived home and passed me and so, I stopped, stood up and followed my Child.

“Are you okay?” I asked my Child.

“No,” my Child answered.

“What’s the matter?”

“I’m just so bored in class.”

“Why are you bored in class?”

“It isn’t fun. All we do is copy what the Teacher writes down.”

“Yeah, that doesn’t sound like fun.”

“It’s not. I’d like to do what you do.”

“What I do?”

“Yes.”

“Why would you like to do what I do?”

“It’s fun.”

“It is fun, but I’m already doing what I do.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“...I’m not saying that you couldn’t be helping others in the same way that I help others. I’m helping you realize that you should do what you enjoy doing. This is your life. And you should live your life in the way you decide to live it. You should live life in your way. Don’t allow others to tell you how you should live your life. They don’t know any better. They don’t know anything. And no one is better than you.”

“Even you?”

“Even me. No one is better nor worse. We’re all...in the rhythm of things.”

“...Okay, but I’m not sure what way I want to live life. What could I do?”

“Well, what could you do...? When one is unsure of

what to do, what could they do?”

“They could find out what to do?”

“Yes, they can realize what to do.”

“Realize? What does realize mean?”

“To realize means to become aware of a thing. It’s not the same as knowing.”

“And what about knowing? What does knowing mean?”

“To know means to have knowledge. But we can’t have knowledge.”

“Why is that?”

“Because everything can be questioned. And because everything can be question everything can be refuted. Nothing cannot be refuted. And because everything can be refuted, we can’t know anything. We can’t have knowledge. What can we know when everything can be refuted...? This is why I prefer to use realize over knowing. Because when one realizes they’re only becoming aware of a thing. Their attention is being brought to the thing. They don’t know the thing. And they can’t know the thing. And this is why no one can know any better than you. This is why you should live life in your way. This is why each one of us should live life in their way.”

“Okay, I’ll realize what to do. And then I’ll live life in my way.”

“Very good.”

“But how could I realize what to do?”

“...Why don’t I show you a place to help you realize what to do?”

“And which place is this?”

“I’ll just show you to keep the secret for longer and allow the magic to blossom.”

And so, my Child and I left, walked together and found ourselves at the bookshop.

“A bookshop?” my Child asked me.

“Yes,” I answered. “Books have helped me to realize what to do when I feel unclear.”

“But books are boring.”

“How are books boring?”

“Because they make me fall asleep.”

“But not all books are the same. What books have you read?”

“The books from class.”

“Is that all?”

“Yes.”

“Then no wonder you believe books are boring. Because you associate books with class and you believe that class is boring, you believe that books are boring too. Correct?”

“...Yes.”

“Books don’t have to be boring. They can be fun. You just have to read the books that’ll interest you.”

“But which books will interest me? The only books I’ve read are the ones that I’ve read in class.”

“I don’t know which books will interest you, but you should decide which books to get.”

“How do I decide?”

“Which book grabs your attention?”

My Child turned around and wandered through the bookshop until my Child found a book.

“This one,” my Child answered.

“Very good,” I said to my Child. “Now, why don’t you read the book and share with me the lessons that you’ve learned from it?”

“Okay.”

And so, I purchased the book and we went back home.

Later, my Child approached me.

“I’ve finished the book,” my Child said to me.

“And?” I asked my Child. “What did you think?”

“I loved it. It was so much fun to read.”

“I’m glad you liked it. What did you learn from the book?”

“I learned about communication, the importance of communication in our lives and some ways in which we can

become better communicators.”

“And what are some ways in which we can grow our communication?”

“Listening was a big one. Others appreciate it when one listens.”

“I agree. Were there any other ways?”

“Asking questions was another one. We like being asked questions.”

“And why is that?”

“Because many like talking about themselves.”

“Very good. Were there any other ways to grow our communication?”

“Yes, but listening and asking questions were the ones I liked the most.”

“Good. And how important is communication?”

“Very important.”

“And why is communication very important?”

“We couldn’t do anything unless we could communicate with each other.”

“Yes, I agree. It seems that you’ve learned a great many lessons.”

“Thank you. Can I get another book from the bookshop?”

“Yes, you can. But can we make a deal?”

“Okay.”

“You can read as many books from the bookshop as you’d like so long as you write down the lessons you’ve learned from each book and share those lessons with me. Can you do that?”

