

Into the Deep

Fish for Truth, Live with Purpose,
and Attain Spiritual Freedom

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For Sol

In order to mold His people, God
often has to melt them.

Amish Proverb

Foreword

A counsellor had a client with a grave dilemma. Her husband died tragically six years previously. Though she grieved her loss, she hoped to love and be loved again.

Sadly, her children and in-laws forbade this possibility. From a foreign land with different customs, they warned her that they would withhold financial and emotional support. She would suffer the attendant backlash and be ostracized.

She was at an impasse. While she had clarity in her mind and heart, she lacked the will to act for what was just and true.

Though many of the counsellor's patients had faced more severe trauma, he viewed this case study as one of the most extreme. The denial of life's most precious need and desire, to love and be loved, was unparalleled. He questioned how to proceed.

He reviewed his notes. He researched. He consulted colleagues. He had a classic understanding; yet, he did not know how to help her bridge confusion to clarity and action.

The challenges of the soul are problematic and people handle them differently. Moreover, one's failure to achieve a particular life purpose is not without impact. Similar to killing a butterfly when there is no justification, when one is prevented from loving and being loved, humanity is affected. The consequences are significant. A butterfly, which suffers a needless and untimely death, may have distracted a man from crossing a street and meeting his certain demise some time in the future. One's failure to love denies others of what could be.

The counsellor chose an unorthodox approach with this client, one not wholly consistent with his code of ethics. He wrote a letter to his client's family. He hoped they would heed his wisdom, accept a macro view of life, and release their selfish motives.

While he believed his client would cope well with their unreasonable demand that she not date, he believed her children would

live into an unresolved future. His client's failure to act would adversely affect her children.

If his letter were received well, his client might overcome her fear. She might be courageous and assertive. She might love and be loved. She and her children deserved to live abundant and purposeful lives.

Since one's failure to be the full measure of his potential is perhaps life's greatest tragedy, the counsellor encouraged his client to be bold and with a fulfilling purpose. To that end, he believed man should rid himself of life-draining patterns. Man need not be saddled with foreboding preconditions. Absent impediments, the counsellor believed the mind, heart, and will were limitless.

He challenged his client to overcome what she knew was wrong. He encouraged her to welcome the possibility of love. A purposeful life, he believed, had to be wilfully congruent with a healthy mind and heart. He had to aspire and inspire for man's reason for being. This was his commitment to her and her family.

He wrote the following letter:

With profound respect and utmost humility:

I am your mother's friend. She recently shared about your wonderful father and the children she loves.

She spoke of dating and how this would impact her family. She said she would not receive support. I offered her reasonable insight which she understands, but may not fully appreciate. Please allow me to explain.

Your father was a loving husband and father. His death was a devastating loss. Your mother still seeks answers, answers which may forever remain unknown. Part of the unknown is the impact on you. She knows you will be affected until each of you understands and accepts this loss. This is one of the problems she faces as a mother. She wants you to find closure. Yet, she realizes she may not be the one who is able to help. Who is able to help? In my humble opinion, your father is your best influence to this day.

The best gift a father offers his children is affirmation. To affirm means to declare, proclaim, and to make known. In his unique way, your father affirmed your worth. This affirmation lives within you. A father plants seeds of affirmation—a perpetual testament of his strength, character, and love of your worthiness. His affirmation is the silent and uncontested testimony of your family heritage. What you do with his affirmation is huge. What you do in your family name is defining. A child may either honor a father's affirmation or disregard such treasure.

He wanted you to be accomplished, educated, disciplined, sensitive, expressive, loving, kind, strong, compassionate, and understanding. He wanted you to be courageous and overcome obstacles, understand struggle and reconcile suffering. He wanted you to love and be loved, listen, share, and persevere. He wanted you to be competent and complete in every way.

Fathers either affirm or they do not. And, if they do not affirm, that is affirmation at its worst. Without affirmation, a child does not believe he is worthy.

The affirmation I gave my children was and is my greatest gift to them. My father affirmed me. Your father affirmed you. Your challenge is to know and accept this gift. It is not difficult; look inward.

As with most good fathers, yours was a warrior. Warriors battle and prevail with purpose. Fathers do this because life is not easy. Life is not meant to be easy. As such, your father's example is one to be emulated. He wanted you to be mighty warriors with sound character. He wanted you to prevail with purpose.

I hope this makes sense. For, ultimately, the issue is not about your mother dating; it is about overcoming struggle within your minds and hearts in a manner which honors your father and dignifies his affirmation. Any conflict, like your mother loving and being loved, requires that you dignify the person your father hoped you would be. This honors him and your family

name.

Adversity is one reason your father affirmed you. Does a father need to affirm when life is easy? Not necessarily. A comfortable life prevents fathers from affirming their children. This failure often ends in further suffering. He does not want you to suffer needless confusion. He wants you to suffer with clarity and purpose.

Your father understood life. He knew you would struggle and suffer into the unknown, which includes how you handle the prospects of your mother moving forward without him. Your father did not want her to be alone.

When my father died, he encouraged his wife to remarry. He wanted her to be happy. Your father wants both your mother and you to be fulfilled. Loneliness is the most unwanted and dreaded aspect of life. It hurts to be lonely.

How does your father expect you to handle conflict? Is your mother dating a conflict? Should it not be a blessing? If you answer negatively, do you contradict your father's affirmation?

If you believe your father would be dishonored if your mother dated, you believe a lie. Rather, with his affirmation, seek the truth and reject the lie. Identify the reason for your anguish and defeat it. Persevere with love and dignity. Embrace truth.

Your mother and father want you to live a life replete with challenges. Any challenge must be negotiated with wisdom. Wisdom requires love, love of yourselves and your mother.

Love requires strength of mind and heart. In this light, view your mother as worthy—the matriarch who deserves the respect your father bestowed. Is this for her benefit? No, not necessarily. He did this for you. Children deserve to know how to love with a true love, love embodied by selfless acts.

If a child respects and loves his mother, he has honored his father. Such a child embraces the affirmation of a father who cared enough to instill the resolve to love victoriously.

My purpose for writing is simple. I help those who contend

with challenges. I was able to share some thoughts with your mother. She is right to be concerned. Any inability to understand and accept the loss of your father will unduly affect how you relate, not only to her and various challenges, but how you handle any relationship.

Your father would want your mother to love again—for your benefit. This is your mother’s desire as well.

Be victorious. Know and accept your father’s affirmation. Your mighty name is a reflection of his character. Seek answers which enlighten. Be victorious. Encourage your mother to be victorious.

I am your mother’s humble servant. I am your humble servant. Your well-being is my sole aim.

Hopeful of the letter’s purpose, his client went home with renewed energy. Sadly, though, she never returned. Years later, as he made his way to the metro station, he saw a woman sitting upon a bench, his former client. Her posture was slouched. Her attire was adorned rather carelessly. She lacked energy and hope from bygone days.

When he spoke with her, she said that life was quite unremarkable and her children were enmeshed with struggles that grieved her heart. He was not surprised. When he probed further, she tendered a simple answer: life was wholly unfulfilling and she questioned her purpose.

When he offered her perfunctory words of encouragement, she nodded begrudgingly. As he walked away, he glanced back just as a child darted toward the bench to catch a butterfly that had alighted upon it ever so briefly.

He sighed and turned. This was the last time he ever saw her.

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Preface

Brian leaned into the past and resurrected boyhood memories of fishing. His father taught him how to cast a rod and hook a fish. He taught him how to gut, scale, and cook what he caught. He taught him the artful nuances of fishing. His father was a master angler and his hero.

Brian recalled how the line jerked, the rod bent, and the reel zipped and whined. He remembered the first time he unhooked the slimy and scaly creature and how the fish wriggled free and flopped desperately upon the ground, and how he squealed and laughed and hesitated before he held it more firmly. Children rarely forget such experiences.

For Brian, fishing was a mystery of the unseen instinctively surviving below murky and deep waters. He appreciated the plight of fish as parallel with life, with profound lessons, some of which he did not understand for decades.

One lesson concerned the art of letting go. If a fish was not needed, he heeded his father's wisdom: "Release it, son." Brian knew why. It was too small, they had enough, or they fished for sport. Since his father taught him the art of fishing, a mere subset of the art of living, Brian knew the release of a fish was a sacred act, an act of love. Love afforded the fish the possibility to live into the unknown. The release allowed the angler and fish to manifest a life of purpose.

Chapter One

Heather darted across the open field and ran toward the forest. "I'm gonna beat you, Maddie!"

The two girls waded through a humid afternoon in the Deep South. The moisture dripped like Spanish moss and the heat, as stated by locals, was close. Heather and Maddie were unaffected. The waist-high grass may have slowed their feet, but not their desire. Maddie, who ran through a path trampled seconds earlier, could not keep pace. Yet, she enjoyed the race no less. She was with her best friend. She knew Heather would wait along the way.

Brian, Heather's father, observed the girls and admired their unbounded energy and freedom. "To be young again," he whispered to himself.

Maddie's father, Joe, spirited his only child. "Fly like the wind, Maddie!"

Both men, worthy fathers, smiled broadly. Lagging behind, the girls' mothers walked casually with Heather's brother, Spencer.

Heather Barth was an intellectually sharp and quick-witted child. At the age of twelve, she possessed uncanny insight and a natural affinity for people. She loved life, a love reflected in her engaging personality, radiant eyes, and enchanting smile. When with others, especially Maddie, Heather shared an infectious enthusiasm.

Brian knew his daughter was special. He marveled at her ability. "You have a gift," he once told her. "You love people selflessly. This is an admirable quality."

Humbled, Heather deflected the compliment and tickled

him. "I can't love anyone more than you!" Humility was part of that gift.

If anyone depicted innocence, it was Maddie Flynn. With long brown hair and equally brown eyes, she, at the age of ten, found no greater pleasure than being Heather's friend. Without a sibling, Heather was the ideal substitute. Maddie's serious nature dissolved when they were together.

Maddie's mother often remarked to her parents, "If we did not live directly across from you, she would become a Barth."

Gasping for air at the threshold of the forest, Maddie was not surprised to find a figure crouched behind a thick pine. "You made it Maddie!" Heather leapt from her hiding spot and gave the latecomer a hug.

Crowned with sweat-matted hair, Maddie blurted, "You are fast!"

Heather grinned. "Daddy says I have gazelle blood!"

They heard rustling and turned to see their fathers arrive. This was their second trip in as many years to Paradox Peak, a small mountain with a canyon that dropped one hundred feet to a seasonal creek. Every spring, the terrain ushered melted snow through innumerable tributaries which joined at two outlets and formed a magnificent waterfall.

The height of the spring season was an attraction for local citizens. The Barth and Flynn families vowed to return. However, scheduling conflicts forced them to postpone the trip until late summer. The creek had long since retreated to a trickle. Only lingering pools of water dotted the otherwise dry canyon basin.

"Daddy, let's go to the other side and follow the path near the mountain!" Heather petitioned.

From where they stood, the forest was only thirty feet in width before the canyon's edge. The canyon stretched some fifty yards to the other side where a narrow dirt path ran along the

canyon before the forest began anew and covered the mountain.

The path on the nearside of the canyon was paved with asphalt and meandered a half mile south to a bridge. The path on the far side, which hosted two observation posts, brought hikers close to wildlife and a dense forest. It was an enchanting venue where shadows shifted and faded and drew the mind into the mystical.

Brian explained the lack of time to walk north and cross Hero's Point, a bridge which traversed a narrow sixty foot span to the other side.

"Pretty please, Mr. Barth!" Maddie shouted.

Brian looked at the girls and replied, "No. We have to wait for your mothers."

Crestfallen, they looked away. Last year they took the asphalt path on a day that had rained. The girls vowed to take the other path when it wasn't muddy. They hoped to stare into the canyon from the observation posts.

Joe looked at Brian and said, "Take the girls across. I will wait for Stacy and Wendy."

Maddie grabbed her father's hands and jumped for joy. "Oh thank you, Daddy!"

Heather, a forever hopeful child, looked at her father with silent expectation. Brian asked Joe if he would cross Hero's Point or walk south to the bridge at Devil's Trap.

Joe looked across the meadow and did not see their wives. He said they would take the paved route and meet them a half mile down.

Brian knew Wendy and Stacy were walking slowly. He then factored the element of time. He said, "If we leave now, we will reach the other side of the canyon in thirty minutes. We should be at Devil's Trap in less than an hour. We will meet you there."

Joe nodded. "Sounds like a plan."

Heather twirled her famous twirl and yelled, “Hero’s Point, here we come!”

Maddie hugged her father. After walking twenty paces, she turned and raced back to him. “Don’t worry, I will see you soon,” she said with utmost sincerity.

Joe laughed heartily at the ever serious nature of his little girl. “You will see me when I let you see me,” he replied as he placed his index finger on her button nose.

With her hands clasped in front of her waist, she tiptoed and kissed her father. “I love you, Daddy.”

Joe smiled and gave his patent reply. “Not half as much as I love you!”

Maddie turned and galloped alongside her best friend. The girls marched onward as a soft breeze descended down the mountain, flowed with the canyon, and graced their faces. They were on another grand adventure. They headed to the enchanted forest, the land of good and bad, fairies and trolls, and princes and damsels in distress—the realm of the mysterious and enlightened.

Brian looked across the canyon and into the trees. The mountainside served as a barrier which made the venue darker and more ominous. He marveled at the power of imagination and the unknown.

Chapter Two

By the time Brian and the girls reached Hero's Point, Wendy and Stacy met Joe. He disclosed their plan and they departed southward. He looked over his shoulder and glanced toward Hero's Point one last time. He noticed the hint of storm clouds from the west. "We have enough time," he mumbled.

Heather and Maddie raced to the middle of the bridge at Hero's Point and dropped rocks over the top railing. One by one, they deposited stones into a pool of water kept alive by a weak creek and a seemingly lifeless waterfall.

"I hit it!" Maddie shouted.

"What a splash!" Heather responded.

Meanwhile, Brian veered left on the far side and shouted, "Don't get eaten by the ugly trolls under the bridge!"

The girls faced each other and screamed. Heather grabbed Maddie's hand and yelled, "Run!"

When they caught up with him, they were out of breath. The girls sat upon a log and rested. Heather stared into the woods. She thought for a moment and asked, "Daddy, do you believe in princesses?"

Brian was amused. "I have you, don't I?"

Maddie grinned and jabbed Heather with her elbow. "You are your Dad's princess."

Heather was not satisfied. "Daddy, I am serious. Do you believe they are real?"

Brian dropped his head and slapped his leg. "Yes Princess! I think you are real."

Maddie laughed. Heather fumed.

“Well,” she declared, “You’re not my prince charming!”

Maddie and Brian doubled over in laughter. Heather’s hint of a smile, like the sun creeping around a cloud, broke wide open. She jumped onto her father’s back and hugged him.

Kneeling on the ground, Brian told the girls to listen.

Maddie pointed to the obvious. “I don’t hear anything.

“Exactly.” Brian said. “Listen to the silence.”

The girls peered into the deep forest as Brian said, “We’ve got to go. We are falling behind.”

To the left, an inch thick cable was laced through wooden posts anchored into the ground by cement every ten feet. The cable ran parallel to the canyon. It was the only artificial barrier between the path and the edge of the canyon. Brian seized the girls’ attention and stated under no circumstance were they to approach the cable. “Stay away,” he cautioned them.

Without a care in the world, the girls responded affirmatively and eagerly lunged forward. They looked for the first observation post.

“There it is, Daddy!” Heather exclaimed.

Minutes later they reached an outcropping home to a platform which jutted five yards beyond the cliff. The railings were covered by a thick wire mesh which allowed the girls to view the bottom of the canyon. Brian consented to Heather’s wish and lifted each to the top.

Heather stretched her arms forward and proclaimed, “I am Superwoman!”

When Brian hoisted Maddie, she was as stiff as a board. She grabbed his left arm with both hands and tentatively looked over the railing. As he lowered her, Brian remarked of distinctions between people. What makes one child more daring than another? What makes a child fearful? Why are people the same, yet so unique?

Brian was a philosopher at heart. He mused about a myriad of topics and pursued ever elusive but life-defining answers. What is the purpose of life? Why does man suffer? Why are some people joyful in the worst of conditions, while those in abundance are miserable? He did not know and he never expected to find the answers. Life was a mystery.

Other than his ability to embrace what was real and a fluctuating faith in a higher power, for he often equated a belief in a God as a foray into the undefined, Brian found little relief with intangibles. He loved his family, knew the worth of friendship, and accepted sound principles as integral to a grounded community. He was curious, positive, and hopeful.

He was grateful for not being fearful. He cast his eyes toward Maddie as she stepped back and slowly softened her gentle frame. "Hey," he said with encouragement, "you were brave."

She gave a reluctant smile. "Thank you, Mr. Barth."

Conscious of time, he hastened their hike toward Devil's Trap. He was thankful they were alone. They made their trip on a sweltering day and hoped for general solitude. With no one else around, they were rid of distractions.

The girls ventured ahead and collected rocks for the next observation post that had an opaque deck, which offered a view of a pool filled by a spring-fed creek that flowed out of the canyon wall. Brian could hear the water hit its target. The noise muffled other sounds and added a dimension of tension to the atmosphere.

Maddie found a grassy spot filled with flowers to the left of the trail. Heather quickly came to her side and picked from the assorted colors. With their pockets full of rocks and their hands packed with flowers, the girls were lost in the moment.

When Maddie reached for a white flower, a black squirrel

bolted from the grass and darted to the left and then the right. Fearful, the squirrel was indecisive. Maddie screamed and spun around. When she tried to escape the frightened creature, she absentmindedly bowled into Heather, who stumbled backward and struck a rock with her right heel.

Heather, wildly off balance, began to fall. She instinctively dropped the flowers and grabbed what was available. With her head thrown back, she could not see forward. She tried to stop her fall and was oblivious of her death-grip of Maddie.

Maddie was just as unstable and could not serve as a counterbalance for Heather's inevitable descent. With Heather's hold, coupled with the force of gravity, she was dragged forward.

Maddie, whose fall was accelerated exponentially in seconds and feet, dropped her flowers and barreled over the cable. She fell as fast as Heather's fall to the right. In an instant, they had exchanged sides.

Brian was a short distance up the path and saw everything unfold in slow motion. He heard Maddie's scream and thought she was merely excited and that nothing was wrong. They were safely on the left side of the path and at least five feet from the cable and seven feet from the canyon's edge.

When he saw a black blur, he questioned whether they had found a snake. Once he saw the squirrel dodge erratically, he knew they were in no danger. However, he did not foretell the connectedness of physics precipitated by Maddie's initial reaction.

As the scene unraveled and the girls fell blindly toward the cable, Brian charged forward. His urgent demands to drop to their knees were delivered in vain. The girls panicked. They did not hear him.

When Maddie's shirt snapped free from Heather's clutch, she went headlong into tall grasses on the wrong side of the

cable. The grasses, at least eighteen inches in length and ten inches in width, were anchored by thousands of thirsty roots within tightly earth-hungry clusters. Thick and coarse, the grasses would have easily broken her fall. Yet, the cable clipped her lagging shins. She rolled into a somersault and onto her back. Her legs sailed over the edge of the canyon and drove her downward. She slammed into the canyon wall. Terror seized her heart. She was at the mercy of the strength of her arms and her desperate hold of the grass.

Without her hold of Maddie, Heather lacked equilibrium. She intuitively sought to correct her imbalance. She looked for an anchor. As she tumbled, she found branches from a nearby bush. She secured them as if they were her only worldly possession. But, she could not stop her momentum.

She fell over the edge of the canyon. Her body turned and slammed into the cliff. With a weak hold, she had seconds to find support before she fell to her death. She thrust her left leg randomly in a blind search for leverage. To her surprise, she lodged her foot against a protruding rock. With added pressure, the rock loosened. She had to find an alternative foothold.

She spied another rock formation to her right. She braced her foot against the loose rock and, with a feverish hold of the bush, pushed off and threw her body out and over the abyss. After she violently met the wall again, she drove her foot down into the rocks and pressed upward to relieve her arms.

Maddie's weight slowly weakened the root system of the grass she held. The humidity and the sweat on her hands complicated an already precarious grip. She screamed, "Mr. Barth! Mr. Barth!"

Heather's hold upon the branches was worse. Thin and hard, they cut into her hands. Blood married the sweat from her palms. She braced herself against the rock and, pulling with her

left arm, she twisted the branches and looped them around her right hand. This choke-hold lessened the effort required to support her weight.

Brian rushed to the cable. He expected the worst possible scenario. He was relieved to find the girls and prepared for battle. He shot a look to the left and sized up Maddie's situation and then to the right. Heather would fall to her death within seconds.

"Hold on Maddie!" he shouted. "I am coming!" He lurched toward Heather, turned around, and quickly draped his knees over the cable. Like water from a jar, he poured fluidly over the edge of the cliff and stretched his arms to his daughter. "Grab on!" he yelled.

Heather cried uncontrollably. Her fear-riddled expression drove a stake into his heart. "Grab on!" he repeated.

"I can't!" she replied.

He knew she was traumatized. He yelled, "Damn it! Maddie is in the same situation just eight feet away. We have to save her. Grab my hand."

Brian's admonition worked. She clasped him and he secured her wrist. "Place your thumb and pinky on the inside of my watchband for support and hold tightly."

Heather complied.

To maximize time, he harnessed her attention and commanded, "Let go of your other hand and spin around." He knew she would face the inside of the canyon. As soon as she swung one hundred and eighty degrees, he barked, "Look at me! Look up here! Do not look down!" He then warned, "I need your help to save Maddie!" She took stock of her father's plea.

Brian told Heather to swing her body. He had to shift to his body to the right. "Maddie, I am coming!" he yelled.

"Mr. Barth, my arms are weak. My hands are slipping!" Maddie screamed.

Brian distracted her into compliance. He knew a state of shock would end in tragedy. “Maddie!” he screamed with instructive effect, “Place both feet against the canyon wall and push up to rest your arms.” Brian did not know whether she would be able to find leverage; but, she had to try. “Do it!”, he yelled.

Maddie replied hesitantly that she would.

“Good girl, Maddie. I want you to do something else.” He paused deliberately. “Let go of your right hand and grab the top of the grass. Twist your wrist around the grass and grab the grass again at the bottom.”

He listened, but heard no reply. “Maddie!” When she acknowledged him, he simplified his instructions. “Grab the top of the grass, twist it around your wrist, and grab the bottom.”

She pushed her feet against the canyon wall, released her right hand, and quickly did as instructed. “I did it, Mr. Barth. I am hanging from the grass.”

“Thank God,” he whispered.

Brian had traveled three feet to the right while he advised her. Heather continued to focus on her father. She swung at his urging.

The backs of Brian’s knees were rubbed raw by the cable and started to bleed. Each time he lifted them, the skin, muscles, and tendons were kneaded and pinched mercilessly. His legs became heavy. Fatigue crept into his hanging form. Blood coursed through his arteries; his arms thickened.

His face was flush and serious. Sweat rolled from his scalp and dropped onto Heather or into the depths. Rivulets ran down his arms and flowed between his and Heather’s hands. He frequently adjusted his fingers to refasten an ever weakening hold.

He made a mental calculation. The drop of the cable from

the post prevented him from getting as close to Maddie as he wanted. He could scale it to a point. Some twelve to eighteen inches would separate them once he and Maddie extended their arms toward each other.

When he could go no further, Brian looked for Maddie and called out. "I am here. Look at me!"

She peered around the grass clumps and spied him. "I see you, Mr. Barth." She was farther than he expected.

Brian collected his composure and spoke to the girls. "Heather and Maddie, listen!" Both were silent. Their cries were graduated to silent dependence, nothing less than humility forged by a harrowing experience. "Maddie, I will swing toward you with Heather's help; but, you must stretch toward me at the same time." Brian paused and emphasized the last point. "We have to do it at the same time!"

He gave her one more caution. "When I grab your hand, let go of the grass." He was not convinced that she understood. He repeated his warning. "Heather is hanging above the canyon. I will use her weight to swing to you. You must release your right hand when I grab your left. Okay?"

Maddie consented with more force. "Okay."

Brian looked at Heather and spoke. "You are a brave warrior. Let go of my right hand." He then added, "Push off the canyon wall." She swallowed hard. "We must build momentum. Swing hard." Heather blinked confirmation.

"Ready Maddie?" Brian yelled. "One!" Heather pushed and Brian pulled with his left arm. With a slowed cadence he shouted, "Two!" Again, Heather swung and Brian pulled. On the last count, he delayed for Maddie's benefit. Timing was critical. He had to ensure the highest possible apex. Timing and velocity had to be maximized. "Three!"

Maddie leveraged whatever pressure she could with her

feet, leaned forward, and released her left hand. She stretched the expanse of three feet. Brian forced his body into the canyon and to his right. He reached beyond the tall grasses. He caught a glimpse of her hand, closed the gap, and grabbed her left wrist. "Let go!" he screamed. "Let go!"

