



The Ambassador and the Touchperson

A folk tale about
**The Little People of the Ozark Mountain
Book Three**

*Stories of an adolescent past,
retold for grown-ups, who still
cherish the magic of those days gone by!*

by

Tom Gnagey



The Ambassador

And the Touchperson

A folk tale

Book Three

In The Little People of the Ozark Mountain™ series

*Stories of a time gone by,
retold for grown-ups,
who still cherish the magical possibilities
life has to offer.*

As told to

Tom Gnagey

[The only known living confidant of the
Little People of the Ozark Mountains™]

Although not entirely necessary
It will help to have read

Book One: Ring Of The Farjumpers
And

Book Two: Man of the Clan
before perusing this volume.

Book Four: Twiggs and Cinnamon

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D E D I C A T I O N

This book is dedicated
to those among us,
who believe humanity
is a species worth saving,
enriching and improving;
and
who are willing to work each day
toward those grand
and urgent goals.

- G.F.H.

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**CHAPTER ONE:
This Ambassador/Touchperson thing
was going to be okay!**

"You're two seconds late, Twiggypin," I declared, playfully, as at last, I felt the familiar weight of my best friend settle gently onto my right shoulder.

I had been at the cabin since a bit before sunset - cleaning, straightening, and starting a roaring fire in the fireplace. Mostly, though, I found myself just lying back on the bed, restlessly anticipating the stroke of midnight and my first honest to goodness visit with Twiggs since that sad, sad day back in August when I thought he had left my life forever.

My parents thought it strange that I would want to spend a cold, late December night all by myself, up at the log cabin, but they allowed it. Recently they had been allowing a lot of things that told me they understood I was growing up, and that they recognized I wasn't just a run of the mill, nine-year-old boy.

"Well, please forgive me, Sir! I didn't know if you'd be up here or down at Jutting Rock, so I stopped off there first. Sorry for that prolonged delay! I assure you that it won't happen again," Twiggs said, play-acting an apology and bowing deeply."

We couldn't contain our smiles.

"Boy it's good to really be back with you, Jay-man," he continued, pressing his face against my earlobe and giving the side of my face the hug of all hugs.

I responded carefully with my own lingering, gentle, three fingered stroking of his tiny back.

"Jump over to my knee so I can get a good look at you,

ol' man," I said, still reclining on the bed, knees bent over a pillow which I had found too musty to use behind my head.

"Jeepers! It really is good to see you again," I said, just having to reach out and continue touching him. He took hold of my finger with both hands, much as he had done that very first time we met. He was obviously every bit as happy to be there with me, as I was to have him there.

"What! No flowing Ambassador's robes or Golden Scepter," I said, giggling through my words. "I figured from that proclamation you left for me, they'd have you all decked out in purple finery." I giggled on, hand cupped to my mouth.

At that, Twiggs playfully sailed his brown, wide-brimmed, pointed hat toward my face. It would have been a direct hit on my upper lip if I had not reached out and masterfully snatched it in midair.

"The red feather looks pretty sharp," I said, giving the hat a once over. "And the red vest, too. Pretty snazzy! It makes you look different - not wearing the green one anymore."

"More handsome, no doubt!" Twiggs joked, flexing his non-existent muscles. "And for your information, this is a crimson vest."

"Woo-oo, crimson," I taunted - just a bit. "And this red plaid shirt I'm wearing is, well, it's red plaid, so there!"

We both laughed a bit too much. It was sort of awkward and yet it was wonderfully natural. 'The jitters will leave any minute now,' I told myself. If he had been my size, a spirited tussle would have been in order to ease us through the moment. That not being the case, we'd just have to deal with it like older guys.

Twiggs sat down on my knee, legs dangling. He leaned forward, looking me right in the eye.

"I'm in love, Jay. I mean really, one hundred percent, totally and absolutely in love! So much has happened I don't know where to start."

"Sounds to me like you just started," I said, skootching up a bit, so we would be eye to eye.

"Just go on! Tell me all about it. I can hardly wait to hear."

That next thirty minutes turned out to be the exclusive

property of one certified, lovesick, puppy! This Cinnamon of his, with the perpetual smile and the long golden hair, must really be something special, I thought. I wondered if I should be jealous.

I also wondered, as he babbled on, whether I'd ever be so fortunate as to find someone just that right for me. Although in my mortal realm, as Twiggs referred to it, there had been no one girl created just for me - as Cinnamon had been for him in his realm - I felt confident about it all. Perhaps by listening to Twiggs, I could learn things that would be of help in my quest.

With that in mind, I tuned him in again.

"So, I guess that's about it. She's just everything and more a guy could ever hope for," he said, apparently bringing his account to an end - for the time being, at least.

"J. J. kissed me the other day," I said, trying to relate in some small way to this new, but obviously all-important romantic side of his life.

"She kissed you?"

"Yeah," I sighed. "She caught me off guard and I wasn't prepared."

"She ... kissed ... you?" he repeated, emphasizing each and every word.

"Okay, so I'm a dufus! She kissed me and I didn't kiss her back. But I'll be ready next time," I added hurriedly, attempting to regain some sense of dignity in the whole embarrassing matter.

Then, seeing a brilliant opportunity to re-focus the topic away from me, I asked:

"So how is it - kissing? Is it as good as we thought it would be? Did we practice the right way? Well?"

"There's no way to practice, Jay-man, but somehow you just know how to do it when the time comes. Don't ask me how, but you just know!"

"So, is it great or what?"

"It's the greatest thing in the world, Jay! It's not just the kiss - though that is great. It's the holding her close and feeling her breathe - feeling her heart beat against your chest. It's the softness of her lips and cheeks. It's running your hands through each other's hair. It's looking into one

another's eyes and never wanting to look away. It's knowing that she desires all of that with you, just as much as you do with her. It's closeness. That's it, really. It's a wonderful kind of closeness you've never known with another person before."

"Well, don't pucker up in my direction, Mr. Ambassador," I joked, trying to relieve some of the new and poorly understood sensations that welled up inside me as he talked.

"So, besides spending hour upon hour kissing with Cinnamon, what else have you been up to?"

Another half-hour passed as Twiggs related the new levels of accountability involved in using his magic, Goodakting, and Wishgranting. He spoke of how it was different for him being a man of the clan, and of the colossal load of responsibility which adulthood had thrust upon him. He told me about the book he was writing about mortals and I readily agreed to help. He caught me up on other things - his parents, Gramps, Harmony and the tree house he was building for Cinnamon and him to live in after they were married - an event still four years away.

The room chilled a bit and we moved to the rug in front of the fireplace, where, as the two best friends who had ever been best friends, we continued to share experiences and compare notes until dawn began peeking through the small window over my bed.

At that, we realized we were starved, so, resting the big iron skillet on the coals in the fireplace, I fixed bacon and eggs. Twiggs skewered several slices of bread with some pointed hot dog sticks and made toast. It was like the old days - the two of us - and yet from our brief time together, I think we both realized it was no longer the old days. In those four, short, months we had both changed - grown, I suppose would be the proper term.

Oh, it wasn't that we could not still be very best friends. Nothing like that. We just needed time for the new Twiggs and the new Jay to get acquainted. It would all work out fine.

"After breakfast, we really need to put together an agenda for this meeting we're having - it is an official meeting you'll remember - between me, the Ambassador to the Mortal Realm, and you, the Mortal Realm's Touchperson," Twiggs

said, sitting back and rubbing his stomach.

"That makes it all sound awfully important," I said, hit for the first time by the full impact of our most unique situation. "We can agendize at the swimming hole, just as well as here, can't we," I suggested more than asked.

"Sounds great to me," Twiggs agreed.

"You know," I went on, teasing Twiggs a bit, "The strangest thing has happened down at the swimming hole. It stays warm the year 'round now, like it may have struck some underground, volcanically heated spring."

"You don't say," Twiggs mused, fighting back his grin. "I can hardly wait to see it."

He knew I knew that he'd fixed it with his magic, but he wasn't about to give me the satisfaction of admitting to it!

I bundled up from hat to boots and blanketed Twiggs - sitting there on my shoulder - in one end of my scarf, for the chilly trip across the meadow.

The lightest wisps of snow were falling, adding a new sparkle to the soft white, gently rippled meadow floor. In my Ozarks, one could not always count on a white Christmas, but it looked like that year everything was going to be Christmas Card perfect.

The five-minute walk went quickly, as our non-stop conversation continued. Not unsurprisingly, Jutting Rock was snow-free and the air above it a good eighty degrees hot. Twiggs had thought of everything. Two seconds late, indeed! In no time, flat, we were enjoying a wondrous rerun of summer dips past.

We inspected the dam and found it to be in good shape. We dove and cannon balled, and swam and floated. We swam under water and dove for a nickel. Twiggs raced the Blue Gills and I hitched a ride on the big mud turtle who seemed quite uncertain as to whether or not it was truly time to bury himself in the creek bed and hibernate.

After a time, we lay on the big flat rock and watched the sun make its way toward the top of the sky. Mostly we talked - some of silly things like boys, and some of serious things like men. I was fascinated by the fact that we both seemed completely comfortable both ways - as boys one minute and as men the next.

"I hope we never lose that," I said to Twiggs, at one point.

"Don't lose what," he asked.

"The little kids that still seem to live inside us."

"Yeah, I know just what you mean. That's one of the greatest gifts you gave to me, Jay. Did you know that?"

"Well, Yeah, I reckon I knew it. I mean, I didn't ever think of it as a gift, though. It was just that you were such a confounded stuffed shirt when I first met you - so out to impress me by how grown up you were, you know? I just couldn't pass up a challenge like that!"

We both had to laugh as we each privately remembered those first days together.

"You know what your greatest gift to me has been, Twiggs?"

"Mine to you? No. What?"

"You helped me realize that there is always some kind of magic around to help handle any problem, if I would just search in the right places."

"But you mortals don't have any mag..." Twiggs words drifted into silence as he realized what I had meant.

"A mortal's most powerful magic is his ability to invent or create the magic he needs at the moment, is that what you mean, Jay?"

"Couldn't have said it better myself. I always sort of lived that way, but it took you to make me see what I was doing. Realizing that made me feel a lot more secure - a lot less scared about growing up."

"And that's what I admire the most about you mortals," Twiggs said. He then amended it somewhat:

"Well, it's what I admire most about many of you mortals, at least. Many others just seem to be content to sit around on their pratts and wait for somebody else to solve all their problems, meet all their needs, fulfill all their dreams. Some mortals even seem to be in the business of causing the problems that the rest of you must then solve. As a group, you are a most baffling species, you know."

"I do know what you mean." I said.

Twiggs continued:

"It's the most difficult part of my book, so far -

describing what mortals believe is good and right and possible. I suppose you'd call it, 'What makes them tick'. I've decided there is no one answer and that will be almost impossible to explain to my Little People. They just won't be able to comprehend that any culture could disagree about so many of the most basic areas of existence - let alone about co-existence."

"I've been thinking a lot about that, too, these last few months," I said. "I even tried to write down what I think must be the basic philosophy of you Little People."

"This should be interesting," Twiggs said repositioning himself cross-legged, squarely in the center of my chest, as I continued to lay there on my back.

I reached out for my jeans that lay crumpled a few feet away, and extracted an equally crumpled piece of paper from their hip pocket - my safe place for all truly important papers.

"Well, here's my first attempt," I said. "Tell me what you think."

Holding it between me and the sun, so as to shade my eyes, I read from the paper:

"Little People believe in always taking the necessary steps to help make the lives of others, happy, safe, and ever growing."

"Wow! Jay. Not bad. Not bad at all!" Twiggs said.

His words, and especially the way he said them, made me feel positively great! I mean I knew it wasn't complete, but I was really pleased to know I was on the right track.

Since I had been six, one of my personal goals had been to design for myself, a complete philosophy of life by my tenth birthday. Now, I wanted to incorporate into it, all that seemed to me to be the best of both realms. I had been trying out that way of life recently - that thing I just read off about the Little People - and I really liked what I had seen and felt. It made me feel some very special way inside. It was a way for which I had no words to describe.

Only later, would I learn that Twiggs' people had a wonderful word to describe that extraordinary feeling - fuzziacious - knowing you had just been truly helpful to someone else. As feelings go, it lies somewhere between a heavy dose of prickly goose bumps, and that of the personal

satisfaction that comes with finally obtaining some really important goal that you had been working toward for a long time. Or maybe it's more between the smell of bread baking and a long hug from your best friend. Well, it's in there somewhere.

If fuzziacious was the main personal motivation that held the Little People's society together in such a grand manner, I wondered what it was that did (or was supposed to do) that for us mortals. More thought would be needed. Twiggs probably already had a head start on that one. It was then that I finally decided that even if Twiggs continued to insist on agendas, this Ambassador / Touchperson thing was going to be okay!

**CHAPTER TWO:
Just knowing a friend is available, can make all the
difference.**

After the swim, we returned to the cabin and feasted on corned beef hash and potato chips. The fire had died down but I soon had it roaring again. Whenever there was a lull in the conversation, Twiggs talked about Cinnamon. It became quite comical - to me first and later to him as well, when he realized what he was doing. Love was good for Twiggs. I hoped when it came my way it would be that good for me.

"Okay, Mr. Touchperson," Twiggs began. "We've played away half our day. Now we really need to get an agenda set. Gramps said an agenda was important so we would make the best use of our time."

"Seems to me we've made pretty good use of our time without one," I commented. "Maybe what we need to do is to make a list of things we want to discuss next time we get together. That way we can both do some hard thinking in between times."

Time was flying by and neither of us really wanted to begin thinking about next time yet. Anyway, I had one very important item on my personal agenda that I hadn't yet brought up. We sprawled out on the bed, me on my side, head propped up in my hand, and Twiggs facing me, tummy down, on the big pillow - the big pillow that had suddenly lost its musty smell as it became his province!

"I've made a pretty big decision, Twiggs."

"What's that?"

"You know that one wish you said you could grant for

me in my lifetime?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I've decided how I want to use it."

The conversation suddenly became quite serious. Twiggs sat up.

"So, what is it? Are you sick? You know it can be anything you want!"

"Well, you remember Sammy, my deaf friend, don't you?"

"Sure. He's a great kid."

"Well, the doctors discovered that the real reason he can't hear is that he has a tumor in his brain - a tumor that is beginning to grow again and it could kill him. Next month, he's going to have an operation. I overheard Doc White telling Parson that there was only a very slim chance he'd live through it.

Twiggs was visibly shaken by the news.

"Here's my wish, are you ready?"

"I'm ready."

"I wish that the operation will be a success and Sammy will live and will be able to hear again. There. I made my one wish. Was that the way to do it?"

"Oh, that was the way to do it, okay," Twiggs said. "Now, I just have to decide that it is really best for everyone involved and that it won't hurt anybody."

Silence overtook us as Twiggs began pacing back and forth, wearing a path of tiny footprints in the soft cotton pillowcase. From time to time he'd stop and nod his head and then turn and start the pacing all over again. At last, he sat down, nodding his head.

"Well?" I asked, a definite question and perhaps even some degree of exasperation in my voice over how long the deliberations had taken. After all, I had already thought it through from every conceivable angle, or I wouldn't have made the wish in the first place.

"I can see no reason not to grant that wish. It's truly unselfish and it will help Sammy and will be a big relief to his family. I can't see how it could possibly bring harm to anyone. It should bring joy to the whole community. Sure, I will grant that wish."

"Thanks Twiggs. I've given it a lot of thought, you know."

"Yeah, I can see that. It's a wonderful way to use your wish."

"I wish there were some way to do it all without making Sammy have to go through the horrors of an operation, but I decided that would be too hard to explain."

"You're right there. I think I can extend that one wish to include a very painless operation for our ... well, for your friend."

I didn't change my position. I didn't stop looking Twiggs squarely in the eyes. But I did begin to cry. I'm not sure why. It was a silent cry. Just tears. No heaving chest or quivering jaw. I was sad and I was happy. I felt that the place in which I had been saving my one wish was suddenly empty. That scared me a bit. Knowing that wish was there in reserve, had provided a good deal of security for me. Now that was gone. I was on my own again.

Twiggs jumped down beside my face and offered his little handkerchief, dabbing at my tears as they rolled down my cheek. My magic friend seemed to feel quite helpless at that moment. Somehow it made us seem more equal. He patted my face and smiled at me through his own tears, as if he somehow understood my sudden emptiness - my sudden fear.

Oh, I didn't have any second thoughts about the wish. Sammy was my best mortal friend and I would have done anything for him, just as I was sure he would have for me. It was just that now my back-up magic was gone forever and I'd only have my own mortal magic – my own ingenuity – from then on. It seemed a heavy wave of new responsibility rushed in and grasped my very soul.

It was one of the first times I hadn't been ashamed to let someone see me cry. Much to my surprise, that, in itself, was a very comforting experience. We cried silently together for some time. Believe it or not, it brought us closer. I was amazed!

Once that was behind us, we moved on to other things. I asked Twiggs about the whole Miss Primm thing - how I had been pretty sure he had somehow been behind her abrupt turnabout from the town's most despicable witch, to the town's

most compassionate older citizen. He related the whole story.

"Got any suggestions for this Goodakt Club I've started," I asked?

"I must admit I was a bit worried when I saw how much of a burden it was becoming for you. I mean you were planning everything, organizing everything and finding kids to do everything. It seemed like way too much for you."

"It was. But I guess it took all that to make me understand that it really wasn't helping them learn about the whole goodaktng process so long as I did all the preparation for them. Now I just make suggestions. I remembered how you said your Gramps would just ask questions sometimes and then drop it - just to get you to think about something you needed to consider. I've started trying that myself. It works like magic - well, you know what I mean."

Twiggs chest swelled, as a chest will do when overcome by a feeling of personal pride. I could tell he was more than a little pleased about all that.

We needed a break.

"Want to trampoline," I asked, pulling up my shirt, exposing my lower abdomen.

"Trampoline?" Twiggs asked, obviously confused.

"Yeah. I got this idea the other night. I'll bet you could jump up and down on my stomach and I could jostle it a bit and you could do trampoline stuff - bet you've never done that before!"

"No, but I have watched you do it in the gym at school," he answered. "It always looked like fun."

He climbed onto my stomach. After a few miscalculations, we began getting the rhythm. Soon he was turning summersaults in the air and doing belly flops on my belly. It was great!

Twiggs started laughing. I started laughing. My giggling stomach sent him far too high in the air and he had to use a bit of his own magic to float himself down to the safety of the pillow. He lay on his back laughing and gleefully kicking his legs in the air. It was such a good time. We were such good friends. I didn't want our time together, to ever end.

"I hope that apple on your lap deal up on the hill didn't get you into any trouble," I said.

"Trouble?"

"Yeah. After I did it I wondered if my seeing you asleep like that was going to be some big sin or something for you."

"Oh. No. The Elders just cautioned me to be more careful about taking naps while visible to mortals. It was no big deal, really."

"I'm glad. I worried about it. Thought later on that I probably should have just ignored you and gone on, but I just couldn't resist that apple thing. It seemed like something you would pull off."

"Me. Why me. Am I not the most serious and studious guy you've ever known?"

"For an undisciplined imp, perhaps!"

We laughed. I was relieved.

I pulled an apple from beneath my pillow and took my knife from my pocket. I carefully carved out a little cone for Twiggs. We enjoyed our snack. It brought back memories of so many good times.

"Remember the day you rode the squirrel like a horse?"

"Remember the day the owl snatched me from your shoulder?"

"Remember the day you were sick and I tickled your foot?"

"Remember the day I first read you the Elves and the Shoemaker?"

We traded 'remembers' for some time, each one renewing our bond and reaffirming our friendship.

Much sooner than seemed fair, it was eleven p.m. - just one hour left in this first of our official meetings. We knew it was time to finally begin working on that agenda for the next meeting.

"You'll be there for Sammy's operation, right?" I asked, seeming to need some unnecessary reassurance.

"You can bet on it. Don't worry, pal. I'll take care of everything. Sammy will be fine."

"It is the right thing to do, isn't it?" I asked, still needing my friend's support in the decision.

"You know that it is," he said. "Now, what about next time?"

