

# **PARABLES**

By Peter J. Hansen

This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance between any characters in this work and any real-life persons is purely coincidental.

Enjoy!

## Assimilation

There lived a husband and wife who were immigrants. They had little respect for what seemed to them the permissive and chaotic ways of the wealthy country in which they lived. They raised their children by the old rules: they took them to church, and taught them right and wrong. Nonetheless, they imagined a future for their son more glorious than anything they would have known how to dream of if they had remained in the old country.

The boy had always been the pride of his family. His intelligence and talents eventually made him the pride of his school and his city as well. He won a prestigious scholarship to attend a great university.

At the university the youth stood out for his energy and frankness. He became a serious student, for many sources of knowledge suddenly seemed open before him, and he was eager to learn as much as he could.

Meanwhile, he maintained with energy and defiance the faith in God in which he had been reared, and which he had embraced as his own since he was a small child. However, though the ridicule to which this faith was subjected only strengthened his resolve, he could not deny to himself that the world was beginning to look different to him.

Perhaps it was his study of science in particular: the more he learned, the more everything seemed to be a product of blind necessity. Why hadn't God left a clearer sign of His plan? His study of history was also not without effect. Could God really have put so much of His effort into forming so malleable and vicious a race? Then there were questions which arose as he studied philosophy. How could it be just to punish in hell a man of weak and corrupt nature who had led a sinful life? What else could one expect of such a creature? Of course the Church had answers to all these questions, but were they honest answers to honest questions, or were they rather attempts to maintain a dogma?

One day the lad woke up, looked outside, and thought about the distance of the sun from

the earth. He thought of how the earth had likely come into being. After a moment, it struck him that he did not at the moment believe that “God created the heavens and the earth.” The phrase even had a cartoon-like quality as he tried to visualize its meaning.

In the days and weeks that followed he prayed for guidance, and he felt at times that God’s eyes were upon him. However, his faith withered bit by bit, under the glare of the repeated question, Why did He make it this way?

Two years later, he joined most of his classmates at a gathering the night before their graduation ceremonies. The others laughed, drank, shared reminiscences, and discussed the future. They described their plans to each other, though those with bolder plans revealed less.

Our young man did not join in. He spent much of the evening sitting in a corner, feeling sad and empty. He had never quite been able to forget that infinite, eternal point of view in which he had grown up. How could he care very much about a fragile life which might last another 50 years? What could he want to accomplish when everything would pass away so soon? How much did it matter if he acquired one position, even a famous and powerful one, rather than another?

In the years that followed he often told himself that this life and this world were all he had, and that he simply had to adjust, to focus on what was present, not on what was missing. But telling himself this never did much good. He never recovered the energy and enthusiasm of his earlier life; he never stopped wishing that he could embrace that old perspective again.

## **An Energetic Man**

There lived a man who was almost constantly active.

Throughout his life, he read and thought about philosophy, science, history, and literature. He studied several languages apart from his mother tongue, and at one time or another he was almost fluent in most of them. He also read newspapers and magazines, and always held firm views on the events of the day.

He worked at different times as a manual laborer, a journalist, a teacher, a forest ranger, a speculator, and a mechanic, but he never felt that he had found a career he wanted to pursue for life.

He pursued many women who intrigued him. Sometimes he loved, and often he was loved. However, sooner or later he always grew restless. Though he considered doing so several times, he never married.

He sought out engaging conversation. He was always glad to learn something new, or to test and sharpen his views. He never became angry at what anyone said, but always wanted to know the reasons for opinions which initially surprised him.

He had many friends, several of whom considered him the most challenging and thoughtful person they knew. They were always glad to see him, though some regretted that his energetic nature usually took him away before any visit had lasted long.

He kept his body fit and firm. When quite young he acquired the habit of taking several brisk walks a day, and soon he could not do without them. He also engaged frequently in more strenuous exercise, such as running, swimming, and competitive sports. He was rarely ill, and he remained thin and strong until he was old.

