



"Calm After The Storm"
The Ardnamurchan Lighthouse from Sanna Bay, Scotland

Chapter 12

"Aloneness versus togetherness"

Learning to wait

Sam sat on a dry promontory and waited. Inexplicably, he didn't fear abandonment. He knew the waiting was temporary, although he couldn't have begun to account for what might happen after the culmination of the waiting. He waited, and waited. He neither ate nor drank. Not one fibre of his inner being was forlorn. He suffered no frustration of desire. Sam experienced during that waiting only what was around him, requiring of it neither satisfaction nor deliverance. He just waited.

A surprise party

Behind him two seahorses appeared on an inexpensive carriage, steered by a third member of the same surprise party. Together the three introduced themselves as an experienced salvage crew - although it wasn't entirely clear to Sam what materials may have nourished their customary business. The Driver lingered, either seated in or fiddling with the rickety chariot, whilst the primary motley pair (for one of the twosome was slight and the other thickset) approached Sam; then accompanied him to the destroyed bridge - wherein the disconcerting poster of Clive had remained undampened and undamaged. The strangers seemed to recognise something about both the notice and the fugitive. Sam couldn't discern whether they had seen a copy of the notice themselves previously, had known Clive as an acquaintance - or simply were familiar with the gist and import of the message it conveyed. The strangers were transparently benign in intent, but they didn't seem in the least anxious to please, or wish to negotiate any kind of deal regarding - as they did with a smiling inspection - Sam's wreck.

A particular pedigree of answer

The more lightweight of the two retrievers asked Sam about his intentions. What did Sam intend to do now? The bantam seemed to expect a particular pedigree of answer - and Sam found it emanating from his core naturally - unforced - as if unprompted nevertheless.

I am not in the least sure, except that my vessel is ruined, and I have no need of its repair now; nor, indeed, any return to the ocean.

The kindly face enquired, *If your boat, by some turn of fortune, were suddenly restored, would you determine to set forth again?*

Sam knew from his innermost that his answer was rendered pure: *No*

Would you care to accompany us? We are going inland.

Knowing well that he hadn't a better notion, Sam replied, *I am weak and, although I'd rather not become your burden, I am barely mobile - let alone capable of work or of otherwise helping with your business.*

Let yourself be free of that concern until tomorrow, came the answer.

A particular sense of direction

By the time they had finished their conversation, Sam and the benevolent lightweight had found their way back to the chariot where the bulky associate seemed engaged in earnest report to The Driver. Sam clambered onto the wobbly vehicle, and the ramshackle quartet set off in a direction of which the funny cohort seemed most sure. Sam squirmed privately at the noisy humour celebrated amongst his new friends. The jolly crowd indulged their spirited merriment with a quip about this - and a crack about that - as if Sam's troubles were mere apparition; what is more, seeming oblivious to his dark travail (seated to the rear as Sam was, writhing in an existential quandary).

A convivial establishment

Eventually, the small group arrived at an inn known intimately by the stockier character. It lay between a forest of scrawny dwellings and the sea, some distance up the coast from Sam's sad wreck. Stocky's familiarity with the hostel was evident from the way he strode up to the modest entrance boldly, and by the way he was regarded once inside by those other seahorses already ensconced there. They seemed to appreciate his (and each other's) very presence, without requiring or anticipating any particular behaviour. The assembly was just as familiar with the lightweight - referring to him as The Feather. The establishment was a cordial one, although no liquor seemed necessary to generate or facilitate its social ease. To any casual observer, the most remarkable thing about the place was its aura. No ritual was in progress, nor did any one member seem to inspire the gathering. Yet here present was an obvious "gestalt": some presence made of more than the sum of its parts or individuals gathered there. It was as if their belongingness with each other possessed an identity of its own. Unambiguously benign, it seemed as resolutely replete with mission as the rocks upon which Sam's vessel and all his youthful ambitions had foundered. Unwavering in its consistency or depth, the connectedness between the seahorses in that forum imbued the entire ensemble with a collective optimism whose durability seemed limited only by the willingness of each constituent party to remain identified with one another. Sam had not yet appreciated the vital quality of their bond. The owners too (the inn being a family concern), were comfortably acquainted with the salvage crew going by the convivial and patterned banter which, unbroken in flow, still had not exhausted itself - and seemed to have legs long enough for a more or less permanent journey.

A protracted conversation begins

A protracted conversation precipitated itself between Sam's self-conscious awkwardness and the conviction and poise of The Feather (which seemed far outsized against his bodily dimensions and bulk). Although Sam had, rather intrusively, posited himself into a stance of private enquiry within his personal space, the lightweight seemed (anyway) to have all the time in the world for Sam's sharp questions:

What do you all possess here? There is no misery! How does it work?

