

The Weaving of Lelonia: Envisioning an ideal society

**By
Tom Gnagey**

**A publication of the
Family of Man Press**

©2008, 2014

CHAPTER ONE: How Things Were As recorded by Thomas, the Scribe

[*The time is anytime. The place is anyplace
– in this context, the small, sovereign, country of Lelonia.*]

Like the headwaters of its many streams, Lelonia had its birth in the high green hills of the west and cradled those waters east to the gently breaking blue waves of the ocean. The dense, billowing, mist of the highlands drew a dramatic contrast in tone and character to the hushed, undulating slips of froth playfully flooding and receding on the russet sands of the ocean shore. The mists stood like sturdy, steadfast, sentinels against invaders from beyond, allowing the froth to play in innocent safety on the beach.

The setting was ideal with adequate rain, moderate temperatures, sunshine almost daily, and fertile plains to support the needs of the citizens. There were the hills for recreation, orchards, and vineyards, the beach for sunning and swimming, and the streams for fishing and boating.

Washopolis, the capital, was the sole true city and sat near the center of the country. There were dozens of smaller villages spread throughout. In its totality, Lelonia was smaller than Switzerland but larger than Belgium, nearly square, and roughly 125 miles on all sides. A century before, English had been declared the official language. That was no longer the case, but such things will be considered later.

The area's history had been agrarian with a brief period of mining – primarily iron and coal. The iron had run dry decades before. The forests provided a plentiful supply of wood for building and heating, and small game for the tables. The beautiful beaches gently rolling, forested hills, held grand possibilities for supporting a thriving tourist industry.

Realizing the futility of mounting a defense against the larger countries that surrounded it, the military had been disbanded – but again, I get ahead in the story.

During the decades leading up to the time of this story, Lelonia had been in chaos. Taxes were high. Services were poor. Lawless bands roamed and ruled the countryside. Politicians were crooked. Citizens were angry and their tempers, volatile. The deceit, discontent, and mounting impatience had led to the rapid demise of dozens of Leaders who had been unable to provide immediate ways of quelling the mob mentality and solving the more basic problems of the country – the economy, taxes, low wages, high prices, inferior goods, services and food, and inadequate resources for education, child care, and old age.

And so in that day, in Lelonia, there existed a smoldering *tinderbox*.

But also, in that day, in Lelonia, there existed a remarkable young man, *Marcus*.

If Lelonia and its people were going to survive, strong, insightful, creative new leadership was required. The timeless and fundamental merits of Truth had become tired memories buried in the rubble of the distant past. The citizens of Lelonia, in their moment of fear-filled desperation, had been attracted to several

important attributes they agreed were true about Marcus.

It was universally agreed that he was not merely charismatic but in most ways was rare among men. He was brilliant beyond genius. He was faultlessly compassionate and a fully altruistic individual. He was wise beyond his years. He naturally understood the subtlest needs of people. He was able to quickly and accurately assess the immediate features and long-term implications of situations. He avoided placing blame, choosing instead to fix things so similar problems or unhelpful situations would not again emerge to disrupt the positive orderliness of life; vengeful tendencies were therefore not a part of his being. He was a political outsider with no axes to grind and no hidden obligations to fulfill. As the leader that Lelonia required, he was that one in a million person who most folks believed could handle the job – a job at which so many others had failed in recent years. Marcus was appointed Leader by near acclimation of the country's several million citizens. Marcus was seventeen.

In the flow of this remarkable story, that appointment had occurred a generation past. My name is Thomas. Marcus and I have been forever friends. We were born within days of each other and lived our early lives as inseparable next-door neighbors – giggling ourselves to sleep in the same bed most nights. Together we discovered the wonders of life. We pondered man's inane, repetitive, rush into fully irrational and potentially devastating pitfalls while marveling at the grand possibilities tucked away within the same being.

Marcus and I have come by a good balance between us. If I have a gift it is the ability to ferret out significant problems before they arise. My basic stance has been that of the vigilant pessimist, admittedly not the most blissful way to live one's life. Marcus is a dogged, optimistic, problem solver. He never contemplates the possibility of failure. He believes that you only fail when you choose not to get up and try again. Success always awaits. My inclination toward gloom provides a counterweight to his overconfidence in man's positive potential and his tendency to overlook our species' darker side. As I said, we have struck a useful and productive balance.

Marcus had already become a successful 'activist for good' by the time he was six. He quelled fist fights on the playground, nipped foundless gossip in the bud and consoled girls whose romantic advances were not returned by the boys of their dreams. It has been my life-long privilege to carefully chronicle my dear friend's triumphs. He would never use that word – triumphs. He would prefer phrases like logical conclusions or universally helpful solutions or, even, growth-producing events. He has never commandeered credit for what he says could not have taken place without the toil and successes of others. And, in a caring society that should always be the case – cooperative consideration and effort.

I have struggled to maintain a vocabulary equal to his. He believes the larger it becomes the more precisely one can think and that without precision in thought, detrimental and erroneous interpretations will inevitably occur. It was also why he became fluent in a half dozen languages – different languages view reality in slightly different ways adding additional dimensions to the accuracy of thought. I often chuckle to myself as he says, "I must contemplate that in French (or German, or Russian, or Arabic, or Mandarin, or Yiddish) tonight." He always

searches for that edge that may provide more clarity or some new insight. He is a remarkable bundle of ever-focused, inexorable, energy.

During our country's darkest days, I felt compelled to recount for posterity the story of how Lelonia was reborn – rewoven – under his leadership. The story may seem to proceed with irregular starts and stops – such is the course of any worthwhile undertaking. As Marcus points out, repetition within new contexts allows – often forces – new insights.

There was an old man who lived in the hills – Sagacious was his name; he was a writer and above all others he was respected for his wisdom and insights. A group of leaders from across the country approached him hoping for a thoughtful suggestion that would save Lelonia from its rush toward self-destruction. Sagacious was Socratic in his approach. He had many questions for the delegation. In the end, he led them toward the formation of a three-step strategy: agree on and clearly state the problems, formulate a plan to handle them, find a strong leader who can carry it out. Since it had been born of their deepest concerns and created by their own suggestions, the populace readily agreed to allow a reasonable period for it all to develop and succeed.

Stage one was to specify exactly the dozen or so primary concerns of the citizens. Fewer would risk important omissions; more would be cumbersome. This was to come as the result of a hundred gatherings around the country – each village hosting a series of informal get-togethers during which they would come to an agreement on just what those major concerns were. All ages from ten on were to be included and it was agreed that all those who wanted to speak would be given an open minded, attentive audience.

Those final lists accompanied two elected delegates from each village to a national discussion, the purpose of which was to agree upon a single list of the most pressing concerns. In the end, fourteen became preeminently evident, the details of which are mostly irrelevant since the wisdom of Sagacious was not so much in the list, itself, but in the cooperative, gentile, focused, problem solving process the plan had set in motion.

The finalized list was carried back to each village and the call went out for local citizens – again from age ten up – to submit plans to solve the problems and redesign the government into a fair, far reaching, citizen centered, framework. Dozens upon dozens of plans were proposed – at least one from each village. Again, the wisdom of the Sagacious plan was as much in having large numbers of citizens seriously considering the solution as it was in finding that final plan. They were all discussed at length and given careful scrutiny so the best one or two from each place could be approved for submission to a central panel for final consideration. There were several criteria set forth upon which each proposal would be judged. Did it handle each of the fourteen primary problems earlier agreed upon? Was each of the methods for attaining the desired changes acceptable to the citizens? Did it consider, maintain, and guarantee each citizen's rights for freedom, dignity, justice, and inclusion? Did it hold promise of representing a system of governing that could stand the tests of time – in comfort and freedom – beyond the present crisis?

One hundred and eleven plans were submitted to the newly formed and intentionally temporary *National Council*. With two elected representatives from each village it was cumbersome in size but unmistakably representative and focused in function. There were old folks, middle-aged folks, and young folks. There were bright folks and not so bright folks. There were those with both eloquent and non-eloquent tongues. There were males and females. There were professionals and non-professionals, educated, and less educated. The single guiding principle was that everyone deserved a respectful and patient hearing from all the others. That had not been the case during the decades just past. Raised voices had replaced reason. Fists and worse had replaced discussion. Polarization of viewpoints had replaced compromise and consensus.

The national meeting went on for nine weeks. From the day of the trek up the hillside to find and consult Sagacious, until each village approved the final plan, four months had elapsed. To the amazement of most, during that period a huge portion of the anger and volatility had subsided and, even without any new programs, life was generally better than it had been for years. The most thoughtful among the citizens understood what was taking place. The others happily accepted it. A handful of incorrigibles continued to plunder and do harm; they seemed incapable of positive, mutually productive social interaction. Marcus had plans for them.

Finally, at the request of the *National Council*, each community drew up a list of personal traits that would be needed in a Leader if he or she were to be able to carry out such a plan and maintain the respect and cooperation of the citizens. Each village began a diligent search for such a person. In light of the desperation and universally acknowledged impending national collapse, egos were by and large set aside in deference to the greater good. Candidates were selected and the vote was taken.

The winner proved to have three, significant, qualities. He was the author of the winning plan. He possessed, in aces, every one of the necessary traits set down and agreed upon by the citizens. And, he was the great nephew of Sagacious. A trifecta of sorts.

Being a leader had not been among Marcus's plans for his life. Being the head of government most certainly had not. Being responsible for the very life of his nation was an overwhelming assignment he would have never sought. Still, without so much as a wince or a protestation, without a whimper or a 'why me', Marcus nodded his acceptance and received the scepter, which had been associated with the office of Leader for two hundred years.

His first official act was to place that symbol on display in the city square stating that from that point on it was to be considered the symbol not of one man but of everyman because the success of the new government – the new Lelonia – would rise or fall on the participation, integrity, and compassion of every citizen, within every village and family, every day. The act immediately endeared him to the people. They understood that they had found their Leader. How long they would be content to wait for results remained the unknown factor.

Marcus and I returned to his quarters after the inauguration ceremony.

"You will stay by my side through all of this, won't you?" he asked me.

It was less a question than it was a renewal of the life-long bond of forever friendship between us. It had never really been spoken so I felt no need for words. I smiled into his face. He understood it was my pledge. His hand quivered as he placed it on my shoulder. I returned mine in kind. It was cause for another smile between us. That was not the first quiver we had shared in our lives. There would be others.

“The people need something solid immediately – today,” he said removing his shoes and lolling onto the couch. “It must be simple and yet profound. It must be immediately helpful – show promise of immediate change for the better.”

He grew quiet and closed his eyes. Presently, he sat up.

“Try this on for me. During this first month of our new government each citizen is asked to become engaged in fixing or beginning to fix one social ill in his neighborhood. It may be simple and straight forward or the initiation of something more complex and long-term: cleaning up the roadways or parks, or repairing the home of an aging resident, or providing day care for working families, or starting a community garden, tutoring, or whatever jumps out at *them* as an unmet, yet immediately solvable need.”

“Interesting. It certainly fits with the basic belief statement you are going to ask us all to accept and act on in our daily lives: *‘If everybody treats his family and neighbors this hour the way I treat my family and neighbors this hour, the World will become a happier, safer, more growth producing place.’* Some will grumble, of course. Some may even refuse to participate. I imagine most will rush to embrace it, however.”

“We will see, I guess. I am going to propose a form of it as the sole rule – law – we will have in Lelonia.”

“Really! Astounding! Replace our thousands upon thousands of laws with something so simple and yet something so universally applicable. It just may work. I’ll share my reservations about it later. What about age limits for this first step – the find and fix a social ill initiative?”

“Ah, good point. How does ten and up sound? It follows the limits set by our ad hoc leaders during the planning process so our citizens are used to it.”

“How about ten and up with even younger children engaged to help according to their skills and level of maturity? Early participation in good works will be the key to long-term success for such a plan.”

“Yes. We’ve often spoke of it. It is set, then. Now, we need a way to get the word out?” he said.

“Yes, indeed. A method more efficient than any we now have. Inadequate communication and the intentionally deafened ears of those who have received it have been at the seat of many of our problems. But how?” I asked.

“Once again you toss the question back at me. You’re right it should be my decision. It brings into focus one glaring problem we have while at the same time providing the opportunity to solve another. I have long been distressed that our people have been left in the dark about most important governmental matters.”

“Many could have cared less, you realize,” I added just to keep his

thinking realistic.

“I have a plan that will keep everyone informed about everything of importance whether they think they want to know or not.”

“I’m listening.”

“A three pronged communication chain.”

He stopped as if his explanation had been sufficient. I did my furrowed brow reaction – a long established signal between us that he needed to disclose more. He nodded. I believe he always appreciated that. Above all else, Marcus wanted to make his thoughts clear. He often said, ‘Big words for precise thinking and small words for precise communication’. I thought it represented a grand level of insight.

“There will be many pieces of information each week that will need to be passed on to our citizens. How can we make sure everyone receives them in a timely manner? Here is the answer. I will pass the information on to *you*. *You* will tell three others who will be your regular chain links – contacts. Each of them relays the message to their three regular chain links and so on. Within hours everybody in the land will be informed. It dawns on me that we need an equally effective reverse chain so I can hear their questions and responses and ideas. We will need to set up a reverse chain as well. Can you see to that?”

“I can and I’m impressed with the arrangement even though it has several flaws – flaws we will certainly learn how to fix. Everybody will necessarily be informed about the outgoing messages because they will be part of the chain passing them along. In addition, each person will repeat the message three times, by then certainly learning its contents. Then, a sizable number of folks will be apprised of problems and ideas that are being sent back here for consideration. They can add insights and possible solutions and further observations as things are funneled back here. Ingenious! Talk about a completely informed citizenry. I’ll bet no country ever had such a thing before. Yes, I will get on it immediately. Is that the name for me to use: communication chain?”

“There must be something better. Let’s see. You got anything?”

I thought. Marcus thought. He spoke first.

“*Enlightenment Network* maybe EnNet for short. It goes a step further than mere communication. It emphasizes the purpose and suggests a degree of personal responsibility.”

“I like it.” Enlightenment Network it will be. You know, if this undertaking – the rebuilding of our nation – weren’t so pants wetting frightening, it could be fun.”

“Why don’t we agree together right here and now that in spite of the fright, we will make every effort to keep it fun?”

“Was that really a question?”

“I guess not. Just figured you’d agree. It’s how we’ve always operated, right?”

“Right. Okay, then. Fun, fun, fun! As soon as I put on some dry pants I’ll get that enlightenment thing rolling.”

“Joker.”

“I wish.”

It left my friend wondering and my quick exit disallowed his further exploration of the truth about my moisture issue. In my absence, Marcus did some quick mental calculations – multiplying out the sequences of threes: $3 \times 3 = 9$, $3 \times 3 = 27$, $3 \times 3 = 81$, and so on. Within fourteen steps – links in the network – the entire one and a half million adult citizens could be reached. Allowing time for the word to travel from village to village he calculated any message could be delivered to everyone in from four to six hours – less time when necessary. It was even better than he had dreamed. Time would tell and adjustments would be made as required. The first two problems of the new era had been handled.

Marcus was determined to make his government as truly tied to each citizen as possible. He was also committed to cutting the national spending to the bone while still offering those services not reasonably possible from other sources. He would have to build-in a way to keep track of the incoming communications he was going to encourage and to do so at a minimal cost. His Plan had included a massive volunteer corps. Perhaps that would be his starting place.

During the next forty-eight hours the network was established and I must admit I was surprised at how well – enthusiastically, even – it was accepted. Folks suddenly felt important – essential, for a change. They had a necessary part to play in the larger context and would be privy to what was going on in their government. On their own they made certain every adult had a place in the chain. Hope rose. For me, it made our responsibility for success even more frightening. For Marcus, it became a good omen.

I use the word ‘our’ at Marcus’s insistence. We have always been a team in his eyes. We have, but I understood that my role was negligible. I had been reliably blunt and forthright in my assessment of his ideas and plans and he in his responses to me. It had always worked to build things that were better than either of us could have created alone. We recognized that at an early age. Brothers – twins, even – could not have loved and respected each other more.

That bond emerged from several sources. Clearly, we were genetically prone to be loving individuals. Also, and there is no gentle way of saying this, he and I were drawn to each other because we were both oddballs – out of the ordinary in our thoughts and actions. Early on, we were ostracized by the other children who were admonished by their parents not to get involved with us.

For example, at nine Marcus had been forbidden from returning to Sunday School because he asked the wrong – difficult and probing – questions and proposed alternative scenarios that were immediately threatening to the basic teachings of our church. Like him I seldom accepted any unexplored ideas at face value so I exited the program with him. We held our own philosophic discussions each Sunday morning – usually in our tree house or, weather permitting, while skinny-dipping in one of the several streams in our area. Not in church! Making up our own religion! Cavorting naked in the streams! Such was the stuff of the fully unacceptable in our little village.

As we grew older and the other kids became less tied to their parent’s admonitions, things changed. By the time he was thirteen Marcus had emerged

from childhood sporting an alluring charisma that drew others to him. Partly it was his wonderful, ever-present, smile. Partly it was the way he always listened and looked you squarely in the eyes while conversing. Partly it was his good looks and athletic build. Mostly it was his personality – accepting, nonjudgmental, compassionate, and above all else, helpful. Well, I mentioned all that before. Still, he became popular despite his continuing out of the ordinary behaviors and ways of thinking.

In those quarters where I was accepted, it was mostly because Marcus and I were seen as joined at the hip – if you wanted Marcus you got me as part of the package. I remained plain looking and fragile with ears too large and hair too frazzled. I found that maintaining eye contact was all quite unnerving and though I was basically inclined to be a good and helpful person I often had difficulty initiating such things. I have always been more the evaluator than the initiator. Marcus just barges in wherever he sees a need and proceeds to fix it whether asked or not.

There is something else that drew us together. It involves the greatest sadness a child can experience and I will present that in the next chapter as I try to build the necessary background for this chronicle.

CHAPTER TWO: The Calamity

It had been our combined, eighth birthday party. We always celebrated together having been born just four days apart. (I am the older but would never lord that over Marcus – well, maybe sometimes!) After the others had gone home and the sun had set and we had time to play with our new toys, my mother tucked us into my bed and we were soon asleep – fully tuckered out from the daylong festivities.

Near mid-night I felt Marcus pushing on my ribs.

“Wake up,” He whispered. “Something’s going on outside.”

We left the bed and carefully approached the window – carefully because it was a dangerous time – nighttime in our isolated rural village. We looked down on the scene below. A band of the *Despicables* had come to town. They were roaming groups of outlaws that took what they wanted and hurt and killed for the sport of it. There was no effective police force left to deal with them. Mother said they were sick. Father said they were murderers and deserved to be hung. Regardless of which was correct, terrible events unfolded as we watched.

“Leave us alone,” my father shouted from the porch below us.

“And why should we do that?” came the taunting response from the group’s leader.

He was an overly large man, unshaven for years, with the kind of shiny skin that came from months without bathing. His hair was tied back and a red bandana was drawn tightly around his forehead. They carried shotguns – a few pistols – and all had knives slipped into their belts. I counted ten of them.

The leader walked toward my father. I could make out his sneer in the moonlight. He moved out of our sight under the porch roof; we heard the scuffle that ensued. Marcus’s father opened his door across the street and seeing the problem walked in quickstep to aid my father. The two of them were no match for the gang – unarmed and unaccustomed to fighting as they were.

Our fathers were dragged out into the center of the street and threatened with guns to their heads. They were knocked to the ground and kicked viciously. Marcus started to call out but I clapped my hand over his mouth. It couldn’t help and most certainly would make things worse. He turned his head and nodded that he understood. I removed my hand. We felt helpless, of course, and scared like we had never felt scared before. We clung to each other, trembling, suddenly knowing each other’s racing heartbeats.

The *Despicables* laughed, taking obvious pleasure as they inflicted increasingly worse pain on the helpless men laying there on the ground. We winced and turned our heads though still maintained the scene in sight. The move was intended to somehow ease our pain about it all. It didn’t. Tears began to stream and drop into pools on the windowsill.

The bad men seemed incapable of talking without swearing – cursing better described it as it was filthy talk; I knew that much even though I couldn’t claim to really understand its meaning.

Our father’s bodies lay there, motionless. We wondered if they were

dead. I supposed they were. Marcus would withhold judgment until he was sure. Soon we would be sure. The leader put his shotgun to my father's head and pulled the trigger. He moved to Marcus's and did the same. We screamed and beat on the window. My mother rushed into my room. We turned and buried our faces in her bosom, for some time sobbing the sobs of all sobs. We heard the men depart leaving a trail of laughter and threats in their wake.

Marcus was the first to return to the window.

"Mother," he called seeing her rushing from their house onto the street below.

He turned and before either mother or I could restrain him he was down the stairs and outside, running to meet her. His mother pulled him into a full embrace and they sank to their knees together beside his father. Mother and I soon joined them. Presently, many of our neighbors spilled onto the street and surrounded us. The women sobbed. The men expressed outrage. I had to wonder why the men among them had waited so long to show themselves. Now I can understand they had taken the only sensible approach but I couldn't see that as a child. I waded into the crowd flailing my fists at anybody sporting trousers. Mother soon corralled me. She and I accompanied Marcus and his mother to their house. The others arranged for the bodies and such. It was the last time we saw our fathers, such as they were lying their faceless on a crimson sea.

To this moment the memory of that vision returns the frightened child to my chest. I relive the heartbeat and the heavy breathing. I feel the heat of Marcus beside me and realize that my rock in the world was just as frightened as I was. I feel the loss and the abject helplessness. In those short moments my mother became a hundred times more important to me, a hundred times more precious to me. In some way I had to make sure that she would never be taken away.

During the weeks that followed I became her shadow. The same scenario developed across the way. Sometimes Marcus and I would meet at the center of the street and chat nervously as we kept watch into the open front doors of our houses. Those conversations never included the tragedy. It was many months before we took that up between us. It happened one Sunday morning.

"So, tree house or stream this morning?" I asked.

"How about the cemetery?" he said measuring his words and studying my face more intently than usual.

I knew it had been a suggestion pending my approval.

"Won't be easy. Haven't been there since that day. You going to be okay if we go out there?" I asked, really wondering if I would be. Marcus understood. Marcus always understood.

"We can stop at the gate and see how we feel."

"Then we can sort of edge our way on in if it seems right."

"Sounds okay to me."

We took our time crossing town, easily allowing ourselves to be distracted by squirrels, birds, and such – even the suddenly darker blue-green color of the moss on the big oak tree in front of Doc Wilson's office required our prolonged

attention and discussion. We talked in distractions avoiding the topic that was really on our minds. Death is a fully perplexing subject at eight. I fully expect it may still be perplexing at a hundred and eight. What we knew for sure was the hurt and loneliness and fear, and how none of that was going away. I'm not sure that we expected any of that would change by a simple visit to our fathers' final resting places, as the minister had referred to the dank, deep, moist holes cut so precisely into the black soil.

"If he really meant *final* resting place," Marcus said at last, "He must not really believe in Heaven."

I didn't respond, understanding it was merely the kernel of a concept he would continue to explore. Under other circumstances I would have smiled. That day our mission was just too serious – to all-consuming.

The rusted, wrought iron, sign that arched above the gate was unimaginative – *CEMETERY*. As boys will do, we had often joked about this and that associated with such places – ghouls, ghosts, and otherworldly phenomena. It was like an inoculation that most kids come upon and self-administer. That day no jokes came to mind. We stopped at the gate and as one, breathed a heavy sigh.

Eventually, Marcus took the first steps inside. *His* seemed determined. I followed more tentatively but then caught up to walk side by side with him. I reached out and took his hand. He squeezed it and turned his head to look me in the face. I managed a faint smile. It was returned with a reassuring nod. I think we were both surprised that we just kept moving forward. We came upon my father's grave first. A few sprigs of grass had begun to unfold atop the low mound of hard packed, rich looking, dark, earth. My first impulse was to pluck them from the soil. Once it had grassed over, he would seem even further removed from me.

A temporary wooden marker was in place. It bore his name and the dates of his life. An indecently insignificant statement, I thought. I knelt. It seemed the thing to do. Since I refused to release my friend's hand he was forced to kneel beside me. I realized that wasn't his sort of thing but also knew there would never be a complaint about it.

"I'd like to talk to him," I said looking toward Marcus hoping for some response. "Would that be dumb? I know he's dead and can't hear?"

"It would only be dumb if you think it is. The soul thing, remember. It may be true. It's one of the unprovables in this life. Who knows? How can it hurt? You want to talk, talk!"

I nodded, maintaining it longer than reasonable but filling time as I decided what to say. Finally, I began.

"Father. It's me, Thomas, your son. I don't know if you can hear me but I need to say some things. Marcus is here with me in case you can't see things. First, I really do know it isn't your fault that you died but I'm still really mad at you for dying. Mother and I really miss you and life is going to be really hard on us without you. I always figured that if anything did happen to you I'd have Marcus's father to help fill in for you. Now I don't even have that – they killed him, too, in case you didn't know. I'm mad at the other men in our neighborhood, too. They

didn't come to help you. I haven't been able to speak to any of them since. I cry a lot. Some of it is because you died. Marcus says some of it's because I'm feeling sorry for myself. I know part of it is because I am so scared about what's going to happen to Mother and me. I also wanted to tell you how much I love – loved – no, *love* you and I want to thank you for raising me up proper and everything. I guess that's all – for now, anyway. If I think of anything else I'll come back later. And, oh yes, thanks for being my Father. . . . Goodbye – for now – I guess.”

“Amen,” Marcus added with a single, firm nod.

It puzzled me.

“Amen?” I asked as we got back to our feet.

“It means, ‘So be it.’ I figured what you said needed a, ‘So be it’. That’s all. It was really great what you said. It is amazing about us. What you said is exactly what I’ve been turning over and over in my head – anger, fear, uncertainty, trepidation, love.”

(As I mentioned, Marcus was into big words from an early age. I let them swirl about me like some wonderful fragrance, which I could not yet identify.)

We moved on toward his Father’s grave. He didn’t kneel. I knew he wouldn’t. He folded his arms across his chest and just looked down at the wooden cross. He shook his head. I knew he was thinking the same thing I had thought. We would find a way to get suitable markers in place.

He cleared his throat as if he were going to speak. I was surprised because I was sure he didn’t believe in talking with the dead. He made it short and sweet.

“What Thomas said.”

We stood there in silence for some time. At last he sighed a huge sigh and turned to me.

“Ready for a dip in the stream?”

“Always ready.”

We usually chatted non-stop when we played in the water. That day we were uncharacteristically quiet. Every once in a while one of us would force a phrase, just because, but nothing of significance surfaced. The water was always cool. The sun was always warm. The gentle breeze that often moved from the ocean shore, across the plains, and up the slope to the western hills was somewhere in between frigid and warm depending on one’s degree of wetness in the open air. We soon tired of the water and lay out in the grass to air dry.

The *Despicables* let children alone so we had little fear of being hurt should they come along. I wondered how I would react the next time I saw them. I knew what my instinct would be but acting on it could only come to no good.

“What about the *Despicables*?” I said tossing it out as a conversation opener.

“They will be the ruination of our country – if the corruption of the politicians doesn’t destroy us first. That’s what Father always said. There is no controlling either. They’re both robbing us blind. The politicians take our tax money and the *Despicables* take our possessions and good men. Neither is

worse than the other. It's a sad time in Lelonia, Thomas."

"And we're just two kids. What can we do?"

"I like the question. I don't like that, 'just kids,' reference. It implies you've given up, that you don't believe in us – yourself and me."

We grew quiet. What had just been said pretty well characterized our differing approaches to life. We often laughed about it and mocked each other playfully. Suddenly, all of that seemed for kids. Suddenly, we seemed less kids than ever before. We spoke of it then and there – moving up a notch from kid to something greater. I hated the change. Marcus reveled in it.

Since his life was clearly transformed that morning, taking on new meaning and direction, so was mine – reluctantly, you must understand. We had always been inseparable. We had always depended upon each other above everyone else. Now, with our Fathers gone and our country in turmoil, we closed ranks even more. We became the Marcus-Thomas.

As the birthdays passed – nine, ten, eleven, twelve – we deliberately set out to do what we could to keep things alive and well in our small village. Marcus was an idea factory. We enlisted the help of the ministers and professional people and kept the school open. We rallied and organized the teenagers and were able to keep the parks safe for children and families – free from would be troublemakers. When community services such as trash pickup, police, and firemen were discontinued due to budgetary shortfalls, we helped organize volunteer groups to fill in. When tragedies struck we organized help groups, rebuilding homes and business that were torched by the bands of outlaws, and staffing our small hospital with aids – largely teenage girls.

How could two boys – outcasts during most of those years – manage such things? Marcus called it, 'seeping the subconscious', and he became the master at its use. It was something his Uncle Sagacious had demonstrated time and time again. Marcus developed it as a remarkable skill. To transform our ideas – mostly his ideas – into action, he would make short, pointed, clear, suggestions in the presence of those adults we thought would be most able to initiate them. Before the ideas could be set aside or Marcus could be put down as merely a kid, he would change the topic to something that fully distracted and engaged the adults' minds.

Within days, the seed he had planted, surfaced as a plan by the 'seeped' adults. Since they believed it was *their* doing, it became acceptable. I lost count of the number of times Marcus worked his seeping magic. It numbered into the hundreds.

As we matured, Marcus became handsome, well built, and popular. I just matured. It was always okay between us. I shunned the spotlight. The mere thought of it caused saliva to flood my mouth and initiated that tell-tale quivering deep within my gut. Although Marcus did not seek recognition or popularity, it soon became clear to us that it was his inevitable destiny. By the time we were fourteen he had an ever-trailing bevy of girls from which to choose. We had to get past his guilt over him being the *have* and I being the *have not in* that department. By fifteen it was no longer an area of contention. Eventually Agnes and I found each other and we have remained close to this day – two plain

goslings maturing together into loving and compatible, if awkward and tentative, goose and gander. Because of the transformation our lives took as seventeen year olds, neither Marcus nor I married. Our lives were solely dedicated to the cause of rebuilding and sustaining Lelonia.

There were other landmark events that are worth noting here. Discontent continued to grow and our country became more like a collection of city-states than a single nation. The central government, although it continued to exist, lost respect and support and fell into a long period of powerlessness outside of the capital walls. Numerous Leaders were elected and just as quickly sent packing. Becoming Leader came to be an opportunity to loot the treasury and escape to some country from which extradition was impossible – and that would have been most any country. The judges of the land were put in place by powerful interests and were expected to express their appreciation in biased rulings. For all intents and purposes, national services ceased to exist. The forestry division allowed over logging. The fish and game division looked the other way as big business over fished and over hunted. The streams became polluted from industrial waste. The air became heavy from the uncontrolled and indiscriminate black belching of the chimneys. The once unspoiled ocean shore became infested with the refuse of the world. The literacy rate sank. Infant death rate increased. Migration out of the country doubled and tripled and more – primarily the educated and professional people. Disease spread. Animals and people suffered and died. Our once proud, once pristine, once productive Lelonia degraded into the cesspool of the continent.

As happens with the degradation of literacy and education, the citizens had few resources – in terms of knowledge or technology – with which to help them cope. Those things lead, of course, to ignorance, which leads to lives ruled by unfounded lore, fear of the unexplainable, and rumor. In a single generation Lelonia had slipped from a well-ordered showplace to a land of chaos and misery. Our village remained the sole oasis in it all and had we not shut our borders to outsiders that, too, might well have gone the way of the rest of the country.

As always happens when groups are set adrift in these ways, leaders, of one stripe or another, surface to take advantage of the floundering, disengaged, populace, and seize control for their own personal gain. The first to emerge were the bands of *Despicables* who ruled by terror. They were local and unorganized on any large scale. Contentious, neighboring, groups soon killed each other off, again leaving the citizens to fend for themselves. For whatever reason, several moderately strong, foresighted, leaders came forth the year of our seventeenth birthday. They were inept at governing and unimaginative in general, but had the good sense to understand that. It is when and why they decided to approach Sagacious who had fled into the hills some years earlier.

Sagacious was a wise man – brilliant and thoughtful and had written dozens of locally beloved books. Like his great nephew, Marcus, he shunned the spotlight but would not run from it in his country's darkest moment. Marcus and I had visited him often and at his feet learned much about life, philosophy, and the ways of the human mind. When the several leaders agreed to consult with him it

was Marcus and I who showed them the way to his isolated cabin in the forest in the hill country.

The old man had been preparing for years, knowing just what he thought could save the country. He had patiently waited for the right moment. The populace must come to him. He knew that even a person of his stature could not just inflict a plan on the people. The several crucial factors had at long last come together – the collapse of the government, the emergence of a set of reasonable, altruistically motivated leaders, and the preparedness of Sagacious. It was not known at that time, of course, but the person who would lead the country back to greatness had already been prepared and was waiting in the wings. That future leader was as unaware of it as anyone.

The plan was soon set and I have described it earlier: have the people agree on the important problems, develop a plan from and approved by the people, and find the Leader essential to its success.