"Well, for sure we'll need to talk about the operation

and see if there are things we need to do to help Sammy and his Mom adjust and all," I suggested. "And, since I can't keep tuned in to what you're doing, the way you can do to my activities, you'll need to catch me up on what you've been up to."

"I'll bring a copy of what I've written on my book. We can go over that together, Ok?" Twiggs said.

"In that case, I'll bring my magnifying glass," I joked. "I'm sure I'll have some questions about this whole goodakting thing."

"I just remembered," Twiggs said, eyes dancing, "Next time we get together will be on your birthday - April twelfth. You'll be an old man of ten!"

"Gee! That's right. I want to have my philosophy of life all written out by then. I'll share it with you - see what you think about it."

"What do you want for your birthday?" Twiggs asked.

"Just that Sammy is ok. That's really all I want this year."

"Come on. Just be selfish for once and tell me something you'd really like for yourself."

"I never can think of much that I want for presents. Getting stuff really isn't all that great to me, you know. I'd rather make stuff for myself - that's the enjoyable part - making things - inventing things. You know what I mean?"

"Oh yes, I know what you mean. You're undoubtedly the hardest person in both realms to get a gift for!"

"Just having you here with me will be the greatest gift I can think of, Twiggs. Maybe bring a picture of Cinnamon, if that's allowed. That would be nice. I feel like she is my friend and I've never even met her."

"She feels like you are her friend, also, Jay. I'll see what I can do."

Twiggs had that look - that look he gets when the impish side of his mind is working overtime. 'What have I started,' I asked to myself?

* * *

It was so different that time, when I placed him in the palm of my hand, up on the hill, under our big oak tree. Although I knew in a moment or two he would be gone, this

time I knew he would be back. Just knowing a friend is available, can make all the difference.

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CHAPTER THREE:
Sometimes the biggest miracle of all
is just getting folks to see the big picture.

I had been surprised, I'll tell you that for sure and certain! I suppose it had been one of the finest compliments, of a sort, that I would ever receive.

You see, Sammy's mother had told him she would try her best to give him any gift he wanted that final week before his surgery. You know what he wanted? You know what he asked for? He asked if he could stay at the cabin with me, the night before he went into the hospital way down in Little Rock.

No one knew that I was aware of how serious his operation was going to be, or they probably wouldn't have put so much responsibility on my shoulders. It was a lot of responsibility, too. I mean I had to keep his spirits up and behave as if nothing out of the ordinary was in the offing. Just in case, it was going to be the last time he'd ever be able to be there with me I felt I had to make it the best time of his life.

I had difficulty deciding whether to plan it all out or just let things flow naturally. It seemed to me I was always at my best when things were just flowing, so that's the way I played it.

We both had a wonderful time. We made a ten-foot-tall snow man out of some snow that just happened to be left in the little ravine behind the cabin (thanks to Twiggs, no doubt!). I hollowed out its head and carved it like a jack-o-lantern. Then we put a candle inside. Sammy packed snow around a long stick and made an arm that actually waved, with the help of a cord and a pulley in a nearby tree. It was a shame the

World couldn't have seen it because it was a certified, ingeniously crafted, work of art.

Of course, we swam in Twiggington Spa - the name I had given the recently heated swimming hole. We made angels in the snow. We made a sled trail from the front door of the cabin, clear down the hill, and right out into the middle of the meadow.

At midnight, we told ghost stories. They were so scary that we kept the lantern burning all night - that was at Sammy's request. Though I didn't admit it, it made me feel better, too!

Well, that was almost three months ago. Just as Twiggs had promised, Sammy came through the surgery in fine shape and the operation was a total success. Sammy can hear as well as I can, now, and his speech is improving every week. It was a wonderful way to have used my one wish. There would never be any regrets about that.

I knew all along that Twiggs would do all that was within his powers to make everything work out right - I just wasn't sure if even his magical powers were really mighty enough for something that big. I would never doubt them, or Twiggs, again!

Sounds like a nice little story with a really happy ending, right? Wrong, oh, wrong-o!!! It seems if we mortals can mess up a good thing, we will! Well, that's not always the case - not even usually - and I do know that. It's just that this whole thing makes me so aggravated at the hard-headed, pig-headed, ego-headed, grown-ups in this town.

In one minute, it will be April 12 and I will be ten years old. Twiggs will be popping out of nowhere any second now. I'll continue the story after he arrives, since he and I have some hard thinking to do about this particular situation.

I held my hand above my head and gradually dropped it as I eagerly counted off the final five seconds:

"Five, four, three, two, one, ..."

"Bingo!" came his familiar, high pitched, little voice in my ear.

Quite uncharacteristically, Twiggs immediately became extremely bossy.

"Comb your hair. No, let me do it. There! Now, put

your shoes on. You mortals are so slow. There! Straighten your collar. Gee Whiz, Jay! Do you turn into a total slob when I'm not around?"

I had no idea what was going on. I even looked him over extra close to make sure it was really Twiggs. He was smiling that smile that told me he was most definitely up to something pretty big.

"Now, sit on your bed the way you sit with your legs underneath you. Put the pillow in front of you and smooth it all out. Think of it as a stage."

This was becoming ridiculous. I wouldn't have put up with it from anybody else in the whole world. Then, after all of that preparation, he just poofed himself out of sight.

Presently, floating there, six inches above my pillow, was his little head, as if poked out of nothingness.

"Ready for your birthday present, Jay-man?"

So, that was what all of this was about. Suddenly I found my exasperation rapidly turning into excited anticipation. I felt a little sheepish about my initial reaction to all of it.

"My birthday present? Sure! I'm ready, ol' man. Bring it on!"

"Keep watching right here. I'm going to leave you again for just a few seconds," Twiggs said, nearly unable to control his playful exuberance.

The light in the cabin grew dim. A circle of brightness, as if from a spotlight, bathed the center of the pillow. Suddenly, out of nowhere and into that light, stepped Twiggs, and after him, holding his hand, appeared - well I knew immediately who it was of course - Cinnamon.

"Cinnamon," I gasped. "Twiggs, how in the name of St. Bountiful did you pull this one off?"

Ignoring all of what I had just said, Twiggs spoke:

"Jay, I want you to meet my beloved Cinnamon, the most extraordinary woman in our World. She will only be allowed to stay for a few minutes, but, just take my word for it - it's all legal and properly sanctioned."

"Cinnamon, I am honored to meet you. I never thought in a million years that I'd get to actually see you. Welcome."

"I'm really happy to be here, Jay. Twiggs has told me all about you."

I could just imagine some of those 'all abouts' he had probably told her. I'd deal with him later!

"I'm afraid I don't have a chair or anything, but do make yourself at home."

Twiggs and Cinnamon sat on the pillow and we talked as if we had always known one another. Twiggs mostly remained quiet. The time was too soon gone.

"Before I go, Jay, will you do me one favor."

"Of course. Anything, Cinnamon!"

"May I sit up there on your shoulder like Twiggs does?"

"Sure. Please, be my guest."

I rubbed off each shoulder as if expecting a cloud of dust or something. Dumb, but then I was getting used to doing dumb, pretty regularly.

Presently she was there on my right shoulder. She was noticeably lighter than Twiggs - something I hadn't thought possible. Twiggs joined in and made himself at home on my other shoulder. That was a moment in my life I shall never forget.

"I guess I have to leave you two now. Happy Birthday, Jay. I'm so happy that I had this one time to be with you face to face."

She leaned close to my face and kissed me – oh, it was a very proper, friend to friend, type kiss. I glanced at Twiggs and immediately saw that he was smiling his approval.

"I'll see Cinnamon home and then I'll be right back."

Then, with one last, quick, "Happy birthday you mangy mortal," he and Cinnamon poofed out of sight.

I sat back against the log wall at the head of my bed, trying to digest all that had just happened. That Twiggs! He had found a most wonderful present for me after all. I never asked how he had arranged it and he never offered. I just took him at his word that somehow it had all been properly authorized.

Twiggs reappeared.

"That didn't take long," I observed. "Probably not much of a good-bye kiss, huh?"

"She used it all up on you, you ol' Romeo!" he said, smiling.

"That was a wonderful present, Twiggs. There's no

way I can ever thank you properly."

"That's one of the great things about being very best friends, Jay-man. You never ever have to be able to thank each other properly."

We both ignored the single tear that rolled down my cheek.

"She certainly is a beautiful girl - woman - whatever she is," I said, hoping that uncertainty hadn't messed up what I had intended to say.

"And such a pleasant personality," I continued. "It was like we were old friends."

"She really likes you, too," Twiggs said. "Of course, she had already had a few opportunities to see you in action."

The conversation gradually turned to other things, as Twiggs caught me up on all of his activities those past four months since our December meeting. He drew a picture to show me the progress he had made on his tree house. As promised, he had brought the manuscript he was writing about mortals. It was the first time I had known my name was to be included in the title: *Mortals*, according to Twiggs: as revealed to him by Jay.

I could have spiced up the title a bit, but I suppose capturing the mass market wasn't really a consideration. Still, something like, "My Perilous Journey Through Mortaldom," or "The Day the Magic Disappeared", did seem to have better rings to them. Oh well, it was his book. My mind kept churning them out, however: "Life with the Jay-man," "Friends Across Eternity," or how about, "The Ambassador and the Touchperson." If he didn't want that last one, I just might use it myself, someday!

This Sammy thing really bothered both of us, and it quickly became the focus of our first serious discussion. To continue the story which I began earlier, it was not, as I had indicated, an entirely happy story.

Somehow (and Heaven only knows how) a dispute developed between Sammy's Doctors and his Minister about which had played the more important role in it all - medicine or religion. The doctors claimed it was their skill that should be given credit for the boy's recovery, which all parties did at least

agree, was extraordinary. The minister said if it hadn't been for his prayers (and, he later included, the prayers of others) the miracle could not have happened.

The upshot was that the whole community had divided into two angry camps over the whole thing. The "medicine men" wouldn't talk to the "clerical clan." My Grampa Doug said that in all his years as a journalist he'd never seen the likes of this. When I indicated to him that I had it on good authority that neither one could rightly take full credit, Grampa nodded his understanding, and for some reason his eyes teared.

Well, that was the situation, and poor little Sammy was caught in the middle. When he had asked my opinion, I just cautioned him not to make up his own mind until at least a year had passed. He seemed to see the wisdom in that, and had been able to avoid having to take sides.

"How can it be," Twiggs said, pacing the pillow and flailing his arms, ever so much like a former football coach, "that such a simple wishgrant could end up causing such a ruckus?"

I had no answer so I just remained silent - a most unfamiliar and uncomfortable predicament for me.

"Who gets the credit? Who gets the blame? That's all you mortals seem to be concerned about sometimes. What difference does it ever really make? It doesn't change the fact that Sammy's well. That should be all that is important! Why can't everybody just be pleased and thankful for that?"

By then, Twiggs realized I wasn't offering any answers, or even any of my usual way-out possibilities. It gave him a chance to vent a while longer, and he took full advantage of it.

"It's one of the most puzzling aspects about mortals - this credit and blame thing. When something goes wrong the first thing everyone wants to know is whose fault it is - as if that will typically help. And worse than that, once they think they know whose fault it is, they just ignore solving the problem, as they pursue their uncontrollable urge to punish that person in some way.

"How many centuries have to pass before they realize their very own history proves that punishment is the very weakest form of personal or social control? How many

millennia will it take before they understand that a far more useful approach is to simply ask, 'What new information is needed, by whom, to prevent this problem or situation from reoccurring?' And, 'What must we do now to fix whatever things need fixing?'

"But no! They just keep hurting one another, assuming, in the face of absolute proof to the contrary, that punishment by itself will somehow magically make folks become wiser, smarter or more compassionate. How can such truly intelligent and creative beings, continue to support such an obviously unproductive approach - an approach that everyone sees failing all around them, every single day?"

"If spanking a kid for misbehaving worked, one spanking should prevent all future misbehaviors, but, of course it doesn't. It just makes everybody mad at everybody else. Would punishing all the Methodists until they saw the light and became Baptists actually make many sincere converts? And, Heaven only knows what you'd have to do to convert Unitarians! It's a mystery, Jay. It's an absolute, dark-sided mystery."

Although I had to agree with what he had said, I was intrigued by the fact that the more he had talked about the problem the more upset and the less rational he became himself. That fit my more general observation that merely talking about a problem seldom seemed to solve it, and, in fact, often made it worse. Solutions. Possible solutions. Options. Those were what folks needed to be talking about, if in fact, they needed to be talking about anything at all.

This Sammy thing was going to take all of the combined Mortal and Little Person magic we could muster. Even then, we might fail. I hated to think about that prospect. Doing so wasn't like me. I hated it! I remembered some saying about having to accept that which you couldn't change. It gave me the willies every time I heard it. It had not been my style to give in to such things without a fight, and I wasn't about to begin on my tenth birthday.

"Twiggs!" I said, "We can solve this one. I know we can. And I think I know just the right first step."

"What's that, pray tell?"

It was as near to defeatist sarcasm as I had ever heard

from Twiggs.

"A swim in Twiggington Spa!"

Although the swim was wonderful, it didn't solve the problem of course. It did let us clear our heads - or drain our emotions, is perhaps a better take on it all.

For some time, we lay in silence there on Jutting Rock, looking up at the early morning stars in the still pitch black sky. Presently, Twiggs, in that genuinely innocent way of his, broke the silence:

"Why do Mortal's calendars say, Connely Feed Store across the top?"

That seemed to be just what I needed. I burst into rails of laughter, holding my stomach and rolling from side to side. It would be some later when I would realize it had been a serious question, because at that point my own giddiness became contagious.

Soon Twiggs was every bit as hysterical as I, though, as will happen, he had no idea why. That realization, in and of itself, made it all the more hilarious. It wore us both to a frazzle. Finally, we just lay there, panting in smiling exhaustion. The quiet of the scene was occasionally broken by a hardy, happy grunt, forced aloud from a still unpredictably heaving stomach.

All quite suddenly, I sat up. That was it! Twiggs had given me the answer. Just as Twiggs had been asking a question that he would have never asked if he had had experience with a large variety of calendars, the meds and the clerics had also been asking the wrong question because they had not yet seen the big picture.

"Twiggs, you're a genius. It's the big picture we have to get them to see," I said, searching the dark rock for my clothes.

"Well, I'm pleased to agree that I am a genius, but still, whatever are you talking about?"

"Get dressed and I'll explain while we walk back to the cabin."

He blinked.

"Ok. There. I'm dressed."

"Show off," I said, still struggling to pull on the first sock over a damp foot. I reached out and playfully took his hat,

stuffing it down my shorts for safekeeping.

Amid a barrage of accusations that I was squashing his sacred feather, I finally managed to get myself together. Bundled up, we started back to the cabin. (After just enough squirming had occurred, I acceded to his protests and returned his hat.)

I began my explanation:

"You see, Twiggs, only calendars from Connely's Feed Store say that on them. Those from the bank say, First State Bank, and those from Grampa's newspaper say, The Sentinel."

"Oh, I see where you're going. If I had seen those other calendars from those other places, I'd have never had to ask that feed store question."

"Because..." I said, leading him on while rolling my hand.

"Because ... I would have known the big picture - the idea that there are many different places that give out calendars for advertising purposes so no one name could ever fit all of them."

"Right. Now we just have to discover what the big picture is that the meds and the clerics need to see."

"You mean you got this excited and you don't even know what that big picture is, yourself, yet?" Twiggs asked.

His enthusiasm clearly sagged a bit at that realization.

"Hey, I believe it was your Gramps who said it first, Twiggypin: 'One good question is worth a thousand useless answers.' "

"Well, now we have that good question," I pointed out. "Let's find a way to use it to everyone's advantage."

I guess my optimism was as contagious as my laughter had been earlier, because Twiggs was soon his old enthusiastic self.

I had often observed how optimism or pessimism would rapidly spread among most any group of people. It had become a game for me to plant the seeds of optimism and see them spread. Often just a full-blown smile (a member of the optimism family, I reckoned) would counteract a dingy frown (from the pessimism family) and turn a group into a happy, positive, friendly happening.

Other times, like when asked, "How you doin'?" by someone sporting a less than convincing positive appearance, I had found that a forceful and sincere, "I'm doing just great and happy to see you are too," can turn that someone's day around.

Where was I? Oh, yes. Finding the appropriate big picture and somehow conveying it to the townsfolk.

We kicked around a number of possibilities that all went nowhere fast. It was Twiggs who, at last, arrived at the obvious.

"I wish it were as easy as just telling the calendar parable."

"I think you've done it again, Twiggs. Why not tell the calendar story? Here's what we can do ..."

The Saturday edition of the Ozark Sentinel ran an anonymous editorial titled, *The Parable of the Calendar*. In part it read: *And so, good friends of Spring Meadow, just as it takes a multitude of calendars to arrive at the correct observation that no one of them possesses the complete answer to the question, "What is written at the top of calendars", might it not also be true that there may be several contributing factors that are necessary to answer the question, "What allowed the miracle to happen?"*

On Sunday, the doctors returned to church. The ministers thanked them for their special healing skills and for the way in which they had unselfishly used them on behalf of the afflicted. The doctors prayed for strength and guidance. The crisis of the miracle had passed. The town was one, again.

Sometimes the biggest miracle of all is just getting folks to see the big picture.

CHAPTER FOUR:

I was so fortunate to have had a friend who taught me the true meaning of fuzziacious!

What do you get a magic guy for his birthday - especially a magic guy who never wants anything for himself? I had been stewing over it since April, and now our August meeting, which was also Twiggs' birthday, was only days away.

It's not like I could walk into a store and buy him a new shirt or tie. His red feather was sacred so I couldn't meddle in that area. He had Cinnamon so I couldn't set him up with the dream date of his life - well, that would have presented other insurmountable problems as well, I supposed. The things I had that he enjoyed, like my bike and bow and arrows, were far too large - though I would have gladly given either one of them to him. He was my very best friend.

It was strange - that very best friend thing. In the past eleven months, we had only seen each other twice, and yet, I felt closer to him on a daily basis than ever before. I figured that friendship had to have two sides to it. One part had to do with the enjoyment you got from being together. The other part was more inside your head and heart. It was more just knowing and feeling for sure and certain that you were very special to that other person. Having that assurance gave you a lift. It provided you with a link across time and space - even between realms in our case. It was a magical sort of relationship.

Well, magical relationship or not, I still needed a gift. That was interesting. I said, I needed a gift. This whole thing

was more about my need to show him how important he was to me, than it was about what he would actually receive. Since I was sure he already knew how important he was to me, the gift itself suddenly became quite unimportant. Now that was an all-out mind-buster, and it was barely five am. This had the start of a great day!

As I walked back to the house from my morning swim, I just couldn't put the topic to rest. I supposed that when the cost or the quality of the gift seemed all important to the giver, it was because he thought he still had to convince either himself or his friend of his own worth. That was a lot like buying friendship or esteem. And when the receiver could only be pleased by such an expensive gift, it was as if he needed that to convince himself of his worth to the other. That seemed more than just selfish - it seemed sadly unhealthy.

If it truly was the thought that counted, then some thoughts were far more healthful than others – that seemed pretty clear. I'd find a little something for Twiggs that demonstrated just the right - just the most healthy - intention.

The next several days flew by as I tied up loose ends and prepared for my role as Touchperson in our upcoming meeting. Touchperson. I really liked that term - that title. It was a gentle term - touch. It was through me that Twiggs' realm of the Little People was touching my realm of the Mortals and vice versa. It was an awesome responsibility, and, save for the occasional support of Twiggs and Grampa Doug, I had to handle it all on my own.

It wasn't one of those positions you'd take just for the glory. Heck, nobody could even know I had the position. It certainly wasn't for the salary - there being none. It was for the personal satisfaction - knowing I was doing something important that would help my fellow men have a better way of life.

I also supposed that, quite selfishly, it was partly so I could keep on seeing my very best friend in the whole World. I would have done it though, even if Twiggs had not been the person appointed Ambassador. That realization made me feel better about myself. Getting to see Twiggs was more like a perk - an added extra. Yes, that did make me feel better.

I hoped that when the time came for me to choose a

profession, I could find one that would give me that same kind of satisfaction, and one that would be every bit as helpful to my fellow men. Perhaps I'd become a social worker or a psychologist or, better yet, a writer. Oh, well. Enough of the day dreams. I needed to get on with my tasks for the day.