Maddie relinquished her hold of the grass with her right and swung wildly in the air. As she twisted to and fro, Brian cried in anguish. The undersides of his legs were unbearable. The added weight quartered his limbs. His arms were heavy; his temples bulged. The physical stress gnawed with futility at his determined will.

Chapter Three

Joe, Wendy, and Stacy had been at Devil's Trap nearly twenty minutes. Brian and the girls had been gone nearly an hour. "They should have been here by now," Joe told both mothers. "I am going to check on them."

Wendy attempted to assuage his concerns. "They're coming."

Joe, who became a father after many failed attempts, was not inclined to rest on his wife's unfounded confidence. He quipped that an ounce of prevention goes a long way. He began a modest jog up the asphalt path.

Brian was a responsible father and would not have delayed unreasonably. However, an unwarranted suspicion drove Joe faster. The path was riddled with turns and chance trees which occasionally blocked his view of the other side. He searched for the second observation post. With his pace, he would be across from it in minutes. He hoped Brian and the girls were on the platform. He hoped they had simply lost track of time. He made a turn to the left, saw his mark, and looked anxiously.

No one was on the platform. He walked a few paces farther and saw an anomaly. He perceived a man hanging from the cable. Against the sun's rays, he finally distinguished Heather and Maddie hanging below Brian. Joe was in disbelief. He tensed and screamed, "Brian!" A deathly fright lanced his soul. Instant volcanic rage erupted. "Augghhhhh!" was his primordial response. Fury would not allow any other expression. Raw anger and incomprehensible confusion consumed a man known for his stability. He became unglued. He bolted back down the path.

He ran furiously, almost manically. He cursed for not taking the other path. He had wasted precious time. He boiled uncontrollably. Rage, nothing but unfettered rage, consumed him. "You fool!" he screamed. Like a wild animal he seethed. Spit and tears poured forth. He cried in utter turmoil. "God damn it!" he shouted. "God damn it to hell! You God damn fool!" Brian faintly saw a blurred image on the other side of the canyon. He thought he heard an echo of his name. Was it Joe or was his mind playing games? Maddie began to cry again. She called for her father. "I want my Daddy!"

Heather looked at Maddie hard. She suppressed the urge to sob and said, "No matter what, my Daddy has you."

Joe ran toward his wife and Stacy minutes later; he had no intention to stop. When the ladies looked up, they were petrified with fear. Joe was a man's man; he was Wendy's rock and Maddie's hero. He rarely expressed emotional swings. As an athlete, he could withstand any pressure. A combat veteran, he was revered by his men. Nothing fazed him.

He sounded one command. "Call 911! I want air rescue now!" Wendy froze. She saw his tear-stripped face. She sensed the turmoil in his heart. She knew her husband well enough not to ask questions. Stacy clutched Spencer and reached out to Wendy. "Call 911!" she said. "If we don't have reception, we must climb higher."

He crossed the bridge at Devil's Trap and made a sharp turn to the right and tackled the dirt path. His beta endorphins surged. He felt no sensation. He was a machine on autopilot. In the direst of circumstances, he was transformed. He lost all sense of the temporal and transcended into another dimension.

He and Brian were in combat together. Brian had saved his life, just as Joe had saved others. He knew the price for a higher

calling. He knew better than to judge. There had to be a reason for this crisis. He knew how randomness spirals into chaos. He was hell-bent on his mission.

Brian struggled. Dehydrated and exhausted, he collected his thoughts. "Focus Barth, focus!" he told himself. He looked down and noticed Heather's grip was almost solely dependent upon his watchband, which had rolled and bunched beyond the wrist at the base of his hand. Though he still had a grasp of her arm, his muscles strained.

He knew the weight of both girls would be their undoing. He worked quickly. He pressed his heels toward his hamstrings. Heather sensed a weakening of his left side; she compensated by pressing her legs upward.

Brian performed a delicate act: life in the balance or death in its absence. "Heather," he whispered. "Be brave." He paused to emphasize his point. "Maddie has to climb up. You must be strong." Heather nodded soberly.

Brian turned to Maddie. "Grab my shirt and place your feet on my forearm after I bend my elbow. Climb up my chest and grab my belt. Then crawl to the cable." He looked at her and said, "We don't have much time. Move as smoothly and quickly as possible."

Maddie whispered with a shallow "Okay". She stretched one arm and began her ascent.

Brian looked toward Heather. He kept her focused. "We are almost there, pumpkin."

She replied, "Okay, Daddy" and continued to infrequently dig her feet into the wall for support.

She was emotionally and physically drained. Brian noticed her pinky finger was a bloodless white. Pinched in his military-grade watchband, the tip of her finger had to be purple or nearly black by now. The circulation had been cut off for some time. Her

trapped digits were a key reason she had not plunged to the canyon floor.

Maddie made considerable progress. She pushed her legs against his forearm and took a firm hold of his belt. Brian took this moment to guide her further. "Maddie, sit on my chin and move faster."

Heather looked at him and said, "Daddy, my hand feels funny."

Approximately ten minutes had passed. With the gradual pull downward, she lost sensation in her arm. She had yet to realize this fact. Heather was approaching shock. "Look at me, princess." Brian did not reveal any alarm. "We are almost there."

Maddie sat upon Brian's chin. Her shorts were soaked. The fall scared the piss out of her. Brian's mind returned to the first observation post and the fear she held in her body. He knew she may never dare again.

Maddie's weight brought severe pain to his neck, spine, and lower back. He braced for this moment and waited until she secured herself. Any rocking motion unsettled his knees and jeopardized his position. However, if she successfully pulled herself up, they had a chance.

Joe lumbered onward. His large frame nimbly negotiated the ascent. He lifted his thick thighs and drove his feet decisively. His muscular arms, which swung like pendulums, propelled him forward.

As he ran, he created an operations order. He thought of contingencies. He hoped Stacy had contacted air rescue.

Only the rumbling of thunder distracted him. Joe looked upward. Dark clouds crossed the ridge of Paradox Peak. "Damn afternoon storms!" he exclaimed. The added burden of rain and winds mixed into an already heightened situation made him furious. He knew the consequences of a storm.

Maddie pulled herself higher. She placed her right knee onto Brian's shoulder. She leaned tentatively and slowly placed her heel onto his chin. Brian clenched his teeth and tightened his neck muscles. The pain was excruciating. Maddie heard his muffled breathing. She dragged herself further and drove her knee into his stomach. He felt immediate relief.

Heather stared at her father in disbelief. She knew he was tough; but, his endurance and will power overwhelmed her. "Daddy, are you okay?"

Brian could not speak. He looked at her briefly and closed his eyes in response. Brian noticed a change in Heather's face. She was pale; her eyes were partially closed. Time was a fleeting commodity and their nemesis. He urged Maddie upward.

Without warning, the sky unloaded dauntingly. Brian caught his first glimpse of the afternoon storm. "Damn it to hell!" he said. "Maddie, you have to move!" Alarmed, and with jerking motions, she brought herself to the inside of his thighs.

With a loud "Crack!" a lightning bolt flashed abruptly through the sky. The noise overwhelmed the canyon and ricocheted between the walls like sustained machine gun fire. Maddie screamed. Brian glanced at Heather. She barely noticed. He instinctively counted the seconds until he heard the roar of enraged thunder. Three. The heart of the storm was nearly overhead.

Brian pushed Maddie's butt forward with his right hand. Huge winds gusts whipped and charged across the tops of the trees and dashed into the chasm. Erratic and fierce, the gusts unsettled all of nature.

Brian knew the sequence all too well. The lightning was the advanced assault for greater and sustained forces. The rain, as if kamikaze pilots upon unsuspecting targets, would pummel them mercilessly. They were sitting ducks.

Maddie tensed as much as the temperature dropped. Her sweaty body chilled. Precariously perched, she shivered uncontrollably. She had to dismount beyond the cable.

With each arm, she secured Brian's knees. However, her unreliable hold was compromised by the unpredictable elements. The wind battered her from all directions. When shoved backward, she hid behind Brian's knees and froze. Sheets of rain drove downward. Maddie wrapped her arms around Brian's legs and crouched.

Against the hammering of the rain, he urged her to crawl toward the cable. "Maddie go! You must go!"

She raised her chest and grabbed his right knee. She drove her right foot down. With a bold push, she shifted her hips in between his thighs. She angled her foot forward and pressed her knee into his lower ribs.

Lightning cracked again and, with the added slipperiness, Maddie faltered terribly. Her foot lost traction and her right arm cascaded down the outside of his leg.

She screamed and dropped uncontrollably to the right. She clutched his shorts with both hands. Her right leg extended out and over his torso; her left leg could do nothing but follow. The sudden change in weight forced Brian to wrap his right arm around her ribs. She rested diagonally across him. Her lower body dangled over the canyon.

The violent shake of Brian's body forced Heather into attentiveness. She cried out for no other reason than her fragile form was momentarily unsettled from whatever stability she coveted. Brian looked down.

Though the winds sucker-punched a defenseless foe, Joe was undeterred. The rain bounced off his deft physique. Flash streams rushed in and over the ruts that were artlessly etched in the path by past storms. He estimated that he was no more than a minute

from the observation post. He knew air rescue would not come until the storm abated. He was on a one man mission.

He rounded the next bend and saw the observation post. Just beyond, Brian's knees hung upon the cable. Joe saw nothing else. With fifty yards to cover, he ran with maddening desperation. He yelled, "Brian!" in an insane attempt to get his friend's attention.

The storm intensified unjustifiably. The rain drowned the entire venue. All sounds were squelched. Visibility was now negligible.

Brian tried to provide stability. Maddie's hold weakened. Her left hand fell from Brian's shorts and dropped to her side. He squeezed her with a stranglehold, but the weight was unsustainable.

Joe was ten yards away. As he approached the cable, he regained his composure. He did not want to aggravate a bad situation. He made a quick and reasonable assessment.

Brian was oblivious to Joe's presence. The confluence of circumstances had taken a toll. The rain, wind, cold, weight imbalance, and fatigue were chess pieces which forced checkmate. There appeared to be no resolution. Hope, while eternal in application, became impractical.

Maddie lost her hold of Brian's shorts, which only added to his burden. The disparity from the shift of weight was too much. His body banked to the extreme left. He faced the canyon floor. He could no longer hold Maddie. She began to fall.

Chapter Four

The First Imprint

The boys huddled and peered intensely at six-year-old Brian Barth. Murmurs rotated clockwise and counterclockwise. “Will he do it?” someone asked. “He doesn’t have the guts!” another declared. Brian was the last of three initiates to complete the final act for passage into the neighborhood gang known as The Secret Order of Sons.

In the center of the huddle, a six inch worm twisted in an empty tuna can. Brian stared at the slimy creature. Moments earlier, seven-year-old Justin Stephens swallowed one whole and David Wilson, only six years old, ate his worm with ease.

Brian was in a quandary. The fate of drawing lots placed him last. The two worms consumed by Justin and David were smaller, lifeless, and dry. The healthiest and liveliest of the specimens remained. It was thick, long, wet, and wiggly. However, if he ate the worm, he would assure himself of the title and honor he desired most—member of the SOS.

Billy Vance, the leader of the gang, knelt in front of Brian. The anticipation mounted. As encouragement transitioned to jeers and taunts among the bystanders, Billy raised his arm. He wanted quiet and calm. “Brian,” he said, “this is easy. You can do it.” Brian’s eyes met those of the charismatic eleven-year-old icon, the bravest, toughest, and smartest of the boys. Billy liked Brian and Brian admired his intrepid leader. Yet, Billy could not and would not show favorites. Membership in the gang was a rite of passage with standards he would not compromise.

Brian reached into the tuna can. The worm twisted violently. He felt its scaly segments as it crossed his palm. He cringed. He cupped both hands together and feigned an effort to control it. He delayed what became an improbable feat.

The gang members sensed caution. A spirit of camaraderie had changed to an atmosphere of scorn. Little David Wilson, Brian's best friend, was proud of his own achievement and relished in the separation of victor and challenger. The all too common *we-they* syndrome entered the throng. Division by indecision and eventual derision led to intrigue. The gang was *we* and Brian was *they*—he who dared with a hope to prevail or leave vanquished, defeated, and alone.

He slowly raised the worm to his mouth. The boys hushed to stillness. It was the bottom on the ninth in a tie game and the winning run was on third base. With two outs and a full count, the spectators waited. With an awkward pitch, Brian swung and dropped the worm into the thick grass akin to a foul ball into the stands. The boys heckled and howled.

"He did it on purpose!" David Wilson yelled.

Brian glanced at his new mocker. The lack of loyalty hurt more than David's comment.

Brian scrambled to the ground and fished for the worm before it reached obscurity. Joel Pierce came to his aid. Joel seized the worm and raised it for all to see. Brian froze. Joel ceremoniously placed the worm back in Brian's palm. He stood on the precipice of greatness. He was seconds from recognition and celebration. He only had to eat the worm.

Brian's mind was numbed. Mere seconds seemed like eternity. The breeze paused. The birds hushed. The boys became statues. He heard nothing. His sight turned inwardly. He lowered his head slightly. His body language foreshadowed defeat. Tears pooled in his eyes and dripped one by one down his cheeks.

Victory was not to be.

Billy sighed deeply. He looked at Brian one last time and walked away.

Tommy Gochenour, the fattest of the group, chuckled. "Shucks, I'll eat the dang thing!" he said. He took the worm, threw his head back, and gulped it down.

Brian succumbed to gravity. His body draped into the shape of a ball as he descended to the ground. He was unconscious of the disbanding huddle. The gang followed their leader to the SOS fort.

Parting cat calls were scathing. "Brian Barth is a sissy." "Did you see him cry like my sister?" David Wilson lagged behind and watched Brian briefly. He realized his transgression. He dishonored a friend in an arrogant attempt for greater distinction. The remorse was fleeting though. David gleefully raced after the boys. David was brave; Brian was not.

Brian hung his head in shame. What he wanted most was not to be. He recoiled internally. Tears of defeat outlined the final chapter of this tragedy. "I am no warrior" he said to himself. "I am no hero." Brian resigned himself to a defining conviction. I do not belong.

The Second Imprint

In the spring of 1964, the richness and fullness of life was never more apparent. Brian Barth was in love. At the age of fourteen, he met Susie Jenkins. Susie was petite with blonde hair and blue eyes. The hint of freckles sprinkled upon her inviting visage magnetically drew any admirer close. Her gentle laugh and unassuming manner calmed and encouraged.

Susie had recently moved from New York. She was an instant sensation. The girls flocked to her. They spoke of things

only girls share: dresses, hair, fingernails, dolls, and the prospects of admiring boys. Brian, worse than his male companions, was mesmerized, even stupefied.

The bell rang and the class came to order. Mr. Mills, the 8th grade teacher, assigned Susie a desk directly in front of Brian. He was shocked; he was ecstatic. Mills' decision appeared to be a Godsend.

However, when Susie walked down the aisle, his stupefied disposition descended into incompetence. He did not know what to do or say. His mind became mush. He could not think. He forgot how to sit. He shifted indiscriminately. His world was in a tailspin. Not unlike traveling without gravity, he lost control.

When Susie came to her desk, she introduced herself. "Hi, I am Susie Jenkins. What is your name?"

Oblivious to her polite greeting, Brian sat in silence. The class watched in disbelief. He froze; he knew he froze; he could do nothing to thaw himself.

Bobby Horner reached over and punched him in his right shoulder. "He dooffus," he said. "Earth to dooffus." Everyone erupted into laughter.

Brian looked at Bobby and panned the sea of amused faces. They delighted in his unenviable and inexplicable situation. He turned to Susie Jenkins and said, "I am dandy."

The boys and girls erupted. "I am dandy!" they echoed.

Tony Jones chortled, "Who uses the word 'dandy?'"

Gretchen Smalley felt sorry for Brian. She leaned over and said, "She asked for your name, not how you are doing."

In a last ditch effort to right his bearings, Brian deliberately eyed Susie and said, "I am Brian." He sheepishly looked down at his desk and fumbled his pencil.

Brian was popular. He was bright, assertive, friendly, and compassionate. He was resilient. With a sense of humor, he

laughed easily and effectively disarmed others. His demeanor belied his notorious stumbling over one Susie Jenkins. Such is the power of love.

Brian brushed aside his lapse in judgment and befriended Susie. They became the prized couple of the class. Their relationship blossomed throughout the year in ways he never imagined. He respected Susie. He loved her.

This sudden immersion into a life of bliss excluded attachments that once anchored him to a male-centric world. He discarded trappings of boyhood as easily as a snake sheds its skin in sun-baked fields. Such relics served no other purpose than as emblems of what once was.

Any and all occasions drew Brian's attention to Susie. Sports, homework, outings, nothing was left to chance. Susie and Brian relished an enviable bond, a bond not subject to forces which might separate them. They were dandy together, rich and full.

The summer of '65 represented another revolution of time. Students re-entered known rituals peppered with the incidental and unexpected. Brian was enthusiastic for the new school year. He was president of the class, on the honor role, and captain of the golf and wrestling teams. Susie was secretary of the class, on the honor role, and co-captain of the basketball team. They were a humble couple and their peers deferred to their positive influence. No one expected change; change was not wanted.

However, the inevitable occurs. During the second week of school, Darren Peters was transplanted from the fields of Iowa. He was the new student. A strapping figure with the mind, physique, and personality to qualify his bearing, his aura was complemented with jet black hair and a smile carved in polished ivory. He possessed affability more brilliant than the sun and humility on par with the moon. Darren Peters appealed to the

masses. He awed and inspired and Susie was no less affected, even more so.

The undertow from Darren's groundswell drew Susie out and into the vast unknown. Without full understanding, she went willingly. She wanted what was unfolding to unfold. Sadly, she did not make a distinction between the past and the present. She failed to communicate her thoughts to an unsuspecting Brian. She did not know how.

Brian noticed a change within the week. Susie was silent and cool, indifferent and distant. When he expressed his concern, she responded with general denials. He did not know how to reconcile the unstated and obvious divide between them.

Their social influence diminished like an ice cube on a sun-soaked summer sidewalk. The fragrant aroma of their joint family gatherings dissipated not unlike the fleeting scent of a flower in a gentle spring breeze—subtle and permanent. Brian's world was in upheaval.

One morning Susie came to school with Darren's arm around her shoulder. Brian's stomach sank. His heart ached. He felt worse than sitting at his desk responding "I am dandy" to the girl of his dreams. His mind was inoperable. He was in a fog-filled void. He could not take a firm hold on anything; for, nothing was there. Almost unconsciously, he did an about face and walked home. It was the first and last time Brian ever played hooky.

Time slowed to a crawl. Week after tortured week flowed seamlessly without a beginning or an end. Susie was chipper and engaging. Brian did his level best to paint the facade that nothing had happened. He was grafted into Susie's unspoken representation that the world was healthy and life was complete. The cold, hard truth stung.

Never before had he met a girl of Susie's stature. Unskilled in the ebb and flow of relationships, he never saw an end to his

bliss. His heart and mind remained listless for the balance of the school year. He wanted to contend, but he lacked the will. While his parents were supportive, they knew time would heal.

For Brian, overcoming was not a prospect. He resigned himself to the idea that he was alone. It hurt to lose what mattered most. He was defeated.

The Third Imprint

The morning was cool. The sky was blue and cloudless. Brian arched his shoulders back and inhaled fresh air. He shot a glance at his father and said, "Dad, there's fish to be caught."

His father nodded as he loaded the rods into the car. Brian's mother brought a thermos of coffee to the front porch and placed it on top of the cooler. She packed provisions for another father and son fishing expedition. They were headed to Joshua's Ford, a river famous for the smartest fish in the valley.

Fishing was an art in the Barth family, a true art. Brian learned to fish at an early age. His father taught him the basics and, over the years, he patiently taught him skills which distinguished his son as a master angler.

Brian cherished his father and longed for the times they would steal away and share life near the water. It was a time for a father to cast simple and profound truths with the hope that his son would take the bait. It was a time for a son to be without inhibition with a man who accepted and appreciated the unknown more fervently than the known. Brian's father knew the measure of a man was not who he was in the familiar, but who he became within the unexpected.

This particular fishing trip had special meaning. Within a week, Brian would be graduated from high school and matriculate into the Virginia Military Institute three months later.

Brian's father was a 1987 graduate of VMI, a successful military officer, and an engineer. Brian's choice to attend VMI was predicated upon what his father instilled within him. Though he sent applications far and wide, Brian refused offers which, in the end, did not size up to the standards his father endured, standards he respected.

Brian's mother hugged him and kissed her husband. She waved until the car caressed the curve and disappeared beyond the trees. She remained alone at home. Brian and his father were alone in the world.

Setting up camp had long become a silent ritual. They hiked into the woods and found an ideal spot and unloaded their gear, erected the tent, started the fire, and organized the equipment for inspection. They would fish early in the morning.

Just before dawn, Brian nudged his father. The younger Barth had fueled the fire and made fresh coffee. "Dad, breakfast is ready."

His father looked at him in surprise. "Hey, that's my job," he said. His remark met silence; the flap of the tent batted the words back to him. He brushed the sleeping bag off his chest and eased his knees out. He taught his son humility and deference over the years. He smiled and took quiet satisfaction. Brian had taken the bait.

The sun slowly arced over the tree line. Shafts of sunlight bounced off dew-covered leaves and, within minutes, dodged the currents of Joshua Ford. Birds took flight when the anglers navigated toward the river's edge. Brian looked north and south and, without hesitation, marched with the current. His father paused and assessed the lay of the land.

They had a standing agreement. Whoever caught the biggest fish would gut the total catch for dinner, a task of honor. Invariably, Brian's father prevailed.

However, Brian was almost as competent and relied upon his emerging instincts. If he caught the prized fish, it would not be by accident. He selected the color of line, the right hook, and the choicest bait. With a graceful cast into the rapids, his line spilled beyond scattered boulders that played hopscotch to the other side. He watched his line slip effortlessly with the current.

The venue was majestic. The constant rumble of the river was as pure as a bass chord sourced within the earth's inner sanctum with a frequency that bellowed a glorious message, "You are one with nature."

The rumble was soon interrupted by a whistle up river. Brian's father hoisted a ten-inch trout into the air. The sun accented the victor's body and trophy. Brian looked at the silhouette. "Gosh darn it!" he said to himself. "He never ceases to amaze." Brian honored his father by raising his rod. He then recast his line into the rapids. The battle was far from over.

Over a light lunch, they relaxed as the mid-day heat intensified. Brian's father broke the silence with a shot across the bow. "Son," he began. "Rome was not built in a day." Brian did not budge. He knew the familiar routine. His father continued. "I taught you everything you know; but, I did not teach you everything I know."

Brian enjoyed the ribbing. He looked deep into the woods and, as if speaking a soliloquy, said, "This morning I saw a fish in shallow waters and gestured for it to come nigh." Brian paused for dramatic effect. "When the fish approached, I whispered, 'See that old man up river?'"

Brian's father smiled and waited for him to continue.

Primed to maximize the art of humor, Brian said, "That old man is frail; he needs help."

His father rubbed his hands with pleasure.

"I asked the fish if it had done its good deed for the day. The

fish replied negatively. So I told him to swim northward for breakfast. I assured the fish the old man was performing his good deed by offering a free meal.” Brian hesitated before he delivered the punch line.

“The fish thought for a second and replied, ‘What is your good deed of the day, kind sir?’” Brian looked magnanimously into the sky and stated, “I am performing two good deeds by sending you.”

His father slapped his thigh and laughed joyfully. Brian held his poise and never once gloated in his award-winning performance.

After a short nap, Brian and his father fished again. Brian looked at his father and nodded as if to assure him that he had met his match. He would seize the prized catch. Brian turned northward and traveled some distance beyond the spot his father had found temporary glory.

His father waded into the river just above the rapids. In hip-deep water, he braced against the current and dropped his line within the gurgling and churning waters forward of the boulders.

Brian’s timing and skill paid dividends. Within five minutes, his float sank with a mighty jerk and never resurfaced. The tension was strong. His rod bent and shifted abruptly to the left and then to the right. He drove his weight into his heels and released the line. He allowed the fish to swim freely. He knew the fish would tire. When the line became lifeless, he reeled until he had tension and slowly drew the fish toward him. This was the moment anglers seek: wit against wit, warrior against warrior. Brian sought victory.

After a lengthy battle, he made his way to the center of the river bed. He anchored his feet and worked the fish directly toward him. The traction on the line limited the range of motion the fish could swim. The fish had no choice but to travel due

north. Brian anticipated a sizable catch. He lifted his eyes to his father's location. He wanted him to know of pending defeat. He wanted him to witness poetry in motion.

Brian did not see him. He searched the horizon. His father was not there. Brian froze. His left arm dropped thoughtlessly into the water; his right hand dipped the fishing rod into the river. He fixed his eyes on the rapids and spotted the unusual. With each step forward, Brian noticed a bobbing motion between the boulders.