As a glimmering of hope amid desperation will do, a land swell of interest and enthusiasm was immediately generated by the mere possibility of change. Beginning by having the citizens list their concerns was a stroke of genius – well the old man was a genius, something that also followed Marcus into the world. From the outset, everybody came to believe that his or her concerns were going to be considered. It's hard to get more personally relevant than that. Virtually everybody contributed to phase one. Far fewer engaged in writing plans. They understood they were not up to such a challenge. For many it underscored the importance of education – something that had dropped low on most folks' priority list during their generation-long struggle to survive.

They remained interested in the progress of those who had opted to write plans and listened and offered many suggestions. That discussion became the main social activity in many areas of the country. In our village more plans were produced than in others. It stemmed from our historic insistence on maintaining educational activities and our ability to continue a higher standard of living than was the case elsewhere.

The development of 'our' Plan deserves considerable space so it will consume most of the next several chapters.

CHAPTER THREE: The Basics

“You’re going to submit a plan, of course,” I said to Marcus as I finished reading the flyer over his shoulder.

“We are, my friend. We’ve already all but written it over the years. Finally, getting kicked out of Sunday School is going to pay off – all those Sunday mornings we got to spend musing over the great questions of our time. This one is ours, *compadre*. Ours!”

I wasn’t as sure as Marcus but his enthusiasm and positive attitude always sucked me along – filled me with hope and helped me believe in positive possibilities. He had seldom been wrong in such matters and we had engineered – if all quite unnoticed behind the scenes – a revitalized and well working village right here. Perhaps there was more than mere enthusiasm into which I should be tuning. My spirits buoyed somewhat. For me, ‘somewhat’ represented a major gradient jump.

“Tree house or stream?” I asked anticipating a prolonged brain storming session – excuse me, *mind* storming session. Marcus drew a major distinction between brain – the organ – and mind – the processes. It would be the processes that would be essential here.

“Tree house. You will need to take copious notes. If we come to an impasse we can hit the stream.”

He handed the flyer to me. For most of our lives I had been both the scribe and the caretaker of our things. I tucked it safely into my pocket though realized it would not be needed. Marcus had read it so he would remember the tiniest detail, down to and including the fully insignificant brown chard of wood embedded in the lower right corner of the paper.

“Shall we plan a hike up into the hills?”

My question referred to finding his uncle.

“I think we can do this by ourselves. Uncle Sag would prefer it that way. He is the most likely candidate to become our next Leader, you realize.”

I did and agreed with the contention that we should at least start the plan ourselves. I attempted to quell my growing list of reasons why it wouldn’t – couldn’t – work. There were professors and doctors, teachers and businessmen, as well as experienced government workers who would be submitting plans. What chance did a couple of still wet behind the ears seventeen year olds have? Well, actually a very good chance, I supposed, when one of them was Marcus.

When we were preschoolers the mere excitement of the event would have prompted him to challenge me to a race to the tree house. Once he understood that I never won, he stopped that. It was really not a put down for me. I realized his body was put together to race and swim and wrestle while mine more appropriately engaged in sitting and napping. I enjoyed watching him do those things and only seldom wished that I could have just one of those moments in the sun that he experienced so often. He was not a braggart and had I not witnessed the athletic events or relentlessly grilled him about them later, I would never have known of his successes. He saw no reason to beat someone by fifty

feet if he could achieve the victory with only five. He took no pleasure in humiliating anyone.

If he had a fault it was being too willing to be taken advantage of. I cautioned him time and time again, especially where girls were concerned. To be seen with him was a feather in any girl's cap (perhaps there is a better metaphor, the girls I know never wearing what might be called caps).

We reached the tree house. As kids it had seemed so spacious. That was no longer the situation but we managed. It is why I preferred the stream. His point was well taken however, water not being a good place for note taking. I kept a supply of writing pads on site.

"We will write a Republic and not a Democracy," he began. "A Democracy cannot possibly support our positive social philosophy."

"The difference, again," I asked believing I knew but wanting to make sure we were singing the same hymn."

I will summarize the essence of his response.

Lelonia, under the Marcus Plan was to be a Republic in which only certain allowable decisions were made through the power of majority dominated voting. As a Republic it was *Majority Limited* in that the basis of law, rights, and procedures was set forth in the Plan – more typically in a constitution. The rights of all citizens – including, and especially, the minorities – are protected equally in the document. No majority vote can usurp them. This is different from a Democracy which is *Majority Unlimited* in which the majority rules by vote with no demands for the protection of the minorities. The purely democratic system would not, it is obvious, accept the form of our Plan – one that saw every person as equal under its ken.

Some fool themselves into believing that a system of one person, one vote, makes everyone equal. It doesn't, of course. My one, minority, vote, if always countered by nine other votes – the majority – means I have no guarantee of rights whatsoever. In the Republic form of government my minority rights are spelled out as inalienable in the basic governing document and are protected from ever being voted away by any non-minority. Neither Marcus nor I could ever inflict a hardhearted democratic form of government on anyone.

So, it was with great care and diligence that we went about drafting our Plan – one that would protect everybody's rights and still give the people the power to make decisions within that framework. We cherished the individual's right to vote on procedural matters – who would be mayor of their village or Leader of the country; how much would be spent locally to repair Main Street; how the village school would be administered. All votes were subject to the protection of all citizens' rights as set down in the national document – The Plan.

It became a fine line sometimes. Should the tiniest religious sect be given equal say with the largest in the content of prayer at school functions? Prayer was made silent so all could have the content each preferred – or none at all for those so disposed. In a republic, truth, wisdom, and common sense are revered since so often the governing document must be interpreted and such interpretations must meet the guiding principle of a republic – *Majority Limited; Minority Protected*.

Marcus preferred, *Individual Rights Unlimited*. It was more nearly a positive approach that implied compassion and respect for diversity. Our old constitution had basically outlined a Republic. The concept of majority rule gradually worked its way into the law, however, and usurped the original intent. It happens in representative government and a republic is by definition representative. One person is elected to vote for a large block of people. If he chooses to vote against minority rights and make laws accordingly, the representative form of government can, over time, change the intent of the basic document of a Republic. We will stick with the one person one vote and a document guaranteeing equal rights and justice. It is therefore, admittedly, a modified Republican form of government.

In our document the Leader, acting according to the letter and intent of the Plan, will set the tone and structure through which government and society exist and evolve. The people can remove the Leader if adjudged to have veered from that arrangement.

We agreed that it was not a fully ideal arrangement but we have come as close as we know how. We believe that where minority rights may be impinged upon via elections (the mayor) those abused rights are never the basic, human, rights guaranteed by the Plan. It would be essentially impossible to elect a mayor, for example, that the independents, the liberals, and the conservatives could agree upon. We are not looking for a Milquetoast. If a liberal gets more votes and he operates under the specifics of the Plan, he will not impinge upon either of the other minority groups' rights. Life is complicated. Political life is very complicated. Over the years the process evolved into one that was quite acceptable to majorities and minorities alike. Consensus evolved as a comfortable, respectful, and forceful aspect of governing.

But again, I get ahead of the story. After his discourse on basic plans of government he got back to the practical aspects of our Plan.

"How about beginning with the fourteen concerns that made their ways to the top of the national list?" he asked – suggested. He dictated, subtly helping to make sure I remembered them.

- "Safety
- Lawlessness
- Government by the people
- Taxes / Government spending
- Education/Retraining
- Values (reestablishment)
- Health care
- Jobs
- Retirement security
- Childcare
- Eldercare
- Environment
- Recreation
- Culture"

I captured them on paper – one at the top of each of fourteen pages so I could organize my preliminary notes.

“We’ve dealt with most of them right here in our village,” he began, clearly looking for the best starting place. “But, will they play out differently on a national scale? We must keep that in mind. Also, regardless of which other topic we may be considering, number three on the list, government *by* the people, must remain at the forefront of our minds. Every solution and suggestion must be true to that most basic element. Its gradual erosion over the past forty years is what allowed our country to fall apart.”

“You know we won’t be able to satisfy every citizen with every decision,” I added, continuing my cautionary contributions.

“That in itself must be addressed, helping folks to willingly allow a balance between their needs and those of others. It is the very baseline of any viable definition of society. Make a note of that.”

“. . . Done!”

“Let’s just spin ideas about government in general – structure, participation, representation – things like that.”

“It must be truly representative,” I suggested giving him a springboard for further thought. Then added, “And one decision-making representative per village just won’t cut it if you ask me.”

“So, we do away with representatives. What a revolutionary concept.”

“I didn’t think I said that, Marcus.”

“Here’s what I heard. One person, one vote. It cuts out the middle man and assures that every voice is actually heard.”

“So how can we do that with over a million voters?”

“We can form block meetings or neighborhood meetings on most topics. Everybody gets their say and on national issues every vote is tabulated and sent to the central government.”

“Won’t that be terribly time consuming for the citizens. They do have to work and tend to family business, remember. And won’t they soon tire of it?”

“Again, good questions. My basic plan is to cut national involvement in local affairs to a minimum – well below what any country has ever known. Most of the decisions will only affect the locals. I imagine that will hold the citizens’ attention.”

“We’ll see how that develops, then.”

I remained skeptical and pressed on.

“Roads, waterways, forests, natural disasters, the environment in general and perhaps start-up funds for expensive, though reasonable and necessary local programs? Don’t these require a larger coordination – a national endeavor?”

“Perhaps. But even allowing that, we have already cut government by 95% over what we’ve had in the past. I want the people to tell the government what is needed and desired not the government telling the people what they need and should desire.”

“No argument from here. I just know that I, for one, am not going to want

to spend every evening of the year considering governmental issues.”

“Once the basic decisions have been made then things will just proceed more or less automatically. If a village decides to keep the streets well graveled then someone can be put in charge of doing that. If a village decides to maintain a school system then once it is designed and goals set, somebody – a school board perhaps – sees that the plan is followed and may make suggestions back to the citizens for their discussion and decisions. I envision a master plan that is more procedural than contentual – is that a word? I mean *how* we go about accomplishing things is the responsibility of the national government within the bounds of the Republic’s basic document. *What* we want to accomplish – the content – is left up to the locals.”

“Let me see if I understand. The central government might for example say that there will be neighborhood discussion and decision making groups and that the consensus of such groups are melded with others in a given village. Maybe a nationally set volunteer corps is established but just in terms of how it will work – not exactly how locals will choose to use it. Some sort of taxing structure would be a central government program but what it is to be used for, and therefore how much needs to be raised, will be up to the locals. Am I on the right track?”

“Head on. Pin point. Dead center. Exactly. Isn’t this exciting?”

“Yes. Actually it is exciting. Would it serve us well to begin by postulating those centralized dictates – I know you’ll hate that word. ‘Processes’. How about *processes*?”

“I like that. Make a list. We’ve mentioned some; environment, tax structure, volunteer *corps* – and I’m counting on that one to be at the *core* of many prongs of our program.”

I smiled at his unintentional pun. His head was so involved in the process that he missed both it and my response.

“I’ll add inter-village roads, waterways, and forest maintenance.”

“Probably international relations, commerce, and related concerns, as well,” he suggested.

“This is becoming a sizeable undertaking,” I said.

“Yes. Isn’t that great?”

My word would have been, ‘overwhelming’, but I wouldn’t burst his happy bubble by saying it out loud. I smiled and nodded. He knew my real reaction. We pretty well always knew each other’s thoughts.

Marcus took a ‘side trip’ as he often referred to his tangential mental wanderings.

“My bet is that ours, touting a tiny central government, will be quite different from the vast majority of the plans. Historically there have been three philosophies of governing: a dictatorship, which runs the whole show, those who believe people are just too dumb or uncaring to take care of their own needs so they opt for overwhelming central governmental programs; and those who believe the people should be allowed to care for themselves and their neighbors – thus proposing minimal central government.

“A dictator is out of the question now, although it could well have

happened with the disarray and desperation we have been experiencing. We were ripe to follow anybody who promised a return to a better way of life and many would have gladly given up freedoms in order to assure that. I'm afraid it is happening at this moment in Rustonia. Had one Despicable leader risen to the top and amalgamated the many isolated bands under his single leadership we would be in a very different – quite despicable – situation right now.”

We both caught and appreciated his play on words. He continued.

“A truly appalling aspect of the *big* government approach is that they either fully ignore the possibility that non-governmental agencies could provide needed services at local levels or they regulate them to death, tying their hands so they can't do their good works. A similarly appalling tendency of the *small* government approach is that while they go about cutting central government services so they can cut taxes, they seem to rely on ‘magic’ to meet the needs they no longer provide. One problem is mandating that local governments take over such services, which, of course, could bankrupt them or in the least require significantly increased local taxes (so much for those federal tax cuts). That becomes a lose-lose situation – inadequate local services breed local unrest with the central government. Poor local areas would just have to discontinue such services and accept any snowballing penalties inflicted by the central government.

“In a related matter, the small government guys seem to assume that most of the cut services will begin to be provided by people out in the real world – volunteers or business related programs – a laudable goal, I believe. However, their huge oversight is that they don't typically take the organizational or catalytic steps necessary to make sure that happens. It is the most central and consistent failure made by the small government folks. They provide no structure even in the broadest of senses; not to set up regulations but to establish the common ground on which folks can meet and plan and find funds and resources in order to meet the local needs.

“There is another issue that contrasts the big vs small government camps. The big government guys tend to take on and attack or fix any cause or process that holds even the slightest possibility of bringing harm to the people. They often begin programs to combat the potential problem well before they have significant proof or substantiation of its true magnitude and probable effects. They eagerly spend huge amounts of money and willingly raise taxes if that is necessary. It is akin to overprotecting your children so they grow up helpless.

“The small government guys tend to either ignore such potential problems (threats) or put off action until it is often too late because they are opposed to committing funds to support programs for unsubstantiated needs. They require absolute proof and by the time that comes about it is either too late or at least some portions of the population or the environment have already been devastated. The ‘almost always too late’ scenario seems to be an unavoidable aspect of the conservative approach. Some of that is tied to their skepticism of science. That may be in turn tied to the conservative religions many of them hold – beliefs that science is the work of the devil because it often works to challenge or contradict their basic religious beliefs.

“Contrary to popular belief the small government camp often finds itself in bed with big business giving it huge tax advantages, the idea being the more money businesses keep the more will be passed on to the population as a whole. Hmmm! In our recent history all the recessions have come at the hands of the conservatives. On the other hand, big government finds it easy to so over regulate and tax business that there are no profits left to spread among the people – except, perhaps from government giveaways and bailouts.

“Conservatives – the small government guys – seek solace, safety, and solutions in the ways of the past: What worked then should work now. Never change for change sake. Progressives or liberals – the big government guys – eagerly embrace change – sometimes just for change sake, it seems. They define it as progress and progress as good. That sequence holds no dependable truth in either logic or history – neither, by the way, does the status quo approach.

“So, there are these built-in key problems within both of our major political frameworks. Our plan must correct all those potential pitfalls and provide means for stabilizing situations that swing harmfully one way or the other. We must go beyond the generally accepted dichotomy of EITHER liberal OR conservative and offer something different – something that actually works. It won’t be ‘in between’. It will be ‘*different*’.

“Most of the plans, I believe, will take the liberal or sometimes called the progressive tack. They will attempt to fix things by imposing a broad range of new laws and social programs funded by increased taxes and the inevitable restrictions on citizens that follow. Our plan will be more in the conservative vein – although I hate that term and as a philosophy it falls way short of what we will be doing. I’m going to propose that, for starters at least, we refer to our approach as *Citizen-Responsible* – we can call it CR to ease communication. It will stand in stark contrast to the big government plans so folks will have an obvious choice. We can call the big government approach GR for *Government Responsible*. I suppose the pure conservative approach could be referred to as the *Citizen Adrift* – CA – approach. That may be too harsh although it seems such program cutters often do leave lots of folks abandoned and adrift.

“Why would anyone opt for the GR or CA approach?” I asked, fully mystified.

“History tells a sad story about us human beings, I’m afraid. When left to our own devices, we tend to become self-absorbed and in our rush to obtain money, power, and stuff, we all too often leave compassion and helpfulness in our wake. In such situations there would be no neighbor to neighbor caring for those in need, virtually requiring the big government politicians to take over our basic, human, responsibilities and impose their massive programs.”

“Are you saying mankind is doomed to require big government or end up in chaos?”

“Not at all. There are two fairly universal, though reversible, aspects about living, which I see in us humans that mindlessly multiply our problems. The first is our desire to keep those we care about from failing. It is an insidious tendency based in love – the very hardest sort of tendency to reverse. Kids need to be

allowed to fail. Our families let us fail and we grew strong from it. We learned that failure of a moment was not a lifelong tragedy. We came to understand that there was much of value to be gained from failure that could be learned in no other way. I once read an essay by a psychologist titled: *Encourage Your Children To Fail*. It really referred to encouraging children to *try* even when the risk factor might be high. Failing when young and in the midst of one's supportive family is the best time to learn about both the upsides to failure and the remarkable powers we each have within us to grow from failure.

"The second aspect about living is a matter of semantics – a semantic trick practiced, again mindlessly, and almost universally. We let our illogic trick us into thinking that we actually *deserve* those things we *want*. We see it on a large scale now in the actions of the Despicables. They want something and they convince themselves they deserve it – often at any cost. The fact that they haven't worked to earn it or haven't educated themselves so they can obtain it, or just remain too lazy to set and follow a plan to achieve things they want, slips into the back of the mind.

"Actually I believe we *deserve* very little in life – I mean just deserve to have it handed to us without working for it. Love, family, health, safe and compassionate surroundings, and the opportunity for knowledge, may pretty well sum those up. I'll need to think more on that".

"So, how can you be so hopeful about this smaller government plan – the CR or Citizen Responsible plan as you've called it?"

"We both know most folks are basically good people. They possess the pool of positive traits necessary to be responsible human beings. We just have to make sure the plan keeps that in the forefront of our thinking – keeps that as the most important aspect of social relationships. Too often, big government guys really don't believe in the existence of intelligent, virtuous, and compassionate abilities in anybody other than themselves. It is that *disbelief* in the positive capacity –abilities – of people in general that drives them to take care of us whether we want to be taken care of or not."

I agreed with a reluctant nod. What he said was true but I was not as confident as he that such a necessary, positive, society-wide, philosophy could become second nature. I posed my initial reservation about instituting such an element.

"There are thousands of people here in Lelonia who need immediate help. Can a CR approach possibly attend to that?"

As I asked, a familiar wave of pessimism flowed from my toes to my hairline. It felt comfortable or at least Thomas-compatible.

"Your family and mine believe in the basic goodness of mankind, right?"

"Right, although studying recent history here in Lelonia the actual truth of that belief may be brought into question."

"It has been a matter of the need continuum, I believe," Marcus began.

I sat back and gave him his head – he would take it regardless! I knew he had read widely about it.

"When the basic human needs such as food and shelter and safety are not being met it is difficult for humans to act on their best – higher – 'human' traits

and instincts. People are even given to killing and taking what they need when such situations prevail reverting to the survival level of the lower animals. Our people are not so far into that situation that we won't be able to reverse things. First, we must see that our citizens are able to find ways of meeting those most basic needs themselves. Then they will be in a position to allow their more human side to surface and reign."

"A question. How does that aspect of our plan differ from religious organizations that are already in place? They are basically altruistic, aren't they? Couldn't we begin through the vast network of churches?"

"Churches control their members through fear – fear of excommunication; fear of eternal damnation and living out eternity in a fiery hell if they don't behave themselves according to the tenets of the specific religion. There is really nothing altruistic about any of that. It is akin to a police state in which absolutely appalling suffering is inflicted on those who break the law. I think we need an entirely separate system."

"It was that exact characterization of the church that got you thrown out of Sunday School."

"I was merely asking for clarification and neither the teacher nor the minister would provide it."

"I remember. Just cautioning you to refrain from using the church analogy as we begin justifying our CR party or whatever it may become."

"A way of life. Not a party or movement. A reasoned, logical, compassionate way of living. One that is willing – eager – to learn and grow and experiment for the benefit of all our people. Churches don't allow any of those things. They are fully satisfied with their philosophy as it is and won't allow change. They won't even allow the exploration of differing points of view. Parents forbid their children to read or otherwise be exposed to such material – probably because they are afraid deep down that their children may find something that makes more sense elsewhere. That, of course, would shatter their belief system and their world of certainty would fall apart – as well it should if you ask me, but no one has."

"So, you're saying we will likely be up against many plans that tout a big government, which promise solutions and toward that end impose programs on its citizens. Our alternative will be a small central government. They justify those actions with their belief that people are too dumb or self-centered to adequately care for their own needs and the needs of others. We believe that with the basic human needs met, and a national, noninvasive, catalytic, structure in place, people will indeed be able to work to better the general human condition."

"Exactly."

"I'm impressed by one thing, Marcus."

"What?"

"The thoughtful big government guys, the thoughtful small government guys, and even most thoughtful modern day religions share a common social goal of seeing to it that people are well cared for. The approaches to that end may be quite different but the end is shared. If we could just focus on the desired product rather than arguing over the means for achieving it, much of the turmoil

in the world would certainly be quieted, wouldn't it?"

"Amen."

"*So be it.* I remember the first Amen you tossed in my direction. It was a highlight of my life. Now there have been two."

Marcus looked puzzled. It was not unexpected since he was reluctant to believe that his interaction with others could have such a profound effect. It did, minute by minute, but he didn't stop to recognize it.

With his side trip more or less completed, he returned to the actual plan and its more practical aspects.

"Let's consider the volunteer program," he began. "What aspects of life and government could it improve – with reduced government effort and expenses, both local and national?"

I opted to pursue a potential problem.

"Somewhere in all of this we may need to consider an incentive element – some reason for volunteers to keep volunteering. Face it, Marcus, the present adult generation is not really altruistic by nature – fully self-centered and highly competitive would better describe it – greedy, in fact. People have had to scramble in their own interests just to survive. Sustained volunteerism requires the opposite, I think, unless there is some other personally meaningful reason to be and stay involved."

"A firing squad in every village to handle all slackers," he said his face stern and set.

I was taken aback and showed it.

"I'm kidding, my friend. An absurd assertion often makes a point more quickly than an argument for its opposite."

I'm not sure how I had fallen for it and felt sheepish. Marcus spoke to my previous comment about motivation.

"Sadly, what you say is true. We're among the lucky ones – helpfulness and compassion playing such important roles in our upbringing. That does prove that such things can be learned and come to guide people's lives and their moment-to-moment decisions. Your point has spawned the kernel of an idea, however. Try this on for size. We propose some sort of tradeoff between taxes and time spent in volunteer hours. A voucher system, maybe. Every hour volunteering earns some credit against national taxes. Set the basic tax at some high percentage – say 50% – and let people work it down to some minimum – maybe 10%. That will depend on what becomes established as the basic budget necessary to run things nationally."

"Very interesting! I like that. Maybe it can be phased out as people learn and inculcate altruism as an important part of their personalities."

"That is the most hope-filled comment I've heard from you in months – years, maybe – *ever*, perhaps!"

I smiled as I responded.

"You have a way of engendering momentary lapses in my more comfortable basic orientation to life."

It was worth a prolonged laugh between us.

"Fun! See! I told you we would have fun with this."

“It’s a good start, I’d say. When do we get to talk about girls?”

My comment broke him up. I held onto the closest two by four hoping the structure didn’t fall under his writhing, leg-peddling, laughter.

The interplay had interrupted my ‘hope-filled’ comment. Eyes dried, I continued the thought.

“You and I understand how wonderful it makes us feel when we know we’ve been able to truly help someone or help resolve some general problem.”

“Yes. Go on.”

“My hope is that once people become engaged in altruistic acts, that they will begin doing them just because it is the right and most personally rewarding way to live – to treat each other – to train up our children.”

“Who are you and what have you done with the eternal pessimist I have grown to love and depend on?”

We laughed some more, catching and holding each other’s glance as we looked our love and respect into each other’s eyes.

“I’m still in doubt about how we will be able to make such a drastic cut in the national budget – by doing trades for volunteering.”

That was me speaking, of course.

“Here’s my thinking, Thomas. If we replace previously paid for activities, like aids in schools and hospitals, and labor, like in park and road care, we should be able to save way more than is being given up in return for the volunteering.”

“Sounds like a loss of many, many, jobs.”

“I’ll come to that.”

“Have you put a pencil to the tradeoff yet?” I asked.

“No. But it’s logical. We just have to come to a tradeoff value that favors expenses over tax revenue. How many hours a year can we expect each adult to be able to volunteer?”

It was a crucial point. I offered a first suggestion.

“How about using one hour a day as a starting point. If we envision two-adult households that would be about 700 hours a year per tax return – the equivalent of almost 18, full-time, weeks per year. We must keep in mind that income is now way below what it needs to be if families are going to be able to live comfortably so siphoning off any possible work hours must be clearly worth it.”

“The average income last time stats were gathered three years ago, was twelve thousand pockos – about a thousand a month. It needs to be what – twice that?”

“At least – let’s think in terms of thirty thousand a few years down the road.”

“Okay. That seems reasonable. The blanket income tax rate is now forty percent – although without funds for enforcement agents nobody’s been paying that much in recent years. Say we can replace half the government-funded jobs with volunteer jobs. And let’s say that such salaries represent forty percent of government expenses – I read that somewhere. That would reduce the necessary tax rate by 15% to about 25%. That’s still way too high.”

“As family income rises, and the government expenses remain pretty much the same, the tax *rate* will automatically drop. Say income increases by 2.5 times to P30,000. Forty percent of the current twelve thousand pockos (P12,000) comes to P4,800. But, that P4,800 would only represent 16% of P30,000. Surely we can find ways of cutting out another six percent.”

“See how exciting this is! It will be easy once we cut out the national health insurance and drastically cut old age benefits. And there is absolutely no reason for a little country like this to maintain an army.”

“That seems a bit drastic. People are still going to get sick and hurt and grow old.”

“Of course, but I have alternatives in mind to the current centralized programs. For example, each physician is offered a salary from his patient pool. With a base of 300 to 400 households, and with each paying P100 or so a year, the physician could easily take care of them and earn an adequate living. The insurance expenses could be cut down to just include specialists and specialized treatments all paid at the simple request of any general practitioner. In fact, each household could contribute another say P25.00 to P50.00, which would be held in a pool to take care of other medical related needs – the specialists, mental health care, hospital stays, and so on. That way the national insurance program could be cut to the bone.”

“At this rate we may pare the national budget to less than ten percent,” I said in amazement. I was still bothered by the cutting of government jobs.

“Back to the voucher/Pocko ratio,” Marcus said. “Ten percent tax on P30,000 would come to P3,000. Figuring 700 hours of volunteering per household and contemplating a revenue need reduction of 80%, we could suggest that a proposed 50% tax rate could be reduced down by volunteering to a must pay minimum level of P3,000 – from what would actually be P15,000 (at the basic 50% rate) without the reduction from volunteer hours. *That* should certainly be enough to encourage volunteer participation.”

“That would represent – P3,000 down from P15,000 – or a P12,000 tax saving. At that rate each hour of volunteering could be worth nearly P20.00. Can that be right?”

P12,000 divided by 700 volunteer hours looks like something better than P17.00 to me. Rounding up to P20.00 makes sense. Like I said, that should be plenty of incentive to be altruistic – the wrong term, of course. *Helpful*, I suppose is what it really amounts to.”

“The terminology is awkward,” I complained, then suggested, “How about shortening things to VC for Volunteer Corps and VH for Volunteer Hours. We need something more unique – special – for the word, *voucher*, too, I think.”

“How about, HPs, *Help Points*?”

“Not very classy but it says it nicely. Maybe we need to keep thinking on it.”

“We can just probably do that,” Marcus said spreading a smile.

I had another question – undoubtedly overly practical in nature.

“The amount of necessary bookkeeping for such a volunteer voucher program will be huge and could be very expensive. Who will handle that?”

“Volunteers, of course!”

CHAPTER FOUR: Big Issues, Big Struggles

There were two issues of immediate importance: jobs and lawlessness. They also seemed to be the most difficult to solve and were irrevocably tied together. Marcus had ideas, of course, but admittedly much of it was based on speculation.

“I see our approach to lawlessness as a several step program. The Prisons we have are antiquated and the punishment philosophy promulgated there is self-defeating. They are called *Correctional Programs* but we understand they are actually nothing more than *Retribution Centers*. We have no intention of ‘correcting’ on a large scale – one quick glance at the programs proves that to any ten-year-old. We are punishing, plain and simple. We are garnering society’s pound of flesh for the prisoner’s wrong doing. We regularly look the other way as fellow, incarcerated, bad guys inflict even further unpronounced – unintended – punishment on each other.

We need a totally new prison system in terms of both facilities and programs. The design of the physical structures must follow the nature of the program. The one I have in mind will require a new set of rules, thinking, and procedures for our court system. I plan to replace the punishment model with the rehabilitation model. Conservatives will scoff even before they hear me out. It will necessitate a revolution in our approach. We will need a new breed of highly competent professionals to service the system.

“As a fascinating aside, Thomas, conservatives who say they believe in the worth of the individual tend to put more people in prison than do the progressives. It makes easy sense that the progressives may believe they can use the best of the current techniques and ‘fix’ the criminals, so they tend toward early release or rehab vs warehouse programs. The conservative statistic is more baffling on the surface, at least. My guess is that once a person’s behavior disproves the conservative’s positive belief in the individual they over react and move to deal with them harshly because they broke the trust. I didn’t say it well but it’s something like that. I also read somewhere that conservative parents hit their children significantly more often than liberals. The two issues are probably tied together in some way. Conservatives are less inclined to be compassionate toward other’s plights. The idea seems to be, “I take care of myself and others therefore can and should just do the same.”

“My vision is that in the end there will be two parts to the prison program. One will include counseling, job training, education, and prolonged supervision once a rehab graduate is back out into society. Every ‘lawbreaker’ will get a shot at that ‘fix it’ side of the program. There will be no sentences in terms of length of time. The individuals will remain in the program until the goals set for him have been reached. Each offender will have input into his plan. It will take into account his reasonable preferences. Staff members will be trained in education, job requirements, human behavior, and social systems. An offender will graduate when he has sufficient training and practice to succeed vocationally and socially. This is a nip-it-the-bud program. The first time a person – youngster,

perhaps – comes up with a legal problem he enters the program. We don't wait until the second or tenth hoping he will grow out of it or come around. From what I've read that really seldom happens. In the long run he will be happier and the rest of us will be happier if it is handled sooner than later.

“For those individuals for whom our rehabilitation system fails, there will be permanent placement in secure, residential, facilities where they can work to earn their keep and live without any punishment other than a life separated from the rest of us – those of us who live helpful lives and pose no danger to our fellow citizens. In anticipation of far fewer repeat offenders our police force can be dramatically downsized. Police (we need to find a new name) must come to be viewed as a ‘Helpforce’ replacing the current image as ‘law enforcers’, who snitch on those who stray from the straight and narrow. Their training will stress how to fix the problems they come upon, rather than merely banging heads and imprisoning offenders until they come to trial, sentencing, and eventual punishment. That system has become a terrible drain on our society in terms of expense, human waste, and its utter failure. I have no illusions that we will need to continue dealing with some ugly, violent, bad guys – just many, many, fewer in the long run I believe.

“I have lots of specifics in mind and believe the new program can be in place and functioning within a year – fully functioning within four years. The jobs program, on the other hand, must come about within a few months.

“Our basic problem is twofold. We have a vast number of citizens who are currently unemployed so don't have the money to buy products and services. As a result crime is up and businesses have failed. Those products and services that are still available are ridiculously expensive; that's partly legitimate but it largely represents the willing, ruthless, gouging of the citizenry by despicable businessmen who no longer put the best interests of our people – their neighbors – before, or even on a par with, their own greed.

“I will propose temporary price ceilings as a percent over cost. More people will be able to make purchases so, with more being sold, the profit per business should not suffer very much even with lower per item prices. The period of reconstruction will require some sacrifices from most of us as we look to the return of prosperity down the road. With businesses selling more, more help will be needed and jobs will be created. As people go back to work and have money to buy things, sales will soar. The new jobs will not only be in sales but also in manufacturing and transportation. Price controls will be gradually reduced until a minimally monitored, free market economy can return.

“With more jobs being created, the thievery and injury done by the unemployed will surely decrease – immediately I believe. Much of the criminal activity right now is driven and supported by the fact that basic needs are not being met. When people and families are hungry, living in the streets, and afraid for their very lives, they do what is necessary to maintain their existence anyway they can. There are thousands of basically good people out there making life miserable for the rest of us just because they have to – not because they want to. How would we act toward others if the only alternative to stealing – by force when necessary – was starving and being exposed to the harsh elements? It

could turn the best of us, I believe.

“With the phasing out of the army more people will need to enter the job force. Initially some can be involved in the construction of the new prison/rehabilitation facilities. Our roads are a useless disgrace so jobs will open up there. I see these two areas being able to absorb the soldiers and cost the central government no more than it is currently spending on the military. Instead of cannons and guns we will buy heavy equipment and building material. I know it will become a delicate balancing act but we will find our best organizers and administrators to design and run the program.

“In the most depressed areas along the coast and in the middle hill region, the central government will provide subsidies in the short term as people either get back on their feet in terms of their former work system or learn new skills, perhaps relocating. Every person on a subsidy will require a long-term plan with goals and steps specified to work himself into a position of self-support. Many folks will be able to work part time to help take care of themselves as they receive retraining or education.

