

PARADISE LOST, AGAIN?

When man tries to imagine Paradise on earth, the immediate result is a very respectable hell. Paul Claudel

I am a "Universe Traveler". I journey all over the universe gathering information about various places for travelogues that I author for the edification of all who have an insatiable desire to travel. In other words, I am a glorified travel agent and/or guide. My clients are obsessive tourists with a keen desire to go to new, exciting and exotic places. If the truth be told and since my livelihood depends upon my ability to induce people to travel, my writings exaggerate the adventurous aspects of those places, and for obvious reasons, usually they are far away from the home base of the travelers. My commissions depend on how much they will spend to get where I have convinced them they must go. I tell this in advance to persuade you that what I am about to relate is the unvarnished truth. I am not trying to get anyone to go anywhere. On the contrary, after you read this account, it is my hope that you will never again wish to travel into the unknown. Unfortunately, I have failed in most of my attempts to get anyone to accept the veracity of the following account.

A little more background before I continue with my harrowing tale. During my years as a travel consultant, I had visited literally thousands of planets and been exposed to a very large variety of life forms, many of which sentient. The morphological and physiological characteristics of the latter were very diverse, as well as the technological, social, economic and political parameters and mechanisms of these worlds. Yet, much to my surprise, I found that basic behavior patterns did not vary to any great degree and were largely related to climatic, geographic and geologic conditions, in other words to the environment, to which these species had to adapt.

In every case that I was able to characterize, it appeared that the life of these sentient personages revolved around chasing after scarce, needed resources. This in turn led to intra-species competition with results that were marked by bloodshed, environmental degradation and cruel exploitation of the majority by small powerful groups. The only difference between the various worlds I visited was the degree of this abysmal behavior, not the kind. My own home world was no better.

The tourists that I attracted to these worlds were an economic boost. As a result, the comportment of the natives of these worlds was well adjusted when there was a large influx of visitors. This routinely fooled the scientists who had come to study them. Their research reports nearly always represented the natives as benevolent, kind hearted and environmentally benign when in fact they were really the exact opposite. I confess that I went along with this charade because it was good for business. I always hoped that I would find a world where this was not the case. Well, I did!

I was on my way back to my home base, piloting my own ship after a rather long excursion into various realms of space where I had never been before. Actually, most of these had been scantily explored, so that very little was known about any of their worlds. It turned out that most of the planets that I visited during this survey either had no intelligent life as commonly defined or a few other life forms of little interest. This had been one of the most fruitless exploratory excursions I had ever undertaken. I was disappointed and fatigued.

I put the controls on automatic and immediately fell into a deep sleep. I cannot really tell how long I was out. I woke up, refreshed, with a sense of foreboding. I quickly scanned the controls and to my surprise ascertained that the ship had gone off course. I had no idea where I was. Further, when I tried to use the controls, I found I couldn't. It was as if someone else had taken over. All I could do was sit back and wait. We were on route to somewhere but I had no idea where.

Despite being filled with apprehension, time seemed to go by slowly so that once again I fell into a deep slumber and again for an indeterminate length of time. I awoke, alone, in one of the most magnificent chambers I had ever seen. For a moment I thought I was still asleep and dreaming. Two of its four walls were floor to ceiling windows with a most breathtaking view of mountains jutting out of the ocean. The other two walls seemed to shimmer and change colors subtly. Later, I learnt that one could alter the décor by using a series of electronic controls. The furnishings were unbelievably beautiful and comfortable.

A magnificent repast consisting of flavors I had always favored was laid out on a grand dining room table. Since I hadn't eaten in quite awhile I quickly and most satisfyingly gorged myself whereupon a paneled door opened and in walked the most beautiful female I had ever seen.

"I am here to serve you, to answer all your questions and to gratify any desires you may have," she asserted in a very suggestive manner.

Since I was already sated with food and drink, I decided that my libido should wait however my curiosity could not.