“Yes, but do I have to write the lessons down? Couldn’t I just share the lessons with you?”

“You could just share the lessons with me, but you’ll remember the lessons when you write them down. When one writes down a thought, they remember that thought because they have performed an action that’ll help them to consolidate that thought. So, when you write down the

lessons you've learned, you'll remember the lessons you've learned."

"Okay. Is that why you write? To remember lessons?"

"Sometimes. Sometimes I write to remember lessons. Sometimes I write for fun. Other times I write to share a thought that I believe will inspire others. And then there are times when I just write. Writing is just as valuable as reading."

"Should I write as much as I read?"

"Why not? It could be fun."

"Okay, I'll give it a go."

One of my Pupils approached me.

"Hi," the Pupil said to me.

"Hi," I replied. "Are you happy?"

"Indeed. And you? Are you happy?"

"Yes, I am. What can I do for you?"

"I was talking with one of the other Pupils and we were discussing how all things are, as an expression, the eternal influx appearances of it. And that got me thinking about things. What are they? What is a thing? And I'd like to ask you that. What is a thing?"

"Well, what is a thing?"

"A thing is an object. That's the best answer I could come up with."

"But object is just a synonym for thing. What is a thing?"

"A thing is a...noun?"

"And what is a noun?"

"A word."

"All things are just words. Nothing more."

"But what is the thing underneath the word? There is the word 'sun' that represents the sun, but what is the thing underneath the word 'sun'?"

I clapped.

"...What lies underneath all things..." I said to the

Pupil, "...is just...", and I clapped again.

My Child came to me.

"I think I've realized what I'd like to do," my Child said to me.

"Oh, yeah?" I asked my Child. "What would you like to do?"

"I'd like to write myths because myths reflect us. Myths are us. Myths reflect what we feel. And because we all feel in the same way, through myths, we can all learn from ourselves, imagine life through others' perspectives, grow, induce empathy, compassion, trust, love and bring us together, so long as my myths remain myths and aren't taken literally. What do you think?"

"That's an amazing idea."

"Really?"

"Yes, it's an amazing idea."

"...Plus, myths can help us to come to the great realization."

"And what is the great realization?"

"The great realization is the one realization that we can all come to. And that realization is that life is...", and my Child clapped.

A smile came to me.

"...I also have some myths that I've begun writing," my Child said to me. "Would you read some for me and share the lessons you've learned from them?"

"Yes, of course," I answered. "I'd be happy to read your myths."

"Great, thank you."

"My pleasure."

And so, my Child shared those myths and I took them away, read them and came back to my Child.

"I've finished reading what you've written so far," I said to my Child.

"Yeah?" my Child asked me. "What do you think? Are

they bad?"

"Why would you believe that your myths are bad?"

"I don't know. I just do."

"Well, they're anything but bad. They're pretty remarkable."

"Really?"

"Yes, I especially love the myth about the squire who tries to return home but keeps falling on the way."

"I love that one too."

"There was something that you wrote about how we always fall and that it's not about not falling, but about falling in the direction that'll get one towards their dream. It felt so poetic and wise."

"Wow, thank you. I really appreciate it."

"...Keep writing these myths of yours. Your myths are gifts. And they should be shared."

"I will."

The Guardian and I were lying next to each other, reading books, when the Guardian stopped and looked to me.

"Can I ask you something?" the Guardian asked me.

"Sure," I answered. "What is it?"

"It's going to be a bit of a silly question though."

"That's okay. Sometimes silly questions lead to insightful answers."

"They can."

"What is your question?"

"...Do you still find me attractive?"

"Yes. Just as much as ever."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"You're not used to me? You're not bored with being with me?"

"No, I love you."

"...I love you too."

"...What brought on this question?"

“Oh, I was just – my reflection caught my attention and it dawned on me how old I was getting and how long we had been together. And I thought that I must be less attractive to you.”

“Well, you’re not. Not even close. I’m still as attracted to you as ever.”

“That’s a relief to hear.”

“... Would you like to get away for a while? Just the two of us?”

“Yes, I would.”

“Then let’s do it.”

And so, the Guardian and I arranged for my pupils to look after our Child, planned a trip, went away together and came back with smiles.

One of my Pupils approached me.

“Hi, there,” the Pupil said to me.

“Hi, there,” I replied.

