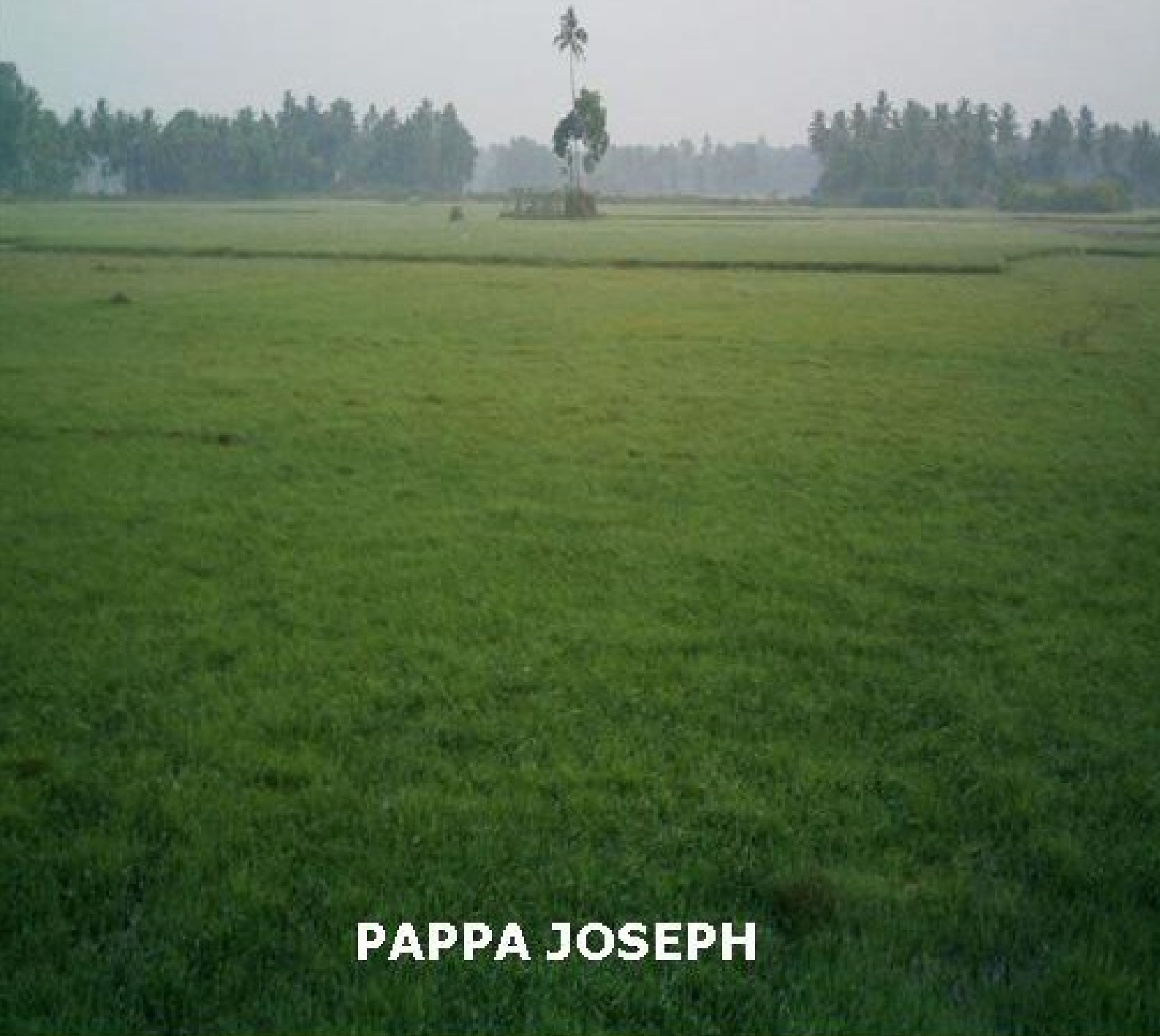


Encounters Of A Heart Kind

THE LOGBOOK OF A SOJOURNER ON EARTH



PAPPA JOSEPH

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A SERIALIZED BOOK BY PAPPA JOSEPH

