

ONE
THE PARABLE OF THE THREE VILLAGES

Once upon a time there were three villages of a curiously different nature in a far off place. One was the village of Osanto. Another was the village of Snarlsgrrrrr. The third was the village of Mystifu.

Now it so happened that on the selfsame day a child was born into each of the three villages. The three were baby boys of a truly uncanny beauty. After the first howl, they displayed bodies of such perfection and opened upon the world eyes of such a luminescent intelligence that nurses, doctors, and even visitors to the hospitals in one of the villages into which they had been born thronged to view them as word of this unusual event got around on the intranet interlinking every home.

The boy born into the village of Osanto was named Ralph. The boy born into the village of Snarlsgrrrrr was named Arthur. And the boy born into the village of Mystifu was named Michael.

An unusual characteristic of all three villages was the sophistication of the computer networking binding each village into its own pool of consciousness. However, only in Osanto did everybody hover over the screen to view every yawn, sleepy eye blink, or gurgle made by the newly emergent Ralph. For another unusual characteristic of all three villages was that, despite the sophistication of the *intranet* within each village, there was no *internet* connecting them in any way to one another.

In order to protect themselves in a doubtful world the villagers of Osanto had long ago withdrawn from the low lands to live in a high mountain place that was purposely difficult to reach. They had decided that under the circumstances afflicting the world at large, it was best to confine

all intercommunication with the outside world to whatever could be hauled up the mountainside by mule train, with the intimacy of computer networking restricted solely to their own doings.

The village of Snarlsgrrrrr was in a much lower area easy to reach by land, sea, or air, with news media reporting on what happened in the village but only in certain categories under rigid control of the Powers That Be. As everything on their screens was piped into each home from the Department of Official Enlightenment, and as the birth of Arthur fit none of the established categories, it went unremarked except by the people in the hospital.

In contrast to the other two, the village of Mystifu was in a most unusual location, by far the most enticing of the three. It was alongside a sea of incredible beauty, at the foot of a mountain of a most wondrous and inspiring shape. There were trees here of intriguing shapes and flowers of every kind. But here the news of the day, and indeed of every hour, minute, and even second was of such an overwhelming cacophony that, glued as they all were by habit to the screens in their homes, it was all the people could do to stagger in mind from report to report.

It had, in fact, been years since anyone in the village of Mystifu had remarked, much less written a poem about or even painted or taken a picture of the beauty of their sea, the majesty of their mountain, the shape of their trees, or the wondrous variety of flowers. Blasting in upon them from all sides, seizing all their senses and even almost every brain cell, was not only the jangling, hopped up, frenetic load of images screaming at them to “look at me, look at me, look at me!” There was also more of the same squiggling along the borders of every picture and periodically exploding to fill the screen and seize the mind with the over-riding scream of “buy me, buy me, buy me!”

Not only did this continual bombardment of information make it nearly impossible to differentiate one report from another. In order to preserve their sanity, they found it necessary to regularly wipe their weary

minds clean of all previous information in order to keep up with each hour's fresh load. So here the birth of Michael was just the blip of a split second swiftly obliterated by the thundering informational herd.

The Story of Ralph

Growing up in the village of Osanto, Ralph went through the usual difficulties of learning how to effectively use the unusual body and the unusual mind he had been born with.

He learned how to rescue people from drowning and carry them from burning buildings by walking a tight rope all the way from the third story to the ground. He learned to heal others of all kinds of pain and injury by simply touching them gently here and there while humming to them in a soothing way. He learned how in emergencies to reach others with messages and get back messages from them just by thinking of what he wanted to say and what he wanted back from them. Displaying the talent that in later years led to his appointment as Chairman of the Architecture Department for Osanto University, he also learned to build dwellings that blended so skillfully into the ways of the trees on the slopes that they both heated and cooled themselves and one hardly knew indoors from outdoors.

He was also distinguished by an unusual ability to give himself over wholly to the task at hand in a way that gave him joy. It was as though he was caught up from within himself by the flow of a psychic stream urging him on to connect with a river and even the spread of a great sea of meaning out there beyond one.

So advanced were the ways of Osanto that over the years there came to be an unusually appealing cluster of characteristics in common for those who had enjoyed the advantages of Osantian parenting and the Osantian educational system as children. What the schools and teachers stressed both face to face in class rooms, and over the playful presence of their preschool and after-hours internet, for example, was creativity shaped by the real

needs rather than by the imposed or manufactured needs of people.