“How are you?”

“Amazing. And how about you? How are you?”

“Good. Good. Could I ask you a question?”

“You just did.”

“Could I ask you another question?”

“You did it again...Go on.”

“...I’ve had these moments where...and I’m not really sure how to describe it, but I can feel it. Does that make sense?”

“Yes, I realize what you’re saying.”

“Good. Anyway, I’d have these moments where I feel it. But then I’d lose it. And then I try to do everything I can to get back to feeling it. But I can’t. As much as I try, I can’t. And then for some reason, it just happens. For no reason, I feel it again. And I was wondering, how can I get back to feeling it when I lose it? Or better yet, how can I keep on feeling it?”

“Well, the first lesson is to not try. It’s like the heart.

The heart doesn't try to beat. The heart just beats. It happens. And the same goes for when one feels it. It just happens."

"But there must be something I could do."

"There's plenty you could do. But in trying to feel it, one won't feel it."

"So, what could I do other than not try...? One can't not do something."

"Yes, one can't not do something. One is always doing. But in the same way, it is always happening. It is just that sometimes one allows oneself to feel it and at other times, one doesn't allow oneself to feel it."

"So, how do I allow myself to feel it?"

"Let go."

"Let go? Let go of what?"

"Whatever you are holding onto."

"And what am I holding onto?"

"All the thoughts you have."

"But how can I let go of all my thoughts? Don't we all think?"

"But that's it, isn't it? In not thinking, we only feel. We only feel it."

"So, I should not think?"

"Yes."

"...Is it bad to think then? Since the way to feel it is in not thinking, is it bad to think?"

"No, because without thought, how could we realize what it is to not think? To only feel...? It is because of thought that we can allow ourselves to only feel."

Words were written.

My Child shared more myths with me.

There was a gathering.

"Where is life?" I asked. "Is life here? Or over there? Where is it?"

“...Life is everywhere,” one of my Pupils answered.

“Yes. And since life is everywhere, life is infinite and eternal. So, how can one go beyond life?”

“...One can’t,” another Pupil answered. “The place that we believe is beyond life would have to be life, since life is everywhere, and therefore, one can’t go beyond life.”

“Very good. And so, the point of life isn’t to go beyond life. One can’t go beyond life. And because one can’t go beyond life, there is no point to life. We just do what we do. That’s it. Nothing more. We just live. We play. Life is play.”

One of my Pupils approached me.

“Hello,” the Pupil said to me.

“Hello,” I replied.

“How are you feeling?”

“Amazing. And you? Are you happy?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Very good.”

“May I ask you something?”

“What is it?”

“You’ve occasionally mentioned how...peace is felt in the space between thoughts. And I was wondering if you knew of ways to quieten the mind.”

“The best way I’ve learned to quieten the mind is to watch the thoughts passing through the mind. It is a discipline that requires practice. But as you practice the discipline the mind will learn to quieten itself.”

“Will you teach me how to watch my thoughts?”

“The discipline is not a discipline that can be taught because one can’t watch others’ thoughts. One can only watch their own thoughts, no one else’s. So, it falls on one to watch their own thoughts.”

“I understand.”

“Just practice the discipline. And as you practice, you’ll realize ways that’ll quieten the mind and realize ways that won’t quieten the mind. And as you realize both, keep on

practicing the ways that'll quieten the mind."

"It need not be complicated."

"No, it can be simple if one allows it to be."

Unlearning of the long and the short sword was happening.

My Child arrived home with slumped shoulders.

"Hi," I said to my Child.

"Hi," my Child replied.

"Are you happy?"

"I'm fine."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"What are you thinking about?"

"Nothing."

"Really?"

"Yes. Why are you asking so many questions?"

"Because I care about you. And if there is something troubling you, I'm going to help you."

My Child just looked away from me.

"...Do you want to talk about it?" I asked my Child.

"Not really," my Child answered.

"That's okay. We don't have to talk about it."

My Child kept looking away.

"...Could you answer me a small question though?" I asked my Child.

"What's your question?" my Child asked me.

"What's something you are grateful for? Anything you are grateful for?"

"I don't know."

"Well, what could you be grateful for? If there was something you could be grateful for, what would it be?"

"I...our family. Our home. That's what comes to mind."

"Anything else? Even something small?"

"Like what?"