Well, there are two unspoken rules - or principles - if you like. The first is that each and every one of us has something in common - and our co-venture is both a morally worthwhile and an indispensable one. We all used to be seafarers and, whilst we were adept at the tiller, we were poor mariners! Although most of us here are quite thoughtful and bright in many other respects, we were struck with the stupidity and temerity to set sail over and over again - with neither veteran for inspiration - nor manual for formal guide. We relied on little more than our own audacity. But that's all over now. Each of us has been landbound for a day, a month, a year; in many cases, quite a lot longer than that. You may find that you experience a certain kind of belongingness with us. We are, each of us, resigned utterly to that conjoining personal truth. If any one of us weren't surrendered to it absolutely, our latent trepidation would tear us away at the expense of this precious succour. Our chances of a further chance of cheery, fair-weather living might be significantly lower than those odds we enjoy now. At last, in no need of convincing, we remain because of our own experience, and value this alternative existence beyond any material or sensual treasure. We are a society with a high membership fee; i.e., shock, wreck and founder. We remember the less fortunate who drowned: their prospects, apparently, were more dismal than ours. Knowing it was not personal merit, we try not to dwell on what saved our skins: we are simply grateful to be living in our own still - and most of us do so more comfortably than ever we did atop the waves.



"Ramshackle Quartet"

(OK - it's really a sextet; but what's a duet between friends?)



"Who's In Charge?"

His Master's (Late) Voice, Triq San Ġwann, Valletta, Malta

An assumption of spiritual equality ...

Sam stopped to take it all in. He knew that among The Feather's words coursed a new and life-affirming wisdom. He longed to ponder and reflect on the secrets coursing through his aching head - but he didn't want to lose the momentum of the conversation. Long before Sam realised that he had assimilated it all he piped up, *Who's in charge?*

That's the other major principle, replied The Feather: there are no leaders here. It is true that we take it in turns to undertake tasks that appear to call upon some kind of clout - but personal authority earns no currency whatsoever in our midst; in fact, we avoid aspiring to it as if a plague. Far from want of responsibility, we acknowledge fundamentally the usefulness of our service to each other, but contrast rendering ourselves available in such a manner with personal ambition which only ever gets in the way of our own peace of mind (for our ambitions, by definition, are never truly satisfied except at some other time - and that is if we are fortunate). Although we are kind, tolerant and forgiving because we know intimately our own moral frailty, a self-promoting seahorse conspicuously lacks personal perspective. There is an assumption of spiritual equality amongst us. If we seem lofty or superior, we demonstrate only our foolishness.

... no-one gets too swanky

Immediately, Sam thought of Clive, wishing almost as quickly that these robust acquaintances had been standing four-square behind him when he had been young, naïve, and had felt engulfed to the point of flight from the Clipboard. If only he'd had the benefit of being able to call upon these seasoned associates then. If only he knew then what he realised quickly he was beginning to know now ... If only ...

How do you get things done? queried Sam. How is housekeeping assured?

Well - as I say, answered The Feather, we roster things out. The jobs that are best for us are the most menial ones: you know - preparing meals and clearing up afterwards. These sorts of activities afford plenty of scope for chatting about this and nattering about that - all told you might say - considerable opportunities for sharing experience with others in the same boat - but only figuratively speaking now, of course! When we meet in chapter house mode like the medieval vocations - to conduct business - to agree on a way forwards - or to make a decision about a matter that affects all of us - we try to defer to experience of landbound or dry living. Inevitably there are disagreements; and, as we all have a flawed history, we can expect some of these disputes to be petty or trivial. But it is better to laugh about such disruptions than take them to heart, and we develop a capacity amongst ourselves for banishing with immediate effect the kind of pride that prevents us admitting our own small-mindedness. If we all honour and stick to these principles, we find that we don't go far astray in practice and - when we do - it is not difficult to attain a fresh decorum in which we can work things out.

So, concluded Sam, no-one gets too swanky - or indeed ever wants to?

You could say that, confirmed the genial conversationalist. We have learned to defer to principles rather than revere individuals. Sycophancy doesn't travel here; in fact, it hardly ever happens. Like everything that feeds self-aggrandisement - it will weed itself out.

But you have such robust personalities! Sam objected. How do you reconcile self-abasement with the raucous presence you seem to enjoy?

The Feather laughed. It's not so much about self-abasement as the earnest pursuit of self-discovery. Our defended and fractious selves get demoted to the back of the bus. That is why you see the untroubled persona to the fore. We are as happy as we choose to be.



"Steadily Ripening Marrow"

A new vista and a new horizon

Sam paused again. He felt flooded with countless sprinting thoughts, a muddle of tangled leanings, but also with essential anticipation. He knew that presently he was stumbling upon something vital – not merely some valuable but discretionary source of helpful information – but, rather, a purposeful, momentous and pivotal re-footing which (from his proud, formerly self-reliant but steadily ripening marrow) he yearned to adopt by means – if only it were permitted – of trading in the entire stock of his suddenly worthless intellectual assets.

So there's something of a personality transplant on offer here?

Yes, The Feather replied. You have to overcome the drive to preserve what is familiar – especially outdated stock. You have to be willing to visit novel territories – to travel outside your comfort zone. That is what shipwreck does for us: it dissolves useless resistance.

How do you know where to look? How would you reach a novel territory?

