

Chapter 13

"Principles, practice and perseverance"

From staunch society to bona fide personal freedom

Yesterday you mentioned something about sponsorship ... interposed Sam (reviving what amounted to his induction interview with The Feather) ... what is that, and how does it help us maintain modest corners of the universe in ways which promote our new-found and mutual freedom?

Every single one of us; at least, each one of us who suffers no dark misery, has a sponsor, answered The Feather, happy to co-operate.

What for? demanded Sam.

The program. This seemed like a brisk resumption to both parties.

What's "the program"? insisted Sam, addressing The Feather.

It's the set of principles that informs, stimulates and maintains our personal spiritual journeys. It has much to do with learning about honesty - or "getting real", if you like. We come to appreciate - if we are open-minded enough - that we have been "spiritually blind" in significant ways, especially in our old lives. That "spiritual blindness" we have heard referred to by others as "denial" or "discounting"; in fact, many things besides - some quite pejorative - because most (if not all) of our thoughtless, inconsiderate and selfish behaviour emerged from the blind side of our personalities. We become willing to try to remedy that state of affairs, but we have to transcend our own inner resistance towards that end. That obstacle is, as it were, a buttress for the raw, sensitive "self" that longs chronically for everything to be OK, and for the reassurance from others that we are OK, too. Although a dispensable defence, it is as hardy as hell, and may take quite a battering before it crumbles.

My goodness, said Sam, you make it all sound like quite a struggle.

We find living far less of a struggle once we have a sponsor and a program, asserted The Feather with absolutely no quiver in his voice.

I think I'm beginning to realise that my shipwreck has dissolved much of my resistance, said Sam - realising he was pretty much on beam.

Quite! answered The Feather. In (not too much) time you may like to establish that as an absolute. We have found that absolute surrender of adherence to the old life is necessary for a truly authentic new beginning. Fortunately, it is the only absolute of the program. Everything else that comes afterwards is satisfied by a reasonable degree of commitment and effort. Any dilution of the primary requirement, and brininess creeps into our nostrils sooner or later. There is no finer practice in the program than the art of letting go.

What comes next, then? enquired Sam, moving fast with his enthusiasm.

You take an honest look at yourself. It may feel brutal at times.

Why? asked Sam, sensing he was being a little obtuse.

Why must you do it, or why might it feel brutal? probed The Feather.

Well - since you ask that way - both: I suppose I meant both.

OK. You can't see yourself as you really are. You need a spiritual mirror. That involves a structure; i.e., the program - and another seahorse - who becomes your sponsor. It can feel brutal because your raw inner self may be exposed in a way that surprises or shocks you. You can count on the support of your friends ... I mean really count.



"Your Raw Inner Self May Be Exposed"
(This specimen's better half was away visiting her own sponsor)



"Imposing Assortment"

Part of Rosalie Chichester's collection, Arlington House, Devon

It all sounds a bit circular - if you know what I mean, moaned Sam.

I do. It's supposed to be. The letting go bit is truly circular. By that I mean that you must do it to experience its effects: and I mean really do it. You can't ... kind of ... test it to see whether it works. It only works if you let go in the sense of relinquishing all of your expectations about what might happen as a consequence of doing it - of actually entrusting your future deliberately but unconditionally!

In what or in whom are you placing your trust when you do that?

That's a personal thing. Do you remember yesterday we talked about Moses and whether he actually carried tablets of stone down the mountain? What you believe matters. You need to find a conviction that's right for you and stems in and from your innermost heart. The way I think about it is this: I presume that anything or anyone that or whom we can trust has the capacity to show us all we need to know. Whenever I possess or express that confidence, it seems to reap a harvest of understanding that just grows and grows in a quiet manner.

That sounds quite spectacular, rendered Sam more co-operatively.

Awesome is what it is. The wonder is in the unravelling of your life.

Let me guess

How do I acquire this capacity for trust - this private experience of confidence and awe? asked Sam with more than a little interest.

You start with a willingness to be guided; that is, consciously relinquish your illusion of self-reliance. This shouldn't be too much of a challenge once you appreciate it for what it is. You can dispense with any lurking doubts by examining your record: your old way of doing things and the consequences that they had - not just for yourself but for others. Anyone who baulks at such an exercise must consider themselves too rounded to make mistakes, or perhaps believe that their record is not sufficiently blemished to require scrutiny - or just reckon that it is otherwise an optional demand on their time.