"Like the trees dancing in the wind. The sound of birds

chirping. Anything?"

"...I like cracks in rocks."

"That's a good one."

"...Smiles. Laughter."

"...There's a lot of be grateful for."

"There is."

"...You don't ever have to share with me the troubles that you're going through. And I will never force you to reveal your troubles. But what I would like for you to do is remember that there is always something to be grateful for. No matter how big or how small, there is always something to be grateful for. And if you can continue to keep in mind the things you are grateful for, then you'll never be disheartened by the challenges that you face."

"...Okay. Thank you."

"Anytime."

The Guardian and I were together, when the Guardian looked to me.

"What do you think is happening with our Child?" the Guardian asked me.

"I don't know," I answered.

"...Should we try to find out?"

"No, we shouldn't interfere when our Child doesn't want us to. We should just allow our Child to be. And eventually our Child will open up."

"That's going to be tough though. To ask us to watch our Child suffer."

"But we don't really have any other choice. If we were to interfere, then that would only form resistance between our Child and us, which would cause our Child to close off from us and we'd be further away from where we started. We should just allow our Child to be."

"Yeah, but it's still going to be difficult."

"Then why don't we look at this as an opportunity to grow?"

“How?”

“By not interfering, by allowing our Child to be, we are practicing self-restraint and patience, two disciplines that can aid one in growing.”

“...Okay, I'll hold back then.”

There was a small group of pupils around me.

“What is a problem?” one of the Pupils asked me.

“As I define a problem, a problem is an obstacle that needs to be overcome,” I answered.

“And why do we have problems?”

“Because without problems we wouldn't have solutions. And without problems, without challenges – which I consider to be a more suitable word – and solutions, how would we be able to grow...? It is because we are challenged to produce solutions that we are able to grow.”

“So, we require challenges?”

“Yes.”

“...What is our greatest problem?” another Pupil asked me.

“The greatest problem we have in life is that many believe that life is a problem. And this leads many of us to make what I consider to be our two greatest mistakes. The first mistake is when we believe that there is some answer out there for us that'll completely solve all our problems. And the second mistake is when we believe we have that answer.”

“Why are these our greatest mistakes?”

“Because making either of these mistakes only ever introduces conflict that doesn't serve anyone. When one believes there is an answer to life out there for them and they go on searching for this answer, then they only ever struggle, looking for an answer that isn't there, that doesn't exist and thus, producing conflict within themselves. And when one believes that they have an answer to life and another also believes that they have an answer to life that is opposed to

one's belief, then the two of them will fall into conflict with each other. And what makes these mistakes worse is that there can never be an answer to life. And because of this, those who either believe that there is an answer to life out there for them or believe that they have this answer will remain in conflict until they realize that there isn't an answer to life."

"Why can't there be an answer to life?"

"Because whatever answer we arrive at must have come from a question that we made up. And therefore, the answer, much like the question, is a travesty."

"Since everything is made up, then every question and every answer is made up?"

"Yes, very good."

"...What could one do when they feel like giving up?" another Pupil asked me.

"Well, what could one do...? They could give up, but would they like that? And do they feel that giving up will give them the best outcome...? Or they could continue on. Keep growing."

"Even if it becomes too much for them?"

"Isn't the overwhelming feeling that it is becoming too much for them an incentive to keep growing? Isn't every challenge that we face an incentive to produce a solution to that challenge?"

"Yes, it is."

"So, why not dream the dream? Why not persist? Why not keep growing?"

My Child came to me.

"Can we talk?" my Child asked me.

"Sure," I answered. "What is it?"

"...I haven't been...feeling well lately. I've just been upset. I won't get into details. But I don't want to feel this way anymore. I'm sick of it. And I was wondering, other than thinking of what we are grateful for, are there any other

ways for me to deal with what I'm feeling?"

"...Thinking of what we are grateful for can be difficult when one feels upset. Really, what has helped me when I have been upset is loving others."

"Loving others?"

"Yes. Give your love away."

"Why does that help?"

"Because giving attracts givers. Giving allows receiving. One can't receive without giving first. And so, when you give your love away, love will come back to you."

"I understand."

"But that also doesn't mean you should give your love away with the intention of receiving love. It's not about giving love in order to receive love. It's about loving. Just loving. Love to love. Love without any attachment to a return. That's what it's about. And by doing that, by just loving, love will come back to you."