Encounters Of A Heart Kind *The Logbook of A Sojourner On Earth*

First Published 2014

Also by Pappa Joseph

Now or Never *Parenting Without Remorse*

Idiotic English and Idiomatic English

The Professional's Guide to Using English Correctly, Intelligently and Influentially

Published by

CommUnion FZE LLE

United Arab Emirates

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Cover Photo: A scene near my home in India, close to the place where the encounter mentioned in 'Nobody Wants Me for Even 5 Rupees Anymore' took place.

PREFACE

Every mundane or ordained circumstance in our daily life is an emotional or emotionless encounter for our soul. Many of those which I accosted, or which accosted me, and have been journaled, are heart-touching, and many are touchingly hearty. All that I have logged here are purely earthly experiences that have moved my soul in a nonearthly way.

Most of what we daily encounter graze the surface of our heart, and ricochet into eternal oblivion; many go a little deeper and are either dissolved by fortitude and forgiveness, or repulsed by conscience and conviction. But some immediately plunge deep into the chords of our soul and remain forever entwined in our hearts.

In my logbook, there is no one particular category of encounters that were able to gain permanent embedment in my consciousness. It could be a comic scene just unfolded before my eyes, or an anguished story just concluded in my presence. It could be a few words of euphoria that rang aloud cheerily in my hearing, or it could be a few moments of sheer silence that knolled the end of a great chapter in a life that had long traversed my own.

Here, extracted from my precious logbook, are those people, places, and events which are stamped indelibly on the tablet of my heart.

Pappa Joseph

Encounters Of A Heart Kind

THE LOGBOOK OF A SOJOURNER ON EARTH

Why I Decided to Read and Write Fiction

Sometime after I left high school I let go of my interest in reading novels and writing fictitious stories. College life offered far more exciting diversions. But even in those days, I did not completely abandon fiction, but would enjoy them whenever I found a little time off from the great interests of my life – whirling with pretty girls and swirling from the merry effects of brandy and toddy.

Later, as my mission in life began to slowly metamorphose in my vision, fiction became actually distasteful for me. The stories were just fantasies, not real, and any writing which was the fruit of human fabrication was falsehood for me. But after reading John Grisham's Kane and Abel in prison, and in the few years after that, I began to realize that good fiction can be of some emotional and moral benefit to a person.

For a person who desires to experience directly or indirectly as many human interactions in this life, nothing makes that possible like fiction. I wouldn't have known about the Cossacks and about life in Russia, and about certain business intrigues if I hadn't read Kane and Abel. I wouldn't have known about a certain aspect of climatic or cosmic changes, or of certain human responses to adversity if I hadn't seen films such as The Day After Tomorrow, or Deep Impact, or In Pursuit of Happiness. I wouldn't have at any time grasped the awesomeness of dinosaurs if I hadn't seen Jurassic Park.

These stories are not real, but they are portrayals of possible realities, or of human realisms. And they have created new dimensions of experiences for me, which enable me to see life more panoramically, experience it vicariously in a more intense way, and thereby deal with it more effectively. It's like I have been there in the midst of the happenings, a silent unobtrusive witness. And I go back home, or lean

back on my chair, after seeing or reading all that - sometimes with more sorrow than ever at the state of the world, sometimes with new nuggets of happiness, but always with more richness of mind than ever before.

I have therefore decided not to completely abstain from fiction from today. In that decision, I have also decided to write a fictional book - a semi-historic novel about the 'sub humans'.

2013

Bahrain Air

Thought I will mention this about my trip back home to India. As the flight took off and I leaned back wondering how I was going to spend the next five hours of flight, I looked at the magazine pouch on the back of the seat in front of me, hoping to find something there to read. I took the only publication in it, apart from the usual safety instruction pamphlets - an inflight shopping magazine. Only one page had something of an article length, and I began to read that.