The Feather smiled. Remember – we have abandoned the delusion of self-reliance! In the schoolyard there was always someone smarter or tougher than you – even if on a different as yet untold day – and the bookworm and the bully both remembered that fact of life if and when ever they were wise. Here, there is always a more advanced pilgrim – someone who has already trodden steps like the ones you need to take. It's not so much (in fact, at all) that you must go the same way – for we all have unique histories and just as special unravelled futures. But the principles are underwritten in spiritual aether – just like the small book of mathematical laws that account somewhat for the still mysterious material universe. Hereabouts, the tutor draws back the curtain that veils the novice's unexperienced highway. The apprentice draws on fresh conviction to take a small but irrevocable step. The Yellow Brick Road²³⁹ (to harness the expression) is a strange attractor! Every pace along its ever-welcoming footage precipitates another yard of splendid vista – always expanding before an ever-lengthening horizon. The new world never fails to astonish!

Have you travelled along your own Yellow Brick Road? enquired Sam.

Of course! Stocky showed me how to tread the first steps of mine – and someone once showed him his own. This is how it works for us: once we are shown, we take the trouble to show others – otherwise our society would die. I have taken many of my own steps since. The journey will not end before I draw my last sacred breath. Having seen what I have seen, I would never choose to return to Munchkin Country!

A "collective consciousness" or a "collective unconscious"?

These spiritual principles that you all recognise, and which you all draw upon for your lifeblood (continued Sam most curiously) ... Are they like a "collective consciousness" or a "collective unconscious"?

They are a "collective consciousness" in that, universally, we recognise them as "truth" – going by our goosebumps on mere exposure to them – but they are not collective in so far as they generate a unique experience for each seahorse who admits and practices them. Perhaps they reflect a "collective unconscious" but, then again, the evidence for archetypal templates is confined to the ways in which they are manifest, so the proof is circular! Anyway, unlike spiritual principles, archetypes may frame the mind-buggering hindrances of swathes of our ancestors even if they emerged from natural selection.

²³⁹ In the renowned and popular fairytale by (Lyman) Frank Baum (1856-1919), the fabled Yellow Brick Road was the route (with variations on the theme) from Munchkin Country to the Emerald City that Dorothy and her understated friends pursued (through many moral adventures) in order to secure the help promised by *The Wonderful Wizard Of Oz*.

Your money or your life

This time it was Sam's turn to smile, and he was most satisfied to oblige. Switching the subject confidently he said, *What about money?*

The amiable lightweight laughed audibly. *We contribute by throwing modest amounts of coinage into the hat according to conscience. There is always enough to underpin our togetherness - meaning that we can pay for the accommodation that we occupy for congregation, and for the refreshments we consume on those occasions. The surplus (of which there is little) pays for transport and other expenses incurred on salvage missions (such as when we attended your own shipwreck). They are not steep yet, all the same, we consider that the expense is one for the society rather than any individual member of it: if we are carrying out any business for the association, we make a point of reimbursing ourselves if there is a financial consequence. That is pretty much all there is to say about money amongst us. We work on the principles of individual conscience and enough - or sufficiency. The business of sheltering and feeding ourselves and our families is another matter. We take care of our interests independently there. There is just as much occupational or professional variety within the society as in the remainder of the entire seahorse universe. We try to earn an adequate income by working, or we otherwise provide for ourselves, according to each seahorse's circumstances or disposition. Not many of us are workshy, especially on the new Yellow Brick Road! Curiously, professional ambitions we once prized can wind up just as foundered as the rusty remnants of our previous misguided existences. Typically, we find ourselves striving in ways that are more naturally matched to our abilities and interests - perhaps, even, our childhood fantasies! Once, we may have been afraid to pursue our dreams because of crises of confidence - or fear of economic insecurity. On the Yellow Brick Road, we have begun to learn the art of transcendent trust, and we apply it to our working lives as much to anything else.*

Sam pounced. *Did you say transcendent trust? What on earth is that?*

The most subtle and deadliest of subtle and deadly foes

The Feather explained how he wanted to impart a few simple notions to Sam, but that a worthwhile appreciation of what he really wanted to convey might require a separate conversation; perhaps on another occasion when distractions were fewer, and the hours more plentiful. The bones of Sam's story had become familiar to The Feather already - in a preliminary but passably expedient kind of a way - and the thoughtful benefactor wanted Sam to understand how those wondrous and heady days he had known in the earliest of his years had, in the modest fullness of infancy, been contaminated awfully by a multitude of unsolicited events and a host of clumsy encounters (only the most ghastly of which Sam might stir up with any clarity of recollection). In truth, Clive and his Clipboard had come to represent many of them at once in a singularly terrifying, card-carrying public nuisance. By all accounts, Clive had been a ruthless bandit, but he had been tarnished, all the same, with many brushes. In a laboured manner, The Feather expounded how nature's legacy to seahorsedom had spawned beautiful things, but that one of her endowments accounted for every discomfiture under the sun. It stalked as fear disguised as reason. Clive had embodied that dubious asset well - nurturing it with care, harnessing it without restraint for the subjugation of all whom he might vilify. Once Sam had obtained a grasp of the subtlety of this dastardly foe, he'd begin to see how his own exacting restlessness, his solitary unhappiness and the irretractable despoiling of his youth by his own hand had all been fashioned by this nasty impostor. Masquerading as spontaneous accomplishment, stratagem - even reckless outburst of last resort - never once had it shown its true colours.