"...Yeah. Thanks again. I really appreciate it."

"Thank you for sharing."

There was a gathering.

"Nothing lasts," I stated. "But what many don't realize is that this idea has two meanings. The first is that everything is impermanent, which is the meaning that most recognize. But the other meaning, the second meaning, is that nothing lasts. Nothing endures. Nothing is permanent. Nothing is the foundation from which everything grows. And it is because we have nothing that we can have everything; that we can have all these illusions that we play into, that we enjoy, that we experience. Without nothing, we can't have everything."

One of my Pupils approached me.

"May I ask you a question?" the Pupil asked me.

"Sure," I answered. "What is it?"

"I've had this question on my mind for so long and I haven't been able to realize the appropriate answer to this

question. And it's driving me insane. I...I'm lost...I..."

"What is the question?"

"What is...life? What is life?"

I just clapped.

Our Child brought home a Friend and the Guardian and I ate with our Child and our Child's Friend.

Later, our Child left with our Child's Friend and the Guardian and I were left alone.

"Our little Baby is growing up so fast," the Guardian said to me.

Smiles came to us.

A Pupil came to me.

"Hi," the Pupil said to me.

"Hi," I replied.

"Are you happy?"

"I am happy. And are you happy?"

"Sort of."

"Sort of?"

"I'm just being honest."

"Why are you sort of happy?"

"I've been trying to detach myself from my thoughts, but I can't and it's giving me grave concern."

"Why is it concerning you?"

"Because I'll suffer unless I can detach myself from thought."

"Are you trying to detach yourself from thought completely?"

"Yes. Why? Shouldn't I be doing that?"

"Well, we can't detach ourselves from thought completely because we think. It's something that we do. So, we shouldn't try to detach ourselves from thought completely."

"But then, we'll suffer."

"Yes, we will. But that is okay because we can't enjoy

life if we don't suffer occasionally."

"But I don't want to suffer."

"Then that should be an incentive to grow. Anything that we don't like to do is just an incentive to do what we'd like to do. And so, if one doesn't want to suffer, they should grow."

"But if we can't prevent suffering, then why grow? What's the point?"

"There is no point. Not really anyway. But growth does alleviate us from suffering and allows us to grow our fulfillment. And since we're always doing, we might as well grow."

"...I don't know how I feel about this. Honestly, I'd rather just not do anything."

"Well, one can't not participate in life. One is life. To not participate in life would mean to not exist. And why would we want that?"

"I don't know. I just don't want to suffer."

"...To detach ourselves from thought doesn't mean to detach ourselves from thought completely. It is about not letting our thoughts command us, but about being in command of our thoughts. It is about realizing that our thoughts are just words that are neither right nor wrong and not to play into them as if they are absolute, and not to play into the separateness of things, but to flow, to move gracefully."

"I see. So, in a way, it's about being human?"

"It's about being."

The sound of waves rolling.

Our Child came to the Guardian and me.

"Can we talk about something?" our Child asked us.

"Sure," the Guardian answered. "What is it?"

"I've been giving this a lot of thought and...once I graduate...I want to travel with my Friend."

“Oh, that sounds great.”

“You’re not upset?”

“No. We love having you here, but it’s your life. You should do what you feel will grow your fulfillment.”

“...Thank you. I don’t say this often, but I really appreciate everything you’ve done for me. You’ve given me an amazing childhood. And an amazing home. You’ve looked after me when I asked and when I didn’t. And you never let me down, even when I wasn’t so happy. You always listened. And I can’t thank you enough.”

“We love you. And we’ll always love you.”

“I love you both.”

We all embraced each other.

There was dancing, cheering, laughter, stories being shared and love being reciprocated at a celebration for our Child’s graduation.

Our Child was there before the Guardian and me.

“...Be safe,” the Guardian said to our Child.

“I will,” our Child replied.

“...I’ll miss you. I love you so much.”

“Love you too.”

Our Child and the Guardian hugged each other, whispered some words to each other and withdrew.

And then our Child faced me.

“...I’m so proud of you,” I said to our Child. “I’m proud of who you’ve become. And who you’ll continue to grow into. You’re so inspiring to me. And you’re going to do amazing things...really amazing things.”

“Thank you,” our Child replied. “That means a lot coming from you.”

