

*The
Magic
Mirror*

*Twelve Allegories
from a
Neglected Reality*

*The Magic Mirror:
Twelve Allegories from a Neglected Reality*

1993 Paul Stephens

*Dedicated to all those who find
themselves, whether hero or
villain, walking amongst
the pages that follow.*

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*"If you ever hear me calling out,
And if you've been by paupers crowned,
Between the worlds of men and make believe
I can be found."*

Dan Fogelberg

Introduction

The words of '70's pop-star Cat Stevens ring often in my mind: "There are no words I can use. Because the meanings still leave for you to choose, and I couldn't stand to let them be abused by you." Communication is at best a difficult endeavor, especially when we desire to express the inexpressible; our thoughts, feelings, or spirit. Each word we choose has been spoken and heard countless times before, a situation that locks their meaning into prejudicial convention. How then may we escape this judgment? How may we express the unconventional?

I was feeling particularly trapped in a prison of words, longing for a way to make my meanings clear, when I realized once again that the solution is always revealed within the problem. To expect another to entirely understand what I wish to convey would be asking them to give up their own perspective in favor of mine. This not only approaches impossibility, it borders on the criminal. What theft could be more intolerable than the theft of another's independence of thought? This realization left me with two alternatives: to withhold my ideas, or to place them in a context free from imposition and open to the hearer's own perception. Obviously I chose the latter. The context? Stories.

Everyone understands stories, for they exist on a multitude of levels. On the surface we will find the simple unfolding of the story line, and this is enough for some people. Closer attention might reveal occurrences or ideas from our own history, and the gateway to true knowledge is, after all, experience. When one is reminded of a past experience through the reading of a story, he meets himself walking among the lines on the page. The greater one digs within a story, the deeper one goes, and the deeper one goes, the closer he comes to truth. For truth, after all, is not the verification of facts, but rather the discovery of the everlasting.

Each of the allegorical tales that follow began with an idea I felt a need to express or a situation I could not find the means to resolve. Most were problems that plagued my ever-active mind. Once the ideas were placed in the context of experience, through characters and circumstances, the stories

basically wrote themselves. It is my hope that as you read them, you will indeed become closer to your own truth. In fact, I hope that you find yourself not reading, but rather experiencing them.

I shall not consider sharing with you the conflicting ideas that served as the catalyst for each allegory, nor will I hint at the root of the symbols therein, for this would only bid you a clouded picture of my own truth. Furthermore, I will not offer an explanation of the ambiguous subtitle, as it is your journey to discover your own "neglected realities." As I can only attempt to speak truthfully of my own, I dream of leading you to the discovery of your analogies, symbols, or realities; indeed to your own everlasting truth. What began as a quest to share my situation has therefore become a quest to lead you to yours, for "the meanings still leave for you to choose." My words may not be able to create the empathy I originally sought, but if my dream has come true, I might just be lucky enough to meet you somewhere, walking along the lines of the pages that follow.

*The
Mirror
of
Truth*

In the heart of the city there was a bistro where people would come from far and wide to revel in merriment with strangers and friends alike. At the heart of the establishment was a manager who longed to create a place where people could come and share their dreams and wishes with those around them. He wished for a place of inspiration, a constructive alternative to the bars in the area where people went to escape their lives. Here he wanted to create a place where people could meet themselves face to face while enjoying the encouragement of others.

One day the manager heard of a special "Mirror of Truth" which enables one to see his image exactly as it is. The mirror had the power to reveal the reflection of the true character of the person who gazed into it. He knew in an instant that he must do whatever was necessary to obtain the mirror. With this wonderful addition his patrons would be assured of receiving honest insight into their lives. Affirmations would abound and people would come from far and wide to consult the magical image. He pooled his resources and took a chance, purchasing the expensive piece of glass.

Upon hanging the mirror he heard it speak as he wiped it clean. "You are a caring man, risking your own security so that others might see themselves more clearly. Others who have tried to purchase me reflected images of greed and fortune-hunting."

Excitement filled the man as he thought of the possibilities that were before him. He could reach out to people like never before. A celebration was surely in order. He held a gala heralding the arrival of his new acquisition, and all the regulars were there alongside others who had heard the news. It was quite an event indeed. The first to try the mirror was a doctor who was respected throughout the city for his work. Walking up to the mirror he asked, "what can you tell me about this face?"

"What is it that you do?" the mirror asked.

"I am a physician," the man answered "I attend to the ill children of this fair city."

"Yes, you are that, and a fine example you are. You see that all our children are given a chance at happiness and health through your generous service."

The manager was overjoyed, for he knew his dream had come true. What an addition this "Mirror of Truth" would be. Pleased with his decision and feeling quite comfortable, he went to his office and allowed his patrons to carry on.

A young woman stepped up to the mirror and asked, "what is it you see?"

The mirror asked again, "What is it that you do?"

"I am an actress?"

"What is it that you do?"

She was confused. "I told you, I am an actress."

"You spend your hours watching movies and your money comes as you wait tables at night. My dear, you are a fine waitress."

"But I am only waiting tables until my career takes off..."

"Actresses act, you are a waitress."

The woman was offended by the mirror's blunt remarks. As she stormed out the door, giggles sifted through the crowd. Many had suspected her to be lazy and full of empty dreams.

Next a local businessman moved to the mirror. He thought of himself as a beacon of goodness in the community as he belonged to every charitable organization imaginable. The mirror asked him the question posed to the previous two patrons.

"I am an accountant," answered the man, "but that is merely my means to support my family and those less fortunate in our community."

"It is true that you offer your finances to those around you, but your ego is your master. If not for the adoration you receive and the medallions of honor, your gifts would not come through."

The man was truly hurt, for no one gave the money and time that he offered. He wondered if anyone should truly care why he gives; the fact is, he gives. He moved to a corner table and sat in puzzled silence.

A bit more reluctantly the next person moved to the mirror, a young lady

who attended the nearby university. In an attempt to avoid the pattern of the previous two who had been offended, she spoke first.

"Mirror, I profess to have no special claims, so I humble myself to you. I am a mere student with dreams of greater worlds to conquer once my studies are complete."

"My dear, why do you long for greater worlds when you are overwhelmed by the one you live in now? Can you be sure your dreams are not a mask you wear while you mark time? Do you surround yourself with acquaintances and call them friends? Dream you are a princess while you wear a pauper's guise, and you'll find you are a pauper in the end. Only when you fly will you be an eagle. Take your head out of the sand and then you may see the sky."

She did not remain at the mirror long enough to answer its questions. She hid her face from her friends and began to weep, embarrassed to show her outburst before them. They assured her that she was worthy of her dreams and promised to remain by her side as she lived her every desire. She retreated into herself, wondering why she felt threatened by their insistence on holding her to her dreams. She spent the remainder of the night in a quiet state of confusion.

The pattern continued for hours and hours as countless people consulted the magic reflection. Some went away elated, while most went away confused, bewildered, even angry. But each noticed a difference when returning home for the night. Those who had a bad experience found it difficult to look in their own mirrors, though they had done it thousands of times before. Still their remained a fear of gazing upon the image in that familiar glass, and each time they saw their reflection they looked with but half their heart.

As weeks went by, the manager noticed the patrons avoiding the wall where the mirror hung. In fact, the attendance dropped dramatically and the tables near the mirror almost always remained empty. Talk in the bistro was subdued and casual and the festive atmosphere was all but gone. The manager could not help but blame the mirror, though it seemed peculiar that not a single person had registered a complaint. Still, it seemed he had no choice but to remove it from the wall.