Moments before Brian's line electrified with activity, his father's rod bent forcefully. The sudden surge unsettled his already unstable footing. He slipped forward and his right foot dropped into a yoga-like stretch that bent his right knee to a ninety degree angle. His left foot dropped downward and to the side and lodged into a crevice. Without weight on his left leg and his right leg overextended, he was without support and control. His efforts to bring his right leg back to center were futile.

Since his left foot would not twist, he sought to anchor his left arm. Yet, nothing was available. He released his rod and culled the water for balance. The current pushed him and his right foot slipped even further. Pain shot from his left ankle to his hip. His right hamstring strained.

Against the pressure of the river, he reached for a boulder ahead of him; but, the distance was too great. The current forced him to his left. He fell helplessly. His head struck a boulder to his rear. His right arm fell effortlessly into the river and pulled him down.

By the time Brian spied the bobbing, his father was unconscious. His head was bleeding profusely. His body blocked the current, which caused the water to flow over him. A rhythmic rocking motion ensued. The current would build and submerge him for seconds until he resurfaced. Again and again and again,

the cycle repeated.

Brian dropped his rod and raced to the river bank. He ran with unprecedented purpose along the shore and threw himself back into the water. He was immune to his surroundings. Tunnel vision enveloped his mind. Fear invaded his heart.

He reached his father and raised his head. He had been force-fed a lot of water. He was not breathing. Brian shifted to the left and placed himself between his father and the rock. He dropped into the water and tracked along his father's frame until he found an immovable left foot. He shoved his shoulder into the shin and freed what had been held captive. Brian popped to the surface and grabbed his father's torso before the pent-up current whisked him away.

He could no longer suppress emotions that rose to his throat. He breathed heavily. Tears clouded his vision. He cupped his hands under his father's shoulders and stumbled backward toward the shore. "Hold on Dad!"

He reached shallow water and grabbed his father's collar. With his free hand, he found a faint pulse in the carotid artery. Brian opened his father's throat and straddled his legs. He placed his hands below his father's navel and thrust them forward. Water gushed out.

Brian screamed, "Breathe, Dad! Breathe!" His cry evolved to desperate sobs. He sprawled to his father's head, opened his throat again and blew into his mouth. He repeated this procedure relentlessly. He rolled his father onto his side slammed his hand between the shoulder blades. Nothing happened. Minutes later, he checked his father's pulse a second time. There was none.

Brian was in disbelief. Deep remorse welled internally. Gut-wrenching sobs painfully birthed the expression of emotions he never felt. His hips sank between his ankles. He cast his blurred vision toward the heavens. He sat in a daze and unconsciously

drew his father's head onto his lap. He lowered his face to the man who had always been his hero and wept.

Anger entered the scene. Brian recoiled and threw his head back. From the depths of his core, a placed that warehoused sounds emitted perhaps once or twice in a lifetime, if ever, Brian uttered guttural despair. He wailed because that is all he could do. He wailed because he had no other choice. Brain wailed because his father was dead.

Chapter Five

Brian's white hair and creased face conveyed wisdom acquired from a life pressed by ruthless forces. His eyes revealed the vibrancy of a keenly discerning mind and quieted heart. He was a warrior, a wise warrior. Accustomed to both victory and defeat, he saw many a soul vanquished by external and internal battles and pummeled into submission and reclusion.

Brian chose a different path. He distilled fundamentals of being with the hope of not only knowing but understanding his life purpose. "My father once told me a man will deviate and make choices which defy reason, bless in ways no one would appreciate, or inflict grief and implode one's life to emotional, mental, and physical ruin."

A gentle touch brought his mind back to the present. His guest looked at him earnestly and asked, "Why?"

Brian knew the reason for the query. The atmosphere was sober. The conversation delved into the deep, into uncharted reservoirs of humanity. Brian had ruminated upon this question since that fateful day at Paradox Peak decades ago. He searched for truth, truth bound to purpose.

"Why?" is an important and powerful question. The answer fills gaps and ties loose ends into order. It allows for follow-through, the same follow-through needed when one casts a fishing rod. Otherwise, the answer does not resolve the unknown just as the bait fails to reach its target. The answer offers peace to a troubled mind and heart and affords a path to understanding and wisdom, even if the answer is difficult. Once the answer is known, the recipient has the burden to accept it and move

positively or negatively into an uncertain future. It is then that he may ask “How?”

Brian sat pensively. He looked toward his guest and shared, “I don’t know why people choose as they do. No one may profess to know the soul of another. However, the warrior in the heat of battle contends with the unexpected; he alone may reconcile his choice.” Brian’s thought lingered until he added, “The repercussions of one’s choices and acts are defining; they define and refine life. People impact life for good or bad, or they merely exist and offer humanity nothing.”

Brian searched for an illustration. “If we observed DNA under a microscope, we would see the blueprint of a person’s physical being. Conceptually, then, let’s consider a DNA strand for the soul, a blueprint which maps the construction of the mind, heart, and will. Such mapping would depict attributes for a wholesome life. Now, suppose this DNA had the uninhibited potential to lead one to the divine.”

Brian delayed his explanation. He wanted the larger message to settle. “There are many belief systems surrounding the divine, whether the meaning of life, purpose of man, essence of being, or the path to wisdom. Yet, all beliefs share fundamentals and ask the same questions. One question is how man becomes congruent with his spirit and why relatively few achieve this ideal.

“Most philosophies agree that an ideal life includes one’s ability to access his spirit and follow a path to eternal truth. Pursuit of this goal leads to obedience, conquering, redemption, possession, clarity, trust, liberation, surrender, and love. Pursuit of the spirit and the divine enables one to bless and be blessed with the promise of death and its endless bounty.”

Brian marshaled his thoughts. “Humanity is plagued by one indisputable and rarely appreciated dilemma. Man enters a way

of being early in life—a way of being which adversely shapes his view of himself and the world. This view affects his decisions and actions. He acquires a default way of being which affects the DNA of his soul. Sadly, he is unable to master his soul, much less tap his spirit.”

Brian rested his elbow upon the recliner. “I shared my three life-defining events for a reason. I gradually understood how and why I failed to be congruent with truth. I surveyed defining experiences that carved uncomplimentary patterns into my soul, patterns that may seek to protect, but actually harm. With this understanding, I came to know who my true Self.”

The silence that filled the room was quickly escorted away. “I don’t understand,” the lady said.

Brian offered more insight. “Forces are afoot as soon as we are born. These forces shape how we act and react. To put it simply, the forces which influence one in the beginning of life are precursors to how he fails to live the balance of his life. These forces are varied and numerous; but, eventually the number of forces are winnowed to a few that guide one into an incomplete existence.”

Brian offered an illustration. “Look at your son.” A seven-year-old boy played with a car on the floor. “He is influenced by much and has been for years, even before he was born. The attitudes he witnesses, the words he hears, and various reactions to his wants and needs are defining. He is and will be based largely upon his experiences.

If he is unduly influenced to protect himself unnecessarily, he will crave isolation. Aversion will guide his thoughts, feelings, and acts. Simply because he is fearful, he will dare less in a world which invites healthy probing. He will manifest selfishness, self-preservation, and fear as a way of being.” Brian knew his answer hit the mark.

He continued. "The answer to your question will make sense if you accept the premise that one's way of being is predicated upon his past. Now listen carefully," Brian added. "If man alters an ingrained way of being, he will chart a course in defiance of patterns that ensure conformance, patterns that ingrain complacency and mediocrity."

The boy looked up and asked, "What is mediocrity?"

His mother laughed and said, "Mediocrity is what one offers when he does not care to do his best."

Brian smiled broadly at the boy's confused look and continued. "If man knowingly charts a different course, he is, it could be said, the captain of his soul." In the interest of time, Brian went to the heart of the matter. "As with anyone, I was affected by negative and positive experiences. While I could not avoid them, I could determine my attitude and reaction. Often though, I failed to steer my soul to equanimity. I was often listless, negative, and without constructive purpose. Such reactions are inevitable."

The lady interrupted him. "Does that mean positive influences may outweigh the negative and forge a superior way of being?"

Brian glanced down briefly and responded. "Possibly, but the impact from negative or painful experiences is considerably more defining, which is as it should be. Pain and suffering," he added, "are more relevant and are often the source of lessons that correct and refine our understanding. They right our ships, so to speak, and serve as the rudder." He knew a significant point had been overlooked.

"Positive experiences, while valuable, are subject to inflation. They are the source of excessive elation and often overstated. These emotions deceive. We are deceived by what we perceive as true. We form unnatural expectations and project

what is not and will never be. On the other hand, trying times instill humility. We are humbled by what is healthy. If willing, we learn and understand.”

Brian offered a note of caution. “Our lives are influenced by significant trials in our formative years to an unprecedented and undetected level. Times of upheaval limit us in ways mostly unseen. Man falls prey to patterns influenced by dark, unresolved, and misunderstood moments and, as a result, he manifests an unflattering way of being.”

Brian looked at her son. “He will be shaped by three major events in his life, one of which has already occurred.” His mother was surprised. “This happened to me; it happens to all of us.”

She was humbled and proffered, “Is this the answer to my query, ‘Why?’” Brian shook his head. “No, my dear, it is only the beginning.”

He reflected a moment and delved deeper. “We want to belong. Man longs for relationships and love. This innate need and desire is inescapable. Love and relationships shape our identity. Love, the capacity to give and receive love, dictates how we view ourselves. When love is wanting, we fill the void. We search. Blindly and recklessly, we search. We don’t know exactly what we seek and we fill the void with what is unhealthy. We search to a fault. We may not even know that we seek, which demonstrates the power of the need and desire to belong.”

Brian steered the explanation to its natural conclusion. “When I learned that three life-defining events formed my way of being, I began a journey. I had to know their impact. While I was told I may never isolate all three, the evaluation of my life during three distinct seasons would be instructive. I evaluated my life between the age of three and seven, eight to fourteen and fifteen to twenty-one.”

“I see,” the lady remarked. “This is why you offered the

memory of the gang, Susie Jenkins, and your father's death."

"Exactly. I wanted to belong. While I prized my independence, I sought acceptance. I accepted others. I related. Humanity instinctively seeks community. The problem is that man reacts differently when the goal of belonging is unattained. In my case, when I failed to be a member of the SOS Gang, lost Susie, and my father died, I became defensive. Inwardly, I sought refuge. I did not express my grief. Consequently, I harbored turmoil that was not reconciled.

"Even with my father's wisdom to release what was I caught, especially that which was not healthy, I ached for what I lacked. I did not let go. A father does not always understand the full extent of a child's pain. While my father guided me, I was unwilling to relinquish my hope to belong. I did not embrace his wisdom."

To emphasize this point, Brian referred to the worm incident. "Billy Vance was my hero. He was my friend. While we remained close until I moved, I never forgave myself for letting him down. I never forgave myself until I became wiser, until I understood there was no reason to eat that hyperactive worm."

Both of them laughed and the boy looked up and asked, "You were gonna eat a worm?" Brian nodded silently.

He looked to his companion and said, "My failure to eat the worm ingrained within my soul that I was not worthy. I did not measure up. I was inadequate. This attitude shaped my life. I became guarded. I was less likely to allow people to be close. I shared less." He paused. "Do you see the impact?" With agreement, he proceeded.

"Susie Jenkins was a revelation. She was beautiful, lively, intelligent, and kind. And most importantly, she liked me, good ole Brian Barth," he added with a smile. "I was worthy. I belonged. Any efforts to prove myself, whether as a student,

athlete, or class president, paled in comparison to my adoration of Susie and her affection for me.

“Susie was the salve that masked any unknown patterns which would have defeated whatever happiness I enjoyed. While I felt invincible, my strength was inherently double-crossed by an undercurrent that would not yield and will never yield. The reverse is true,” Brian scoffed. “The loss of Susie Jenkins profoundly added to the dark undercurrent which flowed unabated during the year we dated. If anything, the pain from her unexpected decision increased my lack of understanding and reinforced the notion I did not belong. Naturally, I withdrew and shielded myself from further pain.”

“The death of your father?” the woman asked.

“His tragic death sank me to depths I had never experienced. I was devastated, unmoored, and aimless. I was not the captain of my soul. My mind was confused. My heart grieved. I lost the will to be as I once was. Entering VMI months later made the loss more incomprehensible. If I ever felt totally disconnected, it was when he left so unexpectedly.” When Brian saw a nonplussed look across from him, he waited for the observation that had to come.

“I am confused,” she said. “I am no closer to understanding why.”

Brian inhaled and sighed deeply. “Three life-defining events ingrained an unalterable and perpetual way of being within me. However, these events no longer dictate my choices.” Brian approached a difficult juncture in his explanation.

“Listen,” he stated, “most people do not know that three events shape and determine their repeated and reflexive responses throughout life. However, some choose in defiance of their historical patterns. Men and women act contrary to a predetermined way of being. They choose to suffer unimaginable

loss. They willingly counter an already and always existing way of being.”

Brian’s eyes moistened. Pain from a far distant memory surfaced. The unavoidable unraveled.

His guest reached for his hand and squeezed. She was speechless. With a measure of confidence, she came to a realization and spoke gently. “You don’t have the whole answer, do you? You are not able to answer why.”

Brian withdrew from her gentle touch and covered his face. He had not intimately embraced this memory in over three decades. Latent emotions surfaced. His chest rose and fell with a grief that, long since, had been fully vetted. He selflessly looked into the dark past and stepped into a time and a place overgrown and enclosed, a place separate from the world, a private place for warriors and sages with the mettle to withstand the grind of the pestle of experience within the cold and harsh mortar of life.

Brian sat solemnly. His thoughts reverted to an age of joy and sadness. He summoned images of life and death. He fished for memories and lessons only a master angler would possess. Brian’s mind drifted until he was hanging directly over the canyon.

Maddie lost her hold of Brian’s shorts, which only added to his burden. The disparity from the shift of weight was too much. His body banked to the extreme left. He faced the canyon floor. He could no longer hold Maddie. She began to fall.

He looked directly at Heather. He blinked hard and screamed with despair. Then, in a surge of unrestrained rage he screamed, “No!” He squeezed his eyes shut and forcefully jerked his left arm upward and thrust it between Maddie’s legs and clasped his hands in a sling-like embrace. He hugged Maddie against his chest and buried his face into her stomach and sobbed.

Joe reached the cable seconds later. He laid himself over Brian's legs. He saw Maddie three feet below. She was wrapped safely in Brian's arms. He could not see Heather. He straddled his friend and, with a firm grip of the cable with his left hand, he threw his right arm over the cable and down. He grabbed Maddie's hair.

Brian did not notice the pressure on his legs. He did not feel. He did not hear Joe command him to let go of Maddie's body. He did not sense relief when Joe lifted her from his chest. Brian was lost. He sobbed and groaned. He crossed the threshold to a place no man dared to enter. Brian found himself in the world of brokenness.

Joe pulled his beleaguered daughter up, grabbed her shirt, and peeled Brian's fingers from his unconscious hold. Joe dragged her toward him. When she slumped safely to the ground, he flipped her toward the path

Absent the weight he held for the last twenty minutes, Brian drooped backward. He was exhausted. His arms, lifeless from inhuman exertion, flopped under his head and waved as freely as strands of a spider web in a gentle breeze. His back arched away from the canyon wall; his head drove downward. His face pointed squarely to the canyon floor.

The rain had eased to a moderate cadence. The wind had died. The sky was gray and silent. To the east, infrequent distant rumblings served as a faint reminder of life's pending and furious unknown.

Brian could not look. He kept his eyes closed. He believed he had dropped Maddie into the canyon as well. Knowing that his desperate attempt to save Joe's only child and Heather had failed, he fought to free his legs. He lacked the will to live; he wanted to end his unfathomable anguish.

Suddenly conscious of his immobility, Brian opened his eyes and looked up. He saw nothing but clouds. Without the strength to pull into a tucked position or the ability to lift his knees off the

cable, he deferred to gravity and swung helplessly. His head bounced and swayed. His attempt to join his daughter was as futile as his efforts to save her.

He slowly opened his eyes. Through a dense and rising mist, he caught a glimpse of a white blur upon the canyon floor. Brian cried to the heavens for redemption. "Oh God! Forgive me!" Brian wept. "Heather!" he screamed. "Forgive me, pumpkin! Forgive me."

Joe seized Brian's shirt and lifted dead-weight until Brian's chest rose to the plane of the earth. Awkwardly, he secured a hold of Brian's arms and pulled his emotion-logged friend near. Joe leaned to his left and rolled Brian over his hip. A mass of flesh fell thunderously to the ground.

He quickly assessed Brian's vitals and limp body. After he glanced at Maddie, Joe threw himself next to Brian and pulled him close. Brian's face melded like a puzzle piece in the crook of Joe's neck. In a state of delirium, without bearings, with emotions that had now settled to absolute surrender, Brian stared at what he did not see. Joe embraced him with indescribable grief. He had no words. He could offer no consolation.

Maddie crawled to her father and rested her chin on his shoulder. She stared at Brian. She realized the context of the situation. She pulled herself onto Brian and whispered, "Mr. Barth, Mr. Barth." She called as if peering through a dimly lit forest. She searched. At a tender age, she intuitively sought the soul of a man who could not be found. "Mr. Barth, Mr. Barth, Mr. Barth."

Brian returned from his reverie and stared. His gaze fell upon Maddie and her son. Haltingly, he spoke of this resurrected loss. "The short answer to your question is that I could never have allowed your mother and father to suffer a loss I could not endure." Brian looked at Maddie and shared, "I chose to save you."

Maddie bowed her head with solemn deference. The selflessness of his last statement fell like a ton of bricks. She could not reconcile a man choosing the death of his own daughter to preserve the life of another man's child. She did not press the issue. She preferred that past suffering remain dormant.

She looked at the man before her and placed an envelope upon his lap. "Mr. Barth, it took me a year to find you. I have traveled a long way to bring my father peace. I hoped to find personal solace as well."

Brian looked unexpectedly at the envelope addressed to him.

She continued. "My father died with a heavy heart. He died without closure. He did not understand. As a result, he avoided part of his past. He admitted to being a coward. He never overcame his ignorance. He revealed his shame before he died. He admitted that he could never have been as courageous and selfless as you. Yet, he died with gratitude for your sacrifice. He asked me to find you."

She placed her hand upon Brian's shoulder and said, "After our conversation, after I leave, please read my father's letter." She held back her tears and whispered, "And if you would be willing to have me in your life, I would embrace you as I did my father. She caressed his shoulder and whispered, "I love you, Mr. Barth. I have always loved you."

By now the young boy had stopped playing and inched next to his mother. He sat respectfully. He witnessed intense emotions. Maddie looked at her son and said, "Brian, everything is fine. Mr. Barth and I have a sad memory."

Brian held the envelope and placed it on the table.

"To answer to your query," he stated, "is that I was willing. I knew your father and mother could not have more children. I knew what you meant to them, no less than what Heather meant

to me and Stacy.” Brian looked at the picture of Heather on the table. “She was my blossom, my one in all.” He reached for Maddie’s hand. “I could not deprive your father of the same.”

Brian stood and secured Heather’s photo. He sat down again and spoke. “Man is forged into a way of being early in life. Three events impose patterns as predictable as they are unnoticed. If I had been consistent with my ingrained way of being, if I catered to the lessons learned from the SOS Gang, Susie Jenkins, and the death of my father, I would have acted differently at Paradox Peak. I would have saved my daughter.

You and I would not be speaking now. My wife would have stayed with me. My son, Spencer, would not have used drugs at a young age nor committed suicide before he finished college.”

Brian tapped the recliner for emphasis. “Maddie, I have learned that few will act against their best interests for the sake of truth. Truth mandates a way of being which juxtaposes what has been ingrained over a lifetime. Few will act with the sole intent to sacrifice completely and selflessly for truth and love.”

Brian shifted his gaze upward and remarked, “Truth is elusive and love is grossly misunderstood. Love is an act, a single, voluntary, and unconditional act. I loved you and your parents. But, somehow, as I hung upside down over the canyon, I loved more than life itself, which meant my daughter’s life and life as I knew it. The power of true love was a truth I embodied for the briefest of moments and I acted accordingly.”

Chapter Six

“I never fished after my father drowned,” Brian offered. “What I realized later is that we fish every day. Our minds and hearts survey the waters of life. We cast our intentions and haul in catches that surprise and frighten. Sometimes we release the catch. Often we keep them. What we release or keep depends largely upon the three imprints we experienced in our formative years. We selfishly covet what we have. What we catch is often a continuation of ingrained tendencies that shelter us from perceived loss and deny us growth.”

Maddie looked pensively at Brian. “Mr. Barth, you cast your line years ago and caught me?”

Brian shook his head and said, “Not exactly.” He paused and shared, “I released my prized catch and caught a prized catch in return.”

Maddie began to cry. Between sniffles she said, “I guess I will never understand. I guess this is why my father died without satisfaction.”

Brian assured her that humanity has no automatic right to either understanding or truth. “We suffer from misapprehension throughout life. We lack clarity. We must reconcile that we do not fully appreciate what the mind considers or the heart weighs.” If only for Maddie’s benefit, he broached a difficult subject.

“Your father was one of the most courageous men I knew. Yet, he was unable to reconcile that I saved you. He was mentally and emotionally crippled. This made little sense as I struggled to overcome my loss. When I sought his support, he withdrew. I did not understand, but I did not judge him.”

Maddie thought and then asked, “Were three imprints in my father’s early years the reason he did not cope well? Did three life-defining events create a default way of being that prevented him from accepting your selfless act?”

Brian nodded. “One may live with apparent ease and rarely stumble. One may appear invincible. One may not understand why he follows unseen patterns that drive him along a seemingly safe and narrow path. It is the unexpected event which sheds light onto an ingrained way of being which causes one to reject what he long accepted as reasonable.”

Maddie interrupted. “Are you suggesting that my father was not aware of his way of being and saving my life was an event that triggered an entrenched or latent incapacity?”

“It is possible. How he handled my choice to save you was based upon influences he did not understand. His lack of understanding was destructive.”

She agreed. “He may have been accomplished in all regards except one. As such, his three life-defining events foreclosed his ability to resolve that one latent incapacity.”

“Your father was overwhelmed with a sense of shame and remorse because you were alive and Heather was not. I cannot imagine this burden. He did not know what to tell himself, much less me. Three events ill-equipped him to express such deep thoughts and tender feelings. He could not cope with them.

“I cast my line toward Joe for years and caught nothing. So I moved to a new fishing spot. Your father did not cast a line in my direction. Had he done so, he would have benefited; I would have benefited. Joe was a brother to me. The loss of his friendship aggravated the loss of Heather and my family.

“Wow,” Maddie uttered. “My father swam in three currents and was unaware that he did so. The balance of his life was dictated by ignorance and limitations. He reacted passively to

events that brought more harm than perceived value.”

Brian looked at the letter on the table. “Joe may have written this letter as a substitute for a solution that was available twenty years ago. Had I received this in time, he might have died complete and whole.”

Maddie’s face saddened. “I knew something was wrong shortly after the accident. My father looked at me differently, as if I my presence was unmerited. Years passed and he still did it. It was as if he had to do something, to offer something. He could not shed his sense of shame and blame.”

Maddie took the tissue Brian offered and wiped her eyes. After a respite she said, “I once overheard my parents conversing. Dad said, ‘I took the wrong path. I took the wrong path, Wendy.’ Then he said, ‘How did he do it? How did he make his choice? How could he make such a choice?’”

Maddie raised her eyes and offered a half smile. “He never reconciled his mistake or your loss. Your sacrifice humbled him beyond measure. He could not deal with your choice. My Dad was a warrior. He was a hero to many. His courage and strength were beyond question. Yet, he capitulated to something he did not understand. This defeated him.”

The import of Maddie’s words was defining. Brian felt the extent of her anguish. He chose to take her fishing.

“You have heard the axiom, ‘Give a man a fish and he will eat for the day; teach a man to fish and he will have abundance all his life?’” He waited as she accepted this wisdom. “My father took me fishing as a child. Fishing was his opportunity to teach me about life. I never appreciated the significance of some of his lessons until I became older and wiser. I took the bait only to be hooked much later.”

Maddie smiled. “Your father caught you. He did not know how long it would take, but he got the prized catch.”

Brian nodded slowly. “He caught me only because I willingly accepted his wisdom. My father was wise. He knew humanity was heavily influenced by three life-defining events, and, to counter the impact of each imprint, he knew wisdom was required.

“I lost my sense of identity and security with the experiences of the SOS Gang, Susie Jenkins, and the death of my father. As a result, I succumbed to flawed patterns. I guarded what little confidence I had, a confidence no one could steal or destroy. I defaulted to a way of being that was small and weak. I did not release this pattern; I did just the opposite. Though I was feeble and insecure, I protected what little confidence I possessed. My ways of being—at least three of them—became what I call ‘Justifiers’.

“My father and mother, friends, and later, my wife, did not know of these Justifiers. They only saw a bold and confident person. I lied to them as much as I lied to myself.”