* * *

When our meeting date arrived, I was pleased to report to Twiggs that the Sammy miracle controversy had been put to rest and no one even spoke of it anymore - well, no one but Sammy and his mother. They were just about the most thankful people I had ever known. Sammy was doing fine in every way, and next school year he would be in regular classes full time. He was going to take my place as last hour tutor in the classroom for the deaf students. Myself, I'd be spending four afternoons a week over in Fayetteville, attending some special program for gifted kids, at the University. I hated that name - gifted. Sounded like I was to be packaged in fancy paper and tied with a ribbon. (Come to find out - and all quite sadly - there was to be more truth than fiction in that analogy.)

* * *

"So, tell me some more about this college thing," Twiggs said, as we stretched out on the newly constructed diving platform above Jutting Rock.

"Not a whole lot more to say, I guess. Mom will take me over there four afternoons a week and I'll take some classes with some other kids that are pretty bored with the regular classroom stuff. They wanted me to go full time but I said, 'No way'. I'm not about to leave all my friends and have to wander around among older guys twice my size."

"I bet there would be some really pretty girls there, though," Twiggs said, testing my resolve.

"Yeah, and they'd probably just pat me on the head like some poor lost little puppy. Anyway, J. J. and I are doing just fine, thank you!"

"Tell me more!" Twiggs said, sitting up, obviously eager to hear all the details.

"Well, we just really like each other, you know. We spend a lot of time together after school and sometimes on Sunday afternoons."

"And?" Twiggs asked, indicating that I should continue with more of the intimate details (as if ten year olds actually had any intimate details).

"And ... okay, so sometimes we kiss each other. There! Is that what you were searching for, my dear Twiggypin?"

Twiggs rocked onto his back and let out a whoop that set a nearby bevy of Bobwhites to flight. Obviously, that was what he had wanted to hear.

"So, how is it?" Twiggs asked, when he at last regained control of himself.

"It's okay."

"Just okay," Twiggs asked, his arms outstretched as if in a quandary.

"Come on now," I began. "Remember, I'm only ten. I don't have a full bag of hormones yet like you do."

That seemed to put it into proper perspective and he let it be. I had to admit to myself, however, that kissing and especially holding her hand when we would sit under the cherry tree in her back Yeahrd, did make me feel really close to her. She was a very special person in my life. It seemed to be more than just another friend kind of thing. I couldn't admit that to my mortal guy friends, of course, so it was particularly nice to have Twiggs, who seemed to understand about it all. Actually, there wouldn't have needed to be any kissing for all that to occur. I understood that someday that would change.

"And you and Cinnamon?" I said, trying an open-ended approach, which I knew full well would light the fuse to an hour-long monologue. That was ok, though, since Twiggs really didn't have anyone else to talk with about her. That seemed sad to me. I felt fortunate that I had Sammy and other friends my own age. And, anyway, I enjoyed hearing about her. I had come to think of her as one of my own close friends. I supposed that I even loved her because Twiggs loved her.

"She's making curtains for our house," he began. 'Can you believe that - curtains. Gingham for the kitchen and frilly things for the bedroom."

At the word, bedroom, we looked at each other like we used to do when we talked about the most intimate kind of boy-girl stuff. We both realized that kind of conversation was

now no longer appropriate - not since the love of his life had become someone real that we both knew. We both respected her too much to bring her down to the level of a tawdry pin up girl. (Not that I had anything against an occasional, no-name, tawdry pin up girl, you understand!)

It was then that I realized that part of our boyhood talks was over. Luckily, Sammy was more than interested in pursuing that topic, so I wouldn't have to give it up entirely.

"She's been watching your mother's church group on Wednesday afternoon's make quilts, and she is determined to make one for us. She's really quite a lady, I'll tell you that."

I hoped that someday I would get that same special look on my face and loving tone in my voice when I spoke about my own special lady. It seemed wonderful, yet actually, still quite foreign. It seemed clear that in that area of our development, Twiggs was rushing on far ahead of me. That was all right, I reckoned, because in time, I'd catch up. I still had butterflies to chase and holes to dig. I wouldn't rush this growing up thing.

Twiggs was thinking along the same lines. He looked me over from stem to stern.

"You know, Jay-man, your head is about a million years ahead of the rest of your body."

I knew what he meant but I liked to hear him wax philosophical, so just played dumb.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean your head is going to college and your body is still in grade school. That must be really hard, isn't it?"

I sensed a rush of understanding and compassion that I hadn't felt anyone else, attach to that topic.

"Yeah. It's really hard sometimes. Some days I wish so much that I had been born with an average head. I even used to pray for it, but - like the magic powers I used to pray for, too - nothing changed."

I felt - I don't know for sure what it was - sad, maybe. A little depressed maybe. Scared a lot - that was for sure. If this brain of mine was a gift, then it didn't seem fair that it had to make life so frightening just then. Twiggs was more insightful than usual that day, as he continued.

"You know, Jay, even though I'll never in a zillion year

be as smart as you are, I can understand what you're going through, I think."

"How's that?"

"This magic stuff, I have. I have to use it responsibly, just like you have to use your intelligence and creativity responsibly. Some days, this past year, it all got so hard that I actually wished I didn't have the magic."

"Really!" I said, more than a little astounded.

"Yeah. Once you have a gift - like your head or my magic - then you have the burden to use it just right. Boy, is it ever hard, some days, to know what is and what isn't just right.

He did understand. I hadn't thought anybody else in the whole universe understood about such things. I sat up and reached out my palm toward him. He climbed in and I held him close against my heart. It was the closest I had ever felt to anyone in my whole life.

The nature of our relationship was changing, but now I saw that was going to be fine, because it was not going to affect our love for one another or our compassion or mutual support. The truly important things would always be there. It was a maturing relationship and maturation requires change.

It seemed just the right moment to give Twiggs his birthday present. We made our way back to the cabin.

"You know," I began, as we flopped down on the rug in front of the long-cold fireplace, "You are the most difficult being in the galaxy to get a birthday present for."

His ears perked up at that.

"Birthday? Present?" he said, sitting up cross-legged and assuming a playful air of dumbfounded nonchalance.

"Yes, present," I repeated, as I gently pushed against his forehead and playfully tipped him over backwards. He sprang to his feet and put my thumb in a hammerlock, of sorts. That was as close to a good tussle as we could come, but it served the purpose just fine.

From its hiding place beneath the rug, I pulled out a sizeable, hand written manuscript, and placed it on the floor in front of him.

"Happy Birthday, ol' man," I said. "Go on. Read the cover."

"Ring of the Farjumpers," he said, standing on the

page. He looked up at me quizzically.

"Go on. Read the rest!"

He backed down toward the bottom of the page as he continued to read.

"A folk tale about the Little People of the Ozark Mountains. Book one."

"It's a story all about you and me and our summer together in the meadow. I turned it into a fairy tale - just the kind you like - so no one would become suspicious. Well, how do you like it?"

"It's fantastic! It's unbelievable! It's overwhelming! It's just

At that point, I interrupted him.

"It's yours, ol' man. Well, it's yours for now. Someday when I grow up I hope to publish it so everybody can read about it. I got this other idea, too. How about if we draw some pictures to illustrate the cover. You can draw the ones about your realm realm and I can do the same for mine. Well, how about it?"

Twiggs was clearly moved, well beyond what I had figured he'd be. He sat down in the middle of the cover and just kept patting it, like it was some wonderful treasure. That made me feel - well, there is only one word for it in all of the English language - fuzziacious!

"I know it's way to large to fit in your book shelf back in Bountiful, but I figured you could easily zap it down to pocket size."

Twiggs nodded, still tenderly running his hand over the cover.

Although it probably wasn't making truly wise use of our official meeting day, we read the book aloud from cover to cover. We giggled at the funny parts. We even shed a few tears at the more moving parts. But mostly, we found ourselves nodding our heads and smiling at one another.

When we finished, Twiggs said:

"It's the best present I have ever received. You truly are a fine writer, Jay. You should strongly consider that as your profession. Let's get started on those pictures."

The rest is history, as they say. I was proud of that first draft of that first book. I was so lucky to have a relationship

like that about which to have written. Most of all, I was so fortunate to have had a friend who taught me the true meaning of fuzziacious!

CHAPTER FIVE: Worrying is a totally useless endeavor!

As much as I loved Twiggs, his apparent belief that the majority of Mortals were wicked, or at least uncaring, really bugged me! So, for our next meeting, I had arranged a field trip.

The fact that it happened to be the Christmas season, in my world, didn't hurt my chances for making the point that most Mortals were really pretty fine folks.

I suppose that, too, bugged me more than a little bit - knowing full well that some mortals only seemed to have the helpful spirit at Christmas time, in that way supporting his argument. But it did seem to prove that most of us, at least, had the capacity to be compassionate beings some of the time.

"So, where are we going on this field trip thing," Twiggs asked, eager to get under way?

I had long ago resigned myself to the fact that Twiggs just automatically added the word, 'thing,' to most nouns and verbs he didn't fully understand. Where once it bothered me, I now thought of it as both amusing and quaint.

"You'll see when we get there," I said, teasing a bit, as I shook the big iron skillet, putting the finishing fluffing to my own special version of scrambled eggs.

"Why are we going on this trip thing?" Twiggs asked.

"Just eat your eggs. The purpose of the outing is for you discover all in good time."

He seemed more excited than was appropriate, but of course, he had no way of knowing that. I smiled to myself as I

hoped he wouldn't be too disappointed when he discovered no dancing girls or painted ladies were involved.

Our first stop was at the Potter's workshop - a place with which Twiggs was already quite familiar. As we approached, the sounds of kids singing Christmas songs, was heard resounding from its rafters.

"I'll go on in the regular way," I said. "You perch yourself some place from which you can just watch but not be seen.

As I entered, the kids all seemed happy to see me.

"Hey, look, it's Jay!" they said, gathering around. There was more than a little enthusiasm in their voices. I had to admit that I liked that confirmation that I was somehow important to them.

"How's everything coming," I asked?

"Great!" they said, almost in unison.

Mark lead me over to a long table filled with every imaginable sort of handmade wooden toy. There were trucks and tops, dolls and dishes. On the floor were several rocking horses and even a dollhouse.

"Boy, you guys have been busy, haven't you," I said, truly amazed at how many things they already had finished for the party that the Goodakt Club was throwing out at the orphanage on Christmas Eve.

I did my V for friendship thing and they all responded in kind. It had somehow come to replace the thumbs up gesture in our community.

J. J. came over and put her hand around my waist. She seemed far less embarrassed about such public demonstrations of affection than I - but then I had discovered that seemed to be a quite normal distinction between ten-year-old boys and ten-year-old girls.

She showed me a list of all the food that had been promised for the event.

"This stuff sounds good enough to eat," I quipped in stilted fashion, still a bit uneasy about that hand clinging all too tightly around my waist. Everyone laughed at my joke - louder and more enthusiastically than befitted what was really a rather trite remark. They always responded that way to my attempts at humor, and I couldn't understand why. It seemed

like a hand out - alms for poor old Jay. Later on, I'd ask Twiggs what he thought it meant.

I congratulated the group on their good work and said my good-byes. J. J. squeezed my hand tightly, our usual signal for a parting kiss, but I wasn't about to go smooching her right there in front of all my friends. Arching my back, I pulled away from the waist up, nearly falling over, in fact. She gave a sigh of understanding and reluctantly released my hand.

"Next stop, the fire station," I said, as I felt Twiggs assume his familiar traveling position on my shoulder.

"You know you just blew a great opportunity for a kiss, don't you?" Twiggs said, repeatedly poking his index finger into the side of my neck.

I ignored the question, though did wonder for a short moment, if I'd ever become as eager for such things as Twiggs was. I figured hormones must have a way of blocking out certain social taboos, and had to question whether or not that was really such a good thing. Good thing or not, it seemed inevitable, and I'd just have to wait and see how it actually worked.

Before we arrived at the fire station, I suggested that Twiggs make himself invisible. That ability of his totally amazed me, but more than that, it annoyed me a bit, because I knew it was one thing I would never be able to understand - and I did like to understand everything.

"Here is something you need to see, my friend," I said, stopping outside the side door at the glass covered community bulletin board. Look at these notices. Twiggs read them out loud.

"Citizens sixty-five and older may get free help figuring their income taxes at the fire station community room, every Tuesday morning during January and February."

Then he added, "We have to talk about these taxes things. I truly don't understand why you need them."

He moved on to another announcement:

"Parents. Trade kids for homework. Call Millie to arrange the swap. At our house, it's easier to help somebody else's children. If that's the case in your home, make it easy on everybody and make the call."

"How could you do your own homework in somebody else's home?" Twiggs asked. Doesn't make a shred of sense to me."

"Well, talk later," I said. "Just keep reading."

"Kids. Sign up now to be a volunteer snow shoveler. There are still a number of elderly folks who will need help, should there come a big snow. We also need older boys to do the sidewalks on Main Street down town."

"That seems like a good project," Twiggs agreed, apparently finally understanding at least one of the messages.

We moved inside.

"Hi Charley," I said, greeting our only, full-time fireman.

"Hi Yeah, Jay. How's tricks?"

"Just great. How Yeah comin' on the toys?"

"We gotten bunches of donations this year, Jay. It's lookin' like I'll be a needin' bundles a more hep to git em all fixin' up and painted by Christmas Eve. Gots lots of dolls that is needin' new clothes. My wife, she's done made a whole passel already and she's havin' a sewin' bee Monday ev'nin's in the church basement 'till they all gits done."

"Lookin' good, Charley. I'll see if'n I can round up a few more dads to come by and give youins a hand. I gotta run, now. Ba!"

"That was as strange conversation," was the way Twiggs summed it up.

"What was so strange?"

"You two used a whole new kind of English for one thing."

"Oh that. Well, Charley grew up way out in the hills and they just say things kind of a different way. I think it sounds pretty neat, really. I always enjoy trying to talk to old Charley in his own tongue, so to speak."

"I reckon that's a plum good gander on the sitchyation," Twiggs said, trying his best to talk Ozarkian. I just smiled and shook my head.

"Nice try, Twiggs. A few more decades around us and you'll have this dialect-thing down pat."

We were both chuckling as we moved on toward the hospital. Spring Meadow was lucky to have a hospital, even though it only had a dozen or so patient rooms. We were a

small town, but the hospital had to serve a really big rural area surrounding us.

"Now Twiggs," I warned only half playfully, "There will be a lot of girls your age here today. They are called Candy Strippers and they volunteer to help out with stuff here. Keep your hormones under control, Okay?"

"Girls!"

He perked up a bit. I could feel him shifting position as if to crane his neck so he could see better.

"Yes, girls! Now don't do anything to embarrass me, you hear."

"Have I ever done anything to embarrass you?" he asked?

"Well, come to think of it, I guess not, but then I've never led you into a covey of pretty females before, either."

We spent half an hour going from room to room. I, of course, couldn't be a candy striper - I looked bad in red and white dresses - but I did drop in regularly and help out a bit with some of the heavy jobs. Twiggs got a roYeah! tour of the volunteer's activities and got to see how much they were appreciated by patients and staff alike. I always hated to leave because my time there made me feel really useful - really needed - mostly, really important, I guess. I considered becoming a physician for a while, but since I really didn't like being around hurting, bleeding, throwing-up, sick people, I decided against it.

Even though school was out for the Christmas Holidays, we stopped by the gym. Mr. Vickers and Bill Wilson were coaching the peewee basketball teams. We got a kick out of watching them - a bunch of five year olds, stumbling around, kicking the ball as they tried to dribble, throwing the ball into the wall, and falling over their own feet. And most amazing of all, none of that bothered anybody. They just had a great time together. I doubt if they even long remembered who won. It could be that neither team actually won. By the time we left, late in the second half, the first points were yet to be scored. That didn't matter. The parents and grandparents, big brothers and sisters, all cheered them on, and the players felt like NBA giants. I'll always remember how good those times felt, back when even short little ol' me, got to play the tall

boy's game.

"One more stop, Twiggs, then we'll head back to the cabin and fix some lunch," I announced and as we exited the school.

"Where to?"

"The town's pantry. It's a place in the church basement where donated food is kept for those who need it."

Much to Twigg's surprise, who should be manning the pantry on that morning but a happy, hymn humming, Priscilla Primm. Twigg hadn't known her first name until that moment. She was assisting a young couple who had a new little baby that was crying at the top of her lungs. Since I didn't recognize them - and since I knew everyone within twenty miles of Spring Meadow - I assumed they must have been passing through.

"Good morning, Jay," Miss Primm called out as I - well, we - entered.

"Hi, Miss Primm. Who are your friends, here?" I asked, never having been able to quell my basic tendency to be nosey, and most certainly never having had a timid bone in my being.

"Bob and Shirley Roberts, meet Jay Wilson, one of the town's very favorite young men."

At that remark, I felt the invisible Twiggs began poking me in the neck again and I felt him jumping up and down on my shoulder. I moved in to shake hands and found out that, sure enough, they were on their way up to Springfield, Missouri, when their old car had broken down and they had become stranded.

Officer Hoffer, the town's only policeman, had already found a mechanic who volunteered to take care of the car. Miss Primm was preparing a basket of food - though I noticed most of it was canned or in boxes, not very practical to use on a car trip. I took a Goodakt Club card out of my billfold and jotted down the name of the Grocery store. I handed it to Shirley and said:

"Just give this to Mr. Akers at the Blue and White Store across the street, and he'll fix you up with some fresh fruit and milk and bread and sandwich fixin's. That'll be easier for your trip."

They were most appreciative. So was I, because once again, I got to experience that finest of all human feelings - fuzziacious. I'd stop by the store later on and take care of the bill out of the Goodakt Club's special assistance fund. Mr. Akers always gave us things at cost or even below.

I wished the couple well, and was about to leave, when I realized Twiggs - invisible or not - was no longer on my shoulder.

I cleared my throat.

"Ah-hum! Well, I guess I'd better be on my way," I said a bit extra loud and overly distinctly, hoping to give Twiggs the idea he'd better get himself back where he belonged. It didn't work, so I just left, figuring he'd catch up whenever he got done doing whatever it was he was up to.

As I made my way toward the edge of town, I evaluated the field trip, and gave it an A+. I felt it had showed Twiggs a tender, caring side of us mortals that he too often had overlooked.

I had just rounded the bend beyond the park, and had begun jogging out the road toward home when, at last, Twiggs reappeared.

"Take a detour?" I asked, smiling.

"The baby was running a fever so I thought I better just go ahead and take care of that. Everything is fine now. Her name is Virginia. Isn't that a pretty name - Virginia!"

"Yeah, that is pretty," I agreed. "You know, ol' man, we could use a guy with your talents in our Goodakt Club. Ever thought of joining?"

I felt the back of his little hand deliver a playful slap to my ear. It made me realize how very much I did miss having him around all the time. But, never having been one to dwell on the down side of life, I thanked my lucky stars that we still had these three wonderful days each year. I was most grateful that at my young age I had already discovered that worrying was a totally useless endeavor!

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**CHAPTER SIX:
Understanding both nature and people, presents a
wondrous and essential (if not always comfortable)
challenge!**

We had agreed that in April we would meet at Jutting Rock, so, after my birthday supper at Gramma and Grampa's, I set out directly for the swimming hole, ready to try out the new fins, mask, and snorkel they had given me.

May evenings in the Ozarks, could still get quite chilly, a fact I had overlooked earlier in the day when I had left my house for Grampa's. Rather than following the road, I had started to take a long cut, as Twiggs would have called it, - since it probably did add time to the trip - up over West Hill and along the high ridge path to Echo Point.

Goosebumps soon won out, however, so I cut down the hill and was soon appreciating the welcome warmth inside the invisible tropical canopy, which Twiggs had created for me there at the creek. I was soon sporting my new equipment and chasing Bluegills and turtles underwater.

By the time Twiggs poofed in, I was already lying out on my new big beach towel, resting. At first, he just stuck his head into view and said, "Ready or not, here's Cinnamon!"

I scurried to properly cover myself and sit up, all in one awkward and less than successful motion - ending up on my back. Then, Twiggs came into full view, bent over, laughing his head off.