As one of his teachers explained the idea to Ralph's third grade class, "People want to help others and be inspired by people doing noble deeds (which later motivated his rescues). They want to help and be helped by others when hurt (hence his later healing touch). They want comforts that don't waste the precious but limited resources of our mountain land (hence his dwelling designs). Above all, they want a sense of some higher purpose in life (hence the drive within Ralph and others to somehow advance human evolution, even if in only the smallest of ways). We want things such as this rather than a flood of trivialities whose main purpose is to sop up all our money, as in Mystifu, or weapons for killing one another, as in Snarlsgrrrrrr."

"How do we know this?" Ralph asked—for along with his exceptional mind went the boldness to speak up whenever a question came to mind.

"We know this because it is sensible, and because it is supported by both the science and spirituality of Osanto," his teacher told him. She then explained to Ralph and the class the unique system of Osanto whereby their Sages were schooled in both science and spirituality rather than those with an interest in science being sent down one inflexible track of education, and those with an interest in spirituality being sent down another inflexible track of education, to become suspicious of each other, and go their separate ways with nothing further to do with one another.

One day one of the Sages herself came to class so that the children could talk to her. She was a very old lady, somewhere over 100 years old they were told, but she was spry and lively and had a merry twinkle in her eye.

She taught the math class that day, and that evening for a picnic supper took them above the rooftops of the village higher up the mountain to a good place for watching the evening star appear.

"It is from our science, where we make use of mathematics, and from there our wisdom comes," she said, pointing toward the star.

“But how does it get here from the star?” Marilyn, a friend of Ralph’s, asked.

The Sage tapped her chest.

“It speaks to and through the heart and tells us whether or not what our brains tell us is making sense.”

She then talked for a while about what seemed to make sense to people in Osanto, such as herself, who had given it a great deal of thought over the years.

“Above all,” she stressed, “we want to help each child find her or his own special path in life.”

To this Ralph later responded by becoming a particularly ingenious designer of children's videos. Instead of learning how to obsess upon every conceivable method of killing one another, as was popular in the videos for the homes and arcades of Snarlsgrrrrr and Mystifu, children using Ralph's videos learned how to explore the wondrous pathways into all of nature including the operation of their own bodies and their minds, how to construct everything from a toy automobile to a hurdy gurdy, and the skills and ways of all the wealth of occupations that awaited them when they were grown up.

Of course he was by no means flawless. Ralph had to learn all this by doing the usual dumb things, like burning his hand on a hot stove. Once he nearly choked to death on a little plastic monkey prize in a box of popcorn that he tried to gobble up too hastily. And along the way he had an awful time of it with such seemingly simple things as remembering the exact spelling of so-called "trick" words.

He never did get it quite clear, for example, whether Mediterrafrican was spelled with two rs or two ns, or Missippoli with two s's and two p's all the way, or whether you dropped one s, as he often did.

He also found himself many times tempted to be less than what was expected of him. For above all, the foundation for the system for getting along together happily for the village of Osanto was impressed upon him.

This foundational belief was called the *expectation of goodness*.

As this was explained to Ralph by his teacher, "Transmitted and building within us through evolution over millions of years from the time of the birth of the stars, it is the foundational belief for our village that we are each of us born into this world as essentially good by nature. If this is true of ourselves at birth, and all of us continue to expect goodness of ourselves and others throughout our lives, life will be good for all of us."

And so it proved to be. This belief became more important than all else he had learned because it provided a meaningful framework, and put into perspective, and gave a purpose to everything else. It became the central piece of guiding wisdom for Ralph—along with the curious saying passed on from ancient times that made it easy for everybody in the village of Osanto to put this belief in the essential goodness of everybody into action.

Apparently long ago things had been different elsewhere for the original settlers of the village of Osanto, who had journeyed there from afar. It was apparently from this experience that had come the part of this rule for action that was difficult to understand. For the phrase "the imposed voices of brutality" was simply something the Osantians couldn't comprehend, being outside their experience. But recognizing that this phrase contained a meaning that their forbears had felt was essential to preserve—perhaps as a warning—they faithfully passed this single, simple line of guidance on intact from generation to generation.

"For guidance, let us listen to the inbuilt voice of goodness rather than the imposed voices of brutality within ourselves."

The Story of Arthur

Soon after birth—he really couldn't have been more than two or three

years old at the time—the first of the endlessly memorable lessons that were in store for Arthur began. His father took him to the deep end of the Snarlsgrrrrr village swimming pool and tossed him in.

Flailing with his hands and kicking with his feet in terror, shrieking out for help between his gasps for breath, the only thing that saved Arthur was the fact of the unusually strong physique he had been born with. This made it possible for him to last the four minutes required by the customs of the village before any attempt at rescue was made.