Maddie applied this wisdom to her father. “My dad may have been viewed as strong, but internally he was weak. People unknowingly create facades. No one knows the truth of a man’s constitution.”

“Yes,” Brian said. “Justifiers are a means of protection. However, some actually realize this truth. They know of these events and their corresponding Justifiers. They know of their predisposition to selfishly defend what they believe they possess. They understand the need to defeat a flawed way of being. Consequently, they expose their weaknesses; they choose and act contrary to dated patterns. They become vulnerable; they risk.”

Maddie was amazed at this insight. “This must mean they are fully alive or at least more engaged with life than the alternative. If they know of their tendencies to avoid life, if they choose to act against a distinctly unflattering pattern, the dynamics change. Their perceptions change. Their lives become

uncomfortable because they chose to walk on the wild side and buck the trend, a tired and unappealing trend.” She considered her own life. She looked at her son. She thought of her father and his dissatisfaction. “There must be a way to reverse this trend. How does one overcome the tendency to limit life? How does one persevere and step where he fears to go, to an unsettled place where randomness, success, and potential injury are probable? Of all people, why did my father not venture beyond a sheltered and shallow way of being?”

Brian did not expect such a potent inquiry. He reached into his proverbial tackle box. “When a man learns to fish, he learns where to cast his line. If he does not know to look elsewhere, he becomes conditioned and expects nothing but the norm. And the norm is often unfulfilling. He must recognize that some fishing spots do not provide what he needs.”

Maddie squinted and brought her hand to her cheek. She pointed downward and asked, “What is the goal? What is the prized catch?”

Brian chuckled. “Ah, you place the cart before the horse. There are stepping stones to the goal. However, I will tell you the prized catch—freedom.”

Maddie crossed her legs, stretched her arms, and asked, “Freedom from ways of being shaped by three life-defining events which limit our responses?”

Brian nodded and replied, “That is the short answer; the full answer is freedom of one’s spirit in truth.”

She was intrigued. She pondered the goal. She considered the decades her father was trapped. She thought of his inability to overcome ways of being which defeated him and led to a less than fulfilled life. She wanted to know why she was limited and how to prevail against subtle, but strong currents. She hoped to influence her son into a world teeming with possibility. “How do I

attain this freedom?”

With a heavy sigh, Brian relaxed his shoulders. He searched for a simple, but comprehensive explanation. Before him sat a lady who fished for answers as elusive as any worthy trout. She hoped to reconcile her ways of being and discern how to attain freedom.

Brian walked to the window and stared at nothing. When a bird distracted him back to focus, he said, “It may be difficult to accept, but just before I saved you, I saw a bright light.” He looked at the floor as if searching for an explanation. “I do not know why or how the light came to be. I do not know if it was from stress, despair, or something else. Yet, over the years, the light was emblematic of the freedom I experienced for a brief moment. I realized it was possible to attain freedom.”

He sat down again. “I researched the bright light for years. I researched the physiological effects of stress upon the mind and heart. Nothing gave me an adequate answer. I delved into various religions and practices.” With emphasis, he said, “I faced a choice no man should have to make. In order to choose your life over my daughter’s and have peace, my soul had to be free and congruent with my spirit.”

Maddie thought of his choice. “You were more than liberated from a default way of being dictated by three life events. You entered a different realm, a state of being not likely found in an untested existence.” She paused and then offered, “Mr. Barth, you entered...” She could not finish her sentence. She could not find the right word.

“Some call it the providential or the presence of God,” Brian said. “I know it to be truth. Freedom is truth; and truth must be sourced within the often untouched orbit of providence. God is truth. My faith flows to the seas of the divine.”

Brian appealed to her capacity to discern. “Most people

exist without genuinely seeking their true nature. Most are lost in a world filled with random circumstances. They simply react to them. Idle success and failure define their existence. The mind and heart perceive and man believes incorrectly. He covets an insulated life fabricated by myopic, distorted, and flawed understandings.”

“This is not freedom,” Maddie contended.

“No,” he replied. “Absent truth, there is no freedom.”

The significance of his words surpassed a reasonable philosophy of life.

“Mr. Barth, please clarify the concept of freedom. What is freedom?”

He blinked rapidly to a calm gaze. “Freedom is a mirrored reflection of God and His true nature. Freedom, then, is a state not influenced by success or failure, misunderstandings, the senses, emotions, or impediments. Freedom is a state unaffected by circumstances. Freedom is unencumbered by past experiences and memories that might otherwise unduly influence one’s correct perceptions or subsequent right acts.”

He gave an alternative explanation. “Freedom is a state achieved with clarity in truth and acts that are right and true, acts which occur when one sheds wrong perceptions of the mind and heart.”

“What do you mean by stating ‘only when one sheds wrong perceptions of the mind and heart’? Are we not our minds and hearts?”

“You are not your mind or heart. You are nor your perceptions. Most fail to make this distinction. People may experience the same event, yet most have different mental and emotional constructs afterwards. Why?”

Maddie considered this dynamic. “Each has their own prejudices sourced within a past that persists into the present.”

She mulled her words and added, "Each has a soul affected by a default way of being which gives rise to predetermined thoughts and emotions."

Maddie sat in silence. Brian waited patiently. She embraced this life-altering insight. "The fact that most walk away with different conclusions and, therefore, a different experience, does not diminish the conclusion or experience. However, they may be no nearer truth or a correct understanding of their true Selves. It is as if they are attached to wrong perceptions which prohibit knowing their true natures."

He agreed. "Must one accept a given perception?"

She smiled slightly. She marveled at the depth and simplicity of the query. "I must answer in the negative."

"So what does that tell you?"

Maddie shook her head. She could not escape the notion she had lived a fallacy her entire life. "This tells me a force outside the mind and heart chooses whether or not to accept perceptions, whether they are correct or not." She took another pregnant pause. "I am other than my mind and heart and any thoughts, emotions, and perceptions. I am independent. I choose to accept or reject any and all perceptions."

"How does this affect your understanding of the three life-defining events that shape one's way of being?"

She thought of her father. "If a man acts and reacts based upon his perceptions of the past, and his actions, however misguided, are tied to events which have already defined him, he will accept whatever arrives in an already established context." She frowned and said, "He will never have true awareness if he does not know why or how he is affected by wrong perceptions. He will not know his true identity. He will be nothing more than a preformatted and incomplete existence. He will never be free."

Brian was pleased. "Allow me to share a specific example. I

have a friend, Tara, who lost her husband in a tragic accident six years ago. This loss devastated her and her children. However, she wants to love and be loved again. Her children refuse to accept this idea. Her extended family condemns her desire. Sadly, she refuses to overcome her inhibitions and defeat her family's demands."

Maddie could not help but see Tara in the same light as her father and his refusal to be free from his own constraints. "Tara denies her true Self by persisting in a way of being tied to her past. Although she wants to love and be loved, with a default way of being, she will not defeat the untenable. She refuses to defeat her own limitations. She faces challenges that her mind and heart perceive as insurmountable. She accepts wrong perceptions as true.

"My father faced challenges he would not defeat. He accepted wrong perceptions as true. He was not his own. He lacked freedom. In fact, he was imprisoned."

Maddie felt as though she teetered upon a tightrope. With Brian's guidance, she would know why both her father and Brian chose to be as they were. She wanted to successfully cross to the other side. She wanted understanding. "Mr. Barth, does freedom depend upon one's motivation?"

"That is an excellent question. The answer must be that motivation is an impediment to freedom."

"Why?"

"If one acts with a desire to love, does he act out of self-interests? If self-interests are primary, such motivations will influence an outcome. When I saved you, did I act upon selfish desires?"

"Absolutely not!" Maddie proclaimed.

"Then the reverse must be true. To attain freedom, one may act without prejudice."

Maddie's eyes darted to Brian. "You were without motivation that day?"

He conceded the point. "Motivation often implies a prejudice. Motivation impairs freedom. Although I could not tolerate the idea of Joe losing his only child, this was not my motivation."

Maddie raised an objection. "My desire to provide for my son is not unreasonable; rather, caring for him is a sound desire and necessary."

Brian steered the conversation to the relevance of freedom. "My notion of motivation is a concept most will reject. Most are unwilling or unable to possess this distinction." Brian hesitated. "A mother's care of a child is proper and cannot be discounted. A healthy mother does right by acting with a healthy love. Her desire is not anchored within a selfish agenda. For example, if your son required correction, would this be uncomfortable for you?"

"Yes," Maddie said.

"Well, it is right to correct a child. A man's decision to act contrary to the best interest of his child may be deemed abuse. When I saved you, did I act contrary to my daughter's best interest?"

Maddie did not know how to respond. "You could not have had a motivation to save me." She realized the insensitivity of her statement. She recoiled and pleaded for Brian's forgiveness.

He shook his head and said, "Your query is appropriate for our conversation." He offered context. "When I was upside down upon the cable, as I struggled with unspeakable conditions and humbling thoughts, as I dealt with emotions too unnerving to describe, I had an inexplicable moment of peace. I understood. I loved and I acted in love. I was free of any selfish goal. I did not do it for you or your father, just as I did not act against Heather,

myself, or Mrs. Barth. I did not act in your best interest. No. I had clarity and I chose to act. It is that simple. I loved. I loved as never before and may never do again. I experienced freedom, driven by truth, underwritten with clarity, with an unwavering faith in love.”

“Mr. Barth, this may be more than I am able to comprehend.”

“We are speaking of concepts and philosophies I have taken a lifetime to understand. You will not appreciate everything in an afternoon.” He tried to ease her bewilderment.

“But, your loss was great!” she cried out.

“The mind and heart are doors into all things external and internal; both are shaped by past and current influences. Freedom will not be achieved when the mind and heart force a contrived agenda. Freedom will not be attained with a misperception. If able to segregate a wrong perception from what is true, one may transcend all motivations.”

Maddie addressed the element of the mind and heart again. “You knew your mind and heart had an incorrect perception of your circumstances at the canyon. You were independent of both your mind and heart? When you had clarity, you acted without motivation?”

“In a nutshell, that is correct. Otherwise, how does a man choose to act as I did? How would he endure his choice and the aftermath?”

Maddie had a general dismay about humanity. She sighed heavily and said, “I understand why others may not reconcile your choice. This is what grieved my father. He did not understand the strength and courage of such love.”

“Consider,” Brian offered. “that your father was influenced by perceptions; I was not. Your father was subject to change; I was not. Of the two of us, who possessed truth? Who had the

possibility to be in freedom? Did I ask myself, 'Who am I?' Or did I choose to be."

Maddie saw the distinction. Her heart filled with a longing. "I don't want to wonder who I am; I want to be."

Chapter Seven

Brian was humbled by Maddie's last statement. He reflected about the impact of time. Had he known at the age of thirty what he knew presently, he would have benefited tremendously. He would have thought, felt, and acted differently. He would not have squandered effort to change what he was not able. He would have recognized impediments and lived a more purposeful life.

"You have the opportunity to be in a way I never was at your age. After our conversation, you will have greater appreciation for obstacles that impair your capacity to be and defy and deny your sense of purpose."

Maddie sat upright and rolled her shoulders back. She was encouraged. That she might understand why her father failed to overcome inconsequential blocks and live with purpose excited her. "I am listening," she said.

"Consider my three life-defining events and weigh my unhealthy patterns as a result of those experiences. These patterns, which are comprised of memories, feelings, defense mechanisms, ignorance, wrong perceptions, the senses, a negative attitude, and much more, caused repercussions and defeated possibility. They became and are ruts that preclude a life of clarity and purpose."

"This is a new perspective and it overwhelms me." Maddie was distraught. "I have not fully lived. Have I ever truly been alive?"

"Ah," Brian replied. "You are lost in the details. Take a breath, step back, and consider that all challenges and impediments to freedom are within a bubble. Look at the bubble

and assess it as a whole. What do you see?"

She thought for a moment. "I see adverse conditions, negative influences, and a massive obstruction to one's ability to be with clarity and purpose."

Brian cut to the quick. "If all a man distills from and for his life are predicated upon that bubble, will he attain freedom?"

"Certainly not!"

"So," he continued, "the alternative is to avoid and defeat anything that prevents freedom and replace it with a grounded, truth-based, and purposeful state of being without flawed perceptions."

"Did you attain this truthful and purposeful state of being in freedom at the canyon?"

Brian bowed his head. "I was humbled by that experience. That brief connection with freedom—regardless of the pain—forever changed my life." He cautioned Maddie. "Many will view my perspective from their own confined bubble and will not understand what I did or why I did it. Mrs. Barth never forgave me for Heather's death. She is angry and bitter to this day. We have not spoken since Spencer's funeral."

Maddie realized the impact of his choice. "If most people exist with an error-filled mind and heart, replete with maligned memories tied to a past which furthers the influence of three life-defining events, if people are overwhelmed with a selfish perspective laden by emotions, if they are driven by their senses and the blind pursuit of happiness as an ultimate motivation regardless of the harm, they will not achieve clarity. They will not understand. They will never be free."

Brian deliberated and said, "And they may never realize their plight. When one is rid of encumbrances and the mind and heart are directed to error-free perceptions, he is whole and complete. He has integrity and may discern and possess truth."

“How do you measure this, though?” she asked. “How does one know if a perception is free of errors?”

“Brilliant question. Let’s revisit Tara. If she, six years removed from her husband’s death, refuses to love and be loved because her family objects, she is mired within errors which prohibit choices and acts predicated upon truth. She caves to the distorted and misguided agendas of others. Tara fails to act with hope to attain true purpose. She covets a lie and fails to live with purpose.

“Listen closely,” Brian emphasized. “The impediments which affect Tara’s family adversely influence her choices and actions. Thus, her life is heavily saddled; she lacks clarity and is hopelessly entrapped. The arrogance, emotions, reactions, prejudices, wrong perceptions, and motivations of others, not to mention subsequent challenges, defeat her possibility to be with purpose into freedom. She defaults to a way of being sourced within her three life-defining events.

“Now imagine the reverse. If Tara had clarity and defied the confines of the bubble, if she sought to love and be loved, her family would benefit from her true perception whether they realized it or not.”

“Yes,” Maddie replied. She drew a parallel to Brian’s choice at the canyon. “I hesitate to say this, but not everyone benefited from your actions at the canyon.”

He weighed her assertion and replied, “Besides your incorrect perception, what other obstacles prevent you from understanding that any choice and act is an opportunity for all to benefit?” He pondered and then asked, “Are you speaking of Stacy?”

“Yes.”

Brian subconsciously squeezed his hand. “Before we examine specifics and individuals, let’s consider the topic of

benefits. If a rural town chooses to access fresh water from a nearby aquifer, does everyone benefit even though some do not pipe water to their homes? Is the fact that water is available and indoor plumbing is possible a net gain for all?"

Maddie listened intently.

"If, however, three children die of leukemia and citizens discover a nearby source of pollution that feeds into the river, does awareness of the cause benefit everyone?" Brian was adamant. "A closed mind and a hardened heart cannot be so closed and hardened to the exclusion of what must be acknowledged.

"The Mayor may not easily and categorically reject the source of the pollution in order to protect the legal interests of the city. He may deny the claim, but he must consider alternatives nonetheless. The consequences of any tragedy, whether direct or indirect, are not entirely negative." Brian declared, "One's unwillingness to accept truth is no different. Such unwillingness does not preclude benefits."

Maddie understood. "If a glacier represents a tragedy and the ground represents the soul, a drop of water, which is a benefit, may melt at the top of the glacier and take months to reach the soil. Even one drop is something. That the soul does not receive the benefit for some time does not negate the benefit."

"Yes," Brian said. "As for Stacy, although improbable, she could have discerned what happened without prejudice. She was overwhelmed with a prime motivation, love for her daughter, even if a selfish love. If she had to live a life without Heather, she would and did blame me.

"This is no different from Tara. She blamed her family for her inability to love again. People live into regret and blame others for their failure to seek and act with clarity.

"However," Brian looked sternly at Maddie, "are we to

presuppose my choice to save you had no positive impact for Stacy? Was she was not influenced favorably in some manner? Did her mind and heart not weigh alternatives to her pain, a pain she selfishly possessed in a futile attempt to justify an abject refusal to accept a tremendous loss?

“Why did your father struggle senselessly with my choice? Why did he refuse to reconcile confusion?” Brain saw Maddie wince at this accusation. “It is just a thought. Deal with the thought without entangling yourself within a quagmire of emotions. Do not add unnecessary meaning to the conversation. Could your father have extracted himself from a confining bubble and viewed his life from a macro perspective? Could he have discerned the bubble as nothing but deceit? Could Stacy have done so?”

Maddie struggled with this concept. She then suggested, “One may choose to be without wrong perceptions. Mrs. Barth could have manifested a much different life, just as Tara has the possibility to love and be loved. I understand my father ended his friendship with you. Confusion is a primary cause for an unfulfilled life.

“My father could have been with me in pure gratitude and without reservations for what he did not understand. He did not have to diminish or defeat his full purpose as a father. He could have possessed true understanding and freedom.”

Brian massaged his chin. “Confusion may be the heart of an unfulfilled purpose and the force for one’s unwillingness to accept any benefit. Such a posture is an impediment. Understanding is critical to freedom. Misunderstanding cripples, but the benefit is always in play.”

Maddie was humbled by the tone of the conversation. “Obstacles prevent understanding. To gain freedom, one must be rid of misunderstanding; one must defeat that which impedes.

This is not easy, especially if what is known is what the mind and heart misperceive within a confined bubble created by three life-defining events.”

“Let’s consider your last observation. Are the mind and heart altered similar to how water or wood change?”

Maddie looked perplexed.

“Water turns to steam when boiled, wood to ashes when burned. Do the mind and heart?”

“Yes,” she replied.

Brian continued. “But for time, new experiences, or refined thoughts and emotions, the mind and heart renders new perceptions quite different than former ones.”

“Yes.”

Brian made a firm distinction. “As the mind and heart influence, the mind and heart are influenced.”

Maddie came to a conclusion. “Wrong perceptions may eventually become true perceptions.”

He nodded and she smiled.

Maddie said, “Man burdens himself with incorrect understandings for years, decades, even a lifetime. This is regrettable—all because of unseen impairments.”

“Undoubtedly,” Brian offered, “your life will be more abundant with increased awareness of any and all obstructions. Your awareness as to why and how your mind and heart perceive will provide greater context and lead to truth. You will eventually shun what would otherwise deny truth and exercise your will and direct your mind and heart into clarity.”

“On my way to freedom,” she added.

“On your way to freedom,” he echoed.

Maddie asked, “What if one believes he has a correct understanding and he knows no differently?”

“The answer should be self-evident.” Without waiting for a

response he said, “Perhaps the greatest challenge to true perception is that the mind and heart perceive in the moment. Yet, since we know the mind and heart are subject to change, we must appreciate that the three life-defining events are powerful influences.

“We default to patterns of behavior, which includes thoughts and emotions, because of these three events. We act in a rote-like manner for the simple fact that we do not know any differently. However, once aware that past events imprint and influence our choices and actions, how life occurs to us will change. In the end, the mind and heart change because we perceive differently and, at times, correctly.”

“It is possible to live and never know the true nature of something.”

“Certainly, especially when people are unwilling to alter how events and corresponding perceptions occur.”

Maddie realized the truth of Brian’s words and posed a significant question. “How did you gain clarity at the canyon if you were plagued with a defaulted way of being?”

“As with all of humanity, I contend with impediments. My life became an unnoticed routine. Even my perceptions and reactions to the unexpected were commonplace and required minimal engagement. I capitulated to typical responses and went through life rather automatically. However, what was not routine, what was highly improbable within what was seemingly unalterable, compelled a fresh perspective that prevailed as true until proved wrong with keener insight.

“For years after Heather’s death, I pondered how and why I was able to save you. That a man could prevail against decades of conditioning to achieve the unthinkable was a challenge. While it is difficult to recall the experience, I came to appreciate that I suddenly and dramatically viewed life through a different lens.

“And you are correct. Had I reflexively followed ingrained patterns formed early in my life, Heather would be here today and you would not. Maddie, you are alive because I reconciled truth amidst lies. I recognized that prior perceptions were not true. Any reflexive response to save Heather was not truth.

“As I hung upon the cable, I hoped to save both you and Heather. Similar to the stream that poured from the canyon wall and cascaded directly into the pool below, my mind and heart became focused. Did my heart anguish at the thought of you and Heather dying? Yes. However, I acted with clarity and directed my will to save life when I knew only one life could be saved. My will was congruent with truth and love.”

Brian reached a critical element. “Do not judge me. Do not accept either my choice or action as wrong. Rather, seek understanding. My goal was free of encumbrances because I perceived free of errors. I had pure intent. I had clarity without selfish motivations.” He swallowed hard before he made his next point. “Maddie, I sensed you upon my torso.” He struggled to utter the words. “I looked at Heather. I chose to love without parameters. My purpose was clear and unmatched. Love is an act; true love is an act amidst great suffering.”

Maddie was mesmerized.

Brian continued. “Imagine viewing the source of the stream from a spring deep within the earth. Now, view the spring from the heavens. Watch the spring flow out of the canyon wall. You do not see droplets fall to the sides. You do not worry about lost remnants. You witness true purpose accomplished without gain or loss.”

Brian cleared his throat. “What I am about to share is difficult to express and equally difficult to accept. That fateful day, in an instant, I lost all awareness of who I was. I became love. This is the only reason I acted in truth and love. It was then that I

saved your life. I was one with the divine. My spirit was free. I tapped into the divine spirit that encouraged, guided, and consoled and does so even now.

“As with the spring that fed the waterfall, I tapped into a reservoir which poured forth directly through me. The freedom I experienced is the freedom that saved you.”

Maddie tried to pose a question, but Brian interrupted. “I know what you are going to ask.” He looked at her and said, “The three life-defining events which led to my default way of being were no longer relevant. They could not have influenced me then. I acquired freedom without impediments. I was not impaired in the least. My three life-defining events and any default response were of no consequence.”

Maddie could not accept the totality of these thoughts. She struggled to distill the essence of Brian’s wisdom through her own filter fraught with prejudices.

Brian decided to help. “Allow me explain a critical concept. When a man observes everyone as equally human, equally vulnerable, and equally worthy, without noting size, shape, intelligence, wealth, or other defining characteristics, when one embraces humanity as humanity, one may then be truly compassionate. A state of absolute clarity begets absolute compassion.”

Maddie watched her son leafing through a magazine. “You saw no difference between me and your daughter.”

Brian conceded. “That is the simple answer. My mind and heart may have perceived Heather as my daughter, who was, therefore, worthy of being saved. However, I knew humanity was worthy of being saved. Therefore, I loved.”

Maddie was pensive again. “This must mean you no longer saw yourself as her father.”

“Another brilliant observation. I have thought about my

role. Who was I at that moment? I have often considered that I was energy within a vessel used to accomplish what God desired. Conversely, I concluded that I was not a father in the truest sense. However, I know this is not true. Ultimately, the title assigned to a man is immaterial. If I saved another child because it was impractical to save my own, am I less of a father?"

Brian choked with emotions. "Sometimes I am at a loss for words. I was my daughter's father, but I transcended in ways that reduced my role as unimportant."

Maddie felt the impact of this tender topic. Brian cried gently and whispered, "I did not fail Heather."

Chapter Eight

Though Maddie was not prepared for the depth of such insight, she grew from their conversation. She was moved and awed with Brian's strength and wisdom.

"Mr. Barth, is your passion the reason why you have such a firm understanding of your true nature?"

Brian laughed lightly. "Where did you get your smarts? Your father was never this inquisitive." She blushed as he continued. "The truth is, I know who I am. My passion is not necessarily a primary factor. I am not confused. I am not searching. While I am willing to learn, I have discerned the essence of life. I know my purpose. I am, therefore, not attached to what detracts me from being authentic and whole. My passion is authentic."

"Please share more."

"Let's revisit my three life-defining events. If I were attached to an ingrained way of being, I would, even today, practice defensive ploys and insulate myself from harm. I would deflect what is harmful and qualify my responses. I would not be vulnerable. I would be but a shadow of my true Self, which would prohibit my purpose. My passion would be misguided. Consider your father. He could not defeat his way of being or my decision. His past influenced his present which denied understanding, especially of himself."

Maddie shook her head despondently. "Had my father known his true self, he may have understood your actions. Is this correct?"

"Yes," he affirmed. "Joe was attached to any number of detractors that denied him clarity. He was attached to you and his

own judgment of me and my choices. He was attached to memories which tainted any objective outlook. Whatever comprised your father, whether his attitude, likes, dislikes, memories, or awareness of pain and pleasure, he was immersed in a way of being and unable or unwilling to change.”

Brian deliberated and said, “Tara not choosing to love and be loved is an example of someone under profound influences. Now, let’s examine a woman consumed with her own pain until she sought and acted upon what she misperceived as love.

“Soledad lived in another country. Like all of us, she was influenced by three life-defining events. Her oldest brother, Raphael, died when she was a child. Secondly, she struggled in a local school and, contrary to tradition and with much consternation, she switched to another school. Finally, her parents divorced when she was older.