"Cinnamon's not really coming. I just wanted to see what you'd do, Nature Boy!"

Relieved and peeved at the same time, I just lay there,

half draped, waiting for my heart to climb back into my chest. Gradually coming to see the impish humor in it all, I too, began to chuckle. I could only imagine how startled and flustered I must have appeared.

"Looks like you have sprouted some new parts there - green feet and an antler," Twiggs observed, still joyfully playing with my head.

"Yeah, it's a sure sign of puberty in us mortal males," I said, answering prank with prank.

"So, you're an old man of eleven today," Twiggs said at last. "How do you feel?"

"With my fingers, of course."

We both groaned, but smiled. I sat up.

As had become our greeting custom, I picked him up and held him close to my heart for a long time. It was certainly special to love someone that much.

When, at last, I put him down, he related to me a series of messages from Cinnamon - another happening, rapidly gaining the status of a new custom. I sent several back to her.

He then caught me up on things back in his realm. Twiggs never tired of describing how wonderful it was to be in love or to inform me, down to the most minute detail, about the progress on their tree house.

It was the first time he had described to me his Mortal Monday undertaking. That was, perhaps, due to the fact that this was the first time he could actually report that it had begun to catch on among some of the other Little People.

Most people walked from place to place in Bountiful on Mondays. The majority even refrained from magic, except as required of them by the Scriptures. Many of the housewives had begun discovering how to prepare meals from scratch.

Twiggs reported that Gramps had commented on what a healthful thing it all seemed to be. Although Little People could not actually ever be unhappy or down hearted, they seemed to have a new kind of purpose, a new sense of pride in things they achieved through non-magical means.

On Monday's, some of the younger men had begun laying out - and paving with cobblestones - paths leading from place to place around the village.

"I think it is a grand start," Twiggs said, as he brought

the report to an end. "And it was the very last thing I had ever dreamt might happen."

"The very last thing, what?" I asked, suddenly confused.

"That we, Little People, would benefit from emulating the ways of the Mortals."

"The mangy mortals," I chided, half-playing and half-serious.

"I used to use that phrase - we all did - but quite truthfully, it's seldom heard anymore. Since we didn't know you, I suppose we were at least leery, if not some scared, of you. You were huge and had just finished blowing each other up with bombs of unimaginable magnitude."

"It's okay, Twiggs, I understand. We probably deserved every bit of your skepticism and fear."

"Yeah, but my point is this:"

"Oh, there's a point here?" I teased.

"Yes, there is a point here. You may even get it if you'll kindly shut your oral orifice," he said, swatting my knee with his hat. "It isn't fair to judge everyone in some group by what just a few of them do. I shouldn't have done that. It's another good lesson we learned from you."

"I'm afraid we Mortals fall into that same trap all the time. Someone new or different or foreign arrives in our midst and many of us - maybe the majority, even - immediately become suspicious or like you said, even scared, maybe. We've even been known to run folks like that off, rather than take the time to get to know them."

"Not something either of our realms can be proud of, I guess, is it," Twiggs said more than asked.

"Certainly not!" I added with emphasis.

We just sat, thinking in silence, for a long while. Finally, I figured a swim might break our chain of negative suppositions, so I snatched his hat from his head, tossing it safely aside to protect his precious feather, and, picking him up still fully clothed, I jumped into the water.

Seemed like that had been a good move. We had an especially fine swim that morning. It being a Monday, Twiggs insisted we build a bond fire to dry out his clothes, rather than using his magic squeegee thing. (I was getting as bad as

Twiggs!)

Instead of heading back to the cabin, I suggested we raid the berry patch and watch the sunrise from our special tree up on East Hill (West Mountain to the folks in Bountiful and Harmony).

That too, turned out well, as Twiggs had some really important, though particularly perplexing topics on his mind that day.

"I made a list in my book of some of the things you Mortals have to have or deal with in your society that we can't even imagine in ours," Twiggs began.

"Let's hear them," I said, eagerly, though, I must admit, already feeling a bit on the defensive.

"Well, it includes things like, first place ribbons, funerals, postulating heaven and hell, police, courts, lawyers, money, doctors, poverty, riches, fair and unfair, child rearing problems, winning, mental health problems, revenge, gang violence, war ..."

"Whoa," I said, suddenly feeling overwhelmed at the rapid pace he was setting.

"Let's see if I understand what you are trying to say so far. Since Little People never die, you don't need funerals or morticians either, I guess. And because of that, I can see what you mean about heaven and hell - no dying, no afterlife. And, since no one ever breaks any laws ..."

"Expectations," Twiggs broke in. "We don't have laws, we just have expectations about how we each will live and treat one another."

"Ok, so I guess, laws could be on your needless list too. Anyway, since no one ever breaks any expectations, you have no need for policemen or courts or lawyers. And since you are ever helpful rather than competitive, first place awards would not make any sense to your people. Since you can't get sick or hurt, you certainly don't need doctors, hospitals, nurses or medicines.

"I know you don't use money, though that's really hard to understand. But since you don't, I can see that poverty and wealth are also meaningless. I suppose that perfect families don't have imperfect children, so I guess those kinds of problems would not exist either.

"Then there are fair and unfair. Those are a bit harder to think through. I suppose that's because we use the terms so often. But if you each care so much about the welfare of all other Little People, and strive to make everybody's life just as perfect as you possibly can, then I suppose the concepts of what is fair or not fair really don't exist either. I can see where these aspects of our Mortal society are confusing to your people. Heck, most of them suddenly seem confusing to me, as well."

"Maybe they aren't really as confusing as they are just incomprehensibly useless ideas," Twiggs said, thinking out loud. "The really confusing areas I didn't even get to yet."

"So, go ahead. I reckon I've digested what you've said so far."

On second thought, perhaps I had not really digested them, as I was feeling a good case of mental heartburn welling up deep inside me.

At any rate, Twiggs continued:

"Well, for example, how have you Mortals come to make things that are so unimportant in the true scope of things, into objectives that appear to be so extremely important to you?"

"Like what, Twiggs? Give me some examples."

"Like power and status and winning and being the best or the richest. Like face lifts and make-up and having closets filled with more clothes than you can possibly wear in a month while others don't have any at all. Like expensive cars and houses that are so big you can't even get around to spending time in all the rooms every day. Like acquiring piles and piles of stuff that have no relevance to being happy or helpful or maintaining a peaceful, well-balanced society."

I started to respond, but Twiggs broke in again before I could speak.

"No, wait! It just hit me. I think I may have a handle on some of it."

Relieved, I waited for him to collect his thoughts and say what was on his mind. Goodness knows, I had no idea what to say.

"It seems to me that your culture needs money because you value stuff so much, and work so little. I mean, very few

Mortals seem to work for the joy of working, like we do. Work for most of you has become ..., well, it's become a four-letter word. You only work so you can obtain stuff. You seem to worship stuff instead of your humanity - instead of exploring your own possibilities and working to improve the condition of one another's lives. I mean, many of you even lie and cheat and hurt other people in order to get more money so you can get more stuff or power. So, I suppose, it follows logically that for a huge portion of you Mortals, money has to be far more important than are people."

"Wow, Twiggs," I said, sitting back against the trunk of the tree. "What an indictment!"

"Oh, I didn't really mean it as an accusation of any kind," Twiggs said apologetically. "I'm just trying to understand, that's all."

"Yeah, I know that, Twiggs, but in your attempt to understand, I reckon you've hit the nail on the head - or, really, many nails on their heads. At this moment in my life, I feel embarrassed to be the Touchperson."

"I truly didn't mean to do that, Jay. I didn't! Oh, what have I done now?"

Twiggs moved from the limb above me to a sitting position on my shoulder. He patted my ear lobe with great compassion.

"Well, most importantly, I suppose, you have been truthful - you've called it like you have seen it - and that is good, Twiggs. That is certainly good. Truth isn't always pleasant, is it?"

We sat together in silence, looking expectantly across the valley toward the hilltops to the East. Presently, the new day announced its imminent arrival, as a tiny silver sliver, began skillfully riding the far ridge. Soon, faintly yellow streaks split the darkness as if they were feeling their way, every so carefully, making certain it was safe for its mottled crimson and fuchsia bands to follow.

I had always been amazed how something that took place each and every morning, according to exactly the same laws of nature, could be so entirely different each time. No two sunrises were ever just alike.

I supposed that applied to people as well - each

produced according to exactly the same laws of nature and yet, no two were ever just alike - not in looks or beliefs or actions. Nature allowed for fantastic individuality. Sometimes, like in the cases of sunrises, gentle spring rains, and peacemakers, that worked to the advantage of all humanity. In other case, like tornados, Hitlers, and self-centered people, it did not. I suddenly realized, that understanding both nature and people, was to be a wondrous, if not always comfortable, challenge!

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CHAPTER SEVEN:

It may not be true happiness, but sometimes dunking a best friend comes awfully close!

By the time the August meeting rolled around, I had done considerable thinking about the disturbing observations that Twiggs had broached in April. Grampa Doug had offered wise counsel. He and I had grown closer than ever, now that we shared this special bond - our independent experiences with the realm of the Little People.

Standing there on Jutting Rock, Twiggs actually looked his age - fifteen in all respects. His shoulders had broadened, making his waist look all quite trim. His chest had developed and his biceps were his pride and joy - having come primarily, I assumed, from all the physical labor he had been putting into the building of his house. He was proud of the way he looked. I wondered how long I'd still have to wait until I looked that big and strong. At eleven I looked ... well, eleven - what more can be said!

"The house is way ahead of schedule," Twiggs proudly reported, as he sat himself down, cross-legged, atop an old wooden keg under which I stowed my fins and such. "I'll have it under roof by winter."

"That's great," I said, almost envious, I suppose, that he had a single project that meant so much to him. As usual, I had several of my own, but none were of the type, anymore, that allowed me to just stand back and, by looking, determine my progress.

I was particularly pleased when Twiggs asked about the Goodakt Club.

"I know you'll be as excited as I am about this," I began. "We have thirty-one chapters now. They are all over the Ozarks and even one way up in Chicago."

"A chapter - that must be like a separate club, I guess," Twiggs said, trying to follow my story.

"Right! When Sammy went to scout camp in June, he got a lot of the guys interested, so when he came home we started writing to them and before we knew it, we had clubs all over the place."

"I'm really proud of you, Jay-man. What you've been doing these past four months is really important. All I have to show for that same time is a few more walls on my tree house."

He sounded down. I'd never seen him that way before.

"Hey there, best-friend-that-I-have-in-the-whole-universe, what gives?" I asked.

"Oh, I don't know for sure. It's like I'm catching that seemingly universal Mortal condition known as depression."

"That's impossible, of course," I said, then suddenly felt it necessary to add, "Isn't it?"

"Well, Yeah, really. But, I see you doing all these great things here among the Mortals and all I ever get to do is a few goodakts here and a few wishgrants there. I guess it seems that next to yours, my life is just pretty boring and useless."

"I think you need a good risible rousing," I said, scooting closer in order to put myself within easy reach of him.

"What's this thing, risible rousing?" he asked, only to immediately discover those were exactly the wrong words to have uttered.

I tipped him over onto his back and tickled him up one set of ribs and down the other. He giggled his wonderful giggle and kicked his legs in the air, flailing his arms and pounding on my fingers as if that would somehow ward me off.

It was contagious because soon I was laughing every bit as hard as Twiggs. I suppose I didn't stop the tickling as soon as I should have, but it was much sooner than I had wanted to. Laughing until I was crying, two of my huge tears splattered across his face just as he inhaled, causing him to choke and cough. I helped him into a sitting position, and though genuinely concerned, I continued to laugh all quite

uncontrollably. I patted him on his back and he soon recovered.

"Risible rousing, you call it, do you," he sputtered, putting on the brogue a bit heavier than usual. "Just you wait, my friend. Some dark night when you are sound asleep, it will be your risibles that get a good rousing!"

We dried our eyes with the backs of our hands and just sat looking at each other. It was a remarkable thing – best-friendship. No words were even required to confirm it.

"Are we happy, right now, Twiggs," I asked, after a time?

"Happy? Us? Now? Why sure! And a whole lot happier than I was before you attacked my risibles, I can tell you that," he said, a smile ablaze across his still damp face.

"Happiness is such a strange notion, you know?" I said.

"I'm sure it must be if you say so. Just where is this conversation going?"

"Well, you should know that nothing in my life has ever disturbed me more than that last conversation you and I had - the one in April."

"Yeah, I guess I do know that. I really didn't ..."

"Never mind what you really didn't. We already covered that territory. It's all, okay. The fact is, though, it's just about all I've been thinking of these past several months."

"And this has something to do with happiness?" he asked.

"It's all about what makes a person happy," I said. Realizing that was far too cryptic, I went on to explain.

"The question you were really raising was: 'Why do so many Mortals selfishly strive after money and power and status and - as you so aptly labeled it – acquiring stuff?'"

"And the answer you've found is ..."

"Happiness. Everyone is searching for happiness. The problem is, I think, there are just far too many interpretations of happiness, and that becomes dangerously confusing."

Twiggs sat silently, eager to hear more.

"I pulled out Roget's Thesaurus not long ago and looked up happiness. You know what I found?"

"What?" Twiggs said, asking the obligatory question that would keep the conversation moving.

"I found three separate sections dealing with the term, and one of them listed fifty-seven different synonyms - fifty-seven different ways people can look at the term, happiness."

"So, you're saying that when one person uses the word, happiness, there is no assurance that it means the same thing as when someone else uses it," Twiggs said, developing my idea.

"Right. Now think about this. When we were little kids what things gave us the feeling that we termed, happy? - candy, a fast ride in a wagon, getting to stay up past our usual bed time, a horsey ride on daddy's back, going to a show - things like that."

Twiggs nodded with understanding, eagerly continuing the list from the vantage point of his own childhood: "Turning a sick into a lizard, making mutton taste like cherry pie, undoing Mr. Reed's suspenders from across the room ..."

He stopped, realizing there was more than a slight realm-gap developing.

"That's okay, Twiggs, really. We're thinking along exactly the same lines."

I continued:

"But then, when a person matures and begins looking beyond the self-centered domain of childhood, I think the meaning of happiness must also mature. If it doesn't, he just continues to want ice cream and wagons and entertainment, the same as when he was a little kid - only by then they have become caviar, expensive cars and cruises."

"Let me try to jump in here, Jay," Twiggs said, most thoughtfully. "To really be a mature definition of happiness, it has to move beyond pleasant tastes and smells and feelings. Those, like most aspects of childhood, are just the surface things. They're the easy to see and feel things - the things that don't really use our best human talents of intelligence and compassion and love, and our special ability to look into the future and see the results there, of what we do and don't do here, today."

"Great stuff, Twiggs! It has to move away from me and toward us - an idea you planted in my head long ago."

"I did?" Twiggs said, sitting a bit taller and puffing out his chest, partly in jest and partly out of pride.

"Yes, you did. That's what I've been thinking about. A human being - a mature human being - should only really be able to feel this mature happiness thing - as someone I know might call it - when he is acting responsibly for all of humanity. Anything less is immature."

"It's like if we have a skill and we use it, then we can legitimately feel happy," Twiggs suggested.

"Yes, and if we fail to use our skills and other uniquely human capacities, then we can't help but feel unhappy," I added.

"Here's a mind buster for you, Jay-man. When humans don't use those special things that make you human - those capacities that help you rise above the lower animals, so to speak - then you are acting no better than those lower animals."

"Wow, Twiggs! That's exactly where I've been trying to get this thing to go, and for some reason couldn't get it there. It's a genuine mind buster, all right. But now, what does that require from a mature definition of happiness?"

We sat and thought. Twiggs got up and paced back and forth. Suddenly he turned on his heel and jumped up onto my knee.

"You had the answer all along, Jay-man. We just didn't put it all together because you're still a kid, and supposedly, kids don't have this mature interpretation of such difficult concepts."

"I'm confused. Back up. What are you talking about?"

"Way back during that first summer we spent together, we talked one afternoon about our philosophies of life. You said you were trying to arrive at yours by the time you were ten."

"I remember that talk, but I think it was late at night, up on Echo Point, though that doesn't really matter, I guess. Go ahead and make your point."

"At that time in your life, you said you thought that living the good life involved doing four things each and every day. Remember? And that when, at night, as you lay in your bed, you could look back over the day and know that you had done those things, you experienced the most remarkably wonderful feeling you had ever known."

"I still do that. I've made those four things a part of my permanent philosophy of life. I just didn't have a good name for the feeling it gave me until you explained it to me. It's fuzziacious.

"And that, my friend, should be entry number fifty-eight under happiness, in that Roget's Thesaurus Thing, you are always referring to."

I did some further thinking out loud:

"Partly I get that feeling, I think, because of those particular four things I try to do each day - four things that I believe are strictly human in nature, things the lower animals could never intentionally achieve. But, partly, it is also the mere fact that I truly see that I have, indeed, lived up to what I believe is right and proper for a human being. Mr. Webster would call that, integrity, I believe. If one lives up to his own positive beliefs about how to be a good person, he has integrity."

At that, Twiggs pulled a writing tablet, quill and inkwell out of nothingness, saying:

"I want to include those things you do, in our book about Mortals. It will lend a good balance to some of the negative stuff we talked about last time. Go slow now, so I can take them down exactly. What are those four things you do each day that you believe helps you live the good life?"

I skootched up a bit and leaned back against the base of the diving tower. I began thinking about just what words I should use to make it all perfectly clear.

"First, each day I try to do all those things I have to do. My schoolwork, my jobs, my responsibilities, things like that - just those things that life, in general, requires of me.

"Second, I try to learn something brand new every day. That affirms for me that I am still capable of growing and becoming all that I can become. There is so much to learn, and, for us mortals, such a short time in which to learn it.

"Third, I do something nice for someone else each day - something that isn't required of me. Whenever possible, I do it in an anonymous way. Taking credit for goodakts diminishes the unselfish side of the act. Being willing to do it secretly, reassures me that I'm not just doing those things to make others like me or to convince them that I'm something

special.

"Then fourth, I try to spend some time each day doing something just for myself - something I enjoy doing that has nothing to do with anyone else. I read, write, invent, swim, run, think, play my horn or talk to the animals - something like that. I may spend time with friends. Sometimes I even just move rocks around for the sheer pleasure of it. It's my rightful selfish time, in which I take care of myself. It renews me, and helps me remember that I am also a precious being, worthy of a good and happy life, just as are all other humans.

"And, at night, when I look back over my day and realize that I have done all or most all of those things, I feel that most special of all human feelings - integrity, cradled and gently wrapped in the warm soft blanket of fuzziaciousness."

"How did that Jay kid ever become so wise at such an early age?" Twiggs said, as if reading a script.

"What?" I responded. His wording and expression puzzled me.

"That's what Gramps says about you all the time when I tell him stuff you've said."

"Really? Your Gramps says that about me?"

I was really honored that Twiggs' wise old Gramps would have made those kinds of comments. Wow!

"You must have never told him about all the dumb stuff I've done," I said, attempting to make light of the weighty situation.

"Gramps says doing dumb stuff is just necessary practice for being able to do the really great stuff later on - provided you learn the lesson that is made available to you each time."

"If I have one regret about our relationship, that's it, Twiggs."

"What's it?"

"That I'll never get to really know your Gramps. Oh, I hear you talk about him and I have listened by the hour to my Grampa Doug speak of him as a boy, but I'll never personally get to really know him first hand."

"It does seem - well I was going to say, unfair - inappropriate, I suppose covers it - that I get to sort of know all you folks, because I can watch you all, and yet you aren't

given that same opportunity."

"Oh, I'll get through it. It's just one of those things about being a Mortal with which I have to learn to live, and I'll bet you that I will!"

"We Little People have a very serious saying about such matters, Jay-man.

My ears perked up.

"And that is...?"

"Never bet with a mangy mortal!"

Well before he finished speaking, Twiggs was up and running toward the edge of Jutting Rock. He dived in headfirst while I just hurled my body over the side after him. As we filled the valley with our laughter, I landed squarely on top of him, gurgling my way to the bottom. It may not be true happiness, but sometimes dunking a best friend comes awfully close!

CHAPTER EIGHT:

Sometimes, knowing exactly where you're going prevents one from discovering the obvious.