The sentences looked very familiar, too familiar. And then, I realized they were what I wrote a couple of months back. I put it back in the pouch, and leaned back smiling, resisting the inclination to call an air hostess and tell her excitedly it was I who wrote that message for her airline. But I refrained, for I have matured since those days, in my twenties about four decades ago, when on a train I saw my first article in a newspaper and I excitedly gave it to the stranger beside me, and with a palpating heart, told him, 'I wrote this article!'.

February 1 2012

The Man Who Ordered Coffee

Before going to church today, I went to that iconic of all Indian cafes - Indian Coffee House - where turbaned waiters of regal comportment flit from kitchen to dining table and back in one ceaseless motion from morning to late night. I ordered a two-course breakfast: first, puffed puree with mashed beetroot, and then scrambled eggs on toast, concluded with what every fine breed of Indian is reputed to drink first thing in the morning - coffee brewed from the choicest seeds of the finest *coffea arabica* plants in the country, and available in its full aromatic strength only in this chain of coffee houses.

While enjoying my puree, and my next course waiting beside it, a man walks in, and after looking around for a vacant seat, finds one in a corner of the room. Then he gets up and goes to the kitchen...and emerges again after being shooed out from there.

The man then returns to his seat. He asks a passing waiter to bring him coffee, but the turbaned head does not turn and its bearer walks on as if he didn't hear.

The snubbed customer gets up and goes to the toilet, opens first the ladies' toilet, peers in, and then the gents, peers in, returns to his seat, and repeats his order for coffee to every waiter that passes by him.

The man continued to sit there patiently for his steaming beverage. One side of my eyes was riveted on him, while the other was following the movement of each piece of morsel on my plate until I lost sight of it under my nose. But it was getting harder and harder for me to swallow the delectables on my table. I called the waiter who served me and asked him if that man had ordered anything, and, if not, to serve him something and I will pay for it. The waiter replied it was not a problem of the expense of a free coffee, but he was a nuisance and would come frequently and pester other customers if he was shown kindness.

As I finished my breakfast and got up to leave, the unserved customer came up to me and asked if I could help him. I did not answer but walked to the cash counter to pay my bill. The man followed me and

stood beside me at the counter and repeated his request. I remarked aside to the cashier I would have bought him a meal, but I had been advised against it. The cashier smiled approvingly.

When I left the counter, I took the biggest of the bill notes in my wallet, gave it to the man and told him to go outside and buy something to eat. The man grasped the money, and in his ecstasy came with open arms to embrace me, but I ducked just before he could touch me. The cashier shouted his annoyance at him, and in the verbal melee I left speedily before the man got another chance to thank me.

I have no problem being hugged by anyone who wanted to show me gratitude or love. But he smelled contagion, and I didn't want to go to church with some of his vermin crawling on my body. I wonder why the coffee house people allowed him to enter their reputable premises in the first place. There's no doubt hungry people like him are a nuisance to a satiated population.

I prayed as I got out of the coffee house: Lord, give him his daily bread.

November 26 2011

Putting the Eye

Today I attended a 'waistchain tying' ceremony of a baby – the daughter of a relative of my wife. Wearing a gold chain around one's waist in my land is comparable to wearing a gold-chained Rolex around one's wrist in other countries. The less affluent citizens would substitute silver, and I think it was a silver chain that was tied round my waist when I was a toddler. But I remember getting a fleeting glimpse once of an old uncle of mine sporting a thick gold chain around his wrinkled waist when his pants accidentally slid below his hips.

The child was only a few weeks old, but she didn't have the facial contours of a baby orangutan that most human infants have during the first few weeks of their arrival.