As he approached the mirror he was puzzled, for he could not begin to understand the mirror's lack of tact in dealing with his patrons. Had it not

itself praised him for wanting to help and encourage them? He decided to pose the question to the mirror itself, but the mirror refused to answer. It was incapable of introspection, for it could only comment on the images it reflected. As the man started to take the mirror from the wall he had an idea. He took the magic "Mirror of Truth" into the storage room where he found several other mirrors that had been taken down years earlier when the bistro had been remodeled. He positioned the mirrors in such a manner as to allow the magical one to see its own reflection without the ability to focus on any of the other mirrors. He asked the mirror to describe what it saw.

"You are a mirror of truth," he answered. "You see the reality of the image cast before you."

"Why does this 'Mirror of Truth' judge others so harshly?" the manager inquired.

"Most mirrors allow those who gaze at them to see any reflection they choose, fearing not the image before them for it is of their own choosing. This mirror is one of truth for it forces them to see what is really there. This magical mirror does not pass judgment, it only reflects it."

The manager took the mirror from the bistro and placed an ad in all the papers in an attempt to sell it. By this time its reputation was widespread and his ads fostered no inquiries at all. Pondering what to do with the mirror, he remembered the words it had said.

"Judgment." That was the key. "This magical mirror does not pass judgment, it reflects it."

With this revelation the manager knew just what to do. He gave it as a gift to three elderly ladies who had lived a stupendous life of absolute love and endless service to mankind with never a thought for self. They were most grateful for his generosity and had him hang it in their private quarters. For the remainder of their lives they dressed before it each morning and night.

The mirror never spoke another word.

*The
Magic
Coin*

*L*ong ago in a land of wonder and joy there lived a mystical young lady who loved to create things of beauty. She always felt great joy expressing her soul through her art and no muse was ignored in her quest for beauty. Heavenly songs filled the air, pictures adorned the walkways, and beautiful silver sculptures marked the path she walked each day. Anything and everything she encountered served to inspire her marvelous creations, for she found nothing but beauty in everything she saw.

The village people marveled at her work, singing her songs, posting her paintings, and reciting the verses she left at their doorstep. Filled with her beauty, the town was a marvel, and all of its inhabitants beamed with unbound joy. Of all her creations, none was as dear to them as the silver fountain she had built at the entry to her humble homestead. The statue at its center was an exact physical likeness of her, and people came from miles around to toss silver coins into the rippling waters, feeling their wishes come true through the power of her love.

Collecting the coins late each night brought her the material necessities of life, yet she felt sad at her patrons' claims. They truly believed that the silver statue that graced the fountain was a likeness of her, though she knew that this could not be true.

"I am not a body but a spirit," she proclaimed in solitary meditation. "How can they believe that this is me? ...and they call my creations love, but how can this be so? How can they find love in a cold material form such as my body?"

Tortured by the emptiness of their perceptions she continued to create works of art, each treasure more lovely than the last. Each night after the last reveler had retreated into the darkness, work completed, she would go quietly to the fountain and collect the silver coins, storing them in a canister until they

were needed for her sustenance.

One night, feeling weary from a hard day's work, she came out of the palace earlier than usual and noticed a person still at the fountain's side. She felt a strange presence about the grounds as she watched from the hedgerow behind the fountain's pond. Shedding his clothing he entered the pond in front of the statue and submerged himself in the water. He stayed below the surface for quite some time, but in her watchful silence she never felt fear for his life. She understood through a divine intuition that no harm could befall him while he was in the presence of her wondrous creation.

After what seemed an eternity, a bright flash from beneath the water's surface caught her attention. Lifting his hand from the water, the stranger illuminated the night. He had transformed what had been an ordinary silver coin cast forth by one of the multitude of revelers into a radiant and magical light. Rising from the water he ascended on air to the statue above the pond. As he placed the light from his hand on the statue's body, she felt a silver coin against her own as the night returned to order and the stranger disappeared into a foggy mist.

Touched by the display she'd witnessed, she felt no need for material reward this evening and retired to her chambers in wonder. For hours on end she stared out the window overlooking the fountain trying to sort out the feelings racing inside her. She had always been considered to be the essence of love by all who knew her work, for her art revealed its grace to them, but never before the stranger's touch had she herself felt the truth of this love. She knew he alone understood the essence of her spirit, until this moment believed to exist only on an unseen plane. His mystical touch had brought it for the first time into her body.

As she began to prepare for bed she felt no need for her usual ritual of counting the evening's collection. The afterglow of her sensual experience instead sustained her. As she removed her clothing to retire for the evening, a silver coin fell to the ground. She knew she'd have to do something special with this magical coin, for it must not be cast into the canister of ordinary coins where it would be mindlessly spent for earthly goods. Each morning thereafter as she dressed, she placed the silver coin beneath her garments very near her heart. As long as she felt the coin against her, she felt the presence of this true

love radiating throughout her body.

Her art flourished like never before and the world became her showplace. With a newfound wholeness of body and soul, her love was spread to every corner of the globe through her gifts of the muse. As her music began to play in every country, and her paintings adorned every museum, her books and poetry graced every library across the globe. As her sculptures stood at the gates of the noblest mansions and cathedrals, and the whole world danced her mystical dance, the stranger still resided in the mist, for he had sacrificed his bodily manifestation so that she might learn to live and love within her own. Even so, a sense of freedom and loving was not lost on his soul for his spirit resided in each of her works of art.

At the height of love's fulfillment one fateful summer night, the lovely artist prepared once more for bed. Repeating her evening ritual, she removed her garments and reached for the magic coin that fell once more to the floor. She picked it up and placed it in its usual nocturnal resting place, a beautiful fruit-filled cup above a woven heart. But when the morning sun met her lovely face through her window, it failed to wake her from her darkened sleep, for the cup above the heart lay empty.

In the darkness of the evening during her deep sleep, Reality had paid her a visit disguised in earthly ware. He hid his face with the mask of jealousy, and his heart with the breastplate of judgment. His lower body was draped in a robe of fear. Adorned in his cloak of darkness, Reality snatched away the coin that Purity had cast, placing it among all the other coins in the canister.

Upon awaking the morning after, the artist rose from her bed. For reasons unknown she never consulted the cup above the heart, choosing instead to dawn her working attire. Going outside to draw the morning's water, she looked upon the fountain's pond. The first visitor this morning seemed strangely familiar, yet she knew she'd never seen him before. She looked with a bemused gaze at the peculiar actions he performed. He entered the water, fully clothed and waded toward the statue. Upon reaching it he struggled to climb to the top. Removing a coin from its bosom he descended the sculpture and made his way to the pond's edge. Out of all that she had witnessed this morn she couldn't help noticing the sadness that marked his face.

The sight was simply too strange for her to ponder and there was much

work to be done, so she decided not to tarry any longer. Taking her dish of water she turned and walked away, puzzled by a strange feeling within. The emptiness she had always known was somehow challenged by the faint suggestion that something warm had been inside her soul. It was as if she had dreamt the night before that love had inhabited her heart. Snapping to her senses, she knew this couldn't be real and retreated to the four walls of her studio, where she began once more the toil of forging a craft which others called love.

*The
Gopher's
Other
World*

*T*here once was a gopher who loved to burrow deep into the ground. He took great pride in his ability to dig fanciful tunnels of intricate design. Though his path was not always an easy one, he dug and he dug, often having to perform most unusual tasks to make his way through the various materials he encountered far beneath the earth's surface.