“Soledad then married at a very young age. Her husband was unfaithful with the wife of her closest brother. This painful disclosure hardened her already defeated mind and heart. She coped with divorce by dating a dentist for ten years. The dentist used and abused her. She allowed him to perform physical acts that humbled her. This long relationship exacerbated Soledad’s sense of unworthiness. She desperately desired love however it was perceived.”

Brian paused and allowed her to digest the story.

“So,” Maddie said, “Soledad suffered without redemption. She was defined by patterns. She may have had satisfying but incomplete relationships with her children and siblings, but her misapprehension of her true nature was deeply flawed. She was trapped within a bubble which foreclosed any attempt to resolve emptiness within her soul.”

“Good,” Brian said. “Soledad then met Gaston, who lived in America. He defied everything she knew about relationships. She

fell in love with a man who accepted her unconditionally. They married in a spiritual commitment before God. They grew close. When she flew back home, Gaston learned more of her personal and financial hardships. Because of her unbearable circumstances, he did not want to burden her even more. He put a hold on their relationship so that each of them could reconcile their personal challenges. She said that she understood and supported his choice.

“However, Soledad lashed out the next day and refused to speak with him. She said that he had crushed her. She immediately sent an email to Gaston’s friend, Mark, and asked him to find her another man. Soledad defaulted to her ways of being.

“Three months later, when Soledad finally responded to a message from Gaston, she said she had been waiting for him; but she shared that she had met another man. She was speaking with Dennis, someone Gaston knew. Dennis lived in Gaston’s town. Gaston warned Soledad that Dennis had been abusive to his ex-wife and children, was clinically diagnosed as mentally and emotionally unstable, the court issued a restraining order against him and he had a lengthy history with the police and the courts. Gaston shared this information with Soledad’s sister Pam. Pam knew of Soledad’s unhealthy ways of being and wanted to help. Yet, Soledad refused to listen and became defensive. She justified her decisions as grounded and true.”

“What happened?” Maddie asked.

“Within two months of meeting Dennis over the phone, she married him in a legal ceremony within days after he flew to meet her. She rejected her family’s advice. She rejected her sister’s pleas.”

“Unbelievable,” Maddie interjected. “Soledad did not see her patterns. She did not see the impact of her historical pain. She

was insulated within a bubble. She was unable to help herself. She refused help.”

Brian cautioned Maddie. “Consider your father. He waded through confusion and patterns most of his life. The vast majority of humanity exists within ignorance and pain.”

Brian continued. “Soledad will never experience true love because she does not know her true Self. She was conned by a ruthless and unstable predator as much as she duped herself. She will blindly follow false love and associated wrong perceptions. Therefore, she must justify her rash decisions. The most telling revelation is that Soledad told Gaston she was waiting for him weeks before she married this evil predator.”

Maddie was amazed. “There is no real difference between Tara and Soledad.”

“Tell me why,” Brian said.

“Both accept lies. Tara is unable to love because of her unwillingness to be bold. Soledad is unable to love because of irrational tendencies anchored in a painful past. Both women are attached to ways of being that defy what is healthy and true. Each has Justifiers. They are tied to three life-defining events. The objects they pursue, objects of their minds and hearts, are distortions borne within confusion. They seek what is maligned over healthy alternatives.” Maddie hesitated. “My father allowed this in his life as well!”

Maddie became angry. “All three failed to shed influences that ill-served them. Since they did not know the origins of their discontent, they did not know truth or where to look. As such, they did not avoid pain. Pain is what they knew and accepted as true, which they rationalized as truth. Ironically, their pain was comfortable because it was known.”

Maddie’s expression was forlorn. “Soledad is attached to false perceptions and rationalizes that she has a fulfilling and

purposeful life. My father was attached to flawed perceptions and knew his life was unfulfilled.”

“When people believe lies or reject truth, they are comfortable within an unattractive and unappealing existence.”

Maddie considered Brian’s actions at Paradox Peak. “Were you aware that you were detached from an ingrained way of being when you saved me?”

“Not at the time. When I saved your life, I could not explain my choice as disengagement from an ingrained pattern into a larger context of love and truth. I reflected upon the death of my daughter, but I did so with the understanding that you were alive. This contrast helped. From grave loss, I came to appreciate that prior losses throughout life were nothing more than loss. I ceased adding meaning to incorrect perceptions which should not and do not define me.”

“Ah,” Maddie said. “You were no longer attached to a lie. Since you were detached from a default way of being tied to an maligned perception, you were able to seek truth and attain freedom.”

Brian nodded. “I have clarity even today.”

Maddie wanted clarity about being, especially within the context of adversity. “Is it possible to be so unaffected by circumstances to the point of permanent detachment?” She did not know if her question made sense. “Do you understand the import of this thought?”

“Your query speaks of transcendence through and beyond the ebb and flow of life and all permutations of thoughts, emotions, projections, expectations, obstructions, perceptions, and all that misguides.” Brian searched for an illustration.

“Imagine sitting in your yard on a sunny afternoon with your eyes closed. You listen to the sounds and feel the gentle breeze and warmth of the sun. You hear your son playing happily

on the swing. You perceive these circumstances for what they are, nothing more. You are in the moment without error, motivations, or other impediments. You believe that you understand your purpose and act without attachment.” When he finished, Brian asked, “Are you with me?”

“I am.”

“Now, imagine that clouds obscure the sun; the temperature drops; a light mist falls; you are hungry and tired; your son is away at school; your husband is at work; you are alone and lonely; you are uncomfortable; your mind is tired.” He looked at Maddie and asked, “What has happened?”

She looked at the ceiling and deliberated. “Much has happened. Everything has changed. I am not as I was in the other illustration. My thoughts and emotions are less encouraged. My body is weary. My mind is listless. My heart is uninspired. I am without purpose, if only for a lack of clarity.”

As if he were a teacher who labored to impart a lesson that slipped through his student’s mind as water through a sieve, Brian gave Maddie a look of dissatisfaction. But, he accepted responsibility. “I have failed to articulate a profound truth.”

Maddie bolted upright. “Did I miss something?”

He directed the conversation to an observation she made moments ago. “You spoke earlier of altering a way of being that ends in a wrong perspective.” She nodded in agreement. “We spoke at length of influences which affect the mind and heart.” Again she agreed. “At some point the influences are immaterial. Whether the mind and heart perceive correctly or not, one may still attain clarity.”

Maddie dropped her gaze to her lap. She searched.

“It is right there in front of you,” he said.

Silence descended like a heavy fog. Minutes crawled by until Brian cut through the confusion. “You asked moments ago if I was

aware of my detachment from an ingrained way of being at Paradox Peak.”

Maddie nodded silently.

“Three life-defining events do not have to influence your current perceptions. Impediments should not control you. I will ask again. If you are outside and a perfect day becomes colder and wet, you are hungry and uncomfortable and lonely and tired, what happens?”

Maddie relaxed in her chair. She suddenly realized she no longer felt heavy embarrassment from her failure to understand the illustration. She was at peace with the change in circumstances and her discomfort moments earlier. She was no longer affected by pressure to respond or to respond correctly. The answer was apparent. She had an epiphany.

“Nothing changed,” she replied. “Nothing at all.”

“Beautiful!” Brian whispered. “Just beautiful.”

She thought of her father again. “Dad never had clarity because his state of mind was cemented in an interpretation not subject to change. Consequently, he did not move from an alterable misperception into a more permanent state of clarity, a state that did not have to be affected by circumstances. In a word, truth.”

“Good.”

Maddie proceeded. “You must have been devastated with the loss of Heather. It must have been difficult.”

“Life is humbling, if only for the raw emotions we experience. Whether love, happiness, sadness, excitement, or utter despair, we feel and this makes us alive. Yet, we are able to be with emotions and maintain clarity of purpose. Thoughts and feelings may be mutually exclusive and jointly agreeable.

“Your father could not and would not overcome his attachments to his feelings and thoughts about my choice. He was

burdened. I was not. Yes, I wanted to save my daughter; but, I saw the influences of my mind and heart as flawed. Just as a cloudy day is no less ideal, I had clarity when I saved you. When I chose, I was undeterred by all influences.

“Did I grieve? Yes. Am I sad still? To varying degrees, depending upon the circumstances of the moment. But my purpose was and is true and as permanent as that tragic day.

Maddie saw the distinction. “With clarity, you rejected wrong perceptions and all negative influences. You may get tired or hungry; you may be affected by other variables; but your purpose remains true.”

“Yes,” Brian said. “Just imagine if I saved you only to regress into deep remorse, self-doubt, and anger. I would have served no purpose to myself or anyone. In order to shelter myself from further pain, pain heavily influenced by past events, pain that fostered a destructive way of being, I would not have granted you my time and energy today. It would have been too difficult.”

Maddie asked about Tara and Soledad.

Brian launched into an explanation. “Tara, who wants to love and be loved, is heavily influenced by her family and her own predispositions. Her mind and heart are hindered. She is incapable or unwilling to reject errant perceptions. She is unable and unwilling overcome unreasonable demands in order to love again.

“Soledad is wholly incapable of separating herself from life-long pain. Thus, she has no inclination to view her perceptions as deceitful as Dennis, the man she supposedly loves. She will defend her perceived love of an unhealthy and unstable man she does not know. She already senses his destructive tendencies; yet, she will not admit to them.

“For example, she will not share her true reservations about a religious argument she and Dennis had within weeks of meeting

each other on the phone. She will not appreciate that his rigid dogmatism represents a shallow existence. As such, she will refuse to acknowledge her fears as to why Dennis' children no longer relate with him.

“For her to address these concerns would require that she address truth, truth she does not possess. Soledad is incapable and unwilling to do so. Sadly, she will ignore these indicators and Dennis' grave tendencies until a crisis arises. Even then she will justify her default way of being into a problematic future. This is no different from Battered Women Syndrome. Abused women return for more abuse.”

The point was evident to Maddie. “Whether my father or these two women, we may surmise one's true nature is shunned for a contrived representation of the past, a past which harbors an ingrained state of being absent clarity, purpose, and freedom into an unfolding present.”

Brian interjected, “Take your summation one step further. Would Tara's husband have prohibited her from loving and being loved in the event of his death? His family's impositions prevent a surviving wife from being with purpose into a bountiful present. Her sons are deprived of a healthy mother who wants to transition from a grievous loss into a fulfilling and loving relationship.

“Gaston recognized Soledad's chronicled pain when she rejected his concerns and she recoiled from her perceived loss of his genuine love. She immediately begged Mark, Gaston's friend, a man she met only twice, to find her another man. She wanted a relationship regardless. Within months, she hid within a contrived, shallow, and unhealthy relationship with Dennis, a man she met by phone weeks earlier. She clawed her way back to a known living hell of her own making, based upon a default way of being, with a disturbed and violent man.

“Gaston knew three life-defining events held sway over Soledad. He was not surprised when she rejected Pam’s wisdom, a woman who despised Dennis’ devious nature and manipulative ploys from the moment she met him.”

Maddie was vexed. “There must be another reason for such unwise choices.”

Brian admired Maddie’s probing nature. “There is an element to life which must be acknowledged as ever present. That element is power. Look at any relationship, institution, or process. Without fail, power is in play and often misused and abused.”

“Do people fall into a given state of being based upon how they use or are affected by power?” Maddie asked.

“Consider the power of the sun. The impact of the sun’s energy is proportional to its capacity and distance from a given object. The net result is a reflection of that power. A flower grows when power is balanced. However, a tree sheltered behind and under other trees will not grow as well as in direct sunlight.

“Tara neglects her own power while her family exerts undue power. They control her life. They dampen her desire to be with purpose. She is as if she were in a cave. She is effectively powerless. She will not grow.”

Maddie added, “She is in the shade of those who shield her for unmerited and selfish concerns.”

“Now look at Soledad. She exercises a great degree of power; but, she abuses it to her own peril. She spouts that she can make her own decisions. She defies those who are ready, willing, and able to use power for her benefit. Then, Dennis, a deceiver, preys upon her with a twisted and depraved agenda. His power trumps Soledad’s misuse of power.

Maddie understood. “Dennis did not even know her; she was his target; she became his victim.”

Brian shook his head in disbelief. “Akin to freak tornado that devastates a town, he descended upon the unsuspecting. He was married for twenty-six years and had only been divorced for six months. He is reckless—a power that already destroyed his family, wife, and children. He is a destructive freak of nature.”

Maddie provided two conclusions. “Tara was conditioned to comply with projections and expectations of those predisposed to control. Soledad was conditioned to run and hide and she did so with a manipulator and predator predisposed to control with evil intentions.”

“Very good. Now what does this tell you?”

“The three life-defining events are the proverbial shade behind which we hide. Even if done unknowingly, we avoid the power of truth and withdraw into an unhealthy way of being. Yet,” she asked, “is the loss of power automatic?”

“That is a curious question. The loss of power is automatic for one simple reason; we do not recognize the power we inherently possess or fail to use. Those who seek protection within a default way of being defrock themselves of their own authority.

“Consider Tara. She is from another country and a culture that once promoted arranged marriages. She was forced to marry a man against her wishes. She did not know him. However, her parents said, ‘You will marry.’ Her dreams of becoming an artist vanished. She did not want children. Now she is in the second half of her life and she is unable and unwilling to fulfill her dreams. Why?”

Maddie knew the answer. “She does not exercise the power she already possesses.”

“Exactly!”

“What about Soledad?”

Brian shifted in his chair. “She misuses and misdirects

power. She uses power for the opposite of what would be healthy, which, for her, is, unfortunately, comfortable and normal.”

“Please explain.”

“Soledad runs from what is available. If she merely waited, she would benefit. She need only accept what she already has and has always possessed. Yet, she dashes to an extreme and she does so indiscriminately. Whatever happiness she experiences is but a brief and shallow respite from an endless void that gnaws at her soul. As such, in desperation, she succumbs to misguided uses of power.”

“Then a predator senses vulnerability and pounces.”

“Yes, Dennis represents the classic devilish abuse of power. He is cunningly deceitful. Everything he does is predicated upon staging what he wants to conquer or intends to prevent. He works both angles simultaneously.”

“The innocent and distracted are susceptible.”

“Soledad was blindsided. In her vulnerable state, she had little chance. However, had she claimed and exerted her own power with balance, she would have saved herself from her default way of being and Dennis. More importantly, she would be with her true love, Gaston.”

“Mr. Barth, isn’t it true that power is misused and abused because it is misunderstood?”

“Yes,” he replied. “As with most topics, many do not understand power. People accept the misapplication of power as normal. Few question the alternative. Consider a healthy response to the abuse of power. A man is unaffected by any and all circumstances and influences and remains at ease simply for the fact that he understands his own power. Moreover, he understands the abuse of power by those around him. Even their abuse of power has no effect.”

Brian looked to the window. “Imagine a powerful storm bearing down upon us. Imagine the forceful winds, harrowing sounds, and destructive hail. Imagine your fear and frantic efforts to protect your son. Amidst your wild emotions and disjointed thoughts, you seek shelter.”

“Not a powerful presence.”

“Now imagine the same situation with a mother in the hallway calmly escorting her daughter to the stairwell and down into the basement. Why is there a difference?”

Maddie thought about the nature of power and discerned a distinction. “People seek. They want something. They seek and want for innumerable and largely selfish reasons. Whether it is money, status, companionship, control, safety, security, objects, love, relief, and more, people handle tools without understanding how to use them. Power is a tool used to engineer, or in the case of Dennis, contrive a selfish outcome.

“In the example about the storm, I exercised little power and what power I used was poorly applied. I was reactionary. I had negligible control over myself. I was ill-equipped for the randomness of life. The lady in the hallway had a purpose achieved with self-dominion. She was less affected by emotions or dramatic thoughts. She was not overwhelmed with selfish motives. She knew herself in the context of potential loss and directed her efforts to maximize potential gain. She appropriated power effectively.”

“An excellent response. Consider another example. A woman, who professes to be a Christian, has two children. She believes that she loves them dearly. The children, twelve and thirteen years old, have a father they do not see. Their father is loving, healthy and desires to be involved. Though they live in the same town, the mother proclaims the children are too busy to spend time with him. The children buy into her message and

profess their numerous activities and friends. They assert that they control their schedule with their mother's approval." Brian looked at Maddie and asked, "What are your thoughts?"

She weighed the dynamics. "Well, this is no different from the other examples. It seems as though the nature of power is consistently abused to accommodate unique and selfish variables. The mother does not love her children in the truest sense. She buries herself into them to a fault, a fault that defies Christian precepts. She does not honor their father; she does not honor the children and their needs; she does not honor her role as a mother." Maddie thought and then stated, "If she does not honor truth, she will not honor her God. She is far from freedom and truth."

"And the children?"

"The children exercise a power that is not theirs. They exercise an indefensible power delegated by a parent who needs the children to validate an unquestionably unchristian posture. In fact, the children do not respect the limited power they possess, a power to honor their father, truth, and God."

"And the father?"

Maddie struggled with her answer. "The father, while it appears he could assert his supposed 'legal rights', is not inclined to force a conclusion through an institution—the court—which also misuses power. He may not want the court to do what would be expected and just. Perhaps he views a court ordered solution as disingenuous and indignant in light of truth, if only because people lose their power and situations deteriorate into greater acrimony."

Maddie asked, "Is the church able to help?" Then she answered her own question. "The father may not be willing to petition the church, which is but another institution that fails to effectively exercise its power."

She saw the broader context. “In the end, the father stands within the storm unaffected by its forces and destruction. He grieves for the mother and children. He understands the obvious—abuse of power. He resolves to love in and with circumstances that would cause other fathers to attack and condemn in the courts, which would net a reciprocal abuse of power.”

Brian was humbled by Maddie’s response. “Do you see how most people cower within the perceived security of a default way of being? They thwart context and a way of being more congruent with an honest and just end.”

“Mr. Barth, the three life-defining events are chains that bind people to an inglorious past and direct them to an inglorious present. Is freedom the only solution?”

“Freedom is the goal. The solution is the totality of what we discussed today with the healthy use of power. For example, Tara, without understanding, clarity, and purpose, will remain alone and lonely the rest of her life. Soledad, without understanding, clarity, and purpose, will justify her existence in order to suppress the lies she actually covets. The mother of the two children, without understanding, clarity, and purpose, will embrace the lie that her children are unaffected into an unknown present absent their father.”

“And Dennis?” Maddie inquired.

“Well, if you knew his full history, you would conclude that sick people need therapy. He has red flags that warn any healthy person to run. Court orders, psychological evaluations, abused children who no longer speak with him, confrontations with the law, and more.

“There is an axiom: You cannot expect healthy behavior from unhealthy people. Dennis is unable to secure understanding and clarity. He is unhealthy. Absent therapy, he will remain a

fatally flawed character and abuse power.”

The conversation had become heavy. “The element of power is foreboding,” Maddie said. She churned thoughts through her mind until she rested upon an obvious conclusion. “I am alive today because you exercised power in an unexpected manner decades ago. You struggled with a conflict unmatched in your life. It would have been easy for you to cave to selfish desires.”

Brian noted, “The irony is that power does not have to be used. One may simply recognize the dynamics of a situation and allow the inevitable to unfold to a truth-based conclusion.”

Maddie looked confused.

“Perhaps I did not exercise power when I saved you. Perhaps I saw what was true and chose not to impede the manifestation of truth. My choice to save you was not so much volitional as it was deferential. Water flows the path of least resistance. Am I able to stop a tidal wave?”

“Are you suggesting one may choose to fight an overbearing force or allow the force to take its natural and inevitable course?”

“Certainly. Look at Gaston. He expressed his desire to alter his relationship with Soledad until he could provide for her. When she agreed, only to reject his position the next day, he saw unexpected forces surface—powerful forces. Rather than fight those forces, he stepped aside and observed. Three months later Soledad was in a new dynamic. Even newer forces were at work—dark forces. Her plight became more complicated.”

“What did Gaston do?”

“He observed as Soledad enmeshed herself into a misperceived love as maligned as her unfulfilled purpose in life.” Brian drew a parallel to himself. “I simply stepped aside when I chose to save you. I viewed your life in a context anchored in truth. I released my prized catch because I was hooked to a higher calling—pure love. At that moment, the bright light

appeared and I wrapped my arms around you.”

Maddie was humbled. “The willingness not to exercise power is as vital as the proper exercise of power?”

“Absolutely,” Brian said. “The willingness not to exercise power is powerful. Being deferential is as impactful as being volitional. Imagine if the father who does not see his children reacted in anger.”

“His power would serve no purpose. His power would destroy. Power would clash with an abused power. But,” Maddie said, “he should not fail to use power when needed.”

“Correct. The failure to use power is an abuse of power.”

“Did my father abuse power or fail to use power?”

“Both. Similar to Tara and Soledad, he defaulted to ingrained patterns. The subsequent misdirection of his life should not have been unexpected.”

“In retrospect, you mean?”

“Yes, in retrospect for those who are unaware of the three life-defining events. But, for those who understand the consequences of a default way of being, the outcome is not a surprise.”

“Do you realize the magnitude of your last thought?”

Brian laughed. “Of course I do. And so do you. Do you appreciate that, henceforth, you have the possibility to manifest your life in ways previously unforeseen?”

“I believe so. However, where do I get the power?”

Chapter Nine

Brian replied, "You already have the power. The challenge is whether you recognize and use it. Once you possess power, you may harness and direct energy for a chosen goal. A man may harness the energy from the power of the sun to grow a garden. He uses energy from food he consumes for a given purpose."

Maddie interrupted Brian. "But there are times I do not have power. I do not have power over another man's child."

"Correct," Brian said. "However, if you witness a man beat his child, you have the inherent power to intervene."

Maddie nodded.

"A man may hide behind the title of father, but he compromises his authority when he abuses power. The same is true with those in public office. A president, teacher, and policeman have titles and requisite power. However, we have the power to hold them accountable when they err."

"I understand."

"Maddie, if you did not intervene in the obvious beating of a child, it would be no different than witnessing a person struck by a car and failing to offer assistance. You have power at the instant an injustice occurs; but if you fail to possess and exercise power, you fail to direct the energy."

"Is this any different than my father's failure to help himself?"

"You know the answer."

"When he failed to recognize patterns which dictated his present behavior, he lacked the power to understand much less fulfill a particular purpose. Had he recognized his power, he

would have harnessed the energy to correct flawed perceptions and restored broken relationships.”

“How does this insight impact you?”

“I am saddened; yet, I am hopeful. My relationship with him was never the same after Heather died. Though I regret this deeply, I learned from this loss and his failure. I am able to be more meaningful and purposeful in life.”

Tears welled up in Maddie’s eyes. “I know the tragedy at Paradox Peak is one of my three life-defining experiences.” Her heart was heavy. She cried inconsolably and brushed Brian’s hands away in despair.

“Please do not revert to a default a way of being with me. I know too much.” As he reached for her hands a second time, she relented.

When her grief was spent, she said, “I want to live powerfully.”

“You have the power, now direct the energy.” With these encouraging words, Brian explained the nature of energy in general terms. “We have choices. We make choices all the time. One of the choices we make without much consideration is how to use energy. Sadly, we reflexively direct our energy for ignoble reasons. We knowingly or unknowingly cause harm.”

With her surprised look, Brian offered more insight. “Just as water flows down a rut, we discharge our energy forcefully and thoughtlessly. Our energy flows without purpose. The end result is waste and destruction.”

“Is humanity that disengaged with life?”

Brian was struck by her question. “Your query speaks to your level of denial. The answer should be transparent.” She felt a tinge of regret for posing the query.

“Mr. Barth, do I suffer from a lack of awareness?”

“Yes.”

“My question was wasted energy?”

“Perhaps. But your question is the heart of the matter. With an attitude borne from what is routine, you fail to invite an alternative perspective and attitude. If you accept a default way of being as credible, you will less likely see possibility. You will accept what occurs without the least understanding or challenge. Does this make sense?”

“My attitude is energy?”

“Of course. Do not fall into the trap of making something it is not. If you do not understand the definition of a term, energy for example, clarify the definition. If energy is what we apply from a source of power, then attitude is the governor of energy from personal power.”

“Then a good or bad attitude will result in disparate uses of energy and culminate in equally differing results.”

“Exactly right, Maddie.”

“A true intent originates with a healthy attitude and the energy is channeled to a noble end. A maligned intent originates with an unhealthy attitude and is channeled to an ignoble end.”

“I agree with your statement; but, here is a note of caution. Intent may not be maligned in the first place if someone acts thoughtlessly. If intent is executed by rote tendencies, an ignoble end may be achieved. Consider Soledad. Her intent may not have been maligned, but it was a rote response and the end result was disastrous.”

“I understand your point. Soledad defied possibility and reverted to an ingrained pattern. She may have a correct perception in the future and proclaim she never intended to cause or endure such loss or pain.” Maddie pressed the topic and asked, “How does your observation that intent may not be maligned square with one’s attitude and use of energy?”