Our Child and I gave each other a hug.

“I love you,” I whispered to our Child.

“I love you too,” our Child whispered to me.

And then we withdrew and faced each other.

“...Goodbye,” our Child said to us.
“Goodbye,” the Guardian said to our Child.
“Goodbye,” I said to our Child.
And so, our Child turned around and walked away.

The Guardian and I were sitting together in silence.

There was a gathering and I was standing there, before all my pupils, looking back at them.

My pupils kept looking back at me.

“...Occasionally, I might wander around...,” I said, “...not to get anywhere, but to just take it all in, embrace it, enjoy it. And it makes me feel how beautiful life is, how amazing and loving we all are, when we allow ourselves to be. And this was why I fell into what I do. I don’t have to do what I do. It isn’t something that I need to do. No one needs to do anything. But I just do it. I do it. I...love life. I love people. And I decided and committed to sharing that love, not because I had to. I just love life and people. And there’s no great reason for sharing that love. I just do it. That’s it. And what this love that I share has helped me realized is that there’s no great secret to reaching one’s dream. There’s just the decision to love and the commitment to that decision. It doesn’t need to be more complicated than that. It can really be that simple. So, love. Simply love. And watch what happens.”

A Pupil approached me.

“Hi,” the Pupil said to me.

“Hi,” I replied. “Are you happy?”

“Yes, I am. How about you? Are you happy?”

“Yes, I am, thank you for asking. What may I do for you?”

“I have a question that I’ve been pondering for a while and I was wondering if you would like to explore the question with me.”

“Okay. What is the question?”

“Why are we here?”

“Why does there have to be a reason for us being here?”

“But doesn’t everything happen for a reason.”

“In that case, the reason why we’re here is because we grew out of nothing. Everything grows out of nothing.”

“But isn’t there some greater reason for why we’re here?”

“Why does there need to be a greater reason for why we’re here?”

“I don’t know. But mightn’t there be a greater reason?”

“What’s a greater reason?”

“A reason that is beyond us.”

“But mustn’t the space that is beyond us exist in order for us to go beyond?”

“It must.”

“And since the space that is beyond us exists, mustn’t that space be a part of existence?”

“Yes.”

“Then how can we go beyond when the space that is beyond is a part of existence? How can we go beyond existence...? There can’t be a greater reason because all things are happening in the experience that we express as ‘the here and now.’ There can’t be a greater reason because ‘the here and now’ is everything.”

“But why is there something instead of nothing?”

“Well, what is nothing? Can we define nothing?”

“Yes. Nothing means that there isn’t anything.”

“But since we can define nothing, isn’t nothing something?”

“I guess, it is.”

“And if can’t define nothing, then how can we define something?”

“I don’t know.”

“One implies the other. If we can’t define nothing, then we can’t define something. And vice versa.”

“Yeah.”

“...Why do you feel that you need to find some greater reason for us being here?”

“I just...wish there was. I don’t know. The universe is plenty, but sometimes I long for more, even though that usually leads me to making silly decisions.”

“...Desire makes us suffer. But desire also makes us human. We wouldn’t be human if we didn’t desire. So, there’s nothing wrong with desire. And as bad as it might seem to say, there’s nothing wrong with suffering either. Without suffering we wouldn’t be able to love. Suffering implies love. And love implies suffering. We can’t have love unless we have suffering. And because of this, suffering can lead us to love. Suffering can be an incentive to love, so long as we allow suffering to be that incentive to love.”

“...I see. Thank you.”

“Thank you.”

There I was, wandering around, when suddenly, my heart constricted and my breath escaped me, causing me to clench my chest, fall down, close my eyes and fade into the darkness.

As my eyes slowly opened, there was a blurred figure presented before me, only for my vision and hearing to gradually clear and reveal the Guardian, sitting beside me, looking back at me.

“Hey,” the Guardian said to me.

“Hey,” I replied.

“How are you feeling?”

“Okay. What happened?”

“You had a fall.”

“A fall?”

“Yes.”

“What caused my fall?”

“The Doctor still isn’t sure yet. But I believe the Doctor

will figure it out. You have a good Doctor.”

“We’ll see.”

A stranger approached the Guardian and me.

“Hi,” the stranger said to us.

“Hi,” the Guardian replied.

“Are we feeling better today?”