Chat amongst yourselves

Sam was so struck with his sudden capacity for identifying this concealed shadow-thread in all his past affairs that he almost forgot to press The Feather on the implied advantage of transcendent trust - which he presumed represented some exquisite weapon that could be wielded against the surreptitious adversary now or in the future. Sam sensed a comprehension of it at the tip of his own tongue, but wanted to hear a more convincing rendition from The Feather's lips anyway.

And, so, transcendent trust is a direct antidote for fear? Sam asked.

In one, that's it! replied The Feather, but it helps to talk about it amongst ourselves - it's as if we usefully don our armour that way.

I wonder, probed Sam, how it is that your particular seahorse society stumbled upon these magical secrets when - for all seahorse history - they may have profited leagues upon leagues of seahorses before you!

I don't mean to seem picky, said The Feather, but - really - they are neither magical nor secret - and they are neither recent nor new-fangled. Imagine in your mind's eye that you are turning your face gradually towards the sun. The more you turn, the greater the arc of light cast upon your countenance. Light and warmth stream across untouchable distances to nourish you. The only thing required of you is the turning - but turn you must. The effect is both reflexive and proportional! It seems to you that mere readiness to perform the swivel brings about the benefits you anticipate; moreover, the more towards square the turning, the more optimal the photonic response. As far as our very existence is concerned, the sun has always been there (for she preceded us in time by a long chalk). Her spontaneous combustion has nourished our biology over many generations. In the spiritual domain, our collective experience (which we corroborate by sharing it amongst ourselves) confirms that there is some other beneficent power that responds just as lovingly, and just as automatically, if only we are amenable to any invitation to face it. Such beckoning more often than not issues from some messenger who, in turn, was afforded a similar communiqué by an earlier emissary. We are reminded permanently that we do not generate our own redemption. We are not spiritually self-reliant. Simply we are not made that way.

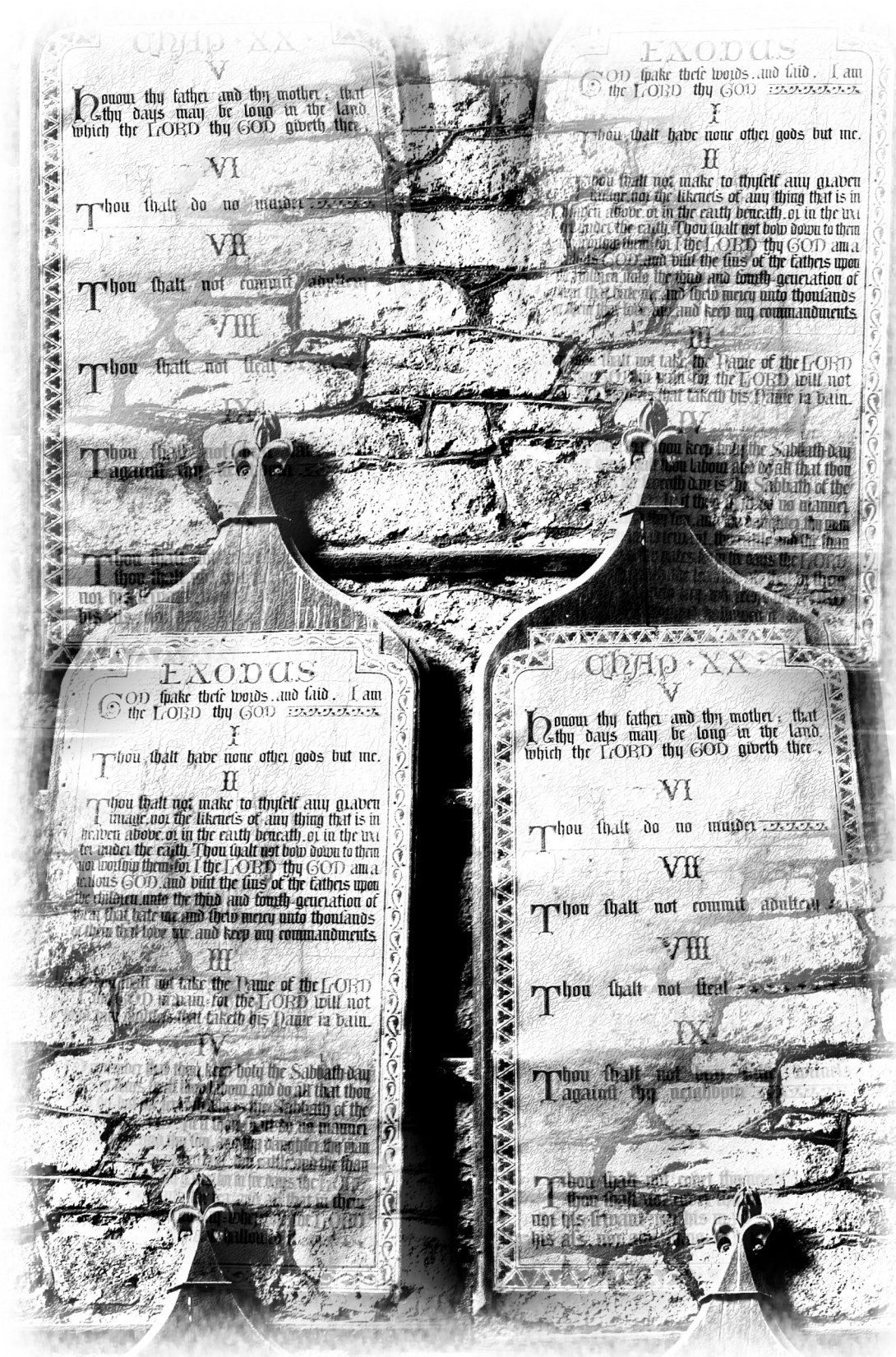
Sam pressed on: Is it correct, then, that this spiritual sustenance that can be so life-restoring and personally liberating has always been available to us - even if it has laid in unrecognised repose? And that to become aware of it we may have to be told about it when we are in some spiritually amenable condition; say, less determined than usual to defend our psychological or spiritual self-reliance? And that the prompting will emanate, as often as not, from another seahorse who was informed by yet another at some earlier time? And that any of us may have it - although not all of us may want it? And, as much as all of this, that it is our willingness to turn towards it - to face it on its own terms (thereby surrendering our resistance) - that precipitates its cascade of caring, guiding and healing power?