“Here is an illustration. An elderly man had a son who was

rebellious and angry throughout his adult life. The father, a title he embraced, attempted to use his power judiciously. He was concerned and sought ways to help his son. He tried everything. He offered rehabilitation and financial support. He offered insight and love. He offered stern advice as to what was right and proper. He shared what he believed to be scriptural truth and encouraged his son to follow the straight and narrow path. Sadly, the son deepened his involvement with drugs and suffered a tragic death. He was murdered.”

After a moment of reflection Maddie said, “Well, the father did all he could.”

“Did he?” Brian asked.

She weighed Brian’s summation. “If I apply what we discussed, I must question the father’s use of power and subsequent energy in light of his attitude. If his perceptions are flawed, his attitude would be incongruent with his son’s needs. The father’s energy would satisfy one of two ends. The first satisfies his son’s genuine needs. The second satisfies the father’s underlying hopes. The first option is ideal; the second may be incongruent with truth.”

“What next?”

“The father is in an unenviable position. If he does not meet his son exactly where he is, if he fails to understand what is spoken and unspoken, he is unable to help in the most effective way possible. If the father is attached to a default way of being that precludes acceptance of what is true, just as anyone might fail to relate with another, the son persists in dire circumstances with or without his father’s understanding.

She added, “I am not suggesting the son would not persist with his destructive behavior if the father related with him with clarity; however, I am suggesting both would more fully understand, especially the father, which would possibly pave the

path for redemption and restoration.”

Brian rested his arms on his knees and interlaced his fingers. Maddie read his posture as an assault to a higher truth. He said, “Your assessment is spot on; however, consider a critical component. You mentioned satisfying the father’s underlying hopes. There is a component missing. The father’s hopes often involve needs and desires. Rare is the father who, lacking clarity, will cease the imposition of expectations and projections. It is difficult to detach oneself from prejudices and constructs that block understanding of another person’s way of being. A father would have to completely disarm himself to affect a son whose deepest misgiving is rightly understanding without being understood.”

“The son had understanding and was frustrated because his father did not?”

Brian pointed his finger toward the ceiling. “Rest assured, while understanding is far more important than being understood, the latter can be devastating.”

“Why?”

“Well, consider the father. He did not understand that his son understood. The son, while he lived destructively, was not wholly unstable. He understood that his father did not understand. If the father had understood this truth, he may have entertained a new perspective. He may have used his energy more effectively.” Brian paused. “Imagine if the father finally understood his son and offered him unconditional love and total acceptance—the only thing the son wanted. Do you see the impact?”

“That is amazing insight!” Maddie exclaimed. “My father did not understand and he was not understood at least by me and my mother. Yet, Mr. Barth, you understood that my father did not understand. Out of ignorance, my energy was misapplied;

whereas your energy was rejected by a man who misused his energy because he misused his power.

“You mentioned that intent may not be maligned if one acts without sound thought or feeling. The father we discussed furthered his intent by and with an ingrained pattern. His son’s tragic death was realized without malice from the one man who could have been more effective.”

“Yes, this is true.”

Brian had been fishing with Maddie for over an hour. They fished into the deep. Akin to a thousand piece puzzle, she placed each new insight where it belonged. She was becoming a master angler.

With a renewed sense of urgency she said, “Had Mrs. Barth met you exactly where you were after the loss of Heather, she would have realized you met her where she was. If my father had done the same, if he had rid himself of misunderstandings and flawed perceptions, he would have been more accepting of himself and your selfless act. He would have forgiven himself for the blame he wrongly accepted. He would have been the friend and father he was before that tragic event.”

She persisted. “Do you doubt whether you did everything possible for my father and Mrs. Barth?”

Brian looked at her and said, “I hope so. People who have been endured unimaginable loss into clarity, those who do not wish to live an empty and meaningless life, they have context that is forever altered. I was broken the day I hung upon that cable. I faintly recall lifting my legs in attempt to hurl myself into the canyon. I believed I had dropped you as well. I did not want to live.”

Brian looked away. He had fished in the toughest conditions. He thought of Stacy and Spencer. He thought of Joe. He thought of Heather. “I did everything I could for Joe and Stacy.

I did my best to teach them how to fish, if only by my silent example.

“If someone does not fish or refuses to cast his line into the deep, he will never catch the finest life has to offer. My father taught me to fish for one important reason. He taught me to fish so that I could teach you to fish.”

“Really?” Maddie asked with disbelief. “How do you know?”

“My father was a fisher of men. In his interactions with people, he delved into the deep. Others may not have realized it, but he met them exactly where they were. He did so with me. I did not appreciate this for years. Just as he taught me to fish in murky and deep waters, he taught me to fish within the souls of humanity. My father marveled at the lessons he learned. He caught more within the deep of humanity than all natural waters.”

Brian walked back to his chair and sat down. “He encouraged me to find fishing partners, those who are teachable. He said I would be amazed at what I would learn and who I would become. This is exactly what happened. I am amazed at the impact on my life and the lives of others.”

Maddie held her breath and choked with emotion. A void within her began to fill with hopeful expectation. “I lost much that tragic day. I lost my best friend; I lost my father; I have grieved for years.”

Brian reached for the envelope on the table and handed it to her. Before you read this letter, I must ask you an important question. Will you be my fishing partner?”

Tears pooled in her eyes. “Yes, I would be honored.”

The two anglers sat in silence until Maddie looked at the envelope. “Mr. Barth, why are you returning this to me?”

Brian smiled gently. “Your father wrote this letter for you. He wanted you to find me. He wanted you to read it in my

presence.”

She was floored. “This cannot be. He pleaded with me. He entreated me until I vowed that I would find you. He wanted me to give you this letter.”

“I know,” replied Brian. “And you were successful. You honored your father and fulfilled your vow. However, your father’s failure to reconcile my choice to save your life in no way diminished his love for you.”

Before Maddie could interrupt, Brian raised his hand. “Listen dear child, I am a father; I am a fisherman and I know my best friend. Now, fish; cast your line into the deep. Open the letter.”

She slowly unsealed the correspondence. When she saw her name at the top, she unconsciously slid from the chair and dropped to her knees. Tears poured forth like a streaks on a water color portrait and created a sobering scene. She had carried this letter for the last twelve months. She was the messenger in search of the recipient only to learn she was the recipient and Brian was the messenger. Humbled, she began to read.

To Maddie, my dearest and only child,

Congratulations! You found Mr. Barth which means you have had one heck of a conversation. Such was my hope. My last wish was for you to find closure and manifest an abundant and purposeful life. My failure to effectively cope with unexpected and unwanted tragedies left me incomplete. My life was less than abundant and purposeful. And most regrettable of all, I was not able to explain why. When you vowed to find Mr. Barth, in many ways, I became whole again. I knew he would make sense of the inexplicable.

Let me tell you a brief story, a story you have never heard. A

long time ago, when Brian and I were junior officers in the Marine Corps, we were in a firefight in Iraq. At one point, as our unit retreated to a defensive position, I slipped and fell. With an injured leg and unable to walk, I was exposed to enemy fire. Brian, who was a few yards away, dove on top of me. He instantaneously rolled me to a nearby concrete barrier. The enemy shot at us. Each roll was a micro-second ahead of round after round and certain death. We survived because of his courageous actions.

Once we were safely at our unit, I wrote a proposed commendation for Brian. He deserved a medal for heroism. When Brian heard of my intent, he cornered me and Gunny Sergeant Bierman, the only other witness to his bravery. Brian convinced me not to acknowledge his actions. He did not want a medal as a constant reminder for saving my life. He did not want to receive praise for what was a natural act of love, as natural as breathing. Brian said he would think less of himself.

His bravery and humility taught me a lot about myself and the meaning of life. These lessons were underscored by one defining thought. Because of him, I would come home to you. We would be together. Years later, with the tragic event at Paradox Peak, I became indebted to him again. Yet, this time, for his selfless act, you came home to me.

Maddie, I am not half the man Brian Barth was and is. In fact, what I confronted the day he saved you was more than I could handle. I did not know how to accept what could not be described. I had difficulty understanding much less acknowledging Brian's loss. I struggled with the gift he gave me and your mother. While I could deal with most anything, my mind and heart were irreconcilable.

As the years passed, I grew distant from everyone. I hid within impenetrable places. I refused to relinquish lies when I

should have expressed unconditional gratitude. This posture grieved my soul.

While I survived difficult circumstances, I do not know why I was unable to deal with your life and Heather's death with equal poise and grace. Why did I allow the unknown to affect my relationship with you? I will never know the answers; however, you may.

Sadly, since that tragic day, whenever I looked upon you, I saw my failure to save Heather and I saw a gift I never fully accepted. I complicated this posture by blaming myself for taking the wrong path. I blamed myself for Brian's loss.

The confluence of these thoughts and emotions reinforced a dilemma. As hard as this may be to express, and as hard as it may be to understand, I would never have sacrificed your life to save another child. I would not have been able to save Heather over you. This consideration, contrasted with Brian's sacrifice, will eat at a man and defeat him unless he makes amends. This is what happened to me.

I was conflicted. I could no longer relate with Brian. I spurned my most important friendship during the most trying of ordeals. I made unwise choices. Ironically, the one man who could have helped me was the one man I avoided. I was humiliated. I felt shame.

Then a revelation began to nag at me. I sowed within you—my only child—seeds of discontent that would take a lifetime to identify much less uproot. To whatever extent, you would become as incomplete and as dispirited as me. I could not leave this world without seeking a resolution. As your father, what was I to do?

The answer became obvious. I had to restore my relationship with my best friend, the man who could save you, the man who saved you decades ago. This is why I asked you to

find Mr. Barth. He is profoundly wise. He has an uncommonly compassionate soul. If anyone is able to help you navigate troubled waters, he is the one. Let me explain.

Brian cares about truth, honor, and justice. His ultimate desire is to love. We know this by his character and actions. He is able and willing to attain these exemplary ideals. I am not able to explain how and why, but he has uncanny insight. He is able to expunge pretenses and love unconditionally. He will offer you what I did not.

Maddie, you are the world to me. I love you. In that same spirit, I place you into the care of my hero. Mr. Barth will provide; he will guide; he will love you as his own.

As a mom, you may appreciate the fundamentals we should bestow upon our children, such as truth, honor, justice, and love. In some small or great measure, I have not given these to you. This reflects poorly upon me. Forgive me, Maddie. Forgive me.

Mr. Barth will lead you to redemption. Listen to him. Ask questions. He will take you on a journey and reveal what few understand. I love you. Dad

Maddie finished the letter and stared. After deep reflection, she looked at Brian and said, "He understands; he is understood."

Chapter Ten

Seated in her chair again, Maddie looked as if the weight of the world had been released from her shoulders. “My father was indebted to you. I am indebted to you.”

Brian summarily dismissed her claim. “You may never understand what I am about to share. Maddie, I am indebted to you and your father.”

Incredulously she asked, “How could this be?”

Brian sought a simple answer for what could be as complicated as rigorous calculus. He thought of an oak tree. The oak is not only majestic, its wood is one of the hardest. The oak’s attributes reflect its character as a warrior. Brian knew a main reason for its strength. “Did you know the mighty oak tree has a taproot?”

She looked quizzically at him.

“The taproot digs deep into the soil, particularly when the tree is young. As the tree grows, the lateral roots expand and strengthen. The taproot anchors the tree. Now, imagine the oak has three main branches growing out of the trunk. These branches produce a number of smaller branches.” Brian leaned forward and lowered his voice to draw her closer. “Life is analogous to the mighty oak. Most people live among the branches. Few thrive at the base of the trunk or access the taproot.”

Maddie sat patiently.

“Imagine the oak during the most horrendous conditions as the winds strike the branches and the elements batter its form. Chaos ensues. Yet, the oak withstands all. Why? The taproot.”

Brian inhaled deeply. “My life is not unlike the oak. I faced two of the most difficult events which involved you and your father. The first event was the Iraq firefight. The second event at Paradox Peak resulted in the loss of Heather and eventually Stacy and Spencer. The totality of such trauma drove me to accept key precepts of life. Severe loss drove me from the branches down to the trunk and into the taproot of my life where I accessed my spirit.”

Maddie was dumbfounded.

Brian continued. “You and Joe are the reason I know what it means to be authentically alive. The majority of humanity lives in the branches. They are so engrossed with distractions and lose sight of life itself. They have little comprehension of what it means to be with purpose.”

“Why and how does man leave the tree trunk and taproot?” Maddie asked.

“For all the reasons we discussed today. Confusion, lack of understanding, selfish motives, and more.”

“Mr. Barth, this does not answer my question. How does humanity get into the upper levels of the tree?” She sought the underlying reason.

“Man climbs the tree because of the three life-defining events that shape his life into a default way of being.”

“The three branches are the three life-defining events!” Maddie exclaimed.

“Yes. Early in life, the three branches are close to the ground. They are within one’s grasp and are easily scalable. Once people climb onto them, invariably they do not return. They climb higher and are unaware of their compromised position within thinner and weaker branches. Humanity unknowingly strives higher for what is elusive and undefined.

“During the spring and summer seasons, leaves obscure

what is outside and below. Man is blind to what is and to possibility. In the winter, when the leaves are gone, he faces a stark reality. He realizes his precarious perch and grips harder for fear of falling. He does not know that he does not know; he does not find truth.

“If he climbs further, his weight becomes more imbalanced upon even more inferior branches. He either falls from a lack of support or the twigs break. Either way, he lands to ruin far from the base of the tree and the taproot he forsook long ago.”

“Why doesn’t man sense a lack of support?”

Brian grimaced slightly. “Your question is largely rhetorical. Consider our conversation. Given what we discussed, you must agree man refuses to be any differently than he is.”

Maddie attempted to justify the failure to be at the base of the trunk, “Well, one may climb down nonetheless, especially if he knows something is wrong.”

“That is fine; but, as a practical matter, how does this happen?”

She was confused.

“Once people climb the branches, even if they know something is wrong, the tree has grown taller. They are too far from the ground to return safely. The trunk is too wide and rugged to slide down. There is no support. Ingenuity and strength are two elements required to descend. One may try, but the impasse is often insurmountable. He quakes in fear. He rationalizes and justifies not returning to base of the tree or the taproot of his existence.”

“Okay,” Maddie said, “but one may receive advice from those who may explain his errors.”

Brain chuckled. “Yes, but it is easier to climb up than down. When one climbs higher, he sees what is straight ahead. He reaches for limbs and secures his feet with ease. Have you ever

climbed down a ladder?"

Maddie thought of the few times she had. "It is not easy," she conceded.

"Even if people receive wise counsel, they balk. They are fearful. Inevitably, the fear of losing an unstable position forces them to accept their lot in life. They justify a belief that their current place is better than falling."

She understood. "We climb further away from what empowers and falsely conclude the Holy Grail is within the upper limits of the tree."

"That's correct. Those who reach the top and get a glimpse of what is beyond may have a nice view, but they cannot touch or hold anything substantial. They search, but they do not know to revert to the basics of life. They have nothing. Meanwhile, their hold is desperate and often accompanied by a subconscious fear of falling."

Maddie was intrigued. "Man lives within the tree and traverses from one life-limiting branch to the others. He acts and reacts within a circumscribed view. The three main branches and all inferior branches represent what is hollow and deceitful."

Brian nodded solemnly. "Life becomes difficult and tragic."

"Tragic," Maddie noted, "for one's failure to be at the base, at the taproot, with one's purpose and truth."

"Do you understand why and how you and your father were instrumental in my life? But for you and Joe, I would not be with such purpose. While the storms of life raged, I was anchored to what was integral. I accessed my taproot. I was grounded, free of most deceit and confusion. Free of distractions. With each loss, I was humbled into a context that I was not to be in life, I was to be life. I am the source of life connected to the Giver of life. All suffering grounded me to this timeless truth. I know who I am. I am able to be. This is why I am grateful."

Brian's explanation struck a chord. Maddie responded. "My father climbed into the three branches and did not return. Now he wants me to leave what ill-serves me and my family." She weighed the other examples. "Tara, Soledad, and the father who lost his son, they are within the branches. They have not climbed down."

"This is true. The longer they remain, the more entrenched they will become. Such is the irony: to be enmeshed within that which does not support."

"What do you mean?"

"People are comfortable with what is uncomfortable. Comfort within discomfort is a pattern. They eventually travel from limb to limb in much the same way a captive lion paces inside a cage. Randomness disappears. The boredom of life and expected become the norm. This is the point that life ceases to enrich."

"Because the expected is what man knows?"

"Certainly. The expected is expected and desired. The unexpected is rejected if only because one does not know how to persevere. He does not have the skills to negotiate the unknown. He does not want the unknown."

"Thus, the pattern."

"The pattern persists like an unwelcome dinner guest."

Maddie laughed. "Oh my, an unwanted dinner guest for years, often for a lifetime."

She marveled at her possibilities. "My father was convinced you could help me. I am far wiser and richer woman for our conversation. Yet, it occurs to me there is a practical element I have not fully appreciated. Is there something more?"

"The answer rests with one word—patterns. The patterns we fabricate must be recognized and defeated. We must be sensitive to patterns that deny a fruitful life. Let's use your father

as an example. We will keep it simple and lay the foundation.”

Brian secured a blank sheet of paper and a pencil. He drew a crude tree with a trunk, taproot and three main branches which extended up and out. He labeled the main branches “A”, “B”, and “C”.

“These three branches are the three life-defining events.”

Brain validated her statement and continued to write. He identified minor branches for “A” as “A1, A2, A3, and A4 and then smaller branches as A4a, A4a1, through A4b2a1 ad others.” The shorter labels are smaller branches which are closer to the main branch. The longer labels reflected higher and smaller branches that are farther away. Maddie followed the development of the pattern until he drew the B and C branches.

Brian assessed his diagram and explained it to her. “Your father was a smart man; however, he was equally stubborn,” he said with a grin. “With life-defining events, he climbed the tree. Based upon his words and actions, we know he struggled and failed to return to the trunk and taproot.”

Maddie observed the path to A4b2a1 and surveyed its distance to the base of the tree. She noted the distance from the three main branches to the ground.

Brian explained, “The farther your father traveled this path, the more he immersed himself within lies cemented by patterns. He frequently lacked strength and support.”

Maddie traced her finger limb by limb. “Branch A juts in multiple directions. Even if my father made progress to the tree trunk, he may have been lured by tangential distractions and distortions. He may have reached A2, but A2c1 and A2d4 may have delayed him or caused him to climb in a different direction.”

This practical exercise was instructive. “Mr. Barth, most people climb life-defining branches and live in a contrived reality. Their energy is consumed and wasted far from the ground. They

literally and figuratively have no grounding. Their existence is dependent upon an apparatus lacking fundamental support.”

Brian observed Maddie as she placed the image of the tree on her lap and contemplated the plight of humanity. “I can’t help but think we are blinded, volitionally blinded. This self-induced condition supersedes objectivity. If one casually embraces wrong perceptions, he has no reason to climb down.”

Maddie thought of her own life. She knew the tragedy at Paradox Peak was one of her life-defining events. She knew this part of her past ingrained a default way of being and subverted a truth-based life. “How is one to know any differently than what he knows? How would I know to alter my outlook if you had not taken me fishing?”

“That is a great question and the answer rests upon a genuine inquiry. One must ask a genuine inquiry with the hope of applying wisdom, similar to what we discussed today. There are effective means to know and defeat a default way of being.

“Consider a few illustrations. If a woman lived a coddled existence and never experienced significant struggle, she may question her life purpose at some point. Why? An easy life lacks substance and meaning. A jarring crisis may convince her that the norm, as she understands, is a lie.

“Suppose a man lives a difficult life for decades and is tired and defeated. Then a casual bystander makes a comment that he lives better than two-thirds of the world’s population. This may lead the man to an epiphany. He may pose a genuine inquiry and understand that his misery is of his own making. He realizes life is a self-fulfilling prophecy.

“The point should be clear. Even with a lifetime of unhealthy patterns, one may inquire and understand. With character, he may seek truth. If he has clarity, if he is detached, and if he has power, among other distinctions we discussed, he

may transform his life.

Maddie was surprised. "Should I conclude that my father did not make a genuine inquiry?"

"Perhaps, but I don't think so. I am certain he inquired and he did so genuinely; but, did he have the tools for transformation? For example, if your father had approached me after that tragic day or even years later, I would have guided him to a right understanding. I would have served as a tool and directed his mind and heart toward clarity. If he had accepted a true perception, he would have benefited and may have been transformed."

Brian reinforced this point. "Tara wants to love and be loved. Yet, her family forbids this possibility. Although she knows their reasoning is flawed, she will not act with truth. She sought counselors to no avail. A close friend vetted the reasons she should act in her best interest and those of her children. Yet, she refuses to use tools and embrace truth with courage.

"With Soledad, we see the opposite. She had tools, but she did not see truth. Gaston made a tough and selfless choice. He was without money and a passport. When he learned Soledad wanted to buy him a ticket and send him money, although she was unable to buy food for her family, he did what any principled man would have done. He loved her so much that he was willing to lose her.

"While Soledad may have accepted his choice for a day, her acceptance was disingenuous. Candidly, she never made a genuine inquiry."

"What tools were available to her?" Maddie inquired.

"Gaston, conversation, congruent emotions, objective thoughts, honesty, clarity, measured justice, and more. We must acknowledge Gaston's motive as pure. He had no intent to harm. When Soledad initially agreed with his conclusion, he marveled at

her apparent depth. If he had the funds, he would have flown to her immediately.” Brian knew this was a vital point.

“Maddie, if the conversation between Gaston and Soledad began as a tabula rasa and, after they finished sharing for an hour, if the blank slate was filled with pure intentions and right understandings, would love have prevailed?”

Maddie saw his point. “A wholesome and honest dialogue was skewed with Soledad’s wrong perception sourced within her painful past.”

“Absolutely!” Brian exclaimed. “Soledad unknowingly introduced visceral pain and historical misunderstanding which foreclosed truth and present possibility.”

Maddie excitedly directed the conversation. “Soledad did not know her past pattern just as my father had no comprehension of his misgivings. Neither my father nor Soledad overcame the obstacles which impaired clarity. They were upon the three branches and traveled far from what would have grounded them. They distanced themselves from truth.”

“Yes,” he said. “We are at a critical juncture. Listen carefully. Something harmful happens when one crosses the threshold from integrity to ignominy. One places blame. Once blame is leveled, one’s course is invariably irreversible. The mind is closed; the heart is cold.

“Soledad, having rejected Gaston’s selfless choice, retreated to her ingrained pattern—an entrenched history. The moment she made her choice, she erected defensive barriers and fired the first salvos of blame. She insulated herself within the bubble that supposedly protected her from loss. Yet, this bubble was the impetus for even greater loss.”

Maddie became agitated. “Soledad refused tools and fled to comfortable discomfort. She fled to a known and already existing way of being that paralleled a past fraught with constant

suffering.” Maddie felt profound regret. “My father did the same and he blamed himself for Heather’s death and his inability to reconcile his unfulfilled life. He instinctively withdrew to an existence that did more harm than good.”

Maddie was disappointed. “And we do this all the time!” She squeezed her fists in contempt. “We do this routinely to ourselves.” As the profoundness of her point settled, she whispered, “Soledad had an amazing future with a man who would not allow her to suffer needlessly. Gaston acted selflessly. He truly loved her. Love is an act. He acted in love.”

Maddie sighed and said, “My father had a life with his daughter and best friend; yet he neglected both. He squandered his purpose because of regret and self-induced pain.”

Brian was pleased with her conclusion. “Both examples demonstrate a salient point. We are solely responsible for the paths we travel. We are responsible for the good and harm we bring upon ourselves and others. We willfully, even if unknowingly, relegate our lives to what should not be.”

Maddie saw the import of this observation. “Our thoughts and emotions either make or break purpose—true purpose. If we lack the virtuous and defer to what is base, we discard what has value. It is only with a genuine inquiry and effective use of tools that carnage may be prevented.

“My father knew he failed. He could not climb down from the three branches. After a lifetime, he realized his choices were flawed. He was miserable; he wanted me to follow another path and defeat my defaulted way of being.”

“I could not agree more,” Brian noted. “Soledad was no different. Even though her sister offered clarity about Gaston’s wisdom and loving act, Soledad lashed out and spurned Pam’s counsel. Soledad climbed higher into unsupported branches and ceased all communication with Gaston. What does this tell you?”

Maddie thought and said, “She had to be right. She had to prove she was right. She drew the proverbial line in the sand. She could not retract her choices and actions; she would not concede the errors of a choice that lacked truth. Doing so would defy her history, a past filled with Justifiers—justification for her thoughts, emotions, and actions. No one could prove her wrong. She refused to be wrong. As such, Pam’s efforts were futile. Soledad’s historical pain mandated her present pain, which was nothing less than a vicious and tragic cycle.”

“Spot on, Maddie. Quite subtly, your father lived within a similar cycle. He lacked the will to seek help.”

Maddie wanted to understand if her father was solely culpable for his suffering. “Are we responsible for our own dilemmas?” she asked.