It was one of those, once every ten years, seventy-four degree, December 22nds, there in my Ozark valley. At midnight, Twiggs would be arriving, and as yet, I had nothing whatsoever on my agenda. It would not be a white Christmas – that, was for sure - though that had not dampened my holiday spirit.

In fact, I reckon, that was the reason for my empty clipboard. I had been determined to make this a great holiday, snow or no snow, so I had been working overtime toward that end.

For Grampa Doug, I had carved a statue out of a chunk of walnut. It was of an older, bearded, and slightly rotund, Little Person, carrying a wooden nickel under one arm and sporting a walking stick in his other hand. I hoped it resembled Twiggs' Gramps, although to me it looked a lot like Burl Ives. I wasn't at all sure how we would explain it to Gramma and Mother and Father, but he and I would cross that one together when we came to it.

For Mom, I had made a teapot from clay. An art teacher at the university had been encouraging me in that direction. It turned out really nice, and I was pleased with that, although I knew full well that, pretty or ugly, if I had made it, she would automatically love it.

Dad was receiving my least creative gift that year. Since he didn't smoke or play golf, I found it quite difficult to come up with unique ideas year after year. How many ties,

hankies, and little pine scented trees for his car could you get one man in a lifetime? So, he was getting a coupon book, which included fifty-two sheets, each one naming a job I'd perform for him when he presented it to me. I figured he'd get a kick out of it even if some of the coupons were for things I'd have gladly done anyway. I included a few as pranks, like: "I will, upon demand, finish your pecan pie for you."

Gramma Mary was always easy to please. She would have been totally satisfied with no more than a hug and a kiss. I had written her a book of poetry - poems about places and people in and about Spring Meadow. With a little help from my colored pencils, I had even illustrated it with scrollwork and lacy frilly stuff that I knew she'd like. I was, in fact, putting the finishing touches on the cover, when my alarm went off, telling me it was ten p.m.

I wanted to get up to the cabin well ahead of time. That always helped me wean myself away from my current world and everyday concerns, and prepare my head for my time with Twiggs. A light jacket was all I needed that evening as I started off across the meadow. The dry grass, snapping beneath my feet, reminded me there would be no angels in the snow that year.

Mother had packed me a huge lunch - more than enough to last all day. My folks never questioned me about how I spent those three special days each year, or why I wanted to spend them away from the house. I had to wonder why not. Perhaps Grampa had said something or maybe Twiggs had cast some sort of spell. Anyway, it was nice that it always worked out so comfortably. I was pretty lucky to have such understanding parents.

I tried whistling - my usual hiking companion - but the cold sore on my lip interfered. So instead, I just talked to the shrubs and the trees, and the little animals. They didn't complain about it, and the squirrels usually took time to stop and shake their tails in a friendly greeting. Before I knew it, I was standing at the cabin door.

Once inside, I lit two lanterns and carefully hung them from the rafters, overhead. Then I started a small fire in the fireplace and began heating a pot of water - Twiggs loved my hot cocoa. I smoothed out the quilt on the bed and fluffed the

two big pillows.

I flopped, belly first, onto the bed, and pulled out two of those magazines that boys always seem to have stashed for private times like that. Paging through them at a casual but steady pace, I concluded that there was no doubt about it. I found them more and more interesting the older I got. I took that as a good sign that things were on their proper course toward puberty, and returned them to their resting place beneath the mattress.

I turned onto my back and scooted up so my head was on a pillow. I put the other one on my stomach and chewed on one corner.

J. J. popped into mind. I liked her a lot, but face it, I was only eleven - well, eleven and a half - and I truly didn't yet really like the mushy side of boy-girl relations. I'd kiss her when she required it, but it was no different than kissing Mom or Gramma - or Dad, for that matter. Twiggs assured me that would change and when it did, so would my whole reason for living.

I took him at his word and had to smile. Twiggs was so in love, and he obviously enjoyed so many things that to me were still just all quite mysterious. I guessed that was ok. He seemed a lot older than me now. The gap between us felt far bigger than it had during that first summer. I calculated that by the time I reached thirteen, that gap would probably begin closing again.

I envisioned him sitting with Cinnamon under their tree, holding each other tight and kissing - tongues and all. I laughed a nervous kind of laugh and shivered my legs a bit. It still made little sense, though that kind of fantasy did hold my attention longer than it had the previous winter.

'I guess the first item on my agenda is to put together an agenda,' I smiled to myself as it neared midnight. 'I wonder what Twiggs will have on his?'

I didn't have to wait long to find out. He poofed into my World exactly on cue, standing there on the pillow, covering my tummy.

"It's good to see you, Jay-man," he said

"Same here, big guy," I said, taking him in my hand and holding him close.

I moved the pillow to the side, raised my knees and perched him atop them. He eyed my cold sore, though said nothing.

"The water's almost hot enough for cocoa," I announced.

"Great!" he said, more than a bit enthusiastically. "I was thinking about that all the way here tonight."

"Gee, all the way here. Why that probably took you how long? Two seconds? Sorry you had to do without for such an extended period of time, big guy."

"What's with this 'big guy' stuff, tonight," Twiggs asked.

"Big guy? Oh, I don't know. Don't I usually call you that?"

"No. You usually call me ol' man or Twiggypin."

"I don't know. I was just thinking how much bigger than me, you seem recently. Maybe that's why," I tried to explain.

"That's strange. I've been thinking the same about you, 'big guy'," Twiggs replied, emphasizing both words. I wasn't fully sure if he was serious or if he was mocking me.

"What do you mean," I asked? "There's nothing big about me."

"It's your head," he said.

"My head," I said, feeling it with both hands. "What's wrong with my head?"

"Nothing's wrong with it. In fact, it's just great. It's just that every time we get together I can see how much further ahead of me your brain has grown. It's growing like crazy this year, you know."

I hadn't realized that - not in so many words, at least.

"Sorry, 'bout that," I said through a nervous giggle, adding a Little Person-like shrug for good measure.

"Nothing to be sorry about. I think it's fantastic. It's just that I know my thinking can't come close to keeping up with yours anymore. You'll just have to be patient with me when I don't understand you."

I truly hadn't realized that was happening, but, again, took him at his word about it. I'd try to tone things down a bit.

"If that's really the case, you'll just have to ask me to explain myself better when I go off on a tangent, okay?"

"Okay. That's a deal."

We did our shake thing - his two hands holding onto my index finger. I intentionally lifted him off his feet and twirled him around. He always liked that. It was one way we could act like boys, together, and roughhouse a bit. I returned him to my knee where, straddling it, he took a seat.

He again eyed my cold sore. I remained silent about it, which I fully understood amounted to teasing him. I knew he wanted to fix it for me in the worst way, but he also knew I didn't like that kind of magic in the cabin.

"So, what's on your agenda," I asked, hoping to delay having to admit that I didn't have one of my own.

"Agenda. Funny you should ask that question."

"It is? Why?" I asked.

"Perhaps we should begin with yours, tonight," he answered, ignoring my question. "I don't want to be selfish about it."

'So,' I thought to myself, 'The magic guy doesn't have an agenda either.' I wasn't sure if that was cause for celebration or alarm. In either case, I relaxed about it.

"How about we just throw out our official agendas this time and play it by ear," I suggested.

Cunning old Twiggs protested slightly.

"Do you think that's wise? I mean we've always followed our agendas."

"My friend," I began, "My villainous, black hearted, deceiving ol' friend. You don't anymore have an agenda with you than ... well ... than I do!"

We both broke into giggles, each somewhat ashamed that he had shirked his duty, but both relieved at the other's matching shortcoming.

"You know that isn't entirely true," I said, thoughtfully. "I do have two things on my agenda. First, hot cocoa and then a nice long swim. Oh, make that, three items. While we're swimming, I want to hear all about everybody in Bountiful."

"That sounds like a good deal," Twiggs said, sliding down my leg to the bed. "On with the cocoa!"

Tummies warmed and filled to overflowing, we set out for the swimming hole. No sooner out the cabin door, then I realized my cold sore had vanished. I turned to look at Twiggs as he sat there all innocent-like on my shoulder.

"Well, I did wait 'til we were outside the cabin," he said, raising his hands in a virtuous gesture.

"Guess I should thank you, Twiggy-pin. It was a pain in the ... well, a pain on the lip, I guess."

We swam and talked, and engaged in every sort of horseplay that guys do with each other. It was a great beginning to our agenda-less day together. I told him about the gifts I'd made - all of which I was pretty sure he had already seen. He made like he was interested, anyway.

Twiggs related all the doings in Bountiful. Mortal Mondays had been officially sanctioned by the Council although the name had been changed to, Little People's Pride Day. I thought that was a perfect name. I made a mental note to see how I could use that same idea there in my own realm.

Cinnamon had been made a full-fledged member of the Echolian Order, and Twiggs burst with pride as he told me. He had not yet achieved similar status in the Ring of the Farjumpers, remaining a novitiate for the time being, at least.

That didn't seem to bother him. As he so insightfully put it:

"It's not like I have to be in some big hurry. I have plenty of time, you know."

We both chuckled, but were reminded once again about that difference of all differences between us - my fragile mortality and his eternal immortality. We had never really spoken much about it, though I was sure he had pondered it like I had. It seemed a good time to get it out in the open.

I tried to sneak up on it.

"How old is your Gramps, or do you even keep track of such things?" I asked, as we climbed out of the water and lay back to rest a while.

"Oh, we keep track in a way. He has two ages, actually. We all do. His eternal age is how long he's actually been a living being and I doubt if anyone could tell you that without looking it up in the official records of the Eternal Watch Office. I'd guess about twenty-five."

"Twenty-five years? Come now!"

"No. Twenty-five hundred years, you dunce!"

"Wow!" was the only response I could muster. I shouldn't have been surprised, but when he threw out that

figure, I must admit, I was taken aback.

Twiggs continued:

"His other age we call the operative age. That's the age he appears to be. Once we reach our operative age, our appearance never changes. We never look any older. Gramps' operative age is sixty-nine. When he got to be that eternal age, his appearance stopped changing. He'll just look that way forever."

"Why?" I asked, eager to learn more and quite honestly a bit confused.

"Well, in a society like ours in which the population is controlled so we will remain a small, close knit group, it seems better to keep a variety of ages. That's just more normal. So, some remain young, some middle aged and, like Gramps, some older.

That made sense. It raised another question, so I asked.

"And how is this operative age figured out or assigned or whatever? How do you each get it?"

"The Scriptures tell us that the Wise One assigns it to every male when we are born. Somehow, we each just seem to know what it will be. That way there are no surprises, I guess you could say.

"My father and mother will always stay like they are right now - thirty-six. The wife always stays the same as her husband, so Gram will stay the same as Gramps. Cinnamon will stay the same as me."

"And how old will you stay, if that's not some kind of classified information?"

"No, it's not classified or anything like that. I suppose you deserve to know."

He hesitated as if unsure if it were really the correct thing to do. He looked me in the eyes - all quite seriously.

"I'm to remain one of the young folks - twenty-one, to be exact."

I began thinking out loud:

"That means that ..."

Twiggs interrupted. He already had it all figured out.

"That means that when you are seventeen, I'll stop aging. When you are twenty-one, I'll also be twenty-one."

"And when I'm ninety-nine, you'll still be twenty one," I said, drawing it all out to an absurd length.

"Right!" Twiggs said.

Silence reined for some time.

"I hope that's all right," Twiggs said, at last. "Are you okay with that? I hope so. There's nothing I can do about it, you know."

"Oh, sure. It's okay. Que sara, sara, you know!"

"What?"

Obviously, he didn't know! "It means whatever shall be, shall be."

"That doesn't sound at all like you," Twiggs said.

"Sometimes, I guess, you can't be like yourself. Seems I have finally come across something that I can't even imagine being able to change."

"Guess that's right," Twiggs said compassionately. "When I first met you, I used to worry that because one day you'd pass me up in age, you wouldn't want to be my friend anymore."

"And now?" I asked, knowing the answer in advance, but feeling Twiggs had the right to state it, himself.

"And now I know that it won't affect our friendship in any way. It will just take some adjusting, and you adjust to things better than anybody I've ever known."

"How about you? How will you feel about me getting older - and wiser - than you," I said, some serious, some teasing?

"Heck, you're already wiser than I am. I adjusted to that long ago. You're smarter than anybody I know, so that'll be no different. You'll just keep changing in your appearance. I'm sure I can learn to deal with that."

"Guess I'd better call you 'big guy' while it still applies, then," I joked.

"Guess so, though in terms of actual height, when allowances are made between our two systems of measurement, I'm quite sure I will always be taller than you," he teased.

That was a fact that I had long ago accepted, myself, but still, being a guy, I couldn't just let it pass. I picked him up by his ankles and held him out over the edge of Jutting Rock.

Looking down at the water below, he started laughing and protesting and trying to shake loose. I began swinging him back and forth very slowly as I counted: "One ... two ..." and on, "three," I tossed him half way across the creek. Legs kicking and arms flailing, he sailed head over heels into the water. Lucky for me I had an indestructible friend so I didn't have to be any more careful than was natural for an eleven-year-old boy.

I jumped in after him, executing the finest cannon ball of my entire cannon-balling career. Fist in the air, he came up sputtering, still laughing, and still protesting. As will happen when you're laughing while in deep water, my strength drained away and I sank, all quite helplessly, beneath the surface.

Feeling a tug on my hair, I knew it was Twiggs to the rescue. That made me laugh all the more and an actual drowning seemed humorously imminent. At last I reached the surface, rolled over onto my back for safety sake, and floated there until I could regain my equilibrium. Twiggs stood squarely in the center of my chest, arms folded, laughing down at me.

We had both really needed a day together like that. The no agenda meeting had turned into one grand expression of love and caring and eternal bonding. It reminded us what living the good life was all about. I supposed that sometimes, knowing exactly where you're going prevents one from discovering the obvious.

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CHAPTER NINE:

Once we truly care about tomorrow, we can more easily see the need to care for each other today.

The stark, dark forms of winter were gradually softening with the new, green, life of Spring. The flat, spiny floor of the meadow was sprouting wave upon wave of velvety grass, and the lifeless, prickly bushes were bursting into cauldrons of glorious color.

The winter had been a mild one, still, I welcomed Spring and the new possibilities it had always represented to me. The birds were building nests, the squirrels were playing chase among the greening branches, and the bees were working feverishly at restoring their depleted cache of honey.

Five A.M. in the Spring, was probably my most favorite moment in the entire year. The swirling colors of the heavens, above, slowly slipped from distant, dim, images, into bright beautiful streaks of splendor, signaling the birth of a new day. In the meadow below, the first faint sounds of morning began to stir across the valley, as the melodic wake-up songs of the blue bird and finch, put to rest the rasping night time call of the Katydid.

It had been just such an awe-inspiring morning that had greeted me that day - that special day - that twelfth birthday. For a lot of guys I knew, it was their thirteenth birthday that was the really big deal - well, next to sixteen and the driver's license thing - but for me it had been number twelve.

Twiggs had been twelve - twelve and three quarters to be exact - when I had first met him, and something about that age had impressed me from that moment on. He seemed so

suave and sophisticated. He could do so many things. He was so kind and thoughtful. He was unabashedly genuine and mostly non-defensive about his personal shortcomings. He was helpful, almost to a fault. He had soon become, I'm not ashamed to admit, my idol.

So, you can understand that that day in no way presented itself as just another birthday to me - no sir, it was an adrenaline pumping, catch the World by its tail, grown-up, giggling good type of day! It was one of those days when I couldn't keep my thoughts focused, because I kept returning to the realization that I was finally and actually twelve years old! In my eyes, I had arrived!

For ever so long a time that morning I just sat quietly there on Jutting Rock, watching the reflection of the sunrise on the surface of the creek below. Occasionally I would toss a pebble out into the middle and watch the ripples play among the brilliant colors. It made me feel somehow powerful, interrupting the static natural scene that way, and orchestrating such a softly undulating, quietly beautiful, sparkling dance upon the water.

I had to wonder if Twiggs had any idea how important that birthday was to me. Grampa did, because I'd told him, but I supposed no one else really had any reason to understand. That was okay. I knew. I'd make it special.

Due to some, once in every hundred years-type of Little People's celebration, Twiggs had to delay his scheduled visit until the following day. In many ways, that was fine because I really needed to spend that particular day alone. It was like a mark in time that separated the old me from the new me. I had a lot of major thinking to do and there was nowhere in the World more conducive to major thinking than right there in my meadow.

Eventually, I slipped into the water and just quietly bobbed about, no special purpose other than just being there - just feeling the familiar surroundings and looking up at the sky with its soft white clouds and pale blue backdrop. An occasional bird or butterfly would momentarily capture my attention, but mostly, on that early morning in April, my mind seemed to prefer no thoughts, no distractions, nothing at all.

It was a rare occasion when my mind was not racing -

not filled with new ideas or working to enhance old ones. I had always been uncommonly active, both physically and mentally. It seemed that recently I was, perhaps, calming down a bit. I had noticed that it had been easier to sit in class that Spring, and I often found myself walking from place to place, rather than rushing at full trot.

I was beginning to actually enjoy kissing J.J., but like Twiggs had said, it was mostly being close and feeling truly special to someone else that made it wonder-filled. Those long awaited special changes in my body were well under way, and I was pleased about that, even though they were coming a good deal earlier than for some of my friends. Since I was spending half my time on the University campus, having a more mature body seemed beneficial to me.

Just as I had predicted, the college age girls tended to pat me on the head, when I would have much rather they'd have been patting me on my behind, but that would have been too much to hope for.

I seemed all split up among several different worlds. There was the world at school as a seventh grader - still a very comfortable place and set of relationships for me even though I had long since surpassed the level of instruction available there. There was my world at the university, which was wonderfully challenging and mentally exciting. Socially, however, it only offered a choice between students who were much older with more mature interests, or my age mates in the gifted program, who seemed less like people, and more like huge brains, set atop pipe cleaner frames. Neither choice presented me with a kind of relationship I wanted to pursue.

The world I looked forward to the most, of course, only poofed into existence three days each year, when Twiggs and I had our wonderful times together. Those occasions were so very special and so thought provoking, that they imbued my being with inspiration that lasted for many weeks - often months - afterwards.

The second best of all my worlds, was where I was, at that early morning moment - in my very own enchanted meadow. I enjoyed it when Grampa and I would take our walks and have our chats there. I enjoyed sharing it with Sammy and my other friends. I enjoyed my meadow most of

all, however, when it was just nature and me, hanging out together. So, understandably, that morning, alone at the swimming hole, had been an altogether special time.

My contented lack of mental activity was in no way depression. It was more just a brief escape from the emotionally draining topic I had been preparing to discuss with Twiggs. It was an area of deepest concern to me, yet, one that appeared to have such a simple answer it was a genuine bewilderment that the problem continued to exist.

* * *

"So, what is this humungous problem that you've been fretting over," Twiggs began, gentling himself down into the pillow on which he had only moments earlier, alit.

I turned onto my side so I could talk eye to eye. Twiggs often said as much with his face and shoulders as with his words.

"Why are we Mortals so bent on destroying ourselves?"

I just said it flat out, not thinking it was a time to beat around the bush.

"Maybe it's more useful to put it this way," I said, after not receiving any immediate response from Twiggs.

"How come we have failed to see that selfishness and greed and power seeking, can only lead to our destruction as a species?"

"I got your point the first time," Twiggs said thoughtfully, "Although the second question is probably a more useful way to put it."

I had a lot more to say, so I just forged ahead.

"I was reading in an adolescent psychology book that adolescence is a time in our lives when we don't seem to be able to believe anything about life except what we experience for ourselves. It's like we can't take anyone else's word for things. It's like we don't trust what grownups, who have earlier been through it all, have already learned and want to pass on to us. Adolescents don't want to believe that they can learn from the older generation's experiences. It is as if adolescence is a time when every generation seems to have to invent the wheel all over again."

"And how is that related to your question," Twiggs asked?

"In the area of social responsibility, I've decided we Mortals just never get over our adolescence. I mean the history books are brimming over with examples of how selfishness, power-seeking, and the pursuit of riches have always led to the eventual downfall of every great civilization that was infected by them. But do we learn from those lessons? No! We just keep on thinking, mostly, about ourselves, and what we want and how we can obtain it all regardless of how it affects or even hurts others. Frequently we even let our fellow men go hungry and remain sick while we go on stockpiling unnecessary stuff or prestige for ourselves."