She was the most adorable infant I had ever seen. Yet, I dared not utter a single word of admiration, for her parents have a cultural background – from which I was blessed to escape – that strongly believes in the 'putting of the eye' – a transliteration of a phrase in my native language which actually means the same as the English 'casting the evil eye'.

Now, suppose I did say something nice about the baby to the parents, and suppose, God forbid, the next day the child gets a fever or a cold, the entire blame would be on the evil eye in me that had cast its spell on the beautiful baby and that had caused my mouth to utter those evil words.

I remember my own mother's reaction when some visitors to our house unwisely uttered aloud something adorable about me when I was a child. I don't remember what was adorable about me in those years – on the contrary, the only few things I remember about my early childhood, such as wringing and tearing apart a chick's neck, could only make me think of myself as abominable. But I do remember seeing my mother frowning at their backs. Being a woman of deep piety, though, it is very likely she might have cast an antithetical prayer to neutralize the spell on her little son.

September 29 2011

Decreasing Distance Between Husband and Wife

I have observed that in my native land, over the past two decades, the distance a wife keeps between herself and her husband as they walk on the road has halved. Until the 80s, when a man walked with his wife to anywhere at any time, the average distance between them was about 30 paces. Today, it's about 12 to 15.

It's not because the husband always outpaces his wife; except for the first 30 steps, the distance is constant, which means the wife, after an initial pause of about 10 seconds so her husband could reach the proper distance away from her, walks as fast or as slow as her man.

The invisible force that maintains a reasonable distance between a walking couple is the same force that causes a wife of my land a few decades ago to decline any invitation by guests to come over and sit with them in the same room as her husband. It's the same force that prevents a good wife and mother from sitting with her family at the dinner table. Instead, she would serve her husband first, then her kids, then her mother or mother-in-law, and then, when the last person has risen from the table, she would quietly sit down to have her meal, including any leftovers with extractable chunks of flesh on them.

Times are a-changin' and while distances are only increasing in relationships everywhere, this is probably the only area in my people's lives where the distance is decreasing. Another couple of decades, and we would be seeing man and woman walking abreast down our country roads, engaged in happy conversation, or entangled in snappy altercation with each other.

July 26 2011

The Self-Slapper

As the bus on which I was traveling stopped to pick up passengers, I saw a bearded man of around forty standing in the porch of a building beside which the bus had stopped. He was chastising himself and after every two or three sentences of self-condemnation, he castigated himself with a tight slap on his left cheek with his right hand. The self castigations happened in quick succession and without remission. Each tight slap cracked with the stinging loudness of a whip lashed on an ox's hide. As the bus moved on, the sound of the tight slaps faded from my ears...to rebound with deafening volume in my conscience for many years.

June 5 2011

The Photographer

Suresh was a handsome, lean, and cheery man in the prime of life - in his mid thirties. Twelve years ago he met his dreamgirl, a sprightly lass, slightly buckteethed, but comely nevertheless. And the lass, on seeing her prince charming regally straddling a bicycle, swooned over him at second or third sight.

The enamored lady lived close to my house, and soon her paramour came to live with her and her parents in their house.

Although he lived close to my house, I had never met Suresh until about five years ago when he came home to return a handsaw that he had borrowed from my mother seven years earlier. Handsaws were a precious implement in this part of the world, and my mother's several attempts to retrieve it from him were dodged with some excuse or other. The handsaw remained Suresh's property until the day he needed to borrow something more precious from my mother. He needed some money desperately, to redeem a gold necklace from the pawnbrokers. He had taken this ornament from his wife on a false but plausible reason and had used the money to pay off his debt at the local toddy shop. Now his wife was threatening to cast him out of her house if he didn't bring back her only necklace soon.

Suresh respectfully laid the rusty handsaw at my mother's feet, and my mother gave him the money. That was my first sighting of Suresh. Since then I encountered him several times on the village road, and we would exchange acknowledging nods. Knowing his maverick lifestyle and his feckless, devil-may-care attitude, he was most probably walking on an empty stomach most of the times I met him on the road. But his brisk manner of walking, with a spring to his step, and his cheery countenance camouflaged his hungry looks and always gave me the impression he was in a hurry to do some work he looked forward to doing.