“One of my very important goals is to at all times have one parent in each home with children. The need for day care will dwindle and children’s over all adjustment and sense of security should soar. This will require two things, I imagine. First, that wages become sufficient for families to live on the equivalent of one income. Each may work half time, for example. Second, that our level of personal ‘wants’ decreases to a reasonable level. This one depends on the rebuilding of a base of positive social values. We must rapidly get to a place where people are universally viewed as more important than stuff; where positive associations among people are more important than the more artificial forms of entertainment; that our investment in each other becomes more important than the stuff we can bestow on each other; that our ultimate sense of personal satisfaction begins coming from altruism rather than self-centered greed.

“Societies by definition are social institutions – groups of people living together by choice compared with living isolated lives – and that requires positive give and take. A personally selfish orientation will be cause for any society’s rapid demise.

“With those things in place we will collectively ‘need’ far less, so smaller wages will go just as far as larger wages did in the past. And with our Help Point system of volunteerism and its provision for reducing taxes, useable income will rise dramatically.

“What do you think?”

“I still want to talk about girls.”

“Doofus! I’m serious here.”

“And you think I’m not? Okay. Okay. What you have said is impressive. There are a thousand points at which it can fall apart but, knowing us – mainly you – I am confident that those problems will be solved as they occur.”

“Beforehand when possible. Begin a list of the ‘could go wrongs’, Thomas. It’s what you do best. Here at the outset it’s as important as any of the positives about the ideas.”

“Well, here’s one to start with: How do we turn around the social value

thing? I assume the churches will help up to a point.”

“Up to the point of threatening folks with hell if they don’t go along. If we are to count on their help we will need to obtain a major understanding. I favor separation using small, secular, exploratory, groups – neighborhood by neighborhood – with trained leaders that can help folks ‘invent’ a system of positive values – make it come from them and their needs and their perceived solutions. Help them discover that a society that is good and helpful and supportive and safe for all of us *must* grow out of such a base of positive values. My bet is that every discussion group will come to identical sets of values because there can really only be one set. We must develop a system of natural rewards and motivation based on obvious and indisputable positive outcomes.”

“The time honored, ‘positive-behavior-brings-positive-results’ idea, you mean.”

“Right,” Marcus agreed rather forcefully. “We’ve often discussed how we believe it’s the only way the human species will survive for much longer. Now, it becomes a matter of national survival.”

“As I recall we started forming that insight about the same time we started to school. If we could see *that* at such a young age, what’s the problem with the rest of the people in the world?”

“Values, pure and simple I believe.”

“Values yes, but natural rewards, too, right.”

“Oh, yes. You’re referring to rewards that are naturally connected with the behavior.”

“Right. I’m nice to you and you are nice to me in return. I see you are hungry so I share my lunch with you and feel good about how I helped. You reinforce that by showing your appreciation.”

I nodded and continued the thought.

“So much of our old society was based on artificial rewards removed light years from the actual deed – like getting paid at the end of the month for working, being given a good citizen medal at the end of the year, or having to wait ‘til you get into heaven to reap the rewards for having lived a good life.”

“As a whole, our society has really been more into getting punished for bad stuff than being rewarded for good stuff. We’ve talked a lot about that over the years.”

“Your points are well taken. We must work toward a system of immediate, natural, rewards. Once the value system is in place all that should begin flowing quite naturally. What most folks see as adequate rewards aren’t in the truly meaningful form we want them to be – medals, money, power, and so on. Altruistic acts typically receive the absolutely quickest and most natural form of rewards – those we give ourselves and those we receive from others. It’s really hard to beat the immediacy of self-delivered rewards.”

“The Help Point system must take that form, I think.” I said not sure where to go with it. That never mattered. Marcus would run with any idea.”

“Another good point. Do you think weekly will be immediate enough? We can deliver to each citizen an updated accounting every Monday. That sort of system will require that it be decentralized, which is probably good. Each village

or neighborhood will need to have a person to do the tallying and make the reports available on how much tax has been saved. A foolproof method for verifying volunteer hours will be necessary. You have an accountant-type personality. How about you work on that?"

"Me and my gloomy, pessimistic, accountant-type disposition, is that what you're saying?"

"Yes. Isn't it wonderful that you have exactly the combination of traits we need!"

"At least I have to say that was immediate feedback – reward of a kind if you will."

"We've always been diligent about giving each other honest and immediate feedback – good or not so good. I think that's the first pillar of our relationship."

"Then your ability as 'Spin Doctor' must be second."

We laughed. We realized that with the setting sun we were famished. We'd hit up his mom first and move on to mine. Then maybe there would be time for a moonlight swim or at least some talking about girls!

* * *

In our village, summer did not mean a total rest from school. It continued on a shortened, 8:00 a.m. to 10:00 a.m. daily schedule. It was what we called the *Each One Teach One Session* and involved adults as well as children. No other village had it. Each older or more knowledgeable adult or student helped teach another student. Often it was review or extra practice. We had a great, young, teacher who kept it fun as well as productive. I'd personally like the whole school year to have that element in it for part of each day. So does Marcus. We believe that in helping another learn, we learned best. In fact, he wants to change the whole concept from *Teacher* – the purveyor of knowledge – to *Facilitator* – the catalyst that assists students in their individual quests for knowledge. It's one of his greatest insights, I think. He also wants to make education a lifelong process and decided to encourage that by using the Help Point system – help yourself to additional knowledge and earn points. Once it becomes a way of life we figure the points will become irrelevant and most folks will no longer even apply for them.

I thought we needed a serious and important rite of passage for our young people. Marcus agreed after hearing my reasoning. Most close knit social, religious, and ethnic groups have such an event. It symbolizes full membership – full acceptance, belonging. It is a signal to everyone that the individual has now arrived and deserves respect and a voice in the decision-making processes. It offers a sense of permanence. When people feel such a close and meaningful bond they tend to take their role and responsibility more seriously and help pass on to the younger generation the essential knowledge and such. My idea was as much pragmatic as it was symbolic.

It would be a major event in every youngster's life – his social, educational, and political life. I suggested that it be called *The Rite of Citizenship Ceremony*. I envision three stages to the program. At each step the young person would be required to show his competence in the areas of government,

social order, and social philosophy. The requirements would be age appropriate at each level. The first would come at age ten. The second at age thirteen and the final, full citizenship rite at age eighteen. Each would require focused study in the three areas and would be a natural outgrowth of the school program. It would be the school's responsibility to make sure each student was fully prepared to pass the skill and knowledge assessment. The final step would be the young person signing the *Positive Citizenship Contract* in which he or she all quite solemnly agrees to support his neighbors and government financially and through personal participation, which includes keeping informed, voting, and other related activities. He also pledges to be ever vigilant to abuses or emerging problems. It is his inauguration into the running of the country.

Marcus raved about the concept and it became an important part of the plan. It inspired him to add an additional element regarding the privilege of voting. For each issue or candidate to be on a ballot, a fact sheet would be prepared by an independent panel with the content being approved for accuracy by the relevant person or persons. To be eligible to vote each citizen would have to pass a test showing he or she understood the issues and the positions of the candidates. It could be taken as many times as needed to pass. It didn't prevent folks from voting through ignorance but it at least gave everyone an opportunity to make an informed decision. I think that is a stroke of genius. He also added Help Points for voting – a little added motivation to do ones civic duty and the studying necessary to invoke the privilege.

Unlike most countries, the bottom line for Lelonia would not be a burgeoning economy. Although basically a modified free market would be encouraged, there would be restrictions regarding the limits supply and demand could play. Short supply could never be used as justification for a price increase. That, Marcus saw as antithetical to a society built on positive values. A product factor based on cost plus a given profit percentage would be established which would be fair to the seller and the consumer. If a given business could sell for less than the allowed limit or could buy cheaper and therefore be able to sell for less, that would be allowed – encouraged even. Workplace efficiency and product quality (fewer problems equals fewer expenses) would therefore become of paramount importance.

Business ethics should be synonymous with personal and social ethics. We each treat our neighbors well and we each treat our customers well. We never take advantage of our neighbors. We never take advantage of our customers. We see that our neighbors need some help or need a break and we give that help or break. We see that our customers need help or a break and we give that help or break. In a natural or personal disaster we rush to provide what our neighbors need. Similarly, as a businessperson we would never take advantage of our citizens in their times of need or hardship – we would help to the reasonable limit of our resources.

Marcus thinks that by injecting the personal positive ethic into business we can develop a thriving, mostly classless, socioeconomic base, which will free our people to explore their human potential and build a comfortable, safe, growth producing environment for all who are willing to play by the rules – those which

are the only logical outgrowth of our positive social values.

My lingering question is whether or not the citizens will buy into this dramatic change in the structure of government and business. Deceit, deception, greed, and self-centeredness have been the hallmarks of our society – personal, business, and governmental – for several generations. Marcus says he believes that the failure of the old ways is so unmistakable and dramatic that it will take something quite different like this to catch their fancy and sever their psyches from ways past. He knows people better than I do so I'm hopeful such a plan becomes acceptable.

In many ways our village already models many of the features of the plan. The fact that we have the most thriving economy, lowest crime rate, highest literacy level, and best health care in the country should encourage others to give our plan serious consideration. We still have a long way to go but what we have is excellent by comparison. Our Plan would propel us light years ahead in a very short time.

Last year we closed our old folks' home and started a Senior Center where seniors can get together days and evenings. They all either live in their own homes or they live with their children or friends. With only one parent working in most cases, it becomes a joy-filled possibility to care for our own. Our Volunteer Corps helps out where necessary. Those older folks who remain able bodied spend several hours each day volunteering – classrooms, hospital, library, cultural and arts center, visits with home bound, child sitting, tutoring, storytelling, book reading, and on down a virtually endless list of things they are not only our experts on but also things they really enjoy doing. The goal is for our older folks to never stop feeling they have positive contributions to make. That contrasts with the devastating effects produced by the warehouse model used elsewhere in our country.

At the Senior Center most of their routine medical needs are met – and mostly by other carefully trained seniors. In our village we revere our old folks and recognize the remarkable resource they provide our society.

In our Plan, in order to offset some of the expenses, households caring for old people can accept the transfer of up to 200 Help Points from each in-care, volunteer-capable, Senior, or will be awarded 200 points outright for those who can no longer be productive. Basically, however, we care for our older relatives because we love and cherish them.

Lelonia has a long, proud, cultural history in the arts, from the primitive crafts of our hill people, to music, dance, and theater. Those aspects of our culture have fallen by the wayside in the past decades but in our village we encourage their resurrection and appreciation. The older folks naturally play a major role in this resurgence. Our country's once thriving tourist business had collapsed due to both safety issues and the disappearance of the quaint aspects of our country. During the past few years our village has seen a reappearance of the tourist and that has begun bringing in considerable revenue from outside our country – almost always a good thing for the economy. Marcus enjoys acting in the plays. I play violin in the pit orchestra.

Many homes have opened rooms and a number of bed and breakfasts

have come into being. Our temperate climate allows year round tourist trade. Both my mother and Marcus's have begun supplementing their incomes by renting rooms and providing meals. A new restaurant opened just to serve the transients as the tourists came to be called here. It has no negative connotation. Marcus figures that within five years our country can bring in enough from that source alone to firmly bolster our national economy. If he is right it will allow us to reestablish trade with neighboring countries that have long since disallowed it because of our instability and history of economic defaults. He calculates that if every month we bring in more money from outside our country than we spend abroad our economy will grow by leaps and bounds. How he has always known about such things amazes most folks. The fact that he never forgets anything he hears or reads probably helps, and he is always listening and reading. The fact that he is able to see useful connections between seemingly unrelated things probably helps. The fact that above all else he puts the good of Lelonia and its people first in his life probably helps. The fact that we had prepared for the writing of his plan all our lives, also, probably helps.

CHAPTER FIVE: Aliens and Other Matters

“Aliens.”

It had been the opening word from Marcus that morning as he and I continued working on the Plan. I was feeling some pressure. It was due to be reviewed by our village on June first. It was the first day of May and it remained more a set of ideas than a well-organized, eminently clear, black and white, document.

“Martians or Venusians?” I responded hoping to provide a smile as well as receive clarification. Both were soon forthcoming as he effortlessly pulled himself up into the tree house where I had been waiting.

Marcus spoke, passing off my horseplay with a grin. His smile was full out and wonderful. It caused girls to fall in love and old ladies to all quite irresistibly pinch his cheeks.

“We have the makings for a virtual paradise,” he began. “Once our safety and economic issues are resolved the word will get out about how wonderful things are here. We have seen it happen here in our village. With that will come tourists who will spread the word far and wide. At that point outsiders will come and take a look-see to determine if they want to be a part of our resurrection. Many will decide they do. And with that we will have an alien situation that we certainly haven’t had in our lifetimes and actually not in recent history. How do we deal with them? Do we refuse them? Do we welcome them? Do we insist on citizenship? Do we allow them to work for less than the typical wages? Do we regulate them in any ways?”

“Those would certainly seem to be the questions and I might add it is a forward looking aspect I imagine many other plans will miss,” I said, arranging my pad to record the answers I knew Marcus had already formulated.

“We have a vastly under populated land here in Lelonia. We can easily triple our population and remain a vital, well-established, fully functioning, country with plenty of elbowroom for everyone. New blood will be a powerful plus for us I believe. It will be an interesting balancing act between the establishment of new jobs and admitting aliens that can step in to handle them.”

“Do we need new jobs?” I asked puzzled at the issue. “It seems to me that our plan builds a grand society and vital economy with the current population.”

“I agree that it does. But, we have to plan for the inevitable and I believe that any ‘Eden’ will be inundated with outsiders. We have no way of keeping them out. We have no way of deporting them by the thousands after they arrive. So, we must build in some way to weave them into the fabric of our experience – our society and economy.”

I nodded, not having thought that far ahead. Short of building a miniature Great Wall around our periphery and populating it with rifle toting soldiers willing to maim and kill, there would be no way of keeping a determined alien out. Cordial yet well-orchestrated absorption seemed the only reasonable response to the likelihood. Marcus continued.

“Some aliens will want to become citizens. Others will not. In either case they must be required to learn about our country and how its government operates. In essence, each will need to complete all the training our citizens receive as we progress toward full citizenship at eighteen. They will need to pay taxes and they will need to become a part of the Help Corps.”

“Sounds like you envision that they will in every way be like a citizen whether they choose that final step or not.”

“That’s right. If they are here they shall receive all the benefits we have to offer. They will also pay their fair share in taxes and volunteer time, and be expected to behave in support of our values and institutions.”

“What about the bad apples that arrive and make trouble or won’t work? Do we deport them?”

“Deport them *how* and keep them out, *how*? I see no alternative but to put the incorrigibles into our prison/ rehabilitation program. If they come around, great. If they don’t they will be isolated like any other criminally incurable resident and be expected to earn their keep.”

“About that prison/rehabilitation program. We still haven’t pinned it down in terms of its specifics.”

Marcus smiled sensing my uneasiness with the lack of details in many areas of the Plan.

“I feel the need to let the whole system grow up together conceptually before we put down the particulars. Each element seems to modify and depend on others and I want us to get an accurate picture of how that will work before we solidify the Plan. All elements must mesh together in mutually facilitating ways that never contradict each other.

“A simple-minded case in point: As the laws are now written the corrections department insists that all doors in a juvenile detention center be double locked – a reasonable requirement. The public safety department insists that all those doors not only be fitted with rapid opening levers but that they be left unlocked at all times in case of fire or other disaster – again, reasonable. We just can’t have such contradictions in any part of our Plan.”

I nodded that I understood the approach he was taking. It didn’t quell my anxiety about the timeline, however. I spoke.

“I have some reservations about how the rehabilitation portion of the new corrections program is going to be received by the citizens. For generations most of them have accepted as fact the rule of punishment as the means of choice to change criminal behavior or tendencies. Across the country most parents still hit their children as punishment – very few consider using a non-corporal ‘re-education’ approach to improving behavior. Our village is the sole exception I know of in fact.”

“And we are going to use our village as the basic example to sell the new approach. Most citizens are not going to take time to read the scientific studies and evidence that overwhelmingly show the gross ineffectiveness of punishment in building dependable, *long-term*, behavior change. But, I think they will listen to real world experiences such as ours. Control through physical violence reflects not only the ignorance of the parents but their laziness as well. It’s easier to hit

than to take time and work out an appropriate plan for long term behavior change.”

“I certainly hope that’s right. My belief is that some may see the efficacy of the rehabilitation/re-education/vocational training aspect but only *after* punishment has been administered. It is such a basic part of our cultural thinking that bad behavior just plain and simply demands punishment. Even if they become convinced it doesn’t really change behavior in the long run, they can’t get by the idea that hurt must be applied to those who have done wrong. It’s a revenge thing pure and simple and we both understand that a wide spread revenge mentality will most certainly destroy the human species. It’s a holdover from the old religious teachings, I’m sure, but it makes it very difficult for people to stand back and ask, ‘What is our ultimate goal in handling (treating) those who inflict hurtful behavior on our citizens or society?’” Once they can understand that the end goal is the establishment of self-monitored, dependably ‘non-hurtful’ behavior, and that it can only come about via appropriate re-training programs and genuine opportunities, then, perhaps, the idea may be accepted.”

“Good points,” Marcus agreed. “It will be a gradual acceptance and we must be patient to let it occur over a generation. When the program proves itself in terms of results – lowered crime rates, lowered recidivism rates, vastly increased public safety – then I think the idea will become acceptable.”

“Except for the irrational few who continue to believe punishment must be inflicted just because punishment must be inflicted. When ones church teaches that is so, then, that *is* so, you understand?”

At that moment it seemed humorous that I would be asking Marcus if he understood something. We exchanged a knowing grin. Mine quickly faded. I continued expressing my amazement at the general stupidity of the population in regard to this whole area.

“How can it be that people don’t see the inappropriateness of locking up a criminal for a year and then releasing him, just as he had been, back into the same environment that contributed to his hurtful behavior in the first place? If he were struggling to meet his own basic needs of safety, sustenance and shelter before, and had to engage in criminal behavior to survive, how did locking him away for a year change any of that? Is a year in prison supposed to make him just accept the fact he must starve to death in order to be a good citizen? I just can’t understand how people can be so mindlessly blind to the reality of the situation. They expect him go get a job and earn his keep. He has no saleable skills. Where is he to get a job? Who is going to readily hire an ex-con? How can people in general be so ignorant? ‘Punish the criminal because that will magically prepare him to get along well back out in society’.”

I seldom got that upset about things. It felt both wonderful and terrible. I had another very serious concern.

“In our document we need to deal with fear and its abuse. It is on the minds of virtually all of our citizens.”

Marcus nodded and expanded on the topic.

“The leaders of our recent past have in many ways encouraged the problems with our neighbors because it served their power-based purposes to

keep our citizens in line through perpetuating concerns about invasion. Under our Plan, fear must be minimized and never utilized in such ways.”

“And yet, where there is a real threat, our citizens have the right to know, don’t they?” I asked.

“They do. Real events that are reasonably fear producing must be handled out in the open. There seems to be plenty of that to go around without stirring the pot artificially.”

I tried to put it into a larger context.

“Fear works in much the same way that control through the threat of punishment works (or usually doesn’t, actually). It can only be effective so long as the potential punisher is close by or is suspected of being close by. Once kids are out of sight of the adult who has the power to punish for rule breaking, the power of punishment to control behavior ceases. The same is true, of course, for the likely lawbreakers. They only stay within the law when they believe the likelihood of being caught is high. Countries that rule through fear find they must continually expand the size and scope of their enforcer staff until they permeate society – always seem to be present. Religion uses its ‘all seeing’ God in a similar way. Parents use the fictitious, red suited, all-seeing, Christmas Gift Giver as a means for controlling children’s December behavior.

“Similarly, once the threat is gone from our neighboring countries, the fear is gone. When it is fear of some real or imagined threat that binds citizens to their leaders, the bond breaks if the threat ceases. To that end our leaders have worked to keep the fears fuelled so at least the military coffers will remain full for them to pillage. I hope it doesn’t backfire – unintentionally encouraging our enemies to carry through on the threats. Our tiny, rag tag, army couldn’t hold off an invasion of tin soldiers for ten minutes.”

We had a basic agreement about the use and misuse of fear. As it turned out it was similar to our beliefs about punishment, speaking of which we still had some lingering thoughts about where religion should sit in all of this. Marcus began thinking out loud.

“Religions will have the freedom to practice their beliefs up to the point they infringe on the rights or positive beliefs of others. I cannot envision our people tolerating a church that intentionally sets out to hurt another person or group of people because of some trait or belief they may hold. For example if Church A decides it should in some way attack Church B because the gene pool of Church B members has produced generations of people with deformed ear lobes, and such ear lobes are considered sinful, then Church A must cease and desist its attacks under our plan. Any religion that tries to force its own beliefs on the rest of us through any means, including legislation, must cease and desist. So long as our beliefs, religious or philosophic, do no harm to others, the behaviors that follow will be allowed.”

My problem-seeking personality had to pursue the topic.

“It builds in an irresolvable problem of interpretation or definition, however. All religions may not agree on how ‘harm’ must be defined. I’m thinking of abortion. One group includes in their definition of harm such things as the long term suffering of the mother or family and considers the child who would be

raised in poverty, the child who would grow up being unloved, likely causing harm to others, restricting the ability of the parents to adequately care for their other children and on down their long list of 'harm' related issues. Another group includes in their interpretation of 'harm' the idea that the taking of any life, especially such a defenseless life, is improper – sinful – and that any other consideration is therefore irrelevant or at least secondary. That position, of course, leads to the definition of what is and what isn't life. You see the chain of definition related problems?"

Again, a quick grin.

"I do. Which supersedes which – the right of the government to set policy or the end products of the many individual religious beliefs? I have to believe the government, set in place and maintained by the people, preempts any other source. If Church X wants to restrict abortions among its members it may. It may not try to restrict abortions among non-members – force me to believe or behave as they require.

Can you imagine trying to run a government that attempts to give the beliefs of every religion practiced within its borders, equal say under the national systems of laws? That would be fully impossible. Any time that one religion's beliefs become the law, all other beliefs are disenfranchised. Of course, such a deposing of others' beliefs would not even produce second thoughts for the religion whose beliefs were included since they know they are right and everybody else is wrong."

He continued:

"We must maintain a strict separation of church, business, banking interests, and state – at least in that we don't intentionally favor one over another or inculcate one's beliefs into our system. It becomes a fine line, of course, since the government must address many of the same topics that are basic to religions. A system of laws and privileges will always include an interpretation or stance related to those topics, so may appear to favor one or disfavor another. The problem you foresee inevitably comes down to the personal conviction that 'everybody must believe the way I believe'. It stems from the belief that only I, out of all the people on Earth, possess the truth. And, that belief is seldom shaken by the question about how could it be that 99% of the other equally intelligent people on the planet believe they *also* know the only truth although it is in some way a different truth?"

"So, how do we proceed?"

"Pragmatically! We set up our Plan in a way that logically handles the present and future needs of all our people. We don't meddle in religious beliefs although our philosophy of governing – small government built on a positive (not religious) social philosophy, local control, total participation, low taxation, freedom of religion slash philosophy, openness to aliens, separation of church and state, separation of business interests and state, a belief in the fundamental skills and wisdom of our citizenry, and so on – will certainly be evident in our finished document."

"I think I need to reread our present constitution. I know the last several Leaders have disregarded it but we should know where we came from. I forget

how old it is.”

“Right at 200 years,” Marcus said nodding as if he were re-verifying the fact in his head. “It is a short and to the point document. If it had been administered with good sense as it was drawn it would still be a good guide. But, through the years it has been repeatedly elaborated – some would say clarified – by the writing of countless laws that do not necessarily reflect the original intent but make it veer off course to incorporate the most powerful movements of the time – often religious, sometimes fear based, and on other occasions promoted by reactionary or opportunistic political groups. Taken as a package – the original document plus the laws – it has become cumbersome and internally contradictory. It is a judge’s nightmare trying to reconcile one pronouncement with others. Seldom, in fact, can the majority of a group of learned judges agree on its interpretation. It no longer speaks with a single voice. It has become flawed. It has been interpreted in terms of the judges’ personal preferences, beliefs, and biases instead of trying to maintain the original intention of the document. My father used to say it has become a giant inkblot, which judges and others interpret in terms of their own personalities – their own needs and fears rather than the intentions of the founding fathers.”

“So, starting from scratch seems to be a wise course?” I asked wanting to make sure I had followed his thinking.

“I think so. Our Plan is not really a constitution, I suppose. It is an action plan designed to reignite our potential as a vital, compassionate, growth-producing nation – Republic. Like I said, it is pragmatic rather than theoretical while specifying rights and inalienable procedures of justice.”

“And yet there is strong theory behind it.”

“Interesting. Can a theory be based in pragmatism? What we have seen working so well in our village is based both on experience and theory – how we knew things worked and how we were convinced through logic that things should work. When they didn’t, we thoughtfully modified them.”

“And in the end – although interesting – very little of this discussion really has anything much to do with the writing of our Plan.”

“Where I was trying to head with the idea is this:” Marcus said. “Our Plan must be so simple and so clear that it won’t need thousands of laws written to interpret it. If some aspect of the Plan needs fixing then it should be fixed within the Plan rather than as an add-on. It must be so clear that wise men will be able to apply it by using good common sense and it must clearly give wise men credit for being able to make those good, fair, and level-headed decisions. We write the most unambiguous generalizations and objectives that we can and then depend on those at the local level to make good decisions based on them. Every five or ten years or so it should be carefully reviewed by a representative panel to make sure it still meets the real needs of our people and in the best possible ways. Each proposed change should be approved or disapproved by our citizenry.”

“There are things in that last statement that should be in the opening statement of the Plan, I think. I’ll flag it so we can easily come back to it. How this document is used will be almost as important as the Plan set forth within it.”

Marcus nodded, clearly ready to move on. His head was on a roll.

"I have done some thinking about the tax structure and its relationship to the Help Point system. Follow this for me. We establish a 50% basic tax on household income. It can be reduced to 10% by Help Points. We establish that households may apply up to 720 Help Points each year to offset tax payments – 60 points per month. That may need to be tweaked for single adult households and those with special situations. Tax is paid monthly on earnings for the previous month. It can be offset by Help Points earned during that same month.

Two examples:

"The tax is figured in this way for a two adult household earning P2,000 and applying a combined 40 Help Points during the month (not the maximum 60 that could apply).

>The number of points earned that month is divided by 60 (the maximum number possible to apply that month – 1/12 of the 720 allowed for the year) [In this example, $40 / 60 = .66$] (Earned 66% of possible 60 points.)

>Multiply that times the *flexible tax* rate of 40% (Remember there is a 10% *minimum tax* every household pays – thus the 40% becomes the *flexible* figure: 50% overall - 10% mandatory.) [$.66$ of $.40 = .26$] giving the percent of possible points that was earned that month.

>That is subtracted from the flexible tax rate $.40$ [$.40 - .26 = .14$ or **14%**] and represents a **.24%** total tax rate [the flexible 14% plus the required 10%].

>That is the percent to be paid in taxes that month [P2,000.00 X **.24 = P480.00**].

Second example:

If the household had earned all 60 possible Help Points the figures would have been:

>100% of $.40 = .40$

> $.40 - .40 = 0.0$

> 10% mandatory minimum tax plus 0% flexible tax = P200 in taxes [10% of the P2000 income.].

"The additional 20 Help Points resulted in a savings of P280.00 a sizeable savings and a good motivator to maximize the Help Points every month."

"You have made a believer out of me, Marcus, and I'm with you; when people see they can cut their taxes by 80% by merely volunteering one hour a day which allows the cutting of necessary government spending by probably more than that same amount, I'll bet they'll jump at the chance."

"So, you'd endorse that in our Plan?"

"Absolutely! Sign me up as a volunteer towel boy in the girl's locker room!"

When our smiles retreated, we shook a single shake – something we had done since our preschool days when we agreed on something we felt was momentous. This was the most momentous of all our momentouses.

We were ready to move on to less mentally stressful material. I set the topic.

"Earlier you mentioned that it's important to keep business separate from government. I can easily see the church/state thing but what's the

business/state thing about?

“In the past the bigger businesses have had but one objective – making as large a profit as they can; it is the time honored, unquestioned, basic objective – socially self-defeating in the long run, but firmly entrenched. They have engaged in two activities that earned them special favor from the government. *One* is their continuous campaign to influence government officials to pass legislation that favors them regardless of how it may harm any of the rest of us. Things like easing worker safety regulations, reducing or eliminating pension benefits, allowing pollution of air and water, and so on. They use their size, power, and economic contributions as leverage and often use outright bribery – payments and gifts – to the officials to win their favor. **THAT HAS TO STOP.** Businesses should succeed or fail on their own business-related merits. Believe me, once they know *that*, they won’t take any risks that might cause them to fail (and need a bailout). As it is, they will take unreasonable risks if they see even a tiny chance for profitable success (because they know they will not lose – they *will* be bailed out).

“*Second*, (pursuing that point) big business has come to believe that if it acts irresponsibly and gets into severe financial binds, the government will step in and cover their losses because they are too important to be allowed to fail. They believe the consequences of their failure would be just too far reaching.

“The huge tax breaks given them is part of the package of problems. Those breaks are ostensibly for the purpose of allowing them to reinvest in the business and thereby improve the product or find more product or employ more workers and grow the economy. In reality that virtually never happens here in Lelonia. The big guys find ways of taking the profits with no compassion for the employees or the actual, long-term welfare of the county. I will admit that when they spend that ill-gotten booty it does go back into somebody’s economy. Unfortunately, we don’t build yachts, silk linens, or golden jewelry here in Lelonia, and cruises to the Bahamas brings in not a single cent to our coffers. I have other issues with it. Later, on those.

“In my analysis it is the conservative or small government parties that tend to abuse this relationship the most. In their quest to find some pocketbook other than their own (government) to fix things in the country they eagerly become regulation-generous when given such proposals by business. Our Volunteer Corps will tend to curb the necessity for such relationships. I’m not saying the progressives aren’t at fault as well. They tend to buy into any program that reaffirms their belief in the ineptness of the common man. And, by setting certain types of regulations favoring the current businesses they assure them that others (newcomers) will not be able to enter the competition.

“Our tax plan will not tax businesses on their profits. It will tax the salaries paid to employees, payments to investors, and interest earned on savings. This should have the same effect of encouraging business expansion and maintaining pension funds. Money sitting in a bank can’t possibly make the profit that expanded business activities would produce so profits *will* be put to work.

“I am toying with one concept that reeks of big government and merely considering it makes me uneasy. It reflects our bottom line here as an improved

society rather than an improved economy. It is in reaction to the vulgar amounts some CEO's get paid. I've been thinking to limit any 'administrator's' total compensation package to no more than ten times the amount received by the employee who is lowest on the pay scale. If that is P20,000 then the CEO could receive no more than P200,000. It is still far more than any person needs to live a grand life style here in Lelonia. I guess it expresses my fear that even in its totality our Plan will not quell the horrific greed that seems to lurk in the darkest corners of some men's souls. It is much more than the money, however. It is, as I indicated, as much social as economic.

"One of the major problems I see in societies with totally free market systems is that very soon the gulf between the haves and the have not's grows out of control and becomes the basis for social unrest that tends to lead to separation, misunderstanding, hatred, and eventually revolution. On the one hand I hate the 'liberal' concept that the 'little guy' really isn't wise enough to either govern or take care of himself so the government, in its state of ultimate enlightenment, must rush in and care for him (rather than to put steps in motion to better *prepare him* for success in all these important areas). In all of history there has seldom been such a thoroughgoing put down aimed at the vast majority of human beings. It works to become a self-fulfilling prophecy: 'So long as I am being well planned for and taken care of why extend myself to provide for me and my neighbors'? Understandably, I become lazy and those big government guys point at me and say, 'See, I told you so'. On the other hand, history has never shown us a good solution to the problems associated with the huge economic gap that inevitably emerges in a free economy. I'm open for a better solution but at this point I can't see anything better than a free economy working within broad but stringent limits, which reflect our positive social philosophy."

I responded.

"It seems clear to me that it all comes down to how we define 'success'. When it involves wealth and stuff and power, the stage is set for the increasingly large rich/poor gap you spoke of. If success becomes defined in terms of ones record as being a helpful, compassionate, facilitating citizen – a good human being – that wealth gap not only disappears but becomes irrelevant."

Marcus nodded. I had another thought.

"In several ways the Plan borrows what might be called the most citizen friendly aspects from both the big and small governmental philosophies. Let's plug in what seems best in terms of logic, a positive social philosophy, and what history seems to tell us about our species as it relates to these various central topics. We need to move beyond the limiting philosophies of government that are now available."

"A very un-Thomas like insight," Marcus said smiling through his furrowed brow. "You are saying I must stop labeling approaches as solely big or small government, conservative or liberal philosophies, and examine their components as individual concepts to see how they stand the test of our pragmatism."

"Sure. Of course. Exactly. Precisely what I was thinking."