"And your answer to all of this is ...?" Twiggs said, patiently leading me on.

"To make the wellbeing, happiness, and fullest possible personal development of every single human being our one, most important, ultimate goal."

"You mean where everybody takes good care of everybody else both because they really care about each other and because they understand that anything less, will, without any doubt, lead to the destruction of mankind."

"Sounds like the preamble to the Little People's Philosophy of Living, doesn't it," I observed.

"Well, in a sense, it is," Twiggs agreed.

"How can it work so well in your realm, and never even get off the ground in mine?" I asked, a sense of desperation and disgust undoubtedly displayed in my tone.

"That, of course, is the germ of the basic question," Twiggs said.

"What do you mean, germ?"

"Germ. Like seed or egg. The beginning."

"So, my question needs some refining, you're saying."

"Yeah, exactly."

"Well, let's see. It needs to be put into a practical workable form. I need to state it in a simple way, so it can be easily understood and then logically attacked and solved. How about something like this? 'What needs to happen, so that mortals will see, that a mutually helpful way of life is the only one that will bring to them a happy, truly human level of existence, and ensure the continued life of their

species?'

"Bingo!" came Twiggs' response as he sat up, pushing up his sleeves, as if finally, ready to get to work.

"Boy! That sounds like a big order," I said, rolling over onto my back and staring up at the wood plank ceiling.

"Seems to me," Twiggs went on enthusiastically, "that, first, Mortals have to agree that keeping their species alive is actually a useful and reasonable goal. They have to believe that doing things now in such a way that will guarantee the robust existence of future generations, is all important. Without that, the whole idea seems doomed, and frankly, I haven't seen very many who ever even think about it in that way."

"In other words, until we begin looking down the road and agree that we must guarantee the wellbeing of our grandchildren and great-grandchildren, we can't have the proper perspective on which to base this whole idea - this philosophy," I added, trying to clarify what Twiggs had just said.

"That's how I see it. Why try to save the planet today, if you don't give a diddally-boop about future generations? If you don't care about tomorrow, you have no reason not to be a thoughtless, self-centered, careless - well, even a destructive - opportunist today."

It was making a lot of sense. As much as it hurt to admit it, Twiggs' last statement sure seemed to describe a large segment of the current human population. Self-centered, careless with our natural resources, thoughtless about the present needs of their fellow men, and easily moved to become destructive of others as well as of the values that this whole plan required.

"What things can one little kid possibly do about these huge problems - problems that even the best adult minds in history haven't been able to solve," I asked, with a sigh?"

"Now, you've finally asked exactly the right question!" Twiggs said, growing more enthusiastic every minute. "Gramps would be delighted and impressed!"

"More, Twiggs. Explain yourself."

"Well, you just got down to pewter nails - to use a mortal phrase."

"I think that's brass tacks."

"Whatever. Anyway, you're asking what things you can do. You're not just worrying about it all, or replaying the problem over and over in your head. See! You're beginning to focus on the healing process and you're breaking it down into its tiniest elements. "

"What elements?" I said. "I feel worn out before I even begin."

"Wrong-oh!" Twiggs said, in a sing-songy way. "Wrong-Oh, my friend!"

"I am too tired," I said, probably a bit defensively.

"I don't mean that part," Twiggs went on. "I mean you're wrong about the before I begin part because you began all this years ago."

"What?"

"Sure! You've always been working toward healing what's wrong with your Mortal Clan. So, have a whole lot of other good people, but since I know you best, let me use you as an example.

"You smile at absolutely everyone, and in that way, you let them know there's at least one friendly being out there. You talk with everybody you meet and that helps them feel important. You're always doing helpful things for others, and that makes them feel worthy - that they must be deserving of someone else's help and that they're not alone in their problems.

"Jay, you spread cheer everywhere you go with your sense of humor and just by the great, bouncy way you carry yourself. People see you coming and they just automatically feel better.

"Your upbeat approach to life gives everyone hope, like when others ask how you are and you don't just sluff it off with a usual 'Okay,' or 'All right, I suppose,' or 'Really, kind of lousy, today'." No Sir! You respond with a forceful message that life can be grand!! You say, 'I'm absolutely great, today,' or 'I've never felt better,' or 'I'm ready to take on the World this morning.' People believe you too, and that gives them strength.

"It's like in doing all those things - the smiles, the chats, the good deeds, the positive responses - that you leave a little

bit of your wonderful self behind for them to use in making their own life better for a little while. So, you see, you really began all of this long ago. You already know what things one little boy - or all people everywhere - can do."

That was the first-time Twiggs had ever actually said anything like that to me - about me - to my face, at least. It made me feel really proud - in a good way that I figured that even Twiggs' Wise One would approve of. I rolled my head toward Twiggs and just looked at him. He had just let me have it, and, yet, had made me feel good - both at the same time. What a guy! What a friend!

I reached out my hand and scooped him up, moving him close to my heart. I had no words at that moment - only about the second time in my life that I could recall having allowed that phenomenon to overtake me!

The two messages I had received from our discussion were perfectly clear.

Once we truly care about tomorrow, we can more easily see the need to care for each other today; and, it's not all the big stuff, done by all the big powerful folks that counts. It's the little, everyday stuff that will change mankind and save my World.

CHAPTER TEN:

The uneasiness that often accompanies new knowledge is superior to being content with one's ignorance.

The supple green of the tall grass had long since retreated into the camouflaged, unbending brown, of a sweltering, dry, summer - the kind that seemed determined to drain one's resolve for life itself. With the waning days of August, had come the renewed prospect of September rains, which would allow one last glimpse at the green shades of summer before the colors of Autumn would transform my meadow into a resplendent living rainbow.

Just as I was again feeling close to Twiggs in age and interests, I was hit with the realization that, with the coming of this, his sixteenth birthday, we were entering our final year together before he would be a married man - building still another difference between us.

During that past several months I had been hard at work, trying to devise an easy formula for the Goodakers to follow as they went about the process of transforming our World into a more loving, caring, and mutually helpful place. The bones of that formula had leaped out at me as I had awaked that very morning. Now all I had to do was rename some of the steps in order to form an easy to remember and appropriately prompting acronym.

I had been at the cabin working on that problem for several hours when midnight, and Twiggs, both slipped, all quite unnoticed, onto the scene. As would often happen when my mind was busily pursuing a creative endeavor, I had lost all track of time. Several minutes elapsed before I realized

that Twiggs was sitting there on my shoulder, reading, with apparent interest, what I had written in the tablet on my lap.

In fact, it wasn't until I had put down my pencil and began to stretch and glance at my watch, that I realized he had arrived.

"Watch out, Mortal! You'll squash me against your ear," were his first words that night.

"Twiggs! You're here! The time just slipped up on me," I said, ever so happy to once more see my best friend. We hugged our now, well-practiced hug. As I held him, it appeared to me that he had gained weight. When he stood back so I could look him over, it was obvious that he had, indeed, grown considerably since our last meeting.

"You're looking great!" I said, motioning him with a spinning hand to turn around so I could get the whole show.

He obliged, finishing with a long, deep bow - hat in hand.

"So, you approve, or what?" he asked, poofing up onto my knee.

"Oh yes. You really do look great. Let's measure you."

I pulled a ruler from my backpack on the nightstand and stood it beside him. Twiggs straightened up to his fullest possible height.

Placing my hand on his head, I gentled him down off his tip toes, and reported, "Seven inches exactly."

"Five sellatores, eight pillawigs, to be even more exact," Twiggs offered.

"I suppose that's like five feet eight inches in Mortal terms," I said.

"Pretty close to that, I suppose," Twiggs agreed. "It's a pillawig taller than my father, and three more than Gramps. It's probably about as tall as I'll get."

"Is that okay with you?" I asked.

"Oh yes. Any height would be fine. Size isn't worshiped among us Little People the way it seems to be among you guys."

Now that may have just been a statement of fact, but I took it as a faintly disguised challenge for me to stop fretting about how short I was. It wasn't really that I fretted about it, I guess, but like Twiggs had pointed out, tall was good and

short was bad in my world. Actually, to be big, top to bottom, and small, front to back, seemed to best describe the ideal situation. It was really dumb, but that's the way it was. Compassionately, Twiggs changed the topic.

"So, what are you working on so hard that you'd just sit there ignoring the grand entrance of your very best friend in the whole world?" Twiggs giggled.

I smiled at him. It was always good to have him reaffirm the special nature of our relationship.

"Oh, nothing much," I began slowly, working toward a good tease. "Just some old formula to save mankind, the planet, and all the future generations of us mortal-types."

"Well, if that's all, put it away and let's go down to the swimming hole. It's beastly hot here in your realm tonight."

He had gotten me back, almost before I had gotten him. He had finally mastered the playful, combative, give and take of Mortal boys' relationships. Although I smiled about it all, it was, at the same time both wonderful and sad – wonderful that he understood, but sad that his wide-eyed naiveté, his innocence was fading.

We made our way down the hill and across the meadow. The moon was full and there was not a cloud to be seen from St. Louis to Texarkana. The heat, in its attempt to escape its earlier capture by the rocky-red ground, caused ripples in the night sky that made the moon appear to be actively smiling down at us.

Having had only a pair of shorts to shed, I was in the water long before Twiggs had managed his way out of his several layers of traditional Little People's togs. The gentle coolness of the water was a welcome and refreshing relief from the sultry hot, breeze-less night air. It became a quiet, talk-filled occasion, in which just enjoying the cool was more important than the swim.

"So, what was that smile thing you were working on back there?" Twiggs asked, as face to face, we just quietly treaded water.

"Smiles, I corrected, emphasizing the plural nature of the word. Then I continued:

"It's an acronym, you know, where each letter in a word stands for some other word or phrase. It's really a formula to

help us remember how to meet and treat our fellow men."

"And so, what are those words and phrases?"

"Well, the formula acronym is the word, S M I L E S. The first S actually stands for Smile, and it means we must always approach others with a smile on our face. That sets a friendly, safe, relationship even from a distance. In some cases, that's as close as you ever get, so it's really important.

"The M stands for Maintain a Manner of confidence, otherwise anything else you do or say will be suspect. A confident stride and posture, and a confident tone in your voice let others know that you know for sure and certain what you're about. If you say things are great, they'll believe you!

"The I is a reminder to just Ignore any negative or pessimistic messages the other person seems bent on displaying. If you don't pay any attention to them, you have a better chance of overpowering those kinds of self-destructive feelings.

"L stands for Listen. People immediately feel important if they believe you are paying attention to what they have to say. You don't have to agree with it if you can't, but you can listen attentively. Lots of folks don't seem to have anybody in their lives who will just plain listen to them.

"The E reminds us to act in ways that Encourage others to be their best - to achieve whatever level of Excellence is possible for them. We have to think of encouragement as a method for helping others to recognize their own strong points and begin making those more important in their lives than worrying about their weaker points.

"And the final S tells us that unless we are Sincere in our approach with others, we may well do more harm than good."

Twiggs thoughtfully nodded his approval, as he tried to summarize what I had just said.

"Smile through life, assume a Manner of confidence, Ignore the negative, Listen well, Encourage other folks' positive features, and do it all Sincerely. SMILES ! What a great formula you came up with, ol' man."

"Well, it really all started the last time we were together, when you were going on about how you thought I had already found the key to changing things. By the way,

what you said about me that day was really important to me. I was too taken by it all to thank you properly at the time."

"No perspiration, young Mortal," came, Twiggs reply. (Perhaps all of his naiveté, had not faded, after all.)

Lovingly, I just ignored his idiom error.

"You know us mortals - always trying to simplify things," I said, trying to maintain a lighter turn to the conversation. It was not to be, however.

"My turn yet," he asked, catching me off guard.

"Your turn? Sure," I said, wondering what was up.

"Cinnamon pointed out to me that although having known you is one of the best things that will ever happen to me in all of eternity, it has also been a very disturbing thing."

My heart sank. What in the world had I done to him - my very best friend in the entire universe? I just remained silent, not knowing how to respond.

"Well, you know all about the wonderful side to it all, so let me just explain the down side."

"Please do," I finally managed probably sounding uncharacteristically meek.

"Before I met you, all I knew were the ways of the Little People. Knowing what was right and wrong was easy - they were whatever my people said they were. Knowing how to go about living a proper life was easy - it was the way of my people. Knowing how to dress, how to comb my hair, where to live, who was safe and who was suspect, and what the proper answers were to most every question about life were all easy, because I accepted the ways of my people. I had no idea there were alternatives. Not having money, not having your modern conveniences, never having more than two sets of clothes and never having more of anything than was absolutely necessary - those were the right ways. They were all I had ever known.

"I was content that way, because that is how it was - how it was supposed to be. There were no social problems to concern me. I knew nothing about physical toil or unmet needs. I believed, like most Little People, that the Mortals who we were pledged to help, were just overgrown, nameless, foolish, thoughtless beings, from a backward species, unable

and unwilling to take proper care of themselves.

"Life was full of certainties, you see. I had all the answers because there were no experiences to make me question them. I was blessed with the proper life, while the poor boy in the meadow was doomed to a hapless, crude, even depraved existence.

"But then, you had to go and stub your toe, and I had to feel compelled to do something about it. All of that occurred at the very same moment that I was also feeling the need to test my own twelve and three-quarters year old manliness - my courage and self-confidence. So, I didn't just zap your toe back together from a shrouded distance - no, I had to appear to you. I had to face you straight on.

"From the first moment you smiled at me - from the moment you spoke to me in that kind, mellow voice of yours - from the moment you presented yourself to me as a friendly, safe being - my life was forevermore confused and disordered. You weren't the way you were supposed to be. You weren't dull, unkind and unfeeling. You weren't selfish, thoughtless and sinister. You were a boy who was much more like me, than different from me.

"I soon experienced things with you that made me challenge my previously comfortable and certain way of life. I had to rethink things I had known for sure and certain were unalterably right or wrong, or acceptable or unacceptable. Knowing you turned my world upside down. And you know what was most puzzling of all?"

"What was that?" I asked, my head still spinning.

"You seemed so confounded delighted about it all! You seemed to think it was good and proper to question things and look at things from new perspectives. You presented to me an entirely new approach to thinking. It was puzzling. It was disturbing. Most of all, though, it was wonderful, it was awesome, it was extraordinary!

"Never once, have I wished that I could go back to the way I had been before. Never once have I been sorry I took that bold and brazen step and confronted you that day. But, it is also true Jay, that since that moment, never once have I been truly comfortable and untroubled."

As we climbed out of the water that day, and lay there

drying in the sun, I too, was suddenly visited by a new uneasiness. Though it could never be reversed, I had to question whether or not I had done the right thing by fostering this relationship. It wasn't that, as a nine-year-old, I could have ever foreseen the problems it would pose for Twiggs (and, every bit as mightily, for me, by the way!). It wasn't that I was actually displeased with how he or I had turned out. I just felt bad that the whole process had caused my friend so much pain: so much uneasiness and confusion.

For the time being, at least, I wouldn't bother Twiggs with the turmoil and misgivings, which had been visited on me as a result of our association.

I supposed, however, that choosing enlightenment and new knowledge inevitably produces uneasiness and confusion – sometimes, even fear – for a time at least. I had grown to believe, however, that even the uneasiness that often accompanies new knowledge is superior to being content with one's ignorance.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN:

The less we value stuff and its acquisition, the simpler life becomes, and the easier it is to find, use, and enjoy the truly human being within us.

About mid-month, the welcome comfort of a mild Ozark December inevitability gave way to a nostalgic yearning for snow on the ground, icicles on the eaves, and the scarves, mittens, and other colorful trappings of the Christmas season. So it was, that year.

Although I had given up bare feet for the season, shorts and a T-shirt were still quite appropriate as I made my way across the meadow toward the oak tree on the ridge atop East Hill. Ahead of me, my shadow was long, playing chase with those of the rabbits and squirrels. Though low in the sky, I could feel the last warm rays of the setting sun on the back of my neck. The jacket slung over my left shoulder would soon be welcomed, as the cool of evening settled itself into the valley.

I smiled to think that I had become so organized as to have even remembered to bring a coat along. Appreciating the value of organization was one of the happy bonuses of my experiences in the gifted program at the University. To keep on top of things there, as well as back at my school, at home, and in my unofficial role as adviser to the Goodakt Clubs, I had even succumbed to making lists. Twiggs would kid me about that - me, the guy who taught him to live each moment to its fullest, and only consider tomorrow once it had arrived.

I climbed high in the tree - much higher than usual. I'm not sure why. Perhaps so I would be able to absorb the sun's

warm presence for as long as possible. Perhaps to watch the darkness of the valley below, slowly mount the tree after me. Or, perhaps simply to have climbed high in the tree.

At any rate, there I was, amazed once more, that the sunset was, again, new and different from any I had ever seen before. I wondered if Twiggs and Cinnamon were sitting in their tree, watching it also. I wondered if it would look the same to them.

Thinking of them, I felt a sudden rush of loneliness - not so much for Twiggs, since he would arrive in a few hours. More just for someone special of my own - someone to sit close to, and care about, and to share my feelings with. I wondered who my special person would turn out to be. Would it be J. J.? Most likely not. Who then? Where was she now? Was she watching the same sunset? Was she wondering who her special person would be? There were dozens of questions with no answers.

That would bother most folks I knew - having questions with no answers. But not me. I just loved formulating questions. I supposed the fact that I could so easily live with unanswered questions, separated me even further from the rest of humanity.

The history books were filled with the tales folks had concocted down through the centuries to explain things they could neither understand nor satisfactorily investigate. They covered the forces of nature, the creation of the universe, life, death, and just about everything in between.

Most mortals invariably seem to need concrete answers. When an answer is not readily available, somebody just invents one. It may be based on logic, opinion or even whimsy, but if it presents what seems to be a safe and reasonable answer to an important question, others seem to latch onto it with little or no thought of appraising its actual validity. Many times, possessing such improvised, speculative answers, have been turned into the source of power over others - witch doctors, high priests, and medicine men.

I wondered why folks didn't question things the way I did. Why were they so willing to accept as fact, less than testable ideas? Perhaps it was because that would rock their boats - would take the certainties out of their lives - and

without certainty, their levels of anxiety and fear might become unbearable.

Who knows? Maybe it has actually been their faith in the truth of those fables that has held society together over the years. When verified facts are not available, perhaps fables provide the security most folks need to live a secure and meaningful life. Perhaps such tales add purpose, when otherwise it would not be apparent.

As useful a role as those tales may play during periods of unavoidable ignorance, it seems that they typically die hard once the true answer has been discovered and the actual facts verified. Perhaps I would spend my life studying people's belief systems, and learn how and why they come to believe and value what they do.

While I had been sitting there deep in thought - admittedly my very favorite activity (though, soon to be replaced, like for Twiggs, by kissing, I hoped!) - the glow of twilight had turned into the black of night. In fact, I had found it necessary to move along at a dead run in order to arrive at the cabin before Twiggs. Half way up the hill I heard the distant church bell begin chiming the midnight hour. I turned on the speed, as it became an all-consuming challenge. Just as the twelfth bell peeled forth, I closed the door behind me and, leaning back against it, I puffed as I had not puffed in some time. I smiled. It felt good.

"Your clocks are a good ten seconds slow," Twiggs said, already there and dragging a large stick across the stone hearth into the fireplace. "It's cold in here, pal. Let's get a fire going."

Before long, the fire was blazing and I shed my jacket
Twiggs looked me over, puzzled.

"Bundled up in a coat and yet in short pants. Don't your legs get cold?"

"Not when I'm running," I replied - an answer that seemed to satisfy his curiosity for the moment, but, interestingly, didn't really satisfy mine. My legs had not been cold, even up in the tree, although I had been shivering from the waist up before donning the jacket. What an interesting question! I'd have to peruse a physiology book later and find the actual answer.

"It's probably all that fuzz you're sprouting on your legs," Twiggs added, only partly seriously. "That should help keep you warm."

"I'll have you understand that's not fuzz. It's genuine, dark colored, hair. Look for yourself."