Sam reassured himself: It's OK. I don't fall into those categories.

It's really, really important to understand that nobody else tells you what to believe, think, feel, say, do or become. You acquire your own understanding of all these things - by working with someone else. Remember that your sponsor understands things from both perspectives; i.e., guiding and being guided. Don't consider a sponsor who doesn't have one themselves. Nobody who isn't sponsored can sponsor another.

Sam could see no reason to hesitate. Will you sponsor me? he asked.

No

Why not?

I sponsor an imposing assortment of seahorses already and, in any event, there may be someone more suitable for you.

What do you mean by suitable? asked Sam (not too visibly hurt).

Someone with whom you identify, and whom you respect enough to listen to what they tell you. But always remember that you are not deferring to an individual. Your life is entrusted to a beneficent power now. Take your inspiration from there. Trust that your relationship with your new sponsor will be assisted by a third, spiritual essence. Your willingness to be guided is a condition which generates its own effect. You will find, often, that nothing more is required of you.

With a little compensatory self-assurance, Sam said, Let me guess ...

You can only ask, obliged The Feather softly. Don't be afraid to ask.

A question of honour

Stocky, said Sam slightly obsequiously, do you have a sponsor?

Stocky smiled. Sure do.

Will you sponsor me?

I'd be very glad to, Sam. It would be an honour.

Sam felt struck that Stocky viewed sponsoring him as anything to be glad about. Thank you, he muttered with trepidation, but much relief. The Feather said something about "getting real". What did he mean?

It means that - at last - you refrain from kidding yourself.

Still don't get it. Sam's challenge was acceptably innocent.

Take you and your seafaring escapades ...

Yes, but I had to escape.

Clive corrupted and frightened you, but you reserved your indignation for yourself alone: before, during and after setting sail.

Yes I did, Sam admitted.

Why?

Because I didn't want any interference, answered Sam honestly.

Stocky persevered: What sort of interference had you anticipated?

Any more interference like Clive's, came Sam's straight answer.

Yes - I can see that. But you kidded yourself that every seahorse was like Clive. That isn't actually true. Look around you now.

But you weren't at the jetty. I wish you all could have been.

No, Stocky sympathised, but there may have been folks like us on or near the jetty. You didn't enquire too extensively did you?

No I didn't, agreed Sam.

We came to you at the rocks, asserted Stocky somewhat obliquely.

Yes, you did.

What might have happened to you but for our arrival?

Sam paused in a moment of blankness ... I believe I would have expired.

You are what we call in the salvage business a slow learner!

Do you think I've always been a slow learner? Sam was, in fact, sad.

I was teasing you. Actually, it is probably the rapidity and force with which we learn things - a lot of it going on subconsciously (or underneath our awareness) from the earliest of our days - that generates much of our misery as well as much of our gladness and joy. What do you think you might have been learning before your escape?

Something quite forceful - perhaps instinctive - drove me towards what I saw as independence. I can see now that it all had everything to do with wanting to do things my own way - without anybody telling what I could or couldn't do. Often I felt empty, or like an outsider looking in. Or I felt full of conflicts: torn this way and then that. Or I felt lonely. And I knew from even the very earliest of my private experiences that I could perform affective alchemy - transforming feelings into a more bearable (even pleasurable) haze with the quick application of some convenient concoction or another. I knew that if I engaged with others openly, I would be challenged to the point where I would have had to do everything very differently.

Developing a good appetite

Were there any trustworthy seahorses to whom you could have turned?

Those stones were not the kind I persisted in turning over. I was just determined that no-one like Clive should have the better of me.

That's understandable, affirmed Stocky with due kindness.

Is it? Sam looked up, hopeful.

Yes it is. It is perfectly reasonable to want that kind of freedom.

Sam remained quiet and pensive for a moment. Stocky left him thus before continuing, So you kept your head down, transmitting messages to everybody else that said, "Get off my back", or, "Leave me alone".

Yes, unless I wished to have another seahorse near me for comfort.

So you used others for physical intimacy, concluded Stocky bluntly.

Sam hung his head in sudden, real and spine-tingling shame.

It's important that you realise the truth of your past, said Stocky, but you will also see that usually there has been a quid pro quo. Whoever comforted you at those times wasn't exactly running away. Maybe they had their own reasons for being situated where they were.

No, I mean Yes - but ...

... but you feel bad about it all the same, Stocky sympathised.

Yes, agreed Sam.