I chuckled. He understood that he had run with my little insight and

morphed it into far more than I had envisioned – could have envisioned. That was okay. It was how we often operated. He believed the kernel of an idea was every bit as important as its expansion and application. It was never a contest between us. My greatest hope was that our new society would learn to behave in that very same fashion – helpfully non-defensive and truly proud of the accomplishments of others.

Long ago, Marcus and I had coined a new concept. We referred to it as *coopertition* – a fruitful melding of cooperation and competition. It implied never taking advantage, never seeking revenge, working in peace toward common goals, and always keeping the best interests of everyone in the forefront of our focus. When one person won, everybody won and when that wasn't the case something had gone wrong. Once a person accepts coopertition as his or her way of life, both cooperation and competition immediately seem hollow and barren. There will be lots more to say on the topic as I continue this log. And, of course, if all else fails, there is still Marcus's firing squad solution!

CHAPTER SIX: A Fieldtrip

“What time of the night is it, anyway?”

It had been my response to having been dumped onto the hard, cold, floor from my soft, warm, bed.

“Two a.m. and counting. Get up. We’re going on a fieldtrip.”

“At two a.m. and in case you haven’t noticed I am up – well down.”

“It hit me ten minutes ago that we need to find out first hand what’s going on elsewhere in Lelonia before we can expect to write an accurate and comprehensive Plan. I suggest we head south then loop around to visit Washopolus, explore the western border, and return here. We can improvise the route depending on what we find. It will take us to the coast, across the plains, and into the hills. We can stop and see uncle Sag before returning.”

“Money?”

“Surely you’ve saved enough from our jobs at the hospital.”

“How much you figure we’ll need?”

“Fifty pockos. I packed food from home that will last a couple of days. We can fish if we need to and pick berries and apples. Do we have fifty?”

“We have fifty. I suppose this entails backpacks. You know lugging a pack is not really my thing.”

“I’ve got them mostly packed. The heavy stuff is in mine. It’ll be fun. Remember fun?”

“I’ll need to tell mother.”

“I wrote her a note. You know it will be okay with her.”

“Not really. Me going off into the lawless land on a lark, fully unprotected save for the golden tongue of my accomplice.”

“My mother says she’ll handle it. She understands that this is something we really need to do. Come on. Get dressed. I’d suggest boots and double socks.”

“Why at this time of day – or night as it is, actually?”

“Why not? You keep saying time is running short.”

“Right and that was without this expedition into the fiery entrails of our country. You do realize there is danger involved in this undertaking?”

It had been intended as a pointed question. Instead it hit the wind mostly unnoticed. As I dressed he finished filling my backpack with the essentials.

“You keep the money. We both know I’m not good with money.”

It seemed humorous since the day before he had been expounding on how to improve and ensure our country’s economic future.

By 2:20 we were on our way out my bedroom window and down the tree out back. The exit was an unnecessary hold over from our boyhood days. Many an unauthorized nocturnal adventure had begun in just that way. There was a bright moon and a gentle breeze. The shadows of the swaying limbs brought back memories of fright filled times past. This one by no means portended to be fright *free* for me.

By the time we left the city limits my head was more or less alert and

ready to begin its day.

We followed the road south heading for Lawrenceville a village somewhat larger than ours. We had heard rumors of bad happenings there. One of the Despicable leaders was said to be in charge taking what he wanted, with the citizens kowtowing out of fear of his every whim. I wasn't sure it was a good idea to enter. Let me rephrase that; I was quite certain that it was *not* a good idea to enter.

"We'll be fine. Just need to blend in with the locals. We can do that. One day should be plenty to find out what we need to find out. Then we'll move on."

"And what is it that we are trying to find out?"

"What's wrong? What's right? What the people want. What's left to build on? Things like that."

"Girls?" I joked hoping to buoy up my own spirits.

Marcus enjoyed the quip. It really didn't serve its intended purpose for me.

Soon, I was actually enjoying the walk. The road was in disrepair with ruts and holes and mud puddles but none of that really mattered when you were on foot. I made a note of the conditions for future reference.

The sound of voices emerged from around the next bend. Marcus motioned us into the wooded area to our left. We entered and crouched in the darkness in order to get a handle on who we were about to encounter – or not, should they be less than desirables.

"Men," Marcus said. "Maybe a dozen. On foot."

I had come to the same conclusion. None of that sounded good. We retreated another three meters into the trees. They came into view.

"Drunk," Marcus whispered.

I nodded.

One carried a woman over his shoulder. She was nude. Clearly the men had had their way with her and intended more of the same or they would have left her behind. She lay limp, her long dark hair draping below her captor's belt. We were both outraged but realized any move on our part could only come to no good for her and for us. We had only been in such a powerless situation once before and the fear and desperation of that moment seeped back into our hearts. I reached out for his hand and found it on its way toward mine. We refrained from drawing breaths until they had passed.

"Make a note of it," Marcus said as we both sat with our backs to trunks.

"Note made. Is it time to go home yet?"

I'm sure he smiled, but there in the darkness of the shadows I could not see his face.

"What a terrible thing for that woman," I said sliding my pad back into my pocket. "And they are heading for our village."

"The protectors will turn them back. We have a well-trained and able force. It has kept us free of such marauders for several years. We best be on our way before they return."

A half hour later we had Lawrenceville in sight. It sat atop a slight rise and stood as a stark silhouette before us. It was clearly broken. Buildings that

should have had sharp lines lay crumbled in softened heaps. A fire burned across town from where we stood. Vultures circled. Periodically, tormented human cries could be heard. There were no border guards to answer to so we followed the road into town. No one was in sight – of course it was four in the morning. The landscape cast an eerie mien recounting threat and hurt and ruin.

“I’d suggest we get out of the middle of the road for starters,” I said moving to my right long before I had finished.

Marcus followed clearly in awe of the disintegration of the structures, the streets, and the vegetation. It was worse by far than I had envisioned. I hitched my head and Marcus followed me into the shadow of a crumbling rock wall where we stopped to reconnoiter.

“We need a plan,” I said.

He nodded. In disbelief we continued to scope out the sight. Something moved in the darkness not four meters from where we crouched. I tapped Marcus on his shoulder and pointed. He nodded and put his finger to his lips. I sank further into the shadows. He raised up to get a better view.

Whatever it was moved a bit closer. It seemed small – a dog perhaps. Again it moved toward us in stops and starts. We could see its eyes – white and wide and darting left and right. Not the way of a dog or coyote I told myself. Such a stare would be steady and straight ahead. Something glistened in the moonlight. A knife blade. Again it moved closer. We could see the eyes, the knife, and finally, the dirty-faced boy of ten or so. He said not a word but moved in close looking us over as much animal as human I thought. The knife was kept in evidence. He was gaunt, wearing rags, barefoot. He made a threatening gesture with the knife. Marcus slowly unshouldered his backpack and reached inside removing an apple. He extended it toward the boy. The lad stuck it with his blade and retreated several meters, kneeling and immediately sinking his teeth into it. He didn’t stop until it had been finished, stem, core, and all.

He again moved close and gestured with his knife. Marcus, always braver – or more reckless – than I, moved toward him.

“Put down the knife and I can give you something else to eat.”

The boy again brandished his weapon. Marcus folded his arms across his chest and stood his ground.

“I said put the knife away!”

His voice remained calm and quiet but its firm intent was clear.

With dramatic reluctance the boy returned the knife to his belt, hands at fighting ready, looking expectantly up into Marcus’s face. I had taken an orange from my pack in preparation. Marcus reached back toward me and I placed it into his hand. The youngster’s eyes brightened and he brushed back his long, unkempt, dark, hair. He had difficulty peeling it.

Marcus sat on the ground and reached for the orange.

“Let me fix it for you.”

He held out his hand. With some hesitation the boy handed it back. Marcus peeled a section and broke it out, handing it back. The boy devoured it, juice dripping down his chin. They continued one section at a time until the orange was gone.

“My name is Marcus. That’s my best friend, Thomas.”

He gestured over his shoulder in my direction.

“Do you have a name?”

“It’s Junior. You got more food?”

“How about a sandwich?”

The boy nodded and scooted a bit closer remaining on his knees, his hand never wandering far from the handle of his knife. I searched the backpack and located a sandwich. Ham, cheese, and non-kosher pickles. I hoped he wasn’t Jewish. I handed it ahead to Marcus who broke off a small section and passed it along. I knew what he was doing. Providing six pieces of sandwich would seem like a far more generous gesture than only one. Also it engaged the relationship a half dozen times rather than one.

“You seem so hungry. We are sorry about that. We’re glad we had food to share with you.”

Puzzlement crossed the boy’s face. His brow furrowed and his lower lip pulled high. He put his hand back on his knife.

“I can’t pay.”

He drew back expecting some provocative reaction. None was offered, of course.

“What’s with you?” he asked.

“We share what we have with those who need it more.”

“Don’t go on into town then. Everybody in there needs food. You won’t have none left for yourself.”

He peeked around Marcus to get a better look at me.

“He your brother, you say? Don’t look none like you.”

“He is my best friend. We love each other like brothers. Do you have a brother or sister?”

“Did. Don’t no more. The dark disease got ‘em. Got ma, too.”

“You have no family then?”

“You talk funny.”

“Don’t you have any family?”

“Pop. He’s gone though. Coughin’. Said he’d be back. Ain’t come back yet. He left me his knife.”

“Do you have anybody? Live with anybody? Who takes care of you?”

“I takes care of me. I’m thirsty. Got anything wet?”

I located and passed along a container of water. He chugged half of it then held it in his lap as he relaxed back on his legs indicating, I figured, an increased sense of comfort with us. He pointed at me and looked Marcus in the face.

“Can he talk – your best friend there?”

“Yes. He can talk. I think he has been quiet so as to not frighten you. He is a very kind person and wouldn’t want to scare you.”

“I stopped gettin’ scared long ago.”

He peeked around Marcus again and looked me over.

“Say somethin’.”

“Hello. Like Marcus said, I’m Thomas, Junior. Glad to meet you.”

“Why? Why you glad to meet me?”

It was a question I had never been asked before. I had never contemplated an answer. I tried anyway.

“I like to meet new people. I like to hear about them and what they think about things.”

“That sounds okay, I guess. Marcus is better looking than you are.”

“I know. He’s smarter than I am, too. Those kinds of things really don’t matter between us.”

“You talk funny, too. Where you two come from, Funny Talk Village?”

It was not intended to have been humorous. He turned his attention back to Marcus.

“How about tossin’ Thomas and takin me on as your best friend? I can cook and fish and trap rabbit. I can find you girls. I got a knife. I know my way around. I can read some and do numbers.”

“I’m willing to add friends but not toss out the ones I already have. We are just passing through your village, so won’t be here long.”

“I can come along. I won’t be any trouble. I can cook and fish and trap rabbits. I can find you girls. I got a knife . . .”

His words trailed off realizing they hadn’t gotten him anyplace the first time around so he might as well not continue. It was all he had to offer and he seemed to figure it would not be nearly enough. Junior wasn’t one to give up but in every way Thomas appeared to offer just too much competition. Of course, if he were dead

“Tell us about your town,” Marcus said.

“What’s in it for me?”

“Our friendship, for one thing?”

I nodded and moved closer, taking a seat on the ground beside Marcus, hoping to make us more equal in the lad’s sight.

“You two is really strange.”

“How’s that?” Marcus asked.

“Talkin’ with strangers. Givin’ your stuff away. Askin’ questions. I could gut you both right here and now.”

“Perhaps you could but how would that help anything?”

“Two less strangers.”

“Strangers are bad?”

“Not all I guess.”

“About the village. It looks to be in sad shape.”

“Don’t know. Always looked like this since I been around.”

“Does it have a leader?”

“Ronaldo the Great. That’s what he makes us call him.”

“Is he a good guy?”

“You *are* strangers, ain’t you? He takes anything he wants. Makes us do anything he wants. He and his men take our girls at night – I suppose you now what I’m talkin’ about. If you don’t do like he wants he kills you on the spot.”

“Not a good guy, then?”

“The worst in the whole world the way I hear it.”

Marcus and I were aware there were pockets like this around the country. We hoped not many or the implementation of change would be next to impossible.

“Are there stores?” I asked.

“A few – some food, some clothes, some general supplies. Expensive. Not many have money. Pop left me two pockos for a emergency. I still got ‘em.”

“How long your pop been gone?”

“Years I guess. I’m not much with time over the long haul. Figure I don’t have many years left anyway, considerin’ the way things are. I keep hid during the day so I won’t be caught doin’ nothin’ to cross Ronaldo or his men. They’d as soon skin me alive as look at me. They hate boy kids because we ain’t no good to them. Can’t work and stuff you know.”

“Surely you have some relatives somewhere, don’t you?”

“I think Ma had kin down in Williamsburg. Its south of here the way I hear it.”

“You know their name?”

“Washer I think. Me and Pa is Toolman. Ma was Washer.”

“What do you hear about things down there? Better than here, I imagine.”

“I heard they got a army and keep folks out. Ronaldo lost half his men tryin’ to take over the place. That was a long time ago. Don’t know nothin’ recent.

Marcus and I looked at each other. We often had simultaneous ideas.

“How about you team with us for a few days. We’ll get you down to Williamsburg and see about finding your relatives – er, kin. How about that?”

“No thanks.”

We were taken aback considering his earlier comments, but probably shouldn’t have been. Lawrenceville was all Junior had ever known. As scary as it was it was what he knew. Marcus responded.

“I can understand that you want to stay here. I’d want to stay in my village, too. How about we just pal around together for a while, then? Get to know each other better. Let you help us find out some more about your village.”

“We can do that. No funny stuff or I’ll cut your guts.”

“Funny stuff?”

“You know – body stuff.”

It had been such a remote idea that both of us had missed it. We winced in unison. Marcus, clearly having the best initial relationship with the boy, answered.

“You will NEVER have to worry about that with us. We will never harm you and will protect you the best we can.”

“Why?”

“Because we believe that all people deserve a decent break in life. So far it doesn’t seem like you’ve had yours.”

“I got nothin’ for you.”

“We don’t want anything from you.”

“I really don’t understand you guys. You’re scary, you know?”

“A good reason to get to know us. You seem to be a good judge of

character. Give us some time and let's just see what develops.”

“I could show you my cave I guess. It'll soon be daybreak and I'll need to be off the streets by then.”

“Thanks for trusting us.”

“I *ain't* trustin' you! I'm the one with the knife, remember. I've carved the guts out of other guys. I can carve yours out, too.”

My stomach turned and I thought I would lose its contents right there and then. I didn't. We stood and followed Junior south through back yards and alleys into the center of the city. There were no lights. A strange place for a cave I thought.

As it turned out it was the basement of a former business of some kind. The wooden over structure had been burned – clearly years before. The collapsed rubble from the floor beams and stone foundation had left a void some three meters in all dimensions. We had to enter on our stomachs through a hole near its base. The darkness was offset somewhat by a single candle Junior lit from a heap of barely glowing coals bedded into the bottom of a makeshift, stone, fireplace. He slammed a large chunk of coal onto a flat stone and broke it into smaller bits some of which he added to the coals. They soon burst into brightening flames and he put out the candle. He knew exactly what he was doing.

“Gotta save the candle for emergencies. Have lots of coal. Little chunks heat the place up faster – burn better than a big chunk. Big chunks are for when I'll be away a long time. Gotta keep live coals going. Getting' new fire is hard here. People get killed over it. Feel the walls. See how warm the stones feel. I keep it that way year round. Down here it seems cold even in the summer without it.”

“What do you do down here all day?” I asked.

“Day is my night. I sleep 'til I wake up. I got some books I like to read. The school house basement is full of 'em. I don't know how good a reader I am but I like the stories and the science books. I'll read for you.”

Not waiting for a response from us he moved to untie a bundle wrapped in soft leather. He removed a book as he explained.

“Paper gets damp down here. I keep em' covered. When I'm done with 'em I take 'em back to the school and get more.”

“Do kids go to school there?” I asked.

“No. Got no teachers. Ain't safe. Ronaldo don't like schoolin'. I'll read now.”

He tumbled down close to the light of the coals. For the next twenty minutes he read to us – flawlessly and with perfect enunciation easily conveying the tone and emotional elements of the piece. Marcus and I were amazed.

“... The end. How did I do?”

He sat up expectantly, looking back and forth between us.

“It was remarkable,” Marcus said. “How did you learn?”

“Maudie reads to her kids at night. I sneak in and lay up in the loft where I can look down and see the pages. I guess I just sucked readin' up into my brain.”

“Maudie a good friend is she?”

"She don't even know I'm alive. She'd shoot me down like a rat if she found me in her house."

"You know her kids?"

"I know them. They don't know me. Best way to stay alive is to know others but not let them know you."

"It must be a very lonely life," I said feeling so deeply sorry for the boy.

"Got nothin' to compare it to, I guess. I'm doin' okay. Look around at my place here. See. I'm doing great."

He was clearly proud of what he had.

"We can see that you are," Marcus said not wanting to in any way belittle the boy. His curiosity about the lad grew.

"You said you could do numbers as well as read."

"I can. Give me some and I'll show you."

"Some like what?" Marcus asked confused about how to comply with the request.

"Plusin' and minusin' and timesin' and dividin' for starters I guess. Don't you know numbers?"

Marcus began putting him through his paces.

"You're doing it wrong. Say like 44 plus 167 minus 28 times 15 divided by 36 and on like that."

Marcus gave me a look and began again.

"Can't you think no faster than that?" the boy said complaining while repeatedly snapping his fingers.

Marcus speeded up the process. I had to keep on my toes to remain in the loop. The boy never made an error.

"How old are you?" I asked thinking we might have some condition of stunted growth going there.

"I got a paper that says I was born ten years ago last month. So, I guess I've seen ten and I'm workin' on eleven."

I nodded.

"How old you guys?"

Marcus answered.

"Seventeen last month working on eighteen."

"Same month as me. I like that. You got kin?"

"Yes. We each have a mother, er, ma."

"Just because I say 'ma' don't mean I don't know 'mother'."

"I apologize. I didn't intend it as a put down."

Junior nodded though clearly remained in a mini huff over it.

"No pops, er, *f a t h e r s*?" he continued, the first hint of a smile breaking on his face as he worked to put us in our place.

Marcus and I broke into full out laughter. Junior wasn't sure how to take it and scooted back a bit – intrigued but uncomfortable.

Marcus explained.

"You *got* us. Good for you. You put us in our place. We won't underestimate you again – well, at least we'll try not to."

"Back to your pops."

“They were killed by a band of Despicables when we were about your age – a little younger, actually.”

“I’m sorry. I suppose you were used to having them around, weren’t you?”

“Yes. We were.”

“That was good in one way I suppose but it probably made it worse, too – missin’ ‘em more once they was dead.”

More and more this youngster impressed me. I’m sure he had no idea how smart and insightful he was. In his terms he had nothin’ for comparison. I wanted to take him home to mother. It would probably be buying trouble. He knew nothing of our way of life. Nothing about love, truth, and affection. Nothing about considering the needs or welfare of others. I wondered if he were already beyond help. What a tragedy if that were true. And to think how many more like him there must be across our country. Our Plan had to make certain it never happened again. For all of our heartaches they couldn’t compare with the tragedies through which this youngster had fought and survived. Had he not been so bright – and clearly most were not so bright – he would have perished long ago. I had seldom felt so sad and so helpless in all my life. I fought back tears and averted my face to put it out of sight from the boy. I heard Marcus snuffle and knew his mind as well.

In that instant it became clear to me why this trip was so important. I would be fully on board from then on. First, we had to deal with Junior. Should we give him money and leave him there? Should we interrupt our journey and take him back to our home? Should we take him south to Williamsburg and try to hook him up with his mother’s relatives? Marcus and I needed time alone to talk.

It was Marcus who broached the topic.

“Thomas and I need to poke around the village a little more. I think we’ll go do that now while you catch some sleep.”

The look on Junior’s face told the story. We were leaving and once again he would be alone in the world. It was an angry pout that disclosed his return to emptiness. His comment told it all.

“Got another apple I can have for breakfast, later?”

He would get whatever else he could from us before we abandoned him.

“We’ll be back, I promise,” Marcus said.

Junior raised an eyebrow and moved his hand close to his knife. He scooted back, clearly demonstrating his disbelief and need for separation. I tossed him an apple. He set it aside without comment. He moved to his mattress and closed his eyes severing the relationship. We left, offering no more words of reassurance. He could not have believed them had they been said.

Outside the cave, but still in the pit that had once been the basement, we noted the brightening sky. We climbed Junior’s makeshift, stone slab, stairs and cautiously moved on toward the center of town.

“So what do we do with the budding genius back there?” I asked.

Marcus understood it had been a conversation opener and not a request for an immediate solution.

“He can’t stay here like he is. Maybe there are people here who would

take him in. Let's see what's really going on out there."

From the distance we heard a prolonged, terrifying, scream. We heard a shot. We heard raucous laughter and then silence.

"Maybe he shouldn't stay here regardless of anything else," I suggested.

"He says he won't leave. Do we have the right to force him?" Marcus asked.

Force was not a part of our Plan. Yet, suddenly, we had to face its possible use.

CHAPTER SEVEN: Lessons From Junior

We moved on, certainly more cautious than we would have been prior to our encounter with Junior. As day broke, the unnatural scene from the night before remained. Smoke rose from across town – it may or may not have been from the same source we had noted before. Junior's section of the village seemed to have gotten the worst of things. It was surrounded by neighborhoods that were still mostly intact. A few people were beginning to move about the streets – most on foot.

A stream ran through the village. Women were carrying water from it. It was the Little Breech – one of the streams Marcus and I had enjoyed since childhood. We met a farmer hauling vegetables – to sell we assumed. We were right. Women came out of houses to make purchases as he stopped here and there along the way. A few seemed to offer money. One traded a coat. Another a chicken. Still another some eggs. The transactions were made quickly as was the return to the houses. Safety issues, we decided. No children were in sight.

The commercial part of town, defined by the rows of frame and stone stores on both sides of the muddy street, was no more than two blocks long. The buildings hugged the narrow, unpaved, rut-ridden road. Lights flickered through the windows of several stores. Evidently getting an early start was the habit in Lawrenceville. Marcus had a theory about that, of course.

"I imagine Ronaldo and his men drink themselves into stupors overnight so they remain dormant and less of a threat early in the mornings."

It made sense and I made a note. It was something to check out later with Junior.

As we moved beyond the main drag and back into residential neighborhoods we saw men working gardens, rifles and shotguns in evidence. Many wore side arms. Most carried knives. There were some children with them. Their purpose was clearly to act as lookouts. It appeared that they were mostly boys although it was hard to tell in the ragged outfits they wore. No teenagers were in evidence. Again, Marcus had a theory.

"I wonder if the strong young teen boys have been forced to join or work for Ronaldo? I also wonder if the teen girls are still in the company of his men – the way Junior described it. And, those who are not are probably in hiding."

Again, I made notes and tagged them for reconsideration when Junior was present.

After six hours we had seen what there was to see. It told a sad story – sadder than even I, the champion pessimist of the day, had let myself believe could be the case in our country. My private question was, 'How can we ever solve such a massive and horrific situation?' I could predict the question in Marcus's mind: 'Where shall we begin?' His question would win out in the end. At that moment I was glad that would be the case.

We made our way back to Junior's place. Knowing he really didn't expect us to return and fully expecting to be attacked if we came upon him without warning, we went out of our way to make noise and talk together so he would

know who was there. A knife in the gut was not on either of our agendas that morning.

Marcus rolled an apple in ahead of us. He called out.

“Junior, old man. It’s Marcus and Thomas. We came back just like we said we would.”

A stone moved creating a small peep hole above the entrance. We could see just the whites of two eyes peering out. They gave us the once over and searched beyond, apparently to make sure we were alone. The stone moved back into place. Junior’s head appeared from the entrance hole at ground level and the search-scenario was repeated. At last satisfied with the safety considerations, he hitched his head for us to come inside. We did.

Junior verified Marcus’s theories and he was able to add some details, which only amplified the terrible situation there.

Marcus spoke our mind to the boy.

“We are going to take you with us. We will try to find your relatives in Williamsburg. If that doesn’t work out there are some other options to keep you safe and get you into school. You always have this place to return to, I guess.”

“You two aren’t my boss.”

“Why do you think children have adult bosses?”

He folded his arms and mounted a pout.

“I get your point but I’m not like other kids. I’ve made it on my own here for years. I don’t need nobody takin’ care of me.”

“You are absolutely correct. However you are also smart enough to see a good offer when it’s made, right?”

Silence. Marcus pursued it with the boy.

“*Right?*”

Junior looked up into his face.

“I’m smart enough, alright, and never forget that.”

“Oh, there is no way we could ever forget that. Everything you do and say demonstrates your smarts.”

“*Intelligence,*” he said suggesting he could handle adult conversation. “Demonstrates my *intelligence.*”

We smiled.

“Intelligence, yes, a much better word in that spot.”

“You two are just as scary as Ronaldo’s men, you know?”

“But in a different way, right?” I added.

He nodded as he turned his head to meet my eyes clearly wanting to hear more from me. I obliged.

“Sometimes there is scary bad and sometimes there is scary good.”

I let it drop and we sat in silence for some time. Junior stirred the coals – for more light I assumed so he could better look us over one last time before submitting to our demand – or not.

“Got matches?”

It was not what we expected. Being the tender of all our important property, I answered.

“Yes. Why?”

“My fire will go out while I’m gone. If I come back I’ll need to restart it. Matches is the safest way to go.”

“I took a small box from my backpack and handed it over.”

His eyes lit up.

“Most matches I ever seen at once.”

He opened and closed the slide style box. He shook it close to his ear. He held it close to his body as he looked us over once more.

With no more words, he stashed the box inside the suede wrapping that protected his books. From beneath his mattress he pulled a soft leather pouch with a drawstring. It was large enough to hold a blanket and a bit more. He checked its contents – a folded piece of paper (his birth certificate I assumed), two well-worn Pocko bills, three candles, and a woman’s locket. Those were his most important treasures. He added a blanket, the two apples now in his possession, and stood up hefting the pouch over his shoulder.

“Okay then, boss me.”

It was humorous. It was terribly sad. It was clearly one of the biggest decisions this disheveled little boy had ever made. I felt a rush of responsibility the level of which I had never experienced before. This was a young life to which we had just committed our protection. More than that I realized another feeling growing in almost overwhelming proportion – I loved the child. I looked at Marcus. He raised his eyebrows. His lower lip quivered. Suddenly we had no bosses. We had in that instant become men – perhaps parent figures, in fact. It was terrifying. It was wonderful. It raised us to a new level of vigilance. It provided an instantaneous appreciation of our own parents beyond any we had contemplated before. It was the most significant event in our lives – it paralleled the feeling we would have at Marcus’s eventual inauguration.

By eight o’clock we were well south of Lawrenceville making our way along the stream where it flowed through a second growth woodland area. The peace and quiet was a welcome relief from our recent experience to the north. Marcus and I were both tired and hungry. We opted for sleep first. It required our first real ‘bossing’.

“Thomas and I need to get some sleep. Then we will need to eat something. While we sleep, why don’t you take this bar of soap and enjoy a nice long bath in the stream?”

“Was that really a question because if it was I decline?”

“It was not a question. It was meant to imply getting clean from the tip of your toes to the top of your head. I suggest that you do what you can to wash your clothes as well.”

“Will there be an inspection?”

Again, his very honest remark was humorous. We managed to not let on.

“No inspection if you just give us your word you will do your best to clean up.”

“What if I lie about it?”

“We would be disappointed if you chose to do that. We need to be able to trust each other. So far Thomas and I have kept our word with you. People get along best when that’s a two way street – you understand what I’m saying?”

“Mutual trust is what we’re going for here.”

“Yes. That says it better. I get the idea you know a whole lot more than you have let on.”

“You are perceptive.”

He grinned the first full-faced grin we had witnessed then headed for the stream. Thomas and I unrolled our blankets and were soon asleep. I dreamt about my father. I didn’t question Marcus about what might have transpired in his dreams. I just doubt if a ‘father dream’ would have spread that sort of smile across his face.

We awoke four hours later. The sun was directly overhead. The smell of wood smoke startled me and I sat up and looked around.

“Hey. You guys take really long naps. I got us a nice plump rabbit. It’s been ready a while now. Slow cooked is always better I think. May be dried out a bit. Got some tubers and berries. Tubers in the coals. They’re always best hot I think. That okay?”

“What’s better than okay?” Marcus asked going for the joke.

“Spectacular, I guess,” the boy said, another smile cautiously working its way to the surface.

“I’ll reserve ‘spectacular’ until after I’ve sampled it,” Marcus said giving me a glance.

We ate and talked and remarked about the fine fare. Junior remained tense glancing around as if expecting problems from somewhere – everywhere. He looked clean. He had apparently washed and then sun dried his shirt and pants. Although he didn’t approach Sunday meeting spick and span, the improvement was more than we had anticipated.

“You look great, Junior,” I said at last.

“I tried my best.”

“That’s all we could ever ask for isn’t it?”

He took in the comment but presented no outward reaction.

“I have never known people like you. It’s hard to believe, you know?”

“And we’ve never known anybody like you. It’s like you are our new hero.”

It had been from Marcus. He was the ultimate expert in knowing exactly what needed to be said.

“Hero? Wrong word I think.”

Marcus looked at me.

“Wrong word *you* think, hero?”

“No, seems like the exactly right word to me, hero.”

“You’re funnin’ right?” the boy said risking a modest smile.

“You funnin’ Thomas?”

“Me? I’m not funnin’. You?”

“No, I’m not funnin’.”

He turned back to Junior.

“I guess it’s unanimous. You’re our hero – no funnin’.”

“I’ll need a explanation.”

“Heroes are folks who beat the odds, who survive when everything seems to be against them.”

"I thought heroes saved guys."

"Sometimes they do. Who have you saved?"

He gave it some thought.

"I guess I saved myself."

"And isn't that a pretty special guy to save?"

"I guess the most important to me. I suppose that's pretty selfish."

"How can a guy save the world if he doesn't save himself first?"

"I ain't no world saver so you can just get that out of your heads."

"Did you get my point? You can't be any good to anybody else if you're not here to do it."

"I get it. But why would I want to help anybody else?"

"Look at the lunch you provided us. Why did you do that?"

He hesitated and smiled.

"Gotta keep up the strength of my new bosses."

We laughed. He laughed. It was a wonderful sound – one I imagine he had seldom heard. I reached out and tousled his hair. At first he pulled back but then leaned into my hand. He was exploring a new way to communicate. I'm sure touch had seldom been directed toward him in kindness.

He began learning that it could be wonderful. I learned that it just might take all of the power left in that bar of soap to actually get his hair clean.

We put out the fire, repacked our things, and were on our way again by one. When the trail was wide enough he bobbed along between us. When not, he tried various positions. His energy level was unbelievably high.

By three, the rooflines of Williamsburg's tallest buildings began coming into sight ahead of us. Junior was clearly in awe of the sight. As we neared the outer boundary we could see the fence – ten foot logs sharpened to a point and arranged vertically. It reminded us of frontier pictures we had seen. The trail merged with the road, which approached and stopped abruptly at a doublewide entry gate. It was closed. There were sentries posted. We were stopped and questioned.

Marcus explained the purpose of our visit as it related to the writing of a National Plan. I produced my journal as added evidence that was true. We were both unaccustomed to having to justify the truth of our statements.

"The kid?" one of the soldiers asked, pointing. "He your kin?"

I gulped knowing neither what might happen to him if he weren't, nor how Marcus would respond within the realm of truth.

Marcus smiled broadly, first down at Junior and then into the face of the sentry. He pulled the boy close to his side. Junior made no attempt to resist, instead snuggling his head into his new boss's side to solidify and amplify the effect.

"There has never been kin that was loved and cherished more than this lad right here."

It satisfied the sentry. Marcus had evaded offering an untruth by his forceful use of a truthful though mostly irrelevant, emotion targeting statement. Kinship was clearly still important in Williamsburg. I took that as a good sign. We were allowed to enter.

Just inside sat a makeshift army post with several dozen soldier-types available for immediate action if needed. We were relieved that they had *not* been needed in our case.

The village closely resembled our own. The streets were wide and well cared for. The buildings were in good repair. There were lawns and a park and a town square. People moved about freely – many people. Children were seen; they intrigued our young companion. His focus on them worked to twirl him about as they passed. At one point he stumbled and fell backwards. As he looked up his arms immediately took a defensive posture in front of his face. It was the reaction of someone expecting to be assailed. I reached my hand out slowly, offering to help him up. Tentatively he accepted it eventually lingering in his grip. I had never before known anyone who could break my heart at almost every turn.

Marcus pointed to the Post Office as if to emphasize it as a symbol the community was still integrated into the country as a whole. There was also a bank and rows of flourishing stores surrounding the square and populating its off streets. A statue of an early local leader stood at the center of the square. At its feet spread a flowerbed thick with pansies their faces dutifully smiling back at all those who stopped to admire them.

Junior was amazed with everything. His mouth had dropped open as we entered the gate and hadn't closed. We just let him look, assuming that if he had questions he would ask. There was an ice cream parlor. Marcus indicated it with a nod in my direction. I had to wonder if Junior had ever experienced ice cream. We would soon know.