However, as he passed through his middle years, he began to wonder about the way he was living his life. He was not going to live forever, yet everything he did seemed to be a way of developing, testing, or maintaining his abilities and his strength. Where was the activity chosen

for its own sake? It was as if his life was merely a preparation for living. However, he could not think of any activity that he would choose for the enjoyment it provides in the moment; the idea seemed not merely boring but stifling to him.

During his last years he was frequently occupied by these questions. However, he never found that he was making much progress towards an answer.

## **A Fortunate Life**

A child, upon becoming self-conscious, discovered Hope in his soul. Sometimes Hope faced Limitation, but often it did not, and the child delighted in his Hope. As the child grew to manhood, Hope grew firmer and stronger within him, while Limitation withered, and was at times almost forgotten.

The young man made plans and pursued love and pleasure, and Hope blessed every step; setbacks were soon forgotten, and Limitation was but an occasional bother. But then one day, while he was passing through his 25th year, he realized with surprise that Limitation had quietly grown larger in his soul.

The next few years passed quickly. Hope blossomed as he married his special love. However, soon after his marriage he noticed to his surprise that Limitation was larger still, almost as large as Hope itself!

One day as his 40th year approached he sat watching his children play, and tried to recall what his life had been like when Hope was strong within him. Limitation had long since outgrown withering Hope, and it had spawned a child of its own, Fear, an occasional unpleasant companion whom he dared not examine closely.

Hope still appeared at times, but increasingly rarely in the years that followed, and even when present, Hope was not as free and virile as it once had been. There were pleasures in his life, but Limitation was his most constant companion, while in its shadow Fear gradually grew to frightful proportions.

However, as he grew old Limitation relaxed much of its hold, and Fear departed with it. The gap they left was filled by Weariness, which eventually grew almost as large as Hope and Limitation each had formerly been.

## **A Friendly Man**

There lived a man who wanted nothing so much as to talk with other people. He had few interests and little ambition, but he longed to be friends with the attractive, bustling men and women he saw around him.

At first shyness held him back. But he concentrated his attention, considered different approaches, and eventually struck up conversations here and there.

He found many people who were glad to talk to him about many things. He listened eagerly to what they were saying; however, sometimes he was so pleased that they were talking to him that he forgot to pay close attention to what they were saying. For they talked so seriously of so many subjects, most of them so far away from him and his life, that it was often an effort for him to pay attention.

Eventually he began to wonder why they talked of these things and not of others, why the subjects they discussed seemed so far from their own lives. However, when he asked people to tell him about what really mattered to them, the response he most often received was a strange look.

Some people answered in a more friendly manner, however. One man said that the thing that made his life worthwhile was the knowledge that he was doing what he could to help others. Another man, a scientist, told him of his excitement at being part of the advances currently being made in his field. One woman told him that she had been neglected and unhappy during her childhood, and that she had chosen her line of work to try to help other children avoid a similar fate.

All of them seemed to feel warmer towards the man after telling him these things. He was glad for their warmth, and he found these conversations more interesting than the earlier ones. However, he still felt that he was missing something. The things they had described still seemed so removed from themselves; surely these were not their real loves and dreams.

He spoke again with each of these people. When he said that he did not see how the things they had described could really be the focus of their lives, all three were irritated.

Why wouldn't this be the most important thing in my life? each one demanded.

It seems so far away from you, he timidly answered. You don't have to tell me what really matters if you'd rather not, he added.

I consider this very important, each one responded, with variations in diction and degree of annoyance.

I'm sorry if I annoyed you, he replied, feeling miserable.

The man concluded that he had approached people in the wrong way. Surely the people he saw had friends with whom they spoke frankly. How could he become someone's friend?

He tried talking with more people, but his experience did not improve. He began to wonder if there was some special way people communicated with each other, some informal ritual of which he was ignorant; perhaps his uninformed way of approaching people had the equivalent of a bad smell for them. But when he asked if there was such a form or ritual, people looked at him even more strangely than they had before.

Sadly he began to conclude that he was simply too boring or ugly or stupid for people to want to talk openly with him. He would not find what he longed for in life, simple though it seemed.