Proud of his work, the gopher longed for someone to share his unique underground world of magic and goodness, but it appeared no other gopher was willing to go to such extremes. Then one glorious day he met another gopher who seemed to share his fascination with the possibilities which lie beyond normal gopher endeavors. He invited this insightful friend to enter his world.

When they reached the opening of his vast tunnel, the other gopher commented on the neatness of his craft, noting the perfection with which the mouth of the burrow cut into the frail topsoil. Peeking inside, his new companion marveled at the first room, a cavern that projected freedom and a sense of openness.

"Such a beautiful use of space," his friend commented.

"Oh, but you must see more," answered the gopher, "the best is yet to come. Please come below."

"Well, I really must be going, I've other places to go, but I am truly fascinated with your beautiful work."

The gopher was crushed, for his new companion had seen nothing but the beginning, the ordinary, a sight that might be present in even the most mundane of gopher homes. If anyone was capable of seeing beyond the limitations of a cliché gopher existence he was sure it would have been his special friend, but this gopher only took the time to see what he'd likely seen a thousand plus a thousand times more.

Saddened by his position, alone against the narrow focus of gopher-hood, he retreated to the room he'd built in the side of a piece of stone beneath the surface. It was here he went when he had magic to perform, and today he felt a great need to transcend his reality. In meditation he barked out his condition.

"Oh keeper of dreams, author of my deliverance, help me to find a better world where I can be free to share my marvelous discoveries without fear of persecution or rejection. Here in this world, my fellow gophers fail to see the possibilities that lie beneath them, choosing only to see the surface. Once they hit a bit of bedrock they see it as a boundary, a barrier telling them where their journey must end. They seek the comfort of easy digging, but they have failed to see the wonder that comes from challenging these walls. The riches to be gained by conquering the toughest of adversaries will never be theirs, and I am weary of hoarding my treasures. I want to share what I have gained, but no one will accept my unconventional gifts. I've heard talk of another world, beneath the surface of the great ocean where intelligent creatures swim in freedom. Please allow me to transcend my sod filled world and splash in a vast sea as a limitless dolphin among other limitless dolphins in a boundless ocean of discovery."

With this the gopher found his spirit rising from the depths of the earth. Splashing into the cool waters, he began to see through dolphin's eyes.

He swam for years among the dolphins learning their world. He found it easy to master their system and began to challenge its conventions as he had challenged those of the gopher world. It was not long at all until he had discovered a world of infinite beauty far below the surface of the waters. As soon as this world became his own, he once again felt the pain of loneliness and wanted to share his discoveries. Remembering why he had entered the watery world in the first place, he took a chance and sought that special dolphin who possessed the potential to understand the unconditional world he had enjoyed.

On a wondrous springtime morning, he believed he found this special someone and invited her to join him in his infinite world. Intrigued by the very idea, she agreed to see his marvelous place, for she was one who seldom turned her back on a new experience.

When they arrived at the place where his world began, she commented about the beauty of the fish that swam about. The warmth of the water caught

her attention as well and she felt a certain sense of belonging.

Asking her to collect a deep breath, he led the way as they began to dive. Deeper and deeper they submerged until she began to feel a touch of discomfort, for she'd never challenged her capacity for air to this extent. Furthermore, it was getting ever darker and she began to fear the inadequacy of her sonar in such unfamiliar territory. Overcome with fear, she ended the plunge and raced to the safety of the water's surface. Breathing deeply she felt the sense of freedom that comes from one's deliverance from impending disaster. Quietly in the depths, the lonely dolphin did not feel such relief; for once again his heart had been broken. He had trusted openly that his friend's insightful dolphin mind would be free from the limitations of its underwater world. Free it was not. It appeared to be prisoner to the idea of walls and barriers, much like the earthen dungeon he himself had recently escaped. Once again he felt the cold hard walls of his gopher world close in around him.

He felt sure that his chosen dolphin friend would realize through her intuition that there was no need for worry where they were headed. Time did not exist, so one could hold his breath forever, and one would have no need for sight or sound in a world with no obstacles or barriers to negotiate. It didn't matter now, for he found himself once again alone and he longed once more for another chance in another world.

He remembered a friend he'd made in his life on the land, a beautiful turtledove who flew in peace. "I'll bet the sky has no limits, for it goes on forever, and I've seen so many of its creatures fly high out of sight. I'll surely find a soul there to share a world of such endless freedom." With this thought he suddenly felt himself falling in space with air rushing all about him. Looking through a dove's eyes he saw his wings, extended them, and found himself floating freely in the breeze.

After many days of flying he realized he was ready to move to higher heights and faster speeds. He soared through the clouds and into the heavens, discovering new and better worlds like none he'd ever imagined. With this discovery came the pain that now had come hauntingly familiar. He longed to share his marvelous world with other birds.

Remembering his failures with his earthly and seaward companions, he felt fear beneath his breastplate, but his quest was far too noble to allow the

possibility of another failure to stand in his way. "Besides," he thought, "I've found such beautiful creatures in the skies. Surely I'll find one who is not crippled by convention."

Once he'd met that special bird his fear subsided, for he knew his moment had finally arrived. This bird before him now taught him so many new and wonderful secrets. Never before had he imagined that his quest would see himself in the role of student. He'd only imagined teaching others his amazing discoveries.

Together they flew for days on end, wing tip to wing tip, taking in the marvels of the air. But as days turned to weeks, the dove began to feel restless, for although his new companion showed him many new things in the world of birds, never had they made an attempt to challenge the heights he had discovered. Finally his unrest grew too great and he had to confront his newfound teacher.

"You have shown me so many wonderful new tricks and discoveries, but I have grown weary of one fact. Why is it you never fly above the clouds? Might there be even more to find at newer levels?"

The dove answered, "Why would I challenge the reality handed me by my ancestors? Even the least of the doves knows where he belongs. To fly into the clouds is to suffer great turbulence. One might even become beaten by the winds to the point of injury. Why, one might even plunge to his death. Besides, even if one survived this thrashing, the air is thin. Working harder and receiving less air would mean sure disaster for even the strongest bird. There's so much beauty to be found here in our safe existence, why challenge destiny on the chance of finding more of the same somewhere else?"

Hearing this, he knew not whether to challenge his friend's idea or to quietly accept it and go about his business. Had he not been flying in the role of pupil for these past weeks? Would challenging his teacher's limiting beliefs display something other than the intense love he felt for his friend? After a moment of thought, he felt he must share his insight with this wise bird, for it had grown apparent that the chances of any of the other birds challenging the boundaries of their world were indeed scarce.

Restlessly he spoke. "Friend who has taught me so much about your world, I have found another world above the clouds and I wish to share it with

you. It was the turbulent winds that you fear which propelled me to these new dimensions, and the thinning of the air that taught me to breath with greater efficiency. Learning this economy made me slow down the very hands of time and gave me unbound energy as I learned to use each fraction of my fuel to its utmost potential. You are a wise and respected bird. You can learn this too and bring it back to the flock."

His words shocked his friend and this discord created an obvious strain in their relationship, but not wanting to leave this special bird, he chose to stay and continue the lessons. With time, the differences in their ideas created an unspoken dissension. The journey he had dreamed about could not be compromised for it was built on the institution of limitless potential. No longer wishing to accept the dove's limited view of reality, he knew it was time to move on.

Flying alone now, the dove wondered where he might go to fulfill his prophecy. He had tunneled his way to the depths of the earth, conquered the depths of the sea, and now he had soared high into the heavens. In each of these places, the creatures that called it home were content with only seeing the most obvious of things. With sky, land, and sea exhausted, he wondered where he might turn. Then, in a breath of inspiration he recalled a story from his childhood.