"What's this?" he asked as we ushered him inside.

"An Ice Cream Parlor. You know about such places?" Marcus asked.

"There was a story about one I read once. I figured it was just make believe. I've seen cream freeze and it ain't nothin' nobody would never want in their mouth."

"I think you're in for a great surprise young man."

He put away three dishes – strawberry, vanilla, and chocolate. We figured he'd be sick eventually but then that was part of a boy's normal growing up experiences. He had a lot of territory to make up before 'normal' would even appear on his horizon.

After that we walked the town speaking with everybody who would give us the time of day. We learned a lot. We concluded that although folks had a generally good and safe life there in Williamsburg they were not as enlightened as the folks back home and had not taken full advantage of their more or less stable situation.

We made inquiries about the Washman family. The name was familiar but no one knew of such a family presently residing in the village. We went to the Post Office to see about address changes that might give us some clue. The old Post Master was an eager fountain of information. It seemed the family had moved several years before. The eldest daughter had married and moved to Lawrenceville – Junior's mother we assumed. He didn't know her married name. The youngest daughter had married and remained there in town. She had two

children – a boy nine and a girl seven. Her married name was Forrester. He gave us directions. Junior took it all in but made no comment.

As we followed the designated street we prepared Junior the best we could. We found the house several blocks west of the square and approached the front door. Junior hung back. A plain looking lady in her mid-thirties greeted us. Marcus explained the reason for our presence. Junior peeked up at her from his secure position close behind Marcus.

“James can this really be you? We’ve been so concerned about you.”

She knelt and opened her arms. Junior settled back behind Marcus. He did mutter.

“My name ain’t James; it’s Junior.”

She looked up at us and explained.

“His father’s name was James. He was named after him so was likely called Junior.”

“Do you understand what she is saying? This is your mother’s sister. That would make her your aunt.”

He nodded his head but tightened his grip on Marcus’s waist.

She stood and called back into the house.

“Peter! Rose! Come and meet your cousin James – he prefers to be called Junior.”

Soon the two children arrived, stopping beside their mother to look over the new kid – what they could see of him. Peter stepped forward and took Junior’s hand – a fully foreign act to him. Peter tugged.

“Come in. We can go out back and swing and teeter and climb trees. Come on.”

He looked up at me, unable to see Marcus’s face from where he stood. I nodded.

“We won’t leave you. You know that. Go get acquainted.”

Reluctantly he allowed Peter to drag him inside. He looked back obviously uncertain about what was going on.

Once out of earshot Rose had a comment.

“He seems very dirty even for a boy.”

“Go join them,” her mother said. “Scoot. These gentlemen and I have things to discuss.”

And discuss we did. She was eager for him to live with them. Her information about her sister and the boy’s father had not been complete. It was cause for tears though included nothing she had not suspected. We gave it to her straight. Junior was bright but fully uncultured. His level of trust was almost nonexistent and love had not been something he remembered or understood. If he decided things were not to his liking it was very likely he would run away – probably back to his cave. It had offered the only security – such as it was – that he had ever known. We probably overstated the down side to Mrs. Forrester, not wanting to later be faulted for sugar coating anything.

“Of course we will take him. There is no question. Come in. I have pie and milk. I know what appetites boys your age have.”

We talked for hours. I could see Junior and his newly found cousins

playing in the yard. It was clear he didn't know how to play at anything, let alone with other children. They were amazingly patient with him. Nice kids. It could be Junior's Eden if he'd buy into it. Time would tell.

* * *

The man of the house returned from work about five. He was a bookkeeper for a local store. He had no hesitation in accepting his wife's decision about adding Junior to their family. Mrs. Forrester took in washings and ironings so she could be home with the children. School would not take up again for several months. It would give Junior time to get acclimated to the family and town, and to living a civilized life.

The ways of the new family were often difficult for the boy to understand. He chose not to share a bed with Peter but preferred to curl up in a blanket on the rug. He was certain that pillows would suffocate him and each morning marveled that the others had survived their bouts with the sacks of feathers. He was reluctant to give up his clothes for the night. Socks and underwear were complete nuisances and he stuffed them under the mattress. Regular baths seemed painful and fully unnecessary ordeals. His struggle with knives and forks was the source of much giggling at the table and provided several trips to the back porch for Peter. Junior gave most things a good effort and after a day or so was even offering the occasional please and thank you. That seemed as surprising to him as to anyone – more than once he shrugged his shoulders in our direction. Trust would develop more slowly – if at all.

Of all the good things there, Junior was most taken with the paper and crayons. His talent with them was remarkable and became the source of immediate and legitimate praise and status.

Marcus and I remained in town for several more days until we felt comfortable leaving Junior behind. We sensed a huge loss. We assumed that he did, also. But, we talked it out with him and in the end he accepted the logic of the decision. He needed a stable family with wise parents not two teenagers who still depended on their own mothers and were uncertain about their own futures. We promised to write. So did he. We would.

We said our goodbyes in private away from the family. He administered bone breaking hugs – the first and perhaps the last we would ever receive from him. I took an apple from my backpack and handed it to him. He smiled up into my face and nodded. He reached inside his new shirt and removed his knife.

"Looks like I'm not going to be needing this anymore. Seems right that you have it – all the apples and such. Be safe."

Marcus and I sniffled our way out of town making our way toward the ocean. Our hearts had been touched in ways the likes of which we could have previously never imagined. We were suddenly eager to become fathers and experience what we felt had to be the most wonderful part of life.

CHAPTER EIGHT: Sand Between Our Toes

We left the wooded area of the central plains and walked the flatlands adjacent to the coastline. It was the first time in years that either of us had gazed out across the huge expanse of azure-green water. The sky was deep blue that morning so the break between heaven and earth was dramatic though not necessarily beautiful. The waves were imperceptible until they broke against the gently sloping sands of the beach – the filthy, littered, oily, sands of the beach.

I saw the refuse and debris. Marcus saw the gorgeous stretch of fine, russet, sand that lay beneath. He was buoyed up. I was weighted down with the amount of work that would be necessary to restore it to some semblance of its pristine past.

We removed our boots and rolled up our pants so we could wade. Salt water felt different from stream water.

“Silky slick,” Marcus called it.

“Slimy and sticky,” I called it.

It was cause for smiles and chuckles between us.

It was mid-morning and yet there was no one in sight. Where were they? Working? Sleeping in? Hiding from imminent danger we could not sense? We picked up our boots and walked north enjoying the sand beneath our feet.

A boat – 20 meters long, perhaps – rounded a jut of land just ahead of us. Although we could not make it out clearly we thought better than to flag it down or even be obvious in its sight. We moved back away from the water and knelt behind a low, stone, breaker wall. It turned and headed our way.

“Boots on,” I suggested.

Boots and sand between your toes was not, we soon learned, a pleasant combination. We crawled further inland to a stand of shrubbery and bellied down to watch. I had brought binoculars, which I passed to Marcus – he would have wet his pants waiting his turn had I gone first. He crafted his report:

“An extraordinarily scruffy crew – mostly shirtless with pecs as big as . . . mountains and biceps bigger than your calves.”

My calves weren’t showpieces for sure but they were significantly larger than most men’s upper arms.

“Unkempt beards, soiled bandanas encircling their foreheads, substantial artillery. Not the picture of a government or merchant ship. Bad guys, I’m guessing.”

I chuckled even amid the potential danger.

“Bad guys? In the wake of ‘unkempt’, ‘extraordinarily scruffy’, ‘soiled bandanas encircling’, and ‘substantial artillery’, all you can give me is ‘bad guys’?”

He smiled while he kept watch. The ship kept to a course that paralleled the shore. It slowed and spyglasses searched in our direction. They must have spotted us earlier. We kept low. Marcus passed the binoculars to me so I could get a first-hand impression of the vessel and its crew. What he said!

Within a few minutes the ship resumed its previous course and was soon

a diminishing speck on the southern horizon. I turned over onto my back and breathed a sigh of relief. Marcus was overjoyed at the experience and ran on about it for minutes.

After extracting what sand we could from our boots and toes we proceeded north. According to our recollection of the geography there was a coastal town with a once sizable port not far ahead – Marina. We made it there by lunchtime. Aside from the ice cream, we had spent no money so were in good shape financially. I had split it between our two backpacks in case anything happened to one of them. I hadn't burdened Marcus with that knowledge.

Marina stretched back from the ocean as a long, narrow, strip along the road, which made its way up the gentle rise from the water. The highest point could not have been more than ten meters above sea level. The point of high tide was easily figured as the place where buildings hunkered down behind the rock wall. It was in disrepair. The docks were in disrepair. Boats of every size and description lay rotting on the beach or bobbed mostly submerged still chained to gigantic wooden pier supports, which were otherwise unoccupied. Only one of the several docks seemed to be fit for use and a small freighter was tied there being unloaded by unenthusiastic longshoremen that were in many ways a match to the pirate-types we had seen earlier.

Marcus was determined to approach them and see what we could learn.

"Hard times in these parts," the most presentable of the men told us. "This is the first ship in a month. Can't support a family on one week's wages a month."

"Are your stores well stocked?" Marcus asked.

"Depends on how much money you have. I suppose the rich folks would answer yes. I'd have to answer no. Milk's now one pocko a liter. Just a few years ago it was a tenth of that. And milk is homegrown – local farmers taking terrible advantage of us. Been lots of raids to take the cows and poultry. Imbeciles! They kill the cows for meat instead of keeping them for milk and calves. Imbeciles!"

"Who are the rich folks?"

"The banker. The store owners. The dock owners. Mostly the politicians. Rotten to the core – the politicians. It's a dangerous profession. Lynchings, beatings, all manner of killings. Safer to be poor. It's the kids who get the worst of it – little food, no real schools, no medicine. It's the kids . . ."

"Looks like several big hotels up there. Tourists?"

"Big *empty* hotels, falling apart hotels. No more tourists. Not for years. Most of our kids wouldn't know a tourist if they ran into one getting off a liner and toting a suitcase. Sad times."

"Restaurants?" I asked, feeling the pangs welling up.

"One. Expensive. Poor selection. Bacon, eggs, local vegetables. No coffee. Bread if you can afford it. Wheat is hard to come by. Sugar's nonexistent. We use honey when we can get it. My boy knows a tree. So far it's just ours. If you want a good meal come home with me. Always room for one more if you like soup."

It was a dilemma for us. We didn't want to offend him by declining his

hospitality. We did want time among the locals. We didn't want to take their hard to come by food. The man was sincere, however, so we went with him for lunch.

The residential area stretched on for many blocks. The population of Marina had increased by almost one thousand during the past several years, mostly refugees from inland communities that were disintegrating. The horror stories touched our hearts. The generosity of the people of Marina was unbelievably heartening. They voluntarily refurbished one of the smaller, old, hotels in which new arrivals could be put up until something better was arranged. They had established community gardens and set up protection areas in the outlying areas so there would be fruit and berries from the wild stock. Several young orchards had been established during the past two years. Where the people of Lawrenceville had given up on life these folks were engaged in life for now and the future.

"Who's in charge of all this?" I asked. "The soup is wonderful, by the way."

"No one person. We have a mayor but he's useless. Nobody wants to be a part of the government here so we just keep electing Cyrus. Neighbors have just got together with good ideas and things popped up. My son and his teenage friends imported the trees for the orchards – dug them up, transported them, prepared the land. Have nearly a hundred – apples, plums, peaches. Now they're taking care of the area and are planning an expansion this Fall – pears and more apples. My wife has been in on the housing program. I've helped with the repair work as have many of the husbands of her friends. We all take responsibility for upkeep on the streets that pass our homes. We have a tutoring program for kids. We lost the teachers years ago. Can't afford to pay them. We are at least remaining literate and mostly knowledgeable about science and history. Weak in foreign affairs. So hard to get good information these days. Can't trust what the government circulates. Seems they lie to save face and they got so much face to save . . . well, you get the picture."

They were struggling but had a sense of the future in all of it – the sense of building a good and vital tomorrow for their families. It would become a grand talking point for selling our Plan. Our village and this one virtually proved many of our key points – positive values and volunteerism.

"What's with the ominous looking boat we saw hugging the shore earlier," I asked.

"Bad guys," he began.

I chuckled, thinking back to Marcus's exact same characterization.

"They've learned to leave our village alone. We have a cannon at the dock and as you have seen we keep armed when down in that area. We have a lookout corps working the coastline twenty-four hours a day. These days they actually cause us the most problems out at sea. When they get wind of a ship coming our way they go after it long before it can dock. We've arranged for roundabout approach routes and keep mum about expected arrivals."

"What is the makeup of that group?" Marcus asked.

"Mostly prisoners who escape as the walls fall down or the unpaid guards abandon their posts. They have acquired some younger men who are out of

work with no prospects. We hear it's a once in, never out arrangement. Every so often a young man's body will be found on the beach. The deaths are never pretty – unbelievably ugly in fact. I figure conditions among them must be getting pretty bad if any one of them would even consider trying to escape – knowing the fate of those caught.”

The family was eager to hear what we knew about the rest of the country. We shared what information we had. We also shared some of our ideas for rebuilding the country. They were received enthusiastically.

We thanked our hosts and moved on north. In our assessment, Marina was doing very well considering the general state of chaos in the country. Like Williamsburg they too had postal service. We would keep in contact.

We had been invited to stay the night but, considering the extra ‘Junior time’ it had taken in Williamsburg we opted to keep moving. We headed west-north-west, following a road that would take us into Washopolis, the capital. Our plan was to spend the night under the stars and arrive in the city by mid-morning. It was hot with little shade as we moved across the eastern plains.

Marcus stopped and sniffed the air.

“Water that way over the rise. Maybe a place for a dip.”

“You’re kin to a horse, I declare. Tell me, stream or pond?”

I was kidding. He took up the challenge.

“Probably both. Very few springs over here. I’m envisioning a stream flowing through a wide water basin of some kind.”

And so it was – a small stream feeding a little lake, exiting to the east. It was isolated. We spent the better part of two hours in the water, talking over new insights that had come our way during the past five days. As we dried in the sun I made notes. Marcus kibitzed over my shoulder offering suggestions here and there.

It was good to have several positive situations, which in at least some ways, exemplified aspects of our Plan. It also added credence to the general ideas we were weaving together. Our spirits rose regarding the plan. It sank regarding the oppressive conditions so many of our people had to endure. It became even more essential that *our* Plan, or one similar to it, would rise to the surface. The more we talked the more adrenalin surged through our beings.

We followed the stream. Being energized, as we were, we covered the next twenty kilometers in record time. I kept up easily – a new and puzzling experience for me. Perhaps there was something to this exercise and conditioning thing after all. I wouldn’t share that insight with Marcus or I would never hear the end of it.

Close to sundown we came upon an ideal campsite – the stream cutting a narrowed and rapid flow on one side and a steep, wooded rise on the other. The remnants of a stone fire circle suggested others had also used the place as a stopover. It made us think of Junior and his cave. As we built a fire for the night we rehashed Junior and how he had changed our lives and perspectives. We hoped we had been able to do the same for him but that, of course, would be his to know.

During our discussion it came to us that our approach with Junior had

been that of facilitation. The further revelation was that the best parents we knew, the ones that truly prepared their children to be ready to handle life, were facilitators – not merely effective teachers or good models, not bosses, not demanders, belittlers, or evaluators, and not direction pointers.

It was at that point that the necessary nature of our Plan emerged. The details easily and quickly coalesced around it. *Government at its best is a facilitator.* As infrequently as possible does it boss, direct, require, infiltrate, unilaterally fix, impose restrictions, or make demands. *It facilitates.* It listens. It sets the stage. It works as a catalyst. It sees that the full range of information is available unadorned with political bias. It exists to serve the people and not the other way around. It believes in the basic wisdom of people – the ability to make good, studied, decisions that build safe, mutually helpful lives for everyone. Government must be a facilitator, not a caretaker, yet not a ‘leave-folks-aloner’.

We prepared an outline – more detailed than Marcus would have it, but I was writing and I wanted a fully structured route to the document. We worked all night and the breaking of dawn caught us in complete surprise. We had filled three pads – some hundred and fifty pages. In the end our Plan would run to a thousand pages. At that realization I turned to Marcus.

“*Small government?*”

We laughed and searched the backpacks for food. Cheese, oranges, and hard bread – we toasted it so who would know – or care? We ate our fill.

Marcus had been thinking about my small government comment and he responded thoughtfully.

“My hope is that liberals will like the plan because everyone's basic needs and rights will always be assured. Conservatives should like it because it assures local control, small national government, and low taxes – both national and local.”

“What if a local area opts not to follow the plan? How can The Plan be enforced if we are searching for local control?”

Marcus nodded and thought silently for some time.

“Assuming The Plan will build a better life for those who genuinely participate with it – a better life than other ways – I believe areas that veer away will find degeneration in the quality of life and privileges and such and will self-correct. And, if some such deviation turns out to be better than The Plan that will be wonderful, right?”

I nodded. My mind was exhausted. My fingers were worn out. We were both tired but too excited to sleep. We took an early morning dip. The water felt cold at first. As our conversation continued, temperature became the furthest thing from our minds. The sun told seven o'clock when we finally waded ashore. The air had already warmed. We spread our blankets and were soon asleep.

The time of our projected arrival in Washopolis had been necessarily delayed. We approached the eastern gate at four o'clock. The perimeter of the walled city was guarded by soldiers. They were the first military forces of the national government we had seen. Generally grumpy, they asked their required questions, searched us and our belongings, and passed us on into the city.

It was a wonderful city with tall – four and five story – buildings and wide,

paved streets paralleled by sidewalks with lighting for evening strolls. There were grassy areas and trees and flowerbeds. It was a clean city and the windowpanes glistened, reflecting the sunlight as well as pride in places well kept. It was not, however, a reflection of the country we had just visited. The people were well-dressed – business men in coats and ties, the women fit to enter church services.

We looked at each other and shook our heads agreeing that tight ties and binding jackets were not for us. Although the women looked lovely, their garments revealed nothing boys our age would prefer to have revealed.

The stores were well stocked and street vendors touted the quality and value of their fruit, vegetables, and trinkets. The Capitol building – locally quarried white limestone – loomed ahead. It was the centerpiece in a huge square that occupied an entire city block. It housed all branches of government. The flag – blue, white, and red – rippled from its spire.

The flag presented a light blue background adorned by six red splashes varying in size to represent the six provinces of the country. Across the bottom were the words, *Government for the People*. Even the flag had big government written into it. 'For' not 'By' or 'Of' or 'From'. I made a note. Perhaps a one-word change on our national symbol might be the most far reaching and meaningful place to start.

There was a problem with our coins and currency as well. Each was emblazoned with the phrase, 'God will care for us'. In the least it should be changed to read, 'Some of us believe that God will care for us'. Given the actual situation I would even submit to, '*Most* of us believe that God will care for us'.

Marcus and I didn't so much object to the God reference as we did the implication of the phrase. A society sitting around waiting for a supernatural force to take care of it was hardly properly motivated to get off its butt and work to make things happen. That was another of Marcus's early contentions that keeps us out of Sunday School to this day. Also, contrary to general opinion, such a motto didn't really draw the people together under one creed; it split the people by faith into inflexible segments, each believing it really meant, 'God will care for us, but if it comes right down to it he will care for me best, or sooner, or more completely than you because my particular belief system represents God's Truth and yours – though similar – really doesn't.'" It was the belief that had allowed the country to sit back and give reign to Leader after Leader who plundered the coffers and let the land fall into its present state of chaos and hurtful dysfunction. The clergy perpetuated it all by preaching that God was just testing our faith. Clearly those 'five wondrous words' (God will care for us) – as our Mayor had once characterized them – had not been true, had not worked, had not been reliable, not in their usual interpretation at least. Messing with that, however, would likely cause more problems than it would solve. Pitting religious belief against the purpose of government would not be healthful. Change needed to come from the people and clearly our people felt no need for *that* sort of change.

Our country would be better served, we believed, by separating faith-based-beliefs from the system of positive social values we found had stood the

test of man's history. Since they overlapped it would be a major challenge to keep them separated in the thinking of our citizens. Once confused one for the other, however, we were on our way toward a single minded, monolithic, theocracy and not a 'citizenocracy' for want of a more accurate word. Faith, guiding individual lives, was one thing – usually positive we believed. It allowed for solace, working philosophies, and a variety of input as political discussions progressed. That mix should work to create a healthy, give and take, all-inclusive environment. A state religion would therefore not only be unnecessary but it would be counterproductive – stagnating as it excluded and therefore never considered all other points of view.

It was reassuring that the city appeared to be functioning so well. Now, if we could just find ways to get the country, of which it was the seat, to do as well. Marcus wondered if the residents of the city had any idea how things were outside their wall. We suspected, not.

We walked the halls of the capitol building finding much of it was off limits to us peons. Later we found a restaurant – one that looked about average in price and service. Eating out had been a rare experience for both of us. We knew which forks and spoons to use on which courses but it didn't come without some thought. The fact was that none of that was necessary that evening. Having no idea what most of the offerings might be we both opted for the familiar pot roast – a hearty one-dish meal on which we had both grown up. It wasn't mother's, but very good. We ordered peach cobbler with ice cream for dessert and lingered longer than necessary – partly to relax and enjoy the nice surroundings, partly to ogle the young waitresses. There had been few new girls in our lives since grade school so sitting there was nice – very nice – exciting nice – fantasy inducing nice.

We went for a l o n g run after eating!

The meal had been more expensive than we had estimated – Washopolis had a 40% sales tax on food and lodging. We decided to head north toward the boarder and find a spot to camp.

The foothills in that direction were gently rolling, gradually rising into the high hills of the western border area. They were more grassy than bushy and their lighter green contrasted sharply with the dark green of the forest covered high terrain beyond. The streams flowed with great force, their narrow channels cut deep into limestone. We passed several sawmills that utilized that natural resource for power. Only one showed evidence of still being a sometimes-working site. Logs were apparently slipped into the stream up in the hills and propelled by the rushing water the many kilometers to the mill. It seemed a reasonable arrangement as it greatly decreased the distance over which the finished boards would have to be hauled for distribution.

We made camp at one of the recently deserted sites. The wheel remained in motion; it's discordant, off beat, squeaks, provided an interesting – if not pleasing – counterpoint to the more regular splatter of the spilling water. We found rocks to ring our fire. Not unreasonably, there was a world of firewood ready for our use.

Being at a higher elevation, we anticipated a chillier night. The down

sweeping breeze was also cooler and more intense than we had experienced back on the plains, below. We built a sizable fire. Its flames leapt high, lighting the area as a warning to coyotes and wolves that made the hills their homes. It was said they seldom roamed that far east, but a little extra precaution seemed in order. Not surprising, that had been my idea – suggestion – insistence. We each took time to wash out several outfits and strung a rope line so they could dry overnight. I broke out second blankets for us.

“The problem with a fire for warmth,” I said, “is that it only ever really keeps you warm on one side.”

“That’s easily fixed, you know.”

“Fixed?”

“Certainly. We can build a second fire right over there and sleep between them. No lack of fire wood here.”

I smiled ready to get him.

“But then . . .”

“I know but then your head and feet will still be cold. You’re worse than a crotchety old man with poor circulation.”

We did build the second fire and we didn’t really need the extra blankets – nor, I might point out, were we accosted by any of the aforementioned, indigenous, four-legged, well-teethed, ravenous, creatures. There was one unforeseen problem; the next morning our freshly laundered outfits smelled of wood smoke. Marcus pointed out that you pay extra to get ham that smells that way.

The next morning we climbed the hills to the north and located the border with Halonia. There were no patrols. Not even a wire fence or fire break. From time to time we came across small iron disks nailed to trees stating it was indeed the line of separation between the countries. The hills on our side were in second growth and had been poorly managed. Large sections had been logged bare and the trees that had grown back were struggling, disfigured, volunteers. There was no evidence that any effort had been made to replace the trees in a planned or systematic manner.

That had its upside and its down side. Nature had once again taken care of itself but man, in his greed, had ignored the plight of future generations and the problem of erosion and the loss of woodland plants that need cool shade to flourish. I could tell those things bothered Marcus. He had a difficult time understanding man’s darker side. He even made excuses. I suppose my problem was expecting that to surface all too often.

By four that afternoon we had followed the border west, curving south, and found ourselves standing on the highest point in Lelonia. A small plaque identified the spot. Because of the forest that engulfed the slopes and the ever present, dense, low hanging, clothes soaking, fog, we could not really take in a view of our land. Undeterred by that, Marcus climbed the tallest tree and surveyed the country for some 100 kilometers in all directions. It was a clear day. The sun was to our backs. Long, finger-like, shadows stretched from the massive trunks further darkening the greens and browns that lay before us.

Eventually Marcus insisted that I climb and experience the view. I’m glad

he did. I'm glad I did. For the first time I gained some physical perspective of the land that was ours. I had been taught that Lelonia was a small country. I had taken that as a put down, I guess. If little was so big that I could not see but a tiny part from its highest point, it could really not be small in the sense of being insignificant. I made a note to one day write a book titled, 'Our Massive, Tiny, Land'. It was a someday project for use by school children. I just might follow up with one called, 'This Massive, Tiny, Me'. (The second would get written first. Its message seemed far more important.)

CHAPTER NINE: The Hill Folks

The hill folks had historically kept themselves isolated from the rest of Lelonia. They didn't cotton to outsiders and let it be known with a buckshot volley over your head well before they revealed themselves.

So it was as we approach the small village of Tucky. We stopped and put our packs to the ground. We knew the routine from our many treks into the hills to visit Sagacious. We stepped back and presently two men approached us. Our explanation of our mission – related to the Plan – fell on deaf ears. They hadn't heard about the movement. Nor, did they care.

Marcus began asking them questions about things they'd like to see changed – like less interference from the government in their affairs. THAT got their attention and soon they were toting our packs for us and leading us into the tiny village.

The hill settlements hadn't changed much since we first visited them as little boys. Our fathers had brought us up to camp in the area. These folks who depended on the land for most everything took very good care of it. Those vacation times had been great adventures – times alone with our dads doing things guys did: tents, campfires, fishing, foraging for fruits and berries, swimming in the creeks, whittling, hiking and, of course, just talking, sons to dads. They were good times often remembered and now more precious than ever. We sometimes spoke of our plans to do the same with our children.

There was nothing neat or clean or uncluttered about the village of Tucky, but as I said, none of those things were different from before. The people, once they got by their proclivity to shoot you, were warm and accepting and good hosts. We were offered squirrel stew with lots of vegetables and hearth-baked bread with hard crusts. For drinks the choice was spring water or locally distilled hooch. We opted for water. It wasn't that we hadn't tried alcohol but felt the need to keep our wits sharp. Interestingly, I thought, after an hour or so the stench emanating from all the unbathed bodies seemed to disappear. I wondered what they thought of our odor or lack thereof. I wouldn't ask.

Their lives went on pretty much as they had for a century. They were fully self-sufficient and either really liked children *or* the process by which they came into being. Both, I suspected although I couldn't speak from personal experience regarding the latter. The adults were openly affectionate and the children clearly loved. The only hazard was avoiding streams of tobacco juice, which were forcefully dispensed with little warning and in the most immediately convenient direction. We were offered 'chaws' but declined. They saw us as different but soon came to realize we posed no threat to them or their way of life. We could discern no means of livelihood and the men and women seemed to mostly just hang around and talk – and, make babies. It was like a state of permanent retirement beginning at about age – well, birth. Hmmm! What did they know that the rest of us didn't?

They were uneducated in the facts of the outside world but that didn't translate as unintelligent. Their more or less primitive technology was ingenious.

From what we could ascertain they had no criminal problem. The eldest woman in the village (who still had her wits about her) arbitrated disputes.

It was a long known reality that they didn't pay taxes. On the other hand they voluntarily did everything for each other. They didn't use any governmental services and had no need for a well maintained network of roads across the country. It was clear they posed a special situation that our Plan would need to consider and that would *not* model the ill-fated, invasion by the army ten years earlier in an attempt to collect back taxes. Meddling in the affairs of other cultures with insufficient preparation and familiarity with local ways and beliefs would always be devastating to all concerned. History makes that copiously clear. Some leaders, of course, choose not to read history or study the beliefs and practices of other cultures. Unforgivable!

So far as we could tell these folks did not use the standard monetary system of Lelonia. When I took out some pockos to buy supplies, they seemed to only faintly understand what they were. The young people had no clue whatsoever.

They supplied us with bread and cheese and jerky and the children brought us fresh fruit. They would accept nothing in return. We had made friends and would return to visit with them. That evening at our campsite we discovered one large bottle of home-brew somebody had tucked into my backpack – as a humorous offering, we suspected. We tried it. Had either of us sported chest hair it surely would have curled. My throat still burns and my nostrils still itch and run. We kept it in case we ever had the need for antiseptic or the makings of a small explosive device.

Our next stop was to be at the cabin of Sagacious – the well-known writer and Marcus's great uncle. We knew there would be no warning shots just open arms and kisses. Sagacious was a champion hugger and kisser. From him, kisses felt right. It was nothing Marcus and I would offer each other but just why that seemed uncomfortable I wasn't sure. I'd bring it up sometime. We knew that in many cultures kissing between men was the accepted greeting.

Aside from the hill people, Lelonia had few cultural differences from region to region. That presented both an upside and a down side. We had no clashes of cultures as was the case in many countries. Neither did we have an ever-present opportunity for developing understanding and learning tolerance for and acceptance of folks with different beliefs or customs. The sole, real, ongoing, generational conflict in our culture was that between boys and girls ages eight through twelve or so. It was graciously put aside at thirteen – much to the chagrin and bewilderment of younger boys.

"My two favorite young men," Sagacious called out as we approached him where he sat on his front porch. He stood.

"Our favorite uncle," Marcus called back.

There were hugs. There were kisses. And then they were offered and returned all over again. It was so comfortable. My mother and Marcus's mother hugged and kissed us, and that had worked into something very nice. I liked hugging and kissing with girls but that was something well beyond mere friendship – in fact, on some occasions it really didn't imply friendship at all. I

remember my father's hugs. They were stronger and not as lingering as Mother's but they were always wonderful. I wondered if, at my age now, he would still be offering them to me. I chose to believe he would.

"So, what brings you way up here?" the old gentleman asked moving back to his rocker.

We took seats on the floor, our backs to the posts.

"The Plan for the new Lelonia or our version of it," Marcus said.

"Excellent. I'm glad to see you getting involved. Actually, I'm glad to hear the process is underway. Not much news rises up into these hills. I'd love to hear what you have in mind."

For the next two hours we – mostly Marcus – held forth in both outline and detail. There was no doubt about the old gentleman's intense interest. Clearly, the further we went the more deeply engrossed and impressed he became.

"Well, that's it in a nutshell – a two hour nutshell."

The old man applauded and nodded.

"Wonderful. Where did you two young men come by such wisdom?"

Marcus and I exchanged glances then turned to Sagacious and, in unison, said:

"Right here at your feet, Sir."

He nodded and smiled not so much acknowledging the truth of our statement as its more general context – we were dedicated searchers and listeners. As always, he had questions. He was not one to preach, make pronouncements, or give answers. Instead he led folks to find their own answers by following the paths his questions offered them – demanded of them, even. He had done that with us all our lives and we assumed with our fathers before us. He had once read to us from a book in which it said, "Not until the proper question is asked, can a proper solution be found. If no solution is forthcoming, look to improving the question."

It was one of the most important revelations Marcus and I had ever received. It had become a natural, habitual, part of our everyday interaction with others. It suggested a huge responsibility because, following his lead, we, too, often asked questions in response to questions. If we were to ask the wrong or an incomplete question might we not be harming the other person rather than helping him? We took the responsibility of interchange quite seriously.

We related our experience with the hill people and offered food from the backpacks they had so generously replenished for us. We ate and talked and planned and enjoyed each other's company – 'the grand gift of each other's presence' as Sagacious would describe it.

Later that night as we lay under an intensely starry sky we came to the realization that the old man's questions were not so much paths to answers, as we had once thought, as they were paths to options – to clearly delineating the choices we must consider and the decisions we must make. It had long been clear to us that lots of folks believed that most problems had two sides and further felt smugly proud that they were intelligent enough to realize that – broadminded in fact. The reality is that most problems have many, many, sides to them so stopping at two is actually quite short sighted.

We have been mindful to consider all of the relevant options we can unearth at each juncture as we work toward constructing our Plan.

The questions from Sagacious had helped – if feeling backed into several very narrow, very tall, very steep-sided, box canyons can be considered helpful. (Joke!)

Time and time again we bumped squarely into the competition vs cooperation conundrum. Marcus believed man had more of a competitive nature than a cooperative nature. He believed it was somehow connected to our basic need for survival. I've mentioned it before but that night, as we talked in the dark of the moon, with the billions of stars magnified in the blackness, we began seeing a likely reason for the problem.

First, our basic needs must be met and so long as we are struggling to meet them – food, shelter, safety, etc. – we are stuck at the competition level. We are in serious competition with others for the stuff of our very survival. We have come to believe that once people rise above the basic needs level they often fail to make the transition from competition to cooperation. In fact, most folks don't seem to even consider that such a shift in orientation is required to build a mutually helpful society as compared with one that mindlessly continues to foster a cutthroat, me first at any expense, way of thinking.