Thereafter he was regularly presented with a series of what in Snarlsgrrrrr were considered the vital learning experiences for the growing boy. At the age of four he was armed with spiked boxing gloves and shoved into a room of other little four year olds similarly attired and kept there until one little boy remained standing alone triumphant over his little wailing, bloodied peers. At the age of five this experience was repeated, but this time without gloves. At the age of six each month another favorite toy was taken from him and smashed before his eyes. This was done until he was able to watch without a tear or even the slightest tremble to his lip. At the age of seven he was taught to stab himself in the arm with a knife without crying.

And so it went on like this until he reached adolescence. Even though rebuffed at first, he now felt compelled to ask the questions he had been unable to ask before because his teachers had made it clear with whacks that this kind of questioning was unacceptable.

"Why am I being asked to do this?" he gathered up the boldness to ask on being told the time had come for him to steal the cane and seeing eye dog of a blind person.

"It is a foundational belief for our village that we are each of us born into this world as essentially evil by nature," his teacher told him. "If this is true of ourselves at birth, and all of us continue to expect evil of ourselves and others throughout our lives, the strongest, most clever and unprincipled among us will not only survive but also prosper, and life will

be very good for us."

"But what about the rest of the people?" Arthur asked.

In answer he was not only given a blow so severe he could barely move for a week. He was also shut away in a cell for six months. From this he learned beyond forgetting that one was not to ask this question again in the village of Snarlsgrrrr, where the rule of the people of the Higher over the Lower Order was never to be questioned..

It was also during this time in the cell that the sole thing he was allowed to read or write or even hear—for seven times during each day, in a high, whining, and strangely beautiful voice, it came to him reverberating through the air from the tower he could see through the window of his cell—was this single line of the Snarlsgrrrriian fundamental code for one's conduct:

"For guidance, listen only to what you have been told to do by Those Who Know Better."

And who were Those Who Knew Better?

Bit by bit throughout his experience growing up, Arthur came to know by "second nature," as did all others in the village, exactly who these people were.

Not only were they whoever was bigger or stronger or richer, but even more fundamentally, whoever could hurt you more than you could hurt them.

The Story of Michael

Growing up in Mystifu, life for Michael was sometimes much like life for Ralph, and he was very happy. But at other times, life was much like growing up for Arthur, and this not only confused but also terrorized him and made him leery of other people.

It was important, he saw, to smile at everybody and act as if they were good and were going to treat you accordingly, because this did seem to encourage people here and there to actually be good to you in return. But it was even more important to protect yourself with the armor that was standard issue for every boy and girl on first reaching school age.

As the first day for school approached, along with first workbooks and paint sets and a little mat on which to take naps, every parent purchased for every child the first of the many suits of armor they were to wear throughout the rest of their lives.

At first Michael balked at having to wear the armor.

"It's too hot and too heavy and I can't run and jump and play in it like I used to!" he wailed.

"You will come to like it, just like we have," his parents, who both wore the latest fashions in armor, told him. "And you will learn all the wonderful new games that adults play."

And so it proved to be. And the new games were indeed wonderfully engaging. This was particularly true of the game of sex. Not only did the game of sex continually titillate and tease and poke and prod at one in the overload via the ever-present screens of their internet. It also called for gymnastics in armor that called forth amazing states of ecstasy. But in the end it often left Michael feeling very sad. For when at such times he thought about it he realized that, just as with the colorful and wondrous sensory overload that seized the mind via the ubiquitous screen, even this greatest of all wonders, real sex itself, not just the pictures, also left him unsatisfied or feeling hollow.

It was all very confusing. And indeed, this was the central problem with everything in Mystifu. For life was such a jumble, being pulled in one direction by the way of Osanto and in the other direction by the ways of Snarlsgrrrr. For most the question of right versus wrong became a matter of controversy one avoided, just go with whatever others were up to. Moreover, you never knew when those you thought were your friends

would turn out to be enemies. Or sometimes those who seemed to be enemies turned out to be friends. And in everything else in Mystifu there was this hollow at the core of the experience, which left you feeling unsatisfied and unfulfilled.

There was this hollow, Michael came to realize, that drove one to buy, buy, buy all of many needless things hoping to fill it, and to eat, eat, eat all manner of awful things hoping to fill it. And thereby he observed that Mystifu was becoming a village of blimps who amid all the confusion worked night and day to make enough money to buy and eat everything considered necessary to “keep up with the neighbors.”

One night Michael felt particularly hollow when he woke and couldn't sleep, and he went out on the deck of their home to look at the stars.

They seemed so friendly to him that night. He knew they were far off, but somehow they seemed to be near. There was something about the way they were close to one another that made them seem happy up there in the night sky, as though they were good friends or a very large and happy family.