Once he had been told of a creature who inhabited the earth who appeared to be a superior creature, for not only did this creature have a body and a mind with which to negotiate his world, he had a spirit which enabled him to see beyond his existence. "This is for me!" exclaimed the dove, and he changed into a man.

Living as a human being opened his eyes to so many new possibilities. He learned a new language that could be written as well as spoken. This seemed to be the key to his new quest. If he could write his ideas, they could be distributed to all the people, and surely someone would read them and understand, or at the very least, become curious enough to seek him out. Filled with excitement, he set out on his quest. When his writings were complete, the distribution began. Soon he began to hear from those around him. Critics praised and critics condemned, and people of all kinds wrote to him with a variety of ideas and comments. At first this was very exciting for him, for the

large response was bound to reveal to him that long awaited mate to share his world.

Days, weeks, months, then years passed, with many people passing in and out of his life. Each person who seemed to appreciate and understand his story was invited to his doorstep, and a special few were invited inside his heart. He talked briefly with some and in depth with others, including the one whom he trusted could share his dream. The more he shared his idea with those around him, the greater his knowledge of human existence became. It was that very fact that signaled his destiny! One morning, his closest of friends appeared at his door. Entering, his friend found nothing but a note.

"Do not fear, for I am alive and well in the world of limitless being. I explored the worlds of gophers, dolphins, and doves, and made my way at last to a world that promised a chance for a spiritual life. Upon seeing the creatures willfully refuse this glorious gift, I learned that I could no longer live amongst mankind as one of you. Whenever you see a creature of any kind challenging the walls before him, it could be me. In each of the three animal worlds I visited, I found creatures afraid to dig, swim, or fly beyond their ingrained comfort zones. They failed to realize potential realities simply out of their refusal to see them. This hurt me as I saw them lock themselves in an existence far short of their potential. Living among mankind revealed a greater tomb. At least these creatures left the unknown alone. Man refuses to explore his possibilities as well, but it is not because he refuses to travel to places unknown. It is because he has already labeled these places prior to his arrival, bringing with him the conditions of his limited world. The other worlds I visited had depths and heights unspoiled by prejudice, for creatures that were not yet ready to discover new horizons did not trespass in areas unknown. So I have gone back to the life free of judgment, and alone I shall conquer these pure unknowns. I hope that within your human reality you can one day learn to do the same."

*The
Forbidden
Union*

Once upon a time there lived a pure and true Love. This Love was bound by no conditions and no limitations. Feeling the awesome power of his most unusual gift, the Love decided to set out to find one worthy of its reward. The Love traveled far and wide seeking one whose heart was boundless and free, one within whom he could reside.

The search lasted for centuries, until one day Love set his sights on a green and blue planet named Earth. Love did not speak in words, but the vision he expressed could be translated to mean, "I am most leery of this ball in the cosmos, for it bears a name. To name anything immediately robs it of its truth. I wonder if its inhabitants also bear such labels?"

Making his ascent on the ball, Love was most appalled. Not only did the inhabitants bear labels, but all creatures both living and motionless were bound in a web of rigid conditions. Each object was named, and each carried a wealth of stereotypes. How could Love find one who was worthy in such a place? Nevertheless, the gruesome state of this planet intrigued Love, for he recognized a great challenge in finding one worthy of him in such an environment. Eagerly he pressed on.

The great ball of illumination which appeared to sustain life on the planet - as well as mark a peculiar creature known as time - stood still as the planet made its way around it. The planet made this rotation three hundred sixty-five and one quarter times to complete a cycle, and this completion occurred better than thirty times during the duration of Love's quest. Finally, amidst the turmoil appeared a fair maiden quite radiant and beautiful. As the earth completed more than seven hundred revolutions, the worthiness of the creature became clear.

Love began to think the unthinkable. He could give himself entirely to this earthly wonder, making his essence appear in her. Never before had he even remotely considered taking on a physical manifestation, but she appeared

to be the one worthy of making this union a supreme gesture. Imagining the concept of combining the awesome power of Love with a visible means of expression thrilled him greatly.

As he made his approach, her beauty became more evident. Even Love was overwhelmed by her presence. The closer he got, the more he recognized the potential of this union. His dream was within his grasp, it could work! Love could truly imagine living inside such a marvelous body, creating an omnipotent being capable of ordering a confused world.

As he closed in, his excitement reigned over the whole Earth. The moment of truth was near. The Earth would truly never be the same. An unconditional being! Never before was it even a possibility, yet now it was as near as his next breath. Moving closer, he heard her voice inviting him in. Nearer, nearer, nearer, the dream was to become real! Suddenly, at the instant prior to the magical union, at the height of this bonding into one, the earth stood still on its axis, for what would it be without its limitations? The very idea of an omnipotent, unconditional being threatened the planet's reign and it struck with a vengeance. Rocks pounded rocks and the seas began to moan. Twisters ravaged the ground and hurricanes beat upon the shores. Upon seeing Love flee on the winds of a great monsoon, the sun kissed the moon, signaling to all the Earth's inhabitants that the laws of his domain would not change. Its work had been done.

What a close call that fateful day, for where would the planet be without its rigid laws and principles? And how could Love have survived within these prison walls?

Escaping with his soul intact, Love breathed a sigh of relief, but with his next breath he experienced a sensation he'd never before known. For the first time he recognized a presence he had heard Earthlings describe as grief. He recalled the beautiful one, for he was sure even now that she was worthy to bear him. What would happen to her now, so close to having it all only to see it disappear?

Looking back as he fled the scene, his mind was put at ease, for he saw his chosen maiden still in the field where their union was to occur. She danced a dance of freedom and delight. He realized she would suffer no remorse for losing what might have been, for like the others, she was a daughter of the earth

and all its boundaries. How could she possibly regret missing something she'd never truly known?

*The
Trail
of
Paradox*

*P*aradox walked along a country road paying visits to anyone he encountered. He was a master of the human condition and wished only to share his insight with his fellow stewards in hopes of making their lives a bit more productive.

The first stop on his journey was a plantation where a farmer worked alone in bountiful fields. Paradox approached the man and began a pleasant conversation. The farmer showed him his beautiful garden and plentiful crops ready for market. He told him of the good fortune the weather had bestowed, as harvest was at hand. After several minutes, Paradox was able to see inside the farmer's soul and detected a great deal of stress.

"Excuse me if I'm being overly personal," Paradox inquired, "but I can't help noticing a great deal of unrest in your heart. Would I be prying to ask you why you feel such pressure?"

"It's very simple," the farmer explained, "I live with the fear of every man who ever held the land as his means of support. What if I am unable to feed my family?"

"Sir, I don't mean to be pretentious or to overstep my position, but I am a tremendous judge of the reality of the mind. It seems to me foolish to fear hunger when you stand amongst as beautiful a crop as I have ever seen."

The farmer looked at Paradox thoughtfully. "Thank you sir, it seems you make a good point. I will take your comment into consideration."

With this, Paradox left the farmer to his work and set once more on his way. The next person he saw was a young man pumping water from a well. He walked through the gate and into the man's yard and introduced himself as he approached the well.

"Would you like a drink of fresh water?" the man offered, holding out a

tin cup.

"Why thank you my kind sir, I don't mind if I do." Drinking the water, Paradox felt refreshed. "It is cool and refreshing water, thank you."

"That it is Mr. Paradox, this has been a most productive well. Each morning as I fearfully prime the pump, the water begins to flow easily."

"You said you primed the pump in fear," Paradox questioned, "why would this be?"

"That is really quite simple sir, I thought you said you were knowledgeable about man's emotions. This well is our only source of water. What would I do if it did not produce?"