In his wife's house, however, love was being lost at exponential rates between the once enamored couple. The wife was exasperated to the point of bitterness at her husband's inability to support the family. His once hallowed presence in the house had now turned into a harrowing nuisance, and eventually he was no longer sleeping beside his warm

wife, but beside a cold wall in the corridor of the school located about fifty meters from their house.

I forgot to mention that during the first few years of their united life, Suresh managed to produce through his wife four healthy offsprings - the eldest a son.

Three years ago - two years after he returned the handsaw to my mother - Suresh came to our house again. This time he brought along his son. It was obvious to the keen observer that there was a bond between the father and the son that went beyond the usual father-son relationship in their social class. Although Suresh was an outcast in his wife's house, he was still the greatest hero in his son's sight. And often the son would walk up to his solitary father lying on the floor of the school corridor at night and go to sleep snuggled close to his hero.

Suresh and his son stood before my mother. Hearing the spirited voice that sounded familiar, I went to the door to take a look at the visitor. Suresh was pointing to a camera that his son was holding at waist level.

'Here's Achayan [a respectful term for a senior person]. Son, take a photograph of Achayan too.'

The son dutifully raised his camera to his eye level, pointed it at me for about three seconds and then lowered it back to his waist level.

Our maid was also watching the whole scene from the kitchen window.

'That camera's a hollow one. No film inside', she said derisively.

'No, no, it was gifted to me, just ask my son', refuted Suresh.

'Son, take a photograph of Chechi [sister] too.'

The son raised his camera to eye level again, pointed it at the maid for a couple of seconds and lowered it again.

The maid laughed, but said nothing, and went back to her work.

The camera obviously was a discarded one, or he might have stolen it. Having never seen a camera at close quarters before, he had taken it

excitedly to his son and offered it to him as the biggest material token of love he as a father could bestow on his son.

In this age of credit-card sized digital cameras, a roll of film for this boxy antique is hard to find. But whatever, that day Suresh had his son take three photographs - my mother's, mine, and the maid's - and they left after my mother gave him some money.

I never saw Suresh after that day.

One morning, a year ago as I write this, I heard the maid saying that Suresh's body was found lifeless on the floor of the school's corridor.

'Suicide', said the maid. 'Early in the morning some workers found him dead there. And they informed the wife. "Let him lie there" was the wife's response. What a woman!'

The body was taken by the police and handed over for autopsy. It was not suicide. He had choked on the rice he took for supper late that night.

I learned later that Suresh had gone to his wife's house that night on a rare visit and had asked her for some food, which she grudgingly gave him. As he chewed on his last mouthfuls, he might have sighed at his plight, and the emotional reaction probably might have constricted his esophagus and caused the rice to enter the trachea instead. As he gasped for breath in his final moments of life, his thoughts might have been about his son, and how he might have wished his beloved child had been with him that night to save him.

Suresh was cremated at his parent's place, about twenty kilometers from our village. His wife and her parents, who did not bother to go and see him lying dead in the corridor, did make the effort to attend his cremation, probably more out of a sense of relief at the exorcism of a twelve year old lingering specter than out of any remaining loose strands of affection for him.

A few weeks ago, on my morning walk, I saw Suresh's son with his grandmother. I knew the woman but did not recognize the boy. When I enquired, she told me he was Suresh's son. He was about eleven, a handsome lad with energetic movements. I remembered the

photograph he took of me three years ago. A flood of sympathy swamped my heart for the young photographer.

'In what grade are you now', I asked him, patting him on his shoulder.

'Seven', he replied, smiling.

'Good. Study well. I will visit you at your home one of these days.' Then turning to the mother, I asked, 'Where do you live now?'