“Yes,” Brian consented. “Your astute observation is best explained by what I refer to as ‘singularities.’”

She pondered the name.

“Singularities are isolated choices that disperse energy based upon thoughts, emotions, and intent and may be either good or bad. A singularity bursts with such force that the truth is either propelled to a hopeful unknown or repelled to a hopeless pattern.”

“One’s singular choice has the power of creation or destruction, analogous to the power of God,” she whispered.

He stated the obvious. “We are made in His image.”

“Oh my gosh,” Maddie said. “We choose to be within either a living hell or heaven on earth. Now I appreciate the inordinate suffering my father endured. His mind was a constant battleground. His heart was defeated by despair and confusion. He created his own living hell.”

She sat in contemplation. “Tara is the same. She lives into regret. Her life proceeds without a noble distinction. I cannot

imagine the emotions she harbors. She may know of truth, but she will not possess truth.

“Soledad’s life unfolded not unexpectedly. She rejected what was clear and submerged her life into continued deceit. She ceased all communication with Gaston and entered a relationship months later and married within weeks to a man she would not have under healthy and conditions.”

“Maddie, your assessment is sound. Ultimately, people act unwittingly to preserve what they know. If one is negative, he cultivates negativity. If one is volatile and enters relationships haphazardly to his detriment, he embraces unhealthy people. These are patterns, destructive patterns, patterns without grounding. People accept what is intolerable to avoid what is wrongly perceived to be more intolerable.”

Maddie embraced Brian’s point. “Tara accepts a life of loneliness to avoid a brutal but necessary battle with her family. Soledad accepted life with a predator which furthered an historical pattern: she protects herself within a painful and destructive past. She does not want to be wrong; this prevents her from knowing and doing right.”

The conversation about singularities was not finished. Maddie sought the opposing result. “Once affected by a singularity, one is blessed beyond measure or devastated.”

“Your conclusion is reasonable. However, allow me to steer you toward something particular. One may react positively or negatively to a singularity, or not react at all.”

“I do not understand. If Soledad had waited for Gaston and they were together today, he would be positive. Since Soledad chose as she did, Gaston must be distraught. Soledad’s singularity, which forced her into a chronic past, had to cause him pain.”

Brian cautioned. “Someone’s singularity does not create the

singularity of another.”

This truth was not readily apparent. But, as Maddie weighed the significance of his point, she responded with surprise. “I think I get it. Suppose you had a singularity at Paradox Peak which caused my father’s singularity.” She paused to deliberate. “His singularity did not necessarily cause you to have another one.”

“Exactly so. This is why I am indebted to you and your father.” Their conversation entered the realm of the spiritual. “Some will transcend the temporal and arrive within the divine. They then abide internally and have proper context for what happens externally. The loss of Heather while saving your life, coupled with the loss your father’s friendship, led me to a distinctly spiritual path.”

Brian struggled to adequately express his next thought. “Relatively few people enter the realm of the spiritual. They are attached to circumstances that riddle and plague their lives.” As Maddie leaned her head to the side, he added, “They remain within circumstances and far from a true purpose and the spiritual. A spirit-led life transcends circumstances. There is no need for singularities.

“What of Tara?” Maddie asked.

“Tara could choose to accept her family’s singularity and be with purpose. While her loving another man is unacceptable, she has a choice to be contrary to her past patterns and to be within an unexpected singularity.

“This is no different than being bound to a wheelchair. One may be congruent with this circumstance as providential. One’s choice to accept what cannot be altered—the unthinkable—would be a marvel to most. Many would look with pity upon a person bound to a wheelchair. Few would embrace his circumstances as if nothing was wrong.”

“But Tara suffers from an injustice!”

“This is true. However, the key is to withstand a singularity with understanding. Tara must accept the injustice or create a corresponding singularity. Either scenario may lead her to peace beyond understanding into the spiritual. A new singularity does not need to occur, although a new singularity need not cause further harm.”

When Brian saw that Maddie was confused, he tried to help.

“Refer to Soledad. If her initial response to Gaston’s explanation was genuine, then we know she accepted his choice with strength, courage, and selflessness. Rather than react harshly the next day, Soledad could have acted with love. Love, the defining act of being, could have prevailed. If she loved Gaston, nothing would have affected her. Nothing! There was no reason for a singularity that resulted in her current demise.”

Maddie nodded. “What of Gaston?”

Brian shook his head. “He loves her to this day. Gaston did not act harshly. The fact that she rebelled was new insight for him. He reconciled how and why she handled conflict, even perceived conflict. He saw her default pattern—her historical way of being.

“He did the same when she was duped by Dennis. Gaston felt great pain. He warned her and others about Dennis, but he rose above and beyond circumstances. Clarity and purpose prevented him from being blinded, which included Soledad’s singularity. He loved her even as she impaled herself with an historical past into a foreboding present.”

Brian made a key point. “We learn about ourselves and others when in the thick of trials. Our character is revealed by how we handle struggle. Times of ease are not as instructive.”

Maddie thought of her son. Would he be challenged? How would he act or react to life’s sundry circumstances?

Brian continued. "Gaston was relatively unaffected by Soledad's rash initial reaction. He was patient. He waited. Even when Mark came to him and said that Soledad loved him, he replied, 'Please have her speak with me. I am waiting.' When months passed and Soledad hunkered down into her protective and defensive shell, when she refused to speak with him, he waited still. Meanwhile, he planned for life in her country. He applied for a passport. He saved money and prepared his children for his long absence. He longed to be with the lady he loved."

Brian sighed. "Maddie, I hope you see the parallels and contrasts between Gaston and your father. Your father waited decades for something that would not arrive without a genuine inquiry. Resolved, Gaston waited for months, which may have felt like years. He made a genuine inquiry. He sought what your father did not. He willed for the providential."

"If I understand correctly, variables had little influence over Gaston. He refused to be grafted into what was troubling. He deferred to a spiritual plane and freely sought a divine understanding. In this light, he loved in truth."

"Thus," Brian added, "Soledad's singularity was inconsequential to him. He had no reason to react with a separate singularity."

"You mentioned peace beyond understanding earlier. Is peace critical?"

Brian gave this observation its due. "Peace is freedom. However, such peace is not easily secured. Often the greatest obstacle to peace is one's will. Few understand the import of the will as a means to truth, love, and freedom. The journey from where one is to truth and love is not complicated. Yet, love, truth, and freedom are difficult to achieve without the will."

"Why?"

"True love is attained when one reconciles spirit above self."

When this truth is known, one may will himself to a higher purpose.”

“Mr. Barth, had to reconcile that circumstances did not matter. Is this how you saved my life? You experienced unspeakable anguish; yet, you saw the divine. You willed yourself to love at great cost.”

“No. My will served no greater purpose than to surrender to divine will. I did not create a singularity. I deferred to God’s will, to the true Singularity. I deferred to truth and love. I loved that day—true love.”

Maddie had only one choice to make. She looked earnestly at her fishing partner and declared, “I want to make that journey.”

Chapter Eleven

Brian opined, “The wise suggest life is not about the end, but the journey. It would be difficult and foolish to argue against this premise. The journey is necessary to arrive at truth and love. More importantly, if the journey is inconsistent with truth, the true end will never materialize.”

“So, merely existing until one reaches an untrue end is time wasted. Absent a genuine inquiry, life is not lived.”

Brian agreed. “With that declaration, examine your past, present, and future journey in the context of an inquiry.”

Maddie accepted a blank sheet of paper and a pencil from Brian. She knew what to do. She drew a tree with a taproot and three main branches. Brian drew a tree on a separate sheet. “Evaluate your past. Determine your three life-defining events. These are the reasons you are disposed to a default way of being. I will do the same with Soledad. She will serve as validation for your evaluation. Do not show me your drawing. This is for you.”

After much thought, Maddie identified her three life-defining events and labeled them. Brian labeled the death of Soledad’s brother, her move from one school to another, and the divorce of her parents.

“Identify what you lost as a result of these events. For example, Soledad lost her sense of belonging, worth, and love. While she lost more, we will use these.”

Maddie wrote her answers and Brian proceeded. “Soledad climbed her branches early in life and she remains there to this day. Based upon her past decisions and actions, she exists within the confines of what she knows. She lacks many of the critical

tools for understanding truth. With clarity, correct perceptions, and healthy use of energy, she could descend from the three branches. She may even abide within her taproot.”

With Maddie’s acknowledgement, he stated, “Soledad married a man when she was young, a man she did not know well. She did not love him initially, but this changed with time. They had children and coped as most do. When her husband had an affair with her brother’s wife, she was devastated. She climbed higher into branches. She was aimless and without purpose.

“Her brother was not aware of his wife’s unfaithfulness. Soledad remained silent about the affair as it continued for years. When the infidelity was evident to everyone, her brother ended communication with Soledad. He stayed with his wife. Soledad divorced her husband and climbed even higher.

“She wandered aimlessly and without purpose. She was oblivious to much of the hurt she harbored. Rather than seek healing, she entered various relationships.” Brian wrote numbers on the branches to reflect Soledad’s journey. “She became involved with her personal dentist who promised Soledad that he would leave his wife.”

Once again, Brian drew and labeled. “For ten years Soledad and the dentist physically threw themselves at each other. She recklessly filled a void in her life. When the dentist suddenly told her not to return, she became distraught. The three elements that she lost in her youth were reinforced over yet another relationship that netted nothing. Rather, the dentist simply stole from her. Soledad felt and believed that she was not loved.

“Soledad climbed and, without her knowledge, she became less stable. Weak branches and unsure footing have this effect. For a sense of security, she groped and grasped her way into online dating. After a series of conversations with a man named John, Soledad ended the dialogue. Something about the man told

her that he was not right.”

Maddie said, “Maybe she perceived correctly and climbed partially down the tree.”

Brian frowned. “Not so fast. John told her that she looked like a prostitute in one of her photos.”

Maddie has a revelation. “John had a controlling and abusive nature like Dennis; except Dennis was too cunning to be so overtly abusive before he met her.”

“That is a good observation. Dennis’ default way of being is calculated. He is the type who controls before he abuses. As such, Soledad accepted Dennis’ lies because she did not know the truth about him or his past.”

Brian continued. “Soon after John, Soledad met Gaston. They were an ideal match from the beginning. He was unique; he saw her as a blessing. As he learned about Soledad, and because of his intuitive nature, he discerned her past and where she was presently. He chose his words and actions purposefully. He was transparent and vulnerable. He was honest. She embraced his approach.” Brian continued to label his drawing. He represented that Soledad climbed lower.

Brian admitted, “However, Gaston’s circumstances were difficult; but, Soledad saw him as a man of character. She did not care what he had or did not have. She fell in love. For the first time she was truly alive with hope. She belonged; she was worthy; she loved.

“When she flew to meet Gaston in Virginia, they spent a month together. They committed to be husband and wife before God. They specifically chose not to have a legal wedding. They did not ask the government for permission to be what God intended. Their covenant union reflected spiritual truth.”

Maddie was intrigued. “Did she climb down the tree?”

“As we discussed, it is difficult to climb down. But it can be

done in a moment's notice or gradually. Often one needs help. Let's see what happened.

"Gaston and Soledad made tentative arrangements. The circumstances were not ideal and sacrifice would be required. Soledad flew back home and they continued to grow closer. However, Gaston learned that her circumstances were dire, more than he originally thought. She had legal and financial issues with her father-in-law. Her business did not provide her adequate income. She could barely afford necessities. Yet, she wanted to send Gaston money and buy him a plane ticket."

Maddie knew where this part of the story was going. She frowned in despair.

"Gaston loved his wife; but he refused to be a burden. He told her not to buy a plane ticket. He did not accept her money. He asked her to use any funds for her family. Soledad stated that she would give whatever she could. Gaston struggled with his purpose. He spoke with Soledad and shared that he had to follow a path that ensured his accountability to her. Soledad said that she understood."

Maddie hung her head and said, "She was close. She was going to climb down."

"The next day, Soledad lashed out at everyone—not just Gaston. When he received her messages, he was alarmed. She was angry. She shut him out. She said that if they could not be as they were, they would not be anything.

"Initially, Gaston did not know how to handle her reaction. He spoke with Soledad's sister, Pam, who encouraged him to 'give time to time', meaning that time would heal. Pam said she would speak with Soledad. Sadly, Soledad hid within the recesses of her past. She climbed far from the tree trunk. She rejected counsel from Pam, her closest friend.

"Months passed without change. Soledad spoke with Mark,

who then spoke with Gaston. Gaston had always dealt directly with people. He never used an intermediary. He wanted to speak with Soledad. He said love required a healthy dialogue with open minds and hearts, not diplomacy through intermediaries. He waited for Soledad as he improved his personal situation.

“When Gaston’s son was commissioned as an officer in the military, he sent a picture to Pam, who then forwarded it to Soledad. Surprisingly, Soledad sent Gaston a text within days and they eventually spoke. He told Soledad that he loved her and was moving to her country. She was surprised and excited; but, she hesitated. She mentioned speaking with someone in his hometown for the last six weeks. His name was Dennis. She said that if Dennis had not contacted her, she would be waiting for him.”

Maddie blurted, “How could this be? How did Dennis get her contact information?”

“He is a deceiver,” Brian said. “Dennis went to Gaston’s social media site and stole her information. He contacted her and said ‘I am Mark’s friend.’ However, Mark was not a friend as much as he was someone who counselled Dennis on a regular basis. Since Soledad met Mark when she visited and married Gaston, she believed Mark had provided her contact information to Dennis and sanctioned his call.

“Shameful!” Maddie added.

Brian shook his head. “Soledad spoke to a total stranger without realizing his troubled past or his lack of character. She did not see his manipulative ploys or his violent nature. She only saw what she wanted to see. She naively believed Mark had introduced Dennis and fulfilled her request that he find her another man.”

Maddie became incensed. “What did she fail to see?”

He dropped his head briefly. “The list is long. Dennis ended

a twenty-six year marriage only six months prior. He abused his wife. He beat his children; they no longer speak with him. He is not allowed to see his grandchildren. The local court issued a restraining order against him. He cannot even raise his voice to his youngest son. Sealed court records reveal that he was clinically diagnosed as mentally and emotionally disturbed. He recently faced charges in court for a confrontation with police. In a separate incident, he faced a prison sentence for lying in a political scandal he created. Even the political candidate for whom he worked stated that Dennis was depraved and dishonest. This behavior matches his prior confrontations with the police and other arrests. He spouts off and taunts people. He contrives the fictitious in order to entrap people.”

“Yeah, like stealing someone’s information and using another person’s name to introduce himself,” Maddie said.

“Red flags were everywhere. Soledad could not see these glaring indicators. She was blind. A healthy lady would have come to know and then avoided someone as dysfunctional and vile as Dennis.”

“What happened next?”

“Gaston called Dennis, but he refused to speak with him. Gaston sent him texts. Dennis responded with delays and excuses. Like a petulant child, he hid from truth. Gaston asked Mark provide Dennis with needed counsel. Mark called Dennis; but he ignored these calls as well. Mark sent Dennis an email. He explained that Soledad and Gaston were married and Dennis should respect this truth. Dennis did not respond.”

Maddie declared, “He is nasty!”

“Dennis flew to meet Soledad. Within days he asked her to marry him. Soledad called Pam for advice. Now, Pam had been speaking with Gaston. She loved Gaston and wanted Soledad and him to be together. Pam advised Soledad to refuse Dennis’

proposal. She reminded her that she was married in a spiritual bond to Gaston. Soledad listened and told Dennis of her answer. Yet, Dennis asked again the next day.

“Meanwhile, Gaston told Mark what was happening. Mark called Dennis again. When he refused to answer and did not return his calls, Mark called Soledad. Soledad was defensive. When Mark asked Soledad a question about her and Gaston and their marriage, she lied to him. Mark told her as much.

“Ironically, although Mark counseled Dennis, he did not know of his violent past or his emotional and mental health problems. Dennis never disclosed the truth during his counseling sessions with Mark. Although Mark said Dennis was ‘special’ and had ‘special problems,’ he failed to discern truth. Yet, he admitted Dennis was wrong and should end his scheme with Soledad. Mark said Dennis was a predator who preyed upon the weak. This is proved since Mark and Dennis knew Soledad was in the care of a pastor, counselor, and a psychiatrist.”

Brian sighed. “Pam became angry. Pam told Gaston that she met Dennis for the first time at her home. Dennis, in front of everyone, asked her if she had stopped talking with Gaston.”

“Rude and arrogant,” Maddie whispered.

“Dennis’ words and actions toward Pam confirmed what Gaston had shared. Pam could not wait for Dennis to leave her country. She loved her sister and feared for her safety. When Dennis asked Soledad to marry him for a third time in as many days, she agreed. When Pam asked Soledad why she accepted Dennis’ proposal, Soledad said Gaston had pushed her away from him. Pam was devastated.”

“Amazing!” Maddie interjected. “The predator captured his prey and Soledad did not state her unqualified love for him, a freak she met on the phone weeks earlier. She only said that her true love had pushed her away. She blamed Gaston!”

“Yes, Pam even forwarded Gaston the audio recording of Soledad’s words. Not one profession of love was made toward Dennis.

“In an attempt to stop the marriage, Gaston asked Pam to speak with Mark. Pam said she was willing to risk her relationship with Soledad. However, surprisingly, after speaking with Mark, she reluctantly supported Soledad’s decisions.”

“What?” Maddie protested. “What happened?”

Brian reassured her. “We are speaking of people. Everyone has a past with three life-defining events. We all fail to do right. Most react to singularities and create corresponding and flawed singularities.”

“I understand your point, but Mark had a moral responsibility to speak truthfully. Why did he not share truth with Pam? Was he in his tree and far from his taproot?”

“Maddie, when you asked me about your journey, I illustrated the intricacies of Soledad’s journey for a reason. We must view patterns objectively. Were the characters in Soledad’s tragedy objective?”

“No.”

“Were any?”

“That is a curious question. “Pam was objective until she spoke with Mark. Perhaps only Gaston was objective.”

Brian noted, “As you survey your life, in order to discern, you must detach yourself from prejudices. Clarity means nothing without the will to act with a true purpose. Absent a will driven with clarity, love does not survive or thrive. The reverse is true; confusion reigns.

Maddie mused. “Gaston loved fully. My father did not.” She then said, “The will to act” as if the words were divinely inspired.

Brian added, “Most do not appreciate the nature of the will. Understanding is of little consequence until one wills for

resolution.”

“This wisdom seems obvious.”

“Yes,” Brian said. “But knowing this wisdom does not result in willful acts that are right and true. We may know truth; yet, we do not resolve for a purposeful end. We lack gumption and grit. We do not have willful intent. A resolute will is essential to manifest a life of truth. Absent a resolute will, the heart and mind fall short of purpose. The soul—the mind, heart, and will—must act for truth. Consider your father.”

Maddie sighed. “Well, even if my father knew truth and his mind and heart were free of errors, but for a lack of will he did not prevail.” She weighed this impasse. “All he had to do was reach out to you. It was not hard at all.”

“So sayeth you,” Brian replied.

“What do you mean?”

“It is easy to be on the periphery and cast aspersions.”

Maddie was ashamed of her judgment. “I meant no disrespect toward my father.”

“Of course not. My point has a sweeping application. Those who are outside the thick of battle are not vested. It is easy to project without context and draw errant conclusions about one's failure to act or flawed acts.”

“Are you suggesting judgment is unnecessary?”

“I am expressing a truth, nothing more.”

“Okay, I am listening.”

“Tara wants to love and be loved. She knows truth in her mind and heart; yet, she lacks the will to prevail. Should we judge her?”

“No.”

“If we judge, we impose projections and expectations upon a lady and a situation we do not fully understand.”

“Correct.”

“The children who do not spend time with their father believe lies. Should we judge them for their mother’s failings and their lack of will?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“We project and expect without context. We lack understanding.”

“Good.” Brian continued. “Your father may or may not have had a true perception of what happened that tragic day at Paradox Peak. His misplaced blame and subsequent shame impeded his will. He did not make amends for what he did not understand. Are we to judge him?”

“No,” she whispered humbly.

“Stacy judged me for Heather’s death. She lacked context. Her mind was closed; her heart was cold and hardened. She scorned and condemned. Are we to judge her?”

Maddie shook her head silently.

“Pam possessed truth in her mind and heart. Her gut instincts were that Soledad was blind and Dennis was a freak who preyed upon the weak. Are we to judge her for waffling in the heat of battle, for her failure to act upon an objective willful intent? Shall we blame her for listening to Mark, a man with flaws sourced within three life-defining events? ”

Maddie sat motionless.

“Soledad threw herself—not at Dennis—but into her past, a painful past, but a comfortable a living hell. Although we have a sense of her Justifiers and innate fears, are we to judge her for subjecting herself to a fiend while her true love resolved to be with her? Are we to judge her for seeking what was not truth? Are we to judge her for thrusting a troubled past and a defaulted way of being into her foreboding present?”

Maddie was overwhelmed.

Brian encouraged Maddie. "This truth is a prized catch within the waters of life. Do you sense it?"

"Who am I to judge with or without understanding," Maddie answered.

"Man is deeply flawed. Does judgment accomplish anything other than to further wrong perceptions? Does judgment accomplish anything other than to divide?"

Brian advanced a thought. "Many purport to know the truth about Jesus' acts. But do they? Many purport to know Buddha's wisdom because of his experience. But do they? Many profess to know God's will. But do they?"

Maddie was sensitive to Brian's demeanor. He was distinctly detached from the ways of this world. She listened to a man who spoke from a different place. His words flowed from rarely tapped reservoirs. She observed and sensed that he was elsewhere. He transcended into the deep, into the spiritual.

"Man is not harmonious without the will to act in love. Love is an act. God acts. He loves. God is love. What are we without an understanding mind and heart, or a will without the hope to possess truth, love, and attain freedom through and with purpose?"

"Should we not judge ourselves when we fail to accept a man bound to a wheelchair as fully alive with purpose? Who embraces him with a tabula rasa? Do we accept him or do we extend pity and reduce him to what he is not? What is the will if not the means to act without parameters and influences?"

"Are we fishers of men if we do not catch and release what should be freed? If we judge another with or without understanding, are we not failing to release him back to living waters, waters of life, waters in which humanity, even if unknowingly, seeks life-lessons, lessons which feed the mind, nourish the heart, and embolden the will? Should we not seek

truth with a will bound to the spirit, a spirit that channels the providential, the very spirit of God?

“At what point are we grafted into the divine? When do we release all temporal ties and fleeting lies and abide without judgment? When do we understand truth and act in the spirit of love?”

“Mr. Barth?” Maddie did not know if she should speak. Brian slowly looked her way.

“I am in over my head,” she said sheepishly.

“Judge not,” he admonished her.

Maddie cleared her throat and began anew. “I want to understand and to be nonjudgmental. I want to know who I am. If I relinquish my soul and spirit to the divine, will I find freedom? Will I find truth? Will I be one with God?”

Brian replied with a single question. It was a question Maddie would not expect. It was a question she would not answer correctly. “Do you love yourself?”

This query was not a pleasant one, especially in western culture.

Maddie was startled. “What?” she asked. “Do I love myself?” She laughed out of discomfort.

She crossed her arms and looked down. She was not the angler at this point. She was in murky and deep waters fighting instinctively to survive against the tug of a line that drew her into conflict and the unknown. Her reaction foreshadowed her answer. She defaulted to her past way of being. She slapped her hands upon her thighs and with false confidence and said, “Yes! I love myself.”

Brian immediately accepted her answer and replied, “Okay, then climb down from your three branches. Let’s take your son fishing.”

Maddie was shocked. “That’s not fair.”

“What is not fair? What is *that* exactly?”

Maddie shifted her feet. She felt tension between them that did not exist earlier. Brian predicted her reaction. She had learned from the best. She learned to avoid truth. Her father was her example. Brian knew her past was replete with three life-defining events which had ingrained an unwillingness to embrace truth. Truth was the unknown. She feared the unknown.

He bridged Maddie’s self-imposed divide between them. “An experienced angler will share that any fisherman must expect difficult currents and choose to fish nonetheless. One must have the will to fish.”

Maddie was distraught.

“Do you love yourself?” he asked again. He waited a moment and then firmly reeled her toward him. “You are not willing to venture into the deep. You are not willing to defy currents which flow through you, currents which cut ruts within your soul and deny your spirit.”

He watched her. She was oblivious to his intent.

She stood slowly and brushed her blouse and, with contrived indignation stated, “You have no right!”

“Right?” he asked dispassionately. “Right to what? To take you fishing? To prevent you from living so that you do not live without purpose like your father? To love you as you have never been loved? I have no right to save your life a second time?”

Maddie stepped backward and then forward and then back again. Currents surged within her. She battled unresolved conflict. She contended with matters of the will. Her mind and heart understood; but would she act?

Her son walked to her side, pulled on the bottom of her blouse and said, “Listen to him, Mommy.”