And you feel, perhaps, that there is - so it seems - insurmountable unfinished business with your erstwhile paramours, and all of those interfering busybodies who occasionally - and with a variety of motives including the reasonable and the poisonous - appealed to your better nature, but whom you always despatched with a smarting ear?

Yes. Sam thought that he understood what Stocky was getting at.

Some comforters have had your best interests at heart ...

Perhaps ...

... and some like to be promoted. Others solicit their own dismissal.

Sam realised suddenly that he didn't. What on earth do you mean?

Never mind. Look, let's recap. Since your Indian arrival you have felt strangely compelled - from somewhere within, so to say - in various situations to behave in this way, or refrain from behaving in that. But you mightn't have been able to identify where those compulsions came from. You just realise that they have driven you - now that you have space to reflect on all your affairs deliberately.

Yes. But just clarify what you mean about "somewhere within".

Stocky permitted himself a subdued chuckle. I mean the impulses in question - those that have been driving you - that seem to quicken or quell a given sort of behaviour in various recognisable scenarios ...

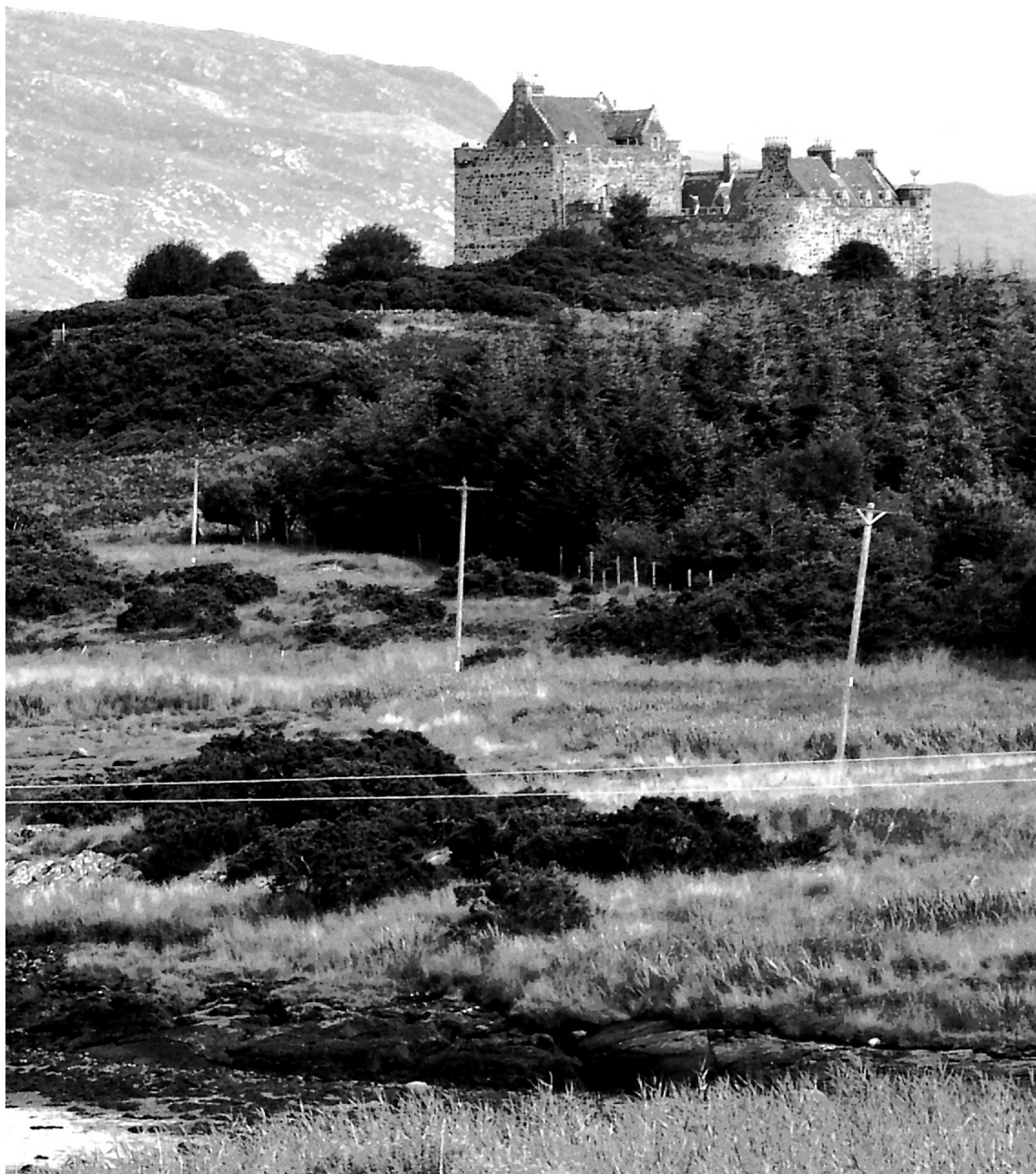
What do you mean by "recognisable scenarios"? interrupted Sam.