Yes! came The Feather's unqualified agreement.

A potted history of disappointments

Do you think Adam and Eve got left out in the cold? teased Sam.

Well - that's an interesting and particular example of togetherness! burst The Feather's unruffled reply. I don't know. I wasn't there. Allegedly, their overlapping purpose was seminal procreation. If you look around you here, you won't see much of the sexual imperative. That kind of relationship seems to be a special case in our affairs - potentially both heaven and hell on earth. Many of us will testify to that - especially wherever we were reckless, thoughtless or selfish.



"Decalogue"

Saint Pancras, Widecombe-in-the-Moor, Dartmoor, Devon

What of communities of the past? continued Sam, unfairly assuming a comprehensive historical knowledge in The Feather. *Was this spiritual sustenance always so hidden and retained quietly by those amongst whom it was discovered that the history books have missed its import?*

The Feather paused for a moment. *We are well-advised to remember that the history books have been written by those who possessed assets for their creation: power, political and social connection, money, time, education, capacity for articulating argument and opinion, materials (including pen, ink and page) - and uninterrupted lives - at least, days consistently enough free of war and strife, personal and family tragedy, poverty, destitution and ill-health. The recording of history is always subjective - even in our present age of sweet and objective reason (and we are not so advanced in the evolution of civic matters or social enlightenment as we are disposed to assume). Spiritual heroism doesn't proclaim itself! We know so little of what has gone before us - at least in matters of spiritual significance.*

What about the religious texts? said Sam, a little rhetorically.

It rather depends on whether you consider them spiritually inspired.

Written by the hand of God? prompted Sam in his usual partial way.

By the hand of someone spiritually surrendered - perhaps.

Didn't Moses have trouble with community cohesion? (Sam had surprised himself.)

What do you think happened on Mount Sinai? counterpoised The Feather, transposing the pattern of Q and A.

Sam found himself on his back foot. *What do you mean?*

Was Moses a frustrated leader who had sloped off alone, hoping for inspiration, eventually returning to his unruly flock with a new set of rules that was successful enough - in terms of maintaining order - that fortunate historians were able to write about them? Or did a sequence of events take place exactly as described in the Bible?

You mean the Ten Commandments were inscribed on tablets of stone by God and delivered to Moses in person on the mountain called Horeb?

Yes. Which is it? The story is allegorical or it is literally true.

Why is that question important? demanded Sam, a little irritated.

Because one understanding lends itself to a fundamentally different kind of "spiritual surrender" than the other; explicitly - to what or to whom are you surrendering? What you believe makes a difference!

Sam realised he'd have to discover the answer to this pivotal dilemma himself - for if what he believed mattered, it was no use arriving at any such beliefs in conversation. He'd have to arrive at them through conviction, and that could only be achieved with his unencumbered "self", unswayed socially if you care. He was getting the hang of The Feather's intuitive style, and introduced a proposition of his own:

Moses's people were lost - not just in the desert, but morally speaking - just like I was moments before my shipwreck. They needed moral redirection and so did I. I needed moral inspiration from someone or something other than myself, and so did the children of Israel. In taking heed of Moses and the Ten Commandments - as they were presented by Moses to his people - they stayed their course for the Promised Land, just as I have glimpsed my own Yellow Brick Road.