"But sir, you said yourself it has been a most dependable well. Wouldn't it be a waste of precious peace of mind to worry about something that has been such a stable gift in your life?"

"I've never thought of it that way before. I do indeed despise inefficient use of my emotions. I shall examine my actions closely."

Paradox once again traveled on his way, hoping to make one more visit before stopping for his evening meal. He came upon an elderly man tending to his horse outside the barn. He introduced himself once more and entered into conversation with the friendly soul. After talking for a good while he learned a great deal about the man's lifestyle. He owned a very modest farm and was nearing the end of his dependence on its resources, for his daughter and son-in-law had done much to make his life comfortable. I asked him why he pampered his horse so.

He answered. "Musket here is my pride and joy. I couldn't live without her. She pulls my plow and tramples my grain. Without her there'd be no farm. I will not resort to machinery; it's not nature's way. Sometimes I can't sleep at night wondering what I will do when she is gone."

"Sir, your love for your horse is delightful, but may I ask you a question?"

"Yes, go right ahead."

"It seems to me," Paradox continued, "and I am a scholar of human nature, that you are torturing yourself needlessly. After any one of your sleepless nights, have you ever found Musket lying lifeless in the morning sun? How many times have your fears been validated?"

"I feel so embarrassed," the old man blushed. "I guess I've acted quite the old fool. Thank you for setting me straight."

Paradox left the man at his horse's side and journeyed to a nearby cafe. Over dinner he thought about the time he had spent with his three new friends. In all his days no one had ever taken to his philosophy so quickly and completely. It seemed they had each accepted his questions easily and thoughtfully. He wondered if they had truly seen the error of their thinking, and more importantly, he wondered if they would be able to change their condition accordingly. When he left the cafe and reversed his journey homeward, he could not believe what he saw. His question was answered in a most profound and horrifying way. Indeed the three had managed to act upon their erroneous thinking. The elderly plowman had put a bullet through his horse's head, the young man had capped his faithful well, and the farmer had just completed raping his land with a bulldozer.

*The
Squirrel
and
the
Apple*

Out amongst an orchard full of bountiful trees there lived a busy little squirrel. He had many friends in the orchard but most of all he loved the many fruits, vegetables, and nuts that grew there. Of all these, his dearest friend in all creation was a new green apple which grew high atop the most gorgeous apple tree that anyone ever laid eyes upon. They had met when he was just a blossom, and even then they could feel their extraordinary bond. For hours on end the little squirrel and his best friend would sit on the branches and talk about everything of wonder. They longed for a day when the apple would be fully ripe and they could set out on a journey together, but for the time being, all they could do was dream; and dream they did!

While the apple hung from the branch high above the orchard he loved to watch the squirrel make his rounds. He delighted at each of the squirrel's encounters and longed for the ability to run and climb like his friend, but he did not share these feelings with his four-legged comrade for fear of sounding envious. He also withheld his frustrations out of a deep love for the squirrel, for the last thing he wanted to do was burden this fanciful creature with the shackles he knew he must maintain. He realized that to sever the stem that chained him to the tree before he was ripe would mean an early and unproductive end to his life, so he accepted his vicarious position as the squirrel's personal cheerleader knowing he might never fully be a part of his merry ride.

As days passed, the apple's green skin turned to red, and he knew his time of freedom was nearing. Excitedly, the squirrel announced his plan. On his next trip to the forest he would take along his best friend on what would be the apple's inaugural voyage.

When the opportunity for travel presented itself, the squirrel made his

plans. Since the apple couldn't walk or run, he had built a special cart on which he would pull his special friend. He set out on his way to the gorgeous apple tree. Along the way he met his friend the frog who asked if he could come along. Hopping along, side by side, the twosome made their way to the apple's tree. Passing under a large pecan tree they heard tiny voices calling out. The pecans on the ground were envious of the squirrel's invention for they knew it meant that even they could journey to the forest. Realizing his invention could be their dream come true, the generous squirrel couldn't bear to pass them by, so he lifted them up and placed them into the cart. As they passed under the old oak tree a similar thought was cast and the cart now held acorns as well. As the journey continued, the cart became full of leaves, twigs, nuts, and berries and the squirrel felt great joy at giving so many friends such a marvelous ride.

At last they neared the apple tree and the squirrel's best friend watched as they approached. At first he felt a bit ill at ease, for the squirrel had said nothing about traveling companions, but his discomfort did not last as he recalled why he loved the squirrel as he did. It was the very attitude of giving selflessly that endeared him to his friend, so he knew he could not be angry at such a noble and generous act.

Arriving at the tree the squirrel began to climb, but the apple called and stopped him, telling him that the cart appeared to be full and that there was no room for him to ride. He offered to wait for the next trip. The squirrel apologized for his oversight but the sentiment was unnecessary, for the apple understood and was happy that the grounded creatures could experience such joy. He knew in his heart that his day would come; besides, the tree, which held him tightly, was still sustaining him. He knew the other's days were indeed numbered, so he graciously put his own desires on hold.

A week later the squirrel came upon another opportunity to take his cart to the forest. He notified the apple by way of a bluebird and set out on his way. About halfway to the apple tree he reached the edge of the fruit tree section of the magnificent orchard. A pear that had recently fallen from his tree called out to him. He had heard about the cart from an acorn friend and wished to join in the fun. With a heart as big as a mountain, the squirrel consented. By the time they reached the apple tree, the cart carried a plum, two pears, and a peach. The squirrel called up to the apple, apologizing because it had happened

yet again. The apple sent down a little laugh and sent them on their way, happy for all of them as the experience had allowed still more dreams to be fulfilled.

On the next journey, the squirrel reached the apple tree with a peach, three plums, and a pear. Again the apple understood and sent them away. The next trip carried plums exclusively, and then came a trip with only pears. The squirrel was elated. He felt like such a noble creature for bringing such joy to the orchard. Everywhere he turned he heard others sing his praises. He felt the greatest joy when he thought about his best friend, his personal cheerleader cheering him on from atop the tree. He knew the special apple would be so proud.

Eventually the trips never even made it to the apple tree as the cart filled so very rapidly, but he knew all the while his apple friend would understand. Besides, he was saving the best trip for him, and oh would it be such a joy! All the while the apple watched the activity, smiling through his loneliness at the joy he witnessed.

When all the fruits on the ground had made their trips, the squirrel ventured over to the vegetable garden, sending a message to the apple via mockingbird, informing his friend of the delay. There simply wasn't time to make it over to the apple tree and back in time for the first vegetable run, and it took so many trips, for only two or three tomatoes could fit on the cart at one time.

After many days of non-stop pulling, every object on the orchard's ground had made a trip to the forest. The little squirrel was exhausted but he felt poignant warmth inside. He was extremely proud of himself, for he knew of no other creature that would go to such lengths to see that everyone was happy. His joy was doubled by the thought of having a friend so special that would share his pride, cheering him on selflessly as he patiently waited his turn. Even though he had not seen or heard from his friend in weeks, that loving spirit never left his heart.

The squirrel had worked so very hard, and now he was entirely worn out, but he believed he could muster just enough energy to give his patient friend that promised trip. Arriving at the tree he called to the apple, yet the voice that returned sounded much more resonant and full than he had remembered.

Throughout the squirrel's many days of service, the apple did indeed wait patiently, but he did not rest idly on his stem. While the squirrel's journey went on and on, he pictured his little friend as he remembered him, but time had passed and the little apple continued to grow, and grow, and grow. Now the beautifully mature apple was five times the size it had been at their last meeting and the squirrel's special cart was entirely too small.