... situations of a particular kind - such as a busy marketplace - and ones that mimic that bustle - anywhere where there is a crowd, say ...

OK

... those impulses don't express themselves as words. They seem to emanate from your core. You have sensed reverberations in your body ...

Stocky paused. Sam paused too. OK, said Sam eventually.



"Remote Location"
Duart Castle, Isle of Mull, Scotland

... the odd thing about that whirlpool of urges, Stocky continued, is that you can't for the life of you tell where they come from. You can't associate them with a particular memory, no matter how you try. They seem most entrenched in you; moreover - quite persistent in the way that they have prompted you in given circumstances - and also ones that feign familiarity; i.e., new ones similar to those you know you have experienced before. You don't possess a confidence that you can obliterate the unpleasant harrying through the exercise of will.

I can recognise what you are saying, answered Sam. It's difficult for me to get a hold of the whole idea in my mind's eye, because I have always lived with that emotional environment. It is biographic, and I can only imagine how it might have been for things to be different.

Things can be different from now on, asserted Stocky. It takes an awakening of the kind you are experiencing now, plenty of patience and an openness to embrace the crowds and the bustle with a new confidence. Before you know it you have become a different seahorse.

OK, said Sam, I think I have an appetite for all that.

Care to digest an oxymoron?

Care to digest an oxymoron? asked Stocky, introducing a diversion.

I have never stooped to cannibalism, replied Sam, not entirely sure whether he'd succeeded in being funny.

Very good! said Stocky. All those busybodies that got in your way ...

Yes, acknowledged Sam.

... I'll wager you can imagine each of them in your mind's eye clearly enough, can't you?

Most certainly, agreed Sam. Many of them have assumed a life of their own. If I am frank, I might barely recognise one in the flesh today.

Stocky was pleased with the progress between the pair of ex-mariners, asking of Sam, How do you feel about all those old acquaintances now?

Honestly? asked Sam, testing the scope of candour permitted.

Of course, replied Stocky.

Well - I have always considered them offensive; some of them grossly so, and don't see much cause at present anyway for changing my mind.

I'm more interested in how you feel than what you think, insisted Stocky.

OK. I feel angry towards them. I could easily call them vile names.

Good! said Stocky, rewarding Sam's straightforwardness. Now, I want you to think about those same busybodies - one at a time. Just hold one of them in your mind - one about whom you feel deeply resentful.

OK ... Sam lapsed into a concordant silence.

What do you feel? probed Stocky gently.

Anger - and an aversion or disgust that compels me to remove myself to a remote location as soon as I have delivered a piece of my mind.

OK. Do you have a sense of unfinished business with that seahorse?

Of a kind, I suppose, concurred Sam.

What kind? pressed Stocky.

There's an ache ... and a responsibility for peace I can't resolve.

Uh-huh, said Stocky - almost enthusiastically. The sponsor waited.

After several moments in a reverie, Sam exploded: *The strange thing is ... I feel I could make that peace just by recognising how I have been self-centred - independently of anything they have done to me. I don't have to make their peace for them. I only have to make my own.*

That's right! chimed Stocky. *You have discovered an enormously useful spiritual principle of the kind that affords a good night's rest.*

No kidding! articulated Sam, a touch sarcastically.

No kidding at all. The oxymoron is, "Let those who live in your head because they offended you, know that you know you have wronged them".

Sam looked unmistakeably burdened by such convolution, blurting out, *You've got me all confused about more than a couple of things.*

I can imagine, replied Stocky.

All this "you know that I know" stuff. Doesn't it smack of playing guessing games? Isn't that a bit old-fashioned for where we're going?

Stocky was firm: *I think that you are being unfashionably evasive.*

So ... I am to reflect on how these other seahorses might have felt?

Exactly, confirmed the robust sponsor.