Going by his silence, and the gentleness of his gaze towards Sam, The Feather didn't appear to consider that there was very much to add.



**"A Messenger As Much As A Ruler" (Hermes Kriophorus)
Statue at Chatsworth, Derbyshire**

Flattery gets you nowhere

Sam thought that he might get away with just a little more of The Feather's attention - especially if he applied a little flattery.

In the old world, attempted Sam, when seahorses spent much of their time trying to convince each other of this and that, a clever ancestor, Plato, argued²⁴⁰ that philosophers like you should sit at the top of the tree overseeing civilisation - in charge of everybody.

As Sam ought to have expected by now, the flattery had little impact. The Feather found only the first few bouts of irony in any one conversation hilarious, and his guffaw was stifled as a consequence.

In my old life, delusions of power accompanied delusions of self-reliance, insisted The Feather. If I sought or accepted power over my friends now, not only would I embarrass myself given our society's shared values but - more to the point - I would be sure to deplete my spiritual resilience. But since that inner robustness is my greatest personal asset, and also my most cherished treasure, I shall avoid claiming position for myself at any expense. Plato considered the philosopher-king, by the way, to be a messenger as much as a ruler! Do you know that there were many overstated intellectual adversaries during those times? A bachelor-philosopher Epicurus²⁴¹ was fond of his friends just like us; however, whereas without abandonment of self-reliance our fellowship bonds could never have formed, Epicurus saw his liaisons as a vehicle facilitating pursuit of self-sufficiency! A constellation of values favoured by Epicurus fits poorly with our own received wisdom. Epicurus promoted the pursuit of pleasure or freedom from pain - what we might call hedonism - as an end in itself: the one by which personal happiness may be obtained. We see happiness as a by-product of being true to oneself by abandoning self-delusion. We are too open-minded about the spiritual life to sympathise with his ideas about everything being explained by the behaviour of atoms moving about in empty space - even if they have the capacity to "swerve" - thereby permitting "free will" amongst seahorses. The idea of "free will" is a little too unqualified for a seahorse who has experienced the power, simplicity and beauty that surges generously from renunciation of that very thing! Epicurus was confident that everything - including the soul - ended at death, but not many of us would hold that we can be certain that there is - or is not - a personal soul (aside from the mind that we know intimately because of subjective experience and, also, how we share that experience amongst ourselves in community). We don't know as an empirical fact whether there is something outside space and time in the form of an afterlife - or what we have to do to enjoy it. We can see, nevertheless, how Epicurus was willing to stand up and be counted on a progressive or unpopular course - such as the education of all seahorses including slaves. And we also appreciate his ideas about retaining all possible explanations of a given thing until any have become demonstrably incorrect. We like that kind of open-mindedness, and find ourselves advocating it strongly to stranded mariners when we are engaged on a salvage spree! We like the way he avoided getting mired in politics, appreciating the trouble they can attract. We too step aside from all possible controversy by sticking to our core business. We don't mind if our results appeal to others, but we try not to promote ourselves. Like Epicurus, we know the value of our ties and of our bonds; but our real self, in so far as such a thing can be appreciated at first hand, emerges out of personal humility rather than any social honour.

²⁴⁰ in *The Republic* (circa 380 BC)