He continued to admire the attractive, bustling men and women he saw. However, he ceased trying to talk with them, for the conversations they seemed willing to have simply made him feel that they did not want him to know about their lives.

He continued living his life, but he felt more lonely than he had before he first tried to talk to people.

## **Know Thyself**

There lived a man who suspected that people do not understand themselves. The way they talk about their feelings, even the portrayals of characters in novels and plays, all seemed to him suspiciously bright and simple. Yet what could be more important than being realistic about oneself? How could people know anything if they did not know their own motives?

He examined his own reactions to his family members, friends, and colleagues, and to strangers he met or saw. He noticed the many situations in which he felt sexual attraction, sometimes for his wife, more often for the wives of his friends or for female students. He noticed feelings of irritation, envy, and hatred, all much stronger and more frequent than he would have guessed. Most surprising to him, however, was his almost delirious pleasure in being noticed and praised.

He grew more attentive as well to his appetites and senses. He noticed the way he became more alert when he was hungry, the way his mouth watered when he ate. He realized that food was on his mind a much larger portion of the day than he had previously suspected.

He read many books about human psychology, and compared what he read with his own experience. The books seemed to him too easy on men, too flattering: they failed to reveal the strength, pettiness, and depravity of human selfishness.

So he wrote a book of his own, which enjoyed success, partly because of his forthrightness in describing his own experiences. Eventually he wrote other books, attracted students, and became influential in the field of psychology.

Oddly enough, however, his books said little about his desire to understand himself.

## Modern Science

There lived a young woman who was easily the smartest student in her high school. Upon graduation she enrolled at the nation's most competitive and prestigious university.

She planned to study physics. She had long felt that the hard sciences, especially physics, the foundation of them all, were the only source of solid and profound knowledge of the world. This was where the mystery of things would unfold itself, in a solid, mathematical, verifiable form. The humanities and the "social sciences" had always seemed by comparison insubstantial, boastful, ridiculous.

She worked hard her freshman year, taking physics, calculus, and chemistry. She learned a great deal, though some of the material had been covered in classes in her high school. However, she was no longer the outstanding student. That was no surprise, at this great university; but she was no longer really very outstanding at all, which was more of a disappointment. On tests she generally scored near the middle of the curve--sometimes even in the lower half.

Nonetheless, she enjoyed herself, made friends whom she liked and respected much more than anybody she had known in high school, and looked forward to continuing.

Her sophomore year was more difficult. She spent hours on her problem sets, while most of the other students, who now formed a much smaller group, seemed to do the work without difficulty. To her astonishment she found that she simply could not grasp some of the concepts; they did not fit into her mind, or if they came in for a moment after a great effort of concentration, they quickly slipped out again, and she could not readily call them back.

By the middle of the year, she had fallen far behind in her work, and she could see that it would be very difficult for her to catch up. She was no longer enjoying herself; she was just trying to survive. The high opinion of herself which she had held throughout her life was long gone, but she didn't miss her past confidence; it had evidently been a fool's paradise.

She planned to catch up during Christmas vacation. As she began the problem sets which had accumulated, however, they seemed so difficult, so daunting, that she felt she would need six months to do them. Could it really make sense that this was to be her career? Perhaps, if there was some reason to expect dramatic change soon; but of course the opposite was the case. Every level of study was supposed to be more abstract and mindbending than the one preceding it.

She came of a Christian family, and in spite of her love of science—or was it better to call it an infatuation?—she had always believed that God at least might be the author of it all. She found herself thinking about that as she attended Christmas services with her parents.

Was it really so important to know the details of how the world worked? Might it not be more important to know the purpose for which it had all been built? Man had no reason to expect that the complexity of God's design would be comprehensible to him. That was a gift that God bestowed upon a very few, for reasons of His own. But the purpose, the moral purpose behind it, wasn't that manifest for all? Nobody of intelligence and good will could fail to understand the fundamental lessons of the Bible; yet so many did. Perhaps a humbling experience like the one she had had was actually very valuable, very rare.

When she returned to school after Christmas, she arranged to change her major from physics to religion.