And everything that has ever gone pear-shaped is all my fault?

Stocky laughed. *Of course not! Remember - you are cleaning up your side of the street. You are not responsible for the other side of it.*

Sam pondered for a second, by which time he thought he had got it.

Not quite there yet

And do I have to visit all those lousy seahorses, apologising for how I used or abused them, when really it was they who screwed me over?

You're not quite there yet, asserted Stocky. *Back up the truck! Remember - you are taking into account something you haven't reckoned properly before; i.e., that you have been selfish towards others.*

Oh yes, said Sam, somewhat shame-faced again.

And what is more, Stocky added, *it may be inadvisable to visit certain of them. You would never want to do more harm than good.*

Sam re-adorned himself with his "a mite baffled" expression.

Stocky clarified: *You wouldn't want to visit any old acquaintance in order to straighten things out where - by the end of the visit - the net harm done to other seahorses had increased rather than decreased.*

Sam didn't like what he was hearing. He knew that his agile mind was hunting the "get-out". Stocky was a few thoughts even farther ahead.

Look, said Stocky, *making sensitive amends to other seahorses for past wrongs ...*

What are "sensitive amends"? interjected Sam.

... sensitive amends are ones that are brief, and let the other person take the apology they want or need. You just say something as vague as, "You know all that stuff - I'm sorry - it was me, not you".

I see, said Sam (and did).

Making amends, continued Stocky, *is a delicate business. Being able to exercise discretion over what and what not to do is one of the greatest advantages of working with a sponsor. Don't go off visiting old enemies without a conversation between us about your intentions.*

Rather predictably, Sam seemed satisfied with that holding advice.



"Pear-shaped"

A Beurre Hardy still dripping after a nice refreshing shower



(... tell at least one person) "Everything"

When will I know everything I need to know?

Is there anything else I need to know about being sponsored? enquired Sam in an absurdly cavalier manner.

Still replete with an abundance of patience (for there had been no shortage of shipwrecks in recent times and, like The Feather, Stocky had an impressive assortment of charges), Stocky humoured his apprentice deftly: *There is much more that you will learn about sponsorship. When you have worked through the cycle of the program once in earnest, you will be sponsoring exhausted seahorses yourself. But these are early days, and you mustn't look too far ahead. Rather than taking on life by the horns, we are satisfied to manage one day. That is what we seem to be built for - our own affairs for 24 hours.*

OK, said Sam, eager to listen. *Anything else I should know today?*

Stocky beamed at Sam's evident readiness to pick things up quickly.

Yes. Remember your fundamental position. You are an ex-mariner. The Feather explained to you the advantage of rendering that absolute.

Yes. I remember, agreed Sam.

Second, find some spiritual entity to trust. It doesn't matter what it is as long as it is meaningful to you - but is not you! If you believe in the divine, that is well and good. Nature spawned you and knows your weaknesses as well as your strengths. The Feather and I are going nowhere as long as you maintain your fundamental position. There are many hundreds of other seahorses upon whom you may rely.

OK, said Sam. He wasn't fighting this. He remembered what The Feather had said about a trustworthy source being able to guide as needed.

Third, enumerated Stocky, we will talk more about your adventures - about the seahorse you have been - and how you have affected the lives of others ... even Clipboard Clive will feature on your list!

Oh gosh! exclaimed Sam, but there was no fundamental resistance.

Sensing Sam's genuine fatigue, Stocky quit the onslaught of numbers.

You will need to tell at least one person everything. It is the last secret that you keep - the one you are most reluctant to disclose - the one you'd escort most ardently to the grave - that makes you most needlessly lonely. It could be the one that beckons you back to sea.

Sam hesitated with misgivings, but said nothing.

We will talk about what sort of seahorse you want to become - unless you consider yourself a finished product already - in which case we will need to address that obstacle first. You will need to be entirely ready to change, to have all your self-delusion dissolved, and yet discern what sort of seahorse nature imagined you to be - and how you wish to converse with her about that. The rules are few.

That sounded quite positive. OK, said Sam.

We have already touched upon your willingness to remedy past wrongs - we will travel to that difficult territory gradually and carefully.

Quite! agreed Sam precipitously.

You need to develop a capacity for recognising when you are wrong.

I think that you are right about that! said Sam most conducively.

We have agreed that you will prioritise attending shipwrecks with us.

I want to! exclaimed Sam.

Above all, Stocky said solemnly, never permit yourself hopelessness.