²⁴¹ Epicurus (341-270 BC), after whom Epicureanism is named

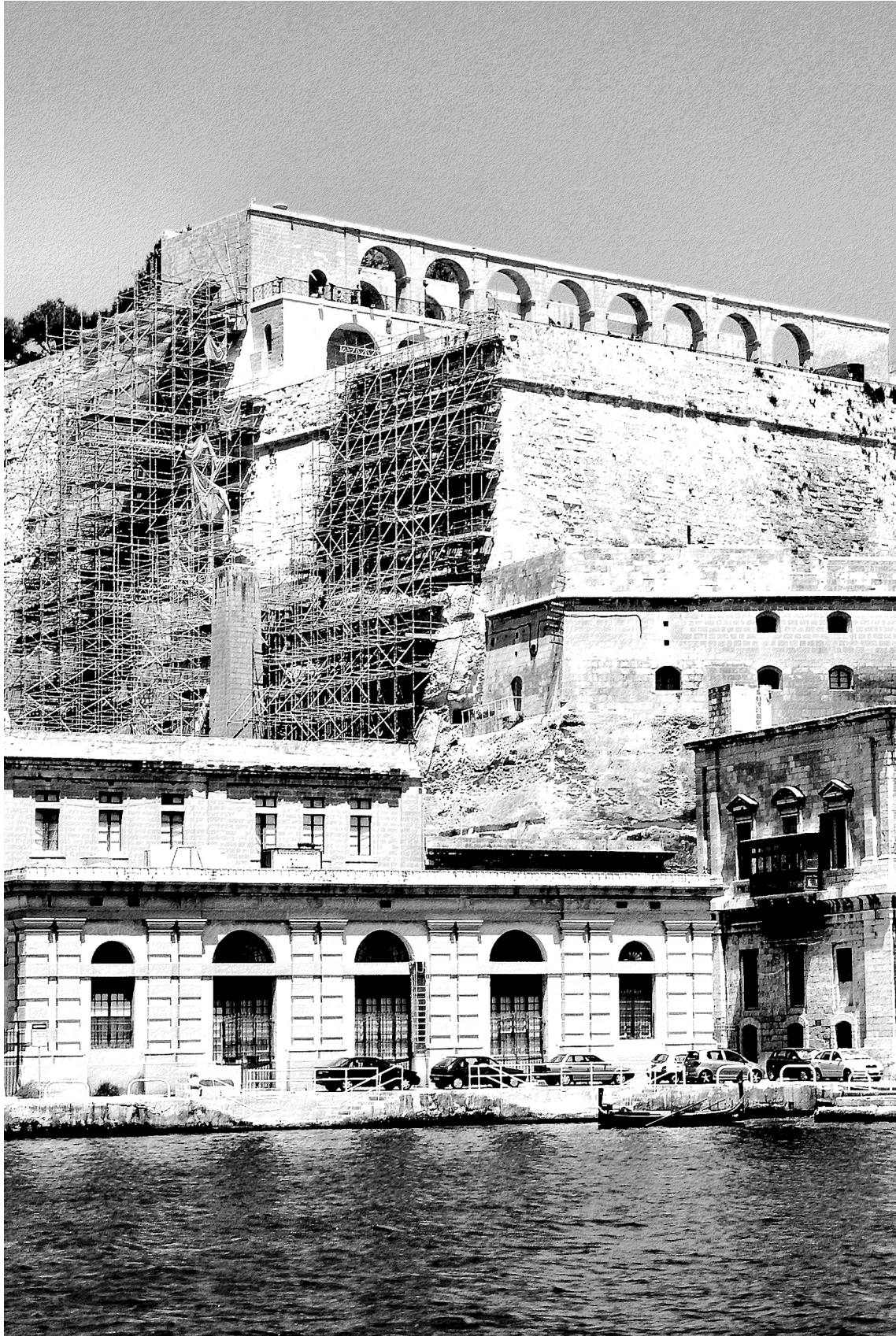
Vestiges of interpersonal authority

Would you say that this cohesion within your seahorse society is linked in a direct manner to this absence of individual authority within it? asked Sam, keen to extract and amplify his understanding on this profoundly political matter. I have been trawling my own limited acquaintance with accounts of groups of seahorses - over the centuries since Plato and Epicurus in antiquity - who gathered themselves relationally around some cause or another. I presume you do have regard for causes adopted by seahorse collectives because you declare a binding purpose yourself! Suppose, furthermore, that some of these other causes were worthy beyond interrogation; moreover, sustainable in and of themselves in so far that we have seen many revived in new groups that generated themselves after the old ones expired. What, then, if all those frustrated communities ultimately faded because their members gathered themselves relationally around an authority figure too, even if only an effigy or a fearsome legacy?

Well, said The Feather, in advance of a considered trawl of my own, my feeling is that you have a point. After all, if we trace our ancestors up to and earlier than the end of the last cold era when the seas were small, and there were very few of us, they seemed to have lived out quite separated lives (as far as we can tell given the paucity of surviving first hand accounts). Constantly on the move - driven almost exclusively by their desperate need for food and sanctuaries for safe breeding - probably there were no authority figures setting aside any local Alpha specimens or uncontested thugs. There would have been no settlements of any significant number and, therefore, no subjects over whom to reign. We might say safely that there could have been no large-scale or culturally-entrenched oppression. In the form of institutional slavery - condoned and prosecuted across the globe - that was to arrive with the earliest of seahorse civilisations and endure until only a few generations ago. In our earliest neighbourhoods along the fertile reef - co-emergent with our harvesting of food in local systematic ways - might became right! The maxim, "I win, you die!" prevailed and violence became a justifiable means to every civic end. Prior to the establishment of such settlements, we know of no special causes that endured over those earlier expanses of history except natural selection herself and all that she precipitated! "Nature red in tooth and claw" got translated in time and cultural evolution to "Seahorse eat seahorse". Ubiquitously history replays the sword pitched against the sword, but barely at all the numerous small and selfless acts of thoughtfulness that raised lives up rather than tore them unthinkingly to shreds. For all we can determine, there have been causes only since there have been oppressors. Oppressors breed oppressors in order to rationalise the toxic culture that is so convenient for them, and to effect a spurious moral basis for their self-serving machinations. The process is a most insidious one, transmitting itself over and over through successive generations as each replicates itself biologically, co-spawning echoes of sanctioned (context-reinforced) behavioural repertoires by rebuking spontaneous behaviour in their bewildered pre-verbal infants who can be cajoled grammatically later. This is how impoverished moral environments are blindly perpetuated. World communities are always a misshapen product of their histories - just like individuals and, just like individuals, they cannot develop a sensitivity to their own corruption without a spiritual mirror. Who is to hold the spiritual mirror to an individual or to a community? The only plausible candidate is a consistently less corrupt one and, since that is an impossible arrangement, we settle for peers. The moment we introduce power, we certainly dance with latent corruption. The only principle that whispers assurance to us is the one that is both ideal but also pragmatic. We have no leaders. And no oppressors.