'By the side of the Laka Temple', the woman replied.

Some months after Suresh's death, his wife's father breathed his last too, and the son in that house, the younger brother of Suresh's wife, took charge. Soon he and his wife managed to cast his mother and sister out of the house, and they found refuge in an abandoned shack near Laka Temple. The outcasts found some means of livelihood by sweeping the premises of the local church and by the charity of neighbors.

This morning I woke up a little earlier than usual, and decided to take the Laka Temple route for my morning walk. I could also visit Suresh's son, as I promised him.

As I neared the temple, I asked a couple of people for the location of the house. The first person gave me a general idea of the location. The second person pointed contemptuously in the direction where the shack was located. When I reached the shack, the mother and daughter excitedly got up from the floor to greet me.

'Oonni Krishnan, wake up!' exclaimed the grandmother excitedly. The lad stirred a bit and dozed on.

'Wake up, son, see who's here', the mother said. But Oonni Krishnan slept on.

'It's ok. Don't wake him. I just came to see how things are with you all. Do you still work at the church?', I asked

'Yes, but they give us only a pittance. We are somehow surviving.'

'Put your trust in God. He will provide your needs' I said, not knowing what else to say.

I opened my wallet and took out some bills.

'Here, give this to your son when he wakes up', I said, giving the mother a couple of notes.

I left the shack and resumed my morning walk.

As I write this, Onni Krishnan is very much on my mind. I have prayed for him and the family with him. I have prayed that he may not follow his father's footsteps, and that his younger sisters may not follow their mother's path.

June 23 2009

“Nobody Wants Me for Even 5 Rupees Anymore”

My morning fitness walk brought me close to the tea shack where I occasionally had my breakfast. As I approached the shack, I saw two men in spirited conversation by the side of the road - like many a two-men we encounter on roadsides in this part of rural Kerala. One would likely be a landowner, and the other a fellow landowning neighbor, or a worker hired by the landowner. The conversation would normally revolve around the state of the crops, or the rising wages of workers, or some other subject related to the rustic life.

So that was my first impression. A landowner of venerable age, around 70, with a respectable countenance, sharing his crop concerns with his neighbor or instructing his worker. I entered the shack and ordered parottas (a kind of flaky, layered pancake) and egg roast - the egg laid by one of the ducks frolicking at that moment in the watery meadow on the edge of which the teashop was perched.

As I waited patiently for the country-fresh delicacy to be served, the man I assumed to be a landlord, walked in, and proceeded right past me into the kitchen area, where a woman and her daughter-in-law were busy kneading the flour for my breakfast. The man looked slightly inebriated.

He ordered parottas. A minute of heavy silence ensued as he waited for the woman to respond.

‘You took the dried tapioca a month back’, said the woman.

‘Yeah’, replied the man.

‘Where’s the money? It’s 20 rupees’

The woman went on with a few more statements in a similar tone.

‘I don’t want the parottas’, said the man, without any emotion in his voice. ‘Whatever happens, I will by any means bring the 20 rupees today.’

He exited the kitchen, and walked to the door.

"NOBODY WANTS ME FOR EVEN 5 RUPEES ANYMORE"



The tea shack, by the meadow, where the encounter took place.

'If you are a man, you should keep your word', the woman hurled the words after him.

The woman came out of the kitchen and laid the steaming parottas in front of me with a nice smile of a country hostess.

'Nobody wants me for even 5 rupees anymore', said the man to nobody in particular as he walked past me to the doorway.

At the doorway he paused and tapped on the shoulder of the person sitting next to me, who was deeply engrossed in reading a newspaper. He asked the reader something. The reader grunted a one-word reply without turning his head.

The man walked out. There was a minute of reflective silence in the shack.

'It would have cost him 20 rupees to have bought the drink this morning'. I remarked to the newspaper reader. 'He could have used that money to pay here.'

'It would have cost him more', answered the reader, without looking up from his paper.