Maddie dropped to her knees and hugged him. Tears made another appearance. She leaned forward and placed her head

upon Brian's lap. She took the bait. He caught a prized catch; Maddie was willfully hooked.

“I surrender,” she said.

Chapter Twelve

As Maddie returned to her chair, Brian asked, “Shall we fish into the deep?”

“Yes, Mr. Barth.”

She reconciled a profound truth. “The will achieves a higher purpose when the mind and heart correctly perceive. Otherwise, the will faces two choices. The will acts upon lies or does nothing. Either alternative does not bear fruit.

“Lies are profoundly corrupting, as were the lies I crafted during the last five minutes of our conversation. I deceived myself!”

“At least you saw this dynamic and willed yourself down an alternate path. You willingly defeated a destructive pattern. You may be willing to climb down the tree and access your taproot.”

“Yes,” she said. “The taproot of my spirit. The taproot to the source of life.”

Before proceeding, Brian asked a fundamental query. “Do you recognize the false singularity you created when you wrongly perceived that I judged you?”

“Yes. Please forgive me.”

“Done. Now, the next question is critical. Do you know that your singularity caused you harm?” Brian asked.

“I reverted to a default pattern.”

“How did I respond to your singularity?”

She knew the answer. “You were unaffected. You accepted me exactly where I was. You loved me unconditionally.”

What does this mean?”

“Well, you were unconcerned with my reaction. You tried to

impress a new understanding upon me, as if creating a new imprint with the hope that my default pattern would be negated.”

“Very good. Review the image of your tree and three main branches. Determine why and how you climbed to higher levels.”

“Okay,” she replied.

“We will discuss concepts and end with a simple conclusion. But first, answer this question. Is one able to effectively fish from the branches of a tree?”

“Of course not,” she replied.

“Why?”

“For any number of reasons. One has no grounding and no leverage. There is no room to cast the line. The line would get caught in the branches or in nearby trees.”

“Any others?”

“Not that I can think of presently.”

“A good angler fishes with clear intent. A clear intent requires follow-through. In order to follow-through one needs grounding, leverage, and space free of impediments.”

Brian introduced a radical idea. “If an angler had the possibility to fish the rivers of heaven which afforded him the possibility to catch the ultimate trophy, truth, and if he had a limited amount of time and he knew his life and the lives of others depended upon his skill, would he covet this fishing expedition?”

“Absolutely.”

“Maddie, we must embrace the present moment. We have the here and now. Every time we fish, we may have ideal conditions. And if not, we must choose differently or recognize the circumstances for what they are and make the most of them.

“We must have the will to execute with every cast. Failure to do so denies not only life, but we foreclose upon what may be. We foreclose upon possibility in the moment.”

Maddie thought of the anger she felt towards Brian ten minutes earlier. She thought of her father, Tara, Soledad, the mother of the two children, and the man whose son died.

Brian said, "Absent the tools and the will to prevail, we are unable to effectively fish for the most prized lessons of life. Rather, we cast poorly to uninspired spots or fail to cast at all. We do not fish."

Maddie did not delay. "Tara did not fish at all. She took the bait from her family. She willfully hooked herself to a lie. She became captive. The mother of the two children is no different. She covets lies in defiance of truth. Entangled within the highest branches, she is far from the waters of life and truth. She has no grounding; she has no leverage; she is not free of impediments. Her faith is relative and not anchored in truth.

"The father who lost his son fishes without purpose from his own tree; he drops his line into shallow waters that offer nothing. He will not understand. He fishes only for what he knows; what he knows is comfortable and perceived as right and worthy.

"Soledad refuses to fish. She is tossed violently within the upper reaches of the tree or she manically traverses one side to the other in search of what temporarily fills the voids in her life. She will remain within this regrettable pattern."

"And your father?" Brian asked.

She knew the answer. "He may be the most tragic."

"Why?"

"He had ideal fishing conditions; but, he would not act. He may have been in the tree, but he was just below the three main branches. He held a branch with one arm with his feet pressed against the tree trunk and stretched his other arm toward you, Mr. Barth. Sadly, he was caught and, ultimately, he was unwilling to release himself."

She was dispirited and said, "I understand. Life is either heaven on earth or a living hell. My father was hellishly soul laden. If he had a willful resolve, he would have released himself to the master angler and fished in living waters teeming with truth. Even if he never caught what was prized, the journey would have served him well. He would have been grounded."

"Beautiful," Brian said. "Your father would be proud. I am proud of you."

Maddie searched for broader context. She considered one's failure to be powerfully resolved. "When someone lacks clarity within the heart and mind, he will not be congruent with truth. And, even with clarity, he may still lack the will to be with truth. This is disconcerting."

"It is shameful what we knowingly or unknowingly do to ourselves and others."

He referred to the examples they discussed. "Tara may have understood her deepest desires, but she was not understood by her children or extended family. She succumbed to their motivations. Once she reached the highest branches, amidst high winds, the branches mixed and mingled with those of her family. She crossed over to their trees. She complied with their perceptions and expectations."

Maddie unconsciously gripped her thigh. "Tara became dependent upon the patterns of others while she was bound by her own defaulted way of being. She does to herself what others do to her."

Brian moved to the next person. "The mother of the two children is within the upper branches. She shelters her children in her own shade. They lack light. They lack power. They suffer from a lack of positive energy. Their taproots and trunks are underdeveloped. They fail to be and become without power.

"The mother defeats her life-purpose and denies what her

children need most. She provides them negative energy and deprives them of a natural source of power—their father. She does not love her children. She fears with an unhealthy faith. Her children will manifest a similar faith and fate. They will know only what they know and avoid the unknown. They will not know themselves, true love, or truth.”

Brian continued. “The son who died recklessly, he dishonored and destroyed his life. Few would disagree. However, one may conclude, because he had clarity within a limited context, he could have descended the tree and fished for even greater truth. Since he did not, he failed to help those who least expected his assistance.”

“His father,” Maddie whispered.

“Yes, his father, who has a wavering, unhealthy, and shifting grasp of any given topic, avoids truth. As such, he is unable to will accordingly. He reacts erratically. He crosses one side of the tree to the other and returns at the same speed. He is inconsistent, often indifferent, and deems the clarity others possess as meritless, especially those he perceives as inferior.

“Is he purely narcissistic? Perhaps. He is consumed with his views. He did not embrace his son where he was. Such a father is prone to random and senseless singularities or singularities of an obsessed theme.”

Maddie asked, “What is his greatest weakness?”

“He believes he abides within his taproot. He believes he is connected to the source of life. Yet, he lacks the understanding and courage to admit his failings. Ironically, he may appear solid, but internally he is rattled.”

“He harmed himself and his son,” Maddie noted.

“Of course.”

Maddie reflected upon humanity’s ignorance of human nature. “Since few have clarity, the strength of human

interactions is problematic.”

“Explain this thought.”

“Those who lack understanding cause the misunderstandings of others. They complicate what is otherwise elementary. Suppose a man has ten substantial interactions on a daily basis. With a maligned outlook, he does not help; he hinders and harms. He is an impediment nine out of ten times.”

“Do you have an example?” Brian asked.

“My father. Even if done unknowingly and non verbally, he taught me to run from emotional adversity. If he did the same with others throughout the day, he was not constructive.” This consideration hung in the air like a guillotine blade. “I will not do this to my son.”

She sought parallels. “Tara fails to love and be loved. She complies with an insensitive expectation that she must remain alone until her death. Her children will not see a healthy mother who is complete and whole. They will control her in ways she cannot foresee. Later in life, they will control and frustrate those closest to them.

“The dynamic with the children who do not spend time with their father is equally disturbing. Under the umbrella of religion, their mother violates a commandment: Honor thy mother and father. The children do not witness true love.” Maddie could not escape the obvious. “The mother must have been burdened by overpowering influences when she was young. She does to herself and others because of impositions and deprivations in her past.”

Maddie arrived at a simple conclusion. “I am convinced that, but for three life-defining events, man would seek more honorable and just exchanges.”

She weighed what ifs. “If my father had released his three life-defining events and descended to his taproot, if he had sought

your wise counsel, his life would have been more purposeful. My father's willingness to accept truth may have positively influenced Mrs. Barth. If she had not blamed you, your marriage would have endured and Spencer would have had the stability he deserved."

Brian added, "Like a chain, one link is secured to another. When a link is broken, the chain's effectiveness is diminished or destroyed,"

Brian spoke of Soledad. "Life is a mathematical formula. We add, subtract, multiply, and divide our way to or from truth. Soledad subtracted her way to a fallacy when she could have added her way to truth. Her sister rightly divided an answer that was a net gain. Pam had clarity and was willing to act; she was willing to risk her relationship with Soledad. This approach was counter to Pam's culture. Yet, once she understood Dennis' depraved nature, she was willing to climb down from her three branches and access her taproot and waters of life for truth."

"What deterred her?" Maddie asked.

"The same as Tara. Pam was unduly influenced by flawed perceptions and a lack of will. Whatever occurred between her and Mark about Soledad multiplied Pam's confusion."

Maddie saw the repercussions of the incongruent based upon a sound mathematical formula. "What happened to Pam should not be a surprise. If we do not know how to add, subtract, divide, and multiply, we lack understanding. If we lack the will to solve the equation, we do not have a correct perception. We do not act in truth. We do not love.

"I see two halves of an equation in Soledad's situation. She has a past replete with unfulfilling relationships and Dennis is unhealthy with a history of troubled relationships. She is lost in despair; he is immoral. The sum is devastation and a continuation of what was and will be."

“Great,” Brian said. “Now view the equation from Pam’s vantage point.”

Maddie hesitated briefly. “Pam loved her sister and Gaston. She admired his heart, clear intentions, and willful sacrifice for Soledad. Pam despised Dennis’ deceit and motives. She knew her sister was starved for love; she knew Gaston’s love for her was wholesome and complete; she knew Dennis was unhealthy and on the heels of a twenty-six year destructive marriage. Pam added, subtracted, and divided to clarity.”

Brian was amused. “Why didn’t you include multiplication?”

“Well, multiplication drastically increases a positive or negative.” She paused. “Am I missing something?”

“No,” he replied.

Maddie looked up briefly. “Multiplication must have occurred and it certainly was not positive. But, I don’t know how.”

“Let me explain. Pam told Gaston that she would intervene and give Soledad an ultimatum. However, she had one request. She wanted to speak with Mark. Gaston asked Mark to speak with her. Please recall that Mark spent time with Dennis and said he had special problems. But Mark did not know Dennis had abused his wife, battered his children, and was clinically diagnosed as emotionally and mentally unstable.”

Brian breathed deeply and said, “After Pam and Mark spoke, inexplicably, Pam told Gaston she would support Soledad.”

“What did Mark tell Pam?” Maddie asked with indignation.

Brian shook his head. “It is unbelievable. Gaston asked Mark the same question.”

Maddie was upset. “But Mark agreed with Gaston that Dennis intruded upon a coveted spiritual union and forced himself upon a lady who was under the care of mental health professionals. Mark knew Dennis exploited two people who loved

each other and avoided dialogue and accountability until his scheme succeeded or failed.” Maddie was agitated. “Gaston assured Pam that Mark would underscore truth.”

Maddie was primed for a revelation.

Brian looked at her directly. “Mark is the father who lost his son to drugs.”

“Oh my,” she said. “Why am I not surprised? What we knowingly and unknowingly do to ourselves and others!” Maddie exclaimed. “Without grounding, we lack purpose, truth, and love. Since Mark could not be in truth with his son, why would anyone expect him to share truth with Pam for Soledad’s benefit? Why would we expect him to act with purpose in truth and love for his friend Gaston?” Maddie’s heart was heavy.

Maddie thought of her father. “My Dad’s reticence was equal to dividing a sum by a larger negative and multiplying. Had he expressed truth, any positive sum would have been multiplied to a healthy possibility in the present.”

Chapter Thirteen

Brian and Maddie had conversed for the last two hours. Little Brian Flynn was restless. Maddie handed him some paper and a pencil. He wanted to draw his own tree. The significance was not lost on her.

Maddie thought of her son's past, present, and future. She thought of his three life-defining events. As with most people, she could not escape the idea that he would become less than his full potential. Man becomes his worst by subjugating sound principles and underlying hopes to what is uninspiring. She did not want her son to relegate his life to what was ordinary.

She knew ordinary meant that one distances himself from his taproot and far from the source of life. He lives powerlessly within wrong perceptions.

To prevent her son from being into an uninspired existence, she distilled the lessons she learned to an irreducible conclusion. "The people we discussed survive rather ordinarily. My father, Tara, the mother and her children, Mark and his son, and Soledad and Pam are unremarkable."

She gestured toward her son and challenged Brian. "How does one overcome the tendency to be other than ordinary or less than ordinary?"

Brian had an answer and hoped she would grasp its relevance. "Of the people we discussed today, who made the most of what they had?"

She could think of only one. "Gaston, but he had nothing from the beginning."

"Really?" Brian asked sharply. "Let me share a story."

“In a distant and bustling foreign city lived an old man. He was deaf, mute, and could not walk. Every day he went to the marketplace and did odd jobs for various business owners. With the use of his arms, he would swing his crossed legs underneath his torso much like a chimpanzee. When tourists saw him, they reacted in various ways; but, most pitied him. They gave him money or tossed coins in his direction. They saw him as a beggar.

“When he raced after the tourists to return their offerings, they were frightened. They shunned him and hurried away or attempted to appease him without understanding. Often they scattered more donations in their wake. Few realized he wanted nothing at all. He only wanted what they did not and would not tender—respect.

“One day, a foreigner witnessed one of these exchanges from the patio of a cafe. He was intrigued. He asked the waiter about the beggar. The waiter smiled and explained the man was not a beggar at all. His name was Jarno and the locals knew him as the richest man in the city. The foreigner protested that Jarno was filthy and wore rags. He questioned Jarno’s wealth.

“The waiter looked at Jarno and told the foreigner to observe his reaction. Jarno took the coins the tourists had tossed to the ground and made his way to the street corner where a blind man sat with a tin cup. Jarno gave the coins to the blind man who immediately pounded his hands onto the ground. Jarno looked at the blind man and did the same.

“The foreigner was perplexed. He looked at the waiter and said, ‘I do not understand.’ The waiter replied, ‘Of course not. Jarno lives in a one room hut with his eighty-year-old mother. With what he earns doing errands for various shopkeepers, they live on less than a dollar a day.’ Once again the foreigner said, ‘I do not understand.’ The waiter said, ‘Of course not.’ He handed the foreigner his bill, filled his glass one last time, and walked

away.”

“Wow,” Maddie said.

“What are your thoughts?” Brian asked.

“Jarno was wealthy despite his limitations and poverty. He possessed an abundance of love, compassion, forgiveness, wisdom, and more. Jarno had what others did not.”

“From and with nothing, Jarno had everything and gave everything. From nothing abundance flowed.”

Maddie could not resist. “Jarno lived at the base of his tree, far from the three branches.”

Brian chuckled lightly. “My dear, Jarno abided within his taproot. He dwelled with the Giver of life.”

She was humbled. She had yet to consider this possibility. She made an observation. “Those within their taproot are far from the three branches.”

“Yes,” Brian replied. “However, those who are ruthless do not have a tree of life. They have no taproot and are far from the source of life.”

“How do they exist?”

“The same as Dennis. They scale the trees of others and seek control. They conquer.”

“They conquer and destroy the mind, heart, and will of the unsuspecting while those like Jarno love and bless.”

“Exactly so.”

This thought confounded her. “How is this possible?”

Brain reintroduced a topic discussed much earlier. Do you recall speaking about DNA?”

“Yes.”

“Consider the DNA of the soul as similar to physical DNA. Both have a double helix. The double helix is made of two separate strands arranged in opposing directions and wind around each other. The double helix provides stability and

support and prevents the destruction of DNA.”

Maddie was intrigued.

Brian continued. “One strand of the soul’s double helix is the mind and the other is the heart. When the mind and heart perceive correctly, the will may be congruent.”

Maddie saw his point clearly. “When thoughts and emotions are inconsistent, one is less likely to have stability and strength. His will is incomplete and lacks resolve.”

“Yes, if one strand is flawed, the DNA is unstable.”

“If one thinks to a fault and ignores his stable emotions, he is imbalanced.”

“Yes.”

“If one is ruled by wild or random emotions, his thoughts are subverted and he acts rashly.”

“Yes.”

“If one’s mind and heart are equally erratic, he is troubled. He is conflicted.”

“As would be expected.”

The significance of the spiritual DNA construction was not lost on Maddie. She reconciled a poignant example. “If we consider Jarno, we must conclude that his double helix was sound and his will was resolved.”

“I could not agree more. The Jarnos of the world are the exception. They transcend circumstances and possess truth. They are extraordinary. They attain freedom.”

“Had my father reconciled a double helix deficiency in his soul, he may have unburdened himself.”

“Certainly.”

“The mother with the two children is burdened with deeply flawed emotions and unsound thoughts. Mark is equally conflicted with his thoughts and his emotions are as disjointed. Soledad will forever deny her troubled heart and rationalize her

thoughts as sound. What of Tara?” Maddie asked. “You said she had clarity in her mind and heart. Is her DNA flawed?”

“That is an astute observation. DNA is functional only with hydrogen bonds. Absent these hydrogen bonds, DNA does not fulfill its purpose. Think of the hydrogen bonds as one’s will. Absent the will, the clarity of the mind and heart are effectively without purpose. Tara’s DNA lacked hydrogen.”

The DNA metaphor gave Maddie complete context to their entire conversation. She knew the health of her mind and heart was vital for her will to prevail into the here and now. A healthy soul would allow her to be with purpose and a positive testament for her son.

Time was short. Brian and Maddie were tired. Their mental and emotional journey had sapped their energy as intensely as an afternoon sun upon fishermen at the river.

Their conversation ended similar to a successful fishing trip. They seized their prized catch and released what was not needed.

As Maddie prepared to leave, she felt the heaviness of the topic. She recognized humanity’s blindness. She intuited that entrenched behaviors and misguided motivations within unhealthy minds and hearts denied a willful resolve and untapped potential.

Fishing with Brian offered her hope. She understood the need to avoid a default way of being. She received the restoration her father knew was vital, restoration he did not secure for himself. That her father was not resolved at the end of his life saddened her. She shared, “Life is too complicated. Could life be made simple or is life simple already?”

Brian was amused. This query underscored the value of choice. “Life is complicated only because we make it so. We choose to make things difficult. We are born and influenced by

choices. We choose to live positively or negatively. We choose to live with compassion or condemnation. We choose to forgive or not. We choose to live and die. Do you understand?"

"Yes, but we do not choose to die. We must die. Death is inevitable. We do not always have a choice."

Brian raised his hand for emphasis. "While death is inevitable, we have a choice to accept or reject it. If we accept death, we consciously choose to embrace what is and will be. Otherwise, we choose to reject death, just as we choose to complicate life. In this light, we reject life."

"Oh my," Maddie said. "I understand why life becomes complicated. We make it so."

"Life is a matter of choice. Often a choice honors the simplicity and power of life or riddles life into the unsolvable.

"Jarno chose a simple and powerful life. He could have accepted the money thrown at him and contended with complex and unwanted variables that wealth brings. However, he saw the bounty and beauty of life within simple and profound principles and truth. Jarno reflected these principles and truth."

Maddie smiled. "Thus, Jarno reflected the divine. Jarno loves as God loves. Love is an act. Such is the benefit of being at one's taproot and connected to the waters of life, waters teeming with truth. This is why and how Jarno had peace beyond understanding."

"Exactly," Brian confirmed. "Life is a simple mathematical formula. We are born. We choose to live one way or another. We choose to add, subtract, divide, and multiply into simplicity or complexity. Then we die. How we die parallels how we live."

"Life and death are easily negotiated if perceived with proper context," Maddie said. "If we choose truth that undergirds life and death, we dismiss lies that would otherwise obscure clarity."

“Yes.”

“Mr. Barth, what you endured at Paradox Peak decades ago may be viewed simply. You choose to save my life while understanding that you had to choose Heather’s death. Your refusal to choose either my life or Heather’s death would have devastated you. You would not be the man you became. You would not have lived simply and powerfully.”

Maddie thought of the others. “How did Tara, Soledad, and Mark make choices that caused grief?”

Brian offered a simple answer. “Tara chose to accept the choice of those who controlled her.”

“She chose to be controlled which complicated her life?”

“Yes.” Brian gave another example. “Soledad chose to reject Gaston’s choice and immediately asked Mark to find her another man. Such a choice defies the love she supposedly had for Gaston. She then chose to reject Gaston’s choice to move to her country. Rather, she chose to marry an unhealthy predator.”

“Soledad chose complications in the face of what was simple.”

“Right,” Brian replied. “Now consider how Mark’s choices reflect complications. He relinquished custody of a younger son, who now lives with his mother in another state. Mark did not see him for six months. His son began using and selling drugs, had issues with the police, and became promiscuous with fellow students and adult women.”

“Mark’s choice adversely affected his son. His son’s life became complicated because it was no longer simple,” Maddie stated.

“We must recall that Mark did not understand his oldest son. We may conclude that he does not understand his youngest son. He would never have understood Dennis, even if he learned of his past. Mark projects his own incorrect perceptions.”

Maddie had an epiphany. “Mark does not understand himself.”

“Absolutely. Mark’s lack of clarity about his own life directly affects the simplicity or complexity of his sons’ lives. Here is an illustration. Mark was married for thirty-three years. After being divorced for two years, he chose to marry again. Even though he was engaged and the wedding was a few months away, he subscribed to online social sites and dated other women.”

Maddie sighed. “Mark was uncertain of his choice to marry a second time. He chose to complicate his life.”

“Yes,” Brian added. “Since he lacks certainty with his sons and the lady he is to marry, we may conclude he is not grounded.”

“I see a pattern. If Mark makes indiscriminate and unwise choices with his own relationships, he would naturally fail to share the truth about Dennis with Pam. In fact, Mark did not know of Dennis’ disturbing secrets. If Mark does not understand the dark and abusive nature of the man he counsels, would we expect him to understand his sons? If Mark does not understand his sons or his role as a father, we would not expect him to share truth and relate honestly and completely with Pam, a lady who wanted to protect her sister?”

“Maddie, your assessment is sound. Based upon our conversation, we know most people lack the mental, emotional, and willful grounding of a wealthy and wise man like Jarno.”

Maddie reflected upon the scope of life and death. She distilled that if one were with purpose, he had to discard what detracted from purpose.

She referred to her father. “If my Dad had resolved self-imposed blame, he would have lived more meaningfully with me.” She looked at Brian, the man who had chosen to save her life over his daughter’s. While Brian may have anguished over his choice, he was anchored to truth that transcended circumstances.

He expressed divine truth and had peace through and because of extreme adversity.

Maddie looked at her son and considered that God bestows life. Each life is a separate and distinct ocean of possibility within which a soul chooses. Choices are emblematic of fishing lines cast into the deep. Some lines are poorly cast and catch nothing, or they catch little of value and cause destruction. Others cast their lines to spots that bring in what is prized.

Meanwhile, there are master anglers who teach others to fish. These fishers of men have delved into the deep. They embody all that is wholesome. They live with and within simple and profound truth and abide in a state of freedom. Their souls are unfettered and undeterred. They fish and instruct others to fish for a life of purpose, distinction, and, eventually, a bountiful death.

Maddie came to a defining hope, the kind of hope that speaks to undeterred willful resolve. “Mr. Barth, I am.”

Brian nodded his head in affirmation. He spoke reassuringly. “Yes, you are.” He embraced her softly and said, “The past is in the past. Go fishing. Cast your line into the deep. Release ways of being that ill-serve you. Let it go.

“Cast your line into new spots. When the line tugs and the float disappears, wait and observe. If the wind whips, the river rises, and the sun disappears behind storm clouds, if your mind and heart fear the unknown, direct your focus on the line no less.

“All is circumstantial. Resist the urge to climb the tree. Remain at the tree trunk and seek your taproot. Release your soul and defer to your spirit. Reel the line in and behold a catch of inestimable worth. Behold truth within freedom. Live life with divine purpose and embrace God into your noble death.”

Brain shared a final thought. He hoped his fishing partner would accept it freely. “Many judge me and my choice. They

believe Heather's death is irreconcilable. However, we both know they do not understand. They do not know how to fish. Neither you nor your father was at fault for my daughter's death. I made a choice. You know why I made that choice."

Maddie kissed him on the cheek and said, "You are a master angler, a fisher of men. You know why and how to fish into the deep."

Maddie smiled sweetly and secured her father's letter. "My life is forever altered. I am humbled by your willingness to share and love. Besides my mother and father, you are the reason I am alive. You are the reason I resolve to release the past. I will seek my taproot and fish the waters of life for truth. Perhaps I will find freedom. Perhaps I will be as Jarno and you. Perhaps I will love as God would have me love and be loved and do so with life-defining purpose."

Brian hugged Maddie and released her. It was a simple act, a sacred act, an act of love.

About the Author



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