The people she met in the religion department were, she had to admit, less impressive to her than those in physics. But the work was surely not less important! It was fine to understand

how things were built, to be sure; but to understand the purpose with which they had been constructed, surely that was still more important!

In the religion department she was an outstanding student, eventually *the* outstanding student--almost to the same extent as in high school. In time she stopped feeling all but the tiniest twinge at the thought of her earlier major.

## **The Pursuit of Happiness**

There lived a man who decided that he would work hard until he had earned what he would need to live in moderately comfortable leisure for the rest of his days.

There were many things he wished to do, once his time was his own, as it had been in his youth: read, think, converse with friends, listen to music, play the piano, travel. None of these things would require a great deal of money, but they would all require time, and freedom from the daily grind of making a living. So his plan was to work hard for a few years, after which he would be free for the rest of his life to do whatever he desired.

He prepared himself for and found a job which enabled him to earn what initially seemed like a great deal of money. But his career demanded that he live in an expensive place, entertain, maintain a certain style of life. And he had to pay a great deal in taxes. He knew people who had ways of avoiding this particular burden; but he was unwilling to consider any step that might endanger or sour the carefree life for which he was striving.

As time passed, though he was as capable as any of his colleagues, he did not advance as quickly as the more clever among them. Perhaps his heart was less in his work. The really big money, the kind of income that might enable him to quit after only a year or two, remained beyond his grasp.

After five years, he had saved a fair amount, but not nearly enough to think of retiring. He was tempted to quit and find a less time-consuming job; but what good would that do? It seemed to him now even more than it had five years earlier that living a good life was an all-or-nothing proposition. Either one was a slave to the need to support oneself, or one was free, able to pursue

whatever seemed worthwhile for its own sake. He was clearly part of the way to his goal; why give up now?

After ten years he was closer, but still not there.

After fifteen years, he had finally saved what had been his initial target figure. But his life had changed. He no longer had the same friends as 15 years earlier. At least socially, the world in which he now lived was defined by the career which had initially been only a means. Perhaps he had liked the friends he had had in his youth more than he liked the friends he had now; but that was gone. It seemed like another life, and he even felt a bit uneasy when he thought of the things he had done in those days: the long impractical conversations, all that time spent on music, the lack of anything secure, anything that produces a concrete strength.

Though he still felt he would like more freedom, he no longer relished the idea of simply following all his whims. What would he do? The idea of a life built around reading seemed insubstantial. When he read now, it usually had to do with his career, or else it was merely for relaxation. Moreover, the idea of living an isolated life somewhere obscure was daunting. Wasn't he better off continuing to hold onto something solid? Meaning money, of course; but also the goodwill of the friends he now had, men who were likely to survive whatever political or economic winds might blow.

Furthermore, there were expensive things he felt he needed to which he had not given a thought in his youth. A good health insurance policy, for example; who could say what that might cost in 10 or 20 years?

What had happened was an old story. The only odd thing was that he had been aware, and wary, of it. He had seen the danger of being trapped or overwhelmed in pursuing the means and therefore never reaching the end. Perhaps he had not quite seen that it might be a different person

who actually reached the end.

At any rate, since he had more control over his career than in earlier years, he decided to arrange more vacations for himself. He spent his 40th birthday in Italy, and he went to Sicily a few months later. He enjoyed these trips more than he had really expected to, and more trips followed; but he was still grateful for the firmness and security of his regular life.

While on vacation, he immersed himself in novels for the first time in years. The sights he saw reminded him of bits of history he had once picked up, and soon he was rereading Tacitus and Thucydides (though not in the original languages, as he had long ago planned to do). Eventually he made new friends, other Americans who spent much of their lives in Italy, and he visited some of them when they were in “the States” as well.

In time his initial plan for his life again seemed good to him. He resigned his job after having held it for just over 20 years, though he agreed to stay with his firm long enough to help groom his successor.

Shortly afterwards, however, he was diagnosed with a lethal form of cancer. He lived for several more years, but the carefree pursuit of whatever captured his fancy eluded him.