Earlier that day Sagacious had summed up the situation in one short phrase: 'Switching from a physical/personal survival mentality, which requires serious competition, to the survival of the social order mentality, which requires cooperation.'

History has clearly demonstrated that competition, which is not based in and subservient to a culture of cooperation and mutual helpfulness, soon destroys those it touches. Put another way, when competition becomes the bottom line – I have to out do you in whatever is being contested – most people are, therefore, hurt while only one rises to the top and not even he typically arrives unscathed. Hurting people just does not fit into our Plan, so competition – a long, mindlessly, revered concept – clearly had to be addressed on tip toes at least at the outset. Illogically held truths often seem to be the most tenaciously defended – perhaps because in the end there was no defense. All our lives we had fought it in the lore, religion, politics, and regularly in everyday conversation.

The old, 'best value for the lowest price', is a strong argument for economic competition. We like that side of the coin even though it may in some cases wreak great hardship and even ruination on some manufacturers or retailers or service providers that can't meet the price. We are working on alternatives in such situations. A well-ordered society based on positive values should remain free of the sanctioned delivery of hurt and harm.

There is another side to competition that absolutely irks us down to our toes. It involves the law of supply and demand where the usual laws of competition go out the window. Say, I own 1,000 oranges at a time when the orange crop is devastated by a freeze. Since I have the only oranges available and people really want them – some even *need* them – I can raise my prices as high as the market will stand. MY price can go up from a quarter each to a pock each overnight – or two or three or ten. Poor folks who need oranges like

anybody else can't afford them so have to do without – be hurt. The businessman who is willing to take advantage of the unfortunate ignores their needs and opts for the outrageous and shameful personal profit. It isn't right. It does not adhere to any sort of positive social value. It is a deliberate, fully selfish, move to guiltlessly cause hurt and pain. "It was just good business," we hear. Our plan will find some way around it. It continues to be a point of confusion in our work. It involves the extension of personal positive social values into the realm of business dealings. It may involve a governmental regulation as much as we detest governmental regulations. Should the government be legislating values? Is that really what would be happening? Even if it were, it would be part of a tiny set of regulations compared with those of today and those present in most governments around the world. We are agonizing over the conundrum.

It bothers us that we can't depend on man's good nature to first of all just automatically take good care of each other – and such price gouging represents the absolute opposite of that. We believe it has to do with not making the appropriate transition from the necessarily competitive approach in meeting basic needs as a child prior to age six, to the essential cooperative stance needed for the survival of a positive, mutually helpful society. As good adult citizens we don't take advantage of other people's hardships and we don't use disasters to our own advantage. Economic matters have to be secondary to social matters – ALWAYS.

I've belabored the point beyond what may seem reasonable, but fairness based on positive social values defines the basic theme of our Plan so we must understand its every nuance.

"Our flag sets a competitive tone among our citizens, you know," Marcus said turning on his blanket to face me.

I was sitting up poking at the fire for no special purpose other than to sit up and poke at the fire. I waited for him to continue.

"The red splashes represent the relative geographic sizes of each of the six provinces. 'There's *our* splash. It's bigger than *your* splash'."

I responded:

"They do reside on the same flag, however. That sets a cooperative tone, I suppose. And the reality is that they *do* differ in size."

He nodded thoughtfully then put my comment into historical context.

"A willingness to consider cooperating at least, or that historically we once considered cooperating. I'm sure I'm exaggerating the problem. That's usually your job. What's going on?"

"You're reflecting the fact that we are struggling with man's unpredictability. We know we have a generous and compassionate side to our nature, but we also know that it often doesn't take much for some among us to override it with other powerful, innate, tendencies such as greed and power mongering. For our Plan to be universally implemented we either need to be able to count on the stability of man's good nature or assure it with a regulation. You don't like the alternatives."

"Insightful. I worry. You poke."

“We both worry but you take constructive actions – like thinking and planning and highlighting the problem – where I revert to playing with fire.”

“I’m eager to get to the actual writing,” Marcus said laying back, hands behind his head. “I feel ready, now.”

He continued to look up into the darkness.

“I think it’s time to end this adventure and return home. What do you say, Thomas?”

“Probably right. I had hoped to kiss some new girls on this trip but that hasn’t seemed to be my lot.”

“Have you noticed that you speak of such things far more often than I do?”

“He who has plenty has no need to speak of his shortfall.”

“Very Sagacious-like. I bow to your wisdom. We will go through Virginia City if we take the long way home. It’s rumored to be in pretty good shape. I imagine we could find some girls willing to pucker up with love starved wayfarers.”

“Then I vote for the long way home,” I said emphatically.

“I, as well. Thinking about it, this has been the longest spell I’ve gone without kissing since I was thirteen.”

I took to my blanket. My kissing history was not nearly that impressive.

We remained quiet for a while. Marcus spoke.

“Do you suppose Junior might be looking at the same sky were looking at?”

“I’d bet on it provided he’s looking at a sky.”

“I’ll ignore that. I miss him. I wonder about him often every day.”

“Me, too,” I said. “Do you think he can ever overcome the terrifying life he was forced to lead for so long?”

“I don’t know. There are undoubtedly lots of kids like that we will have to help in the near future. We will need to check back with his new family for suggestions.”

“We have to remember that Junior likely coped better than most just because he is so bright. It may be an even worse situation for others.”

“The deprivation of emotional needs is likely the same bright or not,” he said. “I can’t see his scars from all that healing easily.”

“Do you suppose he’s moved up from the floor to the comforts of the bed, yet?”

I’m sure Marcus smiled, understanding it required no response. He moved to a related topic.

“I for one won’t be opposed to a bed once we get home.”

I nodded to myself briefly, remembering the one from which I had been dumped just slightly over a week earlier.

“I really believe ground has become harder and bumpier since we were kids.”

We each smiled into the darkness and settled in for the night.

We found Virginia City. We found the park in Virginia City. We found the girls in the park in Virginia City. Although most of them approached Marcus – the usual occurrence – I was not bothered by it. Typically the slender, beautiful,

deeply tanned, dippers went for him immediately – the clinging, fingers through his hair, bursting to pucker, routine. That provided an opportunity for those who could actually carry on a conversation to gravitate in my direction. I have found it to be a good system of pre-qualifying the sort of girl that interests me – a serious and able talker *as well as* a serious and able kisser.

I was soon walking the woods with Clarice. Marcus was being attended to by a bevy of brawn-happy beauties. I'll just report that my afternoon was perfectly satisfying – the walk, the talk, the moments of affection. Marcus reported a similar experience. We seldom shared with each other the details of such times; it was private and would disregard the girl's right to privacy.

Suffice it to say, we both sported broad smiles as we left the village heading home. From time to time we caught each other chuckling. There would be one more night on the road. With the approach of darkness we entered familiar territory – gently rippling grasslands, stands of bushes, and both low lying orchards and tall, sturdy trees. There were still a few fields of wheat and corn but production remained far behind what it had been a decade earlier. Bands of Despicables still roamed the rural areas so we made camp without a fire and set up for the night inside a stand of trees. We portioned out our remaining food so there would be some left for the morning.

Again, we talked long into the night. We were pleased that we had been able to learn so much. We were disturbed by much of what we had seen and heard and yet there were pockets of hope and sanity and wonderful people with big hearts. Most were eager to help fix the government and get the country back on its feet. A few were hoping for the dole. History showed there were always those eager to be kept just as there always seemed to be those willing to mindlessly give them what they wanted. It was a sad situation on both sides of that line, we thought. We were more convinced than ever that facilitation was the form of government Lelonia needed – that the World needed. We would prepare and present our Plan and see what happened. We would examine the others to be submitted in our village as well and try to keep an open mind. We couldn't really do that of course and we recognized it.

I dreamt of scantily clad girls dancing among flowers. Marcus reported visions of Junior snuggled into a bed – his pillow remaining on the floor. They each spoke to enlightening parts of our adventure.

CHAPTER TEN: DUTY

“I do declare you’ve both lost ten pounds.”

Those were my mother’s opening words as we arrived home shirtless and sweating. There were hugs and kisses and clinging. Although we hadn’t considered it, it was the longest we had been gone from home since the camping trips with our fathers. In some ways it seemed like a lifetime. We may have lost pounds but we had grown a hundred fold in other ways.

Marcus crossed the street to his house. We were both exhausted and slept the day away. I awoke to the aroma of mother’s cooking. It was late afternoon.

“Hey sleepy head. Glad you’re up. Looks like rain. Please bring in the clothes from the line. We can fold them later. Marcus and his mother will be here for supper any minute. Look at those ribs! We’ve got to put the meat back on them. Didn’t you two eat at all?”

“We ate fine, Mother. We walked ten and fifteen hours a day. I guess that takes its toll. We were never hungry. I can hardly wait to tell you the story. I’ll wait for Marcus. Our stories are always best when he’s a part of them.”

For some reason, which neither Marcus nor I could ever understand, shirts were mandatory for meals. He borrowed one of mine and we were suddenly deemed presentable. We told our story and went on about the Plan. We – mainly I – made a timetable to guide our work during the next weeks. It would be a tight schedule. Probably no more walks in the woods and kissing until we were finished. During those next few weeks we opted out of the morning school function with the permission of the teacher. The bulk of the writing was done in my bedroom – me at my desk, Marcus on my bed. We followed the outline we had set that night on our trip. I was amazed at how, as a result of that, the document virtually wrote itself.

We signed it at the stroke of midnight on May 31st and delivered it to our local committee chairman early the next morning. She raised her eyebrows when she saw its size.

“There is a ten page summary at the beginning,” I added hoping to quell any initial reservations she had.

“And at the beginning of each section we provide an outline and a brief summary,” Marcus added.

She thanked us with that ‘pat on the head now please leave me to important things’ tone in her voice.

“Surely after all our work she won’t just bury it so it’s not considered, will she?” I asked, looking back as we left the porch.

“We’ll make sure that doesn’t happen.”

I didn’t understand but that was nothing new. We made the rounds of the stores telling of our recent adventure and the Plan we wrote as a result. Marcus was able to stir up real interest everywhere we stopped. He had been right. He made sure the Plan would not get buried.

“What day is it?” he asked as we walked back in the general direction of

our neighborhood.

“Saturday, June first. What shall we do?”

“Not sure. It’s been so long since we had to make that decision. Swim? Fish? Hike? Read? Sleep?”

“Girls?”

Before the day was over all of those things had come our way. It had been like a vacation from our vacation.

* * *

During the next few weeks the village was abuzz about the various plans. There were five submitted for consideration. They were all widely read, studied and discussed. People came up to us with specific questions about things in ours. Marcus answered and I made notes. In the end ours was selected to be sent on to the national conference.

It might have seemed to make more sense to have each *province* select one or two to submit for final consideration. The thinking of Sagacious was that if that had been the procedure some of the good ones might have lost out. If one province had produced all ten of the best plans and only two could move on the national level, then eight of the best would never get to be considered. We thought it was a good, if somewhat cumbersome, plan.

The *National Council* was made up of two representatives from each village – again cumbersome but gave the unmistakable feeling of adequate representation. Marcus and I returned to our jobs at the hospital. We worked three hours a day and then volunteered another. During the school year it kept our lives full. We both believed we needed to help with the family finances. Our Mothers both worked – mine as a clerk in the dry goods store and Marcus’s was a teller in the bank. Neither paid well but then nothing paid well. We got along okay. Our needs for stuff had always been minimal.

Marcus wanted to be a doctor like his father had been. It was his dream from as far back as I could remember. There was the National University in Washopilous where he would go for his first four years. Then he’d have to go out of the country for the medical training – Halonia most likely. They took in a limited number of alien students – most on scholarships – upon a promise to work there for a certain number of years.

I wanted to be a writer. I had read the classics and many of the philosophers. Sagacious believed that the first step in writing was always the philosophy. “Know the values and points of view you want to convey, *then* begin plotting your piece.” I always used that approach. In my younger days I had no idea what philosophy was, hence my wide-ranging reading. I shared what I learned with Marcus and we had wonderful debates and discussions about the really big issues of life and the universe. It formed a good basis for our recent foray into the necessary underpinnings of a new socio-political system of government.

Living ones life according to a positive social philosophy had made sense to us from our earliest years. It grew up with us so never really had to be stated. That became necessary for the first time as we worked on the Plan. We understood that many folks did not believe or at least did not demonstrate what

we considered a necessary take on social interaction. The problem often came back to the same things; selfishness, greed, competition, and the felt need for revenge.

In their own ways, each of those things becomes an opposite of an altruistic stance in life. In selfishness one only looks after his own interests. In altruism one puts the needs of others at least on a par with his own. In greed one takes and accumulates far more than he really needs. In altruism one takes his fair share and seldom more than he needs. In competition one harbors the need to beat or destroy all others that are seeking a goal that is on your own agenda. In altruism the method of choice is cooperation, where most everyone can win. In revenge those who have harmed, crossed, or inconvenienced you or yours must be hurt or destroyed – punished to a level well beyond the trauma visited upon you. In altruism, fixing things is the guiding principle – fixing negative things so they never have to occur again. Neither this approach nor revenge can undo atrocities or other bad works, but through altruism there is hope that things can get better, be improved over the long haul. Through revenge that can never happen, in fact, revenge becomes the seed for more revenge and that for still more in an endless spiral of increasing violence. A family, a village, a country, or a world cannot long survive the revenge mentality. We are deeply concerned about it and believe it is perhaps the major problem of our day. Revenge is seen everywhere from children's stories to blockbuster novels for teens and adults. 'Don't get mad, get even' MUST be replaced with 'don't get mad, fix the problem'.

Every great religion has its own version of the Golden Rule. It has made absolute and ultimate sense to wise and thoughtful men down through history, and yet look where our societies are today. They could never sink to this level of despair and hate driven animosity if but that one rule were enacted every hour of every day by every human being.

For Marcus and me this is not a religious pronouncement or mandate; it is just proven common sense put into action. If people in general actually read history – and I must doubt that – I can tell you for sure that they certainly don't contemplate its messages. It has been made so clear, decade after decade, millennium after millennium. For a social order to survive, people must treat each other with benevolent, thoughtful, kindness and compassion from a basis of mutual trust. Those who won't play by that rule must be excluded so the rest can have a good life.

I've collected nine versions of the Golden Rule from nine of the greatest religions mankind has seen. Five are constructed in the negative; three in the positive. One's a toss-up.

Buddhism: Hurt not others with that which pains yourself. -- *Udanavarga*
5.18

Christianity: So always treat others as you would like them to treat you; that is the meaning of the law and the Prophets. -- *Bible, Matthew 7*

Confucianism: Is there any one maxim which ought to be acted upon throughout one's whole life? Surely the maxim of loving kindness is such. – Do not unto others what you would not they should do unto you. -- *Analects 15.23*

Hinduism: This is the sum of duty: do nothing to others which if done to you, would cause you pain. -- *Mahabharata 5.1517*

Islam: No one of you is a believer until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself. -- *Traditions*.

Jainism: In happiness and suffering, in joy and grief, we should regard all creatures as we regard our own self, and should therefore refrain from inflicting upon others such injury as would appear undesirable to us if inflicted upon ourselves. -- *Yogashastra 2.20*

Judaism: What is hurtful to yourself do not to your fellow man. That is the whole of the Torah and the remainder is but commentary. Go learn it. -- *Talmud*.

Sikhism: As you deem yourself so deem others. Then you will become a partner in heaven. -- *Kabir*

Taoism: Regard your neighbor's gain as your own gain: and regard your neighbor's loss as your own loss. -- *T'ai Shang Kan Ying P'ien*

Since all the major religions admonish their members to live in love, harmony, and helpfulness with all men there can be but one conclusion: the major religions have all failed miserably in that part of their mission.

Marcus has penned what he calls *The Positive Social Contract*. He will ask all our citizens to study it, accept it, sign it, and abide by it. Perhaps when it is taken out of any religious context and put in the plain, in the simple, pragmatic terms of the survival of society, people will perk up and take notice. It moves beyond a Sunday morning platitude. It is not touted as a ticket to heaven. It is not touted as a get out of jail free card. It is not even touted as a sure fire way to be elected Miss Congeniality. Its sole, unadulterated, purpose is to save society and to move it in the direction of a comfortable, helpful, compassionate, useful way of life in which everybody wins because everybody understands the necessity of helping everybody else win.

The Positive Social Contract has gone through several wordings but that is not as important as its essence: *If everybody lives his life this hour the way I am living mine, the world will become a better place for all of us*. It is a test of a kind that we must continually give ourselves to keep us focused and on track.

People who are happy, physically and mentally healthy, safe, with opportunities to grow and become all they have the potential to become are easier to live with than those who are sad, sick, disturbed, in harms way, with no reasonable future. Don't tell me that is not so. Because that is indisputable, even the most greedy and selfish among us should be able to see the logic in making sure people's basic needs are well taken care of. Well cared for folks don't typically rob you, maim you, riot and burn your homes and businesses. (Crime bosses, and the worst of the bankers, politicians, and business tycoons may be exceptions – they are joined at the hip with all the other greedy, selfish, socially destructive, despicable of the world.)

I sound like a holier-than-thou preacher. For that I humbly apologize. But facts are facts and since preachers typically don't deal in facts, I suppose I have lucked out. I'll assume I came off sounding something more like a motivational speaker or at least a cheerleader. There. I'm satisfied, now.

I am intrigued that since the beginning of this writing project – The Plan – my log about Marcus has become more a log about Marcus and me. That pleases me. I'm sure it would also please Marcus. It is not an insight that I am inclined to share with him. I'll bask in my gratification privately.

* * *

Our Plan won hands down in our village. Most looked upon it as Marcus's Plan and that was fine – we had become the Marcus-Thomas, after all. He took every opportunity to correct the misconception over my private protestation to him. Fair was fair in his mind and what we had presented represented the blood, sweat, tears and joy of both of us.

Most plans had, as we expected, been based in the concept of the big government fix. Such an approach had an immediate popular appeal on several fronts. It had rules and laws and predictable reactions and outcomes. It had promises – to take care of its citizens and to protect the homeland. Most of those plans asked the people to accept the prospect of high taxes and restricted freedoms for an extended period of time. People mindlessly consented to that, being easily convinced it was an inevitable part of such a massive reconstruction program.

Ours alone challenged that concept. Well, there *were* several extremely conservative plans that tended to make ours look progressive. Interestingly, the longtime liberals liked many parts of our Plan calling it Progressive. Many of the long time conservatives liked parts of our plan saying it was in the fashion of the best small government tradition. Neither could understand the other group's take on it: "If we can accept it how in the world can *you*?"

Those at the *National Council* came to see it was neither, nor was it merely a blending of the two. It was a new frontier in political alignment. There was no name for it, which made everybody immediately uneasy. All things need names, of course. It had no political home – neither party would give it its total blessing. In the quiet of our sanctuary we envisioned it best described as Mutual Facilitation: liberals, conservatives, facilitators.

In the end the 'no formal name' approach worked in a very positive way for us. It seemed right to many that all of the old ways should be set aside in favor of something new. Neither of the old philosophies had worked consistently. The time had come for something fresh – especially something fresh that contained so much common sense, so many reality based suggestions, such a large dose of the truths written by history.

After all the saying was said and all the pronouncements were pronounced, the Council Chairman spoke:

"The Plan known here as the Marcus Plan has won every vote – save two – on the first ballot. It is hereby accepted and awaits the election of the new Leader to begin its implementation. Logic would appear to suggest that this most insightful Marcus person be elected to set it in motion and carry it out."

The final phase was more like two phases: First came the nominations from all the villages that had candidates they thought were qualified. Each name was accompanied by a résumé and references. Marcus was the sole nominee from our village. The folder that accompanied his name was pretty skimpy next to

the others. It had one entry that did outshine all of them, however; the plan created by Marcus had been the overwhelming choice of the *National Council*. That was nearly all it took. The Council placed eight names on the first national ballot thinking one or more runoffs would be needed. Marcus won in a landslide the first time out. Apparently our contacts during our journey had been impressive enough to talk him up locally and spread the word to the neighboring communities. In a matter of two months Marcus had gone from that good looking, ever smiling, frequently irritating lad in Edenopolis to the Leader of our Nation. I am sure there must have been a choir of Sunday School Teachers wringing their hands.

The night before we left for Washopolis, we slept in the tree house and swam and roasted corn on cob over an outdoor fire. We shot our bows and played catch and climbed the tallest trees. They were things we understood we would probably not be able to do again. They were the vestiges of our childhood and childhood had come to an abrupt halt. Oh, those things would continue in our memories and would from time to time come up in conversation but they were not ours to experience in those same ways ever again.

"I suppose it goes without saying that you are ready for tomorrow," I said, asked, commented, whatever.

"We've been preparing for a long time, my friend. I'm not going into this believing I am fully prepared for the long haul. I do believe I am up to meeting the challenges of every new day so we'll just take them one at a time. We'll learn what there is to learn and when each tomorrow arrives we will be better prepared than we were that same time the day before. I am eager for us to get to work."

"Are you happy with the speech – the inaugural address?"

"Not completely but I'm counting on inspiration to fill in the gaps."

"Just like old times I guess."

We smiled into each other's faces and held the look for a long time. We reached out for each other's hands and held them tightly. Were we scared? Yes. Were we energized? Yes. Were we confident? Yes, the way only seventeen year old boys can be confident – completely, imbued with fully unrealistic self-confidence, totally convinced that we were up to any challenge, any glitch, any risk.

Then why were we scared? Perhaps some cryptic vestige of childhood caution remained – some trace that could override our feelings of personal indestructibility and temper it with reality as others knew it. (That indefinable trace is undoubtedly the sole reason most teen boys live on to see adulthood.) Unbelievably, we slept the sleep of ten year olds.

Neither of us owned a suit. The teacher loaned Marcus his – a nearly perfect fit. It was medium brown. His mother bought him brown shoes. He chose a blue shirt and left it open at the collar as a symbol of youth, a new start, an informality that would allow Marcus to spread comfort into every living room in the country. Just to look at him one immediately understood that it would not be business as usual in Washopolis.

The moment Marcus was sworn in the old establishment was abolished – the representatives and the senators were gone. The lobbyists and special

interests were no longer welcome. The constitution was suspended. The mass of people standing there in the square looked up at him waiting hopefully. The country had bet it all on this long shot. It eagerly awaited some words that would justify its trust. He turned it all back on the citizens just the way the Plan did.

“Can I trust that you want people friendly change?”

He waited for the upwelling, ‘YES!’, to subside.

“Can I trust that you will work with me and with your neighbors to achieve people friendly change?”

Again, the enthusiastic response.

“Can I trust that you are willing to put the needs of others at the same level as your own needs?”

He waited. Each response grew louder and longer.

“Then this I pledge to you. We will work this new Plan together. We will achieve freedom and safety and security. We will achieve economic justice for all. We will communicate constantly – you and me. Can I trust that rather than grumbling among yourselves you will direct your concerns to me?”

“Yes! Yes! Yes! ...”

It went on too long to be comfortable for Marcus but just right for those transitioning from the old to the new.

“Can I trust that you will support and participate in our program of life long education so no one falls behind and everyone’s chances for a better life and a better living may bloom and grow for generations to come?”

“Can I trust that you will each most solemnly and thoughtfully agree to what I have proposed as the Positive Social Contract? It becomes the essence of the single law of our land. Let me repeat it for you now.

If everybody lives his life this hour the way I am living mine, the world will become a better place for all of us.

I want no commitment today. I want you to think about it. I want you to discuss it with your family and friends. I want you to consider the ways in which it can – will – change each life and our society for the better. I want you to consider the clear and inevitable consequences of the opposite way of living. Look to our recent history for proof. It will both limit you and expand your horizons. It will limit the expression of your darker side. It will free and encourage your altruistic side. It will limit your tendency to hurt. It will free your tendencies to help. Carefully consider both sides. Only after such careful and thoughtful soul searching do I want to hear you say, ‘Yes I will live my life according to the Positive Social Contract because I believe in it, in the other people who will pledge their agreement, and in the people-centered society it can help construct and guide. I accept it as the basic law of our land and, where necessary, will submit to the courts’ judgments based on it’.”

There was more although not a whole lot more. Conservation of words had always been a hallmark of his communication style. It was one reason it worked so well. Say it once in a carefully constructed, easily understood way, and move on. He recognized that he who repeated himself often gave folks the impression he believed them too stupid to understand the first time or that they were so insecure they would not ask for repetition or clarification if they felt the

need for it. It was a lot like big government – enacting another’s low expectations or rules on you.

The thumbs on the street were all up. People smiled. People had hope. People were willing to commit to the success of this new Plan. They were eager to get started. Marcus sensed the urgency that established for him – us. We retreated to the Leader’s quarters in the capitol building.

CHAPTER ELEVEN: A New Life

The Leader's quarters were cold and large and austere – everything Marcus was not. We set up shop in the bedroom – bigger than most houses back home. We pushed furniture here and there. Near the large, floor to ceiling window, we made a sitting area for entertaining. We made a work area with desk and tables. We made the sleeping area – two beds sans the fancy bedspreads. Later we would get help to move those sections of the library we wanted to have close at hand.

We made sure there was plenty of openness for playing catch. In the end it wasn't great but much better than before. Marcus was pledged not to spend money fixing the place up. Later we would send for some of our treasures from home.

A butler-looking person appeared and cleared his throat in a butler-sounding manner.

"Yes," Marcus said walking to where he stood in the doorway. He extended his hand. "I'm Marcus and it looks like I'll be here for a while. Hope you don't mind that we changed things around a bit."

"It is not mine to like or dislike, approve or disapprove, Sir."

"No. No. No. That will never do. I am definitely not a sir. Please call me Marcus or Kid. I'm used to responding to either. By the way, this is my colleague, right hand man, and best friend, Thomas. He will be staying here with me. His requests are to be considered my requests. You probably came for some reason other than listening to me run off at the mouth."

"There is a most insistent young man in the foyer. He says he must see you. That he came a long way. That knives and apples are somehow involved."

I looked at Marcus. Our faces brightened as one.

"Junior!" we said in unison. "Bring him in, please. Is he accompanied?"

"All I have seen and heard and heard and heard is the lad, sir . . . Marcus."

He turned and shortly returned with Junior in tow. The boy ran to us and administered hugs that seemed much better practiced than what we had experienced before.

"Look at you," Marcus said. "All gussied up fit for church meeting. How did you get here? You didn't run away did you?"

"No. Ma – Mrs. Forrester – brought me. I sort of insisted and might have threatened some things just a little." He grinned. "When I heard you were going to talk I knew I had to be here. I have some questions about it, by the way. She said you'd never have time to see me – that you were some real important dude, now. She's waiting downstairs. I imagine she's expecting the police to bring me back in irons. You got any apples?"

Marcus turned to the butler.

"I apologize for not knowing your name."

"Worthington, Sir . . . Marcus."

"Worthington, will you please invite the boy's . . . mother to join us. Assure her everything is fine. And if there are apples available we would appreciate a

small supply.”

The man bowed slightly from his waist, turned and walked away.

“We must put a stop to that bowing thing. Make a note.”

Junior turned ‘round and ‘round visually inspecting the huge room.

“Wow! It’s just like my cave back home.”

It was an interesting take on it all we thought. The reference was probably to the fact that it seemed to include everything we needed – just as he had characterized his cave.

We chatted for several minutes before Mrs. Forrester was escorted in. Junior moved immediately to her side, taking her hand and urging her toward us.

“You remember Mrs. Forrester. She’s even better than you said she’d be. Peter and Rose and Dad are all great, too. They’re all helping me catch up on my subjects so I’ll be ready for school come September. Can you believe that? I’ll be going to school with teachers and books and everything.”

I tousled his hair. It was clean and shiny and smelled of sweet soap. It generated another hug. I was also impressed in the overall improvement of his grammar. I mentioned it. My comment was met with a huge smile. He looked up into Mrs. Forrester’s face as he answered.

“It was simple. Ma said to just talk like the books instead of like Junior. It was magic.”

Worthington appeared at the door with a bowl of apples. Marcus held up his hands as if ready to catch one.

“Are you *really* sure about this?” the staid old gentleman asked with a sigh akin to exasperation.

“Sure. Let’s see what kind of an arm you have.”

It provoked a fully out of character smile. He sat the bowl on a table, removed his jacket, selected an apple, reared back and let fly.

“Perfect pitch, Worthington, and I’m not referring to your singing. What have you not told us?”

“National College’s baseball team, pitcher – a few years back, you understand.”

Marcus turned to me.

“We got ourselves a pitcher. Now we just need six more and we’ll be ready to take on all comers.”

“Me! Me! Junior said waving his hand and jumping up and down.

“Okay then, *five* more.”

He turned to Mrs. Forrester. “You play, ma’am?”

“Growing up with six brothers you bet I play.”

It was mostly all a joke, of course, but it bound us together as friends at a moment when friends seemed few and far away. Enjoying the byplay, Worthington tossed an apple to each of the others. The man had possibilities. Next we would work on the bowing thing and getting him completely out of that monkey suit.

Mrs. Forrester’s report on Junior was in most ways positive. She realized it would take time. He continued to question why his new family liked him and why they would take him in and why they would buy clothes and other things for

him. He became obsessively helpful as if he believed he had to pay for or buy the opportunity to remain there.

Learning to be appreciative was a good thing. Coming to know he was loved unconditionally would be the better thing. I had to wonder if that could ever be for him – the knowing part, I mean.

As they left, Junior filled his pockets with apples. Mrs. Forrester delivered the look.

“Hey, it’s all okay,” Marcus said. “You take all you want. Aren’t they feeding you?”

Junior grinned up into his new mother’s face.

“They feed me great. It’s just that when I hold apples I remember about you guys and I feel warm inside.”

“Amazing!” Marcus said looking from the boy, to me, and back again. “That’s exactly how Thomas and I feel when we hold apples.”

From that day on we arranged to have a bag of apples delivered to Junior every Monday morning. In return we would receive his remarkable pictures on the backs of postcards. What a wonder-filled arrangement.

* * *

I have earlier outlined some of the first steps Marcus initiated in terms of communication and immediately relevant help projects. They were both accepted and eagerly pursued. It was clear that the vast majority of the citizens were pledging their support and best effort.

Streets were repaired – even roads between villages in some cases. Long closed school buildings were refurbished and cleaned and made ready for September. Book drives were initiated to provide materials for the students. Improved arrangements for the elderly began to happen following a number of different approaches. High prices dropped voluntarily to levels at which retailers could survive and consumers could afford – well more than before at least.

At the national level the army was gradually transformed into a work force, which first tackled the roads. Without an adequate network of roads we really couldn’t get back to being one, integrated, country again. A sizable segment of the military was retrained as a temporary police force and was divided into small groups, which were put under local control. Within months the several major bands of Despicables had been ousted to the hinterlands and local control by the citizens reestablished. It would serve little good to arrest them when there were no secure facilities or programs to handle them. Their membership dropped and many sought inclusion in communities.

With safety largely restored the farmers returned to the fields and orchards and vineyards. Marcus appointed some of the teens from Marina to serve as coaches in the establishment of youth volunteer groups throughout the country. Gunboat escort for the freighters was initiated and soon the ports were again thriving. Men voluntarily agreed to temporarily work for minimal wages in order to restore goods and services and transportation networks.

Within six months the country was up and running again. The tax and help point system went into effect on January first. It was an almost seamless integration with the programs already born locally. Professionals who had fled

the country began trickling back. Hospitals and schools and banks were able to reopen. We were amazed at the progress. We were amazed at what our people could accomplish when given their head.

Each community put its own, unique, spin, on the projects and local support systems. Big government guys would fear things were turning into a chaotic hodgepodge, lacking a necessary national cohesiveness – regularity – lockstep. Marcus saw it as a remarkable patch work quilt, each patch standing alone and yet secured as an essential and prized part of the larger pattern.

By the following June the lifetime education initiative was instituted in most of the country – the hill folks showed little interest and since Marcus believed that preserving that culture was important, the issue wasn't pressed. They returned to their cottage industries as demands increased for the trinkets they produced – baskets, dolls, toys, jewelry. As tourist trade picked up they put away the shotguns – except as the accompaniment to certain weddings and to maintain the quaintness factor.

"The honeymoon period may be about over," Marcus said one July night after we had taken to our beds.

Since we had been giggly tots we had always schemed our best schemes and done our best thinking in bed at night.

"I don't know. It seems you've been feeding new things out at a perfect pace to keep everybody involved and basically very pleased with our progress."

"I think we are about to begin feeling the negative effects of our slow to gel prison reform program. The first graduation from our training programs to prepare the professionals it requires is still several years away."

"But the building program goes well. The first rehab center will be completed before winter and the first phase of the Long Term Occupancy area should be ready by January. But like you have always said the facilities and the program must come together."

"I believe we have pretty well re-educated the judges away from the old 'establish guilt and then sentence to punish' mentality. That in itself has not been easy."

I had an idea.

"I suppose we could just begin in one area of the country. We have sufficient staff for that. It can be like a dry run in which we can work out any kinks and make any modifications that seem necessary."

Marcus sat up and thought about my suggestion.