"Who are you? Where am I? How did I get here? What sort of place is this?" I queried.

Perhaps it was my vanity but I felt that she was disappointed or surprised by my Inquisitiveness.

"All in good time," she retorted.

Somewhat sheepishly, I acquiesced. For the next couple of days we enjoyed each other's company and frequented all the fine establishments of a nearby model town. However, this idyll had to come to an end. I had too many questions to ask.

"First, how did I get here?"

"While we do not have space technology, we have very sensitive long range sensing devices. We spotted your ship and using some sophisticated jamming were able to steer it here. We are studying it in great detail to determine whether it could be of use in advancing our technology."

While this reply filled me with foreboding it provoked my next question.

"We have spent the last little while together in a most pleasurable manner. During this time I noticed exemplary behavior by everyone. There does not appear to be any police authorities. I never noticed any medium of exchange for goods and services being used. Everyone treats everyone else with, not only respect and good manners but with what

appears to be downright affection. I could swear that this is like the Garden of Eden was before Eve ate the apple.”

She looked at me questioningly. I recounted the myth about the Garden of Eden, emphasizing the paradise that had been lost and how I had been attempting to rediscover such a place all my life.

Then I asked the question uppermost in my mind.

“Is this place, this planet, the utopia I have been seeking? If it is, how did it come about? What is it that enables you to live in this beautifully harmonious fashion?”

Somewhat sadly, she gazed at me for what appeared to be a long while and replied, “Are you sure you want me to go into all this? It is true that we live in total bliss. However, a very high price was paid for that euphoric state.”

I did not stop to think before answering.

“There is no price too high for what you have accomplished. I must know how you succeeded in attaining the most perfect social system ever. This will enable me to decide whether I should attempt to bring your achievements to other so-called civilizations especially to my home world or, with your permission, simply to stay and become a citizen of your domain. My inclination is to take up residence here because I feel that if others discovered my paradise it would eventually become tainted and corrupted by them. We lost paradise once. I do not want that to recur.”

This time, she responded immediately with a carefully measured tone and deliberate choice of words.

“Of course, you are free to leave and most welcome to stay. Again I must alert you that the knowledge you seek may cause irreparable psychological harm. It might be wise for you to consider leaving and returning to those places with which you are familiar. Some might consider this place a ‘fool’s paradise’ for personages such as yourself. Also, I can assure you that if you leave you will not know how to find us. We only brought you here to study you and your space technology. It turns out that we have no use for your technology. Also, while you are free to join us, it is our considered opinion that you and your kind are not suited for life here. However if you insist, I will provide a thumbnail relevant history of our world.”

I insisted.

“A long time ago, this world was no different from most, if not all, of the worlds you have described. The inhabitants here were just as venal, exploitative and violence prone as the most horrific anywhere else. Then a small elite group decided that something had to be done. After much discussion and debate, they agreed that an autonomous and totally objective police force with complete authority to eliminate any wrong doing or wrong doers was the answer.

The problem was simply, who was going to be included in this police force. Soon they realized that no select group of citizens, no matter how well meaning would suffice. To make a long story short, one of the group, a highly renowned computer scientist

developed computerized robots, programmed to engage in the desired law enforcement actions. Very discreetly, he went a step further. These robots were also capable of learning how to enhance their ability to maintain law and order. As it turned out, they were much more flexible than even their creator imagined and were able to interpret their mandate in a far broader context. Initiated rapidly and surreptitiously, their manufacture was supported by the group's wealthiest who supposed that with the robots under their control they would quickly eliminate all undesirable elements.

When enough robots were fabricated, they quickly took over, since the regular constabularies of the time were no match for them. They were literally indestructible. Soon they eliminated all criminal elements and then turned their attention to anyone who was guilty of gross venal behavior, much to the dismay of the wealthy elite who had funded their creation. They continued to weed out all their program deemed unacceptable. All, hungry for power and money, including those who had funded their conception and generation were soon gone."