“Yeah, I believe so.”

“... We haven’t met,” the stranger said to me. “I’m your Doctor.”

“Nice to meet you,” I replied. “How are you? Are you happy today?”

“I’m okay.”

“Just okay?”

“Yeah.”

“Why are you just okay?”

“... I’ve been told you’re like this, looking out for others, despite the situation you’re in.”

“It’s good to realize that’s what others think of when they think of me.”

“... Have you figured out what happened?” the Guardian asked the Doctor.

“Yes, I have,” the Doctor answered. “And... to put it directly, your heart is tiring. It’s just slowing down. And it’s simply one of those things that happens when we get to your age.”

“Are you saying that I’m dying?” I asked the Doctor.

“I am, unfortunately.”

“Is there anything we can do?” the Guardian asked the Doctor.

“We can give you some medication to ease the process.”

“... But?”

“But that’s the most we can do. I’m sorry to share this news with you.”

“My death isn’t your fault,” I said to the Doctor.

“Still willing to look out for me, even though I’m the

barer of bad news.”

“It’s what I do. Do you have any idea how long I have to live?”

“It can range depending on a patient’s age, history, and many other factors.”

“How long do patients in my position usually live on for?”

“Usually, not long. Honestly, I recommend that you say your goodbyes. You can never know what will happen.”

“Then, let it be.”

Many came to visit me: the Guardian, my Child, my pupils, the Archer, the Shopkeeper, the Shopkeeper’s Friend, my Protégé, the Sovereign, many guards, the General, many soldiers, the Grand Inquisitor, many subordinates, the Dictator, many warriors, the Noble Warrior, the Chancellor, and many more, to share their gratitude and love.

My Protégé came to me.

“Are you feeling better today?” my Protégé asked me.

“I am,” I answered. “How are you? Are you happy today?”

“Yes, but I would like you to get better.”

“Thank you. I’m doing everything I can.”

“That’s good to hear. Can I get you anything?”

“No, I’m good for now. But thank you again.”

“...I...would like to do something. But I would like your blessing first, before I commit to this.”

“What is it that you’d like to do?”

“I’d like to develop your teachings into texts and share them with others.”

“It doesn’t matter whether my voice lives on or not.”

“It might not, but your teachings might continue to help others through their struggles.”

“...I will give you my blessing, but only if you’ll develop my teachings in such a way that helps others to

realize that I don't hold the answer to life, that no one holds the answer to life, that there can't be an answer to life and that my teachings are about helping them come to their own realizations, that my teachings are about serving them and not mandating a set of rules to abide to. That is important to me."

"Why is that important to you?"

"Because that will help others to come to the greatest realization one can come to."

"And what is the greatest realization one can come to?"

"...The greatest realization does not come from an answer that one reaches at the end of a crusade, but comes from stripping away everything they believe they know. It is only by tearing down these walls that one will arrive at a moment where they just feel, and are enlightened because of it. That moment is their awakening."

"...I agree. I'll do as you ask."

"Then you have my blessing."

Aching, stiffness, coughing and convulsions were happening to my body, but I was still smiling.

The Guardian came to me.

"Hi," the Guardian said to me. "Are you feeling a bit better today?"

"I'm happy," I answered. "I'm alive. And I have so much to be grateful for."

"That's good. But...are you in less pain today?"

"I am. And how about you? How are you feeling?"

"I'd like for you to be healthy, to be back to when you weren't sick and it was just you, me and our Child, happy together."

"That would be nice. How are you handling all this...? Are you coping?"

"No. Not really. I don't...I don't want you to go."

"...I not leaving you. Not really anyway. I'll be

around.”

“But being a memory is not the same as being with you.”

“...It’s not. But...without death, how can there be birth? Birth implies death. And in turn, death implies birth. And so, to be, we go through the process of birth, life and death, much like how a story has a beginning, a middle and an end. And in this way, without birth and death, how can we live? How can we be? Without birth and death, we wouldn’t be able to be. We wouldn’t be able to embrace life. We wouldn’t be able to celebrate life. We wouldn’t be able to love. Without birth and death, we wouldn’t be able to love. Death enables love.”

“...And it’s why we’ll always love. I love you so much.”

“I love you too.”

Life was the same as it always was, when suddenly, everything gradually blurred and I faded back into nothing.

Life lived on.

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