"We probably have enough teachers and trainers and supervisors for that to work. Our weak link will be in creating the individual plans for each person. Without a plan specific to each person's needs the rest of the program will be dangerously inefficient – probably ineffective. There will also be some resistance, I believe, to putting these guys out in work training situations when jobs are still not overly plentiful."

"But in just one small operation?" I asked.

"We could use Lawrenceville as a first attempt, a trial run, I suppose. With the ouster of Ronaldo it has come a long way back in a short time. So many folks had left during the bad times that people are actually needed in the work

force there. We can provide a complete outline for creating the individual plans until the folks at the university finish the one they are working on for us. How about you head that up, Thomas?"

"It is a question?"

"It is a suggestion that flows directly from your own persuasive comments."

"That should teach me to comment – persuasively, at least."

"Never has."

"I'll get on it in the morning."

"I need to begin some international stuff."

"International *stuff*?"

"I have only had minimal and courtesy contacts with our neighbors – Primia and Halonia. I understand that unrest is growing in both of them. With the rumors of our success here, their citizens are asking why their leaders cannot improve things in the same ways. Those leaders don't like our success. It suggests that such a plan requires the necessary demise of their power and lavish life styles. Short of an uprising they will not set aside their greed and lack of compassion for the masses."

"What are you considering?"

"Something."

"Something?"

"Yup. Got nothing more than something but every great idea has to begin with an area of investigation."

"And you are investigating *something*."

"That's right. I'm ready to sleep on it. You?"

"Yes. It's late. In the morning, then."

* * *

Marcus soon became known on sight everywhere in the country and was met with cheers and applause and meaningful conversation. The first two days of every month he – usually we – traveled to a different area, visiting in several villages. He listened and garnered input on new ideas. He visited the programs – schools, hospitals, stores and other businesses. He asked about banking practices and police work and the quality of life. On one occasion Junior took him to school for show and tell. Some show that was! People were amazed at his youth. People were amazed at his maturity and wisdom. He was universally liked and soon grew to be respected.

It would not be fair to leave the impression there were no problems. When one would surface my heart would sink. Marcus would become energized, intrigued, and eager to fix it. Things always got fixed. We learned important lessons from each one.

The judicial disposition of white-collar crime versus traditional crime became a concern. Pockets of greedy folks in business and finance surfaced from time to time. Those folks had clearly not taken our Positive Social Values to heart. Though disheartening it was not unanticipated. The discussions centered on the relative amounts of hurt inflicted, how to measure it, and what to do with the offenders.

Marcus always focused on intention instead of the end result. If two people both set out to purposefully harm others whether via shady investments or armed robbery they have both failed us equally under our system. They each need to prove that they can develop and function according to mutually facilitating intentions. Until they do that convincingly, they need to remain separated from the rest of us. For Marcus there was no dichotomy between the two kinds of hurt the way the old system of laws had prescribed. A person intends to facilitate *or* he does not. It was a plain and simple, cut and dried, proposition for Marcus.

Our society had no room for folks who weren't willing to engage others in strictly positive, helpful, ways. That philosophy was put to its initial test in Lawrenceville. Once the old judicial concepts were left behind and the shift was made from consequence to intent, the system began functioning quite well. Of course, determining someone's intention was often difficult. A second similar offense presented less of a problem in that regard. By number three, intention, or at least inability to control ones impulsivity, became quite obvious.

Intention was judged by one's history. Given that the person's basic needs were being or could be met, anyone who continued a life of inflicting hurt was adjudged to have the intention or uncontrollable inclination to be a hurtful offender.

Judges had but one question to ponder: If others had done what the accused person did, would life be better (or at least no worse) for all of our citizens?

In the end it really didn't matter if one intended to cause harm or was just so incompetent that he couldn't keep from causing harm. If retraining could not make a lasting change the person could not live among us. Harsh? For whom? For the person being isolated or the many people constantly in danger of being harmed if he remained free to roam among us? Our program took care of the vast majority of our citizens. It did its best, based on current knowledge, to see that offenders learned how to appropriately change their intentions and the behaviors that followed.

Later on another problem developed within the long-term isolation programs. It seemed to be a good idea to keep separate those offenders who were given to violence from those who weren't. There was a legitimate unfairness in putting them together. If the violent types wanted to tear each other apart that was one thing but the rest should not have to live in fear of that. Our goal, of course, was to someday learn how to eliminate such hurt inflicting tendencies. Until we could do that, those having them needed to be kept away from all the rest of us – offenders or free citizens.

Living in a free and open society had its privileges and its responsibilities. Members of a society implicitly agree in advance to a positive social pact. The non-responsible should not have the privileges – not even the privilege of rubbing elbows with the rest of us.

The concept of individual rights was always forefront in our minds. It was born with a double bind: The individual rights of the productive, helpful, law-abiding citizens compared with those of the offenders. Marcus believed

offenders had two rights: the right to become reeducated, trained, rehabilitated, and reintegrated to the extent they could be, and, when not able to change sufficiently had the right to live separated from us, free of punishment and being able to earn a living sufficient to support themselves. Bad guys had no right to be supported by the government. They were expected to use the opportunities provided to make a living and pay taxes like everybody else – just separated from the masses.

One current issue, even among the present, tiny group of separated incorrigibles, was the rampant crime and intimidation that existed within their compound. It was the way of life they had lived on the outside so we supposed we should expect nothing different from them there. Do we allow that to continue and see where the natural consequences of their actions take things, or do we interfere? If we interfere what do we do, begin putting the worst guys in cells thereby defeating the purpose of the system – to let them live out their days freely within the confines we maintained?

Marcus's current thinking is to let those incarcerated men make the rules concerning that. Bad guys determining how to live and deal with bad guys. Fascinating. He has been referring to it as 'structured democracy' in which they would be allowed to draw up rules within a set of broad limits – no capital or corporal punishment, or no deprivation of basic needs for example. We are not sure at this point what path will be followed. Perhaps they could pool some of their income to pay a police force to maintain order. The police could be outsiders or perhaps could be drawn from their population. Lots of questions remained to find answers.

The new procedure of the courts involves several steps: First, it is clearly established that the accused did in fact commit the disruption – ignore the Positive Social Contract. Second, with that established, he is examined and evaluated by the professional staff – psychology, sociology, education, and vocational. With his input a rehabilitation/educational plan is developed with specific steps designed to take him from the present point to a fully functioning, positively contributing, member of society. The plan is worked for as long as it takes. Once he begins working, a portion of his wages is garnished to pay for these services. Each person has his own supervisor/ counselor who is responsible for the implementation of the plan. If it clearly isn't working the professionals are reconvened and a modified plan is developed.

Should he be unable to work *any* plan successfully and continues to be disruptive or uncooperative, he is assigned to the Permanent Isolation Program. If he chooses to continue to work a rehabilitation program he may – eighteen months later –earn one more trial out in society. If that fails he will typically remain in isolation for the rest of his life.

During the first year, the experience with the Lawrenceville project found that no person, once assigned to the Isolation Program, was ever able to successfully navigate a life out in the free society. On the other hand over 90% of those who entered the plan had been able to function well after completing the rehab/education program. Comparing that with the previous 70% recidivism rate most citizens felt the program was a shout-it-from-the-hilltop success. Marcus

wasn't satisfied and kept funding the scientific research that held promise of reducing it even further. Court cases had been reduced by 80% for starters so the 70% represented a far smaller actual number of cases than had been the situation with the former correctional system.

I was delighted. Marcus stewed that some people appeared to be fully incorrigible – a genetically or trauma induced, physio-chemical, hard-wired, brain malfunction he believed. If that proved to be true, isolation was the only way of protecting the masses. Well, some countries would summarily kill them. Not in the Lelonia as envisioned by Marcus. If it were a built in, physical condition, fully or even mostly out of the control of the offender, he did not deserve to be punished or executed. One suggestion offered by a long-time perpetrator of cruel and unprovoked capital offenses, was that each person put into Isolation should be given the option of taking his own life as a reasonable alternative to a life to be lived in segregation. We both abhorred the idea but the man made a convincing argument – if our country was truly based on the concept of freedom of reasonable individual choice, was disallowing that choice truly in line with the basic philosophy?

It tore at our guts and caused sleepless nights. The main counter argument was that such a final solution did not allow for the possibility for change that might come with eventual scientific advances. Most *Liberals* were fully against the 'optional suicide' proposal – they generally believed they knew what was best for the rest of us so wouldn't allow that kind of free choice. Interestingly, they typically favored a woman's right to choose abortion but would fight to save the lives of killers and abusers. *Conservatives* generally lined up as being in favor of it – they harbored the tendency to be punishers (of children as well as grown up offenders). There was some conservative religious conviction against suicide. The growing number of Marcus supporters that had come to be known as *Facilitators*, were on the fence. They didn't like the idea of taking lives and yet they believed in the individual's right to make such a decision – provided it was an educated decision made by a sound mind with full access to the relevant information. *Religious Organizations* generally aligned with the anti suicide faction.

When we were ten years old, a man in our community took his own life. Marcus and I couldn't understand how such a thing could come about. We were still dealing with the deaths of our own fathers. It became clear that the question would not be resolved within either the confines of our tree house or the swimming hole. We launched a clandestine investigation – well, as clandestine as ten year olds could manage.

We discovered the man had an incurable disease and that during the year or so that he was given to live he would both suffer terrible pain and run up monumental medical bills for his wife and daughters. Things would get even worse when his wife would have to quit her job to care for him, and the teen age daughters would need to leave school and go to work to provide the basic necessities for the family. We took that information back to the tree house for one of our frequent 'mull it over' sessions.

"So, what do you think?" I asked my friend.

"I think life is confusing. Just when I think I know something for sure other things come up that make me question it. I ask you, if you were in his situation what do you suppose you would have done?"

"I'm usually the one turning the question back on you," I said. "I'm unfamiliar with this role. But I have an opinion. You know I'm not a fan of pain, especially the kind we heard he was having. If I was going to die anyway I guess I can understand doing what he did."

"But think of the hurt and heartache he inflicted on his family and loved ones."

"Would somebody who truly loved him insist that he endure all that pain just to please them – to serve their own selfish needs? I don't think so."

"His church believes it's wrong to take your own life."

"Churches can be wrong. You and I established that long ago. They are supposed to be the seat of compassion within a society but there is absolutely no compassion I can see in applying that belief to this situation."

"My. I've seldom heard you be so passionate about anything."

"Wrong is wrong and requiring a person to suffer over such a long time against his will is just plain wrong!"

"I guess I agree with you," Marcus said. "I wonder if either of us would have the guts it takes to do that – to ourselves, I mean."

"I don't know. If we knew we were saddling our families with a huge debt forever and forcing them to watch us lay there in excruciating pain, I think I could do what he did," I said.

"Life has always been so precious to us – well, since we really began thinking about it after our fathers were murdered. It's hard to reconcile the two views."

"Reconcile?"

"Settle. Square. Merge."

I nodded understanding and continued.

"I think I'd like to believe in a life after death."

"Be my guest. It doesn't make any sense to me but perhaps when I am older and wiser it will. In his case, however, that really isn't very helpful. His church says if you kill yourself you go directly into the fires of hell."

"Oops! I'll do some more thinking on it."

I agreed with Marcus – life was often confusing. The older we grew the less anything seemed black and white. It often seemed that we were perpetually mired down in shades of gray.

The situation regarding suicide as a choice had not been resolved.

Disciplining of children surfaced as another point of contention. Perhaps ninety percent of the parents accepted Marcus's position that there were better, more humane, and markedly more effective procedures than having big strong people hitting small, defenseless, people. The government was not going to interfere with parental rights to train their children – short of when they clearly inflicted excessive physical harm. The government would, however, continue to circulate reliable information relating to the topic. The problem surfaced more within the several small parochial schools that had been resurrected under the

freedoms of the new Plan. There were both conservative Christian schools and Moslem schools that quoted their scriptures as calling for the 'switching' of children who misbehaved or would not accept the tenets of the teachings.

"We wouldn't let a church or church school sever fingers or break knuckles as discipline," Marcus said. "Where is the line between which kinds of physical abuse we allow and which kinds we forbid? Which areas of behavior do we class as allowable spiritually-related behaviors and which do we prohibit on reasonable and research-based grounds? That line between church and state is a far more difficult one to define than I had assumed it would be."

I responded.

"Wouldn't it be easier if everybody just worshiped at the Church of The Marcus-Thomas?"

He nodded and grinned. We chuckled sheepishly. It provided a cautious perspective we would not forget.

CHAPTER TWELVE: The Keystone

Of the dozens – perhaps hundreds – of programs Marcus was able to institute over the years one stood head and shoulders above all others in his eyes. It was what came to be called the *Value Discovery Sessions*. Initially everyone participated. As the value system became inculcated into our daily lives here in Lelonia the sessions were reserved for the younger folks and, of course, the new arrivals to our country.

Lives lived according to positive social values was the keystone of our success. The *Positive Social Contract* was a statement of the goal. [If everyone lives their life this hour the way I am living mine, the world will become a wonderful, caring, helpful place.] The positive social values were the driving force. [Presented below.] Marcus never tired of sitting in on those sessions. Each time he was amazed all over again at how an entirely different set of people, from different backgrounds and with different personal goals would – time after time – arrive at essentially the same set of values as they contemplated the question: *What beliefs must the members of a society hold in common if that society is to be fully helpful, safe, and supportive for its citizens?*

Each session began with a presentation of our belief in the absolute preciousness of the human species and why we believed it therefore deserved to be protected, improved, and its future secured in safety on a healthy planet now and for the generations to come. Without that basic belief, the whole Positive Social Value concept pretty well evaporated leaving open the single option of a rapid, fully selfish, chaotic, race toward the excruciating death of mankind. That was followed by a discussion of the possible value/belief options and how important it is to find those that are positive and helpful in both the short and long term. Each group examined the possible/probable outcomes of all options with an eye toward maintaining a fully positive, helpful, safe, society. In the end a set of positive social values was set down with the opposite, destructive, value options listed alongside as reminders.

I think a transcript from such a session will best illustrate the process and present the Positive Social Values I have mentioned over and over again. I will vary my style slightly to eliminate any distractions from the content, and present just the substance of such a session. The session I have selected was with a group of five, twelve-year-olds. Marcus was the group leader. The session was being held in a living room of one of the youngster's homes. I take up after the introductions were made.

MARCUS: We have four ground rules here this afternoon. Nobody interrupts; everybody may speak *and* be listened to; we say our say clearly but in as few words as necessary; and no one has to raise their hand to get into the discussion. Do we all understand those ground rules?

Okay, then. How about we ditch these chairs and find comfortable spots on the floor? I for one am going to remove my shoes – join me if you like.

Since you all know each other pretty well I want each of you to tell me

something about the person to your left that helps make him or her a precious person. Do we all understand the term precious? {They indicated that they did} Adam, you begin telling us about Betty.

ADAM: She's a pretty cool person. I'd say her honesty makes her precious. We can always count on her to tell it like it is. That helps everybody.

BETTY: Carl is very helpful. He is always ready and willing to give anybody a hand. That is one of his precious traits.

CARL: Darla is a peacemaker. She doesn't like conflict so she works hard at keeping everybody friends.

DARLA: Eric loves animals. He takes in strays and finds good homes for them. It makes him very special – precious, I think.

ERIC: Adam is my best friend. He's always there for me. I can depend on him for help and advice and I know we'll always find ways to have fun when we're together.

MARCUS: If we were to go around the circle again – maybe to the right this time – do you think you'd be able to come up with more precious things about each other?

GROUP: Yes. Sure. Certainly. No problem.

MARCUS: So, do I get the idea we are all agreeing that everybody here has something about him that makes him precious?

GROUP: Yes.

MARCUS: Let's widen our circle from those of us here to those of us in this village. If we put everybody – over, say, age eight – in a circle do you think we'd hear something precious about each one of them?

GROUP: Yes. Of course.

MARCUS: Let's shift gears away from thinking about individual people and consider the whole human species – human beings in general. What are some things that make humans precious, special, unique, especially valuable above and beyond all other living things?

ADAM: Humans can talk and think in words and I doubt if any other animal can do that.

DARLA: Human beings can love. Maybe apes and orangutans can love but not like people can, I think.

BETTY: Humans know right from wrong and can do right just because they believe they should. I know pets can behave the way we train them to but that isn't really because they can think about whether what they're doing is right or wrong.

ERIC: People can plan ahead way into the future. We can start things now – like parks and schools – that will be around to be good for the next generation and the ones after that, even.

CARL: I don't think any other animal I know about can know that someday it will die. That's not a pleasant thing but you didn't say pleasant.

MARCUS: You're right and I agree that being able to contemplate our mortality is unique to human beings. So, do these things you've listed make it seem like people are particularly special or precious?

GROUP: Yes. Absolutely. Definitely.

MARCUS: From what you have learned about our universe – what we now know about it – do we know of any other beings like us humans?

GROUP: No.

ADAM: I'd like to believe in space men but I guess we really don't have any proof about that . . . yet.

MARCUS: Let's think about what we have said, what we have determined here. Are we saying that no place in the entire universe – so far as we now know – is there any other being as precious, as capable, as intelligent, as the human being?

GROUP: That's right. That's what we are saying.

MARCUS: If that's the case then it seems to me that you and I belong to a pretty precious species. What do you think?

BETTY: I've never thought much about it but, yes, humans are really special.

DARLA: I agree. It's mind boggling now that we've talked about it.

ERIC: We all belong to the most precious species in the universe and better than that, we are each precious by our self, too. I didn't say that very well.

MARCUS: I think you said it *very* well. We are each a precious part of a precious whole.

GROUP: {nods, smiles, sitting up straighter than before, countenances bursting with self-worth, recognition of and a new appreciation for their place in the universe}

MARCUS: How do you care for things that are precious to you?

CARL: I protect those things. I have a belt my big brother made for me – he like carved out wolves heads on it all by himself – and I keep that in my drawer and just wear it on Sundays.

BETTY: I have a bracelet that used to be my grandmother's when she was a girl. I keep it in a special box in my dresser.

MARCUS: So, you *protect* your precious things.

BETTY: Yes, I do. I imagine we all do.

GROUP: Nods all the way around.

MARCUS: And if you, and you, and you, and you, and you, are all precious, what do you do relative to yourselves?"

ADAM: We take good care of ourselves.

BETTY: We protect ourselves.

ERIC: We plan for our future so we will be okay then, too.

CARL: We take good care of the world so it will be here for us and our kids and their kids.

DARLA: We do what we can to keep the peace with each other so we don't destroy the world because without our world there can't be any us. And since all the soldier boys are precious we don't want any of them getting killed on our side or on the other side.

MARCUS: What a wonderful way to say it, Darla. So, if we want to keep the peace – here and every other place – how can we go about that?"

BETTY: We treat each other well. We take care of each other.

MARCUS: Do you understand the meaning of *beliefs* or *values*?

ADAM: Like beliefs about what is good and bad, you mean?

MARCUS: Exactly what I mean. Good or bad, right or wrong, helpful or hurtful. A belief about how to live our lives is a value, such as, I believe we should be honest, like Betty, rather than being dishonest.

CARL: Or like I believe in being kind instead of unpleasant.

MARCUS: Exactly. Let me give you two examples of values – value statements, really. I believe in stealing what I want. I believe in earning what I want. What are some of the differences between them?

DARLA: The earning one is good for everybody and the stealing one is not.

MARCUS: Right. How else could we say that? Put it in terms of our society as a whole.

ADAM: Stealing hurts our society and earning helps it.

MARCUS: Excellent. Which is positive and which is negative?

BETTY: Stealing is negative and earning is positive.

MARCUS: So, if we want to develop or maintain a society that helps and supports almost everybody, which kind of values do we need to see among our citizens?

GROUP: Positive.

MARCUS: What kind of a society would there be if everybody held and acted according to negative values?

CARL: People would take advantage of each other.

ADAM: People wouldn't think twice about hurting other people and taking what they wanted.

BETTY: Nobody would see a reason to cooperate and our government would just fall apart.

MARCUS: You guys are regular social geniuses, do you know that?

ADAM: It sure seems like that. {He didn't really seem surprised! Marcus offered the group one of his wonderful smiles. It was returned in kind, in kind, in kind, in kind, in kind, in kind – number six was mine!}

MARCUS: Here is our real assignment for the afternoon. We need to invent a set of values that will help build a wonderful society for us. Tell me; will that need to be a set of positive values or negative values?

GROUP: Positive.

MARCUS: There are several ways we can find positive values. One is to just think about traits people have who generally make helpful contributions to the people with whom they live. Another is to think of things that make life go bad for us and discover their opposites. Like being dishonest; what would be its opposite?

ADAM: Honest would be the positive value we need instead of dishonest – that would be the negative one.

MARCUS: I think we are on a roll here, guys. Now let's just list some things we know we don't want and then decide what its positive opposite would be.

ADAM: Destroying other people's property. I think the positive side of it would be not destroying or respecting other people's property. Like, I won't

bother your stuff and you don't bother mine.

MARCUS: Excellent! It sounds like maybe you have had some firsthand experience.

ADAM: I have a little brother.

GROUP: Nods and knowing smiles.

BETTY: Deceit and dishonesty. I suppose the positive side would be fair treatment and honesty.

MARCUS: Good stuff! Who else?

CARL: Breaking the laws. I guess law abiding behavior is the positive side of it.

ERIC: Selfishness is not good. I'm not sure of a word for un –selfishness.

MARCUS: Anybody have a word?

ADAM: How about altruism? I think that means putting other people's needs before yours.

MARCUS: That's it. I like to modify that a little bit and define it as putting other people's needs at least at the same level as our own.

ERIC: Fighting, like physical aggression, I guess, instead of talking things out. We don't have much of that around here but I think it would really stink if people began fighting about things they didn't agree on right away. Adults who would fight would be like four-year-olds.

MARCUS: Absolutely important and I really like that illustration. I'd take the *talking it out* part one step further and turn it into logical problem solving meaning the talking needs to make sense and not just be based on unfounded opinions that really don't fit together – hold together.

ERIC: I like that. Let's go with it.

BETTY: Something about competition and how always needing to win or be first is not good for relationships. I guess the opposite would be cooperation.

ADAM: Sometimes certain kids have to have the things they want immediately, like right now. They can't wait to save up for it. You know what I mean?

MARCUS: Yes I do and it is a very important value. It is often characterized as the ability to delay gratification compared with the need for immediate gratification.

ADAM: Sometimes that's really hard though – when I want something really bad it's like I can taste it.

BETTY: That may be because you're always wanting dessert!

GROUP: [Laughs all around.]

CARL: I think there should be something about going into debt for things. I'm not sure how to say it.

MARCUS: A little help for Carl here. You are really good at helping each other out.

DARLA: Maybe that paying as you go along is usually better than borrowing. It's like backwards to get something before you can afford it.

MARCUS: Good thinking. There are certain situations where borrowing makes good sense but in general what you say really is best. Another thing that often happens, I've found, is that while I'm saving up for something I realize I

really didn't want it after all or I now want something different. If I had borrowed and already bought that thing first I'd be sitting here with something I really don't want.

ADAM: I've been saving for a bike. I think by the time I can afford it I'll be too old for one.

BETTY: Then you can buy something nice for your girlfriend.

ADAM: I'm ready for us to move on, please.

GROUP: Laughter

MARCUS: Who has another suggestion – either positive or negative traits – values.

ERIC: Something about respecting life or letting everybody live. Like don't kill anybody.

MARCUS: Super! Sometimes it is called having a reverence for life – your words, *respecting life* – is really good. What would be the opposite – the negative – I mean?

ERIC: Maybe disregarding life or not valuing or destroying life – somebody else's life I guess.

MARCUS: So, we have reverence for life VS not valuing life. Good.

DARLA: Agreeing together on what is needed or how to do things like in town meetings instead of having somebody take over and try to make us do things his way.

MARCUS: Said another way, A democratic approach rather than a dictatorial or strong arm approach.

BETTY: I don't know how to say this but it is about how people are able to become happy. We've been reading that in some areas of the world people try to get happy by having and storing up lots of things. Here we get happy by knowing we have helped other people get happy or get better or get what they need. Do you see what I mean? When I go to bed at night Mother always asks me if I lived my life that day the way I think we need to have everybody live their life if we are going to have a wonderful village. When I can say yes I get the most wonderful feeling inside. I just don't know what to call it.

ADAM: My parents do that same thing. Dad calls it a feeling of *integrity*; he says it means living up to the things you believe in – I imagine that means like the values we are talking about.

MARCUS: I think you guys could do this without me. I am really impressed by how you think and what you already believe. It seems to me that LeLonia is in very good hands. You just keep up the good way of living.

TIME PASSED: {The discussion went on for another hour primarily because the youngsters were fascinated by the topic and the process. They spun long term, 'what if' scenarios with the negative compared with the positive values. I could see them growing and becoming something different – something stronger and more positive than had been the case when they first gathered there that afternoon.}

MARCUS: I want to congratulate you young people on the great work you've done here today. I'm going to have my friend, Thomas, read back to us the list of Positive Social Values you have invented today and we will see that

you receive copies before the end of the week. If you get any more ideas be sure to let me know. Your parents all have my address. I do have one final really BIG question: "How do you suppose you have come by these great ideas about values?"

ADAM: That's easy. It's how we see our parents and older brothers and sisters acting. [That deserved an Amen but I controlled my urge!]

THOMAS: I will read the positive value first followed by the negative or less helpful one. In all you have created twenty-five Positive Social Values – ones that you believe will create the best possible life for everybody, and a set that you know will only contribute to really bad times. [The kids sat back, expectantly, ready to hear the summary of their good work.]

Positive Social Value

Negative or hurtful Value

Logical problem solving techniques	<i>rather than</i> physical aggression
Cooperative	<i>rather than</i> an unbridled competitive approach to life
Ability to delay gratification	<i>rather than</i> the need for immediate gratification
A save and pay as you go approach	<i>rather than</i> irresponsible spend & credit approach
Respect for all property	<i>rather than</i> lack of respect for others' property
Reverence and respect for life	<i>rather than</i> disregard for life
Fair treatment and honesty	<i>rather than</i> deceit and dishonesty
Earning what you need and want	<i>rather than</i> merely taking it
Law-abiding behavior	<i>rather than</i> law slipping
Democratic approach	<i>rather than</i> dictatorial, strong-arm approach
Positive value-based openness	<i>rather than</i> belief in mindedness absolute right and wrong
Altruism	<i>rather than</i> selfishness
Accurately informed decision	<i>rather than</i> uninformed making or

	lore-based decision making
Finding happiness through integrity	<i>rather than</i> seeking it through stuff, status, or power
Planning ahead	<i>rather than</i> Monday morning quarter-backing
Having adult confidantes	<i>rather than</i> only having peer confidantes
Being known by ones good reputation a	<i>rather than</i> trying to be known as a somebody at any cost
Knowing one is a worthy being	<i>rather than</i> having to keep trying to prove one is a worthy being
Kind-hearted	<i>rather than</i> inconsiderate or otherwise hurtful
A user of precise language	<i>rather than</i> imprecise Language
Health and fitness awareness	<i>rather than</i> health unawareness
Cause and effect filer	<i>rather than</i> and observation filer
Analytic participation	<i>rather than</i> heedless participation
Purposefully organized living style	<i>rather than</i> chaotic/ haphazard living style
Peer plus family social orientation orientation	<i>rather than</i> peer-only social

MARCUS: I am going to promise you something right here and now. If all of you will live your lives according to the positive values you have discovered and stated today, and if you will help others to see the wisdom in these values, your life and the lives you touch have the best possible chance of being absolutely wonderful. If problems ever develop for you, review how you are using each of these values in your life. Sometimes we let things slide if we don't review them often. If that doesn't solve the problem talk with folks you admire and respect. You can always send *me* a letter about it, too.

The session ended. The lemon cake was delicious – I had two pieces. Adam and Eric each stowed away four. The girls were amazed if not just a tad disgusted. Betty and her mother were accomplished bakers. I imagine the boys will be back.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: The Country Grows Up

The broad range of powers the citizens became willing to grant him troubled Marcus. Many would have crowned him king or at least allowed him to function as a benevolent dictator. Those things, of course, were forbidden by the basic document of our Republic. Down the road that inclination could so easily lead to the abuse of power by a less honorable Leader. Just as troubling was the idea that it essentially abrogated the basic responsibilities of the citizens and THAT eroded the very foundation of the Plan.

To counter such tendencies, Marcus established a *National Oversight Commission*. Its purpose was not to veto, contradict the Leader's decisions, or remove him from office for unacceptable behavior. It was to keep the citizens informed of any questionable activities or plans enacted or proposed by the central government. It could propose local advisory initiatives to be voted on to provide grass roots guidance about such things. It consisted of six members, one each elected from each province. Every six months one member was replaced by a new one rotating through the group. No person could serve more than once. The Commission had access to everything. It was not a policy making body and the Leader did not consult with it. Its sole function was to keep tabs on what was going on at the national level and call attention to any activities that smacked of impropriety or irresponsibility or seemed to contradict the intention of the Plan. They were paid by their provinces to further separate their function from the national government. Provincial leaders applauded the idea, not because they doubted the integrity of Marcus but because he once again reasserted the powers of the citizens and the local governments.

* * *

During the ensuing years, Marcus initiated regular contacts with our neighboring countries and participated in regional conferences. We only had ambassadors in those countries where we had reason to maintain trade or security pacts. Because of our size and the basic philosophy of our country we posed a territorial threat to no one. A thriving tourist trade developed and cruise ships from many nations docked at our ports. It gave rise to a vital internal transportation system – privately owned and operated, of course.

The hill people gradually allowed our general culture and mores to seep into their way of life. We in turn benefited from theirs. With increased tourist trade, money began coming their way. By the end of our first term – each was six years – they were even voluntarily paying taxes and participating in the Help Point system; they had been all quite selflessly helping each other for generations so their leaders saw no reason not to get credit for it.

The beaches were cleaned and hotels erected. Wildlife flourished and wise land use and conservation added to the vitality of our society. Plans were underway for a second college with local branches in each province. It was to be set up as an independent institution financed by private benefactors and those who used it. Health care had improved remarkably – again within the private sector. Libraries grew and flourished. Schools readily adopted Marcus's

preferred model of facilitation rather than teaching. Essentially it put shared responsibility on the student to help plan and carry out his education. The concept of lifelong education spread like wildfire. The people had become starved for knowledge during the dark days – as the bad decades had come to be called.

No limits had been set in our Plan for the number of terms the Leader could hold. As we were creating it we had envisioned that would be held to one. Late in the sixth year Marcus was approached by a representative delegation from the provinces with the request that he agree to serve a second term. They based their request both on his universally respected performance and on the fact that even after six years all of the provisions he had set forth in the Plan had not come to full fruition. They felt uneasy about allowing anyone else to guide the Plan through to fulfillment.

“Well, what do you think?” Marcus asked me the moment the group had left.

“I guess we’d only be twenty-nine at the end of a second term – still young enough to build a good, regular life.”

“Marriage and family, you mean?”

“That and other things – you do something medical and me spend more time writing.”

“You and Agnes should get married, regardless, you know,” he said being more direct about it than ever before.

“It would be so awkward with my wife here in my bed next to yours.”

“Duffus! There are other beds in other rooms. I won’t accept that as a reason, excuse, or devise for procrastination on the matter. Your happiness and fulfillment should not be totally disrupted by your loyalty to me.”

I sighed a long, long, lung-emptying sigh.

“The Boogie Man,” I said.

“What?”

“I’ve never shared this with you but throughout my life when I haven’t slept near you I’ve been petrified by the Boogie Man. I just couldn’t give up the solace I feel here.”

“Baloney! I can’t even give that a, ‘nice try’. It was terrible. Pathetic! Your worst ever.”

“So, I can stay, you say?”

It broke him up the way our byplay used to do back in our tree house days. I stayed. So did Marcus agreeing with the delegation there were things still undone that he wanted to see through. He also agreed with me that it was only six years and we would still be young men with most of our lives ahead of us.

A proposal arrived from the Halonian government requesting talks about the merging of our countries. Marcus and I both read it as an invitation for us to be subjugated in the deal.

We did meet with the president, however. We heard him out and asked pointed questions. In the end we put it to an advisory vote of our citizens. The annexation proposal lost ninety-five percent to five percent. Most of those

favoring the merger expressed no dissatisfaction with things as they were. They were primarily concerned about Primia to our south and its militarism and dictatorship. It was ten times our size and maintained a substantial army. It had postured against us several times but always backed down. An alliance with Helonia might quell that threat.

Marcus continued talks even after the vote. He recognized a security pact of some kind that ensured Halonia would protect us would be a positive thing. In the end it appeared that we had little to offer in return. We could pay only a tiny pittance of the actual cost and our trade agreements were already open and mutually beneficial. Halonia's president turned down our proposal. It would be full incorporation or nothing.

Later, Marcus proposed a military drawdown in the region – five countries were involved. Two of the smaller ones gave favorable reactions but Halonia and Primia would have nothing to do with it. Following that we considered a joint protection treaty suggested by those two smaller governments – merging and building an army to be shared among us three. The financial burden it would place on our economy – starting from scratch – was prohibitive so those talks and negotiations came to an end.