I finished the delicious but slightly disturbed meal, and resumed my walk. The man's words in my mind kept pace with my steps.

'Nobody wants me for even 5 rupees anymore.'

What about his children? His wife? His brothers and sisters? For that man to utter those words it was very likely something terrible must have happened to his relationship with his family, who now does not value him even a pittance. In other words, to everyone he knew he was more useful dead than walking.

Certainly there was a time he was more precious than the whole universe to several people. There was a time his mother and wife and children considered him infinitely dearer than anything else in this life. Today he knows of none who holds him as dear a 5 rupee note.

What could have happened? His words reinforced in me the awesomeness of the utmost gift of love I receive from my loved ones.

Today if there are people who love you more than any riches in this world, be daily grateful to God for that. Today if there are people who want you more than anything else in this universe, rejoice with unbounded joy. And today if there are one or two people who love you as much, or more than their own lives, fall on your face before God in incredulous thanksgiving.

The closest thing to unconditional love is a mother's love. But God says that even the unfathomable love of a mother would fail given the circumstances. 'Can a woman forget her nursing child, and have no compassion on the son of her womb? Surely they may forget...', he says in Isaiah 49:15.

The supreme love of those who love us more than anything else in life can fail if driven beyond a certain point. Their love is conditional on your present state of being. Change that state to a certain depth of adversity and depravity, and all love flees from you. Michel loved

David to such an extent she risked her life to save him. Then some marital years later, the relationship deteriorated to the point she actually despised him in her heart. Now, many a wife despises her husband momentarily when he acts despicably. But to despise a spouse in one's **heart** denotes the absolute extinction of love. Would you hold in your hands something you despise in your heart, or would you rather have a 5 rupee note in your hand?

In terms of real value of our lives, we aren't worth even 5 rupees of usefulness to God. Yet he loves us unconditionally to the extent he gave up his only begotten son and caused him to die a horrific death so that we may live eternally with him. His love for each one of us cannot be compared with even the greatest of human love.

'Surely they may forget,' says God about mothers, 'yet I will not forget you.'

That man who felt he wasn't worth to anyone even the smallest denomination of the currency...he does not know that he is worth to Someone more than all the gold and diamonds on earth. In fact, he is worth to that Person more than all the universe and more than anything else in eternity. In even greater fact, he is worth to that someone as much as the life of that Person himself!

Who will go after that humanly worthless man and tell him of his real eternal worth? Shall I seek him out, find him, lay my hands firmly on his shoulders, and shaking him up, declare to him,

'Man, you are the most precious thing in the universe to God'

Shall I go? Will you go?

March 26 2009

Mary's Goat

This is a song taught me by a dwarf friend of mine in my school days. Dwarfs are naturally gifted with a merry spirit, as a short compensation for their stunted stature. I have not heard him ever complain of his deformity. Although he sang this song in a merry mood, there is something hauntingly sad about it to me. Perhaps it is because it reminds me of the tragedy of my friend's stunted growth. Perhaps it is also because it conveys something of the tragedy of women in poverty who have to struggle to keep their families from starvation, let alone find the time or means to be as beautiful as their heart deeply longs for. This is a literal translation of that song I heard him sing 40 years ago:

'Mary's goat has given birth
Mary's goat has given birth
Mary's goat has given birth, O Maria
Two male goat kids

'One liter in the morning
And one liter in the evening
Thus two liters
She sold the milk and bought pancakes
She drank the milk, ate the pancakes
She became beautiful, Mary became beautiful

'Mary's goat has given birth
Mary's goat has given birth
Mary's goat has given birth, O Maria
Two male goat kids'

February 17 2009

Three Encounters During My Morning Walk Today

At the homestretch of my morning walk today, I saw a man, whom I had known for many years, walking towards me. As we met, we exchanged pleasantries, and then he asked if I had some change. I gave him two bills of the four bills I had in my wallet.