"Blind Perpetuation"
Original sculpture by Bob Waters at Arlington Court, Devon



**"Maintaining A Very Small Corner Of The Whole Universe"
Upper Barracca Gardens from Grand Harbour, Valletta, Malta**

In an ideal world

Then how do you prevent chaos and preserve social order? invited Sam.

We don't. We have no need to. The code of our society is too robust. If you insist on pushing the point, I would try to convince you by saying that none of us wishes to contemplate a return to the sea and, relying on our mutual belongingness for the strength to resist that temptation, our creating too much disruption would be tantamount to sawing off the branch that is our individual perch on safe, dry land. But that might suggest to you that it is common-or-garden fear that drives us rather than simple belief. Whilst we may experience either at any time, it is actually the spiritual shift precipitated by our shipwreck – the authentic resignation to re-establishing ourselves – that keeps us grounded. It feels subjectively like personal volition.

*Is yours a true Utopia*²⁴²? Sam wanted to see how far he could go.

The Feather smiled a very gentle smile. A true Utopia smacks of greater perfection than you will see around here. A true Utopia would be the end of the line. But that isn't in prospect for us – either personally, or in society. No. We don't claim perfection. We think we have made some progress here. We think that, to some extent, we have got our act together. But we don't believe that standing still is an option for those who have been fortunate enough to walk the illuminated fork in the road. We have to make progress or we regress. Treading water is only ever an unsafe and temporary option for us.

Just one more question, if I could ... urged the interrogating salvagee ... if there are many causes, and some of these are mutually antagonistic, can it ever be possible to have a universal brotherhood amongst us; you know, one that includes every seahorse – the ultimate in social harmony amongst all seahorses – and permanent world peace?

*We don't aim for perfection, as I said, spoke The Feather, resolute. As you will come to appreciate if you remain amongst us, it is not just necessary, but it is also morally sufficient to mind our own business, to take care of only our own moral affairs. We review ourselves critically, but we steer clear of taking notes on others unless we are invited to do so explicitly. We own our own problems and shortcomings and we anticipate that others will do the same. We just take care of our side of the street – and our pavement alone. It is true, I suppose, that if every seahorse, and every society of seahorses, adopted these principles – then global satisfaction would be in prospect! But that is an indulgence of your question, and we are not responsible for world peace. As individuals, we are satisfied with maintaining a very small corner of the whole universe. We do help each other in that task – in what we call sponsorship – and, perhaps it is true that miscellaneous societies of seahorses could sponsor each other progressively towards maturity and mutual harmony. That seems farther off than I can imagine today – much farther off.*²⁴³

²⁴² Based on Plato's *Republic*, *Utopia* (1516) is the "perfect" human society created in fiction and located on an island in the Atlantic Ocean by Sir Thomas More (1478–1535). Like *Nine Seahorses*, *Utopia* favoured equality and pacifism, recognising that whilst perfection is an impossible dream, ideals are worthwhile yardsticks for meaningful progress. There are many utopias in religion, literature, and the broader culture – including the Biblical Garden of Eden. If ever there was an incontrovertible candidate for an ancient and enduring Jungian archetype, perhaps the human capacity for longing for everything to be OK (and imagining that it is) is about as close as one will get.

²⁴³ Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) in *Social Statistics* (1851) wrote, "Every man may claim the fullest liberty to exercise his faculties compatible with the possession of like liberties by every other man ... Morality knows nothing of geographical boundaries, or distinctions of race ... No one can be perfectly free till all are free; no one can be perfectly moral till all are moral; no one can be perfectly happy till all are happy."



"See Others Reach Dry Land"
Saint Michael's Mount, Cornwall

Convinced of a need for belonging

Just suppose, said Sam (still not quite appreciating how fortunate he was to be alive, and how much better off he might be – in both his own eyes and his social standing – to at least seem rendered closer to reticence by gratitude), I am now convinced of my need for belonging in a fellowship such as yours. May I join you? What must I do to qualify? Is there an apprenticeship I must serve? For how long?

Why, certainly you may join us! said The Feather on behalf of the entire society, knowing that its membership criterion had been satisfied easily by Sam's evident personal submission – not to say sheer expression of interest and inexhaustible curiosity in understanding how it all worked. The only requirement we place upon you is that you must desire to remain reclaimed; i.e., you maintain your position about not putting out to sea, and that you remain available as a foremost call on your time to attend shipwrecks – working with us to see others reach dry land. As for a probationary period, there is no such thing; remember – we are spiritually equal! You might say that, for each and every one of us, membership lasts 24 hours on a renewable basis. We never qualify to a criterion, or receive any certificate such as in the trades or professions. You are about to embark on a lifelong journey. Welcome to the home straight!

Sam enjoyed a most exquisite rush of hope and personal satisfaction.



The unobscured "Home Straight" is an elevated feeling!
York Race Course