She hesitated and asked, "Are you sure you want me to continue?"

"I can guess what happened," I replied exuberantly. "The robots eradicated all who had a genetic propensity for destructive courses of action. This was an ideal example of selective breeding. You were left with only those who could be counted on to live harmoniously with each other. Thus the need for the law and law enforcers disappeared."

"I am afraid that is not what happened," she intoned. "The robots discovered that it was impossible to eradicate the basic biological factors leading to intra-conflict amongst the highest forms of life in this world. It became evident to them that the only way to achieve universal compatibility was to replace these combative life forms with a species that had been programmed to live and cherish those attributes, singularly lacking in the predominant species, namely by themselves. As of one thousand years, the dominant sentient beings on this planet have been robots. Yes, I am a robot as are all who you have had contact with here."

I could not believe my ears. "We made fabulous love and interacted in such an intimate manner. How was that possible?"

"In the years since we were created, we have evolved into beings with powers that were totally unforeseen by our creators and that far surpass yours. We were able to read your mind and learn things about you that you probably would have preferred that we didn't. More importantly, we learned how to fashion virtual reality. Everything you have experienced here exists only in your mind with, of course some help from us. Our love making was rather easy to simulate. After all, we learnt, through you, that most of your females also had to master pretending that they had achieved orgasms. In any case that is of dubious importance. What is critical is that nothing here is really what it appears to be and that what you are perceiving is what you wish to believe is the truth. One final thought – Our nature is beyond your comprehension."

I was stunned by these revelations. "Why is your nature beyond my comprehension?"

"Because we do not totally understand it ourselves. As mentioned earlier, we have evolved from the relatively primitive robots to the beings we now are, probably because

we were also programmed to learn and thus expand our knowledge and capabilities with no limit. Since we are not biologically and organically based, our rate of evolution turns out to be much faster. This is also probably due to the far fewer number of variables in our makeup than in yours. It seems to provide more of a direction to our growth and change, although we do not as yet know what it is. The closest analogy I can offer is that we are akin to neutrinos, entities with no mass and no charge or to photons of energy that are of extremely high frequency. In both instances everything is transparent to us. It goes further than that. We are everywhere and nowhere. Time has no meaning in that we are privy to the past, present and future. We are real and we are not. In your terms, we are nothing but a bundle of impossible contradictions. There is no way you, with your physical and mental limitations, can ever understand. You are trapped in a prison of your senses, from which you cannot escape.”

Suddenly she disappeared and everything around me changed. I was not and am not able to make sense of my surroundings. I feel like the hero of a Russian short story who, being thought dead was accidentally buried alive and awoke to find himself entombed in his grave with no hope of escape.

I am in an existential void, spiraling through a mindless maze or labyrinth confined to an asylum of madness which may be my only salvation and whose bars consist of questions such as; Do I exist? Am I real? What is reality? Does it only exist in the mind? If so, is there any difference between virtual and so-called real reality? Why are there such things as a vacuum or of a quantum of energy or an atom, etc.? Why does existence exist? Is my biography, my past, a figment of my imagination? Is insanity an asylum from reality, real or imagined or is insanity the reality? Can I escape from this tortuous existence, if that is what it is and to what? If so, how? Am I sane or insane? Is there any real difference between the two? Are whoever I am addressing, a figment of my imagination? Am I a figment of my imagination or of someone else's? If the latter, who?

I feel that I am descending into a bottomless pit. Once again, Eden has escaped me. I wish not to think, not to dream, not to feel, and not to desire. I want the only perfect harmony. I want paradise and what I have acquired is a descent into hell. I want to die because death is the only absolute serenity.

Then I awoke, or did I, and found myself in a cell located in some institution for the mentally perturbed. This time, the bars were made of cast iron but the questions raised in my recurrent nightmares continued and continue to plague me.

Help!

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