For a while afterward he felt good, but by morning he felt even more intensely the hollow within himself. And every year he found himself more and more driven, as everybody else was, to fill this hollow with the great, galloping, galumping inundation of information that above all drove everything of continuity or meaning from his mind. In addition to everything else he was driven to fill the hollow with golf, self-help books, workshops, psychologists, even marathon running, mountain climbing, and rare achievements of other kinds, all of which left him still unsatisfied.

"Where can I find satisfaction, happiness, and peace of mind?" he asked his teachers.

The first teacher he asked was Mr. Moldright, who felt that the essential ritual for the growing youth would be one that might toughen him and drive him to the ultimate wisdom by "testing the blade with fire." So he told young Michael how to paddle along the shore of the sea and then

go up river until he reached the village of Snarlsgrrrrr.

This Michael did, and for him it was undoubtedly the most exciting but also the most terrifying experience of his life.

It was the custom for the men of Mystifu to tell of such experiences to their sons and grandsons, after they had reached a certain age.

"No more did I enter the village than I was befriended by a charming rogue who took me to a house of all kinds of exciting but rather uncomfortable new sexual delights," Michael later told his son Martin. "It was from here that I barely escaped with my life. For not only did they steal all my money and my clothes, but naked thereafter I was shoved into a pit outside the house. Here, with other hapless visitors from Mystifu—your uncle Jake among them—I was pelted with stones by the villagers of Snarlsgrrrrr who, howling with laughter, held up their children to watch."

This was all he generally told them, for this was enough for the shuddering young ones to make them beg to hear the other story he had to tell. This was of how in answer to the same question of how he might find satisfaction, happiness, and peace, he had been advised to go elsewhere by Miss Makeright, who felt that the essential ritual for the young, girls as well as boys, would be one that might inspire them and drive them to the ultimate wisdom through "first sight of the guiding pattern out of the spluttering confusion of stars across the night sky."

She had taught young Michael how to recognize this particular pattern of stars, and told him of the signs to look for that would point the way over the mountains, and through many a valley and desert, and then up the mountain beyond, until he reached the village of Osanto.

This he did, arriving after a journey of many months. At first he was mightily attracted, if not indeed entranced by what he found there. In order that he might have something to help remember this glorious experience forever he purchased a T shirt and also a silver belt buckle with the Osanto line of guidance emblazoned on them. But then he found that

he was becoming very uneasy and at last frightfully uncomfortable.

Why should this be, he asked himself. It was all very nice and delightful, but something was horribly and fundamentally wrong.

Something frightfully important was missing? What was it?

Then he realized it was because life in Osanto was so unnaturally quiet you could hear birds sing and nobody was wearing any armor!

The experience was for Michael, I suppose, much as most of us might feel in a visit to a nudist colony. At first there would be the excitement of seeing everybody of the opposite sex naked. But then one would become aware of the embarrassment of going about naked yourself, and just the plain "weirdness" of it all would get to one.

So feeling homesick for the safety and the familiar variety of the cacophony and armoring of his own village, Michael returned to Mystifu, and for the rest of his life he remained as confused and unsatisfied as everybody else.

But on the long dark evenings when there were "outages," and "black outs," and "brown outs" for the power lines, and the internet and the television wouldn't work, and no news could come in, and there were only candles for light, it was the custom for the young ones of Mystifu to gather about the old grandfathers or uncles for stories to fill the disquieting silence and pass the time away.

It was then in answer to their requests that Michael would tell of the two great journeys of his life and display his souvenirs. It was then that Michael would lift his shirt and lower his pants to reveal to the horrified but fascinated gaze of the younger ones the souvenir of his visit to Snarlsgrrrrr.

For there on his rear end—with both glee as they had applied the white hot iron to his flesh, but also a stern sense of abiding duty to the Powers That Be and this requirement for attaining the good life here on earth—the Snarlsgrrrrians had branded their central rule for life's journey:

"For guidance, listen only to what you have been told to do by Those Who Know Better."

And the little ones would shudder, and it was then that for a brief time until the power came back on, the T shirt and the silver buckle from Osanto became meaningful to all the younger ones, as well as again to Michael himself. Along with the treasured memorabilia of a lifetime, he kept them both in a glass case in the living room, from which he now took them out with great care.

As in the lull one could again hear the night birds, and the rustle of the leaves of the trees, and the far off call of the bell buoys warning of shallow water along the edge of the sea, the lettering on the T shirt and belt buckle in the glass case seemed to glow with the ancient words.

And even later after the power came back on, despite the characteristic din that made it hard to think clearly or even think at all in Mystifu, the glow lingered on in the minds of many. The ancient words were, in fact, over time to become one of the most cherished and haunting memories of the long dark evenings by candle light when the power broke down.

"For guidance, let us listen to the inbuilt voice of goodness rather than the imposed voices of brutality within ourselves."