The possibility that some action might be taken against us was constantly in the back of our minds. The likelihood that the two, smaller, friendly countries would come to our aid was essentially nil. Year by year Lelonia was more and more becoming the garden spot of the region. Marcus believed we would continue to be left alone at least until we had accomplished most of our goals; then, who knew. Why pluck a flower until it was in full bloom? So long as we continued to grow the good stuff about our country, we would probably be left alone. The other governments would prefer to take over a finished product, especially since they apparently had no clue about how to do it themselves.

Perhaps we needed to pursue an alliance with one of the super powers rather than some regional arrangement. We didn't wallow in the unfairness mode – how unfair it was that those same attributes that had propelled us into the spotlight as the poster child for a sane, citizen friendly, politics, should also make us so vulnerable to the ugly ambitions of less honorable nations.

The irony was that if Lelonia were taken over in order to gain its positive features, the conquering country would soon have to disallow the very features for which it was acquired. Such freedom and citizen determination would not mesh with the other county's more restrictive and repressive approach. Lelonia would disintegrate as it fell under the oppressive clutches of the other government. Life was, indeed, confusing.

Logically, if those countries wanted to enhance their own ways of life they would mimic our processes and philosophy. They would ask for consultation and tours and suggestions. Openness to such enlightenment not being the case, they will mine us for whatever riches they can suck out of us before condemning us to the wretched level of its own citizens. In the end they will be surprised that our success stumbled under their administration and use that as proof ours was a flawed philosophy from the outset. They miss the whole point. Leaders who rise to power so they can own the power are almost never citizen friendly

managers.

Politicians virtually always have a hunger for power – not all and some more than others, of course. Under our plan there really are no national politicians so the threat of being taken over from within is negligible. At the local level almost all decisions are made directly by the people in caucus and through thoughtful and informed balloting. There, again, professional politicians have no place. Some citizens always rise to the top in terms of influence. That is to be expected – helpful even. Such influential folks are easier to monitor and keep in line when they live next door than when they live thousands of miles away.

The Plan could work in any sized country, we believed, so long as the two-way, people to government, communication continued as a major component. Perhaps intermediate areas would need to be established to handle regional concerns but the idea of one person one vote on all important issues (not specified in the basic document of the Republic) should work if the citizens maintain their desire for and continue to be engaged in a truly locally controlled, fully representative, government. It might necessitate the establishment of some sort of administrative councils that communicated back and forth between the national and the local governments. They would have no mind of their own – just function in a purely administrative and communicative fashion.

Perhaps there is some size limitation above which our Plan could not work effectively. Perhaps a planet re-divided into smaller units – countries – would become the way of the future. (That would certainly not be a popular concept among those who easily put aside the concepts for which we stood.)

Most current governments would be blown away by the concept that the economy is *not* the bottom line. They would have a difficult time moving from their necessary *stuff mentality* – that people need to be able to get lots of stuff, therefore wages, a growing GNP, and the like become all important – to the idea that people, who first of all commit to helping each other, really don't need or crave bunches of stuff. Since it means the demise of politicians and bureaucrats, the leaders of most countries would never consider instituting such a plan. Marcus and I recognize that a populace may have to sink into desperate chaos, like we did in the old Lelonia, before it will be able to truly understand that the pursuit of money and stuff is fully unimportant next to the human factors.

A basic dislike and mistrust of the Lelonia project was evident every time we met with officials from other countries. We invited them to tour anywhere, anytime, to experience the ways of the country untainted by our presence or influence. A few did but none seemed eager for the news to spread back home. Primia closed its borders to Lelonia – no one in and no one out. Halonia increased its restrictions on travel by its citizens, but had not denied it to others, especially tourists traveling through its country on their way here. Most dropped a few bucks in Halonia as they traveled in and out. By and away the most used access route was the ocean – private and commercial boats and ships.

After six years our population had exploded by 50%; there were many homegrown babies born to parents who finally believed it was safe to bring new lives into the World. Many others emigrated to Lelonia from places far and near. In general we attracted people with gentle souls. Few came to take advantage of

things. Most arrived willing and eager to participate in our positive ways.

As we entered our twelfth year in office, Junior – long known as James – graduated from college. He was already an artist of note. A group of citizens from our home territory commissioned him to do a portrait of Marcus. James had a style unique unto himself. His portraits incorporated elements that well represented the person he was painting. When, at last, we were allowed to see the finished work we were astounded. There were rainbows and suns, stars and smiles, trees and a tree house, flowers, a stream and a throng of happy people. And yet, there it was, easily emerging from the amalgam, the face of Marcus fully recognizable, youthful in appearance with the hint of a smile, the way ‘Junior’ remembered him from our first days together. Upon close inspection he had included a small representation of me, of him as a child, and of a bright, red, apple.

“This is magnificent, Junior,” Marcus said. “From a distance there I am the kid who had a dream, representing all that is right about our country today. Up close are the elements that have come together to allow it. I can’t put meaning to these three small bolts of lightning, however.”

“They represent the energy and life sources from which we came – our father’s, too soon gone and yet still present in our good works. I hope it was not presumptuous of me to include myself.”

“You were the driving force behind much of our Plan, Junior. When Thomas and I got stuck on some aspect we often thought back to our time with you and answers suddenly seemed evident.”

“Really! It’s mostly how I’ve lived my life as well. Whenever I faced a difficult problem I asked myself what would Marcus and Thomas do. It always provided a solid answer.”

James was married a few months later and they took up residence in Washopolis. She was a potter and he and his wife opened a studio together. A year later twin boys entered their lives. I will let the reader guess as to the names they were given. Our chests have still not returned to normal. We take our ‘uncle’ role very seriously. We also get a kick out of watching Worthington giving horsy rides – two at a time.

Worthington – ‘Worthy’ or ‘Worth old man’ to us now – has come along quite nicely. He can still present the best of a stodgy, formal, presence when visitors expect that but he’s become a formidable foe in broom hockey and bocce ball. To his credit he has never called Marcus, ‘Kid’, in public, although we think it would be a grand hoot if he should. He will retire this year. We will miss him.

So ended the second term. A third would follow. Life in Lelonia only improved with years. We seamlessly incorporated a generation that had known nothing but life under our Plan. They were, by and large, loving, helpful, young people. The idea that stuff or money could be more important than their neighbors or knowledge was a completely foreign and untenable concept for them. They all quite automatically took good care of each other and found ways of improving life within their villages. Education – knowledge, really – was an important part of everyone’s life. The gathering and presentation of information sources became an almost sacred endeavor. People worked less for wages

than for personal satisfaction.

A truly classless society did not develop the way we had envisioned it as naïve, idealistic, teens. Some folks were just naturally given to working harder or being more creative or talented than others in ways that rewarded them differently financially. There were no destitute or even poor people; neighbors saw to that. Few folks held to a superior air – it was counter-productive. Crime was virtually non-existent. Violent crime, especially, plummeted. Marcus attributed that to the fact that those with innate violent tendencies were not free to reproduce. It lent credence to that growing body of science that supported a genetic basis.

Religious groups reevaluated their purposes. People were nice and helpful and altruistic without their teachings or their threats – just because it proved to be the most sensible way to live and interact and became the natural and lasting source of happiness.

Coopertition – the melding of cooperation and competition that Marcus and I had created as children – had been created all over again as a natural result of our positive society. Athletes strove to be the best they could be – not to show up others but to show themselves the limits of their capabilities. Students worked to become as knowledgeable as they could – not to take home a card full of ‘As’ or to eventually be recognized as valedictorian but just so they would know things. Merchants mostly settled into similar prices doing their best in other ways to attract and keep customers. Races were run not so much to win or lose but just to run and check one’s own development. There was no, ‘my dad can beat up your dad’, mentality in Lelonia. Personal pride was never driven by the power to impair.

“Vengeance is mine sayeth the Lord,” and virtually everybody was most willing to leave that in His hands. Revenge was not a part of our thinking. From the time a child left the inevitable ‘me first’ approach to social interaction at about six, they developed and carried with them the ‘how can we fix it?’ and ‘how can I help?’ approach to problems and disputes. Marcus always believed this: that which is well modeled in the home is taken as their own by the children who regularly witness it. That truly seems to be the case.

The volunteer system is much more successful than I ever dreamed it would be. I’m pleased I was wrong. The tradeoff for taxes continues but most able-bodied folks regularly contribute twice the time we had envisioned. In fact, so much of their help time is off the books – once taxes have been reduced – that we have no good handle on how much it may actually be.

Not long ago there was a guest editorial in our home town paper berating the fact that the author had to work to earn wages because it so infringed on her really important task in life – volunteering at the senior center. The following week there was a flood of letters with similar messages. The smile that brought to Marcus’s face has still not dimmed.

I guess I am trying to convey the message that although there have been ups and downs in our progress and that the future remains somewhat unsure – relative to our neighbors’ ambitions – life here in Marcus’s Lelonia is wonderful and continues to improve month by month.

Several times a year the two of us return home. Our mothers are doing well. Mine remarried a number of years ago. They clearly have built a fantastic life together. I am pleased. He was a judge but willingly gave that up to be with her. My mother married to a judge could have smacked of an improper tie to Marcus through me. He stepped down of his own volition.

The court system has developed nicely. Judges study at the university, just as do nurses, teachers, and other professionals. The professional members of the support staff are required to have specialized degrees. Initially the courts were overwhelmed with work and as a result some of those first rehab plans were not well formulated. That is a problem long relegated to the past. It has become a smooth and very successful operation. Members of each specialty from across the country meet monthly to share insights and work together to hone their services. It both works to improve the quality of the programs and to instill some degree of similarity in the programs among the various sections of the country – without mandating it. We had seen that potential inconsistency as a problem and had stewed about it during our period of Plan writing. We wanted local control of the court system but we also wanted consistency in the application of our One Rule – the Positive Social Contract.

There has been no proliferation of additional laws or rules as we had also feared might be the irresistible demand from a citizenry so used to that approach – rule by specifically laid out laws rather than rule by logic and common sense. The former seemed easier to many – “Here is the rule; if I break it I can expect that such and such will happen to me.” It could become a tradeoff game – “Is the worst possible outcome perhaps worth the risk?” It would have been the lazy man’s approach to social control.

Citizens within local communities did agree to certain *conventions* regarding the conduct of their affairs. They served the purpose of efficiency rather than restriction. They included topics such as when and by whom streets and parks would be maintained, how election officials would be rotated, and the legitimate duties of the police – *Help Force* as it came to be called, managed by *Helpmen* rather than cops. There were other areas but that gives the flavor – more like a family’s, Saturday morning, *to do list*, really.

Did I say life was good here in Lelonia? Except for the constant irritation from our saber rattling neighbors, things were wonderful.

Marcus had begun talks with two of the World’s superpowers regarding the possible territorial ambitions of Halonia and Primia in an effort to secure for us the status of a protectorate or some such thing. Although the process appeared to be progressing in the right direction we were both taken aback by the miles and miles of red tape and committee meetings supported by sub-committee meetings and canvases of the constituents, all before any action could even really be considered. The needs of extraneous hundreds had to be met before the need of the *focal one* could be attended to. Marcus arrived home from his last meeting convinced such an arrangement might be years away.

He had chided the President about that country’s inability to just directly bestow such a simple act of kindness. After all, it would never actually involve a military presence or intervention. The mere knowledge that there was an

agreement would quell any threat. With a wink, the president asked if Marcus wanted to trade places for just one day. That immediately put both of their situations into clear perspective. Each would feel helpless in the other's shoes.

So we waited. Rumors abounded. Tension mounted. We felt so alone in the world, so unappreciated. Perhaps the leaders of the world would rather see us fail so they would not have to consider the advantages of our way of living and governing. Marcus's disappointment in the other leaders was obvious and all consuming. It was the first time I had ever seen him down. He had always believed in the basic goodness of man. He had believed in man's ability to intelligently and compassionately apply the lessons of history. Mostly he believed in our Lelonia and agonized over his inability to secure and assure its long-term existence.

The citizens were positive and enthusiastic about life and their future there. Marcus and I began to doubt – not the clear success and viability of our way of life, but the inability and unwillingness of the other people in the world to help us maintain it. The naysayers of the world – virtually everybody who had taken time to scrutinize our system – tried to write us off as a fluke. The success of our society, compared with mounting problems in virtually every other one in the world, not only irritated them but engendered fully unacceptable doubts in their own basic systems. Until we failed or were in some way isolated, their defensiveness would necessarily grow. To ever admit the upstart was right and their long traditions of government were wrong was absolutely unacceptable. Face must be saved regardless of how it continued to expose their citizens to harm. We recognized it was due to their inherent greed and laziness – perhaps misplaced pride. In chorus they chose to all quite irrationally blame us for disrupting their status quo.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: Lelonia Confronts History

The Plan was amended to read that Leaders would be elected for six-year terms and could be reelected as often as our people desired. When a Leader does not receive a majority on the reinstatement vote (essentially a vote of long-term confidence) during his or her final six months in office (no other candidate appears at that time) then the provinces begin to search for alternative candidates. A series of national runoff ballots are then taken until one person receives a majority. Campaigning for the office is not considered proper.

Marcus is now serving his sixth term.

“This will be my last year in office, Thomas. I’ve decided. It’s time for new blood. I am going to send that word out to our people so they can begin the process of selecting my successor.”

I was not surprised. Thirty-five years of growing his country had taken its toll. He looked older than his fifty-two years. His wavy black hair of youth had long been white. Fifteen-hour workdays had left him perpetually tired. Though still in fine physical shape and sharp as ever mentally, it had long been clear to me what an effort every day had become for him.

Sagacious, the man, had died many years before. The products of his mind and heart lived on, of course. When hard times were upon us we often referred to his wisdom. We wondered if our Plan would go down beside the old man’s ideas as part of the historic wisdom of Lelonia. I believed it would – a wildly optimistic position for Thomas the doubter. I think Marcus believed that as well, though for some reason we never really spoke of it. Our Plan had worked in our time and with our needs as a nation. Wisdom had to be applicable to challenges across the span of time. We had no way of being sure about our Plan. Could it be set into a wider, more positive World perspective, I felt certain our approach would prove its worth – become the savior of the human species, in fact.

One of the important successes of our Plan was that it collapsed the value barriers between four typically logic tight compartments in man’s thinking – religion, politics, business practices, and social philosophy. A single ethic emerged based on our positive values and facilitating approach. Our newest generation cannot fathom the old way, where it was not only allowed to cheat and behave in hurtful manners as a politician or businessman but it was encouraged and applauded. Our youngsters are appalled to know that at one time religious sects attempted to legislate their beliefs over all other beliefs in order to control significant aspects of the personal, social and political order. It bewilders them to read of the thousands of laws we once seemed to need in order to maintain a well-functioning society and nation. The one law they have known seems completely sufficient. “Each hour live my life in such a way that it will make life wonderful for everybody (and hurt nobody).”

Although religion still exists and is in fact an important part of most people’s lives, believers understand that spending large amounts of energy defending it serves no purpose. They acknowledge that at their base, religions

attempt to explain the unexplainable through the use of explanations which are themselves unexplainable. It is defined as 'faith' and is understood to be beyond the realm of logic and science or anything provable. It provides many people comfort and hope and guidance. Without the defensive ranting and raving of old, religion has settled into a positive place within our society.

We contemplated doing away with the Help Point system in relation to tax reduction – just go to the flat 10%. Altruism was the way of life now. We talked with citizens of all ages from all sections of our country about that possibility. We were frankly surprised at the reaction our proposal received. It was virtually unanimous: Don't mess with the system. True, we are good people and that, in itself provides wonderfully meaningful rewards, but even good people often need reminders that being that way is the necessary way to live their lives. We probably shouldn't get paid for being good but we know that does make a difference – not every day and perhaps not even every thirty days, but knowing it's there and that there is a corresponding payoff for our good deeds does matter. It builds stability and greater purpose. Please don't change it.

So, we didn't and it flourishes today. Clearly, it doesn't hold down the altruistic acts merely to the level of the tax trade-off, because most citizens earn two and three times as many Help Points each month as needed for that. It is more a reminder of the foundation of our society from the head of state to the newest toddler – facilitation, *mutual* facilitation.

In terms of our modified free market economy the UPL's – Upper Price Limits have been maintained with the blessing of our citizens. It has settled into a figure of 33% above actual expenses per item. Fair values for service providers have been established by committees made up of the service professionals and citizens. It neatly handles the irritating abuses of the supply and demand problem. When, during the heat of summer, for example, it costs more to move fruit and vegetables and milk in cooled vehicles, that is passed on as part of the base expense and no one feels put upon because of it. In winter, when that expense falls out, the prices are reduced accordingly.

The prison system has developed beautifully. (Can that really be said about prisons?) Incarceration has dropped to the lowest in the free world. Recidivism has likewise taken a nosedive. Most who complete the rehab/education program maintain acceptable levels of social conduct to stay free. Those who prove they are unable to live free among the rest of us, maintain their lives within our isolation facilities. They work at jobs for which they are trained and earn the going wages, which they, as a group, establish. They maintain a police force. Most 'lifers' agree that they have a good life – for the most part. Even though they are unacceptable out in our world they report they have been able to develop good feelings about themselves – working at important jobs, earning their own keep, being able to make most decisions about their lives, and so on. It has been one of our proudest successes. Research continues regarding the treatment of such offenders.

One of our outstanding achievements, Marcus and I believe, has been the diminishing of stuff in our lives. In the old days people really believed they needed stuff to be happy – the newest whatever had to be theirs. They worked

overtime to be able to afford stuff. They *even* went into debt to purchase stuff. They flaunted their stuff as the basis of their prestige to gain status among their fellow men. The government encouraged that perverted philosophy because it propelled the economy forward – more demand, more income, more taxes, larger GNP (the shrine at which so many politicians worshiped).

Such an approach easily fell by the wayside under our new positive social philosophy and the Positive Social Contract. If I pay lots of money for stuff that certainly plays no role in improving my life or the social condition, am I living in a way that is generally helpful? Of course not. If I buy a device for P1,000 (because of its brand name, for example) when one that costs P500 works as well, am I not wasting funds that could be better spent on improving the social condition? Certainly I am. When the concept of stuff accumulation was judged against the Contract, stuff lost every time. *“If everybody lives his life this hour the way I am living mine, the world will become a better place for all of us.* If everybody accumulates more unnecessary stuff this hour the way I am accumulating more unnecessary stuff, the world will become a better place for all of us???

Again, our young people cannot fathom how it was to live such selfish and greedy lives or how interacting with stuff could have been more important than interacting with people.

Does it mean folks don't have what they need and a little more? No. We are not Spartans and have not taken vows of poverty. Few among us would not say they have more than is necessary to live a good and comfortable life. With the downsizing of stuff in our lives we have seen ourselves filled with the more natural gifts of personal growth, human companionship, communication, caring, and compassion. The lot of our neighbors matters to us. We have recognized that magnificent state of altruism that allows everybody to live a good and comfortable life. We facilitate each other. We find status within ourselves and from without according to the way we manage our lives so they mesh positively with those around us. Wealth and stuff are never the basis of status, in fact, they immediately define one as a hurtfully, less caring, outsider to our way of life.

Lifelong learning has, in part, replaced the stuff mentality of the old days of less enlightenment. Our youngsters seek knowledge – some to improve the quality of living but much of the activity reflects a love of knowledge for knowledge sake. As a nation we will never succumb to those who would conquer us by preying on our ignorance. Everybody in Lelonia sees himself as a teacher – well, *Facilitator* as the concept has developed here. We always have time to answer another's question and if we have no answer, to help him pursue an answer. We are not just the most literate society on the continent, we are that times ten!

We have removed the old artificiality from education – others telling us what we should learn – and have replaced it with a thoughtful, creative, approach that is both personally and socially relevant. And, since we set no time limits on our learning experience – know a grade school's worth or a high school's worth or a bachelor degree's worth – such divisions have fallen by the wayside. “I'm ten years old and I'm learning things.” “I'm fifteen years old . . .” “I'm seventy years old and I'm . . .” Segmenting educational activities and goals is a ticket to

intellectual disaster. We have overcome that. Ask a young person in Lelonia what grade he is in and you will get a blank stare. "Grade?" The concept is meaningless. "I am twelve and I this month I am studying such and such." Visitors to our Facilitation Centers (schools) are dumbfounded. It seems so chaotic. "May I see the third grade curriculum?" "No. There is none. You might be interested in Marcia's Exploration Plan for the month or Jerry's Side Trip Plan for today – he found a caterpillar on the way here this morning and feels the need to learn about such things."

Many educators visiting from other countries ask about our standardized testing programs. "*Our what?*" we respond. "Your testing to see that students at each level know what they should know at that level." "*What they SHOULD know? How can anybody but the student possibly know what he SHOULD know?*" "You don't understand." "*You're right. You make no sense. If everybody knows just the same things where is the diversity? Where is the accounting for individual differences? Where are the societal and cultural strengths that can only flow from dissimilarity?*" In the end they could not understand us anymore than we could understand them. Do we strive for some communality of basic skills? Of course but that always grows out of the common sense of the students not by mandates. If I am to be a contributing member of our society I need to know how to read and compute, to know the laws of the universe and the human mind, understand how the human condition arose, and on and on and on.

When the members of a society turn from existing as a group of inept spectators and begin living as avid participants, most aspects of life change in remarkably positive ways. A thousand people can watch a group of highly skilled ball players and take as their own success the actual success of those players without ever needing to lift a finger to actually improve or test themselves in any useful way. They continue being fully inept, uninvolved, sit-and-watch, folks, with no basis for personal status except as reflected in the success of 'their team'. But, get those same folks involved in working to improve some skill of their own and their feelings of accomplishment burgeon from within, not on the shirttails of nine well-honed experts.

In Lelonia we participate. The spectator has virtually no place here. Of course we can't all be the best ice skater or hurdler or tenor or actor, and it brings us pleasure to witness such expertise, but our emphasis is on doing, being, participating, and growing instead of sitting back and merely watching. Most team sports have been replaced by individual sports so each participant can judge his own progress rather than seeking to beat somebody else. We learn cooperation through real life activities, not the artificial setting of a team sport. Beating, putting down, hurting – those concepts just don't fly here because they are counterproductive if not harmful to our social order. Comparing ones achievement with those of others certainly occurs regularly but it isn't the focus. We don't feel bad if somebody else is 'better'. We just don't have to be the best to take great pride in the progression of our skill level. In fact, we applaud both ourselves and those others for their accomplishments.

Most western countries cringe at the idea and spin justifications by the

dozen for why maintaining competition is essential. They can become and remain as defensive as they want but the proof is in our pudding and they won't even try our recipe as they propel the human race toward its ultimate, competitive, destruction. We hear that progress – especially in science, medicine, and technology – depends on the competitive spirit. Baloney. In Lelonia we do our best to improve things for each other. We don't need big bonuses paid to the 'winning' researcher in the lab. We don't need fantasies about the riches we will receive if we are the first with the new whatever. We work hard to innovate, create, and invent just because those things will be helpful to our family and friends – even for people we will never meet.

It brings up the concept of cheating – virtually non-existent here for decades. Cheating is born of competition. Its sole purposes seem to be to make one person 'appear' better or have more than someone else. Habitual cheaters fool themselves into believing that if cheating puts one ahead of somebody else it really does make him better. That is hogwash, of course. Our youngest generation cannot conceive of it. In cheating, status, not fact, becomes more important. One could, perhaps, cheat and thereby 'win', but the truth would remain unchanged; the cheater's skill was not proved to be the best.

When Marcus and I were growing up we heard a lot about 'fair and unfair'. Early on we understood both terms were fully indefinable so could hold no universal application. It came into full focus for us over our 'expulsion' from church. It apparently seemed unfair to *them* that we would question the church's tenets or at least that we would raise them in the presence of the other children. It seemed unfair to *us* that they would not address our concerns and questions, and that they frowned on our raising issues that we felt the other children should be allowed to consider. What was the fair aspect of that? Fair, we soon determined, is always contaminated with personal bias. Was it fair the referee called that foul? It typically depended on the direction of one's loyalty – bias. Was it fair that the editor turned down my book which I and all who had read it in draft form agreed was brilliant? Loyalty. Bias. Perspective. Expertise.

Is it now fair that the countries that border us want to take our territory and rule our citizens destroying the positive society we have created? *No*, we say in the loudest and clearest voice. Yes, they say, pointing to those things that justify the move in their minds.

The concept of fair or not fair pretty well disappears when the process of competition is replaced by cooperation. Without the vying for the win, who cares – fair or not fair? Fair or not fair usually comes down to the need for survival or the need for prestige. In a society like ours, where survival needs are well covered and children grow up having learned without any doubt that they are fully worthy and loveable individuals, scampering for prestige just does not exist. I'm great whether or not I win the race or the election. I'm great whether or not I am lauded for whatever. So a mistake may have been made. People make mistakes. Fair; unfair; understandable mistake? I'm not going to wilt because of it.

In Lelonian society, *fair* is reserved for weather references and for that wonder-filled, traveling, summer entertainment extravaganza with tents, and

performers and cotton candy and barkers that urge us inside to experience remarkable sights and fantastic events.

Marcus and I have seen remarkable sights and fantastic events here in Lelonia, our new Lelonia, our rewoven Lelonia – what most, here, refer to as *The Marcus Lelonia*.

Regardless of – or perhaps because of – the recent, remarkable, rebirth, here, Primia, to our south, continues to issue threats about its intention to conquer us through force. Halonia to the north is ostensibly still trying to negotiate our peaceful annexation as a state while increasing its military presence at our border. Neither is acceptable to our people but with no military we are fully vulnerable to either. Even with the largest army we could possibly muster we would be fully vulnerable. No big power has seen fit to protect us.

In the end we have been told that our system of government was benignly antithetical to their purposes. It seemed a contradiction in terms. No one understood what that meant and I supposed those who stated it really didn't either. We assumed the foreign politicians feared for their own futures should our way catch on. We believed that people in general feared the idea of giving up their basic selfishness, which they had come to believe, was both good and the source of their happiness. Those poor, misguided, folks, were seemingly oblivious to the obvious fact that they were impelling humanity toward extinction.

If absorption by some other power became unavoidable, Marcus thought the better alternative would be the association with Halonia, to our north – a generally peaceful and stable country though like so many, corrupt from the top down. It pretended the look of a democratic, big government based system although services and opportunities were actually minimal, restrictions were increasing, and growing unrest was evident among its citizens. If they would allow us to continue to operate as we were – paying them taxes or tribute – it might be tolerable. Chances were they wouldn't because the rest of their country would demand similar privileges.

Primia, to our south, was run by a group of cutthroats who had seized control ten years earlier. It had been a struggling democracy before that, coming off a two-century-old reign by a succession of generally benevolent kings and queens. Its people were not supportive of the new regime and were repressed at every turn. They might support the invasion, however, thinking some of the good things we had, here, might work in their favor.

Fortunately, during the past several years, the internal workings of Lelonia had been on autopilot, running efficiently and compassionately by the local villages. Marcus's input had only occasionally been needed where internal matters were concerned, so his efforts and energies could be directed at the international issues. It was his least favorite of the responsibilities associated with his office.

Early on, neither of us had envisioned the international problems. I guess we were too parochial in our thinking – too focused on our internal programs – too trusting and naive is probably the bottom line. Lelonia was tiny. We posed no military or territorial threat to anyone. We had few natural resources. We were separated from our neighbors by high, rugged, hills with only one main

roadway connecting us with each of the two countries. Who would want to destroy such a tiny, non-threatening, land? The answer had become clear – the short-sighted, selfish, greedy, people in the world cared more about their own current, personally defined, comfort than about improving the more general human condition and in the continued, secure existence of the human species. They could not see beyond their parochially selfish, irrational, positions, therefore, they could not understand what the Lelonian success could mean for the future and continued existence of mankind.

Marcus had only one political detractor. His name was Rohnie. In the beginning he had tried to undermine the Plan's implementation at every juncture. When he saw how well the plan actually worked and how fully it had been embraced by the citizens, he backed off. Now, with the looming international problems he again saw a chance to cause unrest.

Rohnie's motivation was personal power and prestige. What compassion he demonstrated toward the people was clearly not genuine. He seemed to have few true feelings for the welfare of the people and no genuine desire to improve or even maintain the new, smoothly functioning, people-friendly, Lelonia. He took every opportunity to undermine the Plan and Marcus in his role as Leader. It was a thorn in the side that Marcus didn't need, but in the open society, which Marcus so treasured, he would not take steps to quiet the man. Rohnie pretty well dug his own grave every time he spoke. Marcus's early attempts at reconciliation between the two fell on deaf ears so we had not pursued that for years. Rohnie had no following except, perhaps, in his own imagination.

Once Marcus gives notice of his intention to leave office, Rohnie will certainly pounce on the opportunity. It should be an interesting year.

Marcus keeps each early afternoon free, so he can meet with citizens and local leaders to keep updated on pressing issues and offer his assistance as needed. This afternoon the first visitor is the leader of a village on the southern border near Premia. The road connecting the two countries runs through that community.

"It is so good to see you again, Brian," Marcus said moving to the door to greet him.

Brian was sixtyish and had been a good friend and associate throughout our tenure in office. His face conveyed concern. They sat at the huge window from where the green slope of the lowlands could be seen spreading toward the sea beyond the city.

"I have come by information I wanted to share with you in person," Brian began.

Marcus cocked his head expectantly.

"I have it by good authority that Rohnie has been making frequent, secret, trips to the capitol of Primia. I imagine it can only mean he's looking for some personal deal – a promise of power, perhaps – if Primia should invade and conquer us. The idea that his motive is to prevent such a move is unrealistic – absurd even. Do you have any counsel? As you know, the man is a resident of my region living just outside my village."

"We have never interfered with international travel by any of our citizens

and I'm not inclined to do so now. I'm not sure what he brings to the table in Primia – people here dislike him, he has no governmental administrative experience, he has the reputation as a troublemaker. What country would want to get involved with him?"

"I understand what you are saying. Still, he could rile things up here. He is really the only anti-government agitator we have.

"If Primia decides to invade, agitation will provide no margin for anyone. Do you believe he may be encouraging the powers in Primia to invade?"

"He may be, but I would think not without having been assured he would be given some kind of important role in Lelonia's future under Primia's occupation."

"I'm sure you are right," Marcus said folding his hands beneath his chin. "If that is what he is doing it would be an act of treason. We have no specific provision in our Plan for dealing with treason. Over the years it has become more and more clear that our Plan is extremely naive about international matters. I take full responsibility for the oversight. Perhaps we now need to put elements in place to deal with such things."

"It may be an aside but there is a wonderfully positive aspect to this issue," Brian said.

"I'm always ready to hear about positive aspects," Marcus said his tired face brightening momentarily as if out of obligation.

"For over thirty years we haven't needed such a provision in our governing process. Who in his right mind would risk losing the wonderful social order you have created here for us? And I know, you will say that 'we' created all this together but face it, without *you* none of this could have ever come about."

"Are you suggesting that since only one person seems to be involved at this time, we don't really need to address the issue in terms of legal process?" Marcus said a genuine question in his tone.

Brian shrugged.

"Whatever damage Rohnie has been party to, it is probably done," he said. "Whatever personal alliance he may have fashioned was undoubtedly forged months or even years ago. His recent travels may more likely indicate an impending incursion than preliminary meetings. If that is, in fact, Primia's plan, I would think they would have researched the man and found that he has absolutely no influence here that could help their cause. He will be used to obtain information and then tossed aside much to the puzzlement of his overblown ego."

"All of that seems well taken," Marcus said. "I will renew my attempt to win some protective assurance from an intermediate sized world power – one that might see some personal prestige involved in a promise to help a little guy like us. It is not the motivation I would prefer, of course, but we seem to be at that juncture where our survival demands that we must take whatever we can get. It is such a shame that our abundance of love and compassion has not spread beyond our borders. It is another serious omission in our Plan. At the outset Thomas and I were afraid that any missionary effort might well be perceived as an attempt at infiltration for the purpose of upsetting other governments in favor

of our own rather than merely offering options to be considered. The fact is that what we needed to be doing was spreading a positive approach in international relations, espousing the universal rights of all countries to maintain their territorial and philosophic integrity, and calling attention to those countries that seemed bent on the acquisition of foreign territory.”

* * *

Sadly, though appropriately, I believe, it was I in the end who delivered the news.

“Marcus. The armies have gathered and will march on us at daybreak. What shall we do? Our citizens await your wisdom on the matter.”

“We must all continue doing the things we have learned to do best – live in peace, compassion, and helpfulness with one another. Our soon to be captors have much to learn from us. If we fulfill our destiny correctly, one day they will become us. Our land can be conquered, but our spirit, experience, and driving philosophy cannot. Perhaps this is the true destiny that has awaited us all along. Perhaps it is the only way to save humanity – sincerely and dependably modeling to the strangers who will live among us, our set of grand discoveries that makes life good and holds the only proven promise to save our species. Amalgamation. Assimilation. It is my fervent hope that in the end we shall all grow toward something even more remarkable. What else *should* any of us desire?”

With some degree of care, Marcus selected an apple from the bowl beside his chair and launched it across the room. I went long and snatched it from the air. We still had it – that thing between us. It was a forever thing. That was our most fervent hope for our people as we marched into history together – that what we had created would be a forever thing.