I moved my leg forward.

"Looking at the fuzz - er, genuine, dark, colored hair - on guys legs is not one of my interests, these days," Twiggs replied with a grin. Then more seriously, he continued:

"Do you realize that next year at this time, Cinnamon and I will have been married almost four months?" He sighed, stealing a lingering glance at the pictures tacked to the log above my bed.

"Down boy!" I teased. "An old married man, huh? I'll probably never pry you away back into this mortal realm again, will I?"

I was surprised to feel some small sense of true concern developing in that question as I asked it. Perhaps I was a bit jealous of Cinnamon - could that be? More things to ponder later on.

I tossed my jacket on a chair and sprawled out on the bed, looking up at the ceiling. Twiggs seated himself cross-legged, on my chest.

"Oh no, Jay-man. Nothing could ever keep me away from these times with you. Cinnamon says that it's all I talk about for weeks before and for weeks after we see each other. If a Little Person could be jealous, I think she would be."

"I guess I really knew that, Twiggs. I was mostly just kidding. It's just that there is a lot more than my leg fuzz that seems to be changing in our lives now, and I don't want to let any of that interfere with our friendship."

"Let's take an oath right now that nothing will ever come between us," Twiggs said, getting to his feet and placing his right hand over his heart, in obvious imitation of our daily pledge of allegiance at school.

I knew in my heart, that was what I wanted, but I knew in my brain that we really couldn't know it for sure. At any rate, I went with my heart and took the oath. We sealed the deed with a big drink of Grapette, wiping our mouths with the backs of our hands like Long John Silver did in the movie.

We moved to the rug in front of the fireplace. The brilliant fury of the new fire had burned itself off, leaving behind a complement of more subdued, evenly flickering flames. It was most comfortable there near the hearth.

"I'm stuck on the new chapter I'm trying to write," Twiggs offered.

"What's the problem?"

"It's back to that value thing, again. It seems every time I think you've explained it all to me, something else comes up that I don't understand."

"Like?"

"Like, Little People are taught to find the positive value that is present in everything and everyone. Almost nothing is without some kind of value that we can appreciate. We find value in the usual things like friendship and the beauties of nature, and family life and music and learning and, ... well you see what I mean."

"Yeah. So, what's the problem? Most Mortals see the value in those same things. Not everybody does, of course. We are an independent minded lot."

"Well, that's part of it. How can anyone not appreciate the value of family life or one's wife or children? Yet many of you don't. And it goes well beyond those kinds of things.

"We Little People see the good side of things like storms and sadness and fear and dilemmas - drought and blizzards and mud puddles and bruises - everything has its value. Most Mortals don't even look for the good side - for the value - in those things."

"You're saying that we Mortals learn to only value certain things - like desserts, cars, money and power."

"That's sort of what I mean. It's like you have been taught that there is a big list of what can be valued, and another even bigger list of things to just ignore - things that couldn't possibly be important or of any value."

"I can't deny that. That is the way we are. It sounds to me that you have a pretty good handle on it."

"Oh, I think I see how it is, all right. I just can't understand how it makes any sense to a mind as intelligent as the Mortal's."

He tried to explain further:

"Like not long ago when Georgie turned eleven. His Dad increased his allowance by fifty cents a week. But, rather than focus on the new fifty cents he'd have to spend each week, he spent the entire week being mad because it hadn't been a dollar. He saw no value in the smaller raise.

"And when children get disciplined by their parents - and your discipline methods make no sense to me whatsoever, but that's another chapter - the children never focus on what they have the opportunity to learn from it. They just focus on being angry with their parents. They don't see the value in the experience and benefit from it."

"I see where you're going with this," I said. "Another example would be when Betty won third place in the Poppy Poster contest. She won five dollars but rather than being happy about that, she moaned and groaned about not having won the fifteen-dollar first prize."

"Yeah. See. That's my dilemma! It's as if only being first or best, or getting the most, holds any value. Anything less is, ... well, value-less. And since most people, most of the time, cannot possibly come in first or do the best or get the most, or have the finest, they are all just discontent all the time. Your whole way of life is set up to have just one winner and a multitude of losers. How can I explain it? Since only a few can ever obtain all those things that have been identified as most valuable, everybody else always loses - everybody else goes without."

"And your solution?"

"Well, if people valued just being able to participate, then everyone who entered in would feel good about all those kinds of events. Or, if people valued the thought and effort that another person had put into getting a present ready for them, then it wouldn't matter what the actual gift, itself, was. If everyone just valued being themselves and becoming all that they could reasonably become, then they wouldn't keep feeling bad about not being able to become that more valued something they can't be. Do you see what I'm trying to say?"

"Yeah. It's sort of back to the clerics and the meds thing, isn't it? Who is more valuable and who is least valuable? Each one felt they had to be the most important," I added, recalling the huge problems the miracle thing had

presented to my community just a year or so before.

"So, what are we going to do about it?" Twiggs asked.

"You're assuming that something should be done about it, aren't you?" I asked, not at all sure he had properly thought through the larger aspects of the topic.

"Explain yourself, Mortal."

"Well, let's say that folks all of a sudden begin valuing things like friendship and conversation and self-development and doing nice things for one another, more than they value getting more stuff - cars, houses, boats, clothes, jewelry. What would happen to our economy?"

"If obtaining all that stuff was no longer important to anyone, then most folks would need a whole lot less money - maybe only half as much as now. So, they'd cut way back on how much they worked. Then they would have more time for conversation, hobbies, being helpful, and friendship, but the companies wouldn't have enough help."

"Except," Twiggs added, "They wouldn't need as much help, because people wouldn't be buying nearly as many of their unneeded, unwanted products."

"An interesting point, Twiggs. So, the economy would shrink, so to speak, wouldn't it? Production would drop because demand would drop. Work hours would drop because lower production would demand fewer hours. Take home pay would drop, but then, that would be fine, because folks wouldn't be buying nearly so many unneeded - unvalued - things. Tax rates could drop because neighbors would have time to be helping neighbors, rather than expecting government to do that. Many other aspects of government could, also, be handled by volunteers.

"It would require a value revolution, first, and that would, in turn, bring about that economic revolution. Sad as it sounds, there are a lot of egotistical, self-indulgent, money worshiping, power seeking businessmen, who would fiercely oppose any such shift away from the irrational, stuff-valuing society, to a more laid back, people-valuing society."

"But how could they really resist it if folks just decided that stuff, and the frantic way of life it takes to obtain it, was no longer worth the huge human sacrifice."

"The human sacrifice meaning what," I asked.

"Sacrificing the safe, friendly, helpful, trusting, people-centered approach to life that way too many Mortals seem to have already forgotten about."

"How are you saying that all this would change our way of life?" I asked, again.

"Let's think about it," Twiggs said. "People would learn to value and enjoy being with one another and doing things for each other. They would come to see that being among friends on your back porch or in your living room, could be every bit as enjoyable as being with them on a Yacht or in a penthouse or in a rented ski lodge. It would be the people and not the trappings that would count."

"You mean I could go to parties without having to get all dressed up in expensive clothes - just wear my comfortable stuff instead," I said smiling, more illustrating the point than really asking the question.

"And rather than making payments on the boat that you only use a dozen times a year, or on the second car that your reduced work schedule allows you to give up, you could be planting trees to save the planet, or feeding hungry kids, or inoculating babies, or building houses for the homeless."

"I bet there would be far fewer homeless," I said, thinking out loud.

"Why's that?"

"Well, there would probably be less competition for jobs, so more folks could work. And another thing, in a society where everyone really cared about and for everyone else, and had time to show it, there would surely be less mental illness."

"Interesting points, ol' man," Twiggs replied. "And less crime and less violence ..."

"And more caring and happiness," I said, interrupting. "That's the real bottom line. People would be happy in a true sense, deep down inside, because they would know they were being good people, developing and living up to their unique human capacities. A person's worth would be judged on what kind of person he was, not on what kind jeans he wore or what kind of car he drove. People wouldn't be all tied up in pursuing unattainable happiness through counterfeit values."

"Hey, I like that term, counterfeit values," Twiggs said, enthusiastically.

"Me too. It would sure be rough on the Hamlin Wentworths of the world though," I added.

"The who?" Twiggs asked.

"Just a kid I know from a wealthy family who is so shallow as a person, that without his car and expensive clothes and the money he has to buy friends, he would be nothing at all. People, who depend on the show of stuff - those counterfeit values - in order to be somebody, would suffer the most. They would have to learn how to be real people, so to speak."

"But I know for sure and certain that in the long run they'd be a whole lot happier - like you said, deep down inside," Twiggs observed.

We silently rested our brains for a few minutes, digesting

all the things we had been discussing. In the quiet of the moment we listened to the crackling of the fire, and watched as a log shifted position, shedding its glowing embers and sending a colorful display of tiny dancing sparks up the chimney. It seemed somehow symbolic of all we had just been talking about.

The realizations of that night were actually nothing new to me - it was basically the way I been going about life for most of my twelve and three quarters years. How I was going to sell it all to the rest of humanity, however, remained an utter, though absolutely fascinating, mystery to me. Although oversimplified, perhaps, I formulated a summary of my beliefs on the topic:

"The less we value stuff and its acquisition, the simpler life becomes, and the easier it is to find, use, and enjoy the truly human being within us.

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CHAPTER TWELVE:

Smart people everywhere must join forces and develop a foolproof blueprint for the survival of the clan, Humanity.

I had planned it to be my final swim as a boy, and I had been thoughtfully doing all those things I had enjoyed so much during my childhood years, there at my own, private, memory filled, swimming hole.

In an hour and twenty-two minutes, I would become a teenager. It was as if time were finally catching up with me. I felt like a teenager - heck, some days I felt like an old man! Most folks had long treated me as though I were a teenager. During those past few months, I had finally grown tall, and my body had become that of a teenager - right down to a pimple – or six. My hormones had all quite suddenly visited upon me the ever present, never ceasing, attention narrowing passions, of a teenage male.

That last factor, in and of itself, complicated my life a hundred-fold! It seemed that no matter what I started out to ponder, I'd end up thinking about girls. Math notations became the female form. History became the saga of human procreation. And advanced biology - well, what can I say!

At school, I could no longer pass girls in the hall, merely content to smile and nod or make some wise crack. I couldn't just say to myself, 'There's my friend, Judy.' No, suddenly I had to inspect each one, taking mental stock of their various female attributes. It just all seemed to happen quite automatically, even when I consciously attempted to avoid doing it. I felt compelled to ask myself things such as, 'I wonder how good a kisser she would be?' 'I wonder if she is

as soft as she appears from here.' 'Do you suppose she would like to spend some private time with me?' 'If so, what would we do?'

My imagination had always been uncontrollable - it had, long ago, acquired a mind of its own, forging ahead in totally unpredictable and uncharted directions - but now!! Now, it seemed to enjoy - no, to be fully consumed by - lurid, lingering thoughts, the nature of which only, in my very recent past, I had found fully disgusting. It was confusing, but at the same time, I reckoned if I had to be confused, this surely seemed to be one fantastic way to have it happen!

There was no doubt about it, this being a mature male represented at once both a wonder-filled and yet most troublesome departure from my previous approach to life. Twiggs was my expert on such matters and I had an unending list of questions for him.

The night was warm and the meadow was bathed in a shadow-casting, brilliant, light from the full moon. It was my plan to just wait for Twiggs there at the swimming hole. I figured if he could cure brain tumors, he could surely figure out where to look for me. I was right.

* * *

"Hi, mortal lad," came his always cheery greeting, as he poofed into sight just above me on the edge of Jutting Rock.

"Hi yourself," I said, almost as if I were surprised by his sudden presence. I climbed out, standing there dripping, head tilted, trying to pound the water from my right ear. That usually evoked a chuckle from Twiggs. That night, his response was quite different.

"Wow! Tall mortal adolescent being is more like it! You really look different. You look great! Wow! Where in the name of St. Bountiful did you get those muscles and that extra six inches in height?"

"Mother Nature's treated me most generously these last few months. Apparently, she's been hiding some genetic something deep inside my genetic somethings," I quipped, trying to just play down the whole thing which, of course, in reality I had wanted more than anything for him to notice.

"I'll say she has," he replied.

I picked him up, sitting myself down on the rock in the

same motion.

"I have a bunch of questions for you about all this," I said, carefully depositing him atop my knee.

"What, no hug tonight? You're suddenly too grown up to give your best friend in the whole world a simple little hug," Twiggs said, throwing up his arms in mock outrage.

"Oh, sure, Twiggs. I'm sorry. Of course, I still have a hug for my very best friend in the whole world."

I made it extra-long and extra manly to make up for the oversight.

"Hormone problems, huh?" Twiggs observed, as I replaced him on my knee.

"More than I ever dreamed possible," I said. "When do I get these feelings and thoughts under control, so I can get back to being me, again?"

Twiggs removed his hat, and with due deliberation, sailed it toward a low hanging branch. Well on its way to missing the mark, it suddenly corrected its own course in mid-flight and made a perfect landing. Twiggs gave me a slightly sheepish look, and then responded.

"I hate to disappoint you, pal, but you can't really hope to get them under control. You just have to learn to work out a compromise between what they are constantly urging you to do, and what you believe are the proper things to do."

"Well, thanks a lot. That certainly fills my being with hope and joy!"

Twiggs ignored my smart remark and just continued.

"As to ever getting back to being the old you, forget that, also. Up to now you've just been the human fledgling - the naive, callow product of mankind's remarkable instinct to keep the species alive. Biologically, your job has just been to keep yourself safe, grow up, and survive puberty. From this point on, however, you are that propagating force. In that one area of your life, you can never go back to being who you used to be."

It was what I knew I would hear, but I was unprepared for the effect it would have on me. At that moment, I felt a tremendous loss. It was as if Twiggs had just hammered the final nail into the coffin of my childhood. It was a grievous moment, as I had always reveled in being a child - as much or

more, I suspected, than any human who had ever lived.

So, more accurately, it was to be two problems I would have to face - and solve - the loss of my childhood, and invoking my old values to regulate my new (and essential) instinctual desires. Perhaps for only the second time in my life, I felt my shoulders slouch. I hated the feeling that seemed to allow into my heart.

I sighed - perhaps deeper than ever before. I looked into the face of my good friend - man to man for the very first time. I allowed a single tear to bath my cheek - carrying with it the innocence that had been my refuge from the necessity for responsible, mature, human behavior.

Twiggs sat quietly, allowing me my private moment, undoubtedly replaying his own similar instant of transformation.

At last I gave a brief nod of my head, re-straightened my shoulders, and was ready to move on.

"Well, if I'm destined to cope with adulthood, I'm certainly glad you're here to help," I said, looking down at Twiggs and extending my finger for him to grasp. "I have a thousand questions, but we can get to them later. Let's go for a nice long swim."

We swam until daybreak. Actually, it seemed to me that I was no less enthusiastic about the adventure than I had been back when I was a mere kid. I had every bit as much fun cannon balling and doing swan dives off the tower. Being larger and stronger, some things were even more fun than before. Perhaps being a grown-up wouldn't have to be so bad, after all.

So, what if the movement of the clouds, slowly emerging from the darkness above, reminded me of gorgeous ladies doing the dance of the seven veils in a torch lit tent in the desert? It was as close as I'd get to such an erotic rendezvous for many years, so why not just lie back and enjoy it! I did. So, did Twiggs as I described it all to him. We laughed with eager embarrassment, like we had not laughed since that first summer.

"You see," Twiggs said at last, "The way things were, can never really leave you. It's just that now, there is this wonderful new dimension, that gives a fantastic, new,

previously unimaginable meaning to the words life and love and purpose."

"And responsible behavior," I said. "That's pretty deep stuff."

"I've said it all to you before, you know, but ..."

"But I couldn't truly understand what you were trying to tell me because I ..."

"Because you were still just a little, prepubescent, Mortal twirp," Twiggs said, humorously completing our somewhat cryptic, conjoint conversation.

"I'll show you who the twirp is," I said, reaching out to dunk him. It was no surprise that he was long gone by the time my hand got to the spot where he had been. I felt him jumping up and down on the top of my head, as if trying to drive me below the surface. Rather than resisting, I reached deep, and with my newly strong arms, pulled the water over my head. With Twiggs feet snagged in my hair, we sank together onto the soft, sandy bottom.

It had been a good time. It had been a reassuring time. It had been a time filled with fine memories for both of us.

We built a fire there on the bank, and had hot dogs and marshmallows for breakfast. We talked of silly things, remembering the most ridiculous moments and the most fantastic fantasies. We recalled with fondness those carefree days, now available only as precious re-runs in our minds.

We were in and out of the water a dozen times that day. As usual, we jabbered on as if we hadn't seen one another for months. Well, ... Few topics missed our consideration.

"So, is your house finished yet," I asked.

"Nailed the last shingle into place yesterday afternoon. I sure wish you could see it. You'd be proud of what I've done. You've been a good teacher."

"Got furniture, yet?"

"Well, no. Not exactly," Twiggs said, hem-hawing around about, what I had reckoned, was a pretty straightforward question.

"What's the deal," I asked.

"You see, since I built the house in the Mortal way, we decided we should furnish it the Little People way."

"You mean 'blink, blink, and there's the sink'?"

"Yeah, I suppose you could put it that way," he said.

"I think that's great!" I answered. A blend of the two realms. That's really pretty neat."

"I'm glad you think so. It was Cinnamon's idea. She finished the curtains and enjoyed sewing so much, she quilted a beautiful bed spread for us. She's teaching some of the other ladies how to quilt. They all seem to be getting quite a kick out of it."

"So, one day you'll just stand there in the living room and zip, zap, it'll all be furnished?"

"Yeah. Zip, zap," he said, grinning his familiar grin.

I shook my head in wonder, as I looked into the face of my good friend. We both knew that I'd never understand that special, Little Person, part of him, just as he would never understand how I could continue to have such optimism about the future of my Mortal species.

"So, down the line, when you want a new chair, you just poof another one into existence?" I asked, a casual question in my tone.

"Why would I ever want a new chair?" came his totally innocent response.

"Oh, I get it," he added, after only a moment's reflection. "It's that Mortal threedorance thing I've been studying this month.

"Threedorance?" I said, obviously bewildered.

"It's a new term I made up to help me understand a whole raft of Mortal response patterns. "It's like your Mortal acronyms."

"Threedorance?" I repeated.

"You're going to think I'm picking on Mortals again - putting them down. Really, I'm not. Threedorance is just a descriptive term. It doesn't imply any kind of moral judgment."

"Threedorance?" I repeated again.

"We've talked a lot about those Mortal traits that seem to have as their only possible outcome, the destruction of your species."

I nodded, not particularly pleased with the topic, but silently waited for more.

"Three of those attributes seem to get intertwined so

often that I just coined a new term for the whole set of them - Threedorance."

"And those three are ...?" Again, I waited, becoming more and more intrigued by this new, apparently inventive side of Twiggs.

"The th comes from thoughtlessness, the reed from greed and the orance from ignorance. See, threedorance."

"So, this is about thoughtless, greedy, ignorant people."

"Right. Although there are clear differences among the three traits, they often get all tangled up together. Like, greedy folks, just work to accumulate lots of stuff, because having lots of stuff is their goal - garages full of cars, closets full of clothes, banks full of money. They want to have something even when that means keeping it away from someone else who might need it more.

"But, they are often also, thoughtless, because they fail to see - to even consider - what terrible things may happen to others because of their actions or inactions. They tell a secret and ruin a relationship, or they start a rumor or tell a little fib that eventually ruins someone's reputation. They may just fail to treat people in a kind and helpful manner, overlooking their needs. They usually seem to be pretty self-centered folks, by the way.

"Sometimes it's largely more just a matter of ignorance. One example is the lack of knowledge about how, what they are doing, will be devastating to the planet or the future of the species. Another would be parents who aren't aware that there are well established child rearing methods that will consistently produce mentally healthy, trouble-free children, so they just go on in ignorance, using methods long known to do just the opposite.

"These folks with threedorance don't deliberately set out to harm or annihilate any segment of the population. They often end up doing just that, but that wasn't their goal. Their intention was just to selfishly satisfy their own desires in their own tiny world.

"It's folks with threedorance-A who actually plot the destruction of others for their personal gain."