After another thirty meters I saw another man walking towards me. He was blind, and I had known him too since my boyhood. As I saw him, I said to myself, 'I can help only those who ask me' and I planned to pass by him. But then I realized he couldn't ask, because he couldn't see me. A sense of empathy prevailed, and as he came close to me, I greeted him. I asked him how things were going for him. He said he was alone, had no sons, nor brother, to care for him. So how did he manage his life, I asked. 'God provides for me from a day to day basis.'

I gave him the remaining two bills. Another thirty or forty meters more, and I saw yet another needy man, whom too I had known since my youth. On meeting me, he asked if I had some change for his breakfast. I didn't. He said it was ok, and moved on.

In doing good to others, help those who ask. You may not be able to afford, nor may it even be wise, to go around asking people if they need help. But remember there are people who may need as much help as those who ask you but may not be in a position to ask. Give them your equal charity. And if it happens, that after you have done charity to others, and you have no more charity to give, don't feel guilty nor overly apologetic for saying no to them.

November 8 2008

Goodbye, Old Faithful

I have just said eternal goodbye to a pocket companion that served me faithfully for many years - through bad and good times. My little 'phone book', which I had always carried in my wallet. It was the link to my contact with all the people I knew personally. But today, I just completed feeding all the contact numbers into my mobile phone, the first one in my life, and today the precious little book became a predacious space-consumer in my life.

Similarly, I had to cast away with sad sentiments several faithfuls in the past ten years: my film-roll camera, my typewriter, my Sheaffer pen with its 18-carat gold nib, my fax machine, my huge library of audio and video cassettes along with their players, my transistor radio, my Seiko automatic watch, my cathode-ray tv and computer monitor, my piles of paper- and hardbacks, as I could get better editions of the same online, my...oh, it's getting painful to think of all those demises in my life. Even my most intimate breast-clinging 'singlelet' - a soft vest all decent men wore under their shirts until the 80s - had to be cast off my wardrobe like menstruous cloth, because I would rather be seen in public barebodied than be seen wearing a singlelet under my shirt today.

A small invention obsoletes overnight several great industries at once. The digital camera not only killed the analog camera industry but all its peripheral industries as well - film, developing equipment and chemicals, photo frames, and more.

2004

* * *

A few days ago, I read that driverless cars would be on the market in just about two years. Gone forever will be the esteemed profession of driving instructors and their driving schools. Gone for good will be the traffic police department that books traffic offenders. Bye-bye also to parking lot attendants, as the cars will be able to navigate their way to the appropriate lot themselves.

GOODBYE, OLD FAITHFUL

But the greatest casting away of gadgets and devices that are absolutely indispensable for the productive life today is coming in the next few years. The Singularity will obsolete even the human person in the productivity process. Futurists say it could come as early as 2020.

June 8 2013

The Pride of India

The sight of a Premier Padmini, the present Indian version of a now antique Fiat model of about half a century ago, plying the modern highways of a modern city like Dubai, overtaken and bypassed by sleek Japanese, European and American cars, is a pathetic reflection of our past leaders' failure in visioning what free trade could have done for this great nation whose people, in the sight of the West, 'read maths equations like poetry'. It took the persuasions of the World Bank and International Monetary Organization, and the consequences of global trade limitations caused by its economic policies, to cause the government to finally open up the market.

If this nation, in 10 years could lead the world in IT, what could it have done in 50 years, since independence?

When some years ago, a dealer in UK ordered several of the country's iron boxes on wheels, which their manufacturers had proudly named 'Ambassador' – perhaps thinking it was an exemplary envoy of India's automobile industry - the news was reported prominently in the Indian newspapers, and the order reportedly was a matter of pride for the car's creators.

What they overlooked, perhaps deliberately – as this bit of information was also mentioned in the same news - was that the cars were purchased for display in an *antique* automobiles showroom in England, for collectors who specialized in the quaint sedans of the 50s and 60s.

January 27 2003