Crushed by the weight of his own insensitivity, the squirrel rushed off to build a bigger cart, wondering how he could have been so thoughtless. It took him days to gather enough material and a week to complete the task, but at last the cart was complete, and it was truly a special creation. He knew now that he had an opportunity to make up for the time he'd been away, for this cart was a glorious gift, and he promised it would be used only to carry his precious friend.

When he reached the tree he stopped in his tracks as he noticed the unforgettable sight of tire tracks under the tree. Harvest time had come and the harvest was complete. The apple tree was bare.

A week later the squirrel was speaking with a pigeon that had been the apple's mutual friend. He had just come from the county fair, and it seemed the apple's patience and compassion had paid off, for the bird had seen the apple on a table surrounded by people and laced in a blue ribbon. The squirrel was happy for his friend's achievement, but he also felt a bit of pain for having returned too late to deliver his promise. The pain turned to anguish as the pigeon finished the story. The apple had won the contest on the merits of his size, firmness, and outward beauty. This rare beauty became miraculous to the onlookers as the judges cut the apple open. Though the apple had appeared strong and perfect on the outside, cutting into the heart revealed that the core had disintegrated into a thousand tiny pieces.

*The
Camel's
Conclusion*

A camel set forth on his journey across a vast and arid desert. He knew of the value of water, the most precious commodity in this unrelenting climate. He had always been able to appreciate the sparkling refreshment that came from drinking the water, but he feared not the prospects of going without it for days, for he knew that his ability to transform it in his humps meant that he could always enjoy its rewards.

Before making his journey he drank a great quantity, knowing that it could be a dry trip for days on end. Setting out, he happened upon an oasis very early in his journey and enjoyed a quick drink, for his humps were still full. On the next day, he encountered another watering hole, again briefly stopping to wet his lips. As the journey continued he was amazed at the initial frequency of the pools he discovered. Measuring their frequency carefully, he concluded that he would see at least three per week. "This," he thought, "will be an easy journey, for my beloved water will be there to carry me along."

The pattern continued for over a month, and by now he saw no need to stop at each pool, for time was precious also and he felt a need to move on. He remembered the nourishment of past fulfillment and carried this memory in his humps, knowing this alone could sustain him. Enamored with the incredible time he was making, he pressed onward, never looking back. Three watering holes went by without so much as a sip, for he felt he could make his journey in record time. As his mind became overwhelmed with the road before him, he lost all recognition of where he'd been, and his humps grew more and more dry. Just as his body called to him loud and clear, telling him he was almost doomed, an oasis appeared on the horizon. Struggling to make his way to the water, his senses came back to him and he realized the error he had made. Traveling for three hundred miles on water barely sufficient for seventy-five had taken its

toll. But he had survived.

Filling his humps once more with water, he thanked them for his deliverance, and promised not to take them for granted ever again. It was at this moment he felt the deepest love for the gift nature had given him, for without it where would he be?

Refreshed, he set forth to complete his journey, not knowing what lay deep within or before him. His humps had been mortally damaged by the prolonged drought, and the next oasis lay nine hundred miles ahead.

*Will
and
Trust*

The trees love to tell a story of two communities at opposite ends of the woodlands, a city called Will and the village of Trust. Each possessed great natural beauty as flowers and plants graced the wide-open spaces. One day, the elders of the city of Will detected a horrid situation. It seemed as though some of the visitors to the city were picking the flowers, in many cases leaving broken and beaten stalks behind. The sight was atrocious and they feared the ultimate destruction of their beautiful landscape. They knew they must act quickly to restore order.

A meeting was called hastily, and the elders rushed into the chambers of the city hall where all major decisions were made. Angrily the mayor spoke. "The situation is indeed grave and it must not go on for another instant." A chorus of affirmations rang throughout the hall.

"We must adopt an ordinance making it a criminal offense to touch any of our plants," called out one of the elders. Each agreed wholeheartedly and the plan was put into immediate action.

The first to be found guilty of the new crime was a teenage boy who ran into a patch of wildflowers to retrieve a ball that had gotten away at the ball field. Next came the prosecution of an elderly tourist who presented his wife with a fresh daisy. For days and weeks, many tourists and citizens alike were charged in contempt of this rigid new rule.

After the ordinance had been in effect for nearly a month, the local sheriff's deputy discovered a man walking amongst the flowers in the city's central park. He'd seen him many times before and at first thought it to be a most innocent occurrence. Looking closer, he found the man removing weeds from the foliage and pruning dead branches from the plants. Realizing the significance of the new law, he knew he must take charge.

"Who are you and what is your Business?" the deputy asked.

"I am Felecé, and I have come to assist glorious nature in her journey of purity and beauty. I have been the keeper of these grounds since my father's death, thirty-three years ago. The plants were his life and now they are mine."

"Do you not know of the city's stance against tampering with the plants?"

"I know only of nature's stance, and she delights at sharing her work with other creatures who appreciate and accept the challenges of beauty."

"Ignorance of the law is no excuse," the officer growled, and he took Felecé downtown to meet his just punishment.

As Felecé returned to his activities, this event repeated itself each week for two months, until the elders felt they had nothing left to do but to banish him from their city. Doing so, they sent him on his way.

Felecé walked through the forest for three days enjoying nature's majesty and strength. He felt no remorse for what he had done in Will, instead he felt sad that he could not help them to enjoy the gifts bestowed upon them. But he knew the loss was not his, for his journey would continue.

After the three days in the forest, Felecé began to feel restless and knew not why. "After all", he thought, "I am surrounded by nothing but nature's creation, unmolested by man." Then the answer hit him, "...unmolested by man." His father's quest had not only been to assist the plants in their growth, but to teach man and plant to come together as one spirit though housed in vastly differing shells. The prophecy could not be fulfilled without both the body of man and the stalk and foliage of botanical creatures. He knew he must set out for another place where man lived amongst the greenery.

Leaving the forest, he found himself entering the village of Trust, and moved toward the town square. He loved the gardens and parkways he encountered and felt an instant relief. Half of the needed formula was in obvious abundance, now he needed to meet the inhabitants of this beautiful community to see if his work could indeed be fulfilled.

After three days in the village, he had met every soul to be found, for he could not walk for twenty steps without a kind word of welcome reaching his ears. He felt truly wonderful and at peace with existence like never before. The following day, he decided to set out once again on his mission.

He moved into the city's main park and began to prune and pick. No one seemed to mind him prodding and poking at the lovely landscape. In fact, many complimented him for his apparent love of the plants. Even when he would find it necessary to uproot an entire plant, not a soul would suspect anything other than selfless intent. He decided to test his apparent position of acceptance and sought out the community's chief of state.

Looking around, he found no law enforcement office and no city hall. The nearest thing he found was the village library. Though this seemed strange to him, he did not pass judgment, deciding rather to inquire where he might be able to find the person in charge. The librarian informed him that there had been no need for a leader since the community had been founded by a loving individual many years before. Since that day, Trust had flourished on the founder's spirit.

Feeling truly at home, Felecé continued his work, and the plants in Trust grew more beautiful than ever before. His loving hands had nurtured a growth never before present in even the most bountiful season of growth.

Meanwhile, the people of Will continued to fulfill their obligations to their city, and the revenue from violators of their law was great. They earned enough money to build a shopping mall, an amusement park, and countless other amenities. They knew that they were well on their way to being the tourist capital of the region, but as they collected money and built structures, they failed to notice the change all about them. Without the aid of human hands, the plants continued to grow, but the hearty overtook the weak and soon all the land was covered in thistle and brush. The officers had no need to patrol the grounds, for the thorns took over the punishment of wandering hands. With no fines to collect and the beauty waning day by day, the city found itself in dire straits. The elders could not understand why travelers passed their city by as they traveled in the direction of Trust.

After two years of decline in Will, the elders decided to pay the thriving Trust a visit, for they knew there must be foul play at hand. Arriving in the bountiful town, even they could not escape its beauty. As they walked the village streets they noticed a crowd of people who had gathered in the village square awaiting some sort of celebration. The mayor of Will asked a citizen of Trust where he might find the community's mayor.

"You are a lucky man," the local answered, "for a day earlier and there

would have been no such leader; but today we have requested the guidance of a truly great man."

The elders of Will were puzzled. "How could there be no leader?"

The Trustite answered with a huge grin on his face. "Here in Trust, there has never been a need for anyone to impose his views on anybody else."

"What made that change?"

"Oh, it never changed; in fact, we need rules and regulations even less these days."

"Then why do you need to crown a leader at this time?" Such ambiguities baffled the mayor.

"There is no need, only desire. Our town was beautiful from the first day of its existence, but since our special friend entered the village the beauty has flourished beyond belief. We simply want to honor him for bringing us his love. Our city has prospered greatly and we have earned much money from visitors who eat in our restaurants and purchase things from our stores. We decided we should use our money to add to this beauty and honor our founder. That is why we are gathered here. We commissioned a fantastic statue of our community's founder and today we shall unveil it."

"Could you please direct us to the special friend you will crown this day?" the mayor asked.

"Why yes," came the reply. "He sits over there in that chair before the podium."

The elders of Will must have run the full gamut of emotions in that instant as they laid eyes upon the newly appointed leader; Felecé, the very man whom they had banished from their city only years before.

Excitement filled the air as the moment arrived when the statue would be unveiled. Even Felecé was unaware of the statue's identity, for he was new to their town. As the cover fell from the magnificent shrine, Felecé could not believe his eyes. He was overcome with extreme elation as he gazed at the statue, a perfect likeness of his beloved father; founder of Trust.

*The
Subservient
Child*

He grew up as the middle child in a family of nine children. Each time the food was placed on the table, he would sit quietly and watch as a feeding frenzy took place. Hands reached and hands grabbed and bit-by-bit the food was devoured; yet he moved not a muscle until the last of his siblings had been fed. Quietly and alone he would eat the scraps and crumbs left on the table.

He was mild and meek and rarely spoke a word, and even then only to answer what had been addressed to him. His body was frail and weak due to the undernourishment brought forth by his lack of assertion, but he simply could not bring himself to take while his heart said give. Even so, sometimes it was more than he could bear.

Whenever a chore presented itself, he took charge immediately, allowing the younger children to play and the elders to focus on their aspirations. He had never owned a toy nor held a dream of his own, only a hope of seeing that his family was happy and complete. His parents often wondered where he was while the others ran about the house. It seemed they did not notice his loving and dedicated service nor his great sacrificial existence, rarely calling him by name. Even so, no day began with him still at rest and he was always the last to retire.

The strangest part of his bizarre life existed in the fact that every part of his routine was entirely by choice. Never since his birth had anyone asked for or expected a favor from him, and no one dictated his activities in the least. Consequently, neither was a sign of thanks or gratitude ever cast his way.

After years of slaving in his self-created servitude he came upon a wall. The years of sacrifice had eventually taken their toll and he began to weep. He could not understand why none of the loved ones he served so selflessly ever looked his way. He was truly a desert island in their sea of joy. And in this

moment of solitude, the weight of the burden he'd assumed came crashing down around him. In his weakest hour, he summoned his Master Teacher, the strength behind his years of giving.

"Oh mighty teacher, gift of my soul, why do I feel as I do? Years upon years I have worked and given away my share that my family might have more. Why do I now feel need for reward? Why do I feel a need to belong with them when I have chosen to belong to them? Why do I now wish for them to return my love when service alone had once been enough?"

The Master Teacher answered. "It is out of Love that you give and it is Love you now ask for. Trust me noble one, your gifts will be returned in a most profound manner when the journey is done."

"But Master, I find no comfort in your words, for I have not eaten and my body aches each hour of every day. I am weak and in need of assistance, yet no one will lend me a hand. I cannot carry on much longer in this wretched state. I need someone to help me. Help me, please."

The Master Teacher answered. "It is out of Love that you give and it is Love you now ask for. Trust me noble one, your gifts will be returned in a most profound manner when the journey is done."

With this the boy prayed for strength and nourishment and laid his head down to sleep. The following morning he woke at daybreak and began his routine of service once again. For twelve years this continued. None of his older siblings left the home and his workload increased. He still worked without recognition in any form, guided only by the promise set forth by his Master Teacher that lonely night.

At the end of his twenty-fifth year, he laid his head to rest following yet another day of service. No one had stopped to pay tribute to the anniversary of his birth; for he was always the one who arranged acts of celebration in the household. There was no one to do the same for him, and nobody ever made mention of his special day. That night as he slept, he heard his Master Teacher's voice for the first time since that evening twelve years earlier.

"Noble one, you are indeed supreme. For a quarter of a century you have asked for nothing but have given everything. There is not another like you to be found. You have shared with me your resentments and your frustrations and I concur that they are justified; yet you do not allow them to inhibit your

giving. You have reason to hate yet you love. You have reason to run yet you stay of your own free will. You have been treated badly and you deserve deliverance from these wretched conditions. As you wake this morning, you will find your deliverance and the remainder of this century will belong only to you."

He awoke the following morning in a glorious palace surrounded by servants and every amenity one could imagine. Anything he desired was his for the asking and every dream he could consider had in it the power to come true. He lived in this state of euphoria for about a fortnight when there came a knock at his palace door. As a servant opened the door he revealed the identity of the guests. All eight of his siblings stood at his doorstep asking to come in to share the evening meal.

"Where have you been?" they asked him. "We have not been cared for since you left. It is not fair that you should gain such wealth when we have been to school. You have not held a job. It is not fair that you should be given such wealth without earning it. You must have stolen our wares and invested them for yourself. How else could one amass such wealth?"

The subservient child, now grown, and master of his own palace, seated his siblings at the table and fed them a feast fit for a king, every morning, noon, and night for seventy-five years.

*Fanning
the
Freedom
Flame*

One magical night, over a candle-lit dinner for two, a young man fell deeply in love with a beautiful young woman. She was the personification of all things fair and marvelous. The Creator's Grace had touched her soul, and she was the essence of true Love. Freedom had kissed her forehead and given her its noble blessing.

In awe of her mystical presence, the young man sat quietly, gazing into her eyes through the candle's flame. Her eyes, fixed upon his, danced the minuet of intimacy while words unspoken rang between them in masterful harmony. He wished the moment would never end, but end it did, and the young man found himself alone once more.

At evening's end that magical night, the young man had expressed his gratitude and extended a promise to the beautiful soul. He opened his heart to her and invited her inside his soul. Hoping to repeat the supernatural communion they had shared, he offered her an open invitation to share the candlelight with her at anytime she so desired.

Each night he prepared the table with the hope of repeating their magical feast. A place setting for two adorned his table, and the candle in the centerpiece burned brightly in the darkened room. But each night, a solitary silhouette flickered on the dining room wall.

The dishes and utensils on the table began to wonder what drove the man to such madness. What could cause one to be so persistent?

"Why does he continue this futility?" questioned the plate.

"It is difficult for me to understand," added the saucer, "as I would have had the sense to realize long ago that she has no desire to return."

The cup was equally confused. "Why does he continue his lonely quest when it is obvious it hurts him deeply. His heart thirsts for her, yet the well is dry. Still, he lights the candle each night with such reverence and hope."

When the young man brought the food to the table, the situation grew even more perplexing. An aromatic appetizer offered his view of the unusual behavior. "I cast forth a fragrance which invites others to my feast. Once they experience my savory blessing, their appetite lures them to return. When I have done my work well, my patrons will beg for more. He possesses such a marvelous gift. Why does he refuse to bewitch her with his charm? She'd surely find it impossible to reject such persuasion, yet he never even reminds her of his invitation."

As each of the other occupants of the table clambered and clattered at his unusual behavior, the candlestick stood quietly and firmly at the center of the table. Surrounded by chaos and confusion, it seemed oblivious to the questions posed. Atop it, the tiny little flame knew.

Effortlessly, the flame burns brightly, ever-changing yet undeniably open to the world around it. The wick offers itself in sacrifice while the candle weeps joyful tears of wax. At the base of the spark, oxygen gives selflessly to the cause. The fire cannot look back or pause to consider the gifts she receives, for in the flame's world to stand idle is to perish. Even so, her seemingly eternal radiance casts forth the warmth of her gratitude.

No one can see from whence the fire comes, and no one knows where it goes. The solid wick and the invisible oxygen meet with a mysterious spark and together join as one. Anyone can see the light, feel the warmth and smell the trail of smoke that lingers in the breeze, yet nothing and no one can possess the flame. Parted from the source, the fire dies. Cut off from the supply of air, death is certain. Though one may come very near, surround the flame entirely and it will no longer burn.

Just what is this flame? Is it solid wick turned to gaseous smoke? Is it air turned to radiance? Is it life longing for living; love longing for loving? In silence, wick and flame understand this union.

The wick knows nothing but to prepare a place for the spark, for it has no dominion over fire. Cold and alone, it awaits the chance to burn itself out, giving way to the warmth of love. As wick to flame, so is the young man to his beloved lady.

*The
Seed
of
Possibility*

*I*nto a splendid garden walked Possibility. Overwhelmed with the magic that grew all about him, he longed to share the beauty with his world. Struck by a vision, he moved to the center of the garden and began to dig. Within moments he had unearthed a beautiful bulb destined to become the most wondrous and mystical daffodil ever seen. Leaving the garden, Possibility pondered what to do with the bulb. He understood that the bulb was merely a promise of beauty to be realized only after a season of nurturing in fertile grounds. Hoping to place it in such a home, he lovingly left it on Actuality's doorstep. The following morning he received a call. Actuality sensed it was he who had left the unusual gift and wished to hear its story.

Possibility told Actuality all about the garden and its grandeur. Upon hearing about the beauty in store, Actuality agreed to plant the seed in a clearing in the woods. Together they would be free to enjoy a future of visiting the beautiful daffodil grown from the love within.

Within days after the bulb was planted, Actuality ceased to visit the clearing. Growing busy with the affairs of the world, there was little time to detour toward the bulb that rested below the earth. Summer came and the earth was hot and dry. Possibility reminded Actuality of the bulb's need for water, but the bulb was left to wait quietly beneath the soil until priorities could be rearranged. Actuality vowed to tend the soil when the time is right. In the meantime, life went on within and without the lonely bulb.

Time passed and all about there was transformation. Possibility remained at the edge of the woods near Hope. Actuality had long since left the area, taking up residence in the streets of Destiny. One dark and moonless night, struck by a vision of the extraordinary daffodil, Actuality longed to return to the clearing. Possibility had remained a devoted and trusted friend and the separation had been long enough. Actuality set out for the clearing in

the woods. Not wanting to delay the wonderful daffodil's appearance any longer, Actuality vowed to tend the soil with diligence.

Upon arriving at the clearing, Actuality noticed a wealth of new growth, but no daffodil grew among the foliage. The flower's season of opportunity had long since passed. Though it never saw the sunlight the bulb never ceased to work its magic. Without nourishment the bulb was allowed to decay, creating a rich and fertile bed in which other plants received bountiful life.

Possibility heard the news of Actuality's return and came quickly to the clearing. Together they walked through the flowers enjoying the beauty that surrounded them. Though they never brought the daffodil into their conversation, neither could fully deny the emptiness that moved deep inside their souls. Possibility could not help but reflect on what could have been while Actuality weighed what had come to pass.

*Harvest
Forlorn*

*T*here was a farmer who tended his fields with great diligence. He tilled the ground patiently and prepared the soil for planting. There were many beautiful and bountiful plants he desired to grow and he set forth on his journey to sow the appropriate seeds.

The rains came, followed by glorious sunshine, and the sprouts peaked out to see the light of day. Soon the fields flourished with crops of all kinds. There were fruits, vegetables, and flowers as far as the eyes could see.

Harvest was fast approaching and the farmer made no preparations to reap the benefits of his fields. He had worked long and hard and wanted to bask in the beauty of his creation.

Days passed; then weeks turned to months with still no harvest. The fields had long been covered with rotting and rodent infested remnants of what had been there. He usually sat alone, looking proudly at an album he had created with pictures of the richest of acreage. The farmer rarely made his way outside the modest farmhouse anymore, for having the photographs of his most incredible accomplishment made it unnecessary for him to look upon it anymore.

He looked longingly forward to the day when he could once again plow and plant his fields, all the while dreaming of a creation to top even this most recent success.

He offered daily a prayer of thanksgiving for the small garden behind the farmhouse that was able to bear enough food to sustain him throughout the year without him having to disrupt his prized field. The small garden was indeed a modest blessing for the farmer, as it not only protected his fields, but made trips into the nearby village entirely unnecessary. This was most welcome since these trips were not among his favorite of pastimes. He did not enjoy in the least having to pass the meager homes of the impoverished village. The sight of hungry children and embattled mothers toiling in vein failed to entertain him.

Indeed, it was all together better that he not make his way into this painful environment. In fact, he often said an extra prayer of thanksgiving at bedtime; thanksgiving for the wall he had built around his farm that sheltered him from the indigence nearby. Indeed, his life was blessed.

Conclusion

So, what is this "neglected reality" anyway? Again, I could only begin to tell you about my own, and even so, only to the extent I understand it myself. Even then, you could only see it through the veil of your own experience. It is this veil I hoped to sharpen through these parables. My initial voyage was toward a means of sharing my reality with others, in a manner they would entirely comprehend. Though I accepted the futility of this idea, was it entirely an impossible dream? If at any moment, while reading my simple tales, you felt the same sensation as I, then in that instant my initial pilgrimage was fulfilled. If any event chronicled within these accounts evoked an emotional response, you more than likely peeked into that "Mirror of Truth" at your own reflection. When the feelings were most intense, you probably found yourself fixed on the image you saw. If the feelings were happy or hopeful, you uncovered a bit of the reality of which I speak. If the feelings were uncomfortable, you discovered the neglect.

So, what would I encourage you to do with this "neglected reality" anyway? Though the stories did not often end happily, the message is one of hope, for joy cannot exist without sorrow, evil cannot exist without good, and grace cannot exist without tragedy. The question then becomes, "On which do we choose to focus?" The "reality" I dream of cannot be expressed in words or stories, or perhaps even in ideas, but it is most definitely something worth living for. It is this type of reality we so often neglect. Just what this means to you, and where in your life you will find it...?...well, how can I begin to understand your complex reality? I do wish for you, with all my heart, what my heart hopes for itself... to understand and appreciate my own!

P.S.