"Threedorance-A? And the A stands for ..."

"Annihilation, of course. Folks with these four traits -

thoughtlessness, greed, ignorance and the desire to harm someone, are among the most frightening of all the Mortals."

"I would think so!" I agreed.

"So, I only really meant to point out that someday getting a new chair for my house, would probably be threedorance. Greedy, because we probably would not really need it. Ignorant - meaning, being unaware of the devastating cost to the planet when trees must needlessly be cut for lumber, oil made into non-decomposing synthetic fibers for stuffing or fabric. And thoughtless, when there are undoubtedly folks around who are in need, and for whom the chair or the money could certainly be put to better - more humane - use."

"Sorry, I asked," I tried to quip.

"Actually, I'm not sorry," I hastened to continue. "I see your point and I think the term has merit. I'll probably even find myself using it - a lot."

"But?" Twiggs asked, awaiting my predicable rejoinder.

"But, once again my friend, you have failed to see the other side of the coin. You only seem to focus on the bad side of us Mortals."

"I know that's shortsighted, Jay, but that's the side that is surely going to destroy your kind if we don't do something about it in a hurry," he explained, more than a little emotional in his manner.

"And I know that. I know you only have our best interests at heart, but for sake of balance, may I coin a term that is also descriptive of an even larger - far, far larger - segment of my Mortal clan?"

"Sure."

I took a moment to think, and a moment was all it took.

"Infor-thought-erosity."

"Which includes which traits?"

"Well informed people, who are most thoughtful in their relationships with others, and whose generosity knows few bounds."

"Like the new Miss Primm and Gramma Mary, Albert Schweitzer, Mother Theresa, and the Jay-man!" Twiggs said, thoughtfully.

"Yes, and I'm proud to be among that group. I have

tried very hard to become that kind of person. I'm working every single day to help more folks run their lives according to the principle of inforlthoughtlerosity - inforthoughterosity."

"It is a truly great word, Jay-man! It took me a week to come up with threedorance and here you are infor..thought..erosity-ing in less than a minute. That is one magnificent brain you possess there, my friend. Sorry I was jumping on it earlier this morning. We need to take pains to protect it."

I always felt a bit embarrassed about that being-so-smart-thing, so I came back with:

"Just think how brilliant I'd probably be if I hadn't acquired these two dozen scars on my scalp as a kid!" Our laugh eased the tension both ways, although each of us had been dead center on target in what we had said. Greedy, thoughtless, ignorant people, hurt people whether they intend to or not. Although informed, thoughtful, generous people, do improve the lot of mankind, even when armed with their inforthoughterosity, they never seem able to do enough to make up for, or prevent, the devastating effects of threedorance.

It was a sad thought, but the mere existence of the concept, inforthoughterosity, provided hope and purpose. Smart, compassionate, people, everywhere, must join forces, to thoughtfully and knowledgeably, develop a foolproof blueprint for the mutually beneficial survival of my clan members - the Clan Humanity.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN:
The answer is kindergarten-simple:
Neighbors take good care of neighbors!

In just a few minutes it would be August 27th - not just any August 27th, mind you, but that August 27th when Twiggs would become seventeen, and would be one week away from his marriage to Cinnamon.

I had often wondered why the Council of Elders had selected such personally important days for our meetings - our birthdays and Twiggs' favorite of all holidays, the Time of Continuance celebration. I had come to the conclusion that it probably had been their intention that we be willing to make some sacrifices in order to pursue our relationship, even though it was in the greater service of our two realms.

It would be the last time that I would see Twiggs as a - what shall I call it - a single guy, I guess. When we would get together in December, he and his wife would have had four wonder-filled months of new, private, intimate experiences, which we both understood would never be mentioned between us.

I fully realized it only signified that Twiggs was adding an exciting and fulfilling new dimension - as he once put it - to his life, but for some reason I felt it meant I was losing a part of him. Dumb, but that's how I felt.

So, as he poofed into view on the moon lit limb above me there on East Mountain, I was struggling against showing my dejection.

"Happy birthday, ol', about to be married, seventeen-year-old, very best friend I have ever had or ever hope to have

in the whole wide World!"

"Wow! What a greeting! Thanks, Jay-man!"

"Got the jitters?" I asked, not really knowing how fully I should open up the marriage topic, but wanting to get it handled with some dispatch.

"Not really, well maybe a little. Depends what part of it all you mean."

Well, in no way was I going to ask about the various parts, so I remained quiet, thinking he'd say whatever he wanted to. Come to find out, his concerns were just the opposite from what my own hormones had led me to imagine.

"I'm not nervous about finally getting to know Cinnamon in an intimate, physical way. She and I have talked that out and we know we'll just have to take our time and practice and help each other. I'm more jittery about being able to always be a good husband to her. I love her so much and I never, ever want to do anything that would hurt her or make her feel bad."

"I thought marriages were pre-ordained perfect, or something among you Little People," I said, voicing my puzzlement.

"Actually, they are, but, still, I want to work at mine. I don't want to just sit back and let some mysterious force that I can't even understand, do my job for me."

"That sure sounds just like you, Twiggs," I said.

"Actually, Cinnamon says that it sounds just like you, Jay. See, I can't even shake off you're influence in my marriage."

In some way, that helped me. It really pleased me. It made me feel more a part of Twiggs. It's hard to explain, but my blues rapidly began draining away.

"Well, you know I wish you the very best," I said, immediately displeased with the shallowness of the message that even my most sincere words had just conveyed.

"I really need to do the hug-thing," Twiggs said, opening his arms in my direction and, thereby, mercifully sparing me from further attempts at clarifying my good wishes for him.

It was undoubtedly the best hug-thing we had ever had. It was about our love for one another, for my happiness about

his love for and from Cinnamon, and about the realization that we had each worked ourselves into each other's beings in ways that made it impossible for us to ever truly be separated.

At the same time, it also represented a parting, as I realized his Cinnamon was now the most important person in his life. I told myself that was fine - that that was how it should be. It told myself that by practicing this best friend thing on one another, Twiggs and I had prepared ourselves for that most special person who would someday enter our lives. He had found his first, but someday I would find mine. In both cases, we would be better prepared because we had known and loved and respected each other, first.

Although it had been my intention to wait until the very last possible moment of our day together, it suddenly appeared to be the appropriate time. I gently sat him back on the branch.

"This year I have combined your birthday present with your wedding present. Maybe it'll seem corny, but ... well, I have one possession that is the most precious thing I have ever had in my entire life, and I want you to have it."

From my shirt pocket, I carefully pulled the little leather belt - the ring - that Twiggs had given me that first day we had met. I gave it one last, long and fond, look, stroked its tiny little bronze buckle, and then handed it up to my friend. By the time my eyes engaged his, the tears streaming down his face more than matching my own. He took it from me, speechless, holding it close against his chest.

"I don't know what to say, Jay."

That's the great thing about being best friends, remember, you don't have to say anything.

He attempted to put it around his waist but it came up way short. We smiled through our tears and laughed at that.

"I know," he said, and he draped it over his shoulder, pulling it down and around his other arm, fastening it across his chest in front.

"It looks like a Miss America banner," I joked.

"More like one for Mr. Universe, I'd say," he quipped right back, flexing his muscles in a comic pose.

"Thanks twice, Jay."

"Twice?"

"Yes. Once for having treasured it so much, and once for wanting me to have it back."

Well, that didn't do one thing to improve the, less than manly, condition of my ever-moistening cheeks. I gave up trying to blink back the tears. I figured maybe the sooner out, the sooner gone. But really, I didn't even care.

After a period of silence, broken occasionally by sighs and sniffing and back of the hand face drying, Twiggs spoke again.

"There is really one more present I have always wanted you to give me."

The twinkle, magnified by the last few tears still bathing his eyes, told me something out of the ordinary was about to transpire.

"What's that?" I asked eagerly and yet with some guarded hesitation.

"I have always wanted to near jump you with me from one place to another, but, well, your reluctance to let me use magic here in the meadow, kept me from ever doing it."

It seemed he was somehow off track.

"But what is this other gift? I asked."

"That's it. Just that you let me near jump you down to the swimming hole this one time - right now."

I gulped and gulped again.

"You can really do that? Well, of course you can do that. I don't know. I guess so. Is it really okay. Will it do anything to me...?"

I was still babbling out my questions, when suddenly and all quite unexpectedly, I found myself sitting atop the diving tower on Jutting Rock. Twiggs was raising his arms in the 'V-for' sign, and doing what appeared to be some kind of joyous victory jig on my leg.

I sat in silent amazement. Twiggs spoke first:

"Well, how was it? How was it?"

"I have no idea how it was. One second I was there and the next I am here. I have no memory about it, no feelings about it. It just happened. Wow! ... Thanks for letting me give you that present," I said, hoping that attempt at humor might help drain the surging adrenaline rush from my being.

"You're welcome or thank you or whatever," Twiggs

responded, caught up in the spirit of my whimsical banter.

We continued to talk about it for a short time and then moved on to other things. It was an experience, however, that I will never forget.

The day before, the temperature had topped the century mark and it had backed off only slightly as the church bell tolled one A.M. The creek water, though actually warm, felt like a refreshing dip in the arctic. It began as a quiet time together. Our conversation jumped from one unimportant topic to another. There were long silent periods. Being together seemed great. Talking together felt uncharacteristically strained.

In the past, such awkward moments had easily been bridged by some good, old-fashioned roughhousing, but somehow that just didn't seem appropriate.

Earlier in the week, I had thought of it, but it had slipped my mind. What we needed was a good Reader's Digest session - a time to just review and condense all that we had been thinking and saying and trying out those past four years. It re-entered my thoughts as I watched Twiggs bobbing there effortlessly in the moonlight.

"So, how do you think the Wise One's experiment is turning out?" I asked.

"The what?" Twiggs said, turning toward me, obviously not prepared for the topic.

"The great experiment about the Mortals and the Little People. You know, the time of separation and all that, when He made my clan huge, mortal, and without magic, and isolated us from your clan for all time. How do you think it's going?"

"I see. Interesting topic. I wasn't sure you really believed in my Wise One."

"I guess I'm not sure if I do either, but I suppose that's my problem and not yours."

Twiggs smiled and nodded. He knew I respected his right to believe his way, and I felt the same privilege from him. Anyway, regardless of when or how or by whom this whole thing got started, it had gotten started, and it was what had happened since that time that was the point of my question. How was each of our cultures doing and where were they

headed?

Since no immediate response was forthcoming from my friend, I began voicing my own thoughts on the matter.

"It seems to me the answer to how we're doing, depends on what one values about life and living it, doesn't it?"

"Like, for instance?"

"Well, I was thinking about it earlier this week, ..."

"You've been thinking about it every week since I first told you the story about the Wise One's Great Experiment," Twiggs interrupted, politely attempting to set the record straight.

"Well, probably so," I agreed. "But also, I really was thinking about it earlier this week."

"And you decided ...?"

"I decided that if the Wise One values perfection, and a tradition-based, well ordered, smooth running, charitable society, you guys win hands down."

"But...?" Twiggs interjected, waiting for me to flip the coin.

"But, if He values variety and creative effort, and having to struggle against evil in order for good to prevail, then I think we win."

"Is it possible He values all of those things?" Twiggs asked, sending my mind whirling off in a whole new, fantastically complicated direction.

"If He does, I suppose we both get C's," I said.

Then, upon a bit more reflection I corrected myself. "Well, probably you guys get a C. I doubt if we deserve more than a D or D+ - all things considered."

"All things?" Twiggs asked, pushing me a bit further.

"Well, you guys get A's in everything except variety and creativity. You've had no need to develop those traits, so I guess you take an unavoidable F in them. I think we'd get close to an A+ in variety. Just look at how many interesting cultures we have developed. We have dozens of fairly distinct sets of values and beliefs. We'd pretty well have to get another A in creativity, even though much of that has been prompted by our attempts to either inflict evil, or by the necessity to ward it off - the wars, the diseases, the social

upheavals. Our ability to struggle against the evil forces is generally superior too, I think - at least a B or B+. Complacency does seem to usually take over in between crises, though. Ok, so we only get a C or a C- in that last category."

"Where do you get the really low marks, then?" Twiggs asked.

"Acceptance and Compassion both get us F's. If somebody is different from us or upsets us, we show little understanding or offer little helpfulness. Many Mortals even use that difference, all by itself, as sufficient reason to harm the other person or group, or to get rid of them.

"Selfishness gets us another F. Self-centered profit taking, and all the ways it hurts others, gets us still another F - no it should be a G or an H or something even lower. We either tend to take advantage whenever possible and overcharge, or we run the little guy out of business by lowering monetary costs, with no thought for the human costs that are inflicted. We always define profit in terms of money, when it needs to be defined in human terms - both immediate and long term.

"The way so many mortals fail to value life itself, gives us another failing grade as a clan. Senseless murder. Suicide. Terrible!"

"You're being awfully hard on yourself, I think," Twiggs said. "Just look at all of you Mortals who are compassionate, who are not selfish, who do value life and work tirelessly to preserve and improve it. Look at your wonderful little town of Spring Meadow and all the fine folks who live there. They're always helping each other. I think you're being way too hard on your clan."

"I'm glad the good things like that stand out. Seems not too long ago you were failing to see a lot of those, yourself. But break it down. How many minutes of each day does the typical Mortal spend in self-less, as compared to self-ish thoughts and activities? Go zap a survey someday and you'll see. We fail!"

Twiggs remained silent, so I continued.

"And this winning and losing thing - we mortals have it defined all wrong. You guys define winning as when everyone

benefits from something. We define it as when just one person or one side benefits from it. In your society, no one ever loses because everyone works so hard to make everyone a winner. Many of us are only happy when we win. You are only happy when everyone has been properly cared for, feels good and has had a chance to demonstrate his level of excellence. We tend to feel best when we have tasted the blood of our opponent. You feel best when you feel fuzziacious.

"In your society, the guy whose highest skill level is just being able to swing a bat - and who does swing a bat - is valued just as much as the one who can - and does - hit a home run. Just being the best you can be is valued - whatever that best turns out to be. When you're doing your best, you have won, and everyone respects you. Here, if you strike out, you can bet you'll be booed and hissed and if it happens too often, you'll be dropped from the team."

"You are depressing me, my friend," Twiggs said, attempting to interrupt my liturgy of pessimistic judgments.

"Sorry, ol' friend. That's truly not my intention. I'm not depressing myself, in the least. I'm just mapping out things the way they are, so I know what needs to be done. Really, I guess, we've known what needed to be done for a long time. It's that next step that is always the most difficult one. How to make the changes?"

"Or, like you once said, 'How to get people to want to make the changes'," Twiggs added.

"Seeing beyond the end of your nose - that's really what it comes down to," I said.

"Explain," Twiggs asked?

"It's a Mortal expression that just means being able to see the big picture, rather than just your own little, tiny, infinitesimal part of it."

"Little, tiny, infinitesimal!" That must be even smaller than me," Twiggs laughed.

I laughed, too. It was a needed break in the building tension.

"It is amazing to me," I continued, "How people cannot help but understand that living among happy, well adjusted, unselfish, people, who have their basic needs regularly met, is

always going to be safer and more comfortable and more rewarding, than living among the opposite kind of people. If we help others achieve that level of good life, ours can then be good, also. When we allow others to have to live the unpleasant life, neither their, nor our, life can possibly be good."

"But lots and lots of Mortals don't ever seem to get the drift of that concept," Twiggs added. "They just go on hoarding all the good stuff for themselves, regardless of the needs experienced by others. Then they build fences and walls and put bars on their windows so no one will take it from them. They become virtual prisoners themselves."

"Not only that," I said, "But they so isolate themselves from people in need, that they effectively forget that those folks even exist. It's that old, 'out of sight, out of mind thing,' again. We Mortals seem to have been terminally afflicted by that devastating malady. Combine that with the ever popular, 'just wait and it will go away', approach to problem solving, and we have a monumental problem on our hands."

Twiggs added the clincher:

"And then you try to solve all of the problem behaviors that have been caused by that terrible neglect and outright mistreatment, by punishing those who act exactly as one would predict those conditions would teach - if not force - them to act, and, ... well, it's no wonder, is it?"

I sighed, long and deep.

"When will we learn that a few simple, positive, time-tested values, regularly acted upon by all of us, is all it would take to save humanity and provide the good life for everyone, everywhere?"

Thinking so seriously, for such a long time, about so many, seemingly intractable problems had exhausted both of us. We just played for a while. We swam a bit longer. Then we climbed trees and even walked the rail fence. We examined the cabin for needed repairs and, finding none, congratulated ourselves on the high quality of our previous work. By sunset, we were beginning to feel somewhat rejuvenated.

As the low fire flickered under the big iron skillet in which I was preparing my famous Dutch Toast, we began

thinking of just what things these meetings of ours had accomplished up to that point.

Twiggs went first:

"A feeling of personal accomplishment - that's the big thing our meetings have brought to my people. Mortal Mondays - or now, as we call them, Little People's Pride Day - have really added a wonderful new dimension to our lives. It's also changed our perspective about you Mortals. It's given us new respect for you, as you meet and deal with the struggles constantly occurring out here in your huge, cold, scary World. We're growing to love you and not just think of you as an inferior race to be pitied and tended."

"No more mangy mortal jokes?" I asked.

"Well, very few, anyway," Twiggs said, grinning, but not giving me the satisfaction that a total change was yet in order.

It appeared to be my turn:

"Our meetings have put a tremendous burden on me, personally, as I have come to learn from you just how excellent and neighborly and harmonious a society of people can really be. It has required me to recognize the huge task I have ahead as I try to find ways in which to help my own society of people move in those same directions."

"I didn't ever intend for this Touchperson thing to become such a burden on you, you know," Twiggs said compassionately.

I looked him squarely in the eye.

"Whatever you do, Twiggs, don't ever apologize for it! Burdens encourage and allow growth, my friend. Without problems to solve and new solutions to invent, the mortal brain would turn to mush - unfortunately many unconcerned minds do just that every day.

"The problems, you see, were here all along. I inherited them from my forefathers. But my association with you has provided me with hope and guidance and insights that will help me put an end to my Mortal Clan's, sorrowful, downward spiral. I've already proved to myself that things can change. I just have to learn patience, and wait for the each one teach two, idea to spread its way around the - well, my - World."

"All in all, then," Twiggs said, "We have really managed

to help one another in some pretty fine ways, haven't we?"

"No doubt about that my friend. No doubt about that!"

It called for one more long and wonderful hug, lit by one more long and wonderful sunset, there in my very own, very precious, enchanted meadow.

* * *

When we were children, the answer to all of mankind's ills had seemed kindergarten simple to Twiggs and me: Neighbors just take care of neighbors.

As teenagers, the reasons why it was not all that simple emerged in all their harsh ugliness - ignorance, selfishness, mistrust and a variety of vicious hatreds. But even at that age, the sole and sufficient preventative measure for those conditions was quite clear: Just raise children in homes that model the truly human, healthful traits - altruism, trust, inclusiveness, and the love of people, the truth, and the, as yet unborn, generations.

As young adults, Twiggs and I would come to see that not until those hurtful human traits had been put to rest, and the helpful ones solidly established within the personalities of the parents, themselves, could, or would, that vital modeling begin to take place. Rehabilitation, through creative, immediately acceptable approaches for imparting truth, and making such changes seem absolutely reasonable and essential to everyone, would have to take precedence over all else.

As the years passed, it became obvious to me, that it would necessarily become my life-long mission to find and foster those techniques that would help make the required changes in the ways human beings feel about, and relate to, one another. I could only hope that it would not also become the necessary life-long mission of my sons, or, worse yet, of the immortal Twiggs.

Twiggs: Devoted Little Person, Man of the Clan Dewgoodabee, Master in the Ring of the Farjumpers, Ambassador to the Mortal Realm, and, for sure and certain, the very best friend I had ever had in the whole wide World.

Early on, together, we had come to understand the simple solution:

The answer to the problems of the mortal realm is

kindergarten-simple:

Neighbors take good care of neighbors!

Until next time ...

*With love and best wishes,
I remain your faithful storyteller,
Ozark Mountain philosopher, and
eternal optimist about the
ultimate survival of this human species,*